

The Presidents and the Shah:
The Impact of America's Iranian Policy on the Iranian Revolution

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Introduction

The icy relationship that exists between the United States and Iran today is astonishing considering the extremely close ties that existed between the two only a generation ago; under the reign of the Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Iran was one of America's closest allies in the Third World, and rivaled Israel as America's best friend in the Middle East. Not only could the Shah stand as a bulwark against the Soviet Union, his much loathed neighbor to the north, he presided over a nation with vast swaths of oil, was America's biggest purchaser of arms, was a stabilizing force in the Middle East against radical regimes, and supported American foreign policy during a time when few Third World leaders would. All of this was lost to the United States once the Iranian Revolution occurred and Ayatollah Khomeini ushered in a new theocratic and radical Islamic state, a state which to this day is one of America's most loathed enemies on the global stage. The Iranian Revolution is all the more unusual considering that under the Shah Iran's economic growth was the envy of the developing world, he oversaw social reform which ended serfdom and granted freedom and equal rights to women, educational institutions flourished, and communication and transportation networks expanded rapidly.

What's more, the Shah's relationship with the United States was especially close considering he owed his throne to America; it was the CIA who sponsored the 1953 coup which cemented his position as the unchallenged leader of Iran and did away with the fledgling democratic movement. Yet, while there was only one Shah in Iran; there were

numerous Presidents in the United States while the Shah was on the throne, each one having his own policy towards Iran. Though these policies may have differed from President to President, the Shah's close ties to the United States' leaders served as one of the leading causes of the Iranian Revolution. Differing Presidential administrations *did* differ however, and were not all synonymous. While these policies may have differed, each President of the United States wielded considerable influence over the Shah, and the failure of the United States to push for reform lay primarily at the feet of each individual President rather than any structure or bureaucracy that existed between the two countries. Thus, American foreign policy towards Iran under the Shah was largely decided by individual Presidents, and each policy directly contributed to the Revolution while missing opportunities to forestall or prevent it.

Eisenhower

Internal Dynamics of Iran at the Start of the Eisenhower Administration

Dwight D. Eisenhower's ascension to the Presidency came at a crucial moment in Iran's history, and it was under him that the United States established Iran as a client state and set in to motion the events that would culminate in revolution 25 years later. Yet America was a late comer to the game of Iranian politics, such that by the time of Eisenhower's presidency in 1953, Britain had been intervening in Iranian domestic affairs for more than a century. It was this tumultuous Anglo-Iranian relationship which ultimately drove the United States to establish a policy of intervention in Iran.

Throughout the 19th century and early 20th Iran was ruled by a weak and corrupt dynasty, the Qajars, who often supported their lavish lifestyles through selling pieces of the Iranian economy to foreigners. Most notably this occurred in 1901, When William D'Arcy, a British citizen, signed an extremely lucrative contract giving him exclusive control over any petroleum discovered in Iran for sixty years. He in turn established the Anglo-Iranian (initially the Anglo-Persian) Oil Company in 1909, of which the British government purchased a majority 51 percent stake of in 1914¹. The original concession was resigned in 1933 extending it another sixty years, to 1993. Despite the immense wealth Iranian oil brought to Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, Iran saw little benefit. In 1950 Anglo-Iranian earned a profit approaching £200 million from its oil enterprises in Iran, of

¹ Bill, James. 87

this Iran only received £16 million in royalties. Iranians often pointed out that their country received less in royalties than taxes Anglo-Iranian paid to the British government, which amounted to £50.5 million in 1950².

This injustice was not lost on the Iranian people, and while there was much resentment throughout the early 20th century of the deal, it was after World War II when the winds of nationalism began to sweep across the third world before Iranians began to demand a more fair agreement. In Venezuela throughout the 1940's officials began demanding a higher share of oil profits when a landmark deal was struck in 1948 which guaranteed the government a fifty-fifty share in revenue. On the other side of the Persian Gulf and much closer to Iran, Saudi Arabia also reached a fifty-fifty revenue sharing deal with the Arabian American Oil Company. Iranian's were growing more and more livid at Anglo-Iranian as the company firmly stated that there would never be any revenue sharing deal similar to those in other countries. When confronted with Iranian pressure, the company proposed increasing Iranian royalties from 22 cents a barrel to 23 cents³, needless to say the fiery rhetoric of nationalism wasn't tamed by a one cent increase. Even more upsetting to Iranians was the issue of national sovereignty; a foreign company having complete control over Iran's resources while refusing to allow Iranian officials to examine its books enraged nationalists, furthermore Iranians were only allowed manual labor positions within the company⁴. The Forces of Iranian nationalism finally collided with British stubbornness in May of 1951 when the Iranian Majlis (parliament) nationalized the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company under the leadership of Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh.

² Walden, Jerrold. 64

³ Bill, James. 62.

⁴ Bharier, Jullian160

The National Iranian Oil Company was born with great domestic fanfare within Iran, though this jubilation was short lived. Immediately after Mosaddegh passed the nationalization law, the British Government ordered a boycott of Iranian oil and convinced the United States and other European nations to go along with it. The boycott was effective: the Income Iran derived from oil exports plummeted from \$400 million in 1950 to less than \$2 million in the two year time span from July 1951 to August 1953⁵. This economic shock led to instability within the Iranian government, as political parties began deserting the once immensely popular Mosaddegh, leaving him to rely more heavily upon the radical left and communist Tudeh party. Despite this instability, Mosaddegh remained strong and steadfast in the face of the British economic onslaught and beleagueredly requested assistance from the Truman administration. It is important to note, that the Truman administration initially looked fondly upon Mosaddegh and criticized the British for refusing any compromise with Iran while having an imperial mindset not suitable for the modern world. President Truman however, was not long for that office, and in 1953 Dwight Eisenhower ascended to the presidency.

Eisenhower was much more receptive to the idea of direct intervention in Iran than his predecessor. In part this was because the British, realizing Eisenhower's strong anti-communism tendencies, focused on the growing power of Communists within Mosaddegh government. They argued Mosaddegh would be unable to prevent a communist uprising, which they argued was more likely by the day, and thus had to be removed. The chief of British Intelligence in Tehran C. M. Woodhouse stated that "even if a settlement of the oil dispute could be negotiated with Mosaddegh, which is doubtful, he was still incapable of resisting a coup by the Tudeh [Communist] Party, if it were

⁵ Blair, John. 79.

backed by Soviet support. Therefore he must be removed”⁶. Under this situation then, the British were creating a self fulfilling prophecy in order to stoke the Eisenhower administration in to acting. For, upon the initial nationalization of Iranian oil, Mosaddegh had vast swaths of support from all arenas of the political spectrum, as the economic stranglehold on Iran became more intense however; Mosaddegh was forced to rely more and more on the communists. Whether this was the British intent however, is undetermined, what the Eisenhower administration saw was an unstable government which looked as if it could fall into communism with enough internal chaos; allowing the birth of a communist state on the southern border of the Soviet Union was a risk the Eisenhower administration would not accept. Thus on June 14, 1953 Eisenhower approved an operation to overthrow Mosaddegh and guarantee the Shah’s position as the ultimate leader of Iran, this CIA operation was codenamed Ajax.

Operation Ajax

Developed by Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, his brother and head of the CIA, Allen Dulles, and his predecessor at the CIA General Walter Smith, Operation Ajax was a joint CIA and British SIS mission to oust Mosaddegh and replace him with General Fazlollah Zahedi, the Shah’s chosen candidate for prime minister. Allen Dulles and Helmes had in the past worked as agents in post-war Europe, struggling unsuccessfully against communist infiltrations in Eastern Europe⁷. This recent history of successful communist takeovers must have played a large role in minds of Ajax’s backers; plaguing them with paranoia such that they saw eminent communist coups where there in fact were

⁶ Zahran, Mostafa. 95.

⁷ Bill, James. 87.

none. Throughout the summer of 1953, the CIA bribed journalists and politicians to publicly denounce Mosaddegh, and often paid average Iranians on the street to begin marches against Mosaddegh, which grew larger by the week. Here it is important to note, that while the CIA did indeed bribe Iranians to condemn and protest Mosaddegh, logistically not every Iranian protesters in the streets could have been on the CIA's payroll. This means that there was plenty of negative public sentiment towards the Prime Minister, though without the CIA, this would not have led to the overthrow of Mosaddegh. Nevertheless, after days of riots and street fights, Mosaddegh was arrested on August 19, 1953, and American entrenchment in Iran was cemented for the next twenty-five years.

History clearly demonstrates Eisenhower's culpability in the coup, and without his backing the CIA would not have acted nor would the British, never the less, Eisenhower wasn't nearly as gung-ho about the operation as the Dulles brothers or others in his administration. In fact, Eisenhower was probably the most reluctant figure in his administration to support the operation. Two weeks before his inauguration he met with Winston Churchill, the British Prime Minister who fiercely supported a coup, and showed disinterest. In fact, he complained that British efforts to involve the United States in its Iranian troubles had done nothing but "get Mosaddegh to accuse us of being a partner in browbeating a weak nation"⁸. Churchill wisely didn't press the matter, as planning for the coup was already underway and he just needed another excuse to press Eisenhower again. This came on February 28th, when British backed Iranians spread rumors that Mosaddegh was trying to exile the Shah from the country and began violent demonstrations in Tehran. The Dulles brothers seized on the violence and once again told Eisenhower Iran was on

⁸ Elm, Mostafa. 277.

the verge of collapse without intervention and a communist takeover was eminent. Though apparently no one told Eisenhower the violence wasn't a genuine outburst from Iranians, even American Ambassador to Iran, Loy Henderson had been organized rather than genuine⁹. Even after these riots it took Eisenhower weeks before finally agreeing with the British and his advisor and he gave his tacit approval of the plot, though because of the momentous scope, tacit approval was not enough. Thus on June 14, Allen Dulles met with the President, and sensing he wanted to know as little as possible, Dulles gave him "the most 'broad brush' outline of what was proposed"¹⁰. This was all Eisenhower needed, and he gave his support.

Operation Ajax was the number one event that turned Iranians against the United States, although it was recorded as a success by the CIA, and though there were actions American Presidents could have taken later to prevent the revolution, Operation Ajax was a direct cause of Iranian Revolution twenty five years later. Despite this, it was far from guaranteed that the operation would take place at all. As mentioned Eisenhower was extremely reluctant to implement it and without his support it certainly never would have happened. So many what-ifs could have prevented the operation from getting past the drawing board. What if Eisenhower hadn't won the Presidential election in 1952? Britain and the CIA put off the operation while his predecessor Harry Truman was in the White House and waited specifically until after his inauguration before beginning the process. What if Eisenhower was informed of the false nature of the anti-Mosaddegh protests of February 28th? He very well may have been hesitant to support such an operation if the opposition couldn't even rally a protest without foreign support. Regardless of these

⁹ Kinzer, Stephen. 157.

¹⁰ Pardos, John. 95.

questions and numerous others, they all rest on Eisenhower's decision to support Operation Ajax. Historical evidence also clearly shows that without him there would be no coup. Thus Eisenhower, individually, albeit with pressure from within his administration, was able to decide the fate of American-Iranian relations, and his individual decision directly led to the Iranian Revolution.

Cementing Pahlavi-American Relations

With the Shah secure on his throne and oil flowing again to Western markets, the Eisenhower administration pursued a policy of strengthening American-Iranian relations so that it always had a strong and stable ally in the Middle East. Eisenhower also started a decades long tradition of granting military and economic aid to Iran to strengthen the Shah's government from internal threats as well as external threats. In addition to strengthening the Shah's government, these aid packages were shrewdly given only when Iran took a policy with which the United States strongly approved. This aid policy further alienated average Iranians from the United States, which they saw as a friend of the Shah and not of the people.

Within a week of Operation Ajax and the restoration of the Shah, Eisenhower granted \$45 million dollars in immediate economic aid assistance.¹¹ Furthermore, between 1953 and 1960, these aid transfusions amounted to \$567 million in economic aid and another \$450 million in military aid¹². Despite more than \$1 billion in aid, few in Iran were happy. First the Shah and his advisors were disappointed that the U.S. would not commit more to Iran, though this may have simply been a negotiating technique. Much

¹¹ Kinzer, Stephen. 194.

¹² Alexander, Yonah, Allan S. 282

more harmful was the discontent that these aid packages fermented within the Iranian people. These middle class, politically aware Iranians had three large complaints about the aid packages.

First, they argued that the United States was using its aid program in order to gain control over policy-making within Iran, essentially replacing the former meddling British. Evidence at the time certainly gives credence to these suspicions. Several times whenever Iran took favorable actions towards the United States, an aid package was conspicuously announced soon after. After a new oil agreement was signed, a package of \$127 million dollars was announced. Similar aid packages were announced after Iran joined the Baghdad Pact, an anti Soviet alliance of Middle Eastern States and Britain, and its successor, the Central Treaty Organization.¹³

A second complaint from Iranians was that these aid packages spurred a boom in corruption within the government. An inexperienced bureaucracy was suddenly bloated with hundreds of millions of dollars and much of it stayed among the elite. This also began a trend of income inequality in Iran where the government elite would lead lavish lives and the poor would see little, despite America's best intentions.

The final complaint from Iranians was that these aid packages placed too much weight towards military aid. This trend advanced further in 1958 when the King of neighboring Iraq was overthrown. The coup in Iraq deeply shook the Shah and he demanded more military aid to guarantee his throne. On the streets of Iran, many groups argued that this aid was going to be in the construction of a police state while the social, educational, and economic conditions of the Iranian people remained primitive¹⁴.

¹³ Bill, James. 115.

¹⁴ Ibid.

The centerpiece of this new authoritarian style of governance was created in 1957, known as the SAVAK. Standing for the Intelligence and Security Organization for the Country, this security and intelligence organization was meant to enforce the Shah's rule by crushing all opposition through any means necessary, including imprisonment, torture, and execution. Furthermore, SAVAK was established with the full backing of the United States, which put its own intelligence agency, the CIA, at the Shah's disposal by training SAVAK agents in their ruthless methods. Internally, SAVAK was seen as a brutal tool at the disposal of a police state, and its extreme techniques gained it infamous reputation in Iran and around the world.

On the international stage, the American-Iranian military relationship was cemented on March 5, 1959, when the United States and Iran signed a bilateral defense agreement that strongly guarantees and American military commitment to Iran¹⁵. This agreement greatly upset the Soviet Union, especially considering it followed the similar anti-Soviet Baghdad Pact and Central Treaty Organization. The Soviets had up until that time been pursuing their own non-aggression agreement with Iran and accused the United States of trying to convert Iran into its own military base. The Shah privately stated that he had communicated with the Soviets only to increase America's political, military, and economic commitment to his government¹⁶. The Shah would routinely use this strategy to obtain concessions from the United States and foreshadowed the more independent path he would lead his nation on in the coming years.

President Eisenhower left the White House with a radically different view of Iran from when he had entered. At the start of his presidency he was hesitant to intervene in

¹⁵ Kinzer, Stephen. 202.

¹⁶ Bill, James. 119.

Iranian domestic affairs, while at the end of it, his government often got Iran to sign treaties and agreements as the United States saw fit while simultaneously supporting the creation of a police state. His chosen policy would have deep ramifications on both nations. In Iranian eyes the United States was just another colonial power, no different from Britain, which pulled the puppet strings of the Shah and his government.

Eisenhower however was locked in a Cold War mindset and saw everything as it related to the Soviet Union. If he could guarantee an American ally at the expense of human rights, there was little debate. Were he aware of the detrimental impact his aid packages were having for America's image, he may have changed his ways, but given his foreign policy outlook vis-a-vis the Soviet Union, this may have been unlikely. After Operation Ajax America held more control over Iran than it ever would again, but Eisenhower didn't consider using this to better the Iranian people, but rather the Iranian government. This policy began the path towards revolution, for though Operation Ajax had thrown a bucket of water on Iranian nationalistic aspirations, Eisenhower's aid and military policy stoke the remaining embers which would grow fierier as the years went on.

Kennedy

In his inaugural address on January 20, 1961, John F. Kennedy summarized America's new policy towards the Third World:

To those people in huts and villages half of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help themselves, for whatever period is required- not because the communists are doing it, not because we seek their votes, but because it is right. If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich¹⁷.

Altruistic as Kennedy may have phrased it, the main reason for pushing through reforms and economic development served United States' interests. The Cuban Revolution demonstrated to the United States that a repressive dictator could inflame revolutionary sentiment, and by encouraging peaceful reform, the United States could forestall such a revolution. After years of repression in Iran at the hands of the Shah, the United States feared a similar revolt and decided to promote alternative methods of rule. The Shah however, would not acquiesce his power so readily, and was not above manipulating the United States with information regarding potential communist threats in Iran in order to maintain American support. Never the less, the Shah grew independent of the United States throughout the 1960's and began to forge his own path. This, combined with inconsistent policy from the Kennedy administration ensured no serious reform in Iran would take hold.

Kennedy's Push for Reform

Throughout his reign, the Shah's overriding foreign policy concern was an

¹⁷ Kennedy, John F. "The Inaugural Address of John F. Kennedy."

invasion from the Soviet Union, a state Iran shared a long border with. This was not totally without merit, as the first conflict in the Cold War had been the Iran Crisis, wherein the Soviet Union occupied northern Iran until international pressure forced its removal. Never the less, the Shah was constantly preoccupied with a Soviet threat. One British diplomat, Desmond Harney, remarked that the he Shah “saw (the Russians) as eight feet tall”¹⁸. Mostly however, the Shah feared internal threats from communists and the remnants of Mosaddegh’s supporters, the National Front. Abdhassan Ebtehaj, head of the Shah's Plan Organization recalled a meeting in 1959 with American military advisors, Ebtehaj asserted that what Iran needed was money for internal improvements, not guns. If the people are hungry, he argued, advanced military forces meant nothing to them. The Shah soon forced Ebtehaj's resignation, along with other officials who resisted his hunger for arms¹⁹.

The Kennedy administration worried that this desire for weapons would continue to erode the Shah’s credibility amongst his people, and sought to pressure the Shah to bring about internal reforms. Within the administration though there was a divide between those in the State Department, led by Secretary of State Dean Rusk, who sought to strengthen ties with the Shah, and those in the Joint Chiefs of staff, which cautioned that the United States ought to "disassociate itself from the Shah should he appear likely to be overthrown”²⁰. This seemed close to occurring in May 1961, when Teachers in Iran went on strike over low wages, and along with university students clashed with Iranian security forces, bringing about the fall of the Iranian government. In the face of widespread public unrest, the Shah promoted Dr. Ali Amini to the post of Prime Minister

¹⁸ Harney, Desmond. 144.

¹⁹ Summitt, April. 563.

²⁰ Ibid. 564.

and, on paper at least, gave him vast support to implement reform. This appointment was supported and encouraged by the Kennedy administration. While the Eisenhower administration had given aid with strings attached that ensured Iran took a strong anti-Soviet line, the Kennedy administration cleverly gave aid on the condition that reform be pursued. According to U.S. ambassador Armin Meyer, the instability and lack of reform in Iran resulted in “instructions to [the American] ambassador that [America] would provide \$35 million in aid to Iran in return for which we would expect the Iranians various steps which we considered necessary for progress, including even a suggestion as to the prime ministerial candidate we considered best qualify to administer the proposed reforms”²¹.

Pushback from the Shah

The Shah was no fan of Amini and felt that the United States had forced Amini on him, never the less he was willing to accept a reformist Prime Minister in order to contain growing unrest within the country. Despite conflict within the Kennedy administration on whether to focus on relations with the Shah or Amini, Amini initiated reforms within Iran just as he believed the Shah had mandated him to do. Amini and his followers sought to initiate land reform as well as agricultural projects and anti-corruption campaigns. In fact, these land reforms strongly led to his downfall, for before reform was initiated, many rural Iranians were essentially indentured servants of land barons and had little to no political awareness. Amini was able to waken these peasants and sharply raised their expectations of achieving a better life for themselves and their families, this awakening of

²¹ Bill, James. 145.

the large peasant class laid the groundwork for mass mobilization of the people²². However, the Shah, being a land baron himself, was quick to undercut Amini's work and limit in scope, thus while peasants were politically awakened they weren't able to achieve all the reform they had hoped for. Also undercutting Amini's support were former Mosaddegh supporters who saw him as a collaborator with the court who continued the Shah's dominance in Iranian politics. Without the support of the Shah or the intelligentsia and with dissatisfied peasants, the Kennedy administration began withdrawing support of Amini, causing him to ultimately resign on July 18, 1962. Despite Amini's efforts and Kennedy's initial calls for a new relationship with the Third World, the actions by the United States spoke differently. This was because the Shah saw Amini as a potential threat with growing popularity amongst the populace and sought to ensure his own rule. It was at this time that the Shah began talks with the Soviet Union, much to the consternation of the United States²³.

These talks, though not resulting in any major change in Iranian foreign policy, suitably frightened the United States in to reaffirming their support for the Shah, and retracting any given to Amini. After Amini's resignation, the Shah was able to consolidate even more power over Iran. However, once the Shah could guarantee his military lifeline to the United States was intact, and realizing the potential for popularity of reform, the Shah changed his focus such that he began following the reformist path that Amini had started. These reforms came to be known as 'The White Revolution' and were planned by the Shah to launch Iran in to an era of modernity. A critical missing element of the White Revolution however, was democratic reform. This is where Amini

²² Ibid. 147.

²³ Alexander, Yonah. 317.

and the Shah had differed, for while Amini had sought to work with the people of Iran in bringing about reform with their input, the Shah sought economic expansion as he and his advisors saw fit. This action by the Shah, killed the nascent democratic reform in utero, and once again any chance for real social reform within Iran was shuttered. Furthermore the White Revolution itself planted numerous seeds of discontent within Iran that would blossom in to revolution in 1978-79.

There were numerous unintended consequences that the White Revolution had upon Iranian society. For one, it greatly increased the population of groups that had traditionally opposed the Shah, the urban lower class and the intelligentsia. By freeing millions of peasants from the land, many moved to cities where their lives didn't necessarily improve and revolutionary sentiment simmered. Likewise the establishment of numerous schools across the country created a new class of intellectuals who became more aware of the nature of their authoritarian country, especially once organizations such as opposition political parties, newspapers, and trade unions were shut down. The White Revolution also caused consternation within the religious community, as women were now given much more rights than they had previously enjoyed. Land reform also weakened the clergy as well as the wealthy elite, who were stripped of much of their properties.

The White Revolution also gave rise to the penultimate figure of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini. Up until the White Revolution the clergy of Iran practiced political quietism, whereby they refrained from commenting on politics so as to solely focus on the religious realm. Even with the advancement of women's rights and land reform, most Shia clergy held true to this political quietism. Khomeini however,

started a radical shift, whereby he began to criticize the Shah as a person and his rule. In protest of the Shah in June 1963 Khomeini gave a historic, impassioned speech against the Shah. Two days later he was arrested, sparking three days of rioting and the death of several hundred at the hands of the Iranian armed forces²⁴. It was not lost on the rioters that the tanks and guns being used against them were supplied by Americans either. After his arrest Khomeini maintained his public stance against the Shah, establishing a precedent wherein the Shia religious establishment of Iran would take part in politics, an establishment which would lead to the religious opposition movement playing the key role in the 1978-79 revolution.

Conclusion

After the June riots and their brutal crackdown, Iran started on a path it would follow for the next 15 years, heavy-handed top down reform occurring within an authoritarian state. With the death of John F. Kennedy at the end of 1963 and the reform program in place but ineffective, the Shah began another period of entrenchment and repressive political rule. Kennedy's untimely death was a major blow to Iran's reformist movement, and though he had not taken full advantage of the reformist sentiment within Iran, Kennedy was arguably the most reform minded president the Shah dealt with, in fact he had declared the Kennedy years as the most difficult of his reign for the intrusive nature and democratic pushes he had felt from the United States²⁵. The reformist attitude from the White House was directly tied to Kennedy's personality and attitude, and not a result of any natural political occurrence. If Richard Nixon had won the presidency in

²⁴ Gasiorowski, Mark. 133.

²⁵ Pahlavi. 134.

1960 over him, there is a possibility that the Iranian Revolution may have happened sooner, given his strong support of the Shah he would demonstrate during his own presidency. On the other hand, the failure of Kennedy to support Amini further and his democratization plans was yet another reason contributing to the eventual revolution. Further, his failure to push for democratic reform alongside the White Revolution's economic reform also would have dramatic consequences in the future. Never the less, his personal decisions shaped American-Iranian relations and his decisions and indecisions had measurable impacts on the Iranian Revolution. The Shah, on the other hand, was happy to see Kennedy go and he found a new ally in the United States who closely resembled the one he had known in the years following the 1953 coup, Lyndon B. Johnson.

Johnson

Lyndon B. Johnson entered the White House with considerably more experience in dealing with Iran than any other American president. He had visited the country personally while he was the Vice President and had continued a personal relationship with the Shah during the Shah's visit to Washington in 1962. Ultimately it was Johnson's relationship with the Shah and not his concern with the Iranian people which would determine his administration's policy towards Iran. His administration shifted American policy firmly in to the pro-Shah camp, in sharp contrast to the more nuanced approach of the Kennedy administration which attempted but failed to push for lasting reforms within Iran. A number of things explain Johnson's new policy towards Iran, for one, Johnson strongly believed in the efficiency of force. While he did indeed believe in economic development, social justice, and political reform, the need for a bulwark American ally was an essential component of his administration's foreign policy²⁶. Thus, all American contact with opposition leaders in Iran were cut off, a different policy than that of the Kennedy administration, for under Johnson, America was not going to run the risk of annoying a faithful American ally. Another reason for Johnson's pro-Shah policy was his administration's preoccupation with the internationally unpopular Vietnam War, which put a constant strain on his foreign policy. Thus, he was grateful for any Third World country which appeared to be stable. Not only that, but the Shah was one of the few Third World leaders whom actually supported America's venture in to Vietnam, a policy which put him in Johnson's good graces. Yet another reason for Johnson's support of the Shah

²⁶ Bill, James. 176-177

was the Shah's friendly policy towards Israel. As the only state in the state in the Middle East to have warm relations with Israel, the Shah earned the respect of Johnson, who was personally committed to the Israeli cause. At the same time the Shah served as a counter balance in the region to Gamal Abdel Nasser, the revolutionary and nationalist leader of Egypt whom both Johnson and the Shah detested.

While the Shah backed American policy on the international stage, domestically, this was not necessarily the case. Within Iran, he allowed the press to publish numerous articles which condemned American policy sharply. Some criticized the Vietnam War as an example of American colonialism while others perpetuated the idea of petroleum imperialism. All the while, these articles supported the Shah at the expense of America. For example, the viral criticism of Western oil companies contained implications of Western responsibility for Mosaddegh's movement, and stated that the Shah alone was the one leader pushing for Iranian autonomy²⁷. This domestic anti-Americanism came at the same time that the Shah was pushing for more petroleum production and higher prices from Western companies so as to strengthen the economy of Iran. Thus the Shah, while not directly encouraging it, passively allowed anti-Americanism to flourish within Iran so as to boost his own standing amongst his people. Though he didn't publicly encourage it, the Shah would have been able to easily prevent the publication of anti-Americanism, just as he had censored any article critical of his regime. If the American diplomatic elites had bothered to pay attention to the domestic press of Iran they would have at least been aware at the extent which Iranians hated the United States. Ultimately though, the opinion of the average Iranian on the street was of little concern to American diplomats when compared to the opinion of the Shah and the Iranian elite. This anti-American

²⁷ Richards, Helmut. 23.

sentiment would fester for years and became a central component of most Iranians' political views. Had American diplomats cared to examine the opinions of the average Iranian, there could have been a potential for a readjustment in America's policy towards Iran, which could have altered the eventual revolution.

The Status of Forces Agreement and an Ayatollah Named Ruhollah Khomeini

Alongside the overthrow of Muhammad Mossadegh in 1953, 1964 was a critical year in U.S.-Iranian relations which represented a crucial signpost on the path the eventually led to the Iranian Revolution of 1978-79. On October 13, 1964, the Majlis passes a law which gave American military personnel and their dependants full diplomatic immunity, which in effect exempted any member of the American military from Iranian laws and courts²⁸. The U.S. Department of Defense had been pushing for Iran to adopt such a law for some time, but the Shah and his government were extremely reluctant to accept a policy that was a clear violation of Iran's national sovereignty. After plenty of stalling on the Iranian side, the Majlis passed the law which came to be known as the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), though domestically it became known as the Capitulations Agreement. The passage of the SOFA was instantaneous and caused a massive uproar amongst all Iranians regardless of their political leanings, this outrage only grew when twelve days later the Iranian government accepted a \$200 million loan from the United States, a loan seen as the American payoff for Iran's capitulation²⁹.

The secular and religious opposition within Iran bitterly opposed the agreement, and on October 26, 1964, one day after the Majlis accepted the \$200 million loan, a

²⁸ Pfau, Richard. 151.

²⁹ Pryor, Leslie. 88.

religious leader named Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini stood up and publicly condemned the agreement. His speech stands as one of the most important political speeches in modern Iranian history as it gave a voice to millions of disenchanted Iran and became a blueprint of internal opposition to the Shah. In his speech Khomeini attacked the United States and the Shah for attempting to destroy the dignity, integrity, and autonomy of Iran. Referring to the agreement, Khomeini stated

They have reduced the Iranian people to a level lower than that of an American dog. If someone runs over a dog belonging to an American, he will be prosecuted. Even if the Shah himself were to run over a dog belonging to an American, he would be prosecuted. But if an American cook runs over the Shah, or the marja' of Iran, or the highest official, no one will have the right to object...

Appealing to Islam and the Qur'an, he directly criticized the president of the United States and the Shah, while calling for a stronger and fiercer opposition to the Shah's regime.

As for those deputies who apparently opposed this affair, I have this to say to them: "Why did you not do something? Why did you not stand up and seize that despicable man by the collar?" Is this how you show your opposition, you simply sit there and say: "We are not in agreement," and then continue your flattery as usual? Is this opposition? You must create an uproar, right there in the Parliament. You must not allow them to pass this bill when you are opposed to it. Is it enough to say simply I am opposed? Well, we see that when you do they pass it anyway! You must not permit there to be such a Parliament. Kick these people out of the Parliament. We do not recognize this as a law. We do not recognize this Parliament as a true Parliament. We do not recognize this government as a true government. They are traitors, traitors to the people of Iran! O God, remedy the affairs of the Muslims (the audience replies with "Amen"). O God, bestow

majesty on this sacred religion of Islam! O God, destroy those individuals who are traitors to this land, who are traitors to Islam and to the Qur'an.³⁰

The Shah's government quickly dealt with Khomeini by exiling him to Turkey on November 4, 1964. Shortly after his exile Khomeini pointed out that the United States has tried to force similar immunity agreements on the governments of Pakistan, Indonesia, Turkey and West Germany, but all had rejected it while Iran agreed to it.³¹ Years later, after the revolution and his return to Iran, Khomeini still referred to the law, and in a 1982 address pointed out how it undercut Islamic principles and had been forced upon Iran by an outside power. In particular he blasted the special protection afforded to American's whose values were counter to Islam. Khomeini vowed that a surrender of national sovereignty would never occur again.³²

Prior to the SOFA, American intervention in Iranian affairs mainly occurred through unofficial, back-room deals, but with the passage of the Agreement, it became painfully obvious to all Iranians that their country was the victim of an imperialist power, and their leader was not looking out for their best interests. Furthermore, the speech given by Khomeini and his subsequent exile gave him immense popularity and support amongst the Iranian people and he continued to be the leader of the opposition movement up to the revolution. For his part, Johnson certainly could have avoided the entire situation by releasing Iran from any obligation to pass such a law. It was his personal reliance on the Defense Department's opinion which garnered his favor to the law, even when voices opposed to the agreement existed within his administration, namely the State Department. Johnson's personality however, strongly favored such actions which elevated the United

³⁰ 1964 Address from Ayatollah Khomeini to the People of Iran

³¹ Bill, James. 160.

³² Gasiorowski, Mark. 121.

States around the world, nevermind the resentment it might have created. Had he heeded the advice of the State Department or put less personal emphasis on the American military, the law would easily have disappeared, after all, no similar agreement was passed anywhere else in the world, yet America's military personnel stationed abroad survived without diplomatic immunity. Were it not for the agreement Iranian resentment of the United State would likely have still existed, but perhaps not been exacerbated as much. Also, the role of Khomeini would be greatly diminished, as it was his speech against the SOFA which elevated him in the eyes of the Iranian opposition. Never the less, the SOFA was not the only actions taken by the Johnson administration which alienated Iranians against the United States and the Shah.

Tightening Relations and Ignored Criticism

1965 continued the volatility of 1964, when on January 21, 1965, Prime Minister Hassan Ali Mansur was assassinated and on April 10 on of the Shah's personal body guards sprayed the royal palace with machine gun fire in an attempt on the Shah's life. Both men were deeply religious and their actions represented the growing clout of the religious opposition and its extremism. In the aftermath of these attacks, the Shah used them as an excuse to crackdown on dissidence. Despite the religious nature of the men, leftists and members of the intelligentsia were also rounded up and arrested along with the religious opposition in an attempt to quash the two strongest opposition movements.³³ These examples of radical opposition and other moderate opponents of the Shah's regime went largely ignored in the United States.

³³ Bill, James. 163.

Under Johnson, American-Iranian relations tightened considerably and the Shah visited the U.S. in 1964, 1965, 1967 and 1968, and the Shah saw Johnson as a kindred spirit who realized the realities of power and manipulation in politics, in contrast to his predecessor, Kennedy. The Shah showed his own cunning as he dealt with the two main issues he felt were a hindrance in his relations with the United States: limited weapons sales and oil quotas.³⁴

The Shah had a ravenous appetite for high tech military equipment, and was an avid pilot, yet to purchase such equipment from the United States he had to export more oil, and despite production quotas on oil companies, he ratcheted up pressure so much that the U.S. government intervened to convince oil companies to increase productions.³⁵ After he had been given permission to increase the flow of oil, he faced the larger challenge of securing arms sales. In 1965 and 1966 the Shah fumed at American advisors for charging him “discriminating” prices and that he was “tired of being treated like a school boy”³⁶. He reinforced this pressure with the tried and true methodology of courting the Soviet Union in order to frighten the United States into complying, and once again it worked. In 1965 and 1968 the Shah visited the Soviet Union while in 1966 the two countries signed a commercial steel and pipeline agreement and purchased \$110 million dollars in Soviet arms. Throughout 1966 he pressured the United States for increased arms supplies, especially for two F-4 squadrons. He also claimed he was being charged at \$3 million dollars a plane while Soviet Migs were being sold for \$700,000.³⁷ After intense pressure and political maneuvering, the Shah got his F-4s and much more.

³⁴ Blair, John. 23.

³⁵ Bharier, Jullian. 32.

³⁶ Roosevelt, Kermit. 137.

³⁷ Ibid. 143.

In 1967-68, the United States sold Iran \$96 million dollars worth of military equipment, this figure ballooned to \$289 million by 1969-70.

In addition to his personal maneuvering, the Shah could count on a group of growing supporters within Washington to promote a more pro-Pahlavi policy. This initially began in 1965 when U.S. ambassador to Iran, Armin Meyer, was replaced by Julius Holmes. While Meyer would promote Iranian affair objectively, Holmes changed this policy significantly. He discouraged Embassy staff from contacting opposition groups and presenting critical reports while he himself presented glowing reviews of the Shah, such that he was essentially the Shah's public relations advisor.³⁸ Johnson's National Security advisor Walt Barstow served a similar role by conveying Holmes' messages directly to the president, such that Johnson wrote a letter to Meyer in Tehran in 1968 saying "My relationship with His Majesty has been one of the real pleasures of my administration"³⁹.

Despite the pro-Shah atmosphere surrounding the Johnson administration, there were voices of criticism and concern. Iranian students and nationals residing in the United States flooded the State Department with letters and telegrams condemning the corruption and repression that characterized the Shah's rule. Never the less the communications were smothered by individuals such as Benjamin Reed, the executive at the Department of State.⁴⁰ It wasn't just average Iranians who attempted to alert the Johnson administration either; Dr. Ali Sheikholislam, the President of the National University of Iran wrote to Johnson that he himself was threatened with death and that "with the present situation in Iran, I have no the slightest doubt that you will have, in the

³⁸ Bill, James. 172.

³⁹ Ibid. 173.

⁴⁰ Harney, Desmond. 136

near future, another Vietnam or worse”, though just like other concerned Iranians, Sheikholislam’s concerns went ignored.⁴¹ American citizens with large clout in Washington were just as unsuccessful; Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas failed to alert anyone with the administration of the repression under the Shah when he sent a letter to the President stating that the repression and trials of dissidents after the assassination attempt on the Shah were “really trials of the political opposition, not of criminals”.⁴² Another individual, Princeton professor T. Cuyler Young, attempted to raise the issue of Pahlavi repression, but the Council on Foreign Relations chose not to publish his manuscript in a letter stating, “some of us felt that you stressed the issue of the royal dictatorship fairly close to the point of a political polemic and at the expense of other issues”, Young’s manuscript went unnoticed in the United States but was extremely popular within Iran.⁴³ Even within the U.S. embassy in Iran, low level embassy staff noted their concern to Ambassador Holmes, but to no avail.

Conclusion

Johnson was a vastly different figure than John F. Kennedy, and this showed in his personality and policies. Where Kennedy sought nuanced advice from an array of advisors, Johnson placed his confidence in himself, and judged the Shah as a strong, stable leader who was good friends with the United States in a world and time adrift in upheaval and turbulence; it is understandable then why he would initially throw his support behind the Shah. After years in the White House wherein he had the opportunity to learn more of the situation in Iran however, Johnson did nothing. It would be false to

⁴¹ Bill, James. 175.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid. 176.

say that nobody within the United States saw the growing resentment within Iran, and by surrounding himself with like minded people, Johnson guaranteed an unwavering pro-Shah policy. Though given his perspicacity for straight forward, real politics, plus his personal affinity towards the Shah, there is no evidence to suggest that Johnson would alter his position regarding Iran, even with a more open minded administration.

It wasn't just a general ignorance of the popular resentment against the Shah that Johnson pursued, for this ignorance alone would have at least left the situation in Iran similar to where it was at the end of the Kennedy administration. Johnson actually exasperated the Iranian populace by pushing for the Status of Forces Agreement which arguably had little measurable benefit for the American military. As Khomeini noted, the United States sought similar agreements in other countries to no avail, yet still maintained good relations with them. In the eyes of the Iranian people SOFA represented an end to backroom deals and ushered in an era where the United States flagrantly and publicly flaunted its violation of Iranian sovereignty.

Also under Johnson, the United States accelerated its arms deals to Iran significantly. This only further angered the Iranian populace who saw with concern the growing authoritarian nature of the Shah's rule, a rule that only seemed to exist because of American weapons the Shah had purchased and used to quash dissidence. Also, though indirectly, accelerated by Johnson was growing rampant corruption within the Iranian government. By raising oil quotas on Iran, money flow to the county went from a trickle to a flood, and with no domestic mechanisms in place to counter it, corruption skyrocketed. This corruption further alienated average Iranians away from the United States and the West. Seeing only a growing militarism and skyrocketing corruption as the

result of relations with the United States, more and more Iranians turned to more radical elements of society which opposed such a relationship. These two groups were Marxist-Leninists and Radical Islamists. All of these facts demonstrate that Lyndon Johnson not only failed to prevent the Iranian Revolution, but very likely accelerated it due to general ignorance and mismanagement of American-Iranian relations.

Nixon

If under Johnson Iran had become America's close friend, under Nixon the two were practically bedfellows. The Shah epitomized the Nixon Doctrine by defending mutual American and Iranian interests independently without intervention by the United States, though in order to do so, the Shah required arms, and Richard Nixon made sure he got them. The Shah's international clout grew tremendously under the Nixon administration, as any previous concerns on his growing personal power were routinely ignored by Nixon and his chief advisor and head of the National Security Agency, Henry Kissinger. With the onset of Détente between the United States and the Soviet Union and a general easing of tensions, the Shah was able to change his foreign policy from one of a defensive nature leery of the Soviet Union, to a more proactive one in which he projected Iranian power in to the Middle East. The Nixon doctrine essentially gave the Shah free reign to do as he saw fit, both domestically and abroad; a decision, diplomat George Ball would later tell President Jimmy Carter, which played a large part in the Shah's growing megalomania.⁴⁴

Besides being politically aligned, the Shah and Richard Nixon formed the closest personal relationship that the Shah had with any American President. A relationship that extended far beyond the reigns of both men, for Nixon continued his communications with the Shah up to the Iranian Revolution, and afterwards urged him to remain

⁴⁴ Bill, James. 252.

politically active and not, “fade away”. After the Shah died, Nixon attended his funeral and declared that the Shah “was a real man”.⁴⁵

Though Nixon didn’t oversee any direct actions in Iran, such as Operation Ajax or the Status of Forces Agreement, which deeply damaged American-Iranian relations, his overall foreign policy towards the Shah and Iran was arguably just as devastating. It was under Nixon that the Shah’s rule grew alarmingly authoritarian and when opposition movements were forced underground and radicalized, this did just as much if not more to push Iran to revolution than either of the two previously mentioned actions.

The Explosive Growth of the Weapons Trade

Throughout his reign, the Shah’s desire for American arms was unquenchable, even under the Johnson administration; he was quick to complain to Americans who would listen that he was getting a raw deal from the American President. Finally, with the ascension of Richard Nixon to the American Presidency, the floodgates were open, and the Shah was free to spend as much on American arms as he desired. This was the culmination of a May 30-31, 1972 visit Richard Nixon made to Tehran with Henry Kissinger. During this meeting Nixon made the unprecedented promise to the Shah that he could purchase any conventional weapon from the United States he wanted, among these were the extremely sophisticated and high-tech F-14 and F-15 aircrafts.⁴⁶ This agreement greatly alarmed the Department of State and the Department of Defense especially, for while these arms negotiations were going on the Pentagon sent Nixon briefings recommending the United States not commit itself to selling the Shah the F-14

⁴⁵ Ibid. 212

⁴⁶ Pryor, Leslie. 68.

or F-15, laser guided bombs, and that there be no further increase of American uniformed technical personnel in Iran. Despite this, Nixon and Kissinger went ahead with their unprecedented agreement.⁴⁷

Under Nixon and his successor Gerald Ford, the sale of arms from America to Iran took place at levels never seen before in international political history. Between 1972 and 1977, the value of American military sales to Iran amounted to \$16.2 billion. In that same time period the Iranian defense budget increased from \$1.4 billion to \$9.4 billion, a 680% increase. By 1977 the military establishment in Iran absorbed 40% of the Iranian budget.⁴⁸

This surge in weapons transfer did not go unnoticed in the United States. An unusually critical report arose from a Senate Committee on Foreign Relations in July 1976 which noted the problems associated with the growing number of Americans in Iran. “Anti-Americanism could become a serious problem in Iran, as it has elsewhere, if there were to be a change in government in Iran”, the report went on to state that in the event of a crisis “United States personnel in Iran could become, in a sense, hostages”.⁴⁹ It also pointed out that Iran would not be able to properly absorb some weapons, as the F-14 Tomcat was the most electronically complex jet in the world which even the United States Navy had difficulty in keeping operational. Ignoring these concerns, Nixon pushed through the deal and an F-14 training base was established near Isfahan, and plans called for a ten-thousand person American settlement there in the heart of Iran.

A seedier side of the F-14 deal was revealed when Grumman Aerospace was implicated in a scandal in 1976 in which the company agreed to pay \$28 million to

⁴⁷ Bill, James. 201.

⁴⁸ Pryor, Leslie. 63.

⁴⁹ Cottam, Richard. 4.

various Iranian officials in order to “speed up” the \$2.2 billion contract to supply Iran with eighty F-14s. Grumman admitted culpability though General Hassan Toufanian, the Shah’s deputy-minister of War and the head arms procurement officer, responded with indignation and stated that “This shows that foreign countries want to loot us. We will not allow this and we will pull the extra money out of their throats”.⁵⁰ Despite the domestic Iranian uproar that arose from the scandal, Toufanian remained a close advisor to the Shah and face no reprimand.

Bribery had become so endemic as early as 1973 that Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger sent a retired Colonel, Richard Hallock to Iran so as to provide the Shah and Toufanian with some independent guidance on the procurement of weapons. Given this position with access to bribery from both Iranian and Americans, it is understandable, though regrettable, how quickly Hallock came to fall pray to the same corruption he was supposed to weed out. In fact, only two years later, in 1975, the Defense Department sent a follow up advisor to Tehran, Eric von Marbod. Marbod reported that Hallock was already working as a private citizen for Toufanian and was in the “enviable position of advising the Shah on what to buy, advising the United States government on what to recommend to him, helping the arms supply companies close the deals, and overseeing the program under which all these transactions were made”⁵¹.

Though the Shah had long pined for advanced weaponry throughout his reign, and often received plush deals under previous Presidents, Nixon had opened the floodgates to Iran. The Iranian people could only watch in seething anger as their leader squandered away their nation’s oil money on jets and missiles instead of schools and hospitals.

⁵⁰ Bill, James. 210.

⁵¹ Pryor, Leslie. 70.

Though there was an overall growth in the domestic Iranian economy and in the realms of health and education, the enormity of the weapons deals with the United States made this growth seem inconsequential, and Iranians could only guess at how much better off their country would be if the money which went towards weapons went towards their country. The accompanying corruption was also unsettling to Iranians who saw their country being sold to American businessmen. This corruption echoed the corruption that accompanied the late 19th and early 20th century sale of Iranian mineral rights to the British, the only difference was that one imperial power had replaced another.

The Politics and Economy of Repression

The Shah ushered in the 1970s with one of the most extravagant parties in human history. 1971 commemorated 2,500 years of the Persian monarchy and culminated in a week long party of Iranian and International elite at the ancient capitol of Persepolis. The guest list included officials from 69 countries, including 20 kings, 5 Queens, 21 princes or princesses, 16 presidents, 3 premiers, and 4 Vice Presidents, plus several hundred leaders in the industry and arts.⁵² Cost estimates reached up to \$200 million, though the average Iranian only witnessed the celebrations on tv or in newspapers. To his opponents, this was yet another example of the Shah courting westerners, trying to impress foreign elite while his own people saw little benefit from the celebrations. Iran in the 1970s would experience skyrocketing oil revenue and foreign investment, though this investment only seemed to benefit the upper echelon of Iranian society, and average Iranians saw their country divvied up by foreign elites while political repression reached new heights. All of this was encouraged by the Nixon administration, who didn't care

⁵² Richards, Helmut. 14.

about the Shah's methodology of governance, only the results, and the result was a stable and strong American ally.

Following the festivities of 1971, the Iranian Minister of Economy and American Vice President Spiro Agnew addressed the 1972 Iranian-American investment conference in New York City. In attendance were representatives from all reached of American industry, including executives from PepsiCo, Allied Chemical, Goodyear, Pan American Airways, Westinghouse, First National Bank of Chicago, and many others.⁵³ The next year, in 1973, the Shah made his tenth trip to Washington and both countries agreed to establish a joint economic commission to accelerate commercial relations. A March 1975 accord committed Iran to spending \$15 billion dollars on American goods and services, while officials estimated trade would reach \$26 billion over the next six years. These economic agreements combined with the burgeoning military trade between the two nations seemed to weld the two countries into one huge, commercial, binational conglomerate.⁵⁴

These industries scrambled over one another to sign the best deals, and competition for contracts were a sordid affair, involving bribery, huge commissions, and payoffs of all sizes. This situation only allowed contempt to fester in Iran, such that a June 1972 U.S. embassy report on corruption in Iran was entitled, "American Companies and Influence Peddlers" and it listed seven American companies that were "to the embassy's certain knowledge, buying the influence of persons listed with them."⁵⁵ This seedier side of capitalism was apparent to Iranians on the street who placed blame squarely at America's feet. In fact, the Shah began a tendency in the mid-1970s to shrug

⁵³ Abrahamian, Ervand. 54.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 55.

⁵⁵ Harney, Desmond. 137

off more and more blame for Iran's woes on the United States. This scapegoating strategy became so apparent that even the United States government began to take notice, and in mid 1976 became alarmed. A Department of State report that May began: "In recent months the Shah has permitted unusually severe criticism of the United States in Iranian media. He has lent his own name to sweeping charges against the U.S., raising public question about the bases of the alliance and U.S. reliability."⁵⁶ The Shah had previously used this tactic in the mid-1960s, and just as it had then, this policy enflamed anti-Americanism, though did not succeed in deflecting criticism away from himself. At the time of the report, Gerald Ford was in the White House and apparently made no notice of the report, for American policy towards Iran went unchanged.

American policy towards Iran did not go wholly unchallenged in the 1970s. A handful of congressional Democrats such as Edward Kennedy, William Proxmire, Gaylord Nelson, and John Culver began questioning the huge arms sales to such a blatantly repressive country. A 1975 Senate inquiry and 1976 House inquiry produced alarming evidence of repression and torture. A 1975 National Intelligence Estimate warned of serious internal problems in Iran and analyzed various opposition groups in considerable detail.⁵⁷ These and other reports from the government and academic fields noted the fundamental instability of the Pahlavi regime. These reports were largely futile in face of the outspoken acclaim that leaders in industry and government praised on the Shah and Iran. In fact, the last American ambassadors to Iran came from military and security background and encouraged the Shah to keep up his ruling ways. This was especially true for Nixon's Ambassador to Iran, Richard Helms, who had been the head

⁵⁶ Bill, James. 210

⁵⁷ Ibid. 211.

of the CIA up until his nomination to the post in 1973. This appointment was viewed by average Iranians as a blatant admission that the United States through the CIA had been controlling events within Iran since 1953, the only difference now was that the control was formal and official.

Conclusion

The Nixon-Kissinger-Ford trifecta determined the direction of U.S.- Iran relations through much of the 1970s. The Nixon doctrine in particular is responsible for the United States government ignoring the internal problems within Iran. Gone were the days of Kennedy's reformist push; even Johnson had paid lip service to the needs of the Iranian people and had capped American military trade with Iran, even if he increased sales dramatically. Nixon, on the other hand, concluded that a content Shah would best serve America's interests in Iran; if the United States could make money through unlimited arms and commercial trade, all the better. Though the Shah does hold responsibility for his actions, the United States government could not just support any dictator without question and hope it would face no consequence, the Nixon and Ford administrations, however, did just that.

Their support for the Shah could not be defended as just a continuation of established American foreign policy either. The United States invested its nation's interests on a non-Western, absolute monarchy on a scale unprecedented in its history. Never before had arms flowed so freely from one nation to another, nor had America ever gave such blind support to a foreign leader. Nixon had to specifically go about changing established American policy in order to reach such a relationship with the Shah, Ford,

although in office for a short time, did absolutely nothing to change this. In fact, the only political reform to come about in Iran during either administration was initiated by the Shah himself. Though limited in nature, and under his control, this selected visible reform was nonetheless an attempt by the Shah to steer his country away from the violence and repression that had dominated the decade. This new policy was only beginning when Jimmy Carter took the oath of office on January 15, 1977 to become America's thirty-ninth President.

Carter

Only two years after his inauguration, Jimmy Carter could do nothing but watch as one of America's strongest allies collapsed in to chaos. January 16, 1979 marked the last time the Shah ever set foot in Iran, and he spent the rest of his life in exile; meanwhile the United States was forced to walk a fine diplomatic line of recognizing a revolutionary, intensely anti-American regime. This delicate balancing act didn't last long, as on November 4, 1979 America's embassy in Tehran was taken over by revolutionaries and its staff held hostage for 444 days; both countries are still affected by the consequences today.

The first two years of Carter's administration were the most critical in the history of bilateral relations between the United States and Iran. The year 1977 set the groundwork for revolution, while 1978 marked the earliest stages of the revolution when there was still an opportunity to halt it in its tracks. Domestically, the red hot Iranian economy had cooled as oil revenue leveled off between 1975 and 1978.⁵⁸ Meanwhile agricultural output had stagnated, and the steady migration from rural areas to big cities had shifted in to a stampede. Although most of the country was seriously affected by this economic stagnation, the rampant corruption that had accompanied the oil boom showed no signs of stopping. Simultaneously, a Shia Islam religious revival occurred unprecedented in Iran's modern history as Iranians sought refuge from the oppressive secular Pahlavi rule. 1977 was also the year in which the Shah announced dramatic liberal reforms. These reforms, which failed in fundamentally altering the political

⁵⁸ Blair, John. 164.

structure of Iran, and the subsequent American policy of supporting the Shah despite this failure ultimately led to the stormy year of 1978.

Toothless Reform

In his inaugural address to the United States, Jimmy Carter stated, “Our moral sense dictates a clear preference for those societies which share with us an abiding respect for individual human rights”. Carter stressed that it was in America’s best interest to support human rights as it was morally right and would strengthen American allies in the Third World. This new American outlook significantly worried the Shah, who had thrived under the Nixon-Ford-Kissinger years. Carter, on the other hand, was completely new and unknown to the Shah, thus he quickly pushed for an official visit to size up his new ally. The Shah had his first chance in May 1977, when Secretary of State Cyrus Vance visited Tehran where he held an important meeting with the Shah. During the meeting Vance informed the Shah that the United States was still planning on carrying out the sale of 160 F-16 aircraft, as well that the President would seek congressional approval for the sale of the sophisticated airborne warning and control system (AWACS). After these issues were dealt with, Vance also mentioned America’s support for human rights, though also made sure to praise the Shah’s recent policy of liberalization. The Shah responded that Iran had a 2,500 year history of human rights, and that he agreed with this principle, as long as it did not threaten Iranian security. One U.S. embassy official noted after the meeting, “Vance only mentioned the issue of human rights to the Shah; there were many more important issues to be discussed.”⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Bill, James. 227.

Carter's emphasis on human rights only went so far with Iran, and his longstanding support for the Shah demonstrate that he was just as concerned with security and economic issues as any of his predecessors. Iran was centrally important to the Carter administration's foreign policy, and Vance gave five reasons why: 1) The Shah provided important economic assistance to countries in the area; 2) He helped reduce tensions in the Middle East; 3) His forces had helped defeat an insurgency in Oman; 4) He was a reliable supplier of oil to the west; 5) He was Israel's primary source of oil. Compounded with these issues, was the fact that Iran accounted for half of all American arms sales. Thus, according to Vance, "we decided early on that it was in our national interest to support the Shah so he could continue to play a constructive role in regional affairs."⁶⁰ Despite this private conclusion amongst members of the Carter administration, the President still publicly declared his strong support for human rights. Because of this, after Vance's visit word spread quickly through Iran that the Shah had been given an ultimatum: either liberalize or be removed.⁶¹ This wishful thinking was widely circulated until it became fact, and although it was significantly different from what Vance and the Shah had actually discussed, Iranians on the street began projecting unrealistic hopes on the new American President.

Back in the United States, Carter's about face stunned his liberal allies in the Senate when his administration campaigned to sell the Shah the \$1.23 billion AWACS in addition to the \$1.8 billion sale of 160 F-16 fighter jets. During his campaign for the presidency, Carter had criticized the Nixon and Ford administrations' policy of unlimited arms sales. He stated "I am particularly concerned by our nation's role as the world's

⁶⁰ Vance, Cyrus. 317.

⁶¹ Abrahamian, Ervand. 58.

leading arms salesman. How can we be both the world's leading champion of peace and the world's leading supplier of the weapons of war?"⁶² Never the less, upon his ascension to the presidency, he was quick to continue these policies in order to maintain good relations with the Shah. During a Senate hearing on the issue, Senator Thomas Eagleton stated that the deal was "born in the atmosphere of secret deals of prior administrations" and that the United States was putting itself at risk by investing so much in the Shah since Iran's government, "centered on a mortal leader, is fragile and subject to radical change."⁶³ Senator Barry Goldwater argued that the primary reason the administration supported such vast arms sales was for economic reasons and to balance the budget. Eagleton responded that arms sales should be part of the "overall foreign policy interests of the United States and not by considerations of commercial advantage."⁶⁴ After much debate and some compromise, the Shah was able to get his arms. With this gesture of goodwill, Carter was looking forward to his New Year's visit to Tehran.

The Carter Administration and the Iranian Revolution

Iran under the great leadership of the Shah is an island of stability in one of the more troubled areas of the world. This is a great tribute to you, Your Majesty, and to your leadership, and to the respect, admiration and love which your people give to you. These words, given by Jimmy Carter during his visit to Iran for New Years Eve and New Years Day, were a slap in the face to the Iranian people who quickly realized that Carter was not their reformist hero who would push the Shah to make sweeping reforms in Iran. To the average Iranian, Carter was cut from the same cloth as those who preceded him.

⁶² Pryor, Leslie. 128.

⁶³ Ibid. 130.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

Carter's support for human rights was suffocated by his boundless praise for the Shah, and this praise led the Pahlavi regime to believe it could continue to pursue its policy of limited reform coupled with repression. Less than a week after Carter's visit, the Shah's regime planted a highly critical article of Ayatollah Khomeini in the Newspaper *Ittali'at* which assailed his character and accused him of being a tool for the British. The next day clerics and religious students in the city of Qum staged massive demonstrations and marches. The government felt sufficiently comfortable that it had Carter's unwavering support and had no qualms in ordering police to open fire on the protestors, killing two dozen and injuring many more.⁶⁵ This crackdown sparked a long series of demonstrations and violent government reprisals which would grow larger every month, culminating in the September 8, 1978 event known as Black Friday, when government forces killed 88 and injured hundreds. After this, support for the Shah dissipated domestically and internationally. This pivotal event marked the point where any hope for compromise extinguished and the Shah's fate was sealed as demonstrations swelled in size, paralyzing the country and forcing the Shah in to exile on January 16, 1979.⁶⁶

The events of 1978-79 shocked the foreign policy establishment of the United States, though most quickly took to defending themselves and accusing others of losing Iran. President Carter himself doled out a certain level of blame to those he saw as responsible for not doing more to halt the revolution in its tracks. Ultimately, the failure of the United States to prevent the Iranian Revolution falls primarily on the National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and his staff; the State Department; and President Carter himself.

⁶⁵ Harney, Desmond. 138.

⁶⁶ Abrahamian, Ervand. 160.

The State Department: Division and Impotence

Cyrus Vance, the Secretary of State, was a thoroughly professional official, though was thoroughly preoccupied with the Camp David Accords between Israel and Egypt, thus he often relied on others within the State Department to provide him information on Iran. In fact Deputy Secretary Warren Christopher and Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Harold Saunders, who would normally spend more time studying Iran, were *also* busy concerning themselves with the Camp David Accords. Because of this Iranian concerns were even lower on the priority list of the State Department and the responsibility of midlevel officials; it was here in the State Department where no consensus could be reached on Iran.

Saunders and Christopher, and even Vance himself were traditional Shah supporters, making it difficult for important warnings to be noted, never the less some still tried. By mid 1978 Henry Precht, the Iran desk officer, was deeply concerned about the growing violence within Iran. He frequently called meetings with Iranian scholarly experts where it was determined that, “The Shah cannot occupy his country forever, and perhaps his only chance is backing off his plateau of absolute power. Nothing less than his survival and that of his dynasty are at stake.”⁶⁷ Precht took this analysis very seriously, and though he was later scapegoated by the likes of Brzezinski, he was one of the first American officials to recognize the fragile state of the Shah’s power in Iran. His attempts to convey this to the higher echelons of the State Department and the White House however, were largely drowned out by the conventional pro-Pahlavi voices.

In Tehran, William Sullivan became the new ambassador to Iran in June 1977, a tough and traditional Foreign Service officer; he had no formal experience with Iran.

⁶⁷ Bill, James.246.

Never the less he was determined to accurately convey the state of Iranian affairs back to Washington, it only took a while for him to truly grasp the severity of the situation in Iran. As late as May, 1978 signed off a memorandum assessing, “In a major sense, Iran has now reached the position of a stable and moderate mid-level power... There are no outstanding issues of such serious magnitude that need to be identified in this memorandum.”⁶⁸ Sullivan was so confident in Iran’s stability that he took a long vacation back to the United States from June to August of that year. It was not until November 5, that he sent a cable titled “Thinking the Unthinkable”, in which he indicated the United States should prepare a contingency plan if the Shah were to fall, that he seriously considered the fact that the Shah’s regime might not survive. To his credit, Sullivan recognized his own initial shortcomings in failing to recognize the instability in Iran earlier, however he fervently spent the remainder of 1978 and early 1979 in trying to convince the President that Iran was in serious trouble. He even recommended in late 1978 that the United States establish communications with Khomeini in Paris. This and other recommendations increasingly fell on deaf ears in Washington however as Brzezinski and his staff had taken charge of Iran policy while Secretary Vance steadfastly refused to believe the Shah was in danger. The failure of the State Department in conveying the situation in Iran to the White House demonstrates the general blackout of communication that those with the most concern faced.

Brzezinski and his Staff: Influence and Ignorance

Brzezinski was a hardliner who consistently argued that only a harsher crackdown by the Shah against protestors would save his regime. Brzezinski’s major understanding of Iran came from his close friend, the Iranian Ambassador to America, Ardeshir Zahedi;

⁶⁸ Abrahamian, Ervand. 154.

between the two of them they reinforced each others' opinions of Iran throughout 1978. Furthermore, Brzezinski quickly began to dominate American foreign policy decisions such that former Secretary of State George Ball stated, "[Brzezinski] was operating in a freewheeling manner... sending telegrams to dignitaries outside State Department Channels, and even hiring a press advisor so he could compete with the Secretary of State as the enunciator of United States policy."⁶⁹ By the time Cyrus Vance had belatedly some to understand the severity of the situation in Iran, Brzezinski had already had the ear of the president. After the incessant concerns voiced by Sullivan from Tehran, Brzezinski nearly convinced Carter to fire him, only the intervention of Vance saved him.⁷⁰

At the urging of Brzezinski, Carter agreed to send a high ranking military advisor to Iran to, this man was General Robert Huyser. Huyser had visited Iran many times before and pointed out that "I had many audiences with the Shah, at which point mutual respect and trust were established."⁷¹ His ultimate message to the Iranian military was one which encouraged the military to support the Prime Minister, Shapour Bakhtiar, and if his government fell, then to enact a coup de tat and establish a military regime.⁷² The decision to send a military advisor to Iran severely undercut the authority of Ambassador Sullivan, and when the two met they sharply disagreed on their assessment of Iran's military. Huyser believed Iran's military was the only thing that could prevent the regimes collapse, while Sullivan believed there had already been too much force used, and that the only hope lied in a unity government with members of the current regime and the opposition in addition the vast democratic reform. Revolutionaries vehemently

⁶⁹ Bill, James. 249.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 250.

⁷¹ Huyser. 6.

⁷² Ibid. 88.

opposed Huyser's visit, and saw it as an American attempt to force a military solution to the protests. Furthermore, they considered Huyser extremely ignorant of the situation in Iran compared to Sullivan who was actively seeking a diplomatic solution. Husyer even admitted that he spent his entire time in Iran with military elite and made no attempt to talk to average Iranians.⁷³

Ironically, the Shah himself disagreed with Brzezinski's belief that additional military measures were necessary to keep him on the throne. After thousands had been killed on the streets of Iran, the Shah realized that further military responses would only hasten the collapse of the country. He was also incredulous that Brzezinski had vetoed Sullivan's proposal to make direct contact with Khomeini in Paris. Later in February 1979, Brzezinski was as disgusted with the Iranian military as he had been with the Shah, and he wrote that "the Iranian military evidently did not have the will to act"⁷⁴. Ultimately Brzezinski blamed nearly everyone for failing to prevent the revolution: Ambassador Sullivan, the Shah, and the Iranian military.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Jimmy Carter himself must be held responsible for the confused and inconsistent policy his administration pursued that contributed to the disastrous foreign policy loss that resulted from the Iranian Revolution. He began his Presidency with a heavy public emphasis on human rights, and this presented him the initial hopeful support of the Iranian people, unfortunately he provided no follow up to his words, and Iranians felt betrayed and incensed at his duality. Furthermore, he relied too much on the advice

⁷³ Husyer. 18.

⁷⁴ Brzezinski. 393.

of his National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski. Carter himself was an extremely intelligent man who had enormous capacity of storing facts and information; unfortunately he seemed unable to connect these facts to one another. Brzezinski held a very sovietcentric view of world affairs, and strongly believed in realism and the use of force. This straightforward viewpoint clashed with the more nuanced voices coming from the State Department. Carter's decision to throw his support behind Brzezinski may have made his initial foreign policy decisions easier, though in the long run the effects were disastrous. The fact that he consistently ignored the advice from Ambassador Sullivan, a man who was witnessing first hand the events in Iran, at the behest of Brzezinski is difficult to defend.

Furthermore, Carter himself made poor decisions regarding the crisis in Iran. He personally vetoed the proposal that the United States establish contact with Khomeini, the only issue that both Sullivan and General Huyser agreed upon. He also enraged Iranian protestors when he telephoned the Shah the day after Black Friday, with hundred of Iranians dead or injured it was publicized that he contacted the Shah to tell him he still had full American support. This convinced Iranians that the United States was determined to oppose the revolution at all costs.⁷⁵ He continued to publicly declare American Support for the Shah and his belief that he would stay on the throne up until his exile on January 16, 1978. Though he was given inconsistent and incorrect information from his advisors, Carter had plenty of opportunities to alter America's relationship with Iran. Unfortunately when he did make proactive decisions, such as pushing for arms sales and publicly supporting the Shah in spite of his violent crackdowns, Carter only inflamed

⁷⁵ Bill, James. 258.

the situation such that the last opportunity the United States had in preventing or fundamentally altering the Iranian Revolution was lost.

Conclusion

Many American actions taken towards Iran represented important shifts in American foreign policy. Operation Ajax marked the first time that America actively partook in a coup in a foreign nation to further its interests. The Shah was the first authoritarian ruler that America blindly supported at the expense of a domestic population's interests. Finally the Iranian Revolution itself marked a fervent, religious backed anti-Americanism that continues to exist to this day.

It is too easy to declare that one person can't alter the tide of history, and that climactic events such as the Iranian Revolution are ultimately decided by the complex structure that exists in international relations. Every President from Dwight Eisenhower to Jimmy Carter had opportunities to personally determine the fate of Iran, though they may not have realized it at such times. More often than not though, these presidents chose detrimental policies that expedited the path to revolution. When given opportunities to intervene in Iran on the behalf of the Iranian people, opportunities that could have prevented or fundamentally altered the revolution, most decided against it. The only Presidents who showed some support of reform, Kennedy and Carter, pursued inconsistent policy that ultimately made no lasting impact. Ultimately it is the personal decisions of America's presidents that determine American foreign policy, and any president who fails to grasp the magnitude of their decisions runs the risk of calamity such as the Iranian Revolution.

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