

# **BUILDING A CLIENT STATE: AMERICAN ARMS POLICIES TOWARDS IRAN, 1950–1963**

STEPHEN MCGLINCHY

*ABSTRACT: Precious little has been written in academic scholarship about the US arms relationship with Iran. Much of the scholarly focus has been drained into an orbital vortex caused by twin crises in Iranian history: the 1953 British and American sponsored coup and the preceding oil blockade, and the 1979 Islamic revolution that swept the Shah from power. Hence, the years in-between 1953 and 1979 are often treated only in passing. A major feature of this period was an ever escalating arms relationship between Iran and the US which progressively grew both qualitatively and quantitatively throughout the Cold War from a relatively minor aid relationship into a major arms credit partnership; within which Iran became the US's largest arms export customer by 1971. This article focuses on the very early years of the relationship between 1950 and 1963 within which successive US Presidents viewed Iran as a relatively weak chess piece in a sensitive region, with military aid being one of the major levers with which to secure the stabilisation and pro-American disposition of Iran in the emerging Cold War context.*

**KEYWORDS:** Iran, Shah, Military, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Truman, Persian Gulf, Containment

## INTRODUCTION

Precious little has been written in academic scholarship about the US arms relationship with Iran. Much of the scholarly focus has been drained into an orbital vortex caused by twin crises in Iranian history: the 1953 British and American sponsored coup and the preceding oil blockade, and the 1979 Islamic revolution that swept the Shah from power. Hence, the years in-between 1953 and 1979 are often treated only in passing in the literature. A major feature of this period was an ever escalating arms relationship between Iran and the US which progressively grew both qualitatively and quantitatively throughout the Cold War from a relatively minor

aid relationship into a major arms credit partnership; within which Iran became the US's largest arms export customer by 1971. This article focuses on the very early years of the relationship between 1950 and 1963 within which successive US Presidents viewed Iran as a relatively weak chess piece in a sensitive region, with military aid being one of the major levers with which to secure the stabilisation and pro-American disposition of Iran in the emerging Cold War context.

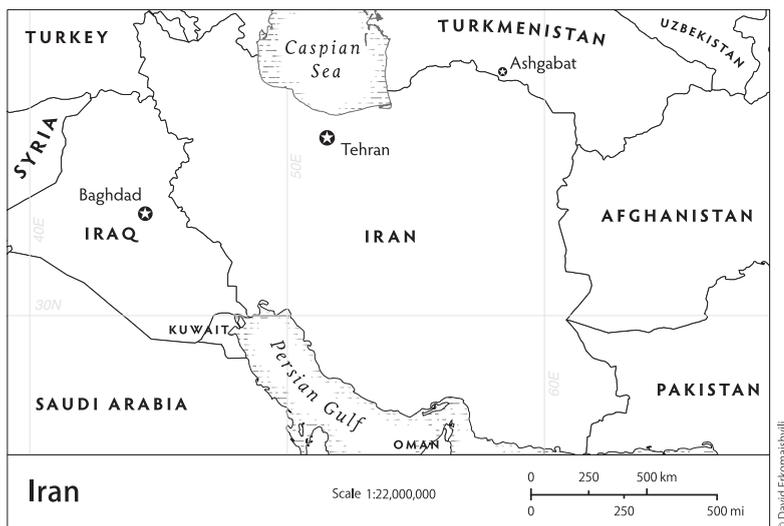
Following the end of the Second World War, Iran was the scene of the first confrontation in what would become known as the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union (USSR). In early 1946, the USSR refused to withdraw from northern Iran where its troops had been deployed since 1941 to keep what was a vital allied wartime supply line clear from Axis interference. This series of events, although resolved without major conflict, established at a very early juncture the potential importance of Iran within the emerging Cold War structure as a nation placed on a geostrategic hotspot, between the Soviet Union and the Persian Gulf region. The Gulf contained the world's largest pool of oil, the steady supply of which was vital to keep the Japanese and Western European economies fuelled. In October 1946, after the resolution of the Soviet-Iran crisis, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) concluded the first major US strategic appraisal of Iran. The report confirmed that both oil resources and strategic location, which provided 'a base for both defensive and counteroffensive operations against the Soviet Union, gave Iran major strategic importance.'<sup>1</sup> Hence, an emerging American approach of shoring up Iran and stabilising it through military and economic aid began to fall into place, to allow the (as then) weak and underdeveloped nation to withstand any further adventurism from its northern neighbour.

#### CRISIS IN IRAN

While Europe absorbed the bulk of early Cold War US attention via the on-going division of Germany and the emergence of the fabled Iron Curtain, the young "Shah" of Iran, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, was keen to ensure the Truman administration did not forget about Iran. As the Iranian Constitution stood in 1949 the Shah only held power thinly via executive control over the Iranian military. Thus

the Shah, who had an autocratic disposition, understandably coveted a strong military to buttress his throne, a theme that would come to characterise his long reign which endured until 1979. With the strategic importance of Iran clearly established by events in 1946, the Shah sought an arms partnership with America that would enable him to secure his domestic position, and simultaneously enable the US to shore up a Cold War weak-spot in a sensitive region. In short, a win-win scenario for both nations.

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The Shah undertook a long visit to the US through November and December 1949 and used much of his time to petition for military assistance to enable Iran to bulk up its rudimentary armed forces. The Shah had narrowly survived an assassination attempt in February 1949, which earned him sympathy in Washington and contributed to a State Department report prior to his 1949 visit that expressed the emerging importance of the Shah in the broader containment effort, primarily via his role in containing the spread of communism in his own country via the Tudeh party who had been blamed for the assassination attempt and subsequently banned. However there were lingering doubts in the Truman administration over the Shah's ability to maintain his position, and in his ability as a leader,<sup>2</sup> and hence doubts over to what extent the US should

entrench itself to him. Consequently the Shah left the US with an assurance that aid would be forthcoming, yet reservations remained over the exact nature that aid would take due to Iran's instability.

Military aid to Iran eventually began on a very limited scale in 1950, as part of a seven-year programme of \$124 million, the bulk of which was delivered between 1950 and 1954.<sup>3</sup> The consistent American position established by Truman in 1950 and subsequently maintained by Eisenhower, was that the aid programme was intended *only* to build Iran's forces up to the level where they could be effective to facilitate the internal security and viability of Iran, and of the Shah's pro-American regime. Yet, the Shah consistently read his regional position differently, desiring a military that could enable him to provide for his own defence, raise Iran's international profile, and gradually rise to a position of prominence in the region – fulfilling (as he saw it) Iran's rightful place in history as the heir to the Persian Empire. Hence, from the outset the perceptions in Washington and the perceptions of the Shah over military aid were deeply mismatched.

On 10 January 1953, ten days prior to assuming office, Dwight D. Eisenhower noted in his diary that he and his Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles had set out four key priorities for Middle Eastern policy noted in order of importance: First was a new system of wide spectrum asymmetric containment – replacing the dominant prevailing wisdom of the Truman administration based on NSC-68; second was resolving the crisis surrounding the Iranian oil blockade which had resulted from Iranian nationalisation of what had been a British oil concession; third was dealing with British disputes with Egypt over basing rights in the Suez Canal; and fourth was a solution to the Arab-Israeli dispute.<sup>4</sup> In line with the aforementioned, Eisenhower set into motion a *New Look* study into containment options via Project Solarium, and attention swiftly turned to Iran.

The Shah had become increasingly sidelined by a powerful governing coalition, the National Front, which rallied for a revised oil concession, and eventually mandated nationalisation of the AIOC in March 1951, unilaterally snatching Britain's largest overseas commercial asset. The British responded with a blockade and economic sanctions, which gradually ground Iranian oil exports to a halt.<sup>5</sup> What was to the British an economic dispute eventually became a Cold War issue to the Americans, complete with undertones of

fears of both disruption to the oil supply to its western allies, and of domestic nationalism in Iran turning leftward to provide a fertile ground for a communist takeover via the now underground Tudeh party.

After a period of considering supporting the nationalist Iranian Prime Minister, Mohammed Mossadeq, and seeking a non-violent solution between 1951 and 1953, American attention steadily turned toward removing him. Falling into line with sustained British persuasion from Churchill, Eisenhower and Dulles became gradually convinced that Mossadeq would neither strike a deal to resolve the on-going oil dispute, nor could be trusted to contain communism. As a consequence, CIA field agent Kermit Roosevelt was directed to initiate a coup in August 1953 in tandem with the British Secret Intelligence Service to oust Mossadeq. This move delighted the British who had been frustrated with Truman who previously demurred at the prospect of direct intervention.<sup>6</sup> As events played out, America emerged as the dominant external power in Iran essentially inheriting the neo-imperial role of the British who throughout the affair appeared growingly powerless.

The shutdown of oil exports via the British blockade left Iran practically bankrupt by 1953, yet afterward it emerged as an embryonic client state of America, complete with a reinvigorated monarch who owed restoration of his throne and a newly enhanced domestic power base to the American intervention. Vice President Richard Nixon visited Tehran in December 1953 and was impressed during his visit, noting that he sensed an inner strength and strong leadership potential in the young monarch.<sup>7</sup> Nixon's positive impressions ensured that an initial package of \$45 million in American grant aid that had been directed to Iran immediately following the coup would be followed up with future assistance.<sup>8</sup>

With the crisis in Iran seemingly resolved, regional politics converged upon resurrecting an idea of a collective regional security system that had been originally proffered by the British earlier in the decade, but had fallen to the wayside due to Egypt's emerging Arab Nationalist persuasion, which scuppered the original plan which was based around a primary Egyptian role. On 2 April 1954 Turkey and Pakistan signed a bilateral mutual security treaty, which rekindled American hopes for a Western oriented defence grouping in the region. By July 1954, Eisenhower had approved NSC-5428,

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which was influenced heavily by Dulles, and recommended that that a best regional defence strategy would be via a *northern tier* of US-aligned states to contain any Soviet expansion southwards, based on an expansion of the Turkey-Pakistan pact.<sup>9</sup> The Baghdad Pact followed in 1955, modelled loosely after NATO as a mutual co-operation, protection and non-intervention pact and comprised of Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey and, interestingly, Britain.

The emergence of the Pact was seized upon by the Shah as a way in which he could rebuild Iran's reputation after the crisis of 1953. The Shah's indications of involvement accelerated the timetable for a revision of American military aid planning to Iran through the summer of 1955. John Foster Dulles approached the Department of Defence on 27 June, requesting that Iran be awarded a package of \$50 million in additional military aid for 1956 and 1957 to prepare it for its role in the emerging Pact.<sup>10</sup> The Secretary of Defence, Charles Wilson responded to Dulles on 5 August denying the request for two reasons. Firstly a review of the viability of long term American training and support for Iran's army (a programme set in motion in January 1955) was still incomplete. Secondly, the Shah had yet to demonstrate, beyond rhetoric, exactly *what* role he envisioned Iran playing in future regional collective defence, making any American commitment premature.<sup>11</sup>

Although discussion occasionally broached the issue,<sup>12</sup> Iran's military aid was not revised until discussions began over a programme to replace the final tranche of pre-existing military aid, which was scheduled to end, on target in 1957. Developing bespoke policy for Iran was heavily overshadowed within American regional policy by the development of Eisenhower doctrine, which did not, much to the chagrin of the Shah, advocate a military upgrade of Iran. In fact, the doctrine advocated the exact opposite, committing American forces to regional security. The administration simply did not believe that a direct attack on Iran was likely. Instead, as with the Truman administration, attention centred on the political weakness of the Shah and the deterioration of the Iranian economy due to inflation, which was in fact partly caused by the Shah's various existing, yet comparatively primitive military endeavours.

In a discussion between Dulles and the Iranian Foreign Minister on 17 September 1957, Dulles noted that all of America's free world allies were competing for military aid, the budget for which

was steadily shrinking as Congress progressively exercised an increased fiscal displeasure with military assistance spending. One month later, William M. Rountree, Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern, South Asian and African Affairs wrote to Dulles after the Shah had delivered a list of military requirements to the Pentagon, costed between \$300 and \$500 million confirming that the Shah 'expects far more military aid from us that we can give him.'<sup>13</sup> The Shah continued to press hard for the military assistance he deemed essential, which began to grate upon the American Ambassador to Iran, Selden Chapin, who noted on 9 November that US-Iran relations had developed into an 'unfavorable trend,'<sup>14</sup> and suggested one month later that the Shah's interest in his military was 'emotional rather than logical.'<sup>15</sup> Ambassadorial relations with the Shah became particularly strained through 1957 due to his military demands, which the Embassy frequently reported back to Washington as "extreme."<sup>16</sup>

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#### FIRST SIGNIFICANT ARMS DEVELOPMENTS: 1958-1959

Dulles met with Eisenhower to discuss the Shah's lingering security situation on 22 January 1958, securing Eisenhower's permission to break the impasse and offer Iran more tanks and 'a more modern air squadron.'<sup>17</sup> Dulles then departed for Tehran for a two-day visit between 24 and 26 January to personally assess the Iranian security situation before making any formal offer. One day into his trip Dulles cabled Eisenhower noting that his visit had so far been "explosive," as the Shah 'who considers himself a military genius' remained obsessed with his military situation, whilst his governmental ministers were deeply concerned with economic problems, with which they were "unable to cope with" due to the Shah's all encompassing military obsessions.<sup>18</sup> Despite the reservations of the Iranian ministers, Dulles pressed ahead on the second day of his visit with the arms offer that had been sanctioned in his prior meeting with Eisenhower,<sup>19</sup> and the following day added that a further development loan in the magnitude of \$40 million would be made to address Iran's economic concerns.<sup>20</sup> The deal was a development for the Shah, yet it was several orders of magnitude below what he had asked for in the autumn of 1957.

The Shah, proving to be a reliably hard man to please, noted only days after Dulles' departure from Tehran that American assistance was at such a low level as to be taking Iran for granted, comparing Iran unfavourably to neighbours such as India who continued to receive American aid despite courting the Soviets.<sup>21</sup> As news reached Washington in mid-April that the Shah would embark on a tour of Taiwan and Japan in June, the Departments of State and Defense swiftly collaborated on a communiqué to American military and diplomatic officials that they should 'take all possible discreet action to prevent a glamorous display of US military aid' in both nations, fearing that it would enrage the Shah and lead to further 'exorbitant demands.'<sup>22</sup>

Following his East Asian trip, the Shah visited Washington on 30 June for a three-day visit, which included two meetings with Eisenhower. Dulles briefed Eisenhower to expect that the Shah would use the visit to press hard for a revision of Iran's military aid, and recalled that the Shah had been wholly unreceptive to prior assurances that Iran did not need a military of significance to deter the Soviets, as 'the deterrent strength of the United States constituted the primary obstacle to Soviet aggression in the area.'<sup>23</sup> As expected, the Shah used his time to express his case of a region at risk from both Arab nationalist and communist threats, to which Eisenhower subsequently remarked to Dulles was "fairly convincing."<sup>24</sup> Although nothing new was agreed as a result of the visit in the area of military aid, subsequent events only two weeks later seemed to validate the Shah's case as the Iraqi coup in mid-July sent shockwaves across the region, caused the Eisenhower doctrine to be invoked in Lebanon, and indicated strongly that the idea of collective security through the Baghdad pact was deeply flawed.

The events of the summer of 1958 led to the Eisenhower administration warming towards the remaining friends they had in the region, of which the Shah had proved to be one of the most staunch. In what was the most significant development in Iran's military progress to date, Eisenhower noted to Dulles on 16 July that the new regional situation dictated that Iran should have all the military assistance that it could absorb.<sup>25</sup> Three days later Eisenhower passed that sentiment on to the Shah,

We believe it is important to begin now to reconsider our collective security planning. It is also our belief that your

armed forces as now supported should be brought up to agreed operational strength and to a high level of operation efficiency.

More importantly, he added that

We fully recognise that the strengthening of Iran's military power and its efforts to achieve economic development will result in strains on the Iranian economy. You may depend on the sympathetic and prompt consideration by the United States, within our available means, of Iran's needs for economic assistance as they develop.<sup>26</sup>

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Eisenhower's words translated into *Plan Counterbalance* which included training and equipment for an additional 37,000 servicemen, more squadrons of tanks, air defence equipment, and F-86 Fighters as part of a renewed five year commitment to Iran. In what would later become characteristic behaviour by the Shah, he reflected upon receiving the news of the plan that whilst he accepted the package, he would have preferred the more advanced F-100 and that the anti-aircraft defence system was inadequate.<sup>27</sup> The summer of 1958 was the first time that regional developments significantly affected American arms policy towards Iran since military assistance had begun in 1950. It would not be the last.

Through the remainder of 1958, and into 1959, the Shah continued to press for yet more military assistance, taking Eisenhower's July letter "very liberally" from the outset, which had caused unusual intensity in his requests and raised alarm throughout Washington.<sup>28</sup> As the Shah felt his additional requests were being ignored or procrastinated over, he began to harness a brinkmanship strategy aimed at blackmailing America to fulfil his military wishes.<sup>29</sup> The strategy featured thinly veiled threats that should his requests not be met he would 'reconsider Iran's position vis-à-vis USSR,' sentiments that led the State Department to be "increasingly disturbed" as frequent reports of the aforementioned were delivered in Ambassadorial correspondence from Tehran.<sup>30</sup> Eisenhower delivered a veiled threat of his own to the Shah on 30 January noting that his military requests had diverged significantly from those with which Washington had set out in *Plan Counterbalance*, and whilst it was not unexpected that differences should arise between "the best of friends," he did not expect the Shah to 'take a step which would imperil' Iran's security.<sup>31</sup> Relations remained strained throughout 1959,

to the point where it was deemed wise that Eisenhower add Iran to what was dubbed a “good will trip” to various allied nations in the Middle East, North Africa, the Indian Subcontinent and South East Europe. Eisenhower subsequently landed in Tehran on 14 December for a brief visit, lasting less than six hours. Eisenhower indulged the Shah to present a briefing of what *he* felt Iran needed for its defence, yet concluded the meeting without making any firm commitment.<sup>32</sup> Characteristically, the Shah interpreted the meeting as a presidential “endorsement” of his defence plans, causing yet more frustration in Washington as the Shah proceeded thereafter to make further military enquiries to the Pentagon.<sup>33</sup>

Eisenhower wrote to the Shah in early January to clear up the misunderstanding. The letter underwent several careful rewrites at Eisenhower’s insistence to ensure that the language was impossible to misinterpret, and communicated a clear message that the administration was reviewing the regional security of Iran, yet that review was proceeding on a timetable that would not be dictated by the Shah.<sup>34</sup> Despite the tactful wording, the letter had no effect on the Shah, who one week later forwarded Eisenhower a list of military requirements valued at approximately \$600 million.<sup>35</sup> It is worth pausing momentarily to highlight the vast divergence in the Shah’s requests and the existing assistance programme. Military aid following the summer 1958 period had been planned in the modest tens of millions per annum; the Shah was asking for nothing less than a revolution in scale.

The administration eventually began to formulate a response to the Shah’s requests via a NSC policy paper on Iran delivered on 6 July 1960, which roundly rejected any revolutionary change maintaining that the level of aid established in mid 1958 was adequate.<sup>36</sup> By 19 September the full review of military assistance for Iran had been completed, as had a forecast of forthcoming expected Congressional budgetary limits. With the aforementioned in mind, the Secretary of State Christian Herter, with concurrence from the Pentagon, wrote to Eisenhower noting that ‘it will not be possible for us to provide the Shah with military aid in an amount even approaching his requests.’<sup>37</sup> Hence, military aid for 1961 would be approximately \$22 million, broadly concurrently with pre-existing levels.<sup>38</sup>

If the Shah thought he had a tough experience with the Eisenhower administration, the results of the November 1960 presidential election would be altogether more foreboding. John F. Kennedy's views on foreign policy were nurtured and influenced by a group of academics whom he had gathered around himself whilst Senator for Massachusetts between 1953 and 1960, who introduced him to the idea of strongly encouraging incremental democratic and economic development in developing countries as an alternative to simply seeking political stability.<sup>39</sup> One of the aforementioned academics, Walt Rostow, who became Deputy National Security Advisor in Kennedy's NSC, was instrumental in influencing Kennedy, particularly for introducing him to his own interpretation of Modernisation Theory, the *Rostovian Take-off Model*, which outlined a process by which non-developed countries can be modernised along a western example.<sup>40</sup> Despite the aforementioned, Kennedy broadly subscribed to the suspicion of Soviet intentions that had characterised the Eisenhower administration, and came to office in the context of clear Soviet dominance in the space race, and with the belief that they were also leading the missile race. Hence Kennedy held a curious blend of progressive, yet clearly traditional set of beliefs, a dichotomy that would be deeply tested when applied to the Middle East.

The Kennedy administration translated the progressive side of its philosophy into action by creating the Agency for International Development (AID). Coming barely two months into Kennedy's tenure, AID was clearly symbolic of the administrations priorities to move beyond the idea that aid was merely an expensive "short-run" tool used to provide basic economic, military and political stability.<sup>41</sup> Instead, aid would prioritise self-help and long term planning aligning America 'with the forces for economic progress in the less developed countries.'<sup>42</sup> It amalgamated the bulk of the bureaucratically fragmented American aid structure, and reinvigorated and expanded aid operations to fulfil Kennedy's aim of initiating a 'Decade of Development.'<sup>43</sup> Regarding the Middle East, the philosophy behind AID reinforced Kennedy's intentions, as enunciated on the campaign trail in 1960, when he noted that 'the Middle East needs water, not war; tractors, not tanks; bread, not bombs.'<sup>44</sup> AID

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was a direct product of modernisation theory, particularly via its emphasis of using aid to initiate a transition towards market economies and democracy in developing nations.<sup>45</sup>

The broad strategy, with AID at its heart, was to treat emerging nationalism with respect, and offer predominantly non-military assistance to inspire pro-western social and economic development and thereby tentative democratisation; rather than push prospective allies out of the reach of American influence and towards totalitarianism. Hence, barely two months into his presidency, Kennedy set out an approach that was at odds with Eisenhower's conviction of supporting authoritarian, yet western orientated, regimes as a best means to ensure strategic stability.

The Kennedy administration entered office to a chorus of alarmism over Iran, which had been building through the prior year. A JCS report, presented on 26 January 1961, noted that Iran was 'the soft spot' in the CENTO defence alliance, chiefly due to its enduring military and political weakness.<sup>46</sup> With the former in mind, in early February, the administration tasked the State Department to prepare a summary of the situation in Iran, with special focus on its internal political, economic and social issues.<sup>47</sup> The British reported a similar assessment to that of the JCS during a bilateral meeting of British Embassy officials at the State Department on 13 February. Lord Hood, Minister at the British Embassy, noted that the Shah's survival prospects generated "a very special problem" which was of great concern to Britain.<sup>48</sup> A National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) in February 1961 concurred, concluding that possibilities for sudden change in Iran, revolutionary in nature, were high.<sup>49</sup> Hence, relations between the two nations started badly, and unsurprisingly reached a 'nadir' during the Kennedy administration.<sup>50</sup>

Kennedy's Iran revisionism caused battle lines to form between the reformist president, and the State Department who were dominated by "traditionalists," largely content with the status quo solidified by the 1953 coup, with the autocratic Shah at the helm.<sup>51</sup> Although the February 1961 NIE had concluded that Iran was domestically unstable, the broad thrust of the analysis was directed towards pushing for deeper American support for the Shah as an embattled ally, rather than a recognition that a post-Shah order should be envisioned, as Kennedy's personal position implied. There was therefore, at the outset, a divergence between the reformist White

House, and the vast majority of the organs of government in Washington, particularly the State Department.

By early May 1961 the alarm had been raised further in Washington due to growing domestic instability and reports of violent street protests in Tehran, giving Kennedy the final push towards the forming of a special Iran Task Force. The Task Force was constituted to provide medium-range objectives, rather than to produce a short-term review. Arms spending cuts, military personnel cuts from 208,000 to 150,000, and providing direct recommendations on domestic politics were adopted as operational guiding principles from the outset,<sup>52</sup> giving the entire exercise a clear, yet broad mandate. As NSC Staffer Robert Komer described the logic that informed the Task Force, ‘every time the Shah mentioned “more arms,” JFK’s response would be “more reforms.”’<sup>53</sup> Hence, the reports and recommendations from the Task Force, the first of which was delivered in mid-May 1961, had an air of inevitability about them.

The disposition of the Task Force prompted the Shah to concede “room for discussion” over his army size, yet he remained resolute that Iran must receive more advanced military equipment, which would mean increased overall expense.<sup>54</sup> By the late summer of 1961, despite being frequently told the “home truths” that he should not expect an increase in military aid,<sup>55</sup> the Shah continued to press hard on the American Embassy in Tehran to convince the State Department to lobby for a “restudy” of his military needs.<sup>56</sup> Tensions subsequently emerged within the NSC that Iran was slipping into a domestic political crisis, exacerbated by its dire financial situation. In a memorandum to Kennedy on 4 August, Komer suggested that the State Department was proving too passive via their recommendations to further subsidise Iranian deficits. Komer added that the new ambassador in Tehran, Julius Holmes, who had assumed the position in mid June 1961, was proving ineffective in exercising political leverage on the Shah to take affirmative action on his domestic situation.<sup>57</sup> Kennedy concurred, and three days later directed the State Department to report to the Iran Task Force as part of a follow-on study.<sup>58</sup>

As Kennedy’s directive began to take effect, Komer noted on 11 August in a memorandum to National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy, that although Kennedy’s input had put the State Department’s “feet to the fire,” ‘I ain’t happy, but I pushed things just

about as far as I could. The main thing is that we've got State moving again.<sup>59</sup> Komer's concern was that the State Department had developed a "sense of fatalistic resignation," which refused to countenance anything beyond the status quo represented by the Shah.<sup>60</sup> With that point in mind, Komer successfully impressed on the Task Force, the viability of looking beyond the Shah and 'backing to the hilt the best alternative available,' an assessment that, once again, Kennedy concurred with.<sup>61</sup> Although Komer was quite correct to attribute much of Iran's problems to the Shah, the lack of a credible alternative figure or grouping to govern Iran, as its domestic political scene was fragmented and characterised by mistrust, was fortuitous luck for the Shah.<sup>62</sup>

By October, the crisis over Iran's internal problems had reached the point where there were widespread fears across Washington that America was 'inhibited in both the military and the political spheres' due to potential opportunistic subversion, or even invasion of Iran by the Soviets.<sup>63</sup> The concern was enough to spur the Task Force to recommend on 14 October a systematic rescue programme comprising of emergency economic aid to allow the systems of government merely 'to survive.'<sup>64</sup> More importantly, a five-year military aid plan for 1962–1967 at \$50 million per annum was outlined (an approximate \$12 million per annum reduction on previous levels) which had at its heart a reduction in overall costs in line with earlier plans to reduce the size of the Iranian army.<sup>65</sup> Fortuitously (again) for the Shah, although he remained convinced that the Kennedy administration was set on overthrowing him, it was outwardly recognised "by all members" of the Task Force that the Shah would remain the "centre of power" in Iran. Hence, Komer's drive to identify and support an alternative was effectively dead by October 1961.<sup>66</sup>

Despite Kennedy's broad ambition in foreign policy to move away from supporting authoritarian regimes and using arms as a crude foreign policy tool, the overbearing needs of Cold War geopolitics dictated the administration's reaction to the crisis of 1961 in Iran. Within that logic, Iran was a *double threat* country, in that it was on the Sino-Soviet periphery *and* was facing existential security problems – to the point that it risked falling "like a ripe plum" into Moscow's lap, to quote Khrushchev.<sup>67</sup> The end result of the Task Force, which was effectively wound down shortly after agreeing its programme of action for Iran in October 1961,<sup>68</sup> was entirely short

term and aimed at crisis management rather than medium term planning – a reversal of the very logic by which it was constituted. Therefore, despite all odds, as 1961 drew to a close, the shape of Iran policy appeared broadly continuous in its essence to that of the 1950s.

*Stephen  
McGlinchey*

*1962: A Change in Fortunes*

As Washington prepared to receive the Shah for a state visit in autumn 1962, discussions centred around the exact composition of the military aid package he would be presented with. The State Department, with Ambassador Holmes at the forefront pushed for a \$70 million annual amount,<sup>69</sup> whilst the NSC (Komer in particular) was resolute that the original \$50 million the Task Force had recommended was adequate. Komer anticipated that Kennedy would use the visit to talk frankly to the Shah about his unreasonable demands in a way that the Embassy seemed unwilling or unable, via the logic that since the Iranian army could not “fight its way out of a paper bag,” the Shah would be forced to comply as he relied on American support for his own survival, both domestically and in lieu of the Soviet threat.<sup>70</sup> Komer’s views, although valid in essence, were over simplified, and roundly underestimated the Shah’s characteristic stubbornness.

In early March, the Shah requested that his visit be moved forward due to the urgency with which he wanted to discuss his military problems. The news was accompanied with indications that the Shah was in a mood of depression and resentment, directly due to the proposed reduction in military aid, and that he was considering abdication.<sup>71</sup> The abdication threat was likely a ruse by the Shah, a point which Komer implicitly pressed as he recommended that Kennedy approve the earlier visit with the proviso that he gave no indication of a revision on how much “military baksheesh” the Shah would get.<sup>72</sup> He further reminded Kennedy that ‘(o)ur job is not just how to keep this unstable monarch from kicking over the traces but how to cajole him into paying more attention to what we consider are the key internal problems confronting Iran.’<sup>73</sup>

Komer’s position was influenced somewhat by a draft report that AID had delivered to the White House on 8 March for eventual discussion at a NSC Standing Group meeting on Iran, scheduled

to take place on 23 March. The paper recommended that the total amount of military aid over proposed the five-year plan could be raised by ten per cent as a minimal concession to the Shah, as a bargaining tool to ensure he accepted the reduction by one quarter of his armed personnel. The paper went on to caution that 'the almost psychotic obsession of the Shah with the problem of his military security is the overriding consideration in negotiating with him.'<sup>74</sup>

With the positions of AID and Komer in mind, Kennedy approached his military representative, Maxwell D. Taylor, in mid-March to advise over whether there was any basis to the central bargaining position of the Shah that military aid to Iran was stunted compared with its regional counterparts.<sup>75</sup> Taylor advised Kennedy that although Turkey received more military aid both qualitatively and quantitatively, there were valid reasons for this, chiefly Turkey's joint membership of NATO and CENTO (the successor to the Baghdad Pact). Regarding Pakistan, its military aid programme commenced later than Iran's, in 1954, by which time Iran had already received substantial investment. Hence, aid was at an enhanced rate as Pakistan was playing catch-up. Additionally, the British training provided to the Pakistani military had enabled it to absorb higher order equipment more effectively than the comparatively backward Iranian forces, explaining the higher technical level of the equipment directed to Pakistan.<sup>76</sup>

With all advice to hand, Kennedy agreed to move the Shah's visit forward to either 10-17 April or 11-18 June.<sup>77</sup> The Shah quickly replied on 18 March, noting that he would arrive on 10 April, the earliest date offered.<sup>78</sup> Prior to the 23 March meeting of the NSC Standing Group meeting on Iran, Kennedy decided to defer any further substantive discussions over the peculiarities of the military aid deal until the Shah's arrival, allowing the Shah the opportunity to make his case.<sup>79</sup> In anticipation of the Shah's visit, several cabinet meetings were held in early April to address the military aid offer. Both Kennedy, and Ambassador Holmes who had been recalled to Washington, attended the meetings. During one such meeting on 9 April, McNamara suggested a significant reduction in naval equipment and softening of certain maintenance costs in the original proposal in order to allow the Shah four squadrons of the F-5A - a new low cost fighter, which had been recently adopted and produced for export and domestic training purposes only.<sup>80</sup> This

was done in anticipation that the Shah would respond better with what was a prized acquisition. Due to the amendments and reductions in the aforementioned areas, the overall deal was still within the original limit, which had been developed by AID on 8 March, of \$330 million.<sup>81</sup>

After a day of preliminary meetings in Washington 11 April, the Shah met with Kennedy and the full cabinet the following morning. As expected the discussion revolved around military issues and Kennedy's desire to see Iran's army reduced in size, which the Shah rejected. The Shah analogised that Iran was being treated like a concubine whilst its CENTO neighbours were being treated like wives.<sup>82</sup> Kennedy reassured that America had two major concerns regarding Iran that necessitated dedicated attention to its needs: military security and economic development.<sup>83</sup> Underlining the nature to which the Kennedy administration had accepted the Shah, Kennedy noted in a private conversation with the Shah on the same day, that without the Shah, Iran and the entire Middle East 'would collapse.'<sup>84</sup> Whilst it is unlikely that Kennedy's statement was much more than a reassurance tactic, when viewed alongside Kennedy's rapprochement with Nasser and India, and the general optimism that existed for the region due to Kennedy's overarching development philosophy, the transcript does indicate a significant warming in the personal rapport between Kennedy and the Shah.

As a result of the Shah's visit, the broad \$330 million provisional plan was formalised, offering of a firm five-year military aid commitment to Iran between 1962 and 1967, subject to Congressional approval, and subject to the Shah's acceptance, which he deferred on to further study the offer.<sup>85</sup> Additionally, a military planning team was shaped to visit Tehran and assess the feasibility of the proposed personnel cuts the Iranian army, which remained a condition of the deal.

As the Shah continued to mull over his military aid offer, Iran's economic situation continued to sharply deteriorate through the spring and early summer of 1962, to the point that the State Department's Policy Planning Council upgraded its 'Basic National Security Policy' paper to emphasise the resulting "special importance" of enhanced administration focus on Iran.<sup>86</sup> The alarm was enhanced by the seemingly endemic instability in Iraq following its 1958 Coup, and its subsequent swing towards the Soviet orbit in the

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years since, amplifying long standing concerns over Soviet military relationships with nations in the extended region, notably Egypt and India. The Shah was unphased by his economic problems, and continued to press for \$135 million additional military aid on top of the (still) pending five-year deal offered in April.<sup>87</sup>

In the early autumn, Iran and the USSR began to normalise diplomatic relations, eventually resulting in a deal in mid-September, which guaranteed that Iran would not be used as 'a medium of aggression against the USSR.'<sup>88</sup> Albeit under the cloak of the Shah's emerging rhetoric of independent foreign policy, considering the on-going disagreements of military aid, and due to the fact that he had stalled on rapprochement with the Soviets only three years earlier, the timing of this move was not a coincidence. This was the second time that the Shah used brinkmanship with the Soviets as a tool to effectively blackmail an American administration to provide him with the military equipment he desired, and it would not be the last time.

Upon learning of the Soviet-Iran deal on 15 September, the Departments of State and Defense approached the White House to seek possible concessions to placate the Shah – to which Komer urged Bundy to reply, 'the President personally says "hell no."<sup>89</sup> After three days of deliberation, a compromise won Kennedy's approval, which despite "severe funding limitations," added radar equipment and restored the naval frigates that were originally removed from the five-year programme in April to accommodate the F-5A squadrons.<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, news was transmitted to the Shah the following day, on 19 September, that the military study group, which had been deliberating over force levels in Iran, had finally agreed that the Shah's army be reduced to 160,000, rather than the earlier figure of 150,000.<sup>91</sup> Hence, the Shah had (again) proven effective in bargaining a much-improved deal, a realisation that grated significantly on Komer, who stressed that Iran policy had reverted to becoming 'essentially reactive,' indistinguishable from that of previous administrations.<sup>92</sup>

Into the spring of 1963, with the Iran's domestic reform programme (White Revolution) underway, things were looking much better for the Shah. Yet, Kennedy remained alert to ensuring that the domestic reforms were having the desired effect.<sup>93</sup> However, Iran Desk Officer at the State Department, John Bowling, later

admitted that through this period, the State Department ‘shamelessly led the White House to believe that the Shah’s White Revolution was the greatest thing since cellophane.’<sup>94</sup> A similar reflection came from William Polk a member of the State Department’s Policy Planning Committee. Polk noted that his experiences visiting Iran sometime later, in December 1963, had caused him to become “disturbed” that Ambassador Holmes, and by association the State Department, had not “mirrored adequately” the adverse effects of the Shah’s reform programme, to the effect that he felt that the Embassy had been describing an entirely mythical state of affairs in their reporting through the prior twelve months.<sup>95</sup> Partially as a result of the one-sided reporting, but also perhaps due to the cascade of regional events that had transpired over late 1962 and 1963 with the war in Yemen at the forefront and the regional stand-off the conflict had initiated between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, Kennedy eventually bowed to the constant pressure and regarded Iran’s domestic developments in a positive light, and made a concerted effort to maintain the Shah as an ally.<sup>96</sup> The bitterest pill to swallow for the Kennedy idealists such as Komer, who remained resiliently opposed to the Shah throughout the period, was that hindsight had shown that through his reforms, the Shah was actually consolidating his autocracy, not moving towards significant social reform.

*Stephen  
McGlinchey*

## CONCLUSION

The developments of this early period, often overlooked, prove a fascinating and essential addition to the history of the US-Iranian relationship during the Cold War. Kennedy’s initial press for reform in Iran has been dismissed as a brief irritation<sup>97</sup> in the progressively emerging relationship between the two nations, and something that would not be again revisited until the Presidency of Jimmy Carter (1977–1981). Although doubts remained over the intentions of the Shah to be a genuine reformer, by the spring of 1963, Kennedy had laid the groundwork with the Shah, building upon the legacy left behind by Eisenhower, for the consolidation of a solid American ally in the region, which would go on to hold major importance in years to come.

The victory of the Shah in overcoming Kennedy’s ideological distaste of the character of his autocratic regime cleared the way for

a mature arms credit relationship in which the monarch's desire to modernise Iran's armed forces and build the country into 'the Japan of West Asia'<sup>98</sup> began to take shape, albeit slowly at this point in history. It would take until late in Lyndon B. Johnson's second term in 1967–1968, and several further regional developments would need to occur – most notably the withdrawal of Britain east of Suez in 1971 – for the Shah to begin to find fertile ground in Washington for his grander military plans. Those plans were finally realised in May 1972 during the Nixon administration as the Shah and Nixon signed a multi billion dollar arms deal that rendered all prior arms agreements between two nations in peacetime diminutive, and set into motion an arms relationship of an extraordinary nature that would endure until the final days of the Shah's rule.

✉ STEPHEN MCGLINCHY is affiliated to Cardiff University and may be reached at: [McGlincheyST@cf.ac.uk](mailto:McGlincheyST@cf.ac.uk)

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- 66 Memorandum from the Assistant Director of the Bureau of the Budget (Hansen) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs (Talbot), Washington, 18 October 1961. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII: 130
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