

Division of Research
Graduate School of Business Administration
The University of Michigan

April 1979

PRELUDE TO AN AMERICAN DISASTER:
SOVIET POLICIES TOWARD IRAN
1945-1962

Working Paper No. 177

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Prelude to an American Disaster: Soviet

Policies toward Iran, 1945-1962

George D. Cameron III

In the wake of the fall of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the recriminations have commenced. Who "lost" Iran? What has happened to American policy in the Middle East? Do we even have any such policy? If so, what is it and why has it been so singularly unsuccessful? Underlying the bitter tone of these questions is a legitimate concern about the fate of this region.

Barely two and a half years ago, a visiting Secretary of State Kissinger proclaimed the Shah a good friend of the United States, along with his fellow "strong men," Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto of Pakistan, and President Mohammad Daoud of Afghanistan. Today, Bhutto has been executed for ordering an attempt on the life of a political opponent. Pakistan is controlled (temporarily) by a military dictatorship that seems committed to radical Islam and has promulgated new laws providing for the "Islamic" punishments of death by stoning for adultery and amputation of the hand for theft. Daoud was killed by Soviet-trained Afghani troops during the revolution that overthrew his government and installed a leftist regime. Most recently, a combination of leftists and radical Moslems has forced the Shah to flee his country, where an unstable coalition is now attempting to restore political and economic order.

Aside for the obvious comment that being a pro-Western "strong man" seems to be a high-risk occupation, what explains these debacles? Is the West doomed to lose friend after friend? Can

nothing be done to stem the tide or salvage the situation? To answer these questions at least partially, this paper focuses on the beginnings of the coalition between Soviet subversion and radical Islam, and in particular on Soviet policies toward Iran during the 1950s.

I. Background to Soviet-Iranian Relations

One of the most significant developments in recent international relations has been the continuing Soviet drive to penetrate the Middle East. This development is all the more vital because for the first time, though Soviet interest in the area dates back at least two hundred years, a Russian based regime has achieved real success in extending its influence to the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. During the earlier stages of this southward thrust by the Russian giant, the Ottoman and Persian empires bore the brunt of the drive, were forced to cede large segments of their territory, and were saved only because of the timely intervention of the Western world, as represented by Great Britain and France. These two Western powers held the line against the colossus of the north until they found themselves debilitated by two world wars and disenchanted with the rise of nationalist movements in these countries. Since 1945, the United States has tried desperately to shore up the area against Soviet blandishments and subversion.

The geographical significance of the Middle East, and of Iran as a keystone of the region cannot be overemphasized. Lying athwart the main lines of communication between Western Europe and the Far East, the area forms the meeting place for the civilizations of the three continents that contain most of the world's population. The Suez Canal provides a vital link for commercial relations between

West and East. The proximity of the Russian power to the north has greatly influenced developments within the area, particularly in states like Iran, which border directly on Soviet Central Asia. Economically, the significance of the area is primarily measured today by its seemingly unlimited oil resources, which provide the life-blood for much of the industry and mechanized life of Western Europe, Japan, and even the United States.

The dead hand of history lies heavily on the Middle East. Here is the cradle of Western civilization. Three of the world's major religions were founded here. Mighty Empires, formed here, stretched to encompass much of the then known world. Important concepts in law, government and philosophy were first developed in this region. In short, the Middle East is not a "dark continent" to be lighted up for the first time by Western European civilization, and any policy based on such an approach is almost certainly foredoomed to failure. We must understand these historical influences to appreciate fully the problems the area faces today, and to formulate Western policies which will meet the Soviet challenge. As put eloquently by the editors of the Political Quarterly:

For the last 3500 years -- from the day when the imperialist Agamemnon sent his ships and chariots against Troy to the day when Sir Anthony Eden sent his ships and aeroplanes against Egypt -- the Middle East has been a geographical and political storm centre ...

... it is no exaggeration to say that, mutatis mutandis, the same geographical, ethnographical, and economic factors are operating to make it a storm centre today Geographically the Middle East

remains what it has been since the beginning of European history, the meeting place of Asia and Europe. Hence geography has made it an area of strains and stresses where two different civilisations, two different ways of life must clash or adjust themselves.¹

These same geographical-historical factors form the warp and the woof of the economic and social ills currently plaguing the region. The endemic weakness of the area, coupled with the destructive impact of Westernization on local institutions, provided the Soviets with a fertile field for trade, aid, and propaganda.

What we are seeing in our time is no less than a clash between civilizations -- more specifically, a revolt of the world of Islam against the shattering impact of Western civilization which, since the 18th century, has dislocated and disrupted the old order, bringing terrible problems of adjustment.²

The result has too often taken the form of a violent anti-Westernism.

This is not to say that all problems burdening the governments of Middle Eastern nations originate in the West's intrusion of the area, but rather that the Western impact acted as a catalyst which exposed and intensified the underlying maladjustments in society. The disease and decay were there, even if unknown or unrecognized; the Westerners exposed these underlying ailments, whose presence at least partly explains why the region has been unable to maintain its political and economic integrity under Western pressure. The World

Today, in discussing the roots of the Middle East problem in 1952, made the following comment:

... both internally and externally it was part of a process of painful adjustment to the impact of Western influences -- political, economic, and intellectual -- that reached back well into the last century.³

Professor Speiser has stated that the outstanding characteristic of this entire group of states is "a pervasive weakness, both in internal and external matters."⁴ Further, he says, this weakness is not the result of external factors, but of those internal to the region itself; -- "The familiar chain reaction of extreme and chronic poverty on a mass scale, with the usual concomitants of malnutrition, disease, and illiteracy."⁵ Nor are these problems of recent origin. Some of them, like the extreme maldistribution of wealth, have been endemic to the region for centuries.

For long centuries, if not for millenia, Middle East society has been traditionally dichotomous, consisting of a broad base of the folk, largely peasant or tribal, who constitute the productive masses upon whose steady labor and docile obedience rests the second group, the comparatively small but powerful elite which rules and reigns, enjoying the risks and gains of political responsibility and economic privilege.⁶

The revolution in expectations associated with the rise of a Western educated, Western oriented middle class has now produced a situation where these conditions will no longer be tamely accepted

as the will of Allah. This vociferous and significant, if still relatively small minority are those who cry the loudest against the exploitation and injustice in their respective countries, despite the fact that they have a considerably higher standard of living than the masses of their fellow countrymen. It is within this group that the old ties of religion and status have probably been weakened the most. This is the group which is seeking "the better way" and better seems to them to be equated with different. The result? An intense, often irrational, desire for change, if only to rid themselves of the hated status quo. Western governmental forms, where given a limited trial, have seemed to be less than satisfactory, indicating that perhaps the Soviet model is more appropriate to their situation.

Historically, Islam has been, without question, the most powerful force in the Middle East for stability and cohesiveness. Operating under various regimes in Turkey, Persia, and Egypt, Islam provided whatever social and political unity the entire area had for many centuries. This regional unity obviously could not last indefinitely, even if the region had been completely isolated from outside influence. The unity known in the medieval Muslim world had been undergoing a gradual breakdown for many years, with the peripheral areas like Central Asia and Persia splitting off to form locally based regimes.⁷ In Persia this geopolitical split was underlined and reinforced by the adoption of the Shi'i version of Islam. Further divisions within the Muslim world were created with the rise of nationalism and the formation of would-be nation-states within the confines of Islam. The fact that many of these nation

states were merely artificial creations by outside powers has contributed to the current instability in the area.

Admittedly the influence of Islam has been blunted and its hold on some of the faithful has been weakened, but it is still a very powerful force in the Middle East. Its social and political (as well as economic) impact cannot be underestimated.

... religion is a live force among the majority of people in the Middle East in a way which has become almost forgotten in Britain. ... Thus the demands both of the national state ... and of modernisation have to come to terms with religion in its social and political aspects.⁸

Perhaps it is precisely because religion remains such an important part of his daily life that the Muslim peasant continues to have such strong feelings about Western intrusion and disruption of his society.

The pious Muslim, witnessing the change of Islam under the impact of Western ideas and institutions, is undergoing a moral crisis. Not only is he shocked that Islam should be divorced from the caliphate and the divine law replaced by secular legislation, but also that the West should be encroaching upon Islam with impunity.⁹

"Imperialism," or "colonialism," has been made the scapegoat, both within these countries and without, for all the regional ailments of the Middle East. The real root of the militant anti-Westernism seems to lie not so much in alien economic systems as such, or in foreign political domination as such. Rather, this

intense emotional reaction to the Western impact comes from the West's smashing of old ties and old institutions and ideologies, and of its continuing failure to replace them with a more constructive force.¹⁰ When the West exposed the weaknesses in Islamic society as then constituted, this represented an "attack" on the entire social, religious, and political system. While the particular colonial power will bear the brunt of the criticism. The religious fanaticism in much of it (like that of the fida'iyān sect in Iran) really represents an attempt to protect Islamic society against further Western inroads.

... so related and interdependent are these elements for most Iranians that for one reason or another they are suspicious of, or opposed to, all those persons and practices which in any way weaken or abrogate the accepted body of genuine Muslim doctrine and law.¹¹

So long as Russia, under the Tsars, remained closely connected with the rest of Europe and its international intrigues, the Middle Eastern nations' view of Russia was not notably different from their feelings toward the other so-called Western imperialists. In order to maintain even the facade of national independence, Persia "permitted" Great Britain and Russia to carve out spheres of influence over large parts of its territory. The fact that Iran was nonetheless able to maintain its identity as a nation is a tribute to the strength of the nation concept within the Iranian people.

... when all is said, Persian civilization is a reality and has been patient under many shocks. There have been times before when the machine has broken down, with no spare parts ready to set it

working. Yet somehow it is mended and works again.

In spite of lapses into bigotry and emotion, the Persian character has quiet charm and insistence, showing how it is that Persia has survived for twenty-five centuries and remains herself.¹²

Much of the strength of the anti-Western sentiment was derived from the reassertion of this national identity, a fact cleverly exploited by the Soviets.

The Bolshevik revolution, being itself anti-Western in some respects, had a great appeal for the Middle Eastern peoples. The Bolsheviks pursued with some success a national liberation policy in the Middle East until about 1921. From 1921 until the second world war, however, the Soviets generally followed a hands-off policy in the area, refusing to intervene in its internal affairs except to make vague statements about national independence from the Western powers. During this period Soviet trade with the area, and especially with Persia, enjoyed a steady growth.¹⁴ With the advent of World War II and Soviet Russia's alliance with the West, Soviet political influence in the Middle East also rose. The Soviets were introduced into Persia as a full and legitimate partner in the Western Democratic Alliance which was to reshape the foundations of the world. The Soviets were given control of the northern areas of Persia, and the nation found itself once more more divided between two powers. The national strong man, Riza Shah, was forced to abdicate in favor of his son, because the Allies suspected him of pro-German sympathies. In a sense, the appeal of the Nazis to the Persians lay in the fact that Nazism was also anti-Western in certain ways.¹⁵ The Soviets wasted no time in

trying to make the most of this great opportunity; in the words of one U.S. observer:

... the Soviets acted strongly, with self-confidence, a consciousness of power, and a clear conception of their post-war national requirements, while the British and Americans acted timidly, without clarity of purpose, postponing issues and compromising on principles.¹⁶

Unfortunately for the Soviets, their master tactician overplayed his hand in the Azerbaijan dispute and was forced to back down under strong Western and Iranian pressure. The postwar attempt to set up two puppet regimes on the northern territory of Iran ended in an embarrassing failure and a decidedly inglorious retreat by the Soviet armies. Soviet motives were certainly clearly exposed to the Iranians, who remain to this day somewhat more cautious in their dealings with the Russians than most of their Islamic brothers. Regrettably, Western propagandists failed to make sufficient use of this imperialistic aggression by the Soviets to alert other Middle Eastern peoples to the danger from the north.¹⁷

Having been so ignominiously rebuffed, Stalin pulled back once again from the Middle East, leaving it to the tender mercies of the Western powers while he consolidated his hold over his new Eastern European empire. Thus from the time of the Azerbaijan fiasco to the death of Stalin in 1953 the Middle East enjoyed a period of deceptive calm, relatively free from Soviet interference. The Soviet policy line in the Middle East during these years was to keep aloof from the affairs of the area, "to maintain an attitude of studious unconcern in relation to that quarter."¹⁸ This

aloofness apparently misled many Western observers into believing that the Soviets had given up their interest in an area of traditional concern to them and their tsarist predecessors. The Soviet Union is tied to the region by geography, history, ethnology, and treaty; surely such a period of relative unconcern could only be a passing phase. The treaties of 1921 and 1927 with Persia were still in effect, complete with the vague wording which seemed to give the Soviets the right to intervene in internal Iranian affairs as they saw fit; surely the apparent reluctance to do so could be no more than a biding of time, a waiting for the most opportune moment. Perhaps as early as 1951, a renewal of Soviet activity in the region could be observed in Soviet efforts at blocking Western-oriented military pacts. Nonetheless, despite all these signs of continuing Soviet interest, the intrusion into the regional affairs of the Middle East in 1955 seemed to come as a great shock and a decided surprise to the Western powers.

II. Soviet Political Relations with Iran.

Political contacts (or any contacts, for that matter) between the Soviet and Iranian governments had been remarkably few in the period of reaction to the 1946 debacle. Prior to 1955 the Soviet policy in Iran and throughout the Middle East was almost completely limited to criticism of the Western role and to attempted subversion through the local Communist parties. (In Iran this is the Tudeh, or "Masses," Party.) During this early postwar period, the Soviet leadership under Stalin appeared determined not to make common cause with the rather substantial nationalist sentiments and national bourgeois movements in the Middle Eastern countries. In current terminology this would be a hard-line policy, one which the Soviets

were then also pursuing in other parts of the world. National leaders of these countries were repeatedly attacked by the Soviets as imperialistic lackeys, etc., no matter which end of the political spectrum they represented.

Even before his death Stalin apparently was having second thoughts on the essential sterility of this approach, particularly since the Soviets were failing to penetrate the area in any substantial way. Such rethinking and reanalysis of Soviet foreign policy coincided with several other circumstances. The British power, badly shaken by the effects of World War II, was abandoning the area, leaving a power vacuum. The United States seemed unwilling or unready to step in to fill the gap (or perhaps was not aware of the necessity of doing so.) Nationalistic feelings were running high; India, Pakistan, and Ceylon served as striking examples of the reality of Asian national independence. Moreover, the Soviet economy had recovered from much of the wartime devastation and arrived at a stage which permitted the utilization of some economic weapons. Western maneuvering for a military alliance among the "Northern Tier" states of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Pakistan was enough to provide the added incentive to Soviet policy makers.

The blow fell in 1955.

It must be many decades since there has been a stroke of diplomacy which has had so rapid and so profound an effect upon the balance of power ... the offer of military and economic aid to the Arabs by Russia and her satellites has introduced an entirely new element into the confused and tangled politics of the Middle

East...

The timing, as well as the content, of the Russian intervention in the Middle East has therefore been masterly. ... Russia's intervention has caught the West off its guard. For the real significance in the cold war of her offer of military and economic aid to Middle East seems to be the assertion which lies behind it of her right to be consulted on the affairs of that area.

Of course, the main thrust of this new Soviet offensive was not directed at Iran and the northern tier, but rather at the Arab countries. The Soviet aim was to leapfrog over the military alignment on their borders and to subvert the strength of the alliance states from the rear. The means chosen were by no means unique; nor was the Russian trader a stranger historically to the Middle East. Tsarist Russia had enjoyed a considerable volume of trade with the Middle East, particularly with Persia, until circumscribed by the West. To the Arabs this historical precedent seemed sufficient justification for renewed Soviet trade; it also, of course, provided them with a welcome alternative to Western overtures.

Overtly the Soviet drive of trade and aid was designed to assist the national aspirations of the Arabs. Indirectly, however, it had the effect of worsening the economic position of Iran vis a vis her Arab neighbors. The political dominance of the West in Iran was underlined by the imaginativeness shown by the Arab states in dealing with both West and East. Militarily the arms deals with Egypt and Syria substantially altered the balance of power in the

region, to the decided disadvantage of the Western-oriented countries such as Israel, Turkey, and Iran.

Immediately before 1955 and the arms deal with Arabs, Soviet relations with Iran had consisted largely of diplomatic and semiofficial protests to Iran about the presence of foreign bases in Iran. The Soviets had shown no concern and had made no statements in 1950 when the Western powers made their tripartite declaration on Israel, which did contain language on arms shipments to the Middle East. The first Soviet reference to this agreement on arms to Israel occurred in an official diplomatic note to Great Britain, dated January 28, 1952, protesting the presence of Western arms in the area, including Persia. Identical copies of this note were sent to the United States, France, and Turkey, but not directly to Iran. These same four countries had previously received a similar protest from the Soviet government on November 11, 1951, but it did not refer specifically to the Israeli arms limitation.²¹

Some might have expected the Soviet Union to step decisively into Iranian affairs during the chaotic Mossadeq period (roughly 1951 to 1953). The country was near anarchy; nationalistic fervor was running high and the Tudeh Party at the peak of its power and influence. Yet, strangely enough, the Soviets did nothing. That is, they did nothing substantial, nothing which might involve them directly in internal Iranian politics. Perhaps they thought they could exploit the situation in Iran better by studiously refraining from interference and letting the West react as expected. If this was indeed the strategy, it seems on balance to have been correct. Mossadeq's dictatorial regime was overthrown by a military coup, led by General Zahedi, and the Shah was restored to his throne. The

Western influence behind this coup became apparent when a new oil consortium agreement was negotiated with the Western companies, a matter considered in more detail in the next section.

The Soviet Union was extremely busy pressing its offensive in the Arab countries during 1955 and 1956, meanwhile making several important policy statements on Iran, and on the Middle East in general. This flurry of Soviet diplomatic activity was designed to take away the initiative and advantage which the West had gained with the formation of the Baghdad pact. On April 16, 1955, the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement, "Security in the Near and Middle East," which denounced the Baghdad pact and the presence of Western arms and bases in the Middle East.²² On October 12, 1955, the Soviet government sent a direct note to the Iranian government, protesting the latter's adherence to the pact in the following language:

The accession of Iran to this military alignment is incompatible with the interest of consolidating peace and security in the region of the Middle and Near East and contradicts the good-neighborly relations between Iran and the Soviet Union and certain treaty obligations of Iran.²³

In response to the Soviet threats in the Middle East and elsewhere, a Western summit conference was held early in 1956, attended by President Eisenhower and Prime Minister Eden. Out of this conference came a joint "Communique Concerning the Middle East," dated February 1, 1956, which proposed certain defense measures by the West. The Soviet rejoinder was swift, sharp, and to the point:

It is not the first time that efforts are being made to impose on countries of the Near and Middle East the will of certain foreign circles whose interests are alien to the national aspirations of the peoples of the countries of the Near and Middle East.²⁴

(Quite so! One would be tempted to paraphrase: "Remember the Azerbaijan Invasion!")

Also in 1956, the new Soviet position with respect to the "bourgeois" nationalist movements in Asia and Africa was officially adopted by the 20th Party Congress; the soft-line approach of trade and aid was accepted. The details of this new policy were later published in the official journal, Soviet Orientalism.²⁵ A further policy statement on the Middle East was made by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on April 17, 1956, in which the "legitimate concern" of the Soviet Union in the affairs of the area was again emphasized.²⁶ It is significant that the Soviets chose to use these general policy statements, which require no reply, rather than formal diplomatic notes, which call for one. Great Britain was somehow induced to issue a joint note with the Soviets on April 26, 1956. This merely paraphrased the Soviets' own policy statement of ten days earlier, but further confirmed the Soviets' locus standi in the affairs of the area. As his next move, a reply to Khrushchev's to a question at a news conference hinted that he would stop selling arms to the Arabs if the West would halt their arms sales to the Baghdad pact nations. This offer, such as it was, the West rejected as not worthy of serious consideration; the Western commitment was too strong.²⁷

Besides the anti-Westernism so prevalent in the region, the Soviets were playing on another sentiment strongly held by many of the Middle East peoples -- neutralism a la Nehru. By pointing out that the West had first offered arms and military pacts to the area, the Soviets were able to persuade many people to regard them as the real champions of peace, the United Nations, Arab independence, and so on. This stratagem seemed successful in Iran, despite the memory of Azerbaijan.

Deep down, neutralism is stronger today in Iran than it has ever been; one can hardly speak with anyone who would not prefer to see his country free of all kinds of foreign entanglements.²⁸

The "positive neutralism" of India, or of the Egypt-Syria group, has a great appeal for the ordinary man in Iran, even if it has not so far won the affections of his government.²⁹

Thus, even westernized Iran harbored an undercurrent of popular sentiment against the Baghdad pact and all that it entailed in the way of Western influence. The stereotype of the imperialist as the merchant-soldier from beyond the sea -- in short, the British -- is hard to erase, and in this light Western military alliances look like a cover-up for Western penetration and domination of the country.

What is important for the assessment of present-day trends of public opinion in Iran is the extent to which Western political methods and intrigues of the past are still alive in the minds of the Iranian people of today.³⁰

The many U.S. technical and economic advisers at all levels of government seem to have had the same effect.

The year 1957 brought a few more surprises for the Iranian government (and its Western friends). The Soviets negotiated and signed a protocol fixing the formerly disputed boundary areas west of the Caspian Sea. While no tremendously significant changes were made the boundary line itself, the fact that Russia gave up her claim to all the waters of the Araxes River was regarded by most Iranians as a diplomatic victory for their government. The mere fact that the agreement was negotiated and that the boundary in this area was settled certainly represented a change in Soviet policy toward Iran. (No similar agreement was reached about the portion of the border lying east of the Caspian, or the Caspian itself.) The general economic decay apparently affecting both sides of the border was undoubtedly the motive for the second Soviet move in 1957.³¹ On August 11, 1957, the Soviet and Iranian governments signed a treaty for the joint development of the Aras and Atrak Rivers for power and irrigation. The Aras (Araxes) River was to provide irrigation for 62,500 hectares each in Iran and the Azerbaijan S.S.R.; the Atrak River on Iran's northeast frontier was to provide irrigation for some 17,500 hectares each in Iran and the Turkmen S.S.R.³² Any scheme for effective utilization of available water resources must be of tremendous benefit to both countries. Iran's plateau soil is fertile, but it needs water and irrigation is the only feasible answer in many parts of the country. The Soviets would also benefit, it is true, but proportionately the effect would be much greater in Iran.

The aura of good will created by this beneficent Soviet attitude lasted through much of 1958, until the Iranians announced a new military alliance with the United States. This was taken as a deliberate slap against a friendly and powerful neighbor. What gratitude! The Soviet government sent a mildly worded note of protest, dated October 31, which reminded the Iranians of their responsibilities under the 1927 treaty. Iran's rejection of this deceptively innocent reminder resulted in a strongly critical article, appearing in Pravda on December 6, 1958, followed in turn by a long (but mild) aide-memoire on the situation from the Soviet Ambassador, issued on December 28, in which talks between the two governments were proposed.³³

The Soviet diplomatic delegation arrived in Tehran on January 29, 1959, evidently still believing that Iran could be persuaded to drop its closest Western ties for a more neutral position. The talks broke down quite rapidly, and ended without any agreement on the key issue of Western military presence in Iran. Pravda printed another long and violent attack on the Iranian government on February 10.³⁴

A government which does not desire to reckon with the interest of the people cannot be strong, whatever support it receives from foreign bayonets. The government's attempts to solve the country's internal difficulties and to fight popular dissatisfaction by participating in aggressive military blocs only indicates its desire to fence itself off from the people and its lack of faith in their support. Such a course will lead to no good.³⁵

A scarcely veiled threat, if ever there was one!

These Soviet propaganda attacks continued throughout 1959 and into 1960, issuing from both press and radio. The so-called National Radio, beamed at the Iranian masses and presumably located somewhere in the Caucasus Mountains, succeeded in gaining a sympathetic audience by airing local grievances against the central government in Tehran. Official protests against the CENTO air exercises held in Iran in May, 1960, were filed by the Soviet government; the Iranian response was to declare that Iran considered the 1921 neutrality treaty to be abrogated.³⁶

Soviet warnings to Iran and Turkey against permitting U.S. military bases in their countries or forming military pacts with the West continued intermittently through 1960. By and large, however, official Soviet relations with both countries seemed to moderate slightly, and the off-again-on-again romance with the two southern neighbors was renewed. A decided lessening of tensions took place in August, 1960; Khrushchev sent a personal message calling for friendly relations with Iran and for a return to traditional Iranian neutrality.³⁷ Soviet Ambassador Pegov returned to Iran in September, 1960, for the first time since the end of 1959, and the Soviet radio and press stopped their propaganda barrage on Iran and the Shah. Iran, on its part, was apparently eager to assure the Soviet Union that no Western bases had been established on its soil and to allay Soviet fears of military threat to the soft underbelly of Soviet Central Asia. The year saw repeated reports of Soviet offers of economic aid, trade, and cooperation in locating and developing Iran's oil.³⁸

Old suspicions die hard (and perhaps with good reason). No one could accurately describe political relations between Iran and Soviet Russia at that time as normal. An official state visit by the Shah to Moscow may have helped to ease tensions between the two countries, but it did not provide much substance for a real foreign policy. There was still little or no traffic across the frontier guarded by fence, wires, and sentry posts.³⁹ Dr. Ali Amini, Iranian Prime Minister during 1961 and 1962, hinted that his government strongly mistrusted the National Front, which he seemed to equate with the Tudeh-Communist Party.⁴⁰ In such an atmosphere, with the cold war as a background, it is hard to see how relations between the two states could have been anything but strained and tense. Yet it is equally true that in international exchanges between the two countries the threats and bullying of earlier periods were absent. Perhaps one can say that the Soviet political relations with Iran were about what one would expect given the realities of international life, if not a great deal better.

III. Soviet Economic Relations with Iran

Writing in 1952, Carleton S. Coon was still able to conclude that "Russian influence on the Middle East, unlike ours, has been almost entirely political."⁴¹ Within a brief ten-year span however, the situation changed dramatically. The Soviets moved extensively into Middle Eastern markets; the economies of several Middle Eastern countries were mortgaged to the Soviet Union on a long-term basis. The Soviet trade and aid offensive (and the accompanying propaganda barrage) was extremely effective in certain

respects. This Soviet drive on Iran will be clearer if we consider first the Iranian economy.

Then as now, the economy of Iran was dominated by oil. Almost as many workers were employed in the oil industry and related businesses as in all other industrial enterprises in Iran, both government and private.⁴² Despite substantial efforts at diversification of the economy, oil was still the dominant sector of industry. At the same time, most of the people were still small farmers or herdsmen, rather than industrial workers. Thus the typical Iranian, if there was one, was the peasant. The greatest problem in agriculture was land reform; until he gave up much of the royal holdings, the Shah and a small landlord group owned approximately seventy to eighty per cent of the arable land.⁴³

The inroads made on their way of life that most affected the Iranian people were probably the economic measures inspired by the West. Political and constitutional changes made at the top of society may pass relatively unnoticed by the masses. But the impact of Western economic forces on Iranian society cannot be dismissed so lightly. The development of natural resources (chiefly oil), requiring considerable numbers of local laborers, extended and intensified popular unrest and dissatisfaction with existing conditions, a phenomenon that also occurred in many other Middle Eastern countries. Resentment and hard feelings against the West are inevitable when people are daily reminded of the tremendous gap between the living standards in Western nations and in the countries providing their raw materials.

Western policies in this regard were also somewhat less than enlightened; the West must share the blame for many of the economic

maladjustments, with its Balkanization, which strangles trade, its support of the medieval social structure, and its failure to assure proper development of the national resources.⁴⁴ Surely the area's economic nationalism--the desire to develop a country's natural resources and its economy with a minimum of foreign interference and control--should come as no surprise to the West.⁴⁵ Granted that the Mossadeq interlude represented an extremist position, the nationalistic sentiments which he expressed struck a responsive chord in the hearts of most of the Iranian people. Combined with the forces of reactionary Islam, this basically negative phase in Iran's development represented an early attempt to remove all foreign influences (especially the British) from all facets of the national life.

The significance of Iran and the Middle East to the world oil markets is easily demonstrated statistically. In 1957 four of the top six oil-producing countries were located in the Middle East; Iran ranked sixth, with a production of 16 million tons of petroleum per year. In the Middle East, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq ranked ahead of Iran: their respective tonnages for 1957 were 54 million, 46.8 million, and 33.2. Although the area accounted for only 21 percent of the world production in 1955, its proved reserves amounted to 67 percent of the world total. Kuwait led, with proved reserves of 7 billion metric tons at the end of 1956, followed by Saudi Arabia with 5.4 billion, Iran with 4 billion, and Iraq with 3 billion.⁴⁶ Little wonder that the peoples of these countries have been impatient for improvement in their standard of living, once they knew of the vast mineral wealth lying beneath their feet.

Middle East oil was made even more attractive to Western developers because of its low production cost. As a general indication of this cost differential, in 1947 the cost of production per barrel at wellhead was \$1.54 in Venezuela, but only \$.41 in Saudi Arabia, and only \$.25 on the island of Bahrein in the Persian Gulf.⁴⁷ Costs at the huge British-built refinery at Abadan were roughly comparable before its nationalization by the Mossadeq government, but this situation changed markedly over the years.

Abadan needed considerable restoration, and other, newer refineries have been built in other countries (for example, the Aramco facilities in Saudi Arabia). The oil companies have worked out newer and safer marketing techniques. Instead of expensive refining plants near the producing fields in the Middle East, the refineries were set up closer to the site of sales to consumers, not only minimizing the threat of further nationalization schemes, but also lowering costs.⁴⁸

Until recent years, Iran has lagged behind Kuwait and Iraq in using oil revenues for national development. Not until the negotiation of the 1954 consortium agreement did Iran receive a 50 percent share of the oil profits, although her oil-rich neighbors had been getting a fifty-fifty split for some time. This arrangement with the foreign operating companies which make up the consortium was an attempt to work out a mutually satisfactory compromise solution to a very knotty problem. Under it the nationalization of the oil deposits, refineries, and transporting facilities remained in force; these are to be national assets owned by the Iranian government. A government corporation, the National Iranian Oil Company, sold the oil at wellhead to the foreign

operating companies, distributed gas and fuel oil in Iran, operated the government's small refinery at Kermanshah, and conducted exploration for additional deposits through a subsidiary, the Iran Oil Company. The National Iranian Oil Company also provided the foreign companies with such auxiliary services as supplying water, food, and housing for the workers, and the like. The foreign companies handled production and were responsible for overseas distribution.

Eight foreign companies joined in the original arrangement: Anglo-Iranian, with a 40 percent interest; Royal Dutch Shell, with 14 percent; Francais des Petroles, with 6 percent; and five United States companies with 8 percent each--Gulf Oil, Socony Vacuum, Standard of California, Standard of New Jersey, and Texas Company. A 1955 modification of the agreement left these five U.S. companies with a 7 percent interest each, and permitted nine smaller U.S. companies to share the other 5 percent.⁴⁹

This consortium agreement did not solve all of Iran's economic problems, but it represented a big step in the right direction. Difficulties arose in defining many of the spheres in which the Western companies and the government corporation would operate, but these were to be expected and were not insoluble. Iran also made exploration agreements with a Canadian, an Italian, and another U.S. firm (Standard of Indiana) for those territories lying outside the consortium territory.⁵⁰ Expansion of the government refinery at Kermanshah was also planned, in order that the government corporation could participate directly in the international marketing of oil. Finally, the oil industry and the revenues it provided, harnessed with related industries under a coherent plan

applied with imagination and determination, could have contributed to the nation's economic growth. Such planning and action would also have benefited the Western companies.

Unfortunately, the possibilities were not realized.

If the risk of expropriation is to be minimized and official arrangements are to last out their intended lives, the economic activities of foreign investors must be deliberately and conspicuously associated with the daily living and economic progress and aspirations of the people in the host countries.⁵¹

Treaties and official statements, if not respected by the people, will not guarantee the safety of foreign assets; popular support of these economic efforts can do so.

Soviet successes in Iran and throughout the Middle East can be traced in part to the West's refusal to recognize and respect the absolutely top priority which these countries placed on hastening national development and raising the standard of living. The West could have assisted the Iranian people and at the same time strengthened its own position in that country by giving its all-out support and assistance to development projects like the project, similar to our TVA, for better utilization of land and water resources in the Khuzestan region.⁵² The West's economic influence has caused severe social dislocation and has intensified class tensions in Iran; the West might have assumed greater

responsibility for seeing that the changes it introduced were changes for the better.

The main strength of the Soviet trade and aid program derived from its full recognition and exploitation of these local aspirations. Not that one completely endorses the easy and frequent assumption by Western observers that

in their foreign trade the U.S.S.R. and other Soviet bloc countries are predominantly guided by political considerations and that the recent trends simply mean an intensification of the cold war on the economic front....⁵³

In the very broadest sense of the term, to be sure, everything the Soviets do is political in the sense that it is designed to further the aim of Soviet world domination. But one should not assume that all Soviet trade policies are dominated primarily or strictly by political considerations, or that these trade policies have not made a great deal of sense economically. Nor should it be forgotten that economic factors limit the possibilities available in foreign trade. The Soviets must ask how far their economy will permit them to aid underdeveloped countries without sapping the strength of the bloc itself.

Political considerations were certainly dominant in the Middle East arms shipments and there were isolated cases of overbuying by the bloc. Nevertheless most of the Soviets' increased trade should be examined in economic terms. Nove pointed out two factors which helped stimulate this foreign trade: first, the removal of Stalin's artificial policy of extreme autarky; second, the economic growth of bloc economies, with attendant shortages in certain areas and oversupplies in others. Any lessening of international tensions as

a reaction to Stalin was bound to provide an occasion for increasing Soviet economic contacts with the outside world. As a matter of fact, it seems more realistic to consider these later Soviet attitudes on foreign trade as normal (if we can apply that word to anything Soviet); the extreme autarkic policies followed by Stalin were the aberrations. With the development of bloc economies, shortages and surpluses were bound to arise, and thus provide the motive for increased international exchanges.⁵⁴

Nor is it so extraordinary economically that the Soviets were making trade deals with the non-Western world. The underdeveloped countries naturally provided a ready market for Soviet bloc machinery and manufactured goods. Also noteworthy at this point is the fact that most Soviet trade was within the bloc, and that a sizable portion of the remainder was with Western Europe. Changing trade patterns both inside and outside the bloc led the Soviet state traders into the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and South America.

From the outset then the Soviet trade offensive had a dual character and dual results; the motives were mixed. On one hand was the economic aim: To benefit the bloc's economic strength while helping to create economic conditions in the less developed country which would in the long run lead to Socialism. On the other hand were political and psychological objectives: to create an atmosphere of good will in the other country, display Soviet economic strength, hammer on the theme of national development, show peaceful intentions. In retrospect, the Soviets had good reason for self-satisfaction.

On balance their activities have paid, or will pay, economically, while politically they have perpetrated,

almost successfully, one of the grandest hoaxes of all the time. [I.e., that the bloc can "compete" with the West economically, and that its intentions are only peaceful.]

What appears as economic competition is rather the timely and strategically placed use of small amounts of resources designed specifically to enhance the Soviet economic and political power position.⁵⁵

Iran provided a good barometer for judging Soviet intentions and policies in the Middle East. During the period when the Soviets were abandoning their sterile policy of subversion and intimidation, about 1956 (after the Shah's visit to Moscow), and beginning to talk about good neighborly relations between the two countries, the border settlements were negotiated, which resulted in the Soviets paying 11 tons of gold and \$8 million in cash to Iran, to settle wartime claims. In 1957 the Soviet bloc exported to Iran some 126,600,000 rubles (126.6 M/R) in trade commodities, of which the primary products were sugar (42.1 M/R), cotton fabrics (26.7 M/R), timber (18.6 M/R), machinery and equipment (15.1 M/R), and iron and steel (14.3 M/R). Imports by the bloc from Iran amounted to 74,100,000 rubles (74.1 M/R), of which the main items were wool (27.4 M/R), fruit (13.9 M/R), raw cotton (9.8 M/R), and lead ore (9.5 M/R). During that time roughly 25 percent of Iran's exports went to the bloc, while Iran received some 12 percent of its imports from the bloc.⁵⁶

What is really significant is not these percentages and totals per se, but the degree of economic and political dependency which they force the trade partner to accept. Iran's terrain and climate have caused much of the country's economic power, aside from oil, to be concentrated in the northern half. It is not at all surprising therefore that some trade should have been conducted with the Soviet Union. Soviet trade also offered advantages: long-term agreements which helped ensure economic stability; extended credit facilities with easy payment terms; the services of Soviet technical experts. Even so, Iran's trade with the Soviet Union and the bloc not unduly large, either in total amount or as a percentage. Nor did the presence of such trade prevent Iran from aligning herself with CENTO, or from developing close relations with the United States. Iran was, for the time being, still firmly committed to the West.

IV. Soviet Cultural Relations with Iran

The key to the Soviet drive for influence in the Middle East is suggested by the phrase "cultural relations". The political and economic maneuvers were, after all, much the same as those in other parts of the globe; they could be met rather successfully with political and economic countermeasures. What has provided the vital cutting-edge for the Soviet offensive in the Middle East and what poses an added threat that Western policy makers have not yet succeeded in countering, is the cultural affinity between the Soviets and the peoples of the Middle East. Perhaps affinity is not the precise word, but it comes close to describing the noneconomic,

nonpolitical attraction which the Soviet Union has had for the Middle Eastern peoples.

This cultural affinity has several aspects, each of which the Soviets have exploited in making their appeal. Most crucial is the existence of six Muslim republics in the Soviet federation; appeals can be made to fellow Muslims. There are also Russian Orthodox communities in many of the Middle Eastern nations; the church can be a most useful instrument of national policy, opening many doors which would otherwise remain closed. National minority groups, quite numerous and strong, exist in many of the Middle Eastern countries; and these groups could obviously be susceptible to appeals from the same national minorities within the Soviet Union -- Blood is thicker than water. Islamic doctrine itself is, in many respects, more compatible with communism than with Western liberal democracy. Finally, quite apart from the usual cultural and sports delegations, Soviet learned societies are conducting a vigorous program of studies and visits. All told, these cultural weapons represent a sizable arsenal at the disposal of the Soviet leaders; effectively used they can present a formidable challenge to Western interests in the Middle East.

Geography and history are clearly important in placing members of these various groupings on both sides of the Soviet-Iranian frontier.

...ever since the middle of the nineteenth century the southern fringe of Russia from the Caspian to Outer Mongolia has been peopled by millions of Muslims with strong cultural and racial ties with peoples over the border in Turkey, Iraq,

Persia and Afghanistan. This Muslim fringe is now organized into six republics which the Soviet Government is intent on using as a shop window to attract the countries of the East, and as a cultural bridge between the Soviet Union and the Middle East.⁵⁷

As indicated, these ties are reinforced by their dual nature; a common Muslim religion is coupled with a common Turkish racial and linguistic background.

Realizing this obvious cultural appeal, the Soviets took several steps toward a general policy designed to exploit it. The official atheism of the Soviet regime deemphasized; a strong effort was made to convince Muslim outsiders that things were different now, that their coreligionists within Soviet Central Asia were no longer subjected to harassment and discrimination. To show their good faith Soviet economic plans devoted an increasing share of the national budget to the Muslim Asiatic republics. For example, the plan covering 1956-60 called for an investment of some 78 billion roubles in the area, or 25 billion roubles more than the total invested in that area under all five of the previous five-year plans.⁵⁸ Such investment shifts may be explained in logical economic terms, but the timing of the shift was significant. The significance was not missed by the Middle Eastern peoples.

Asia perceives, moreover, that the economic and social position of the Soviet Uzbeks and Turkmens, Kirgizi and Tadzhiks, is superior in various respects to that of their brothers residing

in the Northern Tier zone.⁵⁹

The economic progress made by the many millions of Muslims who live under Soviet rule in Central Asia is perpetual theme of Russian propaganda to the Middle East. It is easy to see why. The new heaven and the new earth which the Russians can offer the people of the Middle East are certainly the most powerful weapons in their arsenal.⁶⁰

The position of Islam itself in all this has been somewhat ambiguous, to say the least. While some of its adherents who are more idealistic and sympathetic to the West look on the Prophet's council as an Islamic version of representative government, this attitude does not seem very realistic. The shura, or council, was really a group of notables with a floating membership, and certainly had few characteristics of a democratically chosen assembly.⁶¹ On strictly doctrinal grounds, certainly, it is difficult to reconcile Islam with communism; divine revelation does not sit well with materialism, nor divine law with mechanical historical rules. It takes a certain degree of sophistication to appreciate these intellectual arguments, however; to the Muslim man in the street, the similarities may seem more important than the differences. Both systems of thought are authoritarian; each divides the world into believers and unbelievers; each provides an orthodoxy which purports to answer all problems of individual and social behavior, a complete world outlook. Some very cogent arguments can also be made that Islamic doctrine is against extreme disparities in wealth and all forms of economic exploitation and that it too emphasizes community

duties and the common good.⁶² Soviet Muslims have solved another doctrinal problem by interpreting the holy writ as permitting rule by non-Muslims if the rulers are just.⁶³

All of these similarities were pointed up by exchange visits between so-called progressive Soviet Muslim leaders and their brethren throughout the Middle East, with the Soviet Asiatic republics, especially Uzbekistan, serving as the showcase.⁶⁴ The Soviet Muslims, of course, were able to dramatize the trip to Mecca and other holy places. Travel by non-Muslim Soviet citizens was also encouraged. One such tourist described his visit to Meshed, Iran, the holy city of Shiites, during the annual religious festival, in which most of the participants were peasants:

Made desperate by crop failures, disease, oppression and injustice, they fling themselves frantically upon the ornamental brass doors of the great mosque of Reza in the centre of the city to pray in anguished silence for better days.⁶⁵

To confirm his observations, he quoted a description of Iran, (from the U.S. News and World Report):

"...(a) land of mass poverty presided over by a few fabulously wealthy landowners and speculators who make up the ruling class of the country."⁶⁶

People-to-people contacts of this sort were apparently widely utilized by the Soviets.

Another means of entry to the Middle East was provided by the Russian Orthodox Church, a frequent instrument of Soviet policy. The election of the Metropolitan Alexii as successor to the deceased Patriarch of Moscow in 1945 provided the occasion for a new attempt to extend the influence of the Russian Church over the Orthodox communities in the Near East. No effort was spared to win leadership away from the Oecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. Reciprocal visits took place between Russian church officials and their counter-parts in many Middle Eastern countries. Funds were provided for the restoration and rebuilding of Middle Eastern Orthodox churches. The Constantinople Patriarchate was denounced as a tool of the U.S., Turkish, and Greek governments and the old claim of the Moscow branch as the protector of orthodoxy was renewed.⁶⁷ This was an important phase of the Soviet drive.

The political importance of these churches and Patriarchates should not be underestimated. They are still endowed with many of the secular rights and privileges which they enjoyed under the Ottoman millet system and wield political influence in proportion to the number of their memberships.⁶⁸

The force of these Russian maneuvers was at least partially blunted by new and vigorous leadership from the Constantinople Patriarchate, supported by its member churches in Western Europe and the United States.

The nationalistic aspirations of minority groups like the Kurds provided another Soviet lever against Middle Eastern governments.

Since up to 100,000 Kurdish nationals were residing in the Armenian and Azerbaijan republics, the Soviet Union could spread propaganda and subversion by direct appeals to the Kurds in neighboring states (some two million in southeast Turkey; 750,000 in northwest Iran; 700,000 in northern Iraq; 250,000 in northeast Syria). Kurdish uprisings occurred in 1930 and 1941 which the Iranian Army was called upon to suppress. A Soviet-sponsored Mahabad Republic was established in northwest Iran in connection with the Azerbaijan affair and was reoccupied by Iranian troops in 1946.⁶⁹ The Kurdish rebel leader Mullah Mustafa Barzani, following the collapse of the postwar movement, retired to sanctuary on the Soviet side of the border, not to reappear until 1959. There were indications, however, that the opportunities for Soviet manipulations of Kurdish nationalism subsequently lessened considerably, at least in Iran. Edward Lineham related the following interview with one Qassim Ilkhanizadeh, a leader of the 50,000-strong Dehbukri tribe:

The Kurds in Iraq are not Arabs; those in Turkey are not Turks,...that is why they want their own republic. But we, we are Iranians, and have been for 6,000 years.⁷⁰

The Soviets' intensified efforts in academic pursuits gave them substantial advantages in dealing with the Middle East and its peoples. For many years, of course, the British were considered the experts on the region; this primacy now seems to be slipping from their grasp. Despite the fact that the quality of Soviets' studies of the Middle Eastern area suffered after the death of their great

scholars, Barthold and Krachkovsky, such works can no longer be ignored by the West. Despite their bias toward Marxism-Leninism, Soviet studies on the Middle East made a great impression on the peoples of the area, who asserted the validity of "scientific" conclusions supporting their own nationalistic aims.⁷¹ Science (ilm) is universally revered and respected, and the Soviets were now passing themselves off as the master-scientists.

Conclusions

In its aftermath World War II left massive economic and political dislocations nearly everywhere in the world. The virtually complete demise of the British and French empires thrust the United States into a position of world leadership for which we were perhaps not psychologically prepared. The cold war committed us to a long struggle with a former ally in which both strategy and tactics were much harder to define than in the recent shooting war. Power vacuums in several places around the world made the stakes high and urgently demanded a fast and effective response to the Soviet challenge. On balance U.S. foreign policy during these early postwar years was remarkably successful, considering the handicaps under which a democratic system must operate. We did a very solid job of helping our former enemies to recover both politically and socially, and of aiding other nations in Western Europe.

American policies with respect to the Third World have been less successful, perhaps in part because we could more easily understand and deal with the peoples and problems of Western Europe and industrial Japan than with the vast peasant populations in the Third World and their aspirations and difficulties. In any event,

the initial process of building a nation seems more difficult than rebuilding an industrial nation's capabilities. The former task requires not only a whole new set of attitudes and values to make the transition to modernity a success, but massive changes in the legal and political infrastructure as well. Available reports and evidence imply that much of the anti-American and anti-Western feeling in the Third World has been generated by these social and cultural changes. American policy has seemed too heavily oriented toward military alliances and military aid and to deal insufficiently with the country's underlying social problems.

The futility of such policies was glaringly evident in Iran. Neither the military alliance with the United States nor the billions of dollars of sophisticated weaponry which he has purchased for his armed forces could save the Shah. He felt we had betrayed him. Perhaps in a sense we had failed him, by not trying to negotiate social change as part of the price for our weapons. Perhaps we were at fault for not offering more assistance and information on how to lead a successful social revolution. The Shah had a dream for his country: to build a strong, independent, modern nation. He had oil revenues as high as \$20 billion a year at his disposal. He also had our friendship, with all our resources available to him; yet he failed. If Iran, with all these advantages, was unable to make the transition to modernity in a peaceful way, is there hope for any of the other Third World nations?

The argument in this paper thus ends where it began, by pointing out the need for scholars in the West to pay increased attention to the Middle East, its history, peoples, culture, and problems. Many aspects of the Soviet power play for influence in

the Middle East cannot be countered directly, especially those related to the culture. But there is no reason why we should gratuitously hand them the additional advantage of being more knowledgeable about the area than we are.

FOOTNOTES

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