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Review Essay
Reassessing the Eagle and the Lion

BEN OFFILER

Roham Alvandi, *Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah: The United States and Iran in the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, £38.99). Pp 272. ISBN 978 0 1993 7569 1.

Christian Emery, *US Foreign Policy and the Iranian Revolution: The Cold War Dynamics of Engagement and Strategic Alliance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, £62.00). Pp 267. ISBN 978 1 137 32986 8.

Stephen McGlinchey, *U.S. Arms Policies towards the Shah's Iran* (Oxford: Routledge, 2014, £110.00). Pp 202. ISBN 978 0 4157 3921 4.

In June 2013, Iran surprised many observers by electing the moderate, but still firmly establishment, cleric Hassan Rouhani as President. Following Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's eight years in office, few analysts predicted Rouhani's victory. It was expected that Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, would oversee the election of a more controllable conservative politician than Ahmadinejad had turned out to be. Instead, the array of hard-line candidates presented to the electorate on polling day split the conservative vote, resulting in an overwhelming victory for Rouhani.

For outside observers, Rouhani's victory – not to say the Supreme Leader's willingness to accept the result – suggested a potential shift in outlook from Tehran away from the belligerency that marked the Ahmadinejad era. In the United States, the Obama administration was cautious in welcoming the new President, unsure whether Rouhani would signify any real change from his predecessor when ultimate power in Iran rests in the Supreme Leader's hands. Obama had tried previously – and perhaps fruitlessly – to "reset" Washington's relationship with Tehran when he delivered a landmark speech wishing the Iranian people a happy *Nowruz* in 2009.[1] In January 2015, a historic first telephone conversation between sitting American and Iranian Presidents symbolized the potential for a realignment of US–Iranian relations.[2] In the years that have followed, efforts at cooperation between Washington and Tehran on the contentious issue of Iran's nuclear programme have run parallel with

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[1] "Obama's Video Message to Iranians: 'Let's Start Again'," *The Guardian*, 21 March 2009, at www.theguardian.com/world/2009/mar/21/barack-obama-iran-video-message.

[2] "Obama Holds Historic Phone Call with Rouhani and Hints at End to Sanctions," *The Guardian*, 28 September 2014, at www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/27/obama-phone-call-iranian-president-rouhani.

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tensions over the Syrian civil war and Iranian support for the Assad regime. Just as Rouhani's election in 2013 presented policymakers with an opportunity to realign US–Iranian relations, two more presidential elections in November 2016 and May 2017 – in the United States and Iran respectively – offer historians the chance to reappraise the foundations, evolution and missed opportunities of Washington's relationship with Tehran.

Although the two countries have not had official diplomatic relations since 1980, following the occupation of the American embassy in Tehran by a group of revolutionary Iranian students, to understand the current state of US–Iranian relations it is vital to consider America's Cold War policies towards Iran. After all, Iran was in 1946 the site of one of the first clashes of the Cold War when Washington confronted Moscow over its refusal to withdraw Soviet troops from the north of the country. American interests in Iran were further intensified in 1953 when the Eisenhower administration authorized a coup to topple the democratically elected prime minister Mohammad Mossadegh, restoring the shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, to the Peacock Throne and thereby tying the United States to the fate of the authoritarian Pahlavi regime.

The works under review here – by Roham Alvandi, Christian Emery, and Stephen McGlinchey – each make excellent contributions to the growing literature on Washington's complicated relationship with Tehran.[3] In recent years, historians have sought to go beyond the 1953 CIA-orchestrated coup and the Tehran hostage crisis, which have been the focus for numerous diplomatic historians.[4] Elsewhere, a

[3] For example, see Kristen Blake, *The U.S.–Soviet Confrontation in Iran, 1945–1962: A Case in the Annals of the Cold War* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2009); David R. Collier, "To Prevent a Revolution: John F. Kennedy and the Promotion of Development," *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 34, 3 (2013), 456–75; Christopher T. Fisher, "'Moral Purpose Is the Important Thing': David Lilienthal, Iran, and the Meaning of Development in the US, 1956–63," *International History Review*, 33, 3 (Sept. 2011), 431–51; Mark J. Gasiorowski, *U.S. Foreign Policy and the Shah: Building a Client State in Iran* (London: Cornell University Press, 1991); James F. Goode, *The United States and Iran: In the Shadow of Musaddiq* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1997); Andrew L. Johns, "The Johnson Administration, the Shah of Iran, and the Changing Pattern of U.S.–Iranian Relations, 1965–1967: 'Tired of Being Treated like a Schoolboy'," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 9, 2 (Spring 2007), 64–94; Victor V. Nemchenok, "In Search of Stability amid Chaos: US Policy toward Iran, 1961–63," *Cold War History*, 10, 3 (Aug. 2010), 341–69; Nemchenok, "'That So Fair a Thing Should Be So Frail': The Ford Foundation and the Failure of Rural Development in Iran, 1953–1964," *Middle East Journal*, 63, 2 (Spring 2009), 261–84; Ben Offiler, *US Foreign Policy and the Modernization of Iran: Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, and the Shah* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Roland Popp, "An Application of Modernization Theory during the Cold War? The Case of Pahlavi Iran," *International History Review*, 30, 1 (March 2008), 76–98; April Summitt, "For a White Revolution: John F. Kennedy and the Shah of Iran," *Middle East Journal*, 58, 4 (Autumn 2004), 560–75; Andrew Warne, "Psychoanalyzing Iran: Kennedy's Iran Task Force and the Modernization of Orientalism, 1961–3," *International History Review*, 35, 2 (2013), 396–422.

[4] Darioush Bayandor, *Iran and the CIA: The Fall of Mosaddeq Revisited* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Mark J. Gasiorowski and Malcolm Byrne, eds., *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2004); Stephen Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East*

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number of classic works on the Washington–Pahlavi relationship were written prior to the release of thousands of official US government documents.[5] Although the authors here each focus on slightly different areas of US–Iranian relations (Alvandi on three case studies: Nixon's visit to Tehran in May 1972, the Kurdish question, and the shah's nuclear ambitions; McGlinchey on the crucial arms sale dynamic; and Emery on the Carter administration's policies of engagement during and following the Iranian Revolution), they have much in common, aside from the impressive and meticulous archival research on display.

First, as other diplomatic historians have begun to emphasize the role of non-American actors during the Cold War, these works all highlight Iranian agency in shaping the nature of US–Iranian relations. Second, they illustrate the different ways in which the US–Iranian relationship transcended the Cold War as Tehran sought to achieve its regional foreign-policy goals. This is not to say that the United States was not concerned by traditional Cold War imperatives; indeed, Alvandi, McGlinchey, and Emery each demonstrate that US policy was consistently informed by the Cold War paradigm that stressed the need to contain Soviet expansionism. Tehran, by contrast, was not always motivated by fears of Communism, although the shah in particular was more than happy to exaggerate the threat of Soviet-inspired subversion as a negotiating tactic. Third, each work shines a spotlight on the short-sightedness of US policy towards Iran, whether it be the Nixon administration's willingness to risk Iran's economic stability through its embrace of astronomical arms sales, or the Carter administration's inability to recognize that American association with "moderate" elements of the Revolution could be a poisoned chalice for such groups. Finally, the authors all demonstrate in different ways the limitations of US power and influence, which resulted in successive administrations struggling to understand how best to maintain a fruitful relationship with Iran.

Alvandi's account, as the title suggests, focusses primarily on the relationship between Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, and the shah. Although the final chapter looks at the transition to the Ford administration and its negotiations with Tehran over the sale of nuclear technology, it stresses the continuity in US policy from the Nixon years with Kissinger, as Gerald Ford's Secretary of State and national security adviser, acting as the key conduit between Washington and the shah. It is under Nixon, however, that Alvandi sees the greatest changes in the US–Iranian Cold War relationship.

Noting that Nixon "inherited from his predecessors" (18) a patron–client relationship with Iran, Alvandi "challenges the popular view of the shah as merely 'America's

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Terror (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2003); Fariborz Mokhtari, "Iran's 1953 Coup Revisited: Internal Dynamics versus External Intrigue," *Middle East Journal*, 62, 3 (Summer 2008), 457–88; Gary Sick, *All Fall Down: America's Fateful Encounter with Iran* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1985). On the oil nationalization crisis see Mark Hamilton Lytle, *The Origins of the Iranian–American Alliance, 1941–1953* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1987); Steve Marsh, *Anglo-American Relations and Cold War Oil: Crisis in Iran* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Mary Ann Heiss, *Empire and Nationhood: The United States, Great Britain, and Iranian Oil, 1950–1954* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

[5] James Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American–Iranian Relations* (London: Yale University Press, 1988); Barry Rubin, *Paved with Good Intentions: The American Experience and Iran* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1981).

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proxy'" to argue that "Third World actors like Mohammad Reza Shah were not simply bystanders in this global ideological and material struggle, but active agents of history who often abetted and manipulated the superpowers in the pursuit of their own local ambitions and interests" (3). He adds his voice to those who have suggested that the coincidental timing of Great Britain's withdrawal from "East of Suez" alongside Nixon's election in 1968 and subsequent distraction with Vietnam, rapprochement with China, and detente with the Soviet Union "presented the shah with an opportunity to fundamentally transform the US–Iran patron–client relationship" (26).

It is here that Alvandi puts forward one of his key arguments, suggesting that these developments alone were not enough to account for the shift in US–Iranian relations that occurred under Nixon. Rather, Alvandi contends,

> because of his long-standing friendship with the shah, Richard Nixon brought new ideas to the White House about the Pahlavi monarch and his ambitions for Iran, providing fertile ground for the shah's relentless efforts to forge a partnership with the United States by securing Washington's backing for Iran's regional primacy in the Gulf. (29)

While much of Alvandi's thesis is persuasive – Nixon arguably viewed the shah more fondly than either Kennedy or Johnson did – it perhaps overemphasizes the significance of the friendship and downplays the continuity that existed in US policy towards Iran in the late 1960s and early 1970s. LBJ and Nixon both shared a number of guiding principles that informed their approach to Tehran: first, that Iran was a vital Cold War interest due to its oil reserves, non-radical government, position in the strategically important Persian Gulf, and long border with the Soviet Union; second, that Iran's security and stability rested upon the shah; third, that American influence over the shah had declined dramatically in recent years, thanks to Iran's rising oil income and the shah's firm grasp on power at home; finally, both the Johnson and Nixon administrations believed that arms sales were the most effective tool at Washington's disposal when it came to maintaining close ties with the shah. While Nixon's friendship with the shah may well have influenced his attitude towards Iran, the decision to lift virtually all restrictions on arms sales represented considerable continuity because it was based on the same assumptions that were shared by the Johnson administration.

As Alvandi notes, however, these changes did not come about immediately following Nixon's election. Instead, "the shift in US Persian Gulf policy was a slow, evolutionary process" (42). Alvandi cites two turning points as instrumental in understanding how, and why, the Nixon administration moved away from Lyndon Johnson's "twin-pillar" policy in the Persian Gulf to endorsing the shah's ambitions for regional primacy, notably through the decision in May 1972 to provide him with a "blank check" on arms sales. First, a border crisis along the Shatt al-Arab waterway in 1969 brought tensions between Iran and its traditional rival Iraq to a head. Despite American efforts to restrain the shah, he risked conflict with Baghdad by sending an Iranian ship, accompanied by an air and naval escort, down the disputed waterway. Iraq's reluctant acquiescence to the show of force demonstrated Iran's military superiority over its neighbour, Tehran's determination to assert Iranian primacy, and the shah's willingness to defy Washington in pursuit of his own goals (42–46).

Second, and perhaps more important in terms of shaping US policy, was the Nixon administration's adoption of National Security Decision Memorandum 92. Alvandi

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argues that NSDM-92's acceptance of "'the preponderance of Iranian power' in the Gulf … marked a turning point in the evolution of US Gulf policy," which saw Washington rely increasingly on the shah to secure its national security interests in the region (55). In his discussion of the combined Soviet–Iraqi threat to Iran, Alvandi is convincing in suggesting that "both Nixon and Kissinger were looking at the Gulf through the shah's eyes," thereby ignoring intelligence that downplayed the subversive threat emanating from Baghdad and Moscow (57).

This tendency to view the Persian Gulf region "through the shah's eyes" also manifested in Nixon and Kissinger's support for his policy towards Iranian and Iraqi Kurds. In an excellent chapter, Alvandi traces the complex relationship between Nixon, Kissinger, the shah, and Mustafa Barzani, the Kurdish leader in Iraq. The shah's goal in supporting Barzani was to tie down the Iraqi army, while the White House, willing to follow the shah's lead, saw the policy as an opportunity to demonstrate to Iraq and others the dangers of associating with the Soviet Union. For the United States, the conflict between Iran and Iraq took "on a distinctive Cold War shade" because of Moscow's economic and military assistance to Baghdad (75). For the shah, however, the Kurdish question was very much about local rivalries, but it also provided an opportunity to further demonstrate America's increasing reliance on and declining influence over Tehran: "The decisive factor in the ultimate decision to back Barzani was not Soviet influence in Iraq, but the pressure that the shah was bringing to bear on the White House" (81).

Indeed, it is the Shah's ability to manipulate and exploit both American fears about Soviet expansionism and Washington's reliance on Iran for regional security that links Alvandi's book with McGlinchey's. Both challenge portrayals of the shah as simply an American puppet, instead exposing and emphasizing his agency in asserting Iranian dominance in the Persian Gulf, pursuing his own domestic agenda, and resisting US advice and pressure. At the heart of McGlinchey's thesis is the argument that the arms sales policies of successive US administrations in the thirty years following the end of World War II created a situation whereby "America's regional options had become heavily leveraged on the Shah's Iran" by the time of the Iranian Revolution. The consequence of the Revolution and the sudden end to America's arms sales to Iran was that "the US did not just lose an ally or a customer–client relationship – the entire thrust of American policy towards the Persian Gulf lay in ruins" (5). How and why, McGlinchey asks, did this situation evolve?

Outlining the formative years of the US–Iranian arms sales relationship, McGlinchey highlights the "mismatched" perspectives of Washington and Tehran. For the Truman administration, "military aid to Iran 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" (8, original emphasis). The shah's ambitions for his armed forces, however, were much grander. By the end of the 1950s it was clear the shah sought to increase Iran's military to the point where it could successfully defend the country and assert Tehran's dominance in the region.

McGlinchey's assessment of the Kennedy administration refutes traditional accounts that this period marked a "nadir" in US–Iranian relations because of JFK's zeal for reform, which irked the shah. Instead, McGlinchey argues that while Kennedy initially "considered removing US support for the Shah," by 1963 his policies "broadly reflected the status quo" (22). Rather than being a reform era, then, the Kennedy years "neutered any high-level revisionist thinking over the Shah's role in

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Iran" (33).[6] As such, McGlinchey frames 1966 as "the real nadir" (42–48) when the shah's demands for greater levels of military credit encountered resistance from Washington. Even so, he highlights the "evolutionary progression" (54) that occurred under Lyndon Johnson in terms of arms sales to Iran as new credit deals were reached in 1964, 1966 and 1968.

Echoing Alvandi, it is under Nixon that McGlinchey sees "a revolutionary change in both general US arms sales policy and US–Iran relations" (61). However, he also notes that the early years of the Nixon administration were marked by "continuity, not change" (68–73) and that, at least until 1972, there was "no paradigm change in military sales to Iran and the pattern observed through the Johnson years remained essentially intact" (70). Like Alvandi, McGlinchey makes another valuable contribution to the literature by examining in some depth the Ford administration's arms sales policies. In his argument, the Ford era is "a story of a deepening, and increasingly complex, relationship" that, notably, saw Congress reject its previous relatively laissez-faire approach to US–Iranian relations, and manoeuvre "itself into a position in which it was informed, willing and potentially able to play an active role" (94).

Unlike Emery, who focusses on the Carter administration's engagement policies during and following the Revolution, McGlinchey is primarily interested in how the Revolution impacted the arms sales relationship. On that question, he notes that despite Carter's initial idealism, Washington's arms sales policy was maintained and even expanded to the point that 1977 marked a "historic peak." Carter's conversion to the gospel of arms sales was underscored by his "bullish advocacy" (157) of the 1977 deal for an advanced Airborne Warning and Control System, which eventually overcame stiff Congressional resistance. Indeed, one of the key features of the US–Iran arms sales relationship that McGlinchey identifies is that "at various junctures it was only through concerted action at the highest level that interdepartmental disagreements were overruled and progress was made" (172); support from and intervention by the White House was necessary to maintain the close relationship engendered by arms sales. The significance of presidential interest in US–Iranian relations is apparent in both Alvandi and McGlinchey's accounts, while in his assessment of the Carter administration's policies towards Revolutionary Iran, Emery highlights some of the problems created by a disinterested or indecisive President.

The Revolution, Emery asserts, found American policymakers completely unprepared: "there simply was no plan for a post-Shah Iran" (1). However, Emery seeks to challenge the thesis, which underpins much of the Islamic Republic's anti-American zeal and rhetoric, that US hostility to the Revolution was inevitable and irrevocable. Instead, Emery is interested in examining the Carter administration's varied efforts at engagement with Revolutionary forces, asking, "why did the US believe the new Iranian regime worth engaging and how did engagement emerge as a viable strategy?" (5).

A key problem facing US policymakers was that they still operated under the Cold War paradigm meaning that "the grounds upon which US officials hoped a new relationship could be forged were not built on solid intellectual foundations" (6). The

[6] For a similar argument that criticizes Kennedy's reformist credentials see Offiler, 26–68. For a perspective that emphasizes the Kennedy administration's reformist ideals see Collier.

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Revolution was not a Cold War crisis, as Washington officials tended to assume, but the culmination of social, economic, political, ideological and religious forces that transcended the bipolar conflict. It is Emery's contention, and one of a number of important contributions to the literature, that "US policy failed not because of an instinctive hostility to the Islamic Republic or any attempt to undermine it … [but because of] a number of conceptual flaws and counterproductive actions" (12–13). Moreover, as the Revolution gathered speed, the United States was reduced to a mere "bystander" thanks to a combination of limited intelligence, interdepartmental tensions, and presidential indecision (40–46).

The continued emphasis on the threat of Communism helps explain the Carter administration's move towards engaging with the Islamic Republic; as Emery writes, "stabilising relations with Iran, and a desire for internal stability inside Iran, was thus a policy in tune with America's conventional approach of keeping the Soviets out of the Persian Gulf, which was fundamental to the global balance of power" (57). Emery recounts the failure of early efforts to achieve "realistic empathy" through interactions with elite technocratic, secular revolutionaries, and cites proposals by Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and Ambassador William Sullivan to engage with the Revolution's ideological leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, as a missed opportunity.

Another of the book's important contributions is its discussion of US assessments of leftist groups within, and Soviet policy towards, Iran. Emery notes the ironic similarity between American and Soviet goals and analysis: "the Kremlin would prefer a more secular-orientated Iranian government, but recognised that Khomeini and the clergy would remain dominant in the short term … Critically, like the State Department and CIA, the Soviets believed that clerical dominance was transitory" (115). Turning his attention to the Tehran hostage crisis, Emery acknowledges the significance of the decision to allow the cancer-suffering shah to enter the United States for medical treatment but also highlights the "ill-fated" (138) meeting in Algiers on 1 November 1979 between Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter's national security adviser, and Mehdi Bazargan, prime minister of the Provisional Government of Iran. The meeting, which was not sanctioned by Khomeini or the powerful Revolutionary Council, "represented a severe political miscalculation" (140). It irrevocably tarred Bazargan, and other PGOI officials considered moderate by Washington, with the stain of association with America, a consequence exacerbated by Brzezinski's well-earned reputation as one of Carter's most hawkish advisers on Iran.

Emery shows that time after time, US analysis was based on two faulty assumptions: "that decision-making amongst the religious leadership was entirely irrational, and that the Left was in a position to inherit Iran" (145). As such, efforts to link the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan to a resolution to the hostage crisis by demonstrating the threat posed to Iran by Communism were unsuccessful. Indeed, a recurring theme of Emery's book is a paradox that US policymakers were never able to successfully reconcile: "perceptions of the Soviet threat in Iran featured heavily in US strategic planning, yet contemporary assessments by intelligence professionals and area specialists often downplayed Soviet influence" (192). This disconnect between policymaking and intelligence would prove crucial in explaining the failure of Carter's engagement policy. Moreover, it could arguably be said to be a common feature of US policy towards Iran for much of the Cold War.

The question whether historians should advise US officials on policymaking has been the subject of some debate recently, with two prominent scholars even suggesting

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that the President "needs a Council of Historians."[7] However, should the latest occupant of the White House wish to learn lessons from the history of US–Iranian relations, they could do worse than reading these excellent books by Alvandi, Emery and McGlinchey. Together they highlight the value of sustained presidential involvement in shaping US policy towards Iran, even while it does not guarantee positive results, as illustrated by the long-term failure of Nixon's arms sales policy. Related to this is the need to balance short-term goals and political expediency with a consideration of long-term objectives and repercussions. Throughout the Cold War, American policymakers viewed Iran through a myopic lens that prioritized immediate security over economic and political development that would create serious problems further down the line. Similarly, each of the authors here demonstrates the problems that arise when policymakers allow ideology, instead of intelligence, to dictate policy. Cold War considerations frequently trumped other perspectives in Washington. By ignoring – or simply not having access to – experienced Iran specialists or local Iranian sources, American understandings of Iran have often been clouded by misguided assumptions based on security concerns or limited intelligence. As such, there have been a number of missed opportunities for improving US–Iranian relations, particularly evidenced by Carter's ill-fated attempts at engagement with the new Islamic Republic of Iran. But the opportunities were there. The challenge for future American Presidents is to identify such opportunities to forge a mutually beneficial relationship with Tehran that acknowledges shared economic and security interests while emphasizing political reform and progress on human rights.

[7] Graham Allison and Niall Ferguson, "Why the U.S. President Needs a Council of Historians," *The Atlantic*, Sept. 2016, at www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/09/dont-know-much-about-history/492746. For an alternative perspective see Jeremy Adelman, "Who Needs Historians?", *Chronicle Review*, 9 Aug. 2016, at www.chronicle.com/article/Who-Needs-Historians-/237415.

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