

The British experience in Iraq created the initial Western perceptions, perceptions that propagated through pervasive Orientalist thought in Western media. This foundation of ideas and attitudes laid a foundation for perspectives towards Iraq within the U.S. government.

### C. THE 1979 IRANIAN REVOLUTION

The Iranian Revolution was an unprecedented event of monumental significance. While Middle Eastern history is peppered with numerous revolts and revolutions, no other movement has had such impact within the Muslim world, or upon East-West relations. The 1979 revolution transformed a pro-Western monarchy under the Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, into a radical, Islamist theocracy under the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. During this period, the principal U.S. policy objectives were the containment of Soviet expansion, the steady and secure flow of Middle East oil, and the safeguarding of Israel.<sup>40</sup> Unfortunately, as the end of the Cold War would reveal, the emphasis on Soviet containment effectively overshadowed the numerous smaller conflicts. Such was the nature of the U.S. government's support to the Shah, placed on the Iranian throne in 1953 with the help of a CIA engineered coup, to thwart the possibility of a Communist takeover. U.S. policymakers were convinced that the most critical challenges facing Iran at the time, and increasingly the Shah, were economic modernization and land reform. The U.S. government sought to defend Iran from internal Communist threats by facilitating prosperity and stability through reform. The Shah, on the other hand, was increasingly concerned with external threats and the expansion of Iranian influence. Despite continued pressure from the U.S. government, a CIA report to President Eisenhower on 7 April, 1960 concluded that the Shah's reforms "have alienated new groups of people without causing any groups already opposed to the Shah to come over to his side."<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, in a later reevaluation of U.S. policy toward Iran, NSC 6010 concluded that without significant reforms the monarchy would probably collapse.<sup>42</sup> It also revealed the conundrum facing U.S. policymakers: there were few viable pro-Western alternative leaders who could mitigate internal dissent.

<sup>40</sup> Woodyard, 1.

<sup>41</sup> Little, 218.

<sup>42</sup> NSC-6010, "Statement of U.S. Policy Toward Iran" 6 July 1960, 680-688.

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Thus, while the Shah was slow in undertaking the necessary reforms, Eisenhower had no option but to keep U.S. aid flowing in hopes of containing a possible revolution.<sup>43</sup>

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The Kennedy administration took more aggressive actions, eventually pressuring the Shah to draft internal reform measures subsequently known as the “White Revolution.” This created new challenges for U.S. sponsorship. It had to ensure that reforms progressed at a pace sufficient to garner lower-class support while preventing economic collapse. In addition, it had to develop effective counter-insurgency and police forces necessary to maintain internal stability.<sup>44</sup> Kennedy’s Middle East experts prophesied:

The success of the Shah’s program over the long run may well rest on the extent to which it is identified as an indigenous effort...the Shah’s greatest liability may well be his vulnerability to charges by both reactionary and radical opposition elements that he is a foreign puppet.<sup>45</sup>

This is precisely what occurred on 3 June, 1963 as the Ayatollah Khomeini openly denounced the Shah, labeling him an American puppet, in response to the Shah’s earlier denouncement of the clergy as “parasitic agents of black reaction” with, whom “progress was synonymous with blasphemy.”<sup>46</sup> Through his fiery sermons and rhetoric laden with Islamist appeal, Khomeini quickly became the leading frontman for groups opposed to the Pahlavi dynasty. With U.S. diplomatic support, the Shah began an aggressive campaign of brutal crackdowns that resulted in thousands of deaths and the house arrest of numerous clerics and opposition leaders.<sup>47</sup> Toward the end of 1964, Khomeini, who never relented on his open criticisms of the regime, was exiled from Iran. At the time, the Kennedy administration did not understand the implications of Khomeini’s rising popularity and continued to support and encourage the Shah’s reforms. Later under the Johnson administration, when Vietnam received the bulk of U.S. attention, the Shah’s “White Revolution” was viewed positively against the

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<sup>43</sup> Minutes of the 449<sup>th</sup> NSC meeting, 30 June 1960, w/ James Lay, memo, 6 July 1960, 676-681.

<sup>44</sup> Little, 220.

<sup>45</sup> “U.S. Strategy for Iran” in memorandum from Secretary Dean Rusk to JFK, 20 April, 1963.

<sup>46</sup> Little, 220.

<sup>47</sup> James A. Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relation*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 152-153.