Review - US Arms Policies Towards the Shah's Iran

https://www.e-ir.info/2015/01/03/review-us-arms-policies-towards-the-shahs-iran/

TAYLOR FAIN, JAN 3 2015

US Arms Policies Towards the Shah's Iran
by Stephen McGlinchey
Routledge: New York, 2014

Late in his incisive and thorough history of U.S. arms sales to imperial Iran, Stephen McGlinchey quotes former U.S. National Security Council staff member Gary Sick on the nature of the U.S.-Iranian military relationship on the eve of the Islamic revolution. Sick records in *All Fall Down*, his 1985 memoir of revolutionary era U.S. policy making in the Middle East, that by the time Jimmy Carter became president "[w]hether one liked it or not, Iran was the regional tail wagging the superpower dog" (150). Sick's observation neatly encapsulates the evolution of the volatile dynamic between Tehran and Washington, one largely predicated on the unrealistic political and strategic hopes invested by the United States in the imperial government and aggravated by the Shah's voracious appetite for advanced U.S. weaponry.

McGlinchey captures this relationship in six succinct chapters that assess American military sales to Iran from the administration of Harry S. Truman to the collapse of the Shah's regime in 1978. "As the U.S.-Iranian relationship evolved," he writes, "the idea of arming Iran became an orthodoxy in U.S. foreign policy. It prevailed in spite of resistance from Congress and within the executive and became the essence of an important Cold War security relationship" (3). In the early years of the Cold War and extending through the Kennedy administration, the United States dispensed military aid to Iran in a limited policy designed to secure the shah's regime and keep Iran free from Soviet influence. However, by the mid 1960s the U.S.-Iranian military relationship evolved from one based upon U.S. aid to Tehran to a credit partnership. McGlinchey details how the changing geopolitical realities in the Middle East, the Iranian regime's increasing oil wealth, and the shah's determination to make his nation the region's political and military hegemon led Iran to covet the most advanced American weapons in ever-increasing quantities. Despite the reluctance of many in Congress and the U.S. national security establishment to grant his requests, the shah maneuvered adroitly. He played upon U.S. fears of Soviet advances in the Middle East and the dangers of radical Arab nationalism to the region, and after threatening to acquire arms from the Soviet Union he convinced the Johnson administration to conclude three military credit agreements with his government between 1964 and 1968.

The centerpiece of McGlinchey's study, naturally, is the period of Richard Nixon's presidency when the United States initiated a period of "unlimited and unmoderated" arms sales to Iran (168). Overextended in Southeast Asia and confronted with Britain's decision to end its permanent military presence in the Persian Gulf, Nixon determined to make the shah's Iran a pillar of pro-Western stability in the region and a surrogate for American power there. This story has been related elsewhere, of course, but McGlinchey's achievement is to elucidate Nixon's "intricate, multi-layered, and systematic" (174) diplomacy with the shah, including the often overlooked period of arms negotiations with Tehran from 1969 to 1971, the refinement of the 1969 Nixon Doctrine in the Gulf, and the president's successful efforts to remove arms credit controls from Congress. As a result, by 1972, Iran's government became the largest foreign customer for American arms, larger even than South Vietnam. Nixon's "blank cheque" to the shah resulted in Iranian purchases exploding from approximately $150 million per year to the multi-billions by the middle of the decade. McGlinchey characterizes it as a "grand test of Nixon's idea of outsourcing containment" and a "disproportionate policy package in the region that ultimately ended in spectacular failure" (175).

How that failure unspooled is the subject of the final two chapters of McGlinchey's book, which examine the brief interregnum of President Gerald Ford and the tragedy of Jimmy Carter's Iran policy. Despite facing mounting criticism from Congress and some elements of the executive, McGlinchey argues that Ford effectively reauthorized Nixon's "blank cheque," entrenching the policy of massive arms sales to Tehran and ensuring that it became "an established fixture of U.S. policy rather than…a temporary aberration" (113). When Jimmy Carter entered the White House on a platform of reclaiming American virtue by espousing a robust human rights agenda, he found himself unable to break the chains of his predecessors' Iran policies. In 1977, McGlinchey notes, "Carter actually sold more arms to Iran than the U.S. had during any year prior….After 30 years of investment and political winnowing, America's regional options had become heavily leveraged on the Shah's Iran" (5).

McGlinchey's analysis unfolds in a straightforward and conventional manner. His book is a diplomatic history of the most traditional kind, and is no less valuable because of it. Those searching for analyses of American "Orientalist" biases in shaping U.S. policy towards Iran, or how Persian culture and identity informed the shah's regional ambitions, or for tropes of gender, pathology, and emotion in the language of U.S.-Iranian relations should look elsewhere. Rather, McGlinchey has produced a carefully and perceptively argued account of the relations between American and Iranian foreign policy elites grounded in a close reading of the (mostly U.S.) documentary record.

His deliberate, chronological, approach allows McGlinchey to interweave several important themes throughout the volume. First, he demonstrates repeatedly that ideology played little or no role in the decisions of successive American presidential administrations to sell weapons to the shah. "Partisanship" he contends, "was never an issue that arose in relation to arming Iran – within either the executive or Congress" (170). Chief executives with worldviews as different as Richard Nixon's and Jimmy Carter's followed surprisingly similar policies with respect to Iran. Second, he demonstrates convincingly that "outside the upper echelons of governance in Washington, few factors or persons had any discernible effect in shaping or influencing arms sales to Iran. In fact, the entire affair is notable for a deliberate pattern of exclusion of involvement or consultation beyond the highest levels of the executive branch" (2-3). Congress frequently attempted to moderate executive behavior and struggled to make its voice heard in deliberations over arms sales, but it seldom attempted to contradict administration policies. Rather, the diplomacy of arms sales to Iran was most often conducted at the highest executive levels, often between the American president and the shah himself. Third, McGlinchey underscores throughout that the dynamics of the U.S. arms sales to Iran were profoundly influenced by diplomatic and geopolitical shocks in the Middle East and elsewhere. The ascendance of radical Arab nationalism in the region, the vicissitudes of the Arab-Israeli conflict, revolutions in Iraq, Yemen, and Libya, and Britain's 1968 decision to withdraw from the Persian Gulf all shaped the military relationship between Washington and Tehran. Perhaps no other factor was as important in determining the United States' arms policies towards the shah's Iran as its political and military exhaustion following the conflict in Vietnam, which produced the Nixon Doctrine and the "blank cheque." Finally, McGlinchey makes abundantly clear the doggedness of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in pursuing a policy of Iranian political primacy and military dominance in the Persian Gulf. Clearly, McGlinchey suggests, the single-mindedness of the Iranian monarch to establish his nation as a regional powerhouse did more than anything else to shape the contours of the U.S.-Iranian military relationship.

McGlinchey's meticulous narrative is punctuated by astute, and occasionally surprising, judgments. He is determined to dispel what he considers important misconceptions about the nature of U.S. arms policies towards Iran. Notably, he seeks to overturn the conventional wisdom that the Kennedy administration's insistence that the shah launch domestic reforms produced tensions between the two nations that brought their relationship to its modern nadir. Actually, McGlinchey concludes, "[b]y 1963, U.S.-Iran relations were stronger than they were prior to Kennedy assuming office" (173). The actual nadir of the relationship, he contends, came during the first two years of Lyndon Johnson's presidency when the shah's determination to acquire advanced U.S, weapons clashed with the president's initial reticence to sell him those arms. Another surprise comes in McGlinchey's treatment of President Gerald Ford's handling of Iran policy. The unelected chief executive confronted a Congress determined to assert its foreign policy making authority following the Vietnam debacle and increasingly dubious of the United States' "blank cheque" policy towards Tehran. Yet, McGlinchey shows how the often underestimated president outmaneuvered these congressional critics and skillfully shepherded the policy of generous arms sales to Iran through the legislature.

McGlinchey's slender volume is admirably comprehensive in its treatment of U.S. arms policies towards Iran, but it is

not perfect. The author is on shaky ground, for example, when he asserts that arms sales are a "much neglected" aspect of the long and volatile U.S.-Iranian relationship (2). In fact, they have been frequently and closely examined, though perhaps not as thoroughly as in these pages. Further, McGlinchey's volume would be stronger if it considered some other aspects of the U.S.-Iranian arms relationship more fully. Specifically, the author might have supplemented his treatment of presidential and congressional involvement in these issues with a more thorough and sympathetic assessment of the role played by middle level officials within the national security bureaucracy. How did the area experts, political officers, and hardware specialists in the Defense Department, the armed services, and the intelligence community embrace or question the policies of successive administrations? The author refers to shapers and critics of U.S. policy from various elements of "the executive" but they remain elusive figures in the book.

On a final note, McGlinchey's book contributes to a recent scholarly conversation on the relative power relationship between the United States and Iran in the years just prior to the Islamic revolution. In 2014, Roham Alvandi argued that by the early 1970s its oil wealth, the shah's singleness of purpose, and his adept diplomacy transformed Iran from a client of the United States to a coequal partner in managing the security of the Persian Gulf region. The reality was far more complicated. McGlinchey clearly endorses Gary Sick's metaphor of the Iranian tail wagging the U.S. dog (he cites the metaphor again in his book's Conclusion). This suggests a different dynamic between the two nations and more accurately reflects the degree to which a motivated client state can use its limited assets to manipulate its great power patron, at least for a time. *U.S. Arms Policies Towards the Shah's Iran* provides readers with a valuable guide to understanding this critical aspect of a complex Cold War relationship.

About the author:

Taylor Fain is Associate Professor and Graduate Studies Coordinator in the Department of History, University of North Carolina, Wilmington. He is the author of *American Ascendance and British Retreat in the Persian Gulf Region* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) and is currently at work on a study of the United States in the Indian Ocean during the era of decolonization and Cold War.