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# Evidence and Analysis: The Iran-Contra Affair As seen through American, Middle Eastern, and Soviet news sources

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# Evidence and Analysis: The Iran-Contra Affair As seen through American, Middle Eastern, and Soviet news sources

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Iran-Contra, Irangate Iran, United States, Soviet Union, Middle East, Media, Newspapers, Reagan, Reagan Administration, Washington Post, The New York Times, terrorism, international relations, US-Iran relations, Iraq, Khomeini, Social Sciences, History, Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, Kashani-Sabet, Firoozeh

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**Evidence and Analysis: The Iran-Contra Affair**  
**As seen through American, Middle Eastern, and Soviet news sources**

In early November 1986 a small local newspaper in Lebanon broke a scandal that would cast dark shadows of suspicion on the Reagan Administration, call into question American global leadership, and further complicate power dynamics and loyalties in the Middle East. The international press quickly picked up the story of how the United States government had secretly arranged arms sales to Iran through Israel and used the profits to fund Nicaraguan contra rebels. In this arrangement, two separate American foreign policy schemes were joined in the expectation of mutual benefit. The United States backed the contra rebels who were fighting against the left-wing Sandinista government as part of its policy of preventing the spread of leftist movements around the globe. In Iran, the American government hoped to appease purported “moderates” in the Iranian government with arms sales in order to secure their help in effecting the release of American hostages held by pro-Iranian groups in Lebanon. This move was problematic in that the United States had, throughout the Iran-Iraq War, consistently urged its allies not to fuel the conflict by providing arms to either party. Additionally, by funding the contras, the Reagan Administration was circumventing the Boland amendments passed by the Democrat-controlled Congress, which prohibited several government agencies from providing military aid to the contras between December 1983 and September 1985. The Administration exploited a loophole in this legislation by using the National Security Council (NSC), which was not explicitly covered in the amendments, as the supervising body directing aid to the contras.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Public Broadcasting Service. "The Iran-Contra Affair." PBS.org, accessed April 21, 2014, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/reagan-iran/>

Shortly after the scandal broke, NSC officials Robert Poindexter and Oliver North resigned and were fired, respectively. Higher officials in the government, including President Reagan himself, were also implicated, although it was unclear to what extent these officials were aware of or involved in the dealings. Reagan initially denied the operation had taken place at all; although a week later, he retracted the denial, acknowledging the operation but maintaining that the arms sales were not an arms-for-hostages deal. A presidential commission was soon convened to investigate, resulting in a number of convictions and serious discussions about the limits of the executive and the scope of congressional oversight in foreign affairs.<sup>2</sup>

Both the American public and the international community were shocked by the revelation of the American scheme, which came to be popularly known as the Iran-Contra Affair. The full implications of any international event occurring in the rapidly globalizing world of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century cannot be understood without studying the event from multiple national perspectives. By examining news coverage of the scandal in the United States in comparison with the media of the Middle East—the region most directly affected by the deal; and the Soviet Union, the United States' Cold War rival—we get a valuable cross-section of the meanings and implications of the event on the international stage.

### *American Media Coverage*

Coverage of the Iran-Contra Affair in American newspapers presented the scheme in a highly national-centric light. The scandal was acknowledged as a major discredit to the American government, exposing significant internal issues. American reporting was largely centered on the local effects of the Affair's revelation on the American people.

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<sup>2</sup> Public Broadcasting Service. "The Iran-Contra Affair." PBS.org, accessed April 21, 2014, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/reagan-iran/>

If the evolving press coverage of the incident was any indication, the scandal was a hard pill for the American public to swallow. Americans were unsure whom in their government they could trust. The *Washington Post* questioned whether or not President Reagan even knew of the deal, explaining that the American President is “constitutionally indispensable...So he must be protected, and at times that can mean protection even from significant knowledge.”<sup>3</sup> Still, the article went on, “If the Iran/contra connection was just the result of a twisted application of the principle of deniability, it was atrocious enough.”<sup>4</sup> Could it not be the President, someone within the government should have stood up and spoken out against this warping of policy. The *Post* called upon the President to accept or assign accountability, stating, “[Reagan] has a few weeks to act on Henry Kissinger’s principle: whatever must be revealed eventually should be revealed immediately.”<sup>5</sup> As no one in the Administration seemed willing to offer the information the American public so desired and deserved, the American press took it upon itself to hold the government accountable.

Writers for *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* repeatedly leveled the charge that the American government was not serving its citizens properly. In an article dated November 30<sup>th</sup>, 1986, the *Post* laments, “There’s little sign of recognition that the most fragile and most precious political commodity is at risk: the public’s trust in its Government.”<sup>6</sup> This sentiment is echoed in another *Washington Post* piece profiling the first American hostage released from Lebanon after the arms-for-hostages deal was initiated. The former captive, Reverend Benjamin Weir is quoted as saying he “regretted the ‘trading of arms for hostages,’

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<sup>3</sup> “...From ‘This Lunatic Parlay.’” *The Washington Post*, November 27, 1986.

<sup>4</sup> “...From ‘This Lunatic Parlay.’” *The Washington Post*, November 27, 1986.

<sup>5</sup> “...From ‘This Lunatic Parlay.’” *The Washington Post*, November 27, 1986.

<sup>6</sup> “The Right to Trust the Government.” *The New York Times*, November 30, 1986.

calling it a ‘questionable tactic,’” and stating that he would not want an escalation of the Iran-Iraq War as a result of hostages being released.<sup>7</sup>

By presenting the viewpoint of one of the hostages himself, the newspaper used Reverend Weir as a mouthpiece for the American people. Weir, described only by his rather ordinary profession, represents the average American; thus, the reader takes his view as representative of that of the public as a whole. Yet Weir is also extraordinary in that he found himself caught up in the middle of an international conflict and scandal—an experience that would likely radicalize even the most rational among us. It is perhaps expected that he would support nearly any means necessary to secure the release of hostages, yet he stands with the rest of the American people in denouncing the arms-for-hostages deal. In offering the Reverend and former hostage’s take on the situation, the *Washington Post* emphasizes how deeply misaligned the United States government’s covert deal with Iran was with the preferences of its citizens.

The American media also presented the Iran-Contra Affair as a symptom of a government that was not functioning the way it should. As a nation that sees itself as a “city on a hill” and prides itself on its unique brand of democracy—which it has, historically, even felt the moral obligation to export to other nations, such a scandal was unacceptable to the United States. The press searched for an explanation within the American democratic framework. A November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1986 article in *The New York Times* reported that the official Iran strategy approved by the United States government involved securing Iran’s agreement to stop exporting terrorism and revolution and begin negotiations to end the Iran-Iraq War, however “the checks and balances broke down”<sup>8</sup> and this strategy was neglected. One government official interviewed for the story blamed the departure from policy on the National Security Council, which had circumvented

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<sup>7</sup> “Ex-Captive Weir Regrets ‘Arms for Hostages’ Deal.” *The Washington Post*, November 9, 1986.

<sup>8</sup> “U.S. Policy on Terror.” *The New York Times*, November 11, 1986.

other major governmental departments that should have been involved and would have better understood and prevented the consequences of negotiating with terrorists.<sup>9</sup> Not only had the scandal shocked and outraged the public, but it had also divided the government. As the mouthpiece of a nation committed to democratic ideals, American journalists exposed and denounced the evils of corruption it had found in the government that was meant to inspire both its own citizens and others throughout the world. It is interesting to note that two reputable American newspapers, *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* made the effort to highlight the voices of outrage that came from within the government itself. This was likely done in an attempt to preserve the faith of the American people and of the international community in the existence of American politicians committed to justice, honesty, and the policies that the nation had so vehemently espoused.

Secondarily, the American media zeroed in on what the Iran-Contra Affair would mean for America's reputation on the international stage. In a November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1986 article, *The New York Times* questioned what the revelation of the arms-for-hostages deal would mean for "America's credibility abroad [and] the coherence of its foreign policy."<sup>10</sup> By undermining some of its own key policy objectives, the *Times* acknowledged that the American government had upset and confused its allies—especially friendly Arab nations, about the nature of its true intentions. "American credibility was damaged among moderate Arab nations, which the Administration needs as a buffer in its efforts to curb terrorism,"<sup>11</sup> the same article laments. It is interesting to note that this effect of the fallout was discussed significantly less frequently and less thoroughly in American press than the internal consequences. This coverage also focused mostly on how international connections and perceptions of the United States would suffer,

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<sup>9</sup> "U.S. Policy on Terror." *The New York Times*, November 11, 1986.

<sup>10</sup> "U.S. Policy on Terror." *The New York Times*, November 11, 1986.

<sup>11</sup> "U.S. Policy on Terror." *The New York Times*, November 11, 1986.

rather than how other nations would be affected by the knowledge of the deal or by the Iranian-American relationship itself.

### *Middle Eastern Media Coverage*

Unlike the American press, media sources in the Middle East reacted to the breaking of the Iran-Contra Affair with an attitude of smug acceptance, as if they had expected something like this to come out for some time. Such a scandal aligned with and vindicated the pervasive distrust of American credibility that prevailed throughout many Middle Eastern states. Quoted in the *Damascus Domestic Service*, Syrian Foreign Minister responded to the news by stating “We in Syria never believed that the United States has credibility with the Arabs...we hope that the Arab states that have now discovered the United States’ lack of credibility will pursue their policies in the future on the basis of that belief.”<sup>12</sup> The Iraqi media also reported that Iraqis remained unshaken by the news, acknowledging that the admission by the United States “proves Iraq’s announcements about the suspicious and aggressive ties between the charlatan group in Iran and Zionism.” Iraqi reporters went on to assure their audience that Iraq was not intimidated by the trifecta, and would “continue to insist on defending the homeland and its sacred soil against the aggression of the unjust group in Iran” as it had been doing.<sup>13</sup>

Newspapers throughout the Middle East tied the United States’ deal with Iran to American imperialist tendencies in the Middle East. A Turkish report asserted, “all [Reagan’s] realities are based on the globalist doctrines of the greatest imperialist state’s ruling circles who consider all other countries and peoples pawns in their hegemonistic policies.”<sup>14</sup> In early December 1986, Lebanese newspaper *Al-Nahar al-’Arabi Al-Duwali* backed this idea by running

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<sup>12</sup> “Al-Shar’ Comments on Arms Deal, Israeli Role.” *Damascus Domestic Service in Arabic*, December 1, 1986.

<sup>13</sup> “PNPF: Arms Deal ‘Proves Iran-Zionist Ties.’” *Baghdad Domestic Service in Arabic*, December 1, 1986.

<sup>14</sup> “‘Our Radio’ Comments on U.S. Arms Delivery to Iran.” *Our Radio in Turkish to Turkey*, November 25, 1986.



an interview with the former Iranian President Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, in which Bani-Sadr dismissed the ideas that the Iran-Contra scandal was especially newsworthy and that the safe return of hostages in Lebanon was even among the primary goals of the United States in the region. Rather, according to Bani-Sadr, America had greater ambitions, including: gaining control of OPEC, “replacing Saddam Husayn, establishing an Iranian regime close to the United States, and controlling the terrorist groups.”<sup>15</sup> The hostages-for-arms deal, which was viewed as a major news event in the United States, was seen by Middle Easterners as just another step in a series of American actions towards establishing an imperial relationship with Iran and expanding its sphere of influence and control across the entire Middle Eastern region.

Along with these outdated imperialist tendencies, Middle Eastern media also discussed the United States’ interactions with Iran in terms of a Cold War framework. As a major global center of oil, the Middle East was considered an extremely important sphere of influence and had been the theater for a number of Cold War power plays. As such, Middle Eastern states were understandably suspicious of any Soviet or American actions in the region, and the revelation of the American-led Iran-Contra scheme was no different. While expressing some bemusement at the shock that accompanied the exposure of American-Iranian contacts, one Turkish news source expressed the idea that the United States government was in fact turning the news to its advantage, further advancing its Cold War, neo-imperialist agenda. The article argued that the American government “want[ed] to prove now that nothing has changed...and that when the need arises even Khomeyni goes to them asking for assistance. Thus, the Americans want to convince the Third World, especially Islamic countries, that there is no alternative to alignment

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<sup>15</sup> “Former president on Impact of U.S. Contacts.” *Al-Nahar Al-Arabi Wa al-Duwali*, December 1, 1986.

with the United States or the Soviet Union.”<sup>16</sup> Albeit somewhat paranoid, this concern was not without validity. Although the revelation of the arms-for-hostages deal hurt the United States’ credibility both at home and abroad, it did little to diminish perceptions of American power. Despite some susceptibility to smaller-scale terrorist operations, the admission of US-Iranian contacts reminded the world, and especially the Middle East that the United States still had a monopoly on traditional hard power and the ability to affect the perpetuation and likely outcome of conflicts even far from home.

Suspicions such as these were not inconsistent with widespread Middle Eastern impressions of the United States, as reinforced by the arms-for-hostages scandal and colorfully depicted in the press. The secret dealings of the American government and its duplicity towards its own citizens meant that the United States was branded by the Middle Eastern media as immoral and deceptive. In a November 25<sup>th</sup>, 1986 commentary, *Our Radio* in Turkey announced that “Reagan’s national security adviser, Poindexter, said with no shame: Lying is a legitimate tool in foreign policy.”<sup>17</sup> The *Damascus Domestic Service* agreed with this depiction, reporting, “The attainment of U.S. interests was not always sought through moral and principled means.”<sup>18</sup>

The United States was also characterized as inconsistent and hypocritical. The nation that was perhaps the most outspoken champion of anti-terrorism had “turned state terrorism into a principle of its foreign policy”<sup>19</sup> by militarily supporting Iran—a country frequently identified as exporting terrorism. After seeing how the American government had abandoned its policy against negotiating for hostages, former Iranian President Bani-Sadr told a Lebanese newspaper, “[Americans] are capable of making a 180-degree turn in their policy.” The American

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<sup>16</sup> “‘Our Radio’ Comments on U.S. Arms Delivery to Iran.” *Our Radio in Turkish to Turkey*, November 25, 1986.

<sup>17</sup> “‘Our Radio’ Comments on U.S. Arms Delivery to Iran.” *Our Radio in Turkish to Turkey*, November 25, 1986.

<sup>18</sup> “‘Al-Shar’ Comments on Arms Deal, Israeli Role.” *Damascus Domestic Service in Arabic*, December 1, 1986.

<sup>19</sup> “‘Our Radio’ Comments on U.S. Arms Delivery to Iran.” *Our Radio in Turkish to Turkey*, November 25, 1986.

government's use of the revenues from its controversial arms sales to support the Contra war against the government of Nicaragua and similar insurgencies in "several other freedom loving countries" with Leftist leanings were also emphasized as contradictions of the nation that professes itself a promoter of freedom around the globe.<sup>20</sup>

To make matters worse, not only had the United States abandoned its policies, but it had done so while continuing to compel its friends to hold to these policies. While the United States was clandestinely arranging for Iran to receive renewed military supplies, it was simultaneously "[forcing] its allies not to have anything to do with Iran."<sup>21</sup> The Middle Eastern media seized onto this instance of American flip-flopping and used it to characterize the United States as an international bully, using its power to coerce others into adhering to certain norms or policies, while neglecting to do so itself.

Taking it a step further, Middle Eastern presses attacked the American democratic system as well. Turkish media dismissed the claims of "bourgeois politicians" that "the principle of democracy is carefully protected and everything is done out in the open." Rather, the report claims, "the bourgeois democracy is nothing but a cover behind which the imperialist class hides to carry out arbitrary operations and brutality both in domestic and in foreign policy."<sup>22</sup> Middle Eastern coverage of the Iran-Contra scandal discussed the event in terms that demonized the political system that had fostered such moral decay and corruption. Turning the tables on the country that has long purported to be a model of moral and political ideology—ideologies it continues to try to export to regions like the Middle East—the Middle Eastern media raised questions about the perceived superiority of American systems.

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<sup>20</sup> "'Our Radio' Comments on U.S. Arms Delivery to Iran." *Our Radio in Turkish to Turkey*, November 25, 1986.

<sup>21</sup> "'Our Radio' Comments on U.S. Arms Delivery to Iran." *Our Radio in Turkish to Turkey*, November 25, 1986.

<sup>22</sup> "'Our Radio' Comments on U.S. Arms Delivery to Iran." *Our Radio in Turkish to Turkey*, November 25, 1986.

Yet it was certainly not only the United States that received backlash in Middle Eastern press coverage of the Iran-Contra Affair; Iran was also harshly attacked for its relations with the “arch Satan.”<sup>23</sup> Middle Eastern nations criticized Iran’s participation with Israel in the scheme, accusing the Islamic nation of being a supporter of Zionism, and thus a traitor, to Islamic nations and true Muslims everywhere. In a speech by Iraqi President Saddam Husayn transcribed in the *Baghdad Voice of the Masses*, Husayn called the “cooperation with those claiming to be patriotic Muslims and those claiming to seek the Liberation of Jerusalem” “shameful” and “dirty.”<sup>24</sup> A second Iraqi article, in the *Baghdad Domestic Service* labeled the tripartite Iran-Contra Affair an act of “Zionist-imperialist-Khomeyniite” hostility to our struggler Arab nation.”<sup>25</sup> Husayn used this now-confirmed relationship between Iran and Israel as further proof of the justification for the Iran-Iraq War, even claiming that Iran had been “brainwashing” the soldiers they sent to battle and “try[ing] to create a certain romanticism about holy Jerusalem and its special status in the hearts of some Iranians.”<sup>26</sup> In this way, Husayn hoped to vilify and delegitimize the Islamic revolutionary regime in Iran and increase support for the Iraqi war effort.

### *Soviet Media Coverage*

Soviet coverage of the Iran-Contra Affair framed United States actions largely within a Cold War context. Necessarily, much of the reporting is heavily critical of the United States and the Soviet media capitalized on the opportunity to present its own nation as the alternative moral superpower. Soviet coverage of the unfolding scandal betrayed a tinge of Cold War paranoia towards the state’s competitor for global and ideological hegemony. A November 30<sup>th</sup>, 1986

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<sup>23</sup> “Sadaam Husyan: Iran Arms Deal ‘Expected.’” *Baghdad Voice of the Masses in Arabic*, December 1, 1986.

<sup>24</sup> “Sadaam Husyan: Iran Arms Deal ‘Expected.’” *Baghdad Voice of the Masses in Arabic*, December 1, 1986.

<sup>25</sup> “PNPF: Arms Deal ‘Proves Iran-Zionist Ties.’” *Baghdad Domestic Service in Arabic*, December 1, 1986.

<sup>26</sup> “Sadaam Husyan: Iran Arms Deal ‘Expected.’” *Baghdad Voice of the Masses in Arabic*, December 1, 1986.

article speculated, “what has been revealed so far is just the tip of the iceberg.”<sup>27</sup> The article warned that the details coming out suggested that the United States and Israel did not act alone; rather, NATO allies and American-friendly European nations also participated in supplying arms to Iran as well. The Moscow *Izvestiya* deduced that the issue of the hostages was only a small part of the reason the United States was supplying military aid to Iran. This article argued that the primary purpose behind the United States support of the Iranian military effort was “returning to the country which shares a border with the Soviet Union and which was at one time considered by the United States to be its own domain.”<sup>28</sup>

In response, Soviet press heavily emphasized the hypocrisy in the United States’ deal with the Iranians. Beyond the glaring contradiction between the United States’ professed policy against negotiating with terrorists and the trading of arms for hostages, the Soviets attacked the contradictions in the United States’ presentation of itself as a moral authority and leader of a new, post-war world order. The *Moscow TASS International Service* chided the United States as “active participants in supplying death arms to the conflict region between Iran and Iraq, which [could] lead to further destabilization of the situation in this region in the world, which is explosive even without this.” The article went on to criticize the United States’ support for the Nicaraguan contras, pointing out that the action constituted infringement on Nicaraguan national sovereignty and on the security of other peoples and states of the region as well.<sup>29</sup> The Moscow *Izvestiya* calls attention to another example of the American government violating another global norm advocated widely by the United Nations and the United States; the right of self-

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<sup>27</sup> “US Israeli Policies Assailed.” *Moscow Izvestiya*, November 30, 1986.

<sup>28</sup> “US Israeli Policies Assailed.” *Moscow Izvestiya*, November 30, 1986.

<sup>29</sup> “Contra Connection ‘Real Shock.’” *Moscow TASS*, November 26, 1986.

determination. The newspaper points out that the United States-Israel partnership has been trying to deny this right to Arab Palestinians and prevent them from forming their own state.<sup>30</sup>

Soviet media condemned these actions of the United States as part of a larger pattern of “neoglobalism”<sup>31</sup> and imperialist tendencies. The Soviet press explained that renewing the Iranian’s stock of arms perpetuated the Iran-Iraq War, which fit in “perfectly with the military-political and strategic designs of the United States and Israel in the region.”<sup>32</sup> Emphasizing the United States’ role in perpetuating conflict in the already unstable Middle East and supporting rebels working to destabilize a legitimate regime in Latin America, the Soviet presses worked to portray the United States as an arrogant, manipulative meddler, which put its own international interests above the national interests of other nations.

Setting up the United States as the international bad guy, the Soviet media offered its own government as the alternative good guy in international affairs. In an article discussing the role of entanglements of the United States with Iran, the Soviet press asserts “it is possible to state that the policy of diversionary maneuvers and separate deals merely leads to the endless postponement of a Near East settlement.” It is clear what “separate deals” the article is referring to, published just weeks after the Iran-Contra scandal first broke. In the same piece denouncing the American-led “dirty business” of supplying arms to fuel conflict in the Middle East, the *Izvestiya* slipped in a reference to the Soviet Union’s “constructive proposal” made at the 41<sup>st</sup> session of the UN General Assembly to begin work to set up a conference on the Near East to figure out a solution to the Israeli/Palestinian problem.<sup>33</sup> In this piece, the *Izvestiya* effectively contrasted its portrayal of the the United States as a powerful, but dangerously self-interested

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<sup>30</sup> “US Israeli Policies Assailed.” *Moscow Izvestiya*, November 30, 1986.

<sup>31</sup> “Poindexter, North ‘Scapegoats.’” *Moscow Domestic Service*, November 26, 1986.

<sup>32</sup> “US Israeli Policies Assailed.” *Moscow Izvestiya*, November 30, 1986.

<sup>33</sup> “US Israeli Policies Assailed.” *Moscow Izvestiya*, November 30, 1986.

international actor, with its depiction of the Soviet Union as a global superpower genuinely acting in the best interests of the international community.

Beyond the United States' international missteps, Soviet newspapers condemned American internal handling of the affair as well. Likening the scandal to Watergate, the *Moscow TASS* called the establishment of an committee to investigate "Irangate" "clearly...an attempt to bring down the storm of criticism against the administration."<sup>34</sup> In Soviet eyes, the American administration was more concerned with saving face than with honesty and good governance.

President Ronald Reagan suffered particularly harsh treatment in the Soviet press. He was attacked as an unreliable and selfish leader, who, according to reports "actually tried to disassociate himself further from any complicity in the scandal. He said that he would like the commission to concentrate on the NSC staffers."<sup>35</sup> The President was seen by the Soviets as a coward, forcing lower-ranking officials to take the fall for a scheme in which he was likely involved, and manipulating evidence to save his own reputation. The *Moscow Domestic Service* reported that "Poindexter and North were the tools of [a hypocritical] policy and they were removed certainly not because Washington is abandoning this policy, but only because it took an especially scandalous turn and it was necessary to divert the blame onto scapegoats."<sup>36</sup> The *Moscow TASS* took the accusations even further, reporting that "the U.S. President frankly intimated what conclusion he was awaiting from commission members: to whitewash the administration and to pass off 'Irangate' as an affair of 'individual' staff members of the National Security Council who got out of control of the leaders."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> "'Irangate' Gathering Momentum." *Moscow TASS*, December 1, 1986.

<sup>35</sup> "Reagan Meets With Commission." *Moscow TASS*, December 1, 1986.

<sup>36</sup> "Poindexter, North 'Scapegoats.'" *Moscow Domestic Service*, November 26, 1986.

<sup>37</sup> "Reagan Meets With Commission." *Moscow TASS*, December 1, 1986.

In these portrayals, Soviet news sources attacked the ethics of the American leader, damaging the moral authority of the nation as a whole. It is also interesting to note how the Soviet coverage emphasizes the individual—primarily, the character of Reagan, but also the importance of his scapegoats as being “individual” staff members. This reflects the emphasis on individuality and the power of one in American culture, which proves in this instance to be a double-edged sword that Reagan tries and fails to escape—at least according to the Soviet interpretation.

### *Coverage Comparison*

As details of the Iran-Contra Affair emerged, international media sources provided telling glimpses of how their audiences perceived the event and what it meant to both their national interests and global dynamics. Examining how the press in the United States, the Middle East, and the Soviet Union represented the situation, certain trends emerge. While the United States media expressed shock and outrage at the discovery that its government was negotiating with terrorists and aiding the Iranian war effort, most Middle Eastern newspapers were already aware of some level of collusion—or simply considered this departure from professed policy and betrayal of trust quite in character for the amoral United States. Newspapers based in both the Soviet Union and the Middle East also centered their coverage on the larger context of the scandal, namely the cooperation between the United States and Iran; American media, on the other hand, seemed obsessed with the specific discovery of the scandal itself. Additionally, American coverage of the event was also extremely internally focused, with barely any column space given to the international repercussions of the arrangement. Soviet newspapers, on the other hand, placed a heavy emphasis on how the United States was perpetuating conflict and



instability in the Middle East, and threatening the universal right of self-determination in Latin America. Both Middle Eastern and Soviet news sources placed the Iran-Contra Affair in the context of the Cold War and America's "neo-imperialist" aspirations for influence and control throughout the world.

While the United States media made efforts to hold the American government accountable for abandoning its professed policy and deceiving its citizenry, it also worked to assure its audience of the presence of moral and honest politicians in the government. Both Middle Eastern and Soviet newspapers, however, took the opportunity to emphasize the negative aspects of the United States government and diplomacy, often comparing the American government with their nations' own to make their governments to look better by comparison. American newspapers also framed the scandal as resulting from a failure to adhere to noble democratic principles, while Middle Eastern sources used the outcry to discredit the democratic system as a whole. It is also interesting to note that, while both American and Soviet newspapers focused on reporting objective facts (which are naturally tinged by bias in style of reporting and in what facts they choose to include), much of Middle Eastern reporting surrounding the Iran-Contra Affair consisted of interviews, transcriptions, or commentaries of speeches by Middle Eastern politicians or officials.

## Resources

- “Al-Shar’ Comments on Arms Deal, Israeli Role.” *Damascus Domestic Service in Arabic*, December 1, 1986.
- “Contra Connection ‘Real Shock.’” *Moscow TASS*, November 26, 1986.
- “Ex-Captive Weir Regrets ‘Arms for Hostages’ Deal.” *The Washington Post*, November 9, 1986.
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