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## Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah: The Origins of Iranian Primacy in the Persian Gulf\*

On the morning of May 31, 1972, the shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, received U.S. President Richard Nixon and his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, at Tehran's Saadabad Palace in the foothills of the Alborz Mountains. That spring day, these three men were in high spirits. Nixon had arrived in Tehran the previous day from his summit meeting in Moscow with General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev, where he had signed a series of arms control agreements with the Soviet Union. This was the era of détente, and Nixon and Kissinger were lauded as its architects. While the horrors of the Vietnam War were still unfolding, Nixon had made his momentous trip to Communist China in February, and his soaring popularity would deliver him a landslide electoral victory in November over his Democratic challenger for the presidency, Senator George McGovern. Meanwhile, Henry Kissinger had established a position of unprecedented power in the machinery of American foreign policy, conducting the administration's secret diplomacy in Beijing, Paris, and Moscow, and sidelining the nation's chief diplomat, Secretary of State William Rogers. The shah, too, was at the apogee of his reign. Under his leadership, Iran had enjoyed more than a decade of nearly double-digit gross domestic product (GDP) growth, commensurate with manifold increases in both oil income and military expenditure.<sup>1</sup> Pursuing what he called his "Independent National Policy," he had normalized Iran's relations with the Soviet Union and now sought Iranian primacy in the Persian Gulf in the wake of Britain's withdrawal from the region in 1971. Mohammad Reza Shah had seen five American presidents pass through the White House; each in turn had frustrated and disappointed him in his ambition to make Iran the region's leading power. But now, under the Nixon Doctrine, the United States would rely on the shah to maintain stability in the Persian Gulf. On that May morning in Tehran, Nixon

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1. United Nations, *Statistical Yearbook 1973* (New York, 1974), 582, Table 179; Mark J. Gasiorowski, *U.S. Foreign Policy and the Shah: Building a Client State in Iran* (Ithaca, NY, 1991), 143, Table 12; Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *SIPRI Yearbook 1973: World Armaments and Disarmament* (Stockholm, 1973), 238–29, Table 7A.8.

looked to the shah and uttered the words the Iranian monarch had long waited to hear: "protect me."<sup>2</sup>

The Nixon Doctrine marked a turning point in American strategies of containment in the Persian Gulf. Nixon's predecessor, President Lyndon Johnson, had been wary of the shah's ambition for Iranian primacy in the Gulf and instead saw regional stability as resting on a balance of power between Iran and Saudi Arabia, a policy he inherited from the British during their withdrawal from the Gulf. Contrary to popular perceptions of Nixon's Gulf policy as one of balancing Iran and Saudi Arabia as the "twin pillars" of the Gulf, between 1969 and 1972 Nixon gradually abandoned balancing and tilted in favor of Iran.<sup>3</sup> This article is concerned with the question of why Nixon embraced Iranian primacy in the Gulf, whereas Johnson had rejected it. Declining Anglo-American power in the context of the British withdrawal from the Gulf between 1968 and 1971, and America's quagmire in Vietnam, do not provide an adequate explanation.<sup>4</sup> These important constraints confronted both Johnson and Nixon; yet each president adopted quite distinct Gulf policies. Here I make the case that the shift in U.S. Gulf policy from balancing under Johnson to Iranian primacy under Nixon reflected a change in American thinking about Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. 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, which stood in stark contrast with the views of both the Johnson administration and the British. This change in American thinking provided fertile ground for the shah's relentless efforts to secure Washington's backing for Iranian regional primacy under the Nixon Doctrine. By lifting virtually all restrictions on U.S. arms sales to Iran, Nixon allowed the shah to assume the regional leadership role that he had always sought for Iran.

#### THE SHAH AND *PAX BRITANNICA*

The idea that security in the Persian Gulf rests on a "balance of power" between Iran and Saudi Arabia finds its origins in London. For more than a century, Her Majesty's Government ruled the Gulf as a British lake on the periphery of India, protecting significant political and economic interests along

2. Memorandum of Conversation, Tehran, May 31, 1972. U.S. Department of State, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)*, 1969–1976, E-4, Documents on Iran and Iraq, 1969–1972, Document 201. All documents from the U.S. Department of State's *FRUS* series are henceforth cited in the format *Title*, Volume, Document Number. All are accessible at <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/>.

3. The term "twin pillars" does not appear in the documentary record. Following the fall of the shah, it was commonly used by journalists as shorthand for pre-1979 U.S. policy toward the Persian Gulf, and soon gained currency with historians.

4. See W. Taylor Fain, *American Ascendance and British Retreat in the Persian Gulf Region* (New York, 2008), 169–200; F. Gregory Gause III, "British and American Policies in the Persian Gulf, 1968–1973," *Review of International Studies*, 11, no. 4 (1985): 247–73; Tore T. Petersen, *Richard Nixon, Great Britain and the Anglo-American Alignment in the Persian Gulf and Arabian Peninsula: Making Allies out of Clients* (Brighton, UK, 2009), 79–97.

the southern shore where Arab rulers governed a series of British protected states.<sup>5</sup> Britain's balance of power policy in the Gulf consisted of preventing either of the two largest littoral powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia, from dominating their smaller and weaker Arab neighbors, while also deterring any other great power from entering the Gulf. However, by the 1960s the decline of the British Empire had dramatically accelerated, and on January 16, 1968 the Labour Government, led by Prime Minister Harold Wilson, announced that Britain would withdraw all its military forces from the Gulf by 1971 as part of a larger withdrawal "East of Suez." The decision was motivated by the Cabinet's desire to cut defense spending and achieve fiscal austerity in the face of a severe economic crisis, while avoiding painful cuts in social spending. In order to avoid a power vacuum following the British withdrawal, which could result in regional instability and Soviet encroachment, a new balance of power would need to emerge to protect British interests.<sup>6</sup>

The solution developed by the mandarins of the British Foreign Office was to strengthen the British-protected states by persuading them to join together in a single Arab federation and to encourage Saudi Arabia to play a more active role in the Persian Gulf, thereby providing an Arab counterweight to the shah's ambitions for Iranian regional primacy. In 1967, the Foreign Office had prepared a report on Britain's long-term policy in the Gulf, the conclusions of which were approved by the Cabinet's Defense and Overseas Policy Committee on June 7, 1968. According to this report Britain would "encourage an indigenous balance of power which does not require our military presence." This balance of power would depend above all on Saudi Arabia and Iran, as "they are also the two best placed to bring force to bear in the area, the Saudis by virtue of their commanding geographical position and the Iranians through their growing naval supremacy in the Gulf. If they were at loggerheads with each other, local stability would be unlikely to survive our departure. Conversely if they were to act in concert, or at least with mutual understanding, they could do much to ensure a peaceful transition to whatever new system follows our withdrawal."<sup>7</sup> *Pax Britannica* had been maintained in the Gulf by a preponderance of British naval power. After the British military withdrawal, equilibrium between Iran and Saudi Arabia would prevent either power from dominating the Gulf, thereby protecting the independence of the proposed Arab federation without a substantial British military presence. But such a balance of power would not emerge automatically. Rather, it would have to be constructed and maintained.

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5. In 1968 these British protected states consisted of the emirates of Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Bahrain, Dubai, Fujaira, Qatar, Ras al-Khaimah, and Umm al-Quwain.

6. Wm. Roger Louis, "British Withdrawal from the Gulf, 1967-1971," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 31, no. 1 (2003): 83-86.

7. "Defence Expenditure Study No. 6: Long-Term Policy in the Persian Gulf. Report by the Defence Review Working Party," June 7, 1967, Records of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and predecessors (FCO) 49/10. All British government documents cited are held at the National Archives, Kew, Richmond, Surrey, United Kingdom.

From Britain's perspective, the shah's ambitions for Iranian primacy in the Persian Gulf posed a threat to the successful construction and operation of a regional balance of power, particularly as the shah continued to press Iranian territorial claims against the British protected states of Bahrain, Sharjah, and Ras al Khaimah. At the time of the shah's March 1965 visit to London, British Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart advised Wilson to "disabuse the Shah of the idea that, if and when we ever leave the Persian Gulf, Iran can take our place: given the Arab character of the southern shores of the Persian Gulf, and the pretensions of Saudi Arabia and Iraq (to say nothing of the United Arab Republic) this hope is quite illusory."<sup>8</sup> Given their long-standing political and economic relationships with the Arab rulers of the Gulf, British policy was to contain Iran's ambitions and reassure their Arab clients. Sir Stewart Crawford, the British resident in the Gulf, advised Foreign Secretary George Brown that Britain should avoid any appearance of endorsing Iran's ambitions, thereby giving the impression that "we shall disregard the interests of the [Arab] Gulf States and sell them down the river."<sup>9</sup> In March 1968, Sir Denis Wright, Britain's ambassador to Iran, warned his colleagues in the Foreign Office that "The Shah remains suspicious of our intentions and of our alleged favouritism of the Arabs against Iran."<sup>10</sup> A few days later Wright traveled to London to participate in a discussion of Gulf policy convened by Goronwy Roberts, a junior minister in the Foreign Office. When Wright asked his colleagues "whether the balance of British interests in Iran had been considered against those in the Arab world," he was assured that "on an arithmetical calculation the balance was overwhelmingly in favour of the Arabs."<sup>11</sup>

Mohammad Reza Shah shared the ubiquitous Iranian mistrust of perfidious Albion, stemming from more than a century of British imperialism in Iran. He was convinced that London was now conspiring with the Arabs against Iran in anticipation of Britain's withdrawal from the Persian Gulf.<sup>12</sup> Although the shah's Anglophobia was acute, given that the British had exiled his father in 1941, his suspicion that British interests favored the Arabs over Iran was not unfounded. In June 1968, Sir Denis Allen, undersecretary at the Foreign Office, advised Wright that any attempt to accommodate the shah's ambitions would not only disrupt the stability of the Gulf and "earn us major ill-will from the Arabs," but would in any event fail to "earn us any permanent dividends from the Shah."<sup>13</sup> Although the British privately recognized that Iran would be the single most

8. Note from Stewart to Wilson, PM/65/29, February 23, 1965, Records of the Prime Minister's Office (PREM) 13/409.

9. Crawford (Bahrain) to the Foreign Office, January 31, 1968, FCO 8/33.

10. Wright (Tehran) to the Foreign Office, 536, March 20, 1968, FCO 8/33.

11. "Minutes of discussions on the Persian Gulf held at the Foreign Office by the Minister of State on 25 and 26 March 1968," FCO 8/33.

12. Denis Wright, *The Memoirs of Sir Denis Wright 1911-1971*, 2 vols., unpublished manuscript, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, 385-388.

13. Allen (London) to Wright (Tehran), June 14, 1968, Records created and inherited by the Foreign Office (FO) 1016/755.

powerful littoral power following their departure, they feared that the shah's ambitions would spark Arab-Iranian hostility, threatening Britain's economic interests on the Arab shore of the Gulf and generating instability that could be exploited by the Soviet Union.

British disdain for Pahlavi Iran as a revisionist power, and support for Saudi Arabia as a status quo power, is apparent in a report written in December 1968 by William Morris, Britain's ambassador to Saudi Arabia, following a visit by the shah to the court of King Faisal. Whereas Morris describes Faisal as "a true conservative, by nature cautious and pessimistic," he calls the shah "our Middle East de Gaulle," "restless, bold, innovative, radical." He denigrates the shah as "the son of the illiterate Persian sergeant, self-consciously masquerading as heir to the 3,000 years old Achaemenid monarchy," in contrast with Faisal, a man who "dislikes pomp, ceremony and luxury, and in a quiet rather snobbish way is certain and therefore undemonstrative about his lineage."<sup>14</sup> The shah would have welcomed the comparison to French President Charles de Gaulle. In his memoirs he wrote that when de Gaulle "spoke of France, he seemed to echo the ambitions which I nurtured for my own country: he wanted an independent France. His quiet eloquence inspired faith in his country's future . . . This great patriot was an example to me."<sup>15</sup> But Morris did not intend the comparison as a compliment. He saw the shah as an upstart with ambitions above his station, echoing the Foreign Office's anxiety that Iranian primacy would threaten Britain's long-term interests in the Gulf. These pejorative ideas about the shah and the concept of a balance of power between Iran and Saudi Arabia were the legacy that the departing British bequeathed to the United States in the Gulf.

#### CONTINUITY: JOHNSON'S BALANCING POLICY

In the year between the announcement of the British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf in January 1968 and the inauguration of the Nixon administration in January 1969, President Lyndon Johnson had little time to formulate America's Gulf policy. The Gulf had been a British sphere of influence and the United States had considered it Britain's responsibility to contain Soviet influence there. Johnson had agreed to subsidize Britain's global military presence, while concentrating his own attention on the Vietnam War.<sup>16</sup> Although Britain had informed the United States in April 1967 that it would be withdrawing its forces "East of Suez," the announcement in January 1968 that the Gulf would be included in this withdrawal disappointed the Americans and their reaction was markedly bitter. When British Foreign Secretary George Brown traveled to

14. "Relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran: The State visit by the Shah to Saudi Arabia (9–14 November, 1968) and its background," December 3, 1968, FO 1016/870.

15. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, *The Shah's Story*, trans. Teresa Waugh (London, 1980), 140.

16. See Kevin Boyle, "The Price of Peace: Vietnam, the Pound, and the Crisis of the American Empire," *Diplomatic History* 27, no. 1 (2003): 37–72; Jeremy Fielding, "Coping with Decline: US Policy toward the British Defense Reviews of 1966," *Diplomatic History* 23, no. 4 (1999): 633–56.

Washington on January 11, 1968, to deliver the bad news, he reported to London that he had suffered through a “bloody unpleasant” meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk, who was furious at what he saw as Britain’s shirking of its global responsibilities at a time when the United States was bogged down in Vietnam. Rusk resented what he called the “acid aroma of the fait accompli” and contemptuously demanded, “for God’s sake, be Britain”!<sup>17</sup> That same day Johnson wrote to Wilson expressing his “deep dismay” at the “British withdrawal from world affairs,” which would leave the United States “to man the ramparts all alone.”<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, within a week of these exchanges the U.S. State Department began what would be a year-long process of formulating a Gulf policy, in close consultation with the Foreign Office.<sup>19</sup>

The Persian Gulf was rather low on Johnson’s list of priorities in 1968, as he grappled with the Tet Offensive that was launched by the North Vietnamese in January, followed by his announcement in March that he would not seek reelection.<sup>20</sup> Gulf policy was largely left to the State Department and rarely reached the Oval Office. The Johnson administration quickly dismissed any idea of taking over Britain’s role and instead opted for a policy of relying on the littoral states to maintain stability in the Gulf. In a careless statement made during an interview with the Voice of America on January 19, U.S. Undersecretary of State Eugene Rostow said,

In the Persian Gulf you have some very strong, and quite active and stable countries, which are interested in taking responsibility for regional security—Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia would certainly be a nucleus, and Kuwait—would certainly be a nucleus, around which such security arrangements could hopefully be built, and we can hope that in the long run the policy of Iraq would orient itself in a cooperative direction so that it could join in such efforts.<sup>21</sup>

The statement was careless for two reasons. First, it tarred any regional security arrangement with the imprimatur of the United States, making it more difficult for the Arab rulers of the Gulf to support such an arrangement, lest they be accused by Arab nationalists of collusion with “American imperialism.” Furthermore, the clumsy reference to Turkey and Pakistan—neither of which border the Gulf—angered both of these governments, as they had not been consulted, and also violated the principle that only the riparian powers would be responsible for Gulf security. In short, Rostow’s poorly chosen words had the potential to upset Britain’s plans for a regional balance of power arrangement following

17. Brown (New York) to the Foreign Office, 54, January 11, 1968, PREM 13/1999.

18. President Johnson to Prime Minister Wilson, January 11, 1968, PREM 13/1999.

19. Urwick (Washington) to Stirling (London), January 18, 1968, FCO 8/36.

20. Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963–1969* (London, 1972), 385, 425–437.

21. “Interview with Under Secretary of State Eugene Rostow, 19 January 1968, as broadcast on Voice of America at 6.00 p.m.,” FCO 8/36.

their withdrawal.<sup>22</sup> The British Embassy in Washington assured the Foreign Office that Rostow's comments were made "off the cuff" and without clearance from Rusk, and shortly afterwards the State Department informed all American diplomatic posts in the region that Washington has "no plan, general or specific, as to future [of the Gulf]."<sup>23</sup>

Following the embarrassment of the Rostow episode, the Johnson administration sought to closely coordinate its Persian Gulf policy with London. Wilson's February 1968 trip to Washington smoothed over any residual hard feelings from the withdrawal announcement, and in March American officials traveled to London for the first of a series of Anglo-American talks on the Gulf. What emerged from these consultations was a division of labor between Britain and the United States, whereby London would manage the negotiations to resolve the outstanding territorial disputes in the Gulf and construct a regional balance of power to replace British hegemony, while Washington would continue to pressure the shah to cooperate with Britain and Saudi Arabia in this endeavor. Theodore Eliot, the country director for Iran at the State Department, assured the British that Washington "could take a hand [with the shah] since the United States military relationship was vital to the Iranians."<sup>24</sup> President Johnson had written to the shah in February, after a Saudi-Iranian spat over Bahrain, to remind him that regional stability would require the shah to exercise "patience, understanding and a high degree of statesmanship" in his relations with the Saudis.<sup>25</sup> In his stern reply to Johnson's patronizing letter, the shah said that in dealing with the Saudis, he had gone "as far as any one can go, but our efforts so far have, unfortunately, been answered by precisely the opposite reaction to that expected."<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, the U.S. ambassador to Iran, Armin Meyer, was convinced that Johnson's intervention had exercised a "restraining effect" on the shah.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, the president's national security adviser, Walt Rostow, felt that Johnson had "injected a sobering perspective at a heated moment."<sup>28</sup>

Throughout 1968, the State Department deferred to the Foreign Office to such an extent on Persian Gulf matters that American and British Gulf policy became virtually indistinguishable. In talks held in London in May, Lucius

22. Balfour-Paul (Bahrain) to Stirling (London), January 26, 1968, FCO 8/36.

23. Killick (Washington) to Sykes (London), January 25, 1968, FCO 8/36; Telegram 103449 from the Department of State to the Embassy in Saudi Arabia, January 24, 1968, *FRUS 1964-1968*, XXI, 124.

24. "Minutes of discussions with United States officials at the Foreign Office on 27 March 1968," FCO 8/37.

25. Telegram 108214 from the Department of State to the Embassy in Iran, February 1, 1968, *FRUS 1964-1968*, XXI, 129.

26. Message from the Shah of Iran to President Johnson, February 1, 1968, *FRUS 1964-1968*, XXI, 130.

27. Telegram 3869 from the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State, March 24, 1968, *FRUS 1964-1968*, XXII, 273.

28. Memorandum from Rostow to President Johnson, February 6, 1968, *FRUS 1964-1968*, XXI, 135.

Battle, U.S. assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern and South Asian affairs, assured Geronwy Roberts that the United States “recognised the special British role in the Region and would be heavily influenced by the British view of what it might prove possible to negotiate.”<sup>29</sup> In September, Battle reiterated to Sir Denis Allen that the United States was “in complete agreement” with Britain’s Gulf policy. He readily admitted that Washington “had no solution to offer, nor indeed any particular suggestions” for managing the various territorial disputes in the Gulf and that “the U.S. and everyone else concerned would look to the British” to manage Gulf problems.<sup>30</sup> Theodore Eliot later recalled that “British interests in Iran were very similar to ours, and their record of experience was much longer” and that in this period “there was a real question as to whether we’d be choosing sides between the Saudis and Iranians, obviously none of us wanted to choose sides.”<sup>31</sup> Rather than choose between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the United States had opted for Britain’s balancing policy in the Gulf, which sought to temper the shah’s ambitions for Iranian primacy and encourage Saudi-Iranian cooperation.

The United States’ wholesale adoption of Britain’s balancing policy quickly led to tensions with the shah, who feared his American allies were toeing a pro-Arab British line. The National Security Council (NSC) staff warned of the “basic conflict . . . between the Iranian assumption that Iran has the mission of controlling the Gulf, and the Saudi assumption that Saudi Arabia is responsible for everything on the Arabian Peninsula.” Although the Americans wanted “to stay out of the middle” of this rivalry, the shah worried that Johnson had conspired with the British against Iran.<sup>32</sup> Hushang Ansary, the Iranian ambassador to the United States, had conveyed these concerns to Eugene Rostow in February, and a few weeks later, during a visit to Washington by Iranian Foreign Minister Ardeshir Zahedi, Dean Rusk informed his Iranian counterpart that he was aware of Tehran’s suspicions and assured him that they were unfounded.<sup>33</sup> All Washington wanted, Rusk argued, was to promote Irano-Saudi cooperation as a “prerequisite to peace in [the] Gulf” in the interests of “preventing [the] expansion [of] Soviet influence in area.”<sup>34</sup> Despite his protests, however, Rusk

29. “Record of Conversation between the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and members of the State Department in Washington at 4.30 p.m. on Wednesday, 15 May 1968,” FCO 8/37.

30. “Anglo-American talks on the Middle East in the State Department, 13 September 1968,” FCO 8/37; Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, September 13, 1968, *FRUS 1964-1968*, XXI, 156.

31. Theodore Eliot in an interview with William Burr, San Francisco, July 29, 1986, tape 2A, in the Foundation for Iranian Studies Oral History Collection (FISOHC), <http://www.fis-iran.org/en/oralhistory>.

32. Memorandum from Foster to Rostow, May 21, 1968, *FRUS 1964-1968*, XXII, 285.

33. Telegram 121476 from the Department of State to the Embassy in Iran, February 28, 1968, *FRUS 1964-1968*, XXII, 259; Ardeshir Zahedi in an interview with the author, Montreux, June 11, 2009.

34. Telegram 131326 from the Department of State to the Embassy in Iran, March 16, 1968, *FRUS 1964-1968*, XXII, 269.

shared Britain's concern about the shah's ambitions. In language reminiscent of that used by the British, he would later recall that that shah "was influenced by the dreams of the Persian Empire, he had a very lofty view of what Persia had been and perhaps could be again some day. The sense of glory in the Shah was at least equal to that of President de Gaulle's views about the glory of France."<sup>35</sup>

The shah had tried repeatedly to convince Johnson to tilt toward Iran in the Persian Gulf, using the Soviet threat as his argument for a policy of Iranian primacy. Conscious of the American public's aversion to overseas commitments in the context of Vietnam, the shah had written to Johnson in August 1966 arguing that "A strong Iran can . . . avert the spreading of conflicts in the region, guarantee the smooth and orderly flow of oil to the west and, what is of vital importance and worthy of serious consideration, forestall the repetition of current tragic and costly involvements."<sup>36</sup> The shah firmly believed that radical Arab states like Egypt and Iraq, supported by Moscow, endangered both stability in the Gulf and Iranian national security. He was particularly alarmed by Egypt's military intervention in North Yemen as well as the Soviet- and Chinese-backed rebellion against the sultan of Oman in Dhofar. He feared that Moscow would use radical Arab forces to subvert the conservative Arab monarchies of the Gulf, from where they could disrupt Iran's oil exports through the Strait of Hormuz and press Arab territorial claims against the Iranian province of Khuzistan, where much of Iran's oil reserves are located.<sup>37</sup>

These arguments failed to convince Johnson and his advisers. A succession of American presidents had sought to temper Iranian military spending, fearing that Iran's burgeoning defense expenditure would divert precious resources from economic development, thereby fulfilling the shah's military ambitions at the cost of Iran's domestic stability. By 1968, the shah was able to exert a great deal more leverage over Washington on issues such as arms sales and oil prices than ever before.<sup>38</sup> However, he was unable to convince the Johnson administration to abandon balancing and tilt toward Iran in the Persian Gulf. In February 1968 the NSC's interagency review group concluded that the United States should continue to pursue a balance of power in the Gulf by "avoiding an undue military build-up by the Gulf littoral states."<sup>39</sup> Despite the shah's constant requests for ever larger quantities of American arms, in June 1968 Johnson would only agree to continue providing Iran with \$100 million in annual

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35. Dean Rusk in an interview with William Burr, Athens, Georgia, May 23, 1986, tape 1A, FISOHC.

36. Letter from the Shah of Iran to President Johnson, August 15, 1966, *FRUS 1964-1968*, XXII, 173.

37. Intelligence Memorandum 1355/66 prepared by the CIA, May 21, 1966, *FRUS, 1964-1968*, XXII, 139.

38. See Andrew L. Johns, "'Tired of Being Treated Like a Schoolboy': The Johnson Administration, the Shah of Iran, and the Changing Pattern of U.S.-Iranian Relations, 1965-1967," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 9, no. 2 (2007): 69-94.

39. Record of Meeting, Washington, February 1, 1968, *FRUS 1964-1968*, XXI, 131.

military sales credits, as the United States had done since 1966.<sup>40</sup> In the waning months of Johnson's presidency, Washington continued "to discourage large military expenditures that would adversely affect Iran's economic development" and still held that "Iran's armaments should not be so augmented as to frighten other riparian states and thus endanger prospects for Arab-Iranian cooperation."<sup>41</sup> A shift away from balancing would have to await the election of Richard Nixon to the White House.

#### NIXON AND THE THIRD WORLD

By the first summer of his presidency, Nixon had already decided on the contours of the grand strategy that would come to bear his name. During a tour of East Asia, over which the shadow of Vietnam loomed large, the presidential party stopped on the island of Guam on the night of July 25, 1969. Speaking on background to reporters, and much to Kissinger's surprise, Nixon outlined his views on a post-Vietnam foreign policy for the United States. He declared that while America would always keep its treaty commitments to its allies, it "must avoid the kind of policy that will make countries in Asia so dependent upon us that we are dragged into conflicts such as the one we have in Vietnam." When it comes to defending its Cold War allies in Asia, "except for the threat of a major power involving nuclear weapons . . . the United States is going to encourage and has a right to expect that this problem will be handled by, and responsibility for it taken by, the Asian nations themselves."<sup>42</sup> Nixon's statement was intended to signal to America's nervous allies in Southeast Asia that the United States would not abandon them following a withdrawal from Vietnam, while also assuring a profoundly angry American public that they would never again find themselves fighting someone else's civil war. This "Nixon Doctrine" was quickly extended to the rest of the Third World, where the United States would provide material assistance to regional allies like Brazil, Indonesia, Iran, and Zaire to manage local conflicts and contain Soviet influence without direct American military intervention.<sup>43</sup>

If the Nixon administration was going to rebuild public support for American leadership in the Cold War at a time when the Soviet Union had achieved military parity with the United States, then as Odd Arne Westad argues, Nixon would have to recast America's global role as "an overseer, not an intervener."<sup>44</sup>

40. Memorandum from Rostow to President Johnson, June 11, 1968, *FRUS 1964-1968*, XXII, 292.

41. Memorandum from McClelland to Handley, August 28, 1968, *FRUS 1964-1968*, XXI, 155.

42. Editorial Note, *FRUS 1969-1976*, I, 29. These ideas had been foreshadowed in Richard Nixon, "Asia after Vietnam," *Foreign Affairs* 46, no. 1 (1967): 113-25.

43. Robert S. Litwak, *Détente and the Nixon Doctrine: American Foreign Policy and the Pursuit of Stability, 1969-1976* (Cambridge, 1984), 135-50.

44. Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge, 2007), 197.

Third World conflicts, like the war in Vietnam, were a costly distraction from Nixon's agenda of seeking détente with the Soviet Union and building Washington's leverage over Moscow through the opening to China. Therefore, the Nixon Doctrine and superpower détente were inextricably linked, as the former would redirect American attention and resources to the latter.<sup>45</sup> Nixon and Kissinger were interested in the politics of the Third World only to the extent that it affected relations among the great powers. Nixon famously instructed Kissinger early in his first term not to waste his time on the Third World, "as what happens in those parts of the world is not, in the final analysis, going to have any significant effect on the success of our foreign policy in the foreseeable future."<sup>46</sup> The Middle East was of interest to Nixon and Kissinger mainly because the Arab-Israeli conflict impinged on superpower relations and Persian Gulf oil fueled the economies of America's allies in Asia and Europe. Kissinger readily admitted that in 1969 he had no understanding of Gulf politics: "I did not know how Saudi-Iranian relations worked, my priority was to get the Soviets out of the Middle East."<sup>47</sup> As Jussi Hanhimäki argues, "The overall emphasis on the 'great powers' blinded Nixon and Kissinger to the specific local circumstances that determined the course of the numerous regional conflicts the administration encountered."<sup>48</sup> The Nixon Doctrine was a way of limiting and simplifying American intervention in the Third World, and the Gulf was no exception. Preoccupied with superpower détente, engagement with China, and the war in Vietnam, Nixon and Kissinger reduced the complexities of regional politics to a simple question of whether Iran was capable of keeping the peace in the Gulf after the British withdrawal.

Throughout the period of 1969 to 1972 the shah aggressively lobbied Nixon to convince him that Iran could indeed fill the vacuum left by the British in the Persian Gulf. He employed the language of the Nixon Doctrine to argue that the United States should provide Iran with the necessary arms to maintain the security and stability of the Gulf without direct American military intervention. Relations with Iran were higher on the Nixon administration's agenda than formulating a broad Gulf policy, thanks in large measure to the warm personal relationship between Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and Richard Nixon. Then vice president in the Eisenhower administration, Nixon first met the shah in Tehran in December 1953 after the United States had backed the coup against Mohammad Musaddiq. Nixon wrote of his first encounter with the shah: "I sensed an

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45. Raymond L. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan*, rev. ed. (Washington, 1994), 25–39; Litwak, *Détente and the Nixon Doctrine*, 54.

46. Memorandum from President Nixon to Haldeman, Ehrlichmann, and Kissinger, March 2, 1970, *FRUS 1969–1976*, I, 61.

47. Henry Kissinger in an interview with Faisal bin Salman al-Saud, New York, June 3, 1997, cited in Faisal bin Salman al-Saud, *Iran, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf: Power Politics in Transition 1968–1971* (London, 2003), 65.

48. Jussi Hanhimäki, "An Elusive Grand Design," in *Nixon in the World: American Foreign Relations, 1969–1977*, ed. Fredrik Logevall and Andrew Preston (Oxford, 2008), 40–41.

inner strength in him, and I felt that in the years ahead he would become a strong leader.”<sup>49</sup> Both men were staunchly anti-communist, and both thought of themselves as practitioners of *realpolitik*. They maintained their friendship throughout Nixon’s years in the political wilderness and met in Tehran in April 1967 during Nixon’s tour of Asia, which was intended to burnish the former vice president’s already impressive foreign policy credentials ahead of the 1968 presidential election.<sup>50</sup>

Over lunch at Niavaran Palace on April 22, 1967, the two old friends lamented the loss of American confidence in the age of Vietnam. After surveying the Cold War in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, the shah told Nixon that it was “better for [the] U.S. to have Iran able to defend [it]self than to have . . . another Vietnam.” In his handwritten notes of their conversation, Nixon recorded that the shah’s views echoed the “RN Doctrine.” Planting the seed of what would become Nixon’s Persian Gulf policy, the shah boasted that by 1971 “Iran will be able to help [the] Saudis if required,” though at the time, Nixon thought this claim to be “over optimistic.” The shah complained to Nixon that the “Harvard boys” in the Johnson administration—liberal intellectuals who wanted to curtail Iran’s military spending—enjoyed far too much influence over U.S. foreign policy. Addressing accusations of corruption and autocracy in his regime, the shah portrayed himself to Nixon as a reformer who “attacks problems—not classes.” Unlike the socialists, he was “not imprisoned by any ‘ism’.” Nixon found the shah to be “decisive, confident, strong, kind, thoughtful.”<sup>51</sup> As president, he would never forget the respect and courtesy the shah had shown him while he was out of office. Returning to the United States, he hailed Iran’s “strong monarchy” as a “dramatic economic success.” He readily conceded that Iran was not “a representative democracy by Western standards” but argued that “American style democracy is not necessarily the best form of government for people in Asia, Africa and Latin America with entirely different backgrounds.”<sup>52</sup> The April 1967 meeting profoundly strengthened the bond between the two men and laid the foundation for Nixon’s policy of Iranian primacy. Writing from exile many years later, the shah recalled that during that conversation, “we found that we agreed over several very simple geo-political principles.”<sup>53</sup>

In the first year of Nixon’s presidency the shah’s relentless lobbying quickly overtook the administration’s slow and cumbersome consideration of Persian

49. Richard M. Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York, 1978), 133.

50. “Program for the Informal Visit to Iran of The Honorable Richard M. Nixon,” undated, Wilderness Years, Series 2, Trip File, Iran, Richard M. Nixon Library (RMNL), Yorba Linda, California. See also Steven P. Ambrose, *Nixon: The Triumph of a Politician, 1962–1972* (New York, 1989), 106.

51. Handwritten notes by Richard M. Nixon, Wilderness Years, Series 2, Far East and Middle East Trips 1967, RMNL. See also Gholam Reza Afkhami, *The Life and Times of the Shah* (Berkeley, CA, 2009), 302–03.

52. Address by Richard M. Nixon to the Bohemian Club, San Francisco, July 29, 1967, *FRUS 1969–1976*, I, 2.

53. Pahlavi, *The Shah’s Story*, 143.

Gulf policy. When the shah visited Washington in April 1969 for President Eisenhower's funeral, the White House was expecting him to press Nixon to abandon balancing in the Gulf and acknowledge Iran as the paramount power of the region.<sup>54</sup> The U.S. intelligence community had warned the new administration in a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) in January that, "with the impending British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf, Iran is vigorously asserting its own claim to a leading position there, thus running afoul of the aspirations of Saudi Arabia." Nixon and Kissinger would confront an Iranian ruler who was certain that "he is master in his own house," confidently "seeking for Iran the position in regional affairs that he deems to be rightfully his."<sup>55</sup> At his first-ever meeting with Kissinger, the shah reiterated the same warnings about the Soviet and radical Arab threat to the Gulf that he had expressed to Johnson.<sup>56</sup> Asadollah Alam, the minister of the imperial court and the shah's closest adviser, accompanied his boss to Washington and recorded in his diary that the shah

asked the Americans to consider the advantages they receive from their friendship with us. He stressed that Iran is not an American stooge but that we nevertheless prefer to remain independent of Soviet influence. Iran is a friend of the West sufficiently powerful to maintain her own sovereignty, able to defend her own interests and by implication capable of defending the interests of her western friends.<sup>57</sup>

#### CRISIS IN THE SHATT

Despite this relentless pressure from the shah, the shift in U.S. Persian Gulf policy from balancing to Iranian primacy was a slow evolutionary process. In 1969, many of the same American officials who had implemented Johnson's balancing policy remained in place such as Ambassador Armin Meyer in Tehran and Iran Country Director Theodore Eliot at the State Department. Echoes of Johnson's policy were apparent in the American response to the border crisis between Iran and Iraq over the Shatt al-Arab waterway in the spring of 1969, which threatened to escalate into war. The two countries had long disagreed on where their common border lay, with the Iraqis claiming sovereignty over the entire Shatt based on their reading of the 1937 Tehran Treaty, while the Iranians

54. Memorandum from Saunders to Kissinger, April 1, 1969, *FRUS 1969-1976*, E-4, 7.

55. National Intelligence Estimate 34-69, 10 January 10, 1969, *FRUS 1969-1976*, E-4, 1.

56. Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, April 1, 1969, *FRUS 1969-1976*, E-4, 8.

57. Asadollah Alam, *Yad'dashtba-yi 'Alam: virayish va muqaddamah-i masbrubi dar barab-i Shab va Alam az Ali Naqi Alikhani* [The Alam Diaries: Edited by Alinaghi Alikhani], Vol. I: 1969-1970 (Bethesda, MD, 1992), 165. The English-language translation of this passage is taken from Asadollah Alam, *The Shah and I: The Confidential Diary of Iran's Royal Court, 1969-1977*, trans. ed. Alinaghi Alikhani (London, 1991), 50.

claimed sovereignty up to the *thalweg* or deepest point of the waterway based on common international practice.<sup>58</sup> Tensions had been simmering for some time when the Iraqis sparked, in April 1969, what was the third crisis over the Shatt in a decade. Iraq asserted its sovereignty over the entire waterway by demanding that vessels sailing in the Shatt should neither raise the Iranian flag nor carry Iranian naval personnel. On April 15, Iraq's deputy foreign minister warned the Iranian ambassador in Baghdad that if Iran did not comply, Iraq would use force to block access to Iranian ports. Iran's response was to abrogate the 1937 treaty and to warn the Iraqis that any interference with Iranian shipping would mean war.<sup>59</sup>

The shah's uncompromising reaction to the Iraqi threat was entirely consistent with the bold claims he had made in Washington just two weeks earlier and the American assessment contained in the January NIE. However, the shah's advisers worried that if Iran were seen as the aggressor in a war with Iraq, then they would lose the support of the United States and find themselves fighting the Soviet-backed Iraqis all alone. Alam was visiting his family estate in Birjand in eastern Iran when he received a frantic telephone call on April 17 from Gen. Nematollah Nasiri, the chief of Iran's intelligence service, SAVAK, urging him to return to Tehran immediately.<sup>60</sup> It seemed that the shah was planning on ordering an Iranian merchant ship to sail down the Shatt flying the Iranian flag, escorted by the Iranian air force and navy, as a test case to demonstrate Iranian sovereignty. Fearing that hostilities might break out, Nasiri begged Alam to use his influence with the shah to avert a war. Alam concurred, worrying that if Iran were seen as the aggressor, "American public opinion will easily turn against us." He immediately cabled his concerns to the shah who was then on a state visit to Tunisia.<sup>61</sup>

Ambassador Meyer was aware of the rising military tensions between Iran and Iraq thanks to reports he was receiving from the U.S. Consulate in Khorramshahr near the border.<sup>62</sup> According to Gen. Fereydoun Djam, the acting chief of the Supreme Commander's Staff, the Iranian military had activated

58. See Richard M. Schofield, *Evolution of the Shatt Al-'Arab Boundary Dispute* (Wisbech, UK, 1986): 42–66.

59. Shahram Chubin and Sepehr Zabih, *The Foreign Relations of Iran: A Developing State in a Zone of Great Power Conflict* (Berkeley, CA, 1974), 185–187; Rouhollah K. Ramazani, *Iran's Foreign Policy 1941–1973: A Study of Foreign Policy in Modernizing Nations* (Charlottesville, VA, 1975), 417–18; Hussein Sirriyeh, "Development of the Iraqi-Iranian Dispute, 1847–1975," *Journal of Contemporary History* 20, no. 3 (1985): 485–87.

60. SAVAK is the Persian acronym for the "National Intelligence and Security Organization," which carried out both domestic and foreign intelligence and security functions in Iran from 1957 to 1979.

61. Alam, *Yad'dashtha-yi 'Alam*, I: 173–74; Telegram 1399 from the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State, 20 April 1969, Record Group 59: General Records of the Department of State (RG59), Central Foreign Policy Files (CFPF), 1967–69, box 2218, U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland (NARA).

62. Telegram 1340 from the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State, April 16, 1969, and Telegram 1390 from the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State, April 19, 1969, RG59, CFPF 1967–69, box 2218, NARA.

contingency plans for a war with Iraq, although there had been considerable confusion and delay in mobilizing the armed forces because of the shah's absence.<sup>63</sup> On the afternoon of April 17, Meyer was attending a reception at the U.S. Officers' Club in Tehran, where he spoke with Djam's deputy, Gen. Mohammad Fazeli, who confirmed that Iran intended to assert its sovereignty in the Shatt with a test-case ship. Meyer, without instructions from Washington, expressed to Fazeli "the fervent hope that there would be no shooting." The ambassador later reported to the State Department that he had "mentioned current Congressional sensitivities RE things military and I feared repercussions with Iran."<sup>64</sup> Fazeli interpreted Meyer's concerns as a warning that in the event of a war with Iraq, the United States would cut off military supplies to Iran. Shocked by Meyer's comments, he set off for the Supreme Commander's headquarters where he was due to attend a meeting that evening between Iran's top military brass, Prime Minister Amir Abbas Hoveyda, and the permanent secretary of the Foreign Ministry, Amir Khosrow Afshar, to discuss the crisis. Fazeli conveyed Meyer's comments to Hoveyda, who then instructed Afshar to report them to the shah in Tunisia.<sup>65</sup>

One can imagine the shah's fury in Tunis upon reading the messages from Alam and Afshar advising restraint in the Shatt, lest Iran's actions anger the United States. He was in no mood to back down, cabling back to Alam that "you are not in the picture on this issue. They [the Iraqis] have caused such offence that these actions are necessary."<sup>66</sup> On instructions from the shah, Afshar summoned Meyer to his home on the morning of April 18, where he conveyed the shah's displeasure with the ambassador's comments to Fazeli and asked Meyer "whether [the] Shah in assuring Iran's legitimate self-defense should seek supplies from quarters where no conditions [are] attached." Meyer responded by refuting Fazeli's account and assuring Afshar that he had spoken without any instructions from Washington. Meyer told Afshar, "I had merely voiced to Fazeli certain concerns as [a] true friend of [the] Shah and Iran." He reported to Washington that he "emphasized that [the] decision as to what to do or not to do in [the] Shatt is strictly for Iran to make." Meyer's sole concern was that Iran's image in the United States not be "tarnished," especially as congressional authorization would be required for the arms sales that the shah wanted.<sup>67</sup> The State Department approved the steps that Meyer had taken and shared his

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63. Gen. Fereydoun Djam in an interview with Habib Ladjevardi, March 10, 1983, London, tape 4, Iranian Oral History Collection, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

64. Telegram 1367 from the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State, April 18, 1969, RG59, CFPF 1967-69, box 2218, NARA.

65. Gen. Mohammad Fazeli in an interview with Seyed Vali Reza Nasr, Bethesda, May 14, 1991, tape 1B, FISOHC.

66. Alam, *Yad'dashtba-yi 'Alam*, I: 175.

67. Telegram 1371 from the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State, April 18, 1969, FRUS 1969-1976, E-4, 11.

concern that “military action in the Shatt might tarnish Iran’s excellent image in the US” and “hoped that restraint would be shown by both sides.”<sup>68</sup>

American officials in Tehran were determined to avoid any entanglement in Iran’s confrontation with Iraq, and the Iranians seemed reluctant to push the issue up the chain of command to the White House. Gen. Mohammad Khatam, commander of the Imperial Iranian Air Force (IIAF) and brother-in-law to the shah, had been ordered by the shah to report on the ability of Iran’s American-supplied F-4 Phantom jets to support military operations against Iraq. Khatam asked the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) in Tehran if they would be willing to transfer the U.S. Air Force (USAF) technicians who maintained Iran’s Phantoms to air bases in southern Iran, to support IIAF operations against Iraq. When the request was rejected by Gen. Roy Casbeer, who headed the USAF section of MAAG, Khatam agreed to Meyer’s suggestion that the decision not be appealed to Washington, where it would certainly be denied and would only damage Iran’s relations with the United States. Meyer was convinced that Khatam and other Iranian officials, knowing that Washington would resist being drawn into the crisis, were using the threat of a rupture in relations with the United States to try to constrain the shah and prevent a war with Iraq.<sup>69</sup>

Despite calls for restraint from both the U.S. ambassador and his closest civilian and military advisers, the shah sent Afshar before the Iranian Senate on April 19 to abrogate the 1937 treaty and warn that Iran would retaliate against any Iraqi attack.<sup>70</sup> In the face of overwhelming Iranian military power, the Iraqis backed down. On April 20, Iraqi Defense Minister Hardan al-Takriti informed the SAVAK station chief in Baghdad that Iraq had no appetite for a war with Iran.<sup>71</sup> The Iraqis privately relayed a message that they would not challenge the test-case Iranian ship.<sup>72</sup> Waiting until the shah had returned to Tehran, Iran ended the crisis by sailing the freighter *Abu Sina* down the Shatt flying the Iranian flag with an air and naval escort. As expected, the *Abu Sina* did not meet any resistance from the Iraqis, and the crisis ended in victory for Iran.<sup>73</sup> The Shatt crisis left little doubt about the shah’s resolve to assert Iran’s power in the Persian Gulf against any regional rival. There were some in the American bureaucracy who were clearly unhappy with the shah’s actions. The State

68. Telegram 60660 from the Department of State to the Embassy in Iran, April 19, 1969, RG59, CFPP 1967-69, box 2218, NARA.

69. Telegram 1401 from the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State, April 20, 1969, Nixon Presidential Materials (NPM), National Security Council Files (NSCF), Country Files—Middle East, box 601, NARA.

70. Telegram 1396 from the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State, April 19, 1969, and Telegram 1398 from the Embassy in Iran to the Department of States, 20 April 1969, RG59, CFPP 1967-69, box 2218, NARA.

71. Alam, *Yad’dashtha-yi ‘Alam*, I: 176.

72. Telegram 1416 from the Embassy in Iran to the State Department, April 21, 1969, RG59, CFPP 1967-69, box 2218, NARA.

73. Telegram 1444 from the Embassy in Iran to the State Department, April 22, 1969, RG59, CFPP 1967-69, box 2218, NARA.

Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, which had acquired a reputation as a critic of the shah, went so far as to characterize Iran's actions as "belligerence."<sup>74</sup> But the shah's willingness to risk upsetting Washington in pursuit of regional primacy demonstrated Iran's growing autonomy from the United States. Furthermore, Iran's triumph over Iraq in a regional crisis, without any direct American military intervention, was a harbinger of the role Iran could play under the Nixon Doctrine.

#### CHANGE: NIXON AND IRANIAN PRIMACY

The ongoing British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf had clearly tilted the regional balance of power in Iran's favor, requiring a response from the United States. Consequently, in July 1969, Kissinger ordered an interagency review of U.S. Gulf policy in National Security Study Memorandum (NSSM) 66.<sup>75</sup> The shah was due to make a state visit to Washington in October, and Nixon faced the immediate task of responding to the shah's constant appeals for what Kissinger described as a "special relationship" in the context of the Nixon Doctrine, amounting to a policy of Iranian primacy in the Gulf. Both the State Department and Kissinger advised the president to avoid any premature commitment to the shah's entreaties and to continue, for now, with the balancing policy of the Johnson administration.<sup>76</sup> Kissinger advised Nixon to tell the shah that "The President of the US cannot make policy as easily as the imperial ruler of Iran."<sup>77</sup> Every effort was made to ensure that the shah would enjoy his visit, even if the Americans were not yet ready to respond to his calls for a special relationship. As he would not be accompanied by the empress, the State Department suggested inviting Miss America to join the shah at the state dinner in the White House.<sup>78</sup> The president's personal secretary, Rose Mary Woods, advised against canceling the postdinner entertainment because the shah, "a man of great interests—great sex appeal," was "much more the 'swinger' type than most visiting dignitaries."<sup>79</sup> Despite these arrangements, the shah must have left Washington a disappointed man. In his private discussions with Nixon, he failed to secure agreement for increased Iranian oil exports to the United States, the revenue

74. Intelligence Note 295 from Hughes to Rogers, April 22, 1969, *FRUS 1969-76*, E-4, 12. See also Archie Bolster in an interview with William Burr, Washington, March 24, 1988, tape 3BB, FISOHC.

75. National Security Study Memorandum 66, July 12, 1969, RMNL, [http://www.nixonlibrary.gov/virtuallibrary/documents/nssm/nssm\\_066.pdf](http://www.nixonlibrary.gov/virtuallibrary/documents/nssm/nssm_066.pdf).

76. Memorandum from Rogers to President Nixon, October 17, 1969, *FRUS 1969-1976*, E-4, 26.

77. Memorandum from Kissinger to President Nixon, October 21, 1969, *FRUS 1969-1976*, E-4, 29.

78. Memorandum from Mosbacher to Woods, September 18, 1969, NPM, President's Personal File, White House Social Events 1969-1974, box 123, NARA.

79. Memorandum from Woods to Haldeman, October 6, 1969, NPM, President's Personal File, White House Social Events 1969-1974, box 123, NARA.

from which he pledged to use to buy more American weapons.<sup>80</sup> He warned the Americans against continuing with the balancing policy of the past, arguing that although King Faisal was a wise leader, Saudi domestic instability and the absence of a strong successor meant that in the long run the United States could not rely on Saudi Arabia to protect the Gulf. Rather, Washington should help Iran “stand by itself if necessary” as the protector of the waterway.<sup>81</sup>

Between 1970 and 1972, Iran and the Persian Gulf became largely synonymous in the minds of Nixon and Kissinger. Nixon wrote to the shah in February 1970 to tell him that he shared the shah’s view that Iran should play an important role in the Nixon Doctrine: “As you know, your thoughts and mine coincide at many points on this subject, and a number of the positions I expressed during my Asian trip last summer—as you have noted—would apply to the problems in your region as well.”<sup>82</sup> Nixon was clearly intrigued by the idea that Iran, as the paramount power of the Gulf, could contain Soviet influence in that vital theater of the Cold War. In the spring of 1970, during a meeting with the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) foreign ministers in Washington, the president asked Joseph Sisco, assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern and South Asian affairs, to prepare a study on whether Iran could indeed play such a role.<sup>83</sup> The first real test of this changing American attitude toward the shah came in April when Douglas MacArthur II, U.S. ambassador to Iran, recommended that the United States extend the annual commitment on foreign military sales (FMS) credits that Johnson had made to the shah in June 1968 for an additional three or four years. MacArthur was responding to the shah’s repeated demands that Iran’s military needed larger quantities of American weapons to prepare for the role they would play after the British withdrawal from the Gulf.<sup>84</sup>

Ambassador MacArthur’s recommendation set off a bureaucratic battle in Washington over arms sales to Iran with major implications for the ongoing review of Persian Gulf policy. The principal opposition came from the Pentagon, particularly G. Warren Nutter, a University of Chicago-trained economist who served as assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs. The Pentagon objected that Iran did not have the absorptive capacity for integrating the large volume of sophisticated weapons—including four additional squadrons of F-4 Phantoms—in the short span of time that the shah envisaged and that a decision to increase arms sales to Iran would prejudice the ongoing review of Gulf policy.<sup>85</sup> Others in the administration were eager to avoid angering the

80. Memorandum for the Record, 22 October 1969, *FRUS 1969–1976*, E-4, 31.

81. Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, October 22, 1969, *FRUS 1969–1976*, E-4, 33–35.

82. Letter from President Nixon to the Shah of Iran, February 23, 1970, *FRUS 1969–1976*, E-4, 48.

83. Memorandum from Kissinger to President Nixon, Washington, June 25, 1970, *FRUS 1969–76*, E-4, 75.

84. Telegram 1247 from the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State, April 1, 1970, *FRUS 1969–1976*, E-4, 57.

85. Letter from Packard to Richardson, April 14, 1970, *FRUS 1969–1976*, E-4, 60.

shah, whom they saw as a stable and reliable ally in an important region. Jack Miklos, who had replaced Eliot as country director for Iran at the State Department, was a “long-time friend” of Harold Saunders, the principal aide on Kissinger’s NSC staff dealing with Iran. Miklos thought that acquiescing to the shah’s request was “a very wise, sound approach” and with support from Saunders at the NSC was able to overcome the Pentagon’s objections.<sup>86</sup> Unlike broader Middle East issues, where a major difference in views emerged between Kissinger’s NSC staff and the State Department, the two bureaucracies were largely of the same mind when it came to Iran and the Gulf. The prevailing view, which Undersecretary of State Elliot Richardson expressed to Gen. Earle Wheeler, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was that despite Nutter’s concerns, “we have no real option but to bank on Iran.”<sup>87</sup> Richard Helms, the director of central intelligence, advised the White House that “it is in our own interest to support this concept of a special relationship with Iran” and reminded his colleagues of the vital intelligence the United States gathered on the Soviet Union from American listening posts in northern Iran.<sup>88</sup> By April 1970, a consensus had emerged in the administration that Iran, and Iran alone, could be relied upon to contain Soviet influence in the Gulf. After all, the shah asked Ambassador MacArthur, “who else in the area can supply a credible military deterrent in the Gulf? Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the small weak Gulf States? Of course not.”<sup>89</sup>

Kissinger cautiously weighed in on the side of the shah and, with the president’s approval, authorized Undersecretary Richardson to inform the shah in Tehran in April 1970 that the United States would be willing to extend the 1968 FMS commitment.<sup>90</sup> Richardson told the shah that “we fully appreciate [the] unique contribution Iran can make to [the] defense of free world interest in [the] Gulf.”<sup>91</sup> The “special relationship” that the shah had failed to secure in his two trips to Washington in 1969 was now, just a year later, taking shape. Just as the Pentagon had feared, the administration’s increasing tilt toward Iran prejudiced the ongoing Persian Gulf policy review. This is hardly surprising given that Miklos and Saunders, who had supported the shah on FMS credits, were the principal authors of the report that the NSC Interdepartmental Group for the

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86. Jack Miklos in an interview with William Burr, July 28, 1986, Oakland, tape 1D, FISOHC.

87. Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, April 14, 1970, *FRUS 1969–1976*, E-4, 61.

88. Memorandum from Saunders to Kissinger, April 16, 1970, *FRUS 1969–1976*, E-4, 63. Helms himself had negotiated with the shah for permission to place these installations in Iran in 1957. See Richard Helms with William Hood, *A Look Over My Shoulder: A Life in the Central Intelligence Agency* (New York, 2003), 417.

89. Telegram 1019 from the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State, March 19, 1970, *FRUS 1969–1976*, E-4, 55.

90. Memorandum from Kissinger to President Nixon, April 16, 1970, *FRUS 1969–1976*, E-4, 62.

91. Telegram 1626 from the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State, April 21, 1970, *FRUS 1969–1976*, E-4, 64.

Near East and South Asia (NSC/IG) submitted to Kissinger in June 1970. On the face of it, the report considered five main options for U.S. policy in the Gulf: (1) assuming the role in the Gulf abandoned by Britain, (2) backing either Iran or Saudi Arabia as a "chosen instrument", (3) promoting Saudi-Iranian cooperation, (4) establishing bilateral relations and a major U.S. presence in the Lower Gulf, or (5) sponsoring a regional security pact. However, given the American public's complete aversion to any expansion of America's global commitments in the context of Vietnam, the only real choice confronting Nixon was whether to continue with Johnson's balancing policy (Option 3) or to back Iran (Option 2).<sup>92</sup>

Kissinger's staff saw Iranian primacy in the Persian Gulf as a sound choice, given that Iran was "the most powerful and most stable state in the area" and that "there are strong elements of this in what we are already doing." However, they feared that openly backing the shah would "alienate the Saudis." Therefore, they argued, "The logical strategy lies in marrying what is already in fact extensive support for Iran as the unquestioned power in the area with the logic of cooperation between a strong Iran and a weak Saudi Arabia."<sup>93</sup> While the substance of this new Gulf policy would be Iranian primacy, its rhetoric would pay lip service to Saudi-Iranian cooperation so as to avoid offending Arab sensibilities. Miklos later recalled that the idea of Saudi Arabia as a "pillar" of U.S. policy in the Gulf was considered "ludicrous."<sup>94</sup> On June 5, 1970, Kissinger convened a meeting of the NSC's Review Group to discuss the NSC/IG report. In a brief twenty-minute meeting, the Review Group approved the report and agreed that it was ready for the president's consideration.<sup>95</sup> There were signs by the summer of 1970 that Nixon was seriously contemplating whether the "the Shah's ideas for Iran . . . playing a greater role in the Persian Gulf" were feasible. Despite Joseph Sisco's advice that Iran should be encouraged to gain the "active cooperation" of the Saudis in the Gulf, the administration was inching ever closer to a policy of Iranian primacy.<sup>96</sup>

#### A ONE-PILLAR POLICY

The NSC/IG report did not reach the president's desk until October 1970. In the intervening four months, the White House's attention was focused elsewhere in the Middle East as the War of Attrition between Israel and Egypt

92. Paper prepared by the NSC Staff, June 4, 1970, NPM, National Security Council Institutional Files (NSCIF), Meeting Files, box H-046, NARA. See also *FRUS 1969-1976*, XXIV, 82, f. 1.

93. Memorandum from Saunders and Kennedy to Kissinger, June 3, 1970, *FRUS 1969-1976*, E-4, 70.

94. Jack Miklos in an interview with William Burr, Oakland, July 31, 1986, tape 2A, FISOHC.

95. Minutes of a Review Group Meeting, Washington, June 5, 1970, *FRUS 1969-1976*, XXIV, 83.

96. Memorandum from Kissinger to President Nixon, June 25, 1970, *FRUS 1969-1976*, E-4, 75.

raged until August, and then in September a crisis broke out in Jordan where America's ally, King Hussein, was almost overthrown by Palestinian guerrillas and an invading Syrian army. By comparison, the shah looked secure on his throne, and Iran seemed to be the cornerstone of a largely stable Persian Gulf. The shah had embarked on a diplomatic charm offensive in the Arab world, peacefully relinquishing Iran's claim to Bahrain in May and restoring diplomatic relations with Egypt in August after a ten-year rupture.<sup>97</sup> It was in this context that Kissinger presented the NSC/IG report to President Nixon, who approved a general U.S. strategy in the Gulf that would "promote Saudi-Iranian cooperation as the mainstay of a stable regional system," "recognize that Iran is in fact the preponderant power in the Gulf," and "do what we can to develop a working relationship with the new political entities in the lower Gulf." This strategy rested, according to Kissinger, on the assumption that, "If a radical regime were to take over in Saudi Arabia, the U.S. would have little choice but to move closer to Iran—and there is no reason now not to go on preparing Iran for that contingency."<sup>98</sup>

With the benefit of hindsight, it seems counterintuitive that Nixon and Kissinger would see the shah as a safe bet and the Saudis as a long-term liability. While Mohammad Reza Shah would be deposed and exiled in 1979, the Saudi monarchy would survive the assassination of King Faisal in 1975 and successfully manage the succession to Kings Khalid, Fahd, and Abdullah. But in the autumn of 1970, many American observers imagined that a strong Iran might one day have to come to the aid of a weak Saudi Arabia. At the Islamic summit conference in Rabat in September 1969, the shah had assured Faisal that although a security pact between their two countries was not feasible, he would provide the Saudis with whatever support they asked for in a crisis.<sup>99</sup> As MacArthur observed from Tehran, there was a growing consensus among the Arab rulers of the Persian Gulf that after the British withdrawal, Iran would be the only "moderate neighbor with both the will and the capacity to come to their aid."<sup>100</sup> Just a few months after the Rabat conference, when South Yemeni forces attacked Saudi Arabia, Faisal turned to Iran for help and the shah quickly airlifted anti-aircraft guns and anti-tank recoilless rifles to Saudi Arabia to repel the Yemenis.<sup>101</sup> The shah also

97. Roham Alvandi, "Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and the Bahrain Question, 1968–1970," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 37, no. 2 (2010): 159–77.

98. Memorandum from Kissinger to President Nixon, October 22, 1970, *FRUS 1969–1976*, E-4, 91.

99. Douglas MacArthur II in an interview with William Burr, Washington, 29 May 1985, tape 2A, FISOHC.

100. Telegram 862 from the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State, NPM, NSCF, Country Files—Middle East, box 602, NARA.

101. Telegram 34 from the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State, January 5, 1970, and Telegram 2436 from the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State, June 9, 1970, NPM, NSCF, Country Files—Middle East, box 601, NARA; Research Study RNAS-6 prepared by the Department of State, April 12, 1973, RG59, Subject Numeric Files (SNF) 1970–73, box 2380, NARA.

assured Faisal that the Iranian air force would provide Saudi Arabia with air cover in the event of a future Yemeni attack.<sup>102</sup> Indeed, in July 1973, Kissinger and the shah would begin secret discussions on a contingency plan for Iran to secure Saudi Arabia's oil fields and restore the Al Saud to their throne if the Saudi monarchy were ever threatened, as other Arab monarchies in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Morocco, and Yemen had been.<sup>103</sup> The vulnerable Saudis were never regarded by the Americans as a "pillar" of Nixon's Persian Gulf policy in the same sense as Iran. From Washington's perspective, it was a role that the Saudis were both unwilling and unable to play. Harold Saunders later recalled that Iran was, in fact, the sole pillar of Nixon's Gulf policy, "with the Saudi pillar being a nominal pillar there for obvious necessary regional political reasons."<sup>104</sup>

The United States had important economic interests in oil-rich Saudi Arabia. By 1969, their bilateral economic relationship contributed \$500 million annually to America's balance of payments, and moreover, Saudi Arabia's ability to provide a steady flow of cheap oil to Western Europe and Japan was a vital American interest.<sup>105</sup> However, the Saudis were unwilling to play a regional role that would leave them open to accusations from Arab nationalists of complicity in American or Iranian "imperialism." Both British and American diplomats in Saudi Arabia were aware that Saudi reticence was tilting the balance of power in the Persian Gulf in Iran's favor.<sup>106</sup> In Anglo-American discussions in Washington in March 1969, Geoffrey Arthur, assistant undersecretary at the Foreign Office, complained to his American counterparts that the Saudis had been "passive in their relations with the Gulf" and asked the Americans for their views on "Saudi inattention to Gulf matters." William Brewer, the State Department's country director for the Arabian Peninsula, responded "that the Saudi attitude could be explained by a combination of slothfulness, statesmanship and preoccupation with other matters," a reference to Saudi fears of growing Israeli power in the aftermath of the Six-Day War of June 1967.<sup>107</sup> Saudi reticence was no match for the shah's vigorous diplomacy. The following year, the British Residency in the Gulf concluded that the Saudis "have chalked up the same nil score as in previous years" in their rivalry with Iran.<sup>108</sup>

102. Telegram 7 from the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State, January 3, 1970, NPM, NSCF, Country Files—Middle East, box 601, NARA.

103. Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, July 24, 1973, 5.00–6.40pm, Electronic Briefing Book No. 265 (EBB 265), National Security Archive, George Washington University, Washington, DC (NSA-GWU), <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB265/>; Memorandum from Saunders to Kissinger, July 23, 1973, NPM, NSCF, Country Files—Middle East, box 603.

104. Harold Saunders in an interview with William Burr, February 24, 1987, Washington, DC, tape 2B, FISOHC.

105. Memorandum from Sisco to Kissinger, November 21, 1969, *FRUS 1969–1976*, XXIV, 133.

106. Morris (Jeddah) to McCarthy (London), December 23, 1968, FO 248/1652.

107. Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, March 11, 1969, *FRUS 1969–1976*, XXIV, 72.

108. "Persian Gulf: Annual Review for 1970," January 1, 1971, FCO 8/1570.

King Faisal's commitment to the Arab struggle against Israel severely limited Saudi Arabia's ability to play any leadership role under the Nixon Doctrine. While the shah saw the Nixon Doctrine as an opportunity for Iran to become a major Cold War actor, Faisal saw it as a dangerous development that would only draw the United States and Israel closer together.<sup>109</sup> For Saudi Arabia, the immediate threat to regional stability came from Israel, not the Soviet Union. Faisal was a firm believer in the anti-Semitic "Protocols of Zion," which he had published and distributed, and never tired of telling his American interlocutors that Zionism and communism were conspiring together to drive a wedge between the United States and the Arab world.<sup>110</sup> He warned Nixon in an Oval Office meeting in May 1971 that "Communism is the child, the offspring of Zionism. Zionism is in collusion with Communism for the destruction of the world," and went on to argue that the anti-war demonstrations in the United States were in fact part of a Zionist-Communist global conspiracy.<sup>111</sup> This hostility toward Israel, whether rhetorical or indeed "deeply felt" as Kissinger thought it to be, stood in contrast to the shah's quiet military, intelligence and trade relationship with Israel that dated back to the 1950s.<sup>112</sup> According to Gen. Mansur Qadar, who served as Iran's ambassador to Jordan and Lebanon throughout this period, Iran's close relations with Israel made the shah deeply unpopular in Arab public opinion.<sup>113</sup> Consequently, the Saudis could not afford to be seen as having too cozy a relationship with the shah. Foreign Minister Zahedi confided to MacArthur in May 1971, after a brief stopover in Tehran by the Saudi king, that "while Faisal and the Saudis make all the right noises in private about [the] desirability and need for close Saudi-Iranian cooperation and coordination in [the] Gulf area, they don't even want to hint about this in public."<sup>114</sup> Nixon's view was that whereas America's alliance with Israel "makes us unpalatable to everybody in the Arab world," the shah is "awfully good on that subject."<sup>115</sup> If there were two states that constituted the "twin pillars" of the Nixon Doctrine in the Middle East, they were Iran and Israel, not Saudi Arabia.

In the evolution of Nixon's Persian Gulf policy between 1969 and 1972, domestic instability and succession problems in Saudi Arabia cast doubt on the kingdom's ability to act as a viable regional partner for the United States.

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109. Telegram 42979 from the Department of State to the Embassy in Saudi Arabia, March 24, 1970, *FRUS 1969-1976*, XXIV, 139.

110. Telegram 112 from the Consulate General in Dhahran to the Department of State, February 5, 1969, *FRUS 1969-1976*, XXIV, 127.

111. Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, May 27, 1971, *FRUS 1969-1976*, XXIV, 151.

112. Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston, 1982), 662.

113. Gen. Mansur Qadar in an interview with Gholam Reza Afkhami, Washington, May 4, 1986, tapes 6A and 6B, FISOHC.

114. Telegram 2674 from the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State, 20 May 1971, RG59, SNF 1970-73, box 2380, NARA.

115. Conversation among President Nixon, MacArthur, and Haig, April 8, 1971, Washington, *FRUS 1969-1976*, E-4, 122.

The shah was seen by the United States as a modernizing monarch, having inaugurated his “White Revolution” of social and economic reforms in the early 1960s.<sup>116</sup> Iran’s progress was trumpeted by the U.S. Information Agency as a “model” for the entire region.<sup>117</sup> This stood in stark contrast with the deeply conservative King Faisal, whose leadership was characterized in an April 1970 NIE as “more appropriate to the problems of the past than to those of the present and future. He is deeply religious in the context of the rigid Muslim orthodoxy which still characterizes many Saudis, and in large measure he is attuned to the desires of the traditional elements of the society.”<sup>118</sup> At the Rabat conference in September 1969 the shah had lectured Faisal on the need for social and economic reform in Saudi Arabia, if the monarchy was to weather the political storms ahead.<sup>119</sup> The shah never missed an opportunity to remind his American interlocutors that the Saudis were “very backward” and showed “no inclination to reform.”<sup>120</sup> This reluctance to modernize, the shah argued, made them deeply vulnerable to the subversive threat posed by the Soviet-backed radical Arabs.<sup>121</sup>

Although Faisal had managed to wrestle the crown from King Saud in 1964 after a long internal power struggle, American assessments of the stability of the monarchy were cautious. In the summer of 1969 the Saudis uncovered a coup plot that involved air force officers who hoped to overthrow the monarchy and establish a Nasserist regime. The coup was followed by a brutal and widespread crackdown on anyone suspected of disloyalty, and a crisis atmosphere pervaded the kingdom, particularly after the overthrow of the Libyan monarchy in September 1969.<sup>122</sup> By November, the NSC/IG had concluded that although there was little likelihood of unrest in Saudi Arabia in the short term, “in the longer run we cannot assume the continuation of the political and social order upon which U.S.-Saudi cooperation was built.”<sup>123</sup> Faisal’s health was in doubt, as he made numerous trips to Geneva throughout 1970 for treatment and surgery, and the perennial problem of royal succession loomed.<sup>124</sup> In April 1970 the U.S. intelligence community concluded that in the event of Faisal’s death, “a smooth

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116. See Roland Popp, “An Application of Modernization Theory during the Cold War? The Case of Pahlavi Iran,” *International History Review* 30, no. 1 (2008): 76–98.

117. Richard Arndt in an interview with William Burr, Washington, 9 May 1988, tape 1B, FISOHC.

118. National Intelligence Estimate 36-6-70, April 7, 1970, *FRUS 1969-1976*, XXIV, 140.

119. Telegram 2648 from the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State, May 20, 1971, RG59, SNF 1970-73, box 2380, NARA.

120. Memorandum of Conversation, Tehran, May 31, 1972, *FRUS 1969-1976*, E-4, 201.

121. Telegram 3312 from the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State, August 2, 1970, NPM, NSCF, Country Files—Middle East, box 601, NARA.

122. Gary S. Samore, “Royal Family Politics in Saudi Arabia (1953-1982)” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1983), 259–64; Alexei Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia* (London, 2000), 371–72.

123. Memorandum from Sisco to Kissinger, November 21, 1969, *FRUS 1969-1976*, XXIV, 133.

124. Samore, “Royal Family Politics,” 268.

transfer cannot be assured” and that Faisal’s designated successor, the reluctant Prince Khaled, would likely only serve as a “figurehead King.”<sup>125</sup>

Meeting in Tehran in April 1970, the chiefs of America’s diplomatic missions in the region sat down to discuss future U.S. policy in the Persian Gulf. Surveying the two shores, they concluded that “what is impressive is the contrast between the Iranian image of strength and planning and the fact that the Arabs are divided, uncertain, suspicious and fearful. . . . The lopsided situation has its own seeds of instability. The U.S. problem lies not on the Iranian side—where a firm relationship can be built upon—but on the Arab side.”<sup>126</sup> The ghost of Johnson’s policy of balancing Iran and Saudi Arabia was now well and truly laid to rest. As Kissinger’s deputy, Gen. Alexander Haig, would later recall, the shah “represented the political center in his own country and also in a region in search of a political center of balance.”<sup>127</sup> A new policy of Iranian primacy would eventually entail lifting virtually all restrictions on American conventional arms sales to Iran, thereby giving the Iranian armed forces the ability to deter any aggression by a regional rival. As the shah had explained to Secretary of State William Rogers, Iran “must have an ‘over-kill’ capability so that should anyone be tempted to attack Iran they would think twice or even three times.”<sup>128</sup> Despite the Pentagon’s continuing objection that an Iranian deterrence capability would spark a regional arms race, Nixon signed National Security Decision Memorandum (NSDM) 92 on November 7, 1970, ordering a policy of promoting Saudi-Iranian cooperation while “recognizing the preponderance of Iranian power” in the Gulf.<sup>129</sup> NSDM 92 marked a turning point in the evolution of U.S. Gulf policy from balancing to Iranian primacy.

#### RED STAR OVER BAGHDAD

In accounting for this American tilt toward Iran in the Persian Gulf, Kissinger has challenged the view that Nixon’s personal relationship with the shah played any role in U.S. policy: “America’s friendship with Iran reflected not individual proclivities but geopolitical realities. Iran’s intrinsic importance transcended the personalities of both countries’ leaders.”<sup>130</sup> Kissinger explains that he and Nixon backed a policy of Iranian primacy in order to contain the radical Soviet-backed Ba’th regime in Iraq, which seized power in a military coup in July 1968. In the chaos that engulfed Baghdad after the Ba’thi coup, Iraq’s new

125. National Intelligence Estimate 36-6-70, April 7, 1970, *FRUS 1969-1976*, XXIV, 140.

126. Memorandum from Saunders to Kissinger, April 24, 1970, NPM, NSCF, Country Files—Middle East, box 601, NARA.

127. Alexander M. Haig, Jr. with Charles McCarry, *Inner Circles: How America Changed the World, a Memoir* (New York, 1992), 536.

128. Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, October 22, 1969, *FRUS 1969-1976*, E-4, 33.

129. Letter from Laird to Rogers, October 27, 1970, *FRUS 1969-1976*, E-4, 93; National Security Decision Memorandum 92, November 7, 1970, *FRUS 1969-1976*, E-4, 97.

130. Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 667.

rulers vacillated between extreme violence and political cooption in their efforts to eliminate all domestic opposition, while looking to Iraq's long-standing relationship with the Soviet Union for military and economic assistance. They signed an agreement with Moscow in July 1969 for exploitation of the North Rumeila oil field, followed by a series of military and economic assistance agreements that culminated in the fifteen-year Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation signed in April 1972. Washington was taking note of Iraq's burgeoning ties with the Soviet Union as well as the nationalization in June of the Iraq Petroleum Company, owned by a consortium of Western firms including Mobil and Standard Oil of New Jersey. According to Kissinger, "Iraq was thereby transforming itself into a geopolitical challenge and was on the way to becoming the principle Soviet ally in the area."<sup>131</sup> He and Nixon wanted to ensure that "The vacuum left by British withdrawal, now menaced by Soviet intrusion and radical momentum, would be filled by a local power friendly to us."<sup>132</sup> The logical choice was Iran, given its power and ambitions.

Kissinger's geopolitical calculations reflected his superficial understanding of the Persian Gulf region. In reality, the Ba'thi regime was too busy consolidating its weak position at home to pose much of a subversive threat abroad. By the summer of 1968, the State Department's assessment was that the Ba'th would not last long in power, despite their extensive use of violence.<sup>133</sup> They had to contend not only with their opponents in Baghdad, but also with a Kurdish insurgency in northern Iraq as well as the threat of another war with Israel.<sup>134</sup> The shah had demonstrated Iran's military superiority over Iraq in the Shatt crisis of April 1969. Iraq, weakened by the purges and instability of a military coup, had far more to fear from Iran, than vice versa. The Ba'th could do little more than broadcast anti-shah propaganda on Radio Baghdad, for example, accusing him in July 1969 of being homosexual.<sup>135</sup> Following a particularly vitriolic Iraqi broadcast, Alam recorded in his diary on August 9 that "if our friends and allies let us," Iran would "sort them out."<sup>136</sup> Covertly, Iran tried to overthrow the Ba'th regime, sponsoring two unsuccessful coup attempts in Baghdad in the summer of 1969 and in January 1970.<sup>137</sup> As for the Soviet Union,

131. Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal* (London, 1999), 581.

132. Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (London, 1979), 1264.

133. Research Memorandum RNA-6 from Hughes to Rogers, February 14, 1969, *FRUS 1969-1976*, E-4, 251.

134. CIA Information Cable TDCS DB-315/01044-70, March 9, 1970, *FRUS 1969-1976*, E-4, 267.

135. Airgram A-322 from the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State, July 8, 1969, RG59, CFPF 1967-69, box 2218, NARA. Iraq did provide some modest material support for Arab and Baluchi separatists in Iran as well as safe haven for Gen. Teymour Bakhtiar, the first chief of SAVAK who had fallen out with the shah in the early 1960s. See Abbas Milani, "Teymour Bakhtiar," in his *Eminent Persians: The Men and Women Who Made Modern Iran, 1941-1979* (Washington, 2001), I: 430-37.

136. Alam, *Yad'dasbtha-yi 'Alam*, I: 233.

137. Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, October 15, 1969, *FRUS 1969-1976*, E-4, 262; Telegram 598 from the Embassy in the United Kingdom to the Department of State,

Moscow took great pains to assure the shah that Soviet support for Iraq posed no threat to Iran.<sup>138</sup> Soviet-Iranian relations had been normalized in 1962, and the trade and investment relationship between the two countries had developed significantly since then. The Soviet Union was playing a “balancing act” between Iran and Iraq, hoping to nudge the shah toward a nonaligned position while cultivating Ba’thi Iraq as its local client.<sup>139</sup>

The advice that Nixon and Kissinger were receiving was that there were tensions in Soviet-Iraqi relations and that Soviet aid to Iraq posed little threat to either Iran or the Persian Gulf.<sup>140</sup> In the briefing papers prepared for Nixon’s trip to Tehran in May 1972, written just one month after the signing of the Iraqi-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, the State Department argued that Soviet influence in Iraq may actually constrain and moderate Iraqi behavior, given Moscow’s support for a peaceful settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict and its normalization of relations with Iran.<sup>141</sup> The NSC staff advised Nixon that Ba’thi Iraq was “regarded as about the most unreliable and least realistic of Mid-East states, even in the view of other Arabs. This has meant not only Iraq’s isolation within the Arab world but also ambivalent and unsteady relations with the outside world and great powers, including the Soviet Union.”<sup>142</sup> Nor did America’s British allies see Iraq as a real danger to Gulf stability. For example, Sir William Luce, Britain’s special envoy for the Gulf, told the State Department in January 1971 that “Iraq has relatively little scope for doing mischief in the Persian Gulf states. The people of the area dislike the Iraqis, and Iraq is probably too fearful of Iran’s reaction to risk any adventures in the Gulf.”<sup>143</sup>

Why, then, were Nixon and Kissinger apparently convinced of the need to help Iran contain the danger from Soviet-backed Iraq, despite all the

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January 23, 1970, *FRUS 1969-1976*, E-4, 265; McKearney (Baghdad) to Acland (London), January 24, 1970, FCO 17/1240; Symons (Baghdad) to Hinchcliffe (London), January 31, 1970, FCO 17/1240; Balfour Paul (Baghdad) to Tripp (London), January 31, 1970, FCO 17/1240; Alam, *Yad’dashtha-yi Alam*, I: 355-56; Majeed Mehran, *Dar kuridurba-yi Vizarat-i Umur-i Kharijib chib khabar: khatirat-i yak diplomati qadimi* [In the Corridors of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: the Memoirs of a Retired Diplomat] (Tehran, 2004), 415-18.

138. Memorandum from Eliot to Kissinger, April 13, 1972, *FRUS 1969-1976*, E-4, 305; Telegram 67657 from the Department of State to the Embassy in Iran, April 19, 1972, RG59, SNF 1970-73, box 2380, NARA.

139. Oles M. Smolansky and Bettie M. Smolansky, *The USSR and Iraq: The Soviet Quest for Influence* (Durham, NC, 1991), 164.

140. Telegram 4546 from the Embassy in the Soviet Union to the Department of State, August 13, 1970, *FRUS 1969-1976*, E-4, 274; Telegram 12737 from the Department of State to the Embassies in Iran, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union, January 22, 1972, *FRUS 1969-1976*, E-4, 295; Intelligence Memorandum 0865/72 prepared by the CIA, May 12, 1972, *FRUS 1969-1976*, E-4, 307.

141. Briefing Paper entitled “Iran’s Role in Regional Security” prepared by the Department of State, May 12, 1972, NPM, NSCF, President’s Trip Files, box 479, NARA.

142. Briefing Paper prepared for President Nixon, May 18, 1972, *FRUS 1969-1976*, E-4, 308.

143. Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, January 13, 1971, *FRUS 1969-1976*, XXIV, 93.

contradictory advice they were receiving from their own officials and their British allies? The answer lies in the nature of the relationship between Nixon, Kissinger, and the shah. Absorbed with the Vietnam War, détente with the Soviet Union, the opening to China, and seeking a second term in office, Nixon and Kissinger had little time to devote to the complexities of Iraqi or Persian Gulf politics. Instead, they relied on the shah's judgment on local issues as their regional partner under the Nixon Doctrine. They discussed Iraq with the shah during their meetings in Tehran on May 30 and 31, 1972. The shah made a direct appeal for the United States to help Iran foment the Kurdish rebellion in northern Iraq, in order to paralyze the Ba'athi regime in Baghdad and block Soviet influence in Iraq.<sup>144</sup> A few months after the Tehran visit, Nixon authorized a covert CIA operation to arm and finance the Kurdish insurgency in Iraq, despite the "major view in town," as Harold Saunders put it, "that we should stay out of direct support for the Kurds."<sup>145</sup> The arguments in favor of U.S. intervention in Iraqi Kurdistan were weak. But over the objections of their own advisers, Nixon and Kissinger supported Iran's Kurdish effort "primarily as a favor" to the shah, as a leaked congressional report on U.S. covert operations later concluded.<sup>146</sup> American support for Iran against Iraq in 1972 was an affirmation of, not an explanation for, the policy of Iranian primacy established in NSDM 92 of November 1970. Nixon and Kissinger were seeing Iraq and the Gulf through the shah's eyes. Kissinger later wrote that some of the shah's "analysis was, of course, self-serving in the sense of providing a rationale for existing policy. But self-interest is no inhibition against accuracy."<sup>147</sup>

#### RETHINKING THE SHAH

An account of the origins of Nixon's Persian Gulf policy that simply examines the constraints on American decision making only tells half the story. America's war in Vietnam and the British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf both limited Washington's options in the Gulf. But when confronted with these factors, Johnson and Nixon adopted distinct Gulf policies. To understand why Johnson chose to continue with a British policy of balancing Iran and Saudi Arabia, while Nixon opted for Iranian primacy, we need to also consider the shift in American thinking about the shah from Johnson to Nixon. As discussed earlier, two ideas lay just below the surface of the balancing policy developed in

144. Memorandum of Conversation, Tehran, May 30, 1972, *FRUS 1969-1976*, E-4, 200; Memorandum of Conversation, Tehran, May 31, 1972, *FRUS 1969-1976*, E-4, 201; Kissinger, *The White House Years*, 1264-65; Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, 583-84.

145. Memorandum from Saunders to Haig, June 23, 1972, *FRUS 1969-1976*, E-4, 318; Memorandum from Kissinger to the members of the 40 Committee, undated, *FRUS 1969-1976*, E-4, 322.

146. U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee on Intelligence, *CIA: The Pike Report* (Nottingham, UK, 1977), 196.

147. Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 676.

Whitehall and embraced by Foggy Bottom. The first was that Mohammad Reza Shah was an upstart—the “Middle East de Gaulle”—whose ambitions for Iranian primacy would lead to regional instability and invite Soviet subversion. The second was that the shah’s insatiable appetite for U.S. arms was diverting resources away from Iran’s economic development. Both of these ideas were absent in Nixon and Kissinger’s thinking, thereby creating an opportunity for the shah to push the White House to abandon balancing in favor of Iranian primacy.

An Oval Office conversation in April 1971 between Nixon, Haig, and MacArthur reveals the clear differences between Nixon’s views on the shah, based on their long-standing friendship, and those of Johnson’s advisers or the British. Gone is any notion of the shah as a dangerous upstart. The question now is not how to contain the shah’s ambitions but instead whether the shah is indeed up to the task of fulfilling them. Nixon declares that he is “stronger than horse-radish” for the shah but asks his advisers if the shah can “fill that—the role out there, you know, in the whole darn Gulf area.” He wants to know if the shah has “got the stuff” or is he “thinking too big”? Nixon tells his advisers, “If he could do it, it’d be wonderful because he’s our friend.” “I like him, I like him, and I like the country. And some of those other bastards out there I don’t like.” In Nixon’s view Iran is America’s “one friend there” and “by God if we can go with them, and we can have them strong, and they’re in the centre of it, and a friend of the United States, I couldn’t agree more—it’s something.”<sup>148</sup>

Although Kissinger did not meet the shah until 1969, his views on the Iranian monarch were entirely in accord with those of Nixon. In his memoirs he vigorously refutes the idea that the shah was as an irresponsible leader whose extravagant weapons purchases needed to be curtailed: “Iran’s economic growth was not slowed nor was its political cohesion affected by its defense spending.” Far from being a dangerous upstart, Kissinger thought of the shah as statesman who, “In his grasp of the international trends and currents . . . was among the most impressive leaders that I met. He had a sure grasp of the importance of both the global and the regional balance of power.”<sup>149</sup> Both men were cold warriors who firmly believed that containing the Soviet Union “required the tolerance of brutality as a bulwark against worse suffering.”<sup>150</sup> The pro-Western Pahlavi monarchy was a perfect fit in such a strategy of containment. The shah was conscious of the importance of this new American thinking, and as the documentary record suggests, he consistently used the language of the Nixon Doctrine to advocate a policy of Iranian primacy in the Persian Gulf. He later wrote that Kissinger’s “geo-political ideas coincided perfectly with mine.”<sup>151</sup> His

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148. Conversation among President Nixon, MacArthur, and Haig, Washington, April 8, 1971, *FRUS 1969–1976*, E-4, 122.

149. Kissinger, *The White House Years*, 1260–61.

150. Jeremi Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century* (Cambridge, 2007), 270.

151. Pahlavi, *The Shah’s Story*, 144.

foreign minister, Ardeshir Zahedi, says that when Mohammad Reza Shah argued for Iranian primacy, Kissinger “understood what we were saying.”<sup>152</sup> Iran’s role in the Cold War came to be seen by Kissinger as a text-book example of the Nixon Doctrine:

Under the Shah’s leadership, the land bridge between Asia and Europe, so often the hinge of world history, was pro-American and pro-West beyond any challenge. Alone among the countries of the region—Israel aside—Iran made friendship with the United States the starting point of its foreign policy. That it was based on a cold-eyed assessment that a threat to Iran would most likely come from the Soviet Union, in combination with radical Arab states, is only another way of saying that the Shah’s views of the realities of the world paralleled our own. Iran’s influence was always on our side . . . The Shah absorbed the energies of radical Arab neighbors to prevent them from threatening the moderate regimes in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the Persian Gulf.<sup>153</sup>

#### IMPLEMENTING THE NIXON DOCTRINE

In the year that followed the adoption of NSDM 92 in November 1970, the shah took two steps that confirmed Washington’s assessment of the preponderance of Iranian power in the Persian Gulf. First, in the landmark Tehran Agreement of February 14, 1971, between the international oil companies and the oil-producing countries of the Gulf, the shah cajoled the companies into increasing the producers’ share of oil profits and raising the price of oil.<sup>154</sup> Then on November 30, 1971, just a day before Britain’s defense treaty obligations to the Arab rulers of the Lower Gulf expired, the shah deployed Iranian troops on the Gulf islands of Abu Musa and the Tunbs, which were claimed by both Iran and the British protected states of Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah.<sup>155</sup> London could protect neither British Petroleum nor its Arab clients in the Gulf from the shah. Both actions demonstrated that Iran, with the full support of the United States, had taken Britain’s place as the principal power in the region.

As the mantle of regional primacy passed from Britain to Iran, the shah would play an increasingly active role in the Nixon Doctrine, beginning with the 1971 South Asian crisis. The crisis was sparked when the martial law regime of Gen. Agha Mohammad Yahya Khan, who had come to power in Pakistan in a military coup in March 1969, held national and provincial elections in both East and West Pakistan in December 1970 in order to transfer power to civilian hands. In elections for the federal National Assembly, the Awami League, led by Sheikh Mujib al-Rahman and representing the Bengalis

152. Ardeshir Zahedi in an interview with the author, Montreux, June 11, 2009.

153. Kissinger, *The White House Years*, 1262.

154. Ian Skeet, *OPEC: Twenty-Five Years of Prices and Politics* (Cambridge, 1988), 66–68.

155. See Richard A. Mobley, “The Tunbs and Abu Musa Islands: Britain’s Perspective,” *Middle East Journal* 57, no. 4 (2003): 627–45.

of East Pakistan, achieved an absolute majority, defeating the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), which held seats only in West Pakistan. Negotiations between the Awami League and the PPP to form a government failed, and when the Pakistani army attempted to impose a military solution in late March, a civil war erupted. The Awami League declared East Pakistan's secession as the independent state of Bangladesh while the Pakistani army pursued a brutal crackdown on the Bengali separatists, creating a massive flow of refugees into India. The civil war became an Indo-Pakistan war on November 21, 1971, when the Indian military intervened on the side of Bangladesh, leading to the surrender of Pakistan on December 16.<sup>156</sup>

Throughout the crisis, Nixon wanted to help Pakistan, which was not only aligned with the United States, but also a friend of Communist China, with which the United States was secretly cultivating a *détente*. Furthermore, Pakistan was pitted against India, which had signed a treaty of friendship with the Soviet Union in August 1971. The tide of American opinion was against Pakistan because of the massacres of Bengali civilians. Consequently American military transfers to Pakistan were suspended by the State Department in April, and economic aid was halted in July. Initially, Nixon and Kissinger limited their efforts to preventing the United States from aiding India, over the strong objections of a State Department that had been left in the dark about the opening to China.<sup>157</sup> It was in this context that the shah played a secret role in providing American arms from Iran's own inventories to Pakistan.

Pakistan was Iran's CENTO ally, and the shah had already intervened once in 1965 to support Pakistan against India. With the outbreak of the 1971 crisis the shah worried that if Pakistan were not given assistance Yahya would increasingly turn to Beijing, extending Communist influence along Iran's borders. Foreign Minister Zahedi described such an eventuality as a "disaster for Iran."<sup>158</sup> Moreover, the shah's greatest fear was that an Indian victory in East Pakistan might also lead to the collapse of West Pakistan. This was a nightmare scenario for Iran, given the Baluchi separatist movement along the Iranian-Pakistani border regions.<sup>159</sup> The shah had quietly taken a number of steps throughout 1971 to defuse tensions and encourage a negotiated solution. In April, he had advised the Pakistani ambassador in Tehran that it was futile to try and use force

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156. See Richard Sisson and Leo E. Rose, *War and Secession: Pakistan, India, and the Creation of Bangladesh* (Berkeley, CA, 1990).

157. See Jussi Hanhimäki, *The Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (Oxford, 2004), 154–84; Robert J. McMahon, "The Danger of Geopolitical Fantasies: Nixon, Kissinger, and the South Asia Crisis of 1971," in *Nixon in the World: American Foreign Relations, 1969–1977*, ed. Fredrik Logevall and Andrew Preston (Oxford, 2008), 249–68; Christopher Van Hollen, "The Tilt Policy Revisited: Nixon-Kissinger Geopolitics and South Asia," *Asian Survey* 20, no. 4 (1980): 339–61.

158. Telegram 3328 from the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State, June 22, 1971, RG59, SNF 1970–73, box 2378, NARA.

159. See Shirin Tahir-Kheli, "Iran and Pakistan: Cooperation in an Area of Conflict," *Asian Survey* 17, no. 5 (1977): 474–90.

to control seventy-five million people in East Pakistan.<sup>160</sup> After the Pakistanis arrested Mujib and threatened to put him on trial, the shah acted on an American request in August to press Yahya not to make a “martyr” of Mujib by trying and executing him.<sup>161</sup> As the situation in East Pakistan deteriorated, Yahya made a sudden twenty-four-hour trip to Tehran on September 14 and 15 to ask for the shah’s assurance that Iran would provide military aid to Pakistan if war broke out with India. According to American intelligence sources, the shah’s response was “reserved,” agreeing only to “provide some limited military material” and his good offices for resolving the crisis, but refusing to join Pakistan in any war with India.<sup>162</sup>

In October the shah hosted a lavish celebration for the 2,500-year anniversary of the founding of the Persian Empire at the ancient Achaemenid capital of Persepolis. He tried to use the occasion to mediate the South Asian crisis by arranging a meeting between Indian President V. V. Giri, Soviet leader Nikolai Podgorny, and Yahya, all of whom were attending the celebration. Nothing emerged from the Persepolis meeting other than a quiet Soviet warning to the shah not to provide military assistance to Pakistan.<sup>163</sup> After his mediation efforts had come to naught and with India’s military intervention in late November, the shah began working with the Nixon administration to secretly support Pakistan. Following an urgent appeal for help from Yahya on December 4, 1971, Nixon decided to covertly provide assistance to Pakistan via Iran. This way, the president told Kissinger that morning, “If it is leaking we can have it denied. Have it done one step away.”<sup>164</sup> The need for secrecy stemmed from the problem that such third-party transfers of U.S. arms were illegal, “unless the United States itself would transfer the defense article under consideration to that country.”<sup>165</sup> Kissinger’s staff advised him that, “The President could, of course, give his consent to third-party transfers if he were also willing to establish, as a matter of policy, our willingness to supply the same items directly.”<sup>166</sup> But given the popular mood against Pakistan among the public and in Congress, Nixon was

160. Telegram 1946 from the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State, April 15, 1971, RG59, SNF 1970-73, box 2531, NARA.

161. Telegram 4292 from the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State, August 4, 1971, and Telegram 4462 from the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State, August 14, 1971, RG59, SNF 1970-73, box 2533, NARA.

162. Telegram 5209 from the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State, September 17, 1971, and Intelligence Note RNAN-27 prepared by the Department of State, September 27, 1971, RG59, SNF 1970-73, box 2523, NARA.

163. Telegram 6210 from the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State, November 1, 1971, NPM, NSCF, Country Files—Middle East, box 602, NARA.

164. Memorandum from Haig to Kissinger, January 19, 1972, NPM, NSCF, Country Files—Middle East, box 643, NARA. See also *FRUS 1969-1976*, XI, 222, f.3.

165. Note prepared by the Department of Defense, December 7, 1971, NPM, NSCF, Meeting Files (1969-75), Washington Special Action Group Meetings (WSAGM), box H-083, NARA.

166. Memorandum from Saunders to Kissinger, December 9, 1971, NPM, NSCF, Meeting Files (1969-75), WSAGM, box H-083, NARA.

unwilling to pay the political price of lifting the embargo, so he looked to the shah for help.

An unnamed American official, most likely the CIA station chief in Tehran, met with the shah on December 5 and secured his agreement to Nixon's request.<sup>167</sup> The next day, Nixon confirmed the arrangement with Kissinger, who warned the president that these secret arms transfers were "not legal . . . strictly speaking" and that the White House should make sure "the Democrats don't know about it and we keep our mouths shut."<sup>168</sup> Four days later in New York, Kissinger assured the Chinese ambassador to the United Nations, Huang Ha, that the United States would supply military assistance to Pakistan through third parties, including Iran. He reported to the Chinese that the White House had assured the shah that if Iran's "security requires shipment of American arms to Pakistan, we are obliged to protest, but we will understand. We will not protest with great intensity. And we will make up to them in next year's budget whatever difficulties they have."<sup>169</sup> This was the Nixon Doctrine in action: Iran was intervening in the Third World where the United States could not, by providing ammunition and other military equipment to defend Pakistan against Soviet-backed India.

#### "PROTECT ME"

The U.S. policy of Iranian regional primacy under the Nixon Doctrine, formulated in NSDM 92 and tested in the 1971 South Asian Crisis, was ratified during Nixon's May 1972 trip to Tehran, the first visit by a sitting American president to Iran in nearly thirteen years.<sup>170</sup> Iran was the president's first port of call after the historic Moscow summit between Nixon and Brezhnev, which in itself was an indication of Nixon's esteem for Mohammad Reza Shah. In the first meeting of the visit on the afternoon of May 30, Nixon thanked the shah for the role Iran had played in supporting Pakistan. He briefed the shah on his discussions with Brezhnev and asked if America's allies had anything to fear from U.S.-Soviet détente, implying that détente did not mean a weakening of America's commitment to Iran. The shah replied, "Not if you have the right allies . . . If they are self-reliant they will welcome it. If they have the principle of fighting until the last American they will not welcome it." Clearly alluding to the Nixon Doctrine, the shah emphasized that "Iran, like Israel, must be able to stand alone."<sup>171</sup> The following morning, the shah finally received the American

167. *FRUS 1969-1976*, XI, 222, f. 4.

168. Conversation between President Nixon and Kissinger, Washington, December 6, 1971, 12:02-12:06 p.m., NPM, White House Tapes, Oval Office, Conversation 630-2, NARA.

169. Memorandum of Conversation, New York, December 10, 1971, *FRUS 1969-1976*, XI, 274.

170. President Eisenhower had visited Iran in 1959 and Vice President Johnson had also visited in 1962.

171. Memorandum of Conversation, Tehran, May 30, 1972, *FRUS 1969-1976*, E-4, 200.

acknowledgment that all of Nixon's predecessors had denied him. In his minute of the May 31 meeting, Kissinger recorded that Nixon, "asked the shah to understand the purpose of American policy. 'Protect me,' he said. 'Don't look at détente as something that weakens you but as a way for the United States to gain influence.' The Nixon Doctrine was a way for the United States to build a new long-term policy on [the] support of allies."<sup>172</sup> Nixon's choice of words was extraordinary. The president of the United States had traveled to the court of the shah of Iran to ask Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to protect him. In addition to a commitment to support Iran's secret war in Iraqi Kurdistan, Nixon also assured the shah that his administration would authorize the sale of advanced F-14 and F-15 fighter jets to Iran as well as laser-guided bombs.<sup>173</sup> The shah rightly boasted to Alam that Nixon "gave me everything I asked for."<sup>174</sup>

The Tehran summit was, as Harold Saunders later recalled, the "capstone event" in the shift in U.S. Persian Gulf policy from balancing to Iranian primacy. The turning point had come with NSDM 92 in November 1970. A year and a half later, Nixon had made commitments to the shah in Tehran that were, in Saunders' words, "a ratification of a posture that had long since crystallized."<sup>175</sup> But after returning to Washington from Tehran, Kissinger found that Nixon's policy of Iranian primacy was encountering resistance in the American bureaucracy, particularly in the Pentagon, where many officials objected to giving the shah a blank check on conventional arms sales to Iran. Kissinger was compelled to write to both Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird and Secretary of State William Rogers in July, to remind them that "decisions on the acquisition of military equipment should be left primarily to the government of Iran."<sup>176</sup> At the time of the 1972 Tehran meeting, Iran's military expenditure was already three times that of Iraq and nearly twice that of Saudi Arabia.<sup>177</sup> During Nixon's presidency, annual U.S. military sales to Iran would grow more than sevenfold, from \$94.9 million in 1969 to \$682.8 million in 1974. They would go on to reach a peak of more than \$2.55 billion in 1977.<sup>178</sup> This burgeoning military spending would give Iran a position of largely uncontested power in the Gulf. Far from being an "Anglo-American lake," for a decade the Gulf was a region where Iranian power was profoundly felt.<sup>179</sup> In Iraq, the shah used the Kurdish rebellion against Baghdad to pressure Saddam Hussein into settling the dispute

172. Memorandum of Conversation, Tehran, May 31, 1972, *FRUS 1969-1976*, E-4, 201.

173. Kissinger, *The White House Years*, 1264-65; Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, 583-84.

174. Asadollah Alam, *Yad'dashtba-yi 'Alam: virayish va muqaddamah-i masbrubi dar barab-i Shab va Alam az Ali Naqi Alikhani* [The Alam Diaries: Edited by Alinaghi Alikhani], Vol. II: 1970, 1972 (Bethesda, 1993), 260.

175. Harold Saunders in an interview with William Burr, February 24, 1987, Washington, DC, tape 2A, FISOHC.

176. Memorandum from Kissinger to Laird and Rogers, July 25, 1972, *FRUS 1969-1976*, E-4, 214.

177. SIPRI, *SIPRI Yearbook 1973*, 238-39, Table 7A.8.

178. Gasiorowski, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 112, Table 6.

179. Petersen, *Richard Nixon, Great Britain*, 60.

over the Shatt a-Arab in Iran's favor in 1975.<sup>180</sup> The Iranian military were deployed in Dhofar from 1972 until 1979, playing a pivotal role in defeating the Communist-backed insurgency against the sultan of Oman, which threatened to spread to the other conservative monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>181</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

Richard Nixon's presidency was the high-water mark of Mohammed Reza Shah's relationship with the United States. Never before, nor ever since, did the shah enjoy such access and influence in the White House. The shah convinced Nixon to break with Johnson's policy of balancing Iran and Saudi Arabia as the "twin pillars" of the Persian Gulf and instead embrace Iran's primacy in the wake of the British withdrawal from East of Suez. Some have argued that "the Nixon Doctrine, as implemented in the Persian Gulf, was actually little more than an Iranian policy eagerly embraced by an administration caught in the morass of the Vietnam War."<sup>182</sup> But the Vietnam quagmire tells us very little about the choices Nixon made in the Gulf. It was certainly the case that the United States, consumed by the war in Indochina, could not take on the role that Britain had abandoned in the Gulf. Like his predecessor, President Nixon looked to local actors to fill the vacuum left by the British. But his decision to back Iranian primacy was not the obvious choice that Henry Kissinger has made it out to be. Nixon could have continued with Johnson's twin pillars policy. Instead, he tilted toward Iran as the principal power of the region. American perceptions of Soviet influence in Iraq and instability in Saudi Arabia both played their part in the origins of Nixon's Gulf policy. But the crucial factor was that under Nixon, the shah's ambitions were seen by the White House as an asset rather than a liability. Nixon did not share the view of his predecessors or the naysayers in the Pentagon that the shah's military spending needed to be curtailed. Instead, he saw his old friend Mohammad Reza Pahlavi as a strong, modernizing, anti-Communist statesman, and was happy to provide Iran with whatever arms the shah ordered. With a raft of more pressing international issues on their agenda, Nixon and Kissinger deferred to the shah's judgment on Gulf matters, just as their predecessors had relied on the British. Instead of containing a rising Iran, Nixon embraced it. Instead of curtailing the shah's military spending, he ordered his administration not to second guess the shah.

Less than seven years after Nixon's momentous 1972 visit to Tehran, the shah was overthrown in a popular revolution, and U.S. Persian Gulf policy lay in ruins. In the shadow of the subsequent Tehran hostage crisis, some were quick

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180. See Douglas Little, "The United States and the Kurds: A Cold War Story," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 12, no. 4 (2010): 63–98.

181. See Chubin and Zabih, *The Foreign Relations of Iran*, 310–12; J. E. Peterson, *Oman's Insurgencies: The Sultanate's Struggle for Supremacy* (London, 2007), 329–31.

182. Michael A. Palmer, *Guardians of the Gulf: A History of America's Expanding Role in the Persian Gulf, 1833–1992* (New York, 1992), 88.

to blame Nixon and Kissinger for encouraging the shah's megalomania through unrestricted arms sales to Iran.<sup>183</sup> Yet these critics failed to appreciate the shah's increasing autonomy from his American patrons, particularly after the oil price rises of the early 1970s. The shah's growing leverage over the United States was already apparent under Nixon's predecessors.<sup>184</sup> It is difficult to imagine that Nixon would have had any more success in constraining the shah in the 1970s than President Kennedy's "New Frontiersmen" had in pushing the shah to reform a decade earlier.<sup>185</sup> Instead, we must reexamine the popular myth of the shah as a pliant Third World client of the United States during the global Cold War. What this history of the origins of Iranian primacy suggests is that Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was an architect, not an instrument, of the Nixon Doctrine in the Persian Gulf.

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183. "Kissinger's critique (continued)," *The Economist*, February 10, 1979; "Letter: Kissinger on Iran," *The Economist*, 17 February 17, 1979.

184. Johns, "Tired of Being Treated Like a Schoolboy'."

185. See James Goode, "Reforming Iran during the Kennedy Years," *Diplomatic History* 15, no. 1 (1991): 13-29.