

# US – Iranian Relations in the Americans Presidents Era: 1969 – 1974 Richard Milhous Nixon Administration

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## LECTURES IN DIPLOMACY: US - IRAN RELATIONS – LECTURES

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### INTRODUCTION

**Richard M. Nixon** was elected the 37th President of the United States (1969-1974) after previously serving as a U.S. Representative and a U.S. Senator from California. After successfully ending American fighting in Vietnam and improving international relations with the U.S.S.R. and China, he became the only President to ever resign the office, as a result of the Watergate scandal.

*"... the Nixon Doctrine more than any other U.S. or Iranian policy contributed directly to the rise and fall of Shah Muhammed Reza Pahlavi<sup>1</sup>."*

*"As the ShaKs military power grew, so too did Washington's reliance on Iran's ability to act as the region's gendarme."*

*"Eventually, his ambitions became 'considerably more grandiose' as the Shah began to see himself as the regional hegemon—'the ruler from whom all had to seek permission and indulgence."*

*"By relaxing his control on Iranian society, the Shah opened the valve of public expression that he would never again be able to close."*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/president-nixon>

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/presidents/richard-m-nixon/>

## BACKGROUND

From 1969 to 1972, the United States viewed Iran as one of its staunchest friends in the Middle East and Iraq as a potentially dangerous opponent. Since Iran and Iraq were rivals, Washington's close ties to Tehran only widened the gap with Baghdad. President Richard Nixon, like previous U.S. Presidents, regarded Iran under Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi as a stable pillar of U.S. security in the Middle East. The main point of contention in congenial U.S.-Iranian relations was the Shah's appetite for expensive, but unnecessary, high-technology weapons. Concerned that an arms build-up might imperil Iranian internal stability by diverting funds for social efforts and complicate regional relations, U.S. officials were torn between satisfying and restraining the Shah. As for Iraq, the Nixon administration viewed with suspicion if not hostility the Iraqi Ba'athist regime, which had severed relations with the United States in 1967. Washington conducted its minimal dialogue with Baghdad through the Belgian Embassy, acting through additional third parties when critical issues arose. Unlike the government in Tehran, however, the Administration tended to regard the Ba'athists as too fragmented and weak to pose a serious menace to the Gulf region. Repeated anti-Ba'athist coup attempts reinforced this opinion.

The Nixon administration's tilt toward Tehran led to significant shifts in its policy toward Iran and Iraq in 1972. First, the United States abandoned its sporadic efforts to rein in the Shah's extravagant military spending. During his May 1972 visit to Tehran, Nixon promised to sell the Shah any American arms (short of atomic weapons) that he desired. Second, at the same meeting, the President conceded the Shah's point that Iraq, now a close Soviet ally, was a security danger to the Gulf region. To help keep the Ba'athist regime off-balance, the U. S. Government began to support the Iraqi Kurdish rebellion under Mullah Mustafa Barzani in July 1972. Although the Shah had funded Barzani for years, Washington had resisted Kurdish appeals for aid on the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries. After the Iraqis signed a treaty with the Soviets in April 1972, however, U.S. officials— particularly in the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)—agreed that the threat from Baghdad warranted U.S. attention.

Like the Johnson administration before it, the Nixon White House believed from the outset that Iran's role in the alliance system, particularly its strategic position in the Persian Gulf, justified U.S. arms sales to Tehran. Policymakers considered the \$100 million per year, six-year military agreement that Johnson had signed with the Shah in 1968 to be the "touchstone" of the U.S.-Iranian relationship, which provided Washington with vital political and security privileges. The country team at the Embassy in Iran—mindful of the Iranian-based U.S. intelligence facilities—warned of dire consequences for U.S. influence in Iran if the Shah were thwarted. If the United States failed to supply the weapons the Shah desired, he would obtain them elsewhere. Moreover, Iranian purchases improved the U.S. balance of payments position, since Washington was shifting military aid to Tehran from a grant to a credit basis.

Yet policymakers also recognized that the Shah's arms build-up could threaten stability, both within Iran and in the Gulf region. The Shah was quick to defend his military requests by raising the spectre of expanding Soviet influence through radical Arab regimes like Iraq. The danger would become acute once the British withdrew from the Persian Gulf in 1971, he claimed, and Iran assumed responsibility for ensuring regional security. While Nixon administration officials recognized that Iran was the preponderant power in the Gulf, however, they saw the regional threat as less dire and believed that Persian Gulf security should depend upon joint Iranian and Saudi Arabian cooperation. Department of Defense officials were particularly outspoken in their view that there was little military justification for much of the equipment the Shah sought.

Department of State officials reconciled the arguments for and against arms sales by contending that supplying Iran's military program was the best way to control it. If the Shah trusted U.S. concern for Iranian security, military advisors could then counsel him to establish priorities and eliminate wasteful spending. Nevertheless, a 1972 Department of State Intelligence and Research (INR) study acknowledged the inefficacy of this strategy: "There is little evidence that [the Shah] pays much heed to any efforts on the part of ARMISH/MAAG [U.S. Army Mission in Iran/Military Assistance Advisory Group] to influence the scope of his armament efforts or his concept of what Iran needs... [H]e has moved from a position of some dependence on his American advisers to one which sees them largely as a reliable and helpful channel to his American suppliers."

To finance the type of military he envisioned, the Shah required ever-increasing oil revenues, and appealed for U.S. support in his battles with the western oil consortium that lifted Iranian oil. In 1969, the Shah began to threaten unilateral legislation to achieve an extra \$100 million in oil revenue over the consortium's planned \$900 million off take, invoking the UN principle that mineral resources belong to countries rather than to the foreign companies that exploit them. Emphasizing that the U.S. Government did not control the American oil companies, U.S. officials declined to intervene, and the consortium secured a favourable deal that year. Still determined to solicit Washington's help, the Shah planned to broach the issues of oil and Iran's military requirements in his first State visit with Nixon in October 1969.

On the eve of the Shah's visit, Secretary of State William Rogers sent the President and Secretary of defence Melvin Laird two memoranda that highlighted conflicting U.S. impulses towards Iran's defense program. To Nixon, Rogers described the traditional U.S. policy towards the Shah's military program as an attempt "to contain the Shah's military appetite, without creating a negative impression, since the need for so much additional equipment is questionable in our view and its purchase diverts resources from development." U.S. officials recognized that despite Iranian economic progress, exploding military expenditures might depress living standards and arouse popular discontent. Simultaneously, however, Rogers emphasized to Laird the importance of conveying to the Shah "the clear impression that we are making a determined effort to help him to continue to meet his defense needs." In essence, U.S. officials were not willing to risk good relations with Iran for the sake of a more prudent arms policy.

In his meetings in Washington, the Shah proposed that United States import a large quota of oil from Iran, the proceeds of which he pledged to spend within the United States on military equipment. For his prized air force, the Shah sought two additional squadrons of F-4 Phantom fighter-bomber aircraft, along with pilot training and U.S. air force technicians. Stretched thin by the Vietnam War, the administration initially could comply only on the question of pilot training. The Shah, however, encouraged by officials' expressions of general support, pursued his objectives of oil income, F-4s, and technicians in subsequent discussions with American officials.

Although the Shah left Washington convinced that Nixon had vowed to order the oil companies to purchase more Iranian oil, the administration was willing only to encourage the consortium to provide the Shah with higher revenues. Disappointed, the Iranian leader renewed his threat of a legislative solution to the oil problem, leading President Nixon to warn the oil companies in October 1970 that American security was at stake in the negotiations. By December, a satisfactory arrangement had, for the moment, been reached, but it was soon overtaken by an Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) decision to increase oil prices, with Iran leading the charge.

The Department of Defense remained concerned that Iran was acquiring arms beyond its needs and absorptive capacity, but its reservations were ignored. To relieve the annual tension over military sales, in April 1970 the President approved a plan to stretch out the 1968 military agreement over 7 or 8 years, thereby extending the U.S. commitment as Iran's arms supplier.

In August 1970, when Congress delayed approval of the foreign military sales financing, Washington provided the Shah with \$120 million in Export-Import bank credits, \$20 million above the \$100 million annual military credit. Despite Defense opposition, State and the CIA argued for the proposal that the Shah be allowed to use the credit for the F-4 aircraft, which he felt Nixon had promised him during his Washington visit. After considerable debate, the White House sided with State as Iran splurged on a lavish 2500th anniversary celebration of the Persian monarchy in October 1971, the United States still provided Tehran grant military training in addition to the military credit, which was raised to \$140 million in 1972.

Washington officials had not entirely abandoned hope of using their advisory role to check the Shah's excesses. The Shah, however, disregarded State's advice to purchase only necessary jet aircraft appropriate to the regional balance of power. U.S. officials still took some satisfaction when, on the MAAG's advice, the Shah reduced the number of F-4s needed for accelerated delivery from 16 to 8 aircraft. Moreover, to operate the new F-4s, the air force technical assistance team in Iran extended its stay through 1974. In 1972, as the Shah requested, the military advisory group was expanded by 36, despite the Defense and Congressional mandate to reduce MAAG sizes worldwide. Defense objections notwithstanding, the administration also allowed Major General Hamilton Twitchell to accept contract employment as advisor to Tehran upon his

retirement as Chief of ARMISH/MAAG, believing that Twitchell would direct Iranian military purchasing toward American suppliers.

As a friend of the Shah, President Nixon placed great stress on Iran's role in the Persian Gulf. If he regarded the Shah's more grandiose regional ambitions with scepticism, Nixon accepted the Shah's claim that Iran was the only dependable U.S. ally between Europe and Japan. While Kennedy had emphasized the importance of shoring up the regime's internal position with a broad reform program, the Nixon administration believed that the Shah's "White Revolution" had been successful, despite the regime's narrow base and dependence on the army and security services. The President and other officials believed that Iran was not prepared for constitutional democracy and, at its current stage of development, was best served by a benign dictatorship, a view the Embassy in Iran corroborated. So long as an apparently steady and strong Shah directed a growing economy and an expansive foreign policy, all was well in Iran. U.S. officials responded warmly to the Iranian leader's claim that his "independent nationalism" of self-reliance and self-defence dovetailed with the Nixon Doctrine of letting friends defend themselves.

There were signs, however, that all was not well in Iran. The Shah's territorial claims in the Gulf, which the United States tended to support, irritated Arab-Iranian relations. Americans in Iran also remarked on the quickened tempo of Iranian student protests and terrorist incidents, including a 1970 assassination attempt on Ambassador Douglas MacArthur II. Yet given the tumult at home during the Vietnam War, the administration was relatively inured to student protest. Wary of expanding Soviet influence, many American observers accepted Tehran's claim that forces outside Iran were directing a small Iranian minority engaged in anti-government subversion. A wide audience within Iran, however, revered the regime's opponents, such as exiled religious leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

The Shah's relationship with Washington was itself a source of grievance for many Iranians, and by occasionally striking an anti-American pose, the Shah answered his critics. In several 1972 press statements, the Shah condemned the U.S. MIDEASTFOR [Middle East Forces] naval presence in Bahrain, excusing his outbursts to U.S. officials privately as a public relations gesture. U.S. observers also theorized that the Shah was attempting to place himself on record as opposing any external powers in the Gulf to counter a future Soviet presence. The Shah's disapproval of MIDEASTFOR, however, was genuine. To express displeasure with Washington's policy towards anti-Shah protestors in the United States, the Shah allowed a former student on the government news outlets to accuse American organizations of collaborating with anti-Iranian student groups in the United States. The Shah also attempted to relieve one of the major sources of Middle East strife and U.S. unpopularity, the Arab-Israeli struggle. However, he received only non-committal replies to his urging that the U.S. Government pressure Israel to accept an Arab Israeli peace settlement.

Where U.S. and Iranian interests conflicted, as on the issue of narcotics, Washington found Tehran intractable. The Shah rejected the U.S. request for help in controlling opium production, which Tehran resumed in 1969 after a 14-year hiatus. Many Iranian dissidents accused the Shah's family of complicity in the drug trade itself. Still, American officials declined to pursue the matter with the Shah, allowing that Iran was a "victim" country of the drug trade because of its high number of users, and convinced that Iran would not export opium, despite some evidence to the contrary. As in other fields, American officials inclined towards optimistic analyses of Iran's drug policies. When Tehran pledged to reduce the authorized poppy cultivation of 1973 to 10 per cent of the 1972 level, American officials celebrated.

From the U.S. perspective, the practical value of the relationship outweighed its drawbacks. Iran could be a useful friend, as in 1972 when the Iranians responded to a U.S. plea to turn over their entire force of F- 5A's to South Vietnamese forces in operation "Enhance Plus." Yet the Shah drove a hard bargain for his aid, providing only 32 of the 90 aircraft requested, and insisting that more advanced aircraft replace those he had surrendered. While Ambassador Joseph Farland supported the Shah's demands, Under Secretary of State U. Alexis Johnson dragged his feet, prompting the President's National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger to intervene with a compensation package that exceeded the ambassador's recommendations.

The U.S. Government was similarly willing to pay a high price for even a semblance of Iranian moderation over the issue of oil. In late 1970, the Shah rejected U.S. appeals on behalf of the oil companies and called for higher oil prices for the Persian Gulf countries of OPEC, based on the threat of cutbacks. In January 1971, Nixon dispatched Under Secretary of State John Irwin to Tehran as intermediary in the crisis, but Irwin and Ambassador Douglas MacArthur II quickly adopted the Shah's position that the consortium should negotiate a separate Persian Gulf agreement rather than the OPEC-wide deal the consortium preferred. Signed in February 1971, the Persian Gulf agreement with Iran left the oil consortium vulnerable to successive rounds of price rises, or "leap-frogging," as the Gulf producers and other OPEC members competed for the best terms.

As negotiations heated up in 1972 over the critical issue of the participation of producing countries in the oil industry, Americans persisted in regarding Iran as a stalwart of moderation, despite the Shah's own far-reaching ambitions for control of Iran's oil resources. Although the Shah did not insist on the 20 percent industry ownership that some Arab producers then demanded, he asked the consortium for higher oil income and aid for Iran's national oil company and refinery. In return, the Shah undertook to extend the consortium's oil agreement beyond the current 1979 expiration date.

Pleased at the promise of stability and at Iranian independence from OPEC, the President sent the Shah a congratulatory note on the negotiations, and Kissinger termed the agreement "tough but responsible." The Shah, however, was aghast when Saudi Arabia won more generous participation terms for itself and certain other OPEC

Gulf producers, complaining that this settlement undercut moderate forces like himself by offering greater rewards to extremists. He promptly insisted that his own agreement be revised, either by raising Iranian revenues to the Saudi level, or by transferring significant industry control to the Iranians in a long-term contract. His demands seemed in no way to dent his reputation for moderation within the Nixon administration.

In fact, the Shah felt that the United States took him for granted since Iran was not a hotbed of instability. By 1972, responding to the Shah's increasingly strident reminders about Nixon's long-deferred visit, the White House arranged a Presidential trip to Tehran to affirm the Shah's special relationship with the United States and acknowledge his concerns over Soviet regional objectives. Since the Shah was likely to raise his pet topic of military cooperation, the Embassy and Rogers counselled the President to assure the Shah that Washington viewed Iran as "an outstanding example of national independence and self-reliance, that we value our close relationship highly, and that we have every intention of continuing to cooperate with it," while also urging Iran to work closely with its anti-Soviet neighbours. Kissinger suggested that the President offer the Shah F-4 and F-5E aircraft, avoid commitment on F-14 and F-15s, and reject the sale of laser-guided bombs.

During the May 1972 meetings with the Shah in Tehran, however, Nixon made two commitments of far-reaching importance. First, contrary to his advisors' counsel, Nixon agreed to provide laser bombs, F-14 and F-15 aircraft, and more air force technicians--in short, "all available sophisticated weapons short of the atomic bomb." The second commitment was to aid the Iraqi Kurds (see Iraq section, below). Nixon's response represented the administration's new position that, as Kissinger phrased it, "it is not repeat not our policy to discourage Iranian arms purchases" and prevent Iranian overbuying, which merely sent the Shah elsewhere to the detriment of U.S. suppliers. Instead, "decisions as to desirability of equipment acquisition should be left in the hands of the Iranian Government and the United States should not undertake to discourage on economic grounds." Despite Iran's enhanced oil income, American officials recognized that the Shah was likely to persist in deficit spending. In 1972, the Iranian military budget totalled \$1,023 million, 22 percent of the total budget and 10 percent of the GNP and was expected to rise to 25 percent of the GNP by 1975 if spending patterns continued. Although U.S. officials believed that Iran could afford both guns and butter, many alienated Iranians sharply disagreed.

During Nixon's trip to Tehran, opponents of the Shah orchestrated a bombing campaign that the Embassy believed was the result of "a violence-inclined 'youth underground' [that] has taken root in Iran with possibly serious consequences for the country's long-term stability." Violent protests and demonstrations followed. While these dissidents posed a disproportionate threat, however, officials did not judge them an immediate danger to state security. By August 1972, the Embassy reported that despite a government crackdown, terrorist activity was unlikely to abate in the absence of major political, social, and administrative reforms. Iranian observers, moreover, were less sanguine than Americans that the attacks constituted no decisive

threat, accusing the Iranian Intelligence and Security Organization of the Country, SAVAK, of fuelling anti-Shah opposition to dangerous levels. One journalist dated the spate of terrorist incidents to the harsh SAVAK crackdown on students protesting the 1970 bus fare hike, many of whom had been beaten, expelled, and left without future recourse. Moreover, the chairman of a U.S.-based dissident organization.

The Iran Free Press, warned Washington that revolution was near, and that "it is a clear moral wrong for the United States or any other party to advise Shah Pahlavi to spend hard earned exchange currency on weapons, unneeded and ludicrously expensive, to guide his choice, and moreover to back this choice with personnel, when most families in Iran must survive on less than two dollars per day." Regarding the author's organization as offensive, White House officials did not reply to this letter. From the administration's perspective, despite the dissatisfaction of a few, the Shah's position was fundamentally sound. In talks with the Shah the following month in Tehran, President Nixon promised to contribute to the Kurdish effort to maintain independence from the Ba'ath. By aiding the Kurds, the administration hoped to foster Iraqi instability and thwart Soviet establishment of a Middle East base, as well as ensure the security of the Iranians, Jordanians, and Israelis by tying up Iraqi forces. For Washington, achieving these goals outweighed the risk of complicating the 1972 Moscow summit talks. While shunning direct support for the Kurds, the United States pledged to join a collaborative aid effort with the other interested regional parties.

## **IRAN AND THE NIXON DOCTRINE - AMERICAN ARMS AND THE RISE AND FALL OF THE SHAH**

In 1969, newly elected President Richard Nixon laid the cornerstone of his presidency's foreign policy when he announced an initiative which would become known as the Nixon Doctrine. Aimed at reducing the United States' military commitments in Southeast Asia, the Doctrine called on America's allies to provide for their own defense, rather than depending solely on the United States for their security. Breaking with the past containment strategies that engaged American forces in long and costly conflicts in Korea and Vietnam, the new doctrine stipulated, in cases involving other [non-nuclear] types of aggression we shall furnish military and economic assistance when requested and as appropriate. But we shall look to the nation directly threatened to assume the primary responsibility of providing the manpower for its defense. "The United States would become the arsenal rather than the policeman of the non-Communist world," providing weapons and training to regional allies to contain the Soviet threat.

"Eventually, his ambitions became 'considerably more grandiose' as the Shah began to see himself as the regional hegemony 'the ruler from whom all had to seek permission and indulgence.'" Though this course of action was originally framed as a shift in U.S. policy towards Southeast Asia, the Nixon Doctrine had its real roots in Tehran. There, in 1967, former Vice President Nixon met with the Shah of Iran, who argued that it would be "better for U.S. to have Iran able to defend [it] self than have [a security]



guarantee and another Vietnam. “This counsel from America's foremost Middle Eastern ally predates the Doctrine by over two years and un-doubted played a critical, formative role in the development of Nixon's foreign policy. In making his suggestion, the Shah was not merely offering advice, but was also seeking American support for his ambitions to play a more dominant role in the Middle East, especially in the Persian Gulf. Such ambitions were long in the making and were the product of the Shah's ardent Persian nationalism and distrust of “the motives of his American admirers. “Muhammad Reza Pahlavi knew he had only come to the Peacock Throne after his father was deposed by the Allies in 1941.

His restoration by the CIA in 1953 further added to his insecurity by demonstrating the influence that outside powers wielded over his kingdom. It was in this vein that the Shah's early military goals started as being defensive, “seeking to deter a Soviet invasion” so that he may “ultimately become strong enough to with - stand any foreign pressure.” However, as the Iranian economy developed in the mid-1960s, “Iran's growing oil wealth . . . allowed [the Shah] to think about playing a bigger role in the Middle East.” Eventually, his ambitions became “considerably more grandiose” as the Shah began to see himself as the regional hegemony “the ruler from whom all had to seek permission and indulgence. “When Great Britain announced that it would withdraw its forces “east of the Suez” by 1971, the Shah did not pass up the opportunity to replace Britain as guardian of the Gulf. Speaking with Nixon in 1967, the Shah made a thinly veiled comparison to Britain's imminent withdrawal and America's problems in Vietnam, telling Nixon that “the British are spread too thin to be strong enough every ELEMENTS SPRIN.

### **WHAT IRAN’S REVOLUTION LOOKED LIKE FROM INSIDE THE SHAH’S PALACE?**

Mohammed Reza Pahlavi owed an American president and the Cold War for the zenith of his reign. The quagmire in Indochina convinced Richard Nixon that America should delegate the containment of Communist expansion to nations situated in vulnerable regions, ruled by Western-leaning leaders, equipped with formidable militaries, and known to have stable regimes.

Iran uniquely qualified in all four of those attributes for the Nixon Doctrine—or so U.S. policymakers believed. They regarded the shah as a reliable deputy marshal who would oversee law and order in the badlands of West Asia for decades to come. As for the shah on the Peacock Throne, he was looking into the distant past as well as the future. With the mightiest superpower in history at his back, he sought to restore the glory and hegemony of the Persian Empire in his own part of the world.

In 1971, two years after Nixon announced his plan, the shah put on the bash of the millennia. Sixty-eight heads of states attended a five-day gathering in Persepolis, the ancient Persian capital. The caviar and carpets were local, but all the other luxuries

seemed to come from abroad. In his address to the invitees and to his neighbors, the shah insinuated that he was the modern successor of Cyrus the Great.<sup>2</sup>

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