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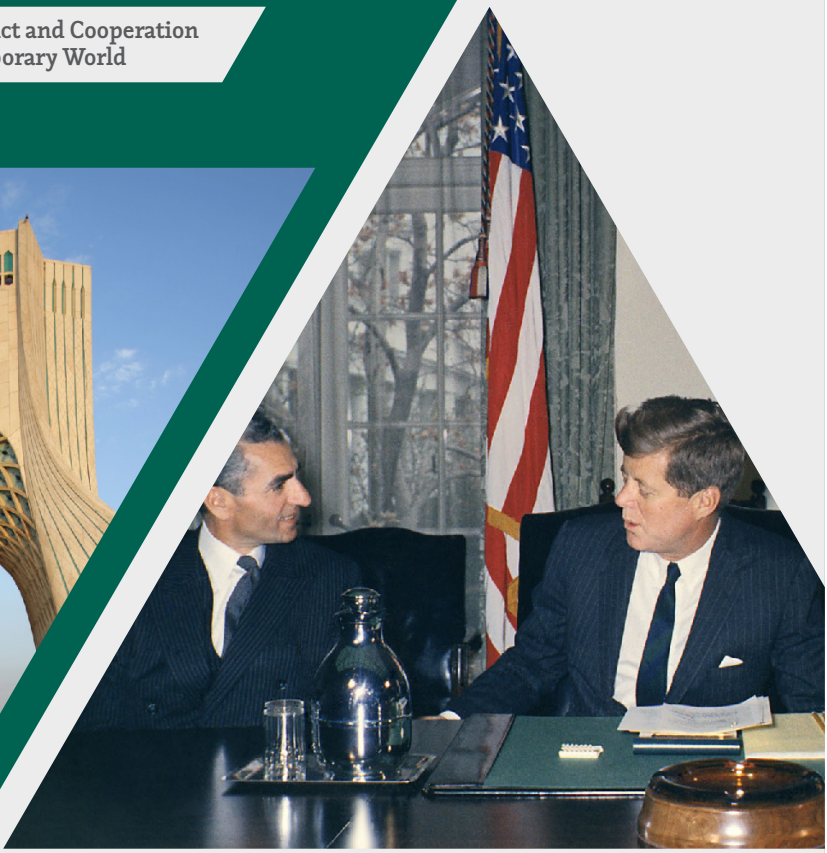

US Foreign Policy and the Modernization of Iran

Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon and the Shah

BEN OFFILER

Security, Conflict and Cooperation in the Contemporary World
Edited by Effie G. H. Pedaliu, LSE-Ideas and John W. Young, University of Nottingham

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Ben Offiler
University of Nottingham, UK

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To my wife, Sammy,
And my parents

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Introduction

On 11 April 1962, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, landed in Washington, DC, stepping off his plane to be greeted by the president of the United States, John F. Kennedy. Accompanied by his wife, Empress Farah Pahlavi, it was only the Shah's second official visit since a CIA-orchestrated *coup d'état* had restored him to the Peacock Throne in 1953. Forced by the inclement weather to welcome his royal guest inside an airport hangar, JFK joked, "This is one of our wonderful spring days, for which we are justly celebrated."[1] Turning to the business at hand, the president told the Shah, "On your shoulders hang heavy burdens and heavy responsibilities"; not least due to Iran's strategic location, "surrounded…by vital and powerful people," but also because of his desire "to make a better life for your people."[2]

As the official visit ended, Kennedy and the Shah declared that it had "strengthened the bonds of friendship between them in their quest for common objectives of peace and well-being."[3] The joint statement released by both governments framed the issue of development and modernization as the focal point of the discussions. Both leaders agreed that Iran needed to focus "on the necessity of achieving a high level of internal economic development and social welfare in order to continue the internal stability necessary to resist external threats."[4] The message complied with the rhetoric used by JFK in his inaugural address, which warned, "If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich."[5] It emphasized the basic assumption that sat at the heart of the modernization theories that have become synonymous with the Kennedy administration, namely that economic development leads to domestic stability, thereby helping to inoculate against communist subversion.[6]

Yet, the visit was not quite as harmonious as the public pronouncements suggest. Bad weather aside, from the outset there were signs that proceedings would not go as smoothly as planned. As the Shah's plane landed, it was met by a protest by the Iranian Students Association; although small in number – and kept out of sight of JFK and the Shah – their support for the ousted prime minister, Mohammad Mossadeq, signalled burgeoning discontent regarding the Shah's regime and its relationship with the United States.[7] In the years to come, these

anti-regime protestors would remain a thorn in the side of US–Iranian relations.

Moreover, the topics discussed by Kennedy and the Shah during the actual meetings themselves were not limited to questions of modernization and development. Indeed, in the run-up to the Shah's arrival, Kenneth Hansen, the assistant director of the Bureau of Budget, complained that the administration's preparations were neglecting issues of development and focusing instead on Iran's military needs.[8] It was, according to Hansen, the question of reform and development that the US should concern itself with as outlined by the Iran Task Force set up by Kennedy in response to the country's post-election crisis the previous year.

Seeking to differentiate itself from its predecessor, the Kennedy administration placed a high premium on the expanded role that foreign aid and economic development had to play in bolstering friendly nations against the threat of Soviet encroachment.[9] In his final meeting with the Shah, the president stressed that Washington was "pinning great hopes" on Iran's modernization.[10] Kennedy declared that "nothing contributed so much to the Shah's prestige as Iran's economic programme," which the United States was "very interested in cooperating with…as far as our resources would permit."[11] The Shah concurred, noting that "he had been working for twenty years at the task of building a strong anti-Communist society through social reform and economic development."[12] However, the Shah's vision of modernity differed significantly from Washington's.

While he accepted the importance of social and economic development, he stated unequivocally that "to succeed on the economic side Iran needs time and security."[13] Modernization, according to the Shah, would be achieved through Iran's military. Rather than economic development, it was "the existence of revamped armed forces which will give Iran the prestige it has needed."[14] Warming to his theme, the Shah enthused that "with such an army Iran can resist Communist pressures and build the country into a showcase."[15] This fundamental difference in emphasis was to become the defining feature of US–Iranian relations throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. Despite there being some agreement between Washington and Tehran on the desirability of pursuing economic development, the Shah prioritized military modernization to achieve Iran's – and the Pahlavi dynasty's – security above all else. Recognizing Iran's strategic value, the United States made maintaining close ties with the Shah its primary objective.

Moreover, as the years passed, the Shah demonstrated a skill for persuasively presenting his own vision of modernity. Throughout the

1960s, Iran's strategic and geographic position combined with Tehran's capacity to make its own case for Iranian-driven development to render the role of modernization theory in US policy ineffectual and obsolete. The question, then, is why did the United States during this period focus on stability, putting all its eggs in the Shah's basket, rather than on development? Did some US officials favour a military sales relationship in order to keep the Shah happy because they saw him as the key to Iranian security? Or was the Shah able to manipulate Washington into turning away from modernization and accepting his version of modernity, which prioritized a strong military?

This book argues that the contest over modernization during the administrations of Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon intersected each of these factors. Internal debates created tension between advocates of modernization and traditionalists who preferred to focus on pursuing a close relationship with the Shah in order to maintain Iran's stability, which in turn created an often incoherent approach to Iran. At the same time, the Shah proved himself adept at exploiting American fears of communist subversion and presenting himself – and thus his vision of modernity – as the only viable option for ensuring Iranian security. It is in this intersection of factors that we see how the contest over modernization in US–Iranian relations played out in the 1960s.

It was not, therefore, simply the case that modernization was the driving force of US policy at the beginning of the decade and then disappeared by the 1970s, although its influence did indeed decline. Rather, the example of Iran shows that US policymakers struggled, internally and in their engagement with the Shah, over the question of precisely what role modernization should have. It was this question that remained at the heart of US–Iranian relations throughout the 1960s, creating a remarkably high level of continuity in Washington's policy as successive administrations grappled with the issue of modernization. As the US responded to Iran's strategic importance by placing greater emphasis on stability, and as the Shah skilfully persuaded Washington to view him as the key to US objectives, American policymakers chose to accept the Shah's vision of modernization by backing him through an ever-expanding military sales relationship.

* * *

The historiography on modernization in US foreign relations has expanded rapidly in the years since Nick Cullather urged historians to treat modernization "as a subject instead of a methodology."[16] In his

excellent assessment of modernization theory's influence on the Kennedy administration, *Modernization as Ideology,* Michael Latham argues that US officials "conceived of it as a means to promote a liberal world in which the development of 'emerging' nations would protect the security of the United States."[17] Modernization theory is considered to have reached its zenith during the Kennedy years when "it enjoyed such popularity that few dissented against its assumptions and predictions, even when clear evidence pointed in other directions."[18] Furthermore, by the 1970s, modernization theory was no longer embraced in the way that it had been by Kennedy.[19] The failure of American development projects in important Cold War battlegrounds, most notably in Vietnam, signaled the demise of modernization as a driving force of US foreign policy. However, this book will show that the influence of modernization theory over US policy towards Iran actually began to decline while Kennedy was still in office. Furthermore, it complicates the claim that modernization was an ideology for the Kennedy administration. While many US officials adhered to the basic tenets of modernization theory as an explanatory model, there was serious internal debate over its validity as a solution to foreign policy problems. Whether or not modernization was an ideology, its influence over US policy towards Iran was ultimately relatively marginal.[20]

Brad Simpson's analysis of US policy and modernization theory in Indonesia offers a useful parallel with Washington's encounter with Iran in the 1960s.[21] Simpson demonstrates how the Kennedy administration supported a regime built upon military and educated elites in order to pursue American national interests in the country through modernization. In Iran, however, the support given by the United States to the Shah's military regime was motivated more by the perceived need to ensure friendly relations with the Iranian monarch as the key figure in maintaining Iran's stability rather than a belief in the military as an effective conduit for development. The key difference lies in the fact that successive US governments saw the Shah as the means to stability in Iran; although some attempts were made at pushing the Shah, tentatively, towards reform and development, Washington's reliance on him for achieving its national security goals meant that Iran's modernization reflected the Shah's predilections more than it did the modernization theories of American academics.

By examining US–Iranian relations in this era, we can see that the normal periodizations associated with the Cold War and modernization do not stand up to scrutiny. While this book acknowledges that modernization theory helped form the views of US officials about the