

HAS THE US POLICY BEEN MORE ANTI-IRANIAN THAN PRO-ARAB WITH THE FALL OF THE SHAH? A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Since the fall of the Shah, the US-Iran relations have changed significantly. During the Shah regime, US-Iran experience a warm relationship through economic and military partnerships, however, it changed since the Iran revolution until today. Iran turned out to be one of the axis of evil during the Bush administration. The fall of the Shah also changes the direction of the foreign policy of the US. It then led to the proposition of whether the US foreign policy has been more anti-Iranian than pro-Arab with the fall of the Shah. This paper seeks to answer this question through historical analysis. It examines the US policy during the Cold War era and the post-Cold War. Therefore, the US policy in the region is not always anti-Iranian than the pro-Arab case. The changed regional architecture influences the priorities of the President of the US at that time to put aside Iran's issue, as it happened on George H.W. Bush, Clinton, and Obama administration. Thus, the characteristic of the leader also heavily influences US posture in Iran, as Bush and Trump's personality and policies are clearly against Iran. However, despite the dynamic relations of the US-Iran, Iran has always been one of the threats for the US interest in the Persian Gulf since the Shah has fallen.

Keywords: Iran, the US, Persian Gulf region

Introduction

The fall of the Shah in 1979 has specifically created the new stage of the US engagement toward the Persian Gulf region and Iran. During the Shah regime, the US general attitudes toward the region were shaped by the US-Iran great relations. The Shah regime has been known for its loyalty toward the US as they shared the same interests, particularly in military and economic, that drove them to a great relationship. However, the rise of the Islamic system and the fall of the Shah had changed the underpinning reasons behind US great engagement in Iran and the Persian Gulf. There were obvious distinctions in the US foreign policy direction toward the region before the fall of the Shah and after the emergence of the Islamic Revolution under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini. Moreover, this historical event has raised the question of whether the US foreign policy has been more anti-Iranian rather than pro-Arab.

In this paper, I evaluate this general proposition through historical analysis. First, I examine the US foreign policy toward the Persian Gulf when the Shah was in office and after the US took control over the region. In the section, I explain the US interest in the region and Iran to understand fundamental ideas behind US engagement toward the region. From this point, I examine whether the US policy back then was more pro-Iran and anti-Arab, or vice versa. Second, I discuss the US policy changes in the region after the fall of the Shah by looking at the US general response in two periods: During the Cold War and post-Cold War. In this section, I provide evidence to test whether the fall of Shah had led to a new situation where US policies were more pro-Arab than Iranian. Finally, Although the overthrow of the Shah has in part contributed to a different posture of the US policy and changed interests in the region, I argue that the proposition saying the US policy has been more anti-Iranian than pro-Arab after since was not always the case.

The US foreign policy in the region during the Shah regime (1971-1979)

The US influence in the Gulf region start after the British withdrew in 1971, even though, the US presence during that time was quite insignificant as the US did not immediately fill in the vacuum of power in the region (Sick 2009, 296). It is important to note that long before the US in charge in the region, Iran' strategic location was seen as a crucial country between the USSR and the Persian Gulf, thus, Iran has a critical role that could transform the Cold War into a devastating third world war (Nemchenok 2010, 342). It shows that the US sees Iran as the mainkey to enter and leverage its influence in the Persian Gulf. Therefore, any of the US behavior and policy toward the region after the British withdrew, was considered as a critical event to analyze the US interest in the region. Moreover, it could also help to understand in a bigger picture the projection of the US policy toward the region, before and after the fall of the Shah. Then, we could examine whether the US policy is more anti-Iranian than pro-Arab in the twenty-first century. Therefore, the analysis would start when the US has a role and presence in the region, especially in the relationship with the Shah from Iran. I will limit my time analysis from 1971 to 1979 when the Shah fall.

It was during the Cold War period when the US took control over the Gulf region. Thus, the power rivalry between the US and USSR dominated the foreign policy formula of the US. The USSR presence was perceived by the US as the most immediate threat to the US ideology, therefore US policies in the region almost exclusively in the context of its global rivalry with the Soviet Union (Sick 2009, 295). Moreover, the British withdrew from the region during the Cold War has brought the US to play a major power in the region. Throughout that time, the ultimate US interests in the region dominantly focused on containing and countering the

influence of the Soviet Union, radical nationalists, and left-wing movements in the region (Naseem 2001, 198). Thus, the new position for the US in the region has strengthened and projected its policy to contain directly the USSR leverage.

To contain Soviet Union influence and strengthen the US position and influence, the US saw Iran as the staunchest friend in the region (US Department of State 2006). This could be seen during the Nixon administration where the US launched the Twin Pillar policy toward the region. This policy was addressed to rely heavily on the two key states of Iran and Saudi Arabia to contain USSR interests and see Iran as the most substantial actor between the two (Sick 2009, 296). As Gary Sick (2009) asserts that "Iran was a more valuable country regarded their military capabilities, its physical juxtaposition between the Soviet Union and the Persian Gulf, and the willingness of the Shah to cooperate openly with the US on security matters". It shows that the figure of the Shah, who has similar values with the US, offered the chance for the US to entangle with Iran. Moreover, during that time, Iran was the main key to enter and to contain the Persian Gulf from the USSR. As Akbar E. Torbat (2004) said that "in 1970s the US policy was to protect its interest in the Persian Gulf region by using the Shah as a proxy to patrol the region"

The Twin Pillar policy, which looked at two major actors in the region, made Iran was more valuable for the US. Even though Saudi Arabia was the richest, Iran meets the criteria of great military capabilities that compatible enough with the US. It also said that Oil-rich Iran was a surrogated regional actor to fill the power vacuum after the British withdrew which is fitted with the US (Bradley 1982, 33). Thus, the Shah has a strong bargaining position in maintaining its close relationship with the US. This great relationship during that time was shaped by the Shah leadership. The US would not maintain its sphere of influence in the region without the support of the Shah. This could be seen

from the Nixon-Shah agreement in May 1972 where the US willing to increase "the number of uniformed advisers in Iran and guaranteed the Shah access to some of the most sophisticated non-nuclear technology in the US military arsenal. In return, the Shah agreed to accept a key role in protecting western interests in the region" (Sick 2009, 297). This was the beginning of the development of Iran's military modernization, where the US armed Iran with the most sophisticated technology.

By examining the conducted of Twin Pillar policy at that time, it shows clearly that the US policy toward the region was heavily relying on Iran's presence. The 'twin' was one pillar policy where Iran was the ultimate US's ally in the region. We could not say that the policy was pro-Iranian rather than Arab, however, the same values that the Iran-the US shared back then during the Shah regime, has become an important factor to determine this proposition. It suggests that during the Shah period, after the US in charge in the region, the US policy was pro-Iranian. The US was more cared to build up Iran's military and economic matters rather than strengthen its relationship with the Arab States.

Another example during the Shah regime was the Carter Doctrine. Originally attempted at the beginning of Carter administration in 1977 and lasted until 1980. The Carter Doctrine was emphasized more controlled arm policy, human rights campaigns especially for authoritarian regimes in a democratic direction, and peaceful efforts on a final settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict (Bradley 1982, 69). This policy was designed as a part of the US containment efforts. Moreover, this policy affects the US foreign policy toward the Persian Gulf but it affected only those who had a mutual relationship with the US, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. Both states had directly affected by the doctrine but only Iran got more impacts. It affected Iran-US armed sales and Iran's human rights aspect as well. Iran under the Shah had bought enormous military technologies from the US and at

that time the Shah already had a long shopping list of arm forces. However, the limitation of arms sales during the Carter administration did affect Iran's wish lists in a very limited scope. As Bradley summarized in his book, any proposed sale from the Shah, even though it faced Congressional criticism, Iran had always treated differently and the Defence Department consistently sympathetic to the Shah's requests (Bradley 1982, 72-73). From this point of view, we could examine that since Iran and the US created a special relationship, the US was more benign toward Iran. The US was more cautious in executed its policy in the Persian Gulf. The US dependency toward Iran has built an intimate relationship that maintains Iran's position as a priority state in the region. It could be said that during the Shah primacy, US foreign policy direction in the region in favor of Iran's side

The US foreign policy in the region after the fall of the Shah

The fall of the Shah was the US's great loss. The US had lost its most reliable and staunchest friend in the region. The Islamic Revolution under Ayatollah Khomeini was an ultimate needed to seek another compatible ally to represent the US interests in the region. The new regime ended the country's close relationship with the United States, which even resulted in a hostage crisis. Thus, the new condition has enforced the US to redefine its interest in the region. However, it is obvious that since the fall of the Shah, US policy directions toward the Persian Gulf has been changing. It resulted in the common proposition that since then US policy has been more anti-Iranian than pro-Arab. Thus, I will examine the US policy in the region since the Shah fallen until the current development. Moreover, I will breakdown the timeline during the Cold War era and the post-Cold War era because of the US containment policy influence the direction of the US policy in the region.

The US foreign policy in the region after the fall of the Shah during the Cold War period

After the Iran Revolution, despite all the unexpected events, the US interests in the region were still to maintain its containment policy and secure oil access. As Gary Sick (2009) asserts that Donald Reagan adopted the former administration's policy in assuring and secure access to Persian Gulf oil and to prevent the Soviets from acquiring political-military control directly or through proxies. Moreover, the US found it difficult to balance and contain the USSR power as the US lost one of its strong pillars. Thus, from the moment of the Iranian Revolution, the US policy direction gradually forms against any Islamic movements. The growth of militant Islam then come to the US attention ever since Ayatollah Khomeini overthrew the Shah (Mansbach and Rafferty 2008, 227).

During the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), the US mainly sided with Arab Iraq by supplying armaments against Iran. Thus, it was the first event that tilted the US interest, from pro-Iranian back then, by intending to contain Iran religious Shiite propaganda throughout the region. For the first time, Iraq and the US shared the same interest and therefore, it leads the US toward Iraq's favor. As Murray Waas (2003) asserts that US decision in backing up Arab Iraq was to ensure that USSR influence in the region did not increase relative to that of the US and to reduce the possibility of Iran's Shiite influence in the region. During this period of the end of the Cold War, the US adjustment position and its new interest during this time, has produced a policy that favor anti-Iranian.

The US foreign policy in the region after the fall of the Shah after the Cold War era

Since the end of the Cold War, the status of the US is crucial as the Middle East's preeminent power. Leverett (2013) argues that "America's unique capability to project conventional military

power into the Middle East has enabled it to assume responsibility for the physical security of hydrocarbon flows from the Persian Gulf and to become the presumptive enforcer of order in the region". This position is not only given economic and political benefits for the US but also challenges to maintain US influence in the region.

It was during the George H.W. Bush administration when the US entered the new stage of international relations as the only global power after the Soviet Union collapsed. At the beginning of the Bush administration, he maintained President Reagan's policy, which addressed the US interest to combat the terrorist threat caused by the Iran Revolution. It was manifested in National Security Directive 26 in 1989 that reaffirmed Iran's presence in the region posed the greater threat of the US interest (Haas -). Therefore, one of Bush's foreign policy was to build a close relationship in politics and economic aspect with Iraq, as a counterbalance to Iran. However, his intention was not coming smooth. In the following year, as Iraqi invasion and occupation in Kuwait and the Gulf War events occurred, then the US policy architecture was more related to oppose any aggressive action from Iraq under Saddam Hussein's leadership. Thus, his intention was manifested in the context of National Security Review (NSR)-10 as it emphasized long-term normal relations between the US and Iraq to promote stability in the Gulf and Middle East (Pauly 2005, 43).

The US sanction of Iraq and the US involvement in the Persian Gulf war counted as the US policy efforts to strengthen US presence in the region. However, during this period it suggests that US policy was addressed to the country that threatens regional stability and US oil interests, as the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait alarmed the US about Iraq controlling Kuwait's oil resources (Miller Center). Iran's threat remained as a US great threat but Iraq aggression action during that time was a

more immediate threat, thus, the US and Persian Gulf Arab states endeavored to limit Iraq's potential danger (Alaolmolki 1996, 50). Moreover, it shows that Iran and Iraq eventually become two sources of threat that had been the US concerns until now in the region.

Following the Clinton administration, the US interest in the Persian Gulf was more heavily on combating threats posed by Iraq's Weapon Mass Destruction (WMD) and sponsorship terrorist organizations by Iran (Pauly 2005, 69). In a broad picture, during the Clinton administration in his two terms, the US policy interests were to promote peace by engaging negotiation and diplomacy. Nothing much to examine whether the US policy during the Clinton presidency was much more anti-Iranian than pro-Arab since his ultimate interests were to rebuild a relationship with Iranian and soft approach toward Iraq. Moreover, Iraq and Al-Qaeda was the most notable threat for the US (Pauly 2005, 83). Therefore, any Clinton's policies were to maintain regional balance by using limited force against Saddam and took necessary diplomatic actions. Thus, reflected Clinton's period, generally, the US policy priority depends on the most imminent threats to its interests. As Iraq under Saddam Hussein posed a greater threat than any other threats in the region.

Moving forward to the George W. Bush administration, it was a highlight on the increase of terrorist threats. Starting in the event of 9/11, the US ultimate campaign on 'Global War on Terror' was to destroy and combat any terrorist organization by military force in any means. As Akbar E. Torbat argues that the Bush administration "propose to find and destroy by preemptive military strike any threat against the US before it can be materialized" (Torbat 2004, 88). Thus, this intention resulted in framing Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as 'an axis of evil'. Iran has been sponsoring Hezbollah and Hamas organization which contradicts the US interests and Iraq that have been US great

threats by its development on the WMD and missile program. In examining US policy in the Bush term, it could be said that concerning the terrorist threat, US policy was manifested in conducted military forces against Al-Qaeda and pursued Osama bin Laden, also condemn Iran sponsored activity to Hamas and Hezbollah. Moreover, other great concern was still focused on Saddam Hussein oppression and aggression toward its people.

In the Bush term, the US foreign policy in the region was not changed much of his predecessor had conducted. The US concerns were remained on securing oil access, strengthen its influence as the guardian of the region, and combat any threatening actions to the regional stabilization. Any speculation toward US policy that was more anti-Iranian than pro-Arab was not found during this period. The US policy was not heavily against Iranian but in the bigger picture, it was against any parties that interrupted US interests in the region. Moreover, the US effort to maintain a close relationship with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries was not a significant factor to judge the US policy was more to Arab favor rather than Iranian.

In the Obama administration periods, the US faced several challenging issues such as Arab Spring uprisings, securing oil-access and oil price, the emergence of religious extremists, and the Iran nuclear development program. On responding to the Arab Spring uprisings, the US general policy was to promote democracy and support any important step that leads toward greater democracy (Shayji 2014, 1). It was in fact, contradict the Gulf leader's view toward this event. They see the Arab Spring as "disastrous, leading to chaos and increased Iranian meddling in Arab affairs" (Shayji 2014, 1). The point that we could examine was the distinction perception toward the Muslim Brotherhood, the actor behind the Arab Spring. While the US has a positive response toward the Muslim Brotherhood, the GCC states see

them as a threat to the Arab World that will make common cause with Iran (Shayji 2014, 1).

On the Iran nuclear issue, the US posture was influenced by the GCC country's posture toward Iran. Iran's nuclear program added the distrust and threat level that has been perceived by the GCC members. As Abdullah K. Al Shayji (2014) asserts that most of the GCC members view "Iran as an existential threat because of its hegemonic posture, the Sunni-Shiite feuds, and its meddling in the affairs of the GCC and other Arab states." However, despite the various responses from the GCC countries, the US still pursues a diplomatic way to ensure Iran's nuclear program will not harm anyone. It was in 2013 where the US along with other UN Security Council members and the European Union initiated the creation of the Joint Plan of Action (JPA). This JPA aims to "set out an approach toward reaching a long-term comprehensive solution to international concerns regarding Iran's nuclear program" (Congressional Research Service 2018). This JPA then continues to the creation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to constraint Iran's enrichment nuclear program to meet the requirements of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in reciprocity for lessening the sanction toward Iran.

While we witnessed the effort of Obama to achieve resolution and peace on the nuclear issue, the overall projection of the US policy toward the region does not meet the expectation of Arab states. Former US Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Chas Freeman (2013) said that "Americans no longer command the ability to shape trends in the Middle East. Almost no one expects us to do so". Al Shayji (2014) also mentions that the disagreement and different views about these issues had worried Gulf countries, and the Middle East region generally, as they start questioning the US's strategic commitment toward the region. The 'Pivot to

Asia' seems to be the main priority for Washington under the Obama administration.

At the beginning of Trump's presidency period, we witnessed a warm response from several GCC countries toward President Donald Trump's policy in the region. As Trump declared for not advocating human rights and political reforms and for strongly against Iran dominance (Feierstein 2017). The Trump doctrine favoring "America First", populism, anti-Iranian, and the tendency to withdraw from international issues, gave a positive response from several GCC countries. However, the tension has heightened after the US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) multilateral agreement of nuclear Iran deal in 2018 and reimposed sanctions. Trump announced relieving extensive sanctions to Iran through JCPOA gives Iran additional resources to continue "malign activities" in the region and to develop ballistic missiles (Congressional Research Service 2018). Since then, the US-Iran tension escalated into conflict as Qasem Soleimani, the commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force, died in a US airstrike in Baghdad on 3 January 2020 (Congressional Research Service 2020). Assessing from Trump's policy in the region, he does not try to rebuild trust and peace in the Iran issue, rather he pursues a policy that contradicts his predecessor.

Conclusion

To conclude, the proposition that since the fall of the Shah, the US policy toward the region has been more anti-Iranian than pro-Arab, is not entirely true. Looking back at the Shah regime, because of Iran's open posture to the US ideology, it was easier for both parties to share the same interests. Thus, the US was more in favor of Iran while in return the Shah guarantees the US interests in the region. Those close and mutual relationship, indeed, was affected by the Iran Islamic Revolution. It could not

be denied that the US change its posture and redefine its interest in the region because of the fall of Shah. However, looking through the policy since the overthrow of the Shah, US policy was not always anti-Iranian than pro-Arab. It is sometimes anti-Iranian as the US interest conflicts with Iran's interests, especially during the Bush and Trump administration. But, it sometimes pro-Iranian where US interest compatible with Iran's interests, such as the US support the Arab Spring by the Muslim Brotherhood while Iranian also pro-Muslim Brotherhood. Moreover, there were multiple times, for example, during the Clinton and Obama period where the US shows its good intention in rebuilding trust and relationship with Iran.

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