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CARTER ADMINISTRATION

THE **CARTER ADMINISTRATION** (1977-81): POLICY TOWARD PERSIA. When the administration of President Jimmy Carter (Figure 1) took office in January 1977, United States foreign relations overall were remarkably stable. A modus vivendi had been established with the Soviet Union, and the Soviet-American cold war, the primary source of disturbance of world tranquility, was on what would prove to be a temporary hold. The Middle Eastern region, often a secondary source of disturbance in world affairs, reflected the general tranquility. The decision of President Anwar Sadat of Egypt to shift sides in the cold war and to remove Egypt from the confrontation camp of Arab states facing Israel, was a major reason for producing regional tranquility. But the growing military strength and apparent political stability of the regime of Moḥammad Reżā Shah Pahlavī in Persia was of at least equal importance. The moment of Jimmy Carter's inauguration was also the moment of America's greatest influence in the Middle East.

Jimmy Carter indicated two major general areas of foreign policy concern for his administration. He would, first, continue and accelerate the process of easing tensions between the two cold war camps. Second, he would make the furtherance of human rights worldwide a central objective of United States foreign policy. But up to the day of his inauguration he had not advanced a strategic plan for achieving these central policy objectives. Presumably the outlines of such a plan would begin to emerge as the administration confronted concrete problems in its multilateral and bilateral relations, including those with Persia.

The Richard M. Nixon/Gerald R. Ford (1968-77) administration's tenure coincided with what could be called the golden years of the reign of Moḥammad Reżā Shah. Following his overcoming the major challenge to his regime in the rioting associated with the opposition of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in June 1963, the shah consolidated his political control of Persia. He did so through a combination of tight coercion and an improving standard of living for much of the Persian population. For more than a decade the average Persian could expect to see year by year a higher real income. For those most favored by the regime, the level of improvement often was beyond their wildest expectations. Unverifiable charges of gross corruption, extravagance in expenditures, and a failure to approach sensibly many central developmental tasks, such as the recruitment and training of a skilled labor force and technocracy, produced some unhappiness but no real sign of regime instability. The incoming Carter administration, therefore, had no compelling evidence that would lead to considering seriously the possibility of imminent revolutionary change in Persia.

American officials responsible for formulating policy toward Persia had a relatively easy task. The regime was both stable and friendly with the United States. The shah's foreign policy objectives appeared to be entirely harmonious with those of the United States. He provided a friendly environment for American investments and commercial activity. His purchases of American weaponry were sufficiently extensive to be a major factor in the health of the American arms industry. He was a proponent of regional stability, good relations with the state of Israel, and containing communist advances in the region. To help accomplish the latter purpose, he permitted the establishing and maintenance of a major American listening post on the Soviet border (Bill, p. 254). His strong advocacy in OPEC of sharp increases in the price of oil had been the only serious source of tension with the United States government in the recent past and by 1977 (Pahlavi, pp. 97-99). The shah's position in this matter had been accepted by United States government officials as not unreasonable.

However, there were in Persia the first hints of the malaise that would set in motion a course of events that would culminate in the Persian revolution. As a result of extensive government spending following the rise in the price of oil in 1974, the economy became overheated (Graham, chap. 3). Inflationary pressures developed and reached levels of over 40% in the following months. Persians with fixed incomes, in particular, were badly hit. Still, the economy

was relatively sound, and the regime should have weathered the crisis fairly easily. Certainly the favorable view of Persia by much of the world community, including in particular the United States, should have forecast international support for the regime as it dealt with its economic problems.

However, the shah viewed the inauguration of the Carter administration with some trepidation. The United States had been and continued to be a major factor in the stability of the shah's regime. It had participated in the coup d'etat that led to the shah's gaining absolute power in Persia (Roosevelt) and had provided generous economic support until the shah had fully consolidated his control (Gasiorowski). Furthermore, the shah understood that the weakness of his internal opposition was due in large part to their conviction that active opposition was hopeless, since the United States government would do whatever was necessary to keep the shah in power. Preserving unquestioning American support was thus essential, particularly at this moment of economic distress. The shah's nervousness in 1355 Š./1977 was a reflection of his conclusion that Republican administrations in the United States were far more reliable friends of his regime than were Democratic administrations. This view was based on his reading of the lack of commitment of the John F. Kennedy administration (1960-63).

Now another Democratic president was taking office, and this president was calling for better relations with the Soviet Union and for the observation of human rights everywhere. The shah, his supporters, and his opponents all saw the prospects of great change in American policy. The conclusions were drawn that the surrogate role of Persia in the region as part of a universal containment strategy would be less important to this new administration and a failure of the shah to loosen his dictatorial control, involving as it did a denial of human rights, could lead to a reduced commitment of the United States government to his leadership. There was an immediate impact of these conclusions on the shah's style of leadership. He ceased making arrogant assertions of the superiority of his style of authoritarian control. Rather, he proclaimed the end of torture in his prisons, released some political prisoners, and tolerated the appearance of overt expressions of opposition from both secular and religious opponents (Ramazani, pp. 92-95). The opposition for its part began to test the waters of expanded freedom of action and looked hopefully to the United States for indications of support. The Persian reading of the Carter administration unquestionably was a major factor in advancing revolutionary momentum.

Actual American policy decisions, however, should have signaled Persians, both supporters and opponents of the regime, that the conclusions they had drawn regarding the new administration's likely policy were in error. It chose as an ambassador William Sullivan, whose tenure as ambassador in Laos and in the Philippines had marked him as a tough, competent proponent of the containment strategy and of support for regimes which, like the shah's, were dependent on American support and willing to ally themselves with American policy. Sullivan would recognize more quickly than others the fatal vulnerability of the shah's regime; his appointment should have reassured the shah on the question of a continuing American commitment, but apparently did not.

Two other early decisions of the Carter administration should have been similarly reassuring. The question soon arose in Congress of the advisability of selling this dictatorial regime state-of-the-art weaponry, including planes equipped with the AWACs (advanced early warning electronic systems). The Carter administration fought and won a battle to continue such sales (Sick, 1985a, pp. 58-60). Then, when the Persian opposition to the United States government for support in its drive for human rights in Persia, it was given the silent treatment. Such blatant moves as the sentencing to prison of Ayatollah Maḥmūd Ṭāleqānī, a theologian well-known for his dedication to freedom, were ignored by a government which continued to broadcast its deep commitment to the struggle to advance human rights everywhere. For a time, opponents of the regime believed this failure to indicate support for the opposition campaign to liberalize Persia could be a reflection of ignorance regarding trends in Persia or indecision. But in December 1977 Jimmy Carter removed any question that the lack of support for liberalization in Persia was a conscious manifestation of administration policy. Carter scheduled an official visit to Persia for that month. His administration was informed in advance that opposition leaders would present a statement to United Nations Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim describing the lack of rule of law in Persia, which would coincide with Carter's visit. The hope was that Carter would refer favorably to the letter. Instead Carter made an extravagant statement of praise for the shah that should have removed all doubts regarding the continued absolute support for his regime. Ironically, the opposition understood this, and the disillusion with Carter dates from that moment. But the doubts of the shah persisted and he contended in his book that these doubts were one of the reasons for his failure to intensify political repression (pp. 161-62).

The revolutionary momentum continued to increase in the following months, and by the summer of 1978 the Carter administration had begun to recognize that the regime was in some jeopardy. Two sharply opposed assessments emerged within the administration regarding the nature of the revolutionary forces and the significance of the revolution for American strategic interests. One view, associated with officials in the Department of State, was that the revolution was essentially an internal manifestation of dissatisfaction with the royal autocratic rule and not connected closely with any external forces (Sick, 1985a, pp. 68-70). In this view success for the revolutionaries would be damaging to American security interests, since the shah had been a primary regional ally, but would result in a neutral, not a pro-Soviet, Persia. The other view, associated particularly with National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, was that the revolution was to some degree Soviet-orchestrated and hence had potentially calamitous implications for American security interests (Sick, 1985a, p. 106). The Brzezinski view came to prevail, and United States policy moved steadily toward emphatic opposition to the revolutionary forces. The administration ultimately associated itself with the position of those in Persia who favored the formation of a military government willing and able to take harsh and effective measures to suppress the opposition. But when the shah finally did appoint a military government the revolutionary momentum had become so strong that even the most draconian measures may have been insufficient to reverse the trend. In fact, however, the government the shah appointed was led by an ailing general Chief of Staff Ḡolām-Reżā Azhārī who, the shah must have known, could not reimpose a tight dictatorial control on the country. The shah, Brzezinski came to believe, was the problem. Whether by virtue of illness or temperamental disinclination, the shah could not take the necessary measures to save his regime. In the final weeks, Brzezinski advocated executing a military coup as the only formula for saving the regime (Brzezinski, pp. 359-361). But there was no time to work out the details of such a move. General Robert Huyser was sent to Persia to determine what could be salvaged, and the option of a coup was still in his packet only days before the Pahlavi regime finally and totally collapsed (Huyser, p. 289).

An alternate formula was advocated by some Department of State officers and finally by former Under Secretary of State George Ball, who was called in ironically on the recommendation of Brzezinski to take a fresh look at the situation in Persia. This formula differed sharply in its assumptional underlay from official policy. It accepted the virtual certainty of a regime change in

Persia but did not view the revolutionary leadership either as monolithic or Moscow-directed (Sick, 1985a, pp. 107-08). It also recognized the severe limitation of American capability to influence the outcome. The proposed formula was essentially identical with that drawn up by the liberal leaders of the revolution inside Persia. The liberals called for setting up a liberal-led transitional government which would call for a free parliamentary election (Stempel, p. 129). Since many of the liberals were well known and respected in Persia, the election of a liberal-dominated parliament with a secular and religious mix was not outside the realm of probability. But the formula required the acquiescence of Ayatollah Khomeini and the cooperation of the shah. The American role would be to persuade the shah to agree. But American policy by then was based on entirely different assumptions, and no serious consideration was given to this approach.

After the revolution was successful, however, the Department of State view came to prevail. Developments within revolutionary Persia had disconfirmed most of the assumptions of the Brzezinski view. The hostility of the revolutionary government to the Soviet Union belied the previous assumption of Soviet orchestration. The rapidly developing conflict within the revolutionary government between liberals who dominated the governmental institutions on one hand and the religious revolutionaries who dominated the revolutionary institutions on the other belied the notion of a revolutionary monolith. And the powerlessness of the United States when its embassy was overrun on 25 Bahman 1357 Š./14 February 1979 belied the view of American capability, for example, to mount a successful coup d'etat virtually without any detailed planning. From February 1979 to November 1979 United States policy toward Persia, reflecting the Department of State view, was diplomatically correct. Some effort was being made to normalize United States-Persian relations, however. Had the effort been successful, the liberal elements in the government would probably have been the beneficiaries. The religious revolutionaries played upon public hostility toward the United States and therefore would lose an important advantage were United States policy to come to be seen as fully respectful of Persian sovereign rights. However, the real advantage of the religious revolutionaries was the fact that their view was much closer to that of Ayatollah Khomeini, the charismatic leader of the revolution. The defeat of the liberals was finalized with the second occupation of the American embassy on 14 Ābān 1357 Š./4 November 1979 by revolutionary youth and Khomeini's decision to allow these revolutionaries to make hostages of the American diplomatic mission in Persia.

As the embassy had been overrun eight months earlier, the second occupation was not entirely unanticipated. Two events had served to trigger this second occupation. First, Prime Minister Mehdī Bāzargān and Foreign Minister Ebrāhīm Yazdī had met with Zbigniew Brzezinski in Algiers a few days earlier, without having cleared that meeting beforehand with Ayatollah Khomeini (Brzezinski, pp. 475-76). Second, the Carter administration had agreed to allow the ex-shah to enter a New York hospital for treatment of his cancer. The two events were described by revolutionaries as indicative of a persisting tendency of the United States government to involve itself in Persian internal affairs. In the first phase of this bizarre diplomatic crisis, therefore, the United States government treated the conflict in traditional diplomatic bargaining terms. Khomeini, it appeared, was holding American officials hostage in order to force the United States to cease its efforts to interfere in Persian affairs. The Carter administration, while denying any intent to interfere in Persia, responded by threatening to punish Persia in a number of ways, mainly unspecified, should the diplomats not be released (Saunders, 1985, p. 73). The application of economic sanctions, encouragement of international condemnation of Persia and even the direct punishment of Persia through military force were options that Persia should understand were available to the Americans for use against it. There was a recognition in Washington, however, that the crisis was based on serious mutual misunderstandings. Therefore the first move from Washington was to attempt to send a delegation of non-official Americans known for their ability to empathize with the Persian revolutionary leadership. Ayatollah Khomeini refused to receive the delegation, however, and the Carter administration proceeded with a policy of successive punishments including the freezing of Persian assets in the United States (Saunders, pp. 75-76). The hostage crisis coincided with indications that the Soviet Union was considering military intervention in Afghanistan to shore up the unpopular Marxist regime in Kabul. Since the Carter and Khomeini regimes were equally opposed to Soviet intervention, Washington hoped that this commonality of interest regarding a major world crisis could lead to diplomatic reconciliation, including the release of the hostages. This hope made any turning to a military option against Persia at this time unattractive.

A second stage of the hostage crisis developed following the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. It was inaugurated by Persian Foreign Minister Ṣādeq Qoṭbzāda. He established an indirect but effective contact with the United States operating through two trusted friends, an Argentinean and a Frenchman (Saunders, pp. 117-18). Qoṭbzāda believed the hostage crisis was

seriously damaging the Islamic Republic, its economic development, and its potential for furnishing third-world leadership. This view was shared to some degree by soon-to-be President Abu'l-Ḥasan Banī Ṣadr and many, if not all, of the governing Revolutionary Council with its clerical majority. But Ayatollah Khomeini saw the crisis as one that would alter the image of overwhelming American power, an image shared by both Americans and Persians. Qoṭbzāda quoted Khomeini as having said that the inability of the Americans to free the hostages would not destroy the image of American omnipotence but would damage it and that the hostages should not be released until the optimal impact of the crisis in terms of capability imagery alteration had been achieved. Khomeini said he would be able to recognize when that moment had been reached. Qoṭbzāda's tactical plan was designed to persuade Khomeini that, indeed, that moment had been reached in late 1359 Š./early 1980 (Cottam, pp. 211-12).

Qoṭbzāda's plan was to present to Khomeini a picture of a United States that was prepared to express regret for past interferences in Persia, willing to see the crimes of the shah exposed, and ready to deal with Persia in the future in terms of sovereign equality. Qoṭbzāda understood that President Carter could not appear to be apologizing to Persia or to return the shah to Persia to stand trial. But he believed he could engineer a set of actions that would be acceptable to the United States and would persuade Khomeini that the taking of hostages had achieved its minimal objective. Specifically he wanted an American statement that could be interpreted by Persians as being close to an apology but would not be seen that way by Americans; he wanted the United States to encourage Kurt Waldheim to arrange a United Nations commission of enquiry that would consider calling for an investigation of charges against the shah; and he wanted the United States to encourage Panama, when it was host to the shah, to go through the motions of entertaining Persia's request for the shah's extradition (Cottam, pp. 218-19).

The Carter administration made an effort to go along with this most strange tactical plan because, as Harold Saunders explained, no other alternative was available (Saunders, p. 109). The astonishing fact is that on at least two occasions it came close to succeeding. Success would have been for the captors to transfer the hostages to control by government officials, including Qoṭbzāda and Banī Ṣadr, who in turn would have released them fairly quickly. But to achieve this success Qoṭbzāda had to convince Khomeini of the timeliness of the transfer and had to orchestrate an acceptance by a set of Persian

politicians who were moving toward bitter factional conflict. It was his inability to orchestrate the political milieu in Persia that led to the defeat of his plan. Cooperation by the Carter administration was without enthusiasm but adequate for Qoṭbzāda's purposes.

In April 1980 Carter gave up on the Persian plan, and a third stage in the conflict was inaugurated. Administration statements, clearly reflecting the prominence of Zbigniew Brzezinski in this phase of the crisis, were seriously threatening. A variety of economic and military options were referred to that might well be adopted if progress was not made toward the release of the hostages (Sick, 1985b, pp. 144-73). Khomeini's response was one of defiance, and the probabilities of serious escalation of the conflict seemed high. However, in this period the final decision was made to go ahead with an elaborate rescue operation, despite the vigorous opposition of Secretary of State Cyrus Vance (Saunders, pp. 281-82). The operation failed, but it had a major impact on United States policy. Cyrus Vance resigned because of the operation, and his successor as secretary of State, Edmund Muskie, expressed his determination not to allow Brzezinski to author American foreign policy. Regarding Persia, this meant the stage of military activism in dealing with the crisis had come to an end.

The fourth stage in the crisis was also the least eventful. Secretary of State Muskie had yet to project his personal thinking on foreign policy including that toward Persia. Consequently, any movement toward resolution of the crisis would occur within the Persian political system. Qoṭbzāda's efforts, it would soon appear, were not the complete failure the Carter administration had assumed. Khomeini had not ordered the hostages transferred to government control. But on 18 Farvardīn 1359 Š./7 April 1980 a statement from Khomeini's office was broadcast to the nation indicating that, after the Persian parliament was elected, the new parliamentary government could deal with the case. Khomeini apparently had indeed concluded that the hostage taking had served its purpose. In Šahrīvar 1359 Š./September 1980 the Khomeini regime signaled its willingness to negotiate an end to the crisis. A member of Khomeini's office, operating through the West German government, indicated that the Persian regime was prepared to enter into indirect negotiations (Sick, 1985a, p. 309). On 21 Šahrīvar 1359 Š./12 September 1980 Khomeini in a public address outlined the initial Persian position, and it was clear that he regarded this next phase as essentially one of bargaining around technical issues.

This phase came to an abrupt end ten days after Khomeini's speech with the Iraqi invasion of Persia. It was immediately assumed in Tehran and by every contending faction in the government that the Iraqi attack was a manifestation of an international conspiracy directed by the United States but with the concurrence of the Soviet Union. This view, which would persist throughout the eight years of the Persia-Iraq conflict, was particularly well elaborated by Ayatollah Khomeini in a speech on 22 Bahman 1362 Š./11 February 1983 (Foreign Radio Broadcast/Near East and South Asia, 26 Bahman 1362 Š./15 February 1983). The assumption was that the hegemony of the oppressor world, in particular the United States and the USSR, had been challenged seriously for the first time by a government representing a people who were part of the oppressed world. The oppressors could not allow the challenge to succeed and chose the option of assaulting Persia through the agency of one of the "lackeys" of the oppressors in the oppressed world, Iraq, supported by other lackey regimes, in particular Jordan and Egypt. The great oppressors and their allies would more or less openly support the aggression.

This thesis was the product of logical deduction, and the lack of any supporting evidence did nothing to reduce the conviction of those holding it. Such evidence that emerged, especially in the form of memoirs of involved officials, suggests that the American response to the invasion was primarily one of dismay (Sick, 1985a; Carter; Jordan). Iraq had long been regarded by official Washington as a Soviet client and, indeed, the United States had been involved with the shah's government and Israel in 1974 in an effort to destabilize its regime. The hostage case was viewed as having nothing to do with the Soviet-American cold war and thus was not relevant for the primary strategic concern of United States policy. Rather it was seen as a bizarre behavioral manifestation of an other-worldly theocratic regime and could not be dealt with by any conventional tactical plan. Then, finally, when this bewildering episode appeared mysteriously to be approaching an end, Iraq attacked and destroyed at least temporarily the prospects for resolution.

As soon as it became clear that Persia would be able to prevent Ṣaddām Ḥosayn from occupying the oil-rich province of Ḵūzestān, Persian officials once again initiated indirect negotiations with the United States for the settlement of the hostage issue. They did so in spite of their belief that the United States had orchestrated the invasion of Persia and also in spite of the fact that Persia's president, Banī Ṣadr, fighting for his political survival, reversed himself and opposed the effort to produce a settlement (*Enqelāb-e*

Eslām, 25 Dey 1360 Š./15 January 1981). Quite clearly, Khomeini's office now saw the hostage case as a liability for Persia in its desperate struggle to contain Iraqi aggression. The final stage of the conflict therefore could be dealt with in a conventional negotiation style. The case was technically complicated, and misunderstandings were inescapable. But commitment on both sides was strong to settle the case before the inauguration of the Reagan administration and with it the probability that the case would have to be renegotiated. Before inauguration day was over, but after President Reagan was inaugurated, the American hostages boarded a plane and left Persia.

When the Carter administration came into office the government of Persia was a close ally and appeared both strong and stable. The shah was regarded as playing a critical role in the policy of containing the Soviet Union and international communism (Kissinger, pp. 1258-65). Four years later, the Carter administration left office expressing great relief that another Persian government had agreed to release fifty American diplomats who had been held hostage for over a year. In the intervening years the Carter administration suffered a reversal of diplomatic fortunes in Persia and in the Middle Eastern region so serious as to raise questions of the American ability to project a significant influence in that region. Persians who opposed, or came to regret, the Persian revolution had difficulty accepting the judgment of precipitous American decline. They inclined to see instead the revolution and Khomeini's leadership role as an expression of a perverse American policy. But as evidence accumulates, the case for a judgment of decline is strengthened. The Carter administration explored every available option to keep the shah in power and to release the hostages. Its failure was less a manifestation of ineptness than of fundamental change in the balance of power.

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