

Comment | Bad Romance: The Curious Case of the Shah and the Neocons

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12 Jul 2012 10:03 [16 Comments](#)

The clash of realpolitik with ideological purity.



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[comment] When is a friend not a friend?

On paper at least, the Shah of Iran in the 1970s seemed a natural partner for influential American neoconservatives who favored his essentially conservative pro-Western, pro-Israeli foreign policy. They both harbored a visceral suspicion of Arab power and a deep distrust of the Soviet Union. Indeed today, when the neocons lament the fate of Iran after 1979, the air is practically redolent with nostalgia for the Peacock Throne. However, the reality of that earlier period was more complicated than some would like to have us believe. Declassified documents from the mid-1970s reveal that neoconservative support for the Shah was at best conditional. In the curious case of the archconservative Shah, we see the origins of the ideological litmus test since applied by neoconservatives to friend and foe alike: "You are either with

us or against us." Count the Shah of Iran as one of those who failed it.

In the early 1970s, Israel had no greater friend in the Middle East than Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. The Shah took great pride in protecting Iran's religious and ethnic minorities, particularly the 60,000 Jews who chose to stay on in Iran even after the state of Israel was established in 1948. Their community had ties with the Persians going back to biblical times. More to the point, the Shah viewed Iran and Israel -- the two non-Arab states in the region -- as natural allies. They were bastions of tolerance, moderation, and anti-communism, friendly to the United States, and shared overlapping strategic interests.

Bilateral ties were extensive if low-key. The government of Israel's unofficial representative in Tehran worked out of the Israeli Trade Mission, located near the United States Embassy. By 1970, about \$40 million worth of Iranian oil was exported to Israel every year. The Shah made the somewhat specious claim that the sale of oil to Israel was a business arrangement worked out with the oil consortium that had nothing to do with his government.

Iran and Israel also enjoyed cultural and economic ties. At the turn of the decade, Tehran's newest supermarket sold Israeli food and publications, and Hebrew literature was openly sold in bookstores and at newsstands. In a country that loved cinema, Israeli nationals ran three of the four biggest film distribution companies. Israel's state airline, El Al, flew two regularly scheduled flights each week between Tel Aviv and Tehran, routed over Turkey to avoid Arab airspace. Israeli engineers and advisers, meanwhile, helped their Iranian counterparts dig deep water wells in Qazvin north of Tehran and irrigated farmland on the southern slopes of the Alborz Mountains. Iran's Jewish community and the state of Israel were on the front lines of the Shah's crusade to modernize Iran and eliminate clerical influence.

Iran's security force, SAVAK, teamed up with the CIA and Israel's Mossad to counter radical and Soviet influence in the

Middle East. Their most ambitious plan was to train, finance, and arm Kurdish separatists in Iraq. Ironically, it was this most secretive of covert operations that ultimately brought the Shah into conflict with a small but increasingly influential group of American intellectuals who otherwise shared his vision of a Middle East purged of radical Arab influence.

The neoconservatives -- "neocons" for short -- were mostly former leftists who deserted George McGovern's Democratic Party in protest against its opposition to the war in Vietnam and embrace of isolationism. While it was true that many neocons were Jewish American, so too was Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, their most fervent adversary in the corridors of power in Washington and the high official they bitterly accused of handing too many concessions to Moscow in return for détente. The turning point for them came in 1973 with Israel's near defeat at the hands of the Arabs. It was Kissinger who observed in his memoirs that the Yom Kippur War "completed [the neocons'] conversation to geopolitical realities." Henceforth, they agitated in favor of a U.S. foreign policy that melded fervent anti-communism with uncompromising support for Israel. Through their champion in Congress, Senator Henry Jackson, and their opinion journal *Commentary*, the neocons fought a legislative rear-guard action to weaken détente by linking nuclear arms talks with human rights in the Soviet Union.

The neocons were enthusiastic supporters of the U.S.-Iranian-Israeli operation in Iraq. The scheme served three primary purposes. The first was to tie down Iraqi army divisions on the country's eastern frontier with heavily armed Iran rather than allow them to mobilize against Israel, which lay exposed in the west. The operation's second purpose was to deliver a bloody nose to the most radical of the Arab states. Third, it sent a strong signal to Moscow that Soviet meddling in the Middle East would not be tolerated. As Kissinger confided to the Shah when the Iranian king visited Washington in the summer of 1973, "We want to create a frame of mind in the Politburo that is tired of costly adventures in the Middle East which do not produce results. We want to do this without confronting them. We want

them simply to recognize that they pay a price for that kind of policy."

The Americans and the Israelis were stunned when the Shah made the decision in March 1975 to turn off the Kurdish operation without consulting his allies. Quite simply, he acted out of national interest. The Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein, signaled he was ready to cut a deal and in return settle a long-standing border dispute along their mutual border. The Shah had already accepted that the Kurds had outlived their usefulness. And although he wanted to send a message to the Russians, the Shah listened when Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev's warned him not to push his luck.

With barely any warning, Iran closed its land border with Iraq. Kurdish forces were trapped, mercilessly hunted by Iraqi army units and slaughtered, captured, and tortured. The result was a humanitarian disaster that drew widespread international condemnation. In Washington, President Gerald Ford was embarrassed by congressional hearings into the origins of the fiasco. Reactions in Israel ranged from anger to panic. Transcripts of Kissinger's subsequent meetings with top Israeli officials showed the extent of their confusion and sense of betrayal. "You heard the Shah sold out the Kurds?" an astonished Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin told Kissinger on March 9, 1975. "I warned the Shah against it and he did it anyway," replied his contrite guest.

With Iranian military pressure on Iraq's eastern frontier relieved, Saddam Hussein was now free to move tanks and troops within striking distance of Israel, which perceived its trust, a matter of vital importance to a small country surrounded by hostile states, as having been rudely violated. White House documents from the period suggest that the Israelis never fully trusted the Shah again. Rabin explained that he could no longer accept Iranian assurances of continued fuel shipments in the event of another Middle East war and oil embargo: "If half our oil comes from [the Shah], if someone on whom we rely takes a whole different outlook here...." Kissinger sympathized with the Israeli plight. "I was shaken too by the Iranian decision," he admitted. "The brutality of it."

In Washington, the Shah's abandonment of the Kurds led to a conservative *volte face*. Up until then, the Shah had been the darling of the Republican establishment and the very model of how a U.S. ally should be expected to behave. That all changed. Senator Jackson argued that the Shah's decision had dealt a blow to Israel's security and showed he was a fickle friend. Why, asked Jackson, was the United States arming a foreign leader whose arbitrary behavior had caught it unaware and left its ally Israel isolated and exposed? The Shah, he suggested, could no longer be trusted to manage U.S. national security interests in the Persian Gulf.

Jackson was especially concerned about the Ford administration's plan to sell nuclear reactors to Iran under the terms of a multibillion dollar trade agreement reached by the U.S.-Iran Joint Economic Cooperation Commission. He urged the White House to revisit the decision because the Shah's foreign policy showed a lack of "reliability and continuity." Iran had forfeited the right to be regarded as an unconditional ally. "Such transactions as the transfer of a sizable nuclear power production capability, with its plutonium by-product, need to be assessed in light of disturbing evidence that...Iran is capable of policy shifts so precipitous as to border on the quixotic."

In the wake of the Kurdish affair, the Shah's critics in Congress challenged his support for high oil prices and demanded curbs on American arms sales. For the first time, conservative Republicans questioned their party's traditional unstinting support for the Pahlavi dynasty. They made life that much harder for the Shah's biggest admirer and defender, Henry Kissinger. Starting in the summer of 1975, the Shah came under fire from critics in Congress, the CIA, and even inside the White House. A series of devastating leaks to the press smeared him as mentally unstable and disloyal.

During his final trip to Tehran as secretary of state in August 1976, Kissinger vented to his senior aides in the privacy of the American embassy compound. One year on from the debacle in Iraq, the Shah was losing friends and influence in Washington. Kissinger was worried. He understood that the foundations of Pahlavi power in Iran were more brittle than most people knew.

The Shah was losing confidence in his American ally and losing his nerve at home.

"I am really mad at all this criticism [of the Shah]," the secretary told his regional ambassadors. "When has he done anything that we disapprove of? Whenever we have needed his help he has been willing to apply positive pressure to help, to send special messages or emissaries." Kissinger laid into the Israeli government and the sympathetic coalition of strange bedfellows it had assembled in Washington from among the ranks of the neocons and liberals. The real threat to support for the Shah back home came from the neocons with their "Joe-McCarthy-like cold war line." "Look at *Commentary* magazine," he lamented, "and you can tell me what is happening."

The implication was that the neocons were such ideological purists that they were prepared to hurt even the Shah of Iran, Israel's greatest friend in the Middle East, to score on a point of principle.