

## Article REVIEW

**Andrew L. Johns.** “The Johnson Administration, the Shah of Iran, and the Changing Pattern of U.S.-Iranian Relations, 1965-1967: ‘Tired of Being Treated like a Schoolboy.’” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 9.2 (Spring 2007): 64-94.

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Andrew L. Johns’s “The Johnson Administration, the Shah of Iran, and the Changing Pattern of U.S.-Iranian Relations, 1965-1967: ‘Tired of Being Treated like a Schoolboy’” joins a growing number of recent studies that collectively help to flesh out Lyndon B. Johnson’s non-Vietnam War foreign policy.<sup>1</sup> Johns has effectively mined a variety of U.S. sources, both published and archival, to produce a thoughtful and insightful account of a heretofore under-appreciated aspect of U.S.-Iranian relations. Throughout, he skillfully weaves together three key themes: the deleterious effect of the administration’s preoccupation with the war in Vietnam on its relations with other nations; the vital role of domestic considerations in the formulation of foreign policy, both in the United States and elsewhere; and the agency that other nations brought to their dealings with the United States, particularly during the Cold War. Although Johns’s article deals only with a two-year period in the U.S.-Iranian bilateral relationship, these themes have much wider application to the field of U.S. foreign relations.

Johns effectively demonstrates that the centrality of Vietnam for U.S. foreign policy during the period 1965-1967 led to neglect of other nations and regions, Iran and the broader Middle East among them. Preoccupied with its escalating commitment in Southeast Asia, the Johnson administration dealt with “secondary (or even tertiary)” concerns like Iran on an as needed basis, addressing them only when “problems threatened to reach a crisis point,” which seemed to be the case in U.S.-Iranian relations by 1967 (72). In Johns’s estimation, this was unwise, shortsighted, and ultimately risky because it could seriously harm vital international relationships. Johns also avers that it did not, in the end, serve the nation’s interests, short or long term. Addressing non-Vietnam issues on an ad hoc, reactive basis did not inspire confidence or good feelings among leaders in other parts of the world, who resented getting short shrift when it came to U.S. attention and, perhaps more importantly for the case at hand, resources. For the shah, those resources were of two types. One was general foreign aid, which the U.S. government determined by 1967 Iran’s oil wealth did not truly warrant. Rather than resenting this decision, the shah saw it as proof of Iran’s transformation from U.S. client

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<sup>1</sup> To the list Johns provides in footnote 1 of his article see, most recently, Hal Brands, “Rethinking Nonproliferation: LBJ, the Gilpatric Committee, and U.S. National Security Policy,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8:2 (Spring 2006): 83-113.

to true partner. The shah's other concern was access to American military hardware, which the administration was not as generous and open about providing to Iran as the shah would have liked. Although U.S. officials were ultimately willing to transfer such equipment as F-4 Phantoms to Tehran, they did so almost grudgingly, as a reward for the shah's loyal support in the Middle East and in Vietnam, where he was among only a handful of leaders from the developing world to back the American war. That the shah always seemed to want more—and more expensive—weapons proved a sticking point in U.S.-Iranian relations, yet in the end American officials acceded to all but the most outrageous arms requests, fearful of the consequences should the shah turn in earnest to other (read, Communist) suppliers.

The ongoing U.S.-Iranian dialogue over military equipment provides one example of another of the article's thematic threads: the way that domestic considerations in both the United States and Iran shaped the way each dealt with the other. In Washington, U.S. officials worried that the shah's almost unquenchable thirst for U.S. military equipment only provided grist for critics like Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, who believed that the shah was paying insufficient attention to the needs of the Iranian people and diverting scarce resources to flashy military equipment of questionable use to the country as a whole. Rather than encouraging the shah's neglect of his people, these critics asserted, the administration should push him toward domestic reforms (something the Kennedy administration had tried with little success and something the Johnson team was reluctant to undertake for fear of alienating him). As the shah's desire for military equipment pushed him closer to the Soviet Union after 1965, the administration also feared that Congress might respond by cutting aid allocations to Tehran, a move that could have resulted in a serious rift in the bilateral relationship, if not Iran's complete defection to the Soviet bloc. For this reason, it was essential that the shah be assured of U.S. support and guaranteed continued or even expanded access to U.S. military hardware. On the Iranian side, the shah sought to undercut accusations that he was an American puppet or stooge by demonstrating his independence from Washington. Such considerations, Johns maintains, help to explain the shah's drift toward Moscow during the early Johnson period, as well as his willingness to allow public criticism of the United States in Iranian media outlets. As officials at the U.S. embassy in Tehran appreciated, such developments were at least partly (if not primarily) plays to the domestic balcony and did not reflect the shah's true inclinations, which were decidedly Western leaning, as evinced in his continued backing for the U.S. position in Vietnam and his return to the U.S. embrace in 1967. (In keeping with the shah's frustration at the U.S. preoccupation with Southeast Asia, the shah's overtures to the Soviet bloc, which included substantial commercial dealings with Eastern Europe in 1966, were also likely warnings that Washington took his support and allegiance for granted only at its own peril.)

Perhaps the most interesting theme Johns explores, at least for scholars of U.S.-Third World relations, is the way the shah used the Vietnam War, and the larger Cold War of which it was a part, to shape U.S. policy toward Iran in ways that favored Tehran. The shah, for example, was well aware of how much Washington valued his support of the

U.S. position in Vietnam, a fact he used skillfully when it came to arms sales negotiations. He also knew that his overtures to Moscow could work to his advantage with administration officials loath to see an important regional ally defect to the Soviet side of the Cold War. To be sure, the shah never considered the Cold War to be of much importance for his own policy formulations—he deemed Iraq and Egypt the real threats to Iran’s security and sought to build up his military arsenal both to demonstrate Iran’s regional superiority and to protect it from a potential attack by its Arab neighbors. Yet he well appreciated the Cold War obsession of his American allies and was not above playing to that obsession to suit his own purposes. In demonstrating the shah’s ability to manipulate Johnson administration officials Johns dispels traditional views of Third World nations and leaders as passive, weak, or even ineffectual in their dealings with the United States. The case of U.S.-Iranian relations reveals, on the contrary, that the shah was a shrewd operator who successfully used America’s obsession with the Communist threat to bend U.S. policy in a pro-Iranian direction. The shah may have complained in 1966 of his frustration at “being treated like a schoolboy,” but within a year he had emerged as a true U.S. partner rather than a client, a transformation that Johns sees as ushering in the increasingly close U.S.-Iranian ties that would develop during the Nixon administration (83).

Although Johns does an admirable job of explicating his three main themes and in many ways provides a model of a well-constructed and -executed scholarly article, some threads of his story struck me as underdeveloped. One concerns the 1964 status-of-forces agreement, which included a much maligned provision regarding extraterritorial rights for U.S. military personnel in Iran. Johns never explains why the Johnson administration pushed so hard for the agreement even in the face of tremendous Iranian opposition. Although he notes U.S. officials’ worries that the inclusion of extraterritoriality privileges might have negative consequences in Tehran (which it certainly did), his discussion of those worries only begs the question of why they went along with the agreement anyway. A second aspect of the article that I wish had been better developed concerns the Iranian side of the story, which at present seems to elide or gloss over important details. A case in point: Johns refers repeatedly to domestic Iranian criticism of the shah’s perceived close ties to the United States, yet rather than providing concrete examples or illustrations of that criticism he merely describes or references it. From my vantage point, the case for the shah’s concerns would have been buttressed had Johns marshaled actual examples of public criticism. He does a truly excellent job of explaining the shah’s fears that he might fall victim to a Diem-style coup if he ran too far afield of U.S. officials. I just wish the same were true of his discussion of the shah’s fears concerning domestic opposition.

These quibbles aside, Johns has unquestionably produced an important and valuable addition to the literature on U.S.-Iranian relations and Johnson administration foreign policy. His use of evidence is nothing short of masterful, revealing a real talent for mining published document collections and secondary sources for useful tidbits. Readers at all levels, but especially students, should pay close attention to his footnotes, which

reveal how much can be gleaned from careful perusal of other scholars' notes. Johns's article is also an excellent example of how to weave concurrent or coincident events together into a coherent and complex narrative. Far from focusing narrowly on the relatively simple story of the U.S. relationship with one country during a two-year period, which the title of his article might suggest, Johns in fact sheds light on the nation's larger foreign policy and provides a framework that might be applied to other aspects of that policy. And that, in the end, is no mean feat.

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