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Victor V. Nemchenok. "In search of stability amid chaos: US policy toward Iran, 1961-1963," *Cold War History* 10: 3 (August 2010): 341-369. DOI: 10.1080/14682740903178579. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14682740903178579> .

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Review by **Ofira Seliktar**, Gratz College and Temple University

Victor Nemchenok's article on the Kennedy administration's dealing with Iran starts from the premise that work on the subject has tried to draw a link between Kennedy's policy and the Islamic Revolution in 1978. The author finds this approach inadequate because it "fails to analyze US policy during that time on its own terms" (p. 342). Moreover, adopting this approach results in "privileging action above motivation" (p. 343).

To remedy this problem, Nemchenok provides a detailed analysis of two phases in Kennedy's motivation. During the first phase, from November 1958 (extending back into the Eisenhower administration) to May 1961, the Kennedy administration is said to be anxious about the unrest in Iran stemming from a deep economic crisis. The Kennedy team split into two camps with regard to the remedies offered. The traditionalists (State Department) felt that a modicum of economic reforms should stabilize the situation, but the New Frontiersman (National Security Council) wanted a more expansive and vastly more progressive reform of the economic and political system. In phase two, from May 1961 to July 1962, the competing factions synthesized their views and settled on a combined economic-cum-political reform program which would require the Shah to give up some of his political prerogatives to mollify continued public unrest.

This detailed analysis leads Nemchenok to conclude that the real motivation behind Kennedy's policy toward Iran was not modernization of the archaic system but rather a search for stability. Still overshadowed by the rapid unraveling of the country under Mohammad Mossadeq, the administration feared that continued unrest would provide an opening for the Soviet Union. Indeed, the author spends considerable time describing the anxiety in Washington over a possible communist takeover in Tehran. Given that the

parameters for stability, as viewed by the White House, did not involve any radical reforms, Nemchenok finds Kennedy's relatively modest policies well on target.

Nemchenok has produced a detailed and analytically coherent narrative of a period of American relations with Iran that has escaped the scrutiny of other historians. His command of facts is impressive and his recreation of the debate in Washington between the traditionalist and the New Frontiersmen is engaging.

At the same time, the work suffers from a major analytical problem. That the treatment of American interference in Iranian domestic policies has been overshadowed by hindsight assessments about the Islamic Revolution of 1979 is well documented in a variety of books, some of which Nemchenok mentions. In other words, American policies in Iran, including the Mossadeq intervention and the Kennedy-inspired White Revolution have been viewed as possible "triggers" for the Islamic movement. It is only from this perspective that the diametrically opposed judgment of Kennedy's policies can be understood. While some historians blame the American quest to modernize Iran for mobilizing the clergy, others argue that the reforms did not go far enough, thus creating the political upheaval that caused the downfall of the Pahlavi regime. Nemchenok seems to be in the category of those who argue that stability took precedence over reform and, by implication, that not enough was done. Ultimately though, whether more or less intervention was a better strategy is an eye of the beholder problem.

Ofira Seliktar is Professor of Political Science at Gratz College and Adjunct Professor at Temple University. She is the author of *Failing the Crystal Ball Test: The Carter Administration and the Fundamentalist Revolution in Iran* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2000) and the forthcoming book, *Navigating Iran: The Politics and Intelligence of American Encounters with the Islamist Regime, 1978-2011*.

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