



Francis J. Gavin, “Politics, Power and U.S. Policy in Iran, 1950-1953,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Volume 1, Issue 1 (Winter 1999): 56-89.

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I would like to thank Professors Lawson and Kuniholm for putting in the time and effort to review an article by a younger colleague. This kind of dialogue with such distinguished scholars is enormously beneficial. However, I must highlight certain features of my article that were neglected or obscured by their selective comments.

Professor Lawson did not focus on the major point of the article. There is a consensus view, based on a large historiography, of what factors drove America’s policy towards Iran during the early 1950’s. Work after work stresses a dramatic break between the Truman and Eisenhower administration.

Professor Kuniholm feels I have overstated my case, but I would ask readers to look at the citations on pp. 60-61 of my article, where I cite seven important works that have claimed a sharp break between Truman and Eisenhower. In each case, these scholars have emphasized domestic politics, presidential personality, and/or ideology as the source for the change in policy. But an examination of the evidence reveals that there was not a sharp break in America’s policies towards Iran between the Truman and Eisenhower administration. In fact, the shift took place during the Truman administration. The most important policy document here is NSC 136/1, “United States Policy Regarding the Present Situation in Iran,” dated November 20, 1952. NSC 136/1 is clearly more aggressive and unilateral in tone than the documents it replaced - NSC 54 (July 21, 1949), NSC 107 (March 24, 1951) and NSC 107/2 (June 27, 1951). Professor Kuniholm downplays these policy shifts, but their importance was well understood within the Truman administration at the time (pp. 78-80). NSC 136 reflected both the Truman administration’s increased willingness to risk war and its disposition to intervene directly in Iran’s political situation if necessary (see fn. 92, 93, 94 and 97, p. 78-79 for increased willingness to risk war; and the discussion and footnotes on pp. 79-80 for the internal intervention). What this means is that a change in America’s Iran policy did occur, but it occurred during the late Truman period, a fact that has been almost entirely overlooked in the historical literature.

The key then is to explain why the Truman policy became more aggressive and unilateral in late 1952 than it had been in early 1951. I whole-heartedly agree with Professor Kuniholm’s multi-causal approach. As I make clear in the article, I do not claim that other factors - personality, domestic politics, ideology - counted for nothing (p. 62). I point out that by the spring and summer of 1952, many within the Truman administration had shifted their positions on Mossadegh (p. 74). In 1951, the Americans had restrained the British because they feared that aggressive action could invite a Soviet intervention or a Tudeh coup. In 1952, these concerns shifted to Mossadegh - so much so that the Truman administration worried that the Iranian

leader's actions could precipitate a crisis that could lead to Iran falling into the Soviet orbit. As NSC 136/1 argued, "present trends in Iran are unfavorable to the maintenance of control by a non-communist regime for an extended period of time" and the "ability of the National Front to maintain control of the situation is uncertain." But the question then becomes: How far was the United States prepared to go to prevent Iran from going communist? Far further than they had been only sixteen months earlier. Why does the November 1952 document talk about a Soviet incursion as a possible "casus belli", when the June 1951 document stressed the need for "political measures to localize the action" and the July 1949 document cautioned that "we are not in a position to make any commitment as to our action if the Soviet Union should take aggressive actions against Iran"? Furthermore, why does the November 1952 document detail an American willingness to implement "special political operations" in Iran that are not mentioned in the earlier policy documents? Comparing NSC 136/1 with NSC 54, NSC 107 and NSC 107/2 makes it clear that the Truman administration's policy towards Iran changed over time. The Truman administration was willing to act far more aggressively to keep Iran out of the Soviet orbit by late 1952.

And this is where the shifting global military balance played a fundamental role. In 1950-51, the United States did not feel confident enough to take risks in its policy towards Iran for fear of provoking a Soviet intervention or Tudeh coup. The United States could not make a military commitment to defend Iran, nor could it allow the British to militarily intervene. As a result of the massive American buildup that began in late 1950 and came on line in strength in mid-1952, the United States felt less constrained to act unilaterally and aggressively, both in the Middle East and in other areas (Korea, Southeast Asia, Germany). As both Marc Trachtenberg and Melvyn Leffler have ably demonstrated, the United States moved from a position of relative weakness to confident strength vis-à-vis the Soviet Union in between early 1951 and 1953 (see p. 76, fn. 80-83). The sense of desperation felt by military planners looking at US policy towards Iran in early 1951 gave way to increased optimism by late 1952. This feeling comes out clearly in Walter S. Poole's "The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy," vol. 4, 1950-1952 (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazer, 1980) especially pp. 354-366, in addition to military planning documents (fn. 88, 89, and 91 on pp. 77-78). The factors that Professor Lawson holds up as polar opposites - America's "increased strength" versus the subsiding of the Soviet threat, were in fact two sides of the same coin. Increased American strength meant that the Soviets would be deterred from responding to American actions in the region in late 1952, and if deterrence failed, the Truman administration was far more confident it could prevail against the Soviets than they had been in early 1951.

Was the shifting balance of power the only factor driving American policy towards Iran? Of course not - I never made that claim. There is no doubt that a wide range of factors drove the shift in America's policy towards Iran. But previous accounts of America's Iran policy have all but ignored the dramatic shift in the balance of military power vis-à-vis the Soviets from early 1951 to 1952. And since the fundamental shift in policy - the willingness to take risks and act unilaterally in the region - took place during the Truman administration, it would seem that this type of structural factor was key.

Although my article is certainly not the last word on this question, I believe the readers of my article will agree with my argument that the dominant historiographic interpretation of America's

policy towards Iran in the early 1950's is unsustainable. Furthermore, the long held belief that the Eisenhower administration - for budgetary and ideological reasons - was more apt to participate in covert actions than the Truman administration has been vastly overstated. Finally, while some may not agree that the balance of power vis-à-vis the Soviets was the decisive factor, they will certainly be unable to ignore this key variable when trying to come to grips with the history of the early cold war.

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