

# The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

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Volume 11  
Number 1 *Parameters* 1981

Article 35

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7-4-1981

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Richard A. Stewart

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### Recommended Citation

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# SOVIET MILITARY INTERVENTION IN IRAN, 1920-46

by

RICHARD A. STEWART

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In the last three years, war and internal upheaval have disrupted and fragmented a once-powerful Iran. Only the waning appeal of the aging Ayatollah Khomeini appears to be keeping Iran from dissolution. This unfortunate situation has created a virtually prostrate nation and severely weakened an important link in a chain of states once unified in the goal of containing Soviet expansionism.

A current US concern is that Iran may be the next target of Soviet ambitions. This concern is one of the reasons for the creation of the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force, instituted primarily to deter Soviet aggression in the Persian Gulf region. The degree of the potential Soviet threat to Iran and the Persian Gulf was recently outlined in congressional testimony by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General David C. Jones, who stated that there are now 36 reinforced and upgraded Soviet divisions deployed near the Iranian border, a force capable of conducting a full-scale invasion.<sup>1</sup>

Soviet ambitions toward Iran have a long history. Since the time of Peter the Great, Russian rulers have longed for a warm-water port on the Persian Gulf. In efforts to gain control and influence over Iran, the Soviet Union has invaded Iran on several occasions but in each instance was compelled to withdraw and leave behind an independent state. An examination of Soviet political and military efforts to gain control of Iran is revealing with respect to the nature of Soviet objectives, the degree to which the

Soviets have been willing to pursue those objectives, the military means they have employed, the reaction of the Iranians to the Soviet incursions, and the effectiveness of measures taken to thwart Soviet ambitions.

## THE 1921 TREATY

Beginning in the 1700s, the weak and decadent Qajar dynasty of Persia suffered intermittent Czarist pressures and encroachments. A number of humiliating treaties were forced on Persia by the Russians, who were prevented from gaining total control of Iran only by the counterbalancing power of the British Empire. After World War I, when a newly established Soviet government offered to renounce the unequal agreements forced on the Iranians by its predecessors, Iran was receptive. A treaty was drawn up that generally favored Iran. Some Soviet forces occupied portions of Iran at that time, however, and because the Soviets were exhausted after years of war with Germany and the White Russian armies, they insisted on a clause that would insure their security against any remaining White Russian elements. This demand resulted in article six of the treaty, a controversial clause that read:

If a third party should attempt to carry out a policy of usurpation by means of armed intervention in Persia, or if such a Power should desire to use Persian territory as a base of operations against Russia, or if a

foreign power should threaten the frontiers of Russia, and if the Persian government should not be able to stop such a menace after having been once called upon to do so by Russia, Russia shall have the right to advance her troops into the Persian interior for the purpose of carrying out the military operations necessary for its defense.<sup>2</sup>

The treaty was accompanied by an official letter which stated that article six applied only to the threat posed by White Russian forces, some of whom had taken refuge in Iran following their defeat. The treaty was signed on 26 February 1921, only five days after an Iranian Army colonel, Reza Khan Pahlavi, overthrew the government in a military coup. Although Iran has repeatedly renounced article six of the 1921 agreement, the Soviet Union continues to maintain that its provisions are binding and has used the treaty as a pretext for armed intervention.

### THE INVASION OF GILAN PROVINCE

The first Soviet military intervention in Iran occurred in the spring of 1920, even before the treaty was signed, when the remnants of General Deniken's White Russian army withdrew by ship to the Iranian port of Enzeli on the Caspian Sea.<sup>3</sup> On 18 May 1920, a Soviet flotilla appeared off Enzeli and demanded that the small British garrison at the port turn over the White Russian refugees. When the British refused, the Soviets bombarded the port and landed troops, obliging the British to withdraw. All of Gilan Province was quickly occupied, and a local pro-Soviet tribal leader, Kuchik Khan, was proclaimed the leader of the "Soviet Republic of Gilan." A force of White-Russian-led Persian Cossacks was dispatched against the invaders and rebels but was defeated and driven back to

the British garrison at Qazvin in August.

Protests were then lodged by Iran in the League of Nations over the continued Soviet occupation, which became increasingly difficult for the Soviet government to justify after the last British troops had departed in May of 1921. Under diplomatic pressure, the Soviets had to take some type of action. They elected to bring in reinforcements in June and July of 1921 to assist an offensive by Kuchik Khan's forces against Tehran. The strong defensive position of the Persian Cossacks checked the rebel advance, however, and forced the Soviets to choose between withdrawing from Iran altogether or mounting a massive military adventure.<sup>4</sup> The Soviets chose the former option, abandoning Kuchik Khan's forces in October 1921 to the advancing Iranian forces of Reza Pahlavi. Concerning the reasons for the Russian decision, Professor George Lenczowski has theorized:

The withdrawal of Soviet troops was the ultimate test of the sincerity of the [1921] Soviet-Iranian Treaty. If the treaty was conceived mainly as a propaganda instrument for the Bolsheviks then it was wiser not to provoke an open breach with Iran.



After the withdrawal of British troops Iran was in a position to claim that she was now the victim of the new Soviet imperialism. Russia had to choose between either the cultivation of good relations with the central government and the gradual infiltration of Iran with Communist propaganda . . . or high-handed direct action aiming at the sovietization and detachment of several Iranian provinces in connivance with discontented elements in Iran. By the autumn of 1921 Moscow apparently came to the conclusion that the first method would better suit its purpose.<sup>5</sup>

After defeating the Gilan rebels, Reza Pahlavi consolidated Tehran's control over the various rebellious tribal groups. In 1926, he was elected Shah of Iran by the Iranian parliament and, after promptly identifying modernization of Iran as his first priority, he worked tirelessly to minimize Iran's dependence on foreign powers while obtaining all the benefits of Western culture and technology.

The Soviets stepped up subversive activity in Iran during the early years of Reza Pahlavi's reign. The extent of this activity came to light in late 1930 when a former attaché at the Soviet embassy in Tehran, George Agabekov, defected to the West and published a series of articles detailing Soviet infiltration of the Iranian government.<sup>6</sup> These revelations led to numerous arrests and several executions, although some of the more influential Iranians who were implicated escaped unscathed. Nevertheless, this purge of Soviet sympathizers and agents temporarily impaired Soviet operations in Iran. Soviet activity was also curtailed by the massive blood purges underway in the Soviet Union in the 1930s as Joseph Stalin consolidated his control over the nation. Soviet interest in Iran was revitalized, however, following the purges and the conclusion of the Nazi-Soviet Nonaggression Pact in 1939.

#### THE SECRET PROTOCOL OF 1940

Stalin used his expedient alliance with Hitler to further his own territorial am-

bitions. When Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, the Soviets allowed the Germans to defeat the Poles before rapidly intervening to occupy the eastern portion of Poland. Then, during the winter of 1939-40, Stalin's army invaded Finland when demands for territorial concessions were not met. Concerned over the Soviet action, the British and French organized a plan to assist the embattled Finns. Before they could undertake any action, however, the Finns were defeated.

Increasingly fearful of German-Soviet cooperation, the British and French also devised a plan in March 1940 to bomb the Soviet oil-refining center at Baku in the Caucasus to deny oil to Germany. The attack was to be staged from Syria and Iraq during the latter part of June, but Germany overran France before the plan could be implemented.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, Stalin made further moves to acquire new territory by occupying the three Baltic states and annexing the province of Bessarabia from Rumania.

In neutral Iran, concern increased that the Soviets would soon turn their attention southward. A US intelligence officer, Lieutenant Colonel Henry C. McLean, noted fears of such a Soviet move while traveling through the Middle East. On 20 June 1940, he provided the War Department with an assessment of Soviet objectives, offering the following reasons why the Soviets might advance from the north:

- To reach a deep-sea outlet on the Persian Gulf.
- To gain control of the oil fields in the Mosul-Kirkuk area, the oil fields astride the Iran-Iraq boundary near Khanaquin, and the extensive Anglo-Persian oil fields near Basra.
- To gain complete control of the Caspian Sea by taking over the southern shoreline of Iran at least as far as the Elburz Mountains.
- To gain control of the lucrative Iranian fishing industry and thereby void \$7 million in annual royalties paid by the Soviets.
- To absorb the Iranian Turkomen tribes, which were closely allied racially to the inhabitants of Russian Turkestan.<sup>8</sup>

McLean further noted that it was a

commonly held opinion in the area that the Soviets would not move against Iran "until Britain was in such a difficult position that Russia would not be involved in serious resistance. Russia wants to avoid becoming involved in a major military effort."<sup>9</sup> McLean rated the combat efficiency of the Iranian Army as "very low" and opined that it would "offer little opposition to armed Russian intervention."<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, the British were also becoming concerned that the Soviets might move into Iran and threaten the vital British oil fields and refineries in southwest Iran. In March 1940, the British War Cabinet drew up a contingency plan code-named Trout that called for the deployment of an Indian division to Basra, in Iraq, which could then rapidly move into the Iranian oil fields in the event of a Soviet invasion.<sup>11</sup> Growing pro-Nazi activities in Iraq prompted the War Cabinet on 1 July to order Trout implemented. The British immediately became concerned, however, that the landing of troops in Iraq might provoke the Soviets at a sensitive moment and they therefore ordered the Indian division diverted to Egypt.<sup>12</sup>

Concern over Soviet intentions grew acute in Iran on 1 August when Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov accused Iran and Turkey of conspiring with the Allies in the plan to bomb Baku, which had been uncovered after the fall of France.<sup>13</sup> On 6 August, Brigadier General Sherman Miles, the American military attaché in Moscow, informed the War Department that the Soviets were preparing to demand that Iran relinquish control of its Caspian Sea coastline.<sup>14</sup> He also noted persistent rumors that several Soviet divisions had been transferred from recently occupied Bessarabia to the eastern Caucasus.

Unknown to the West, the Soviets had entered into secret negotiations with Germany to carve the tottering British Empire into spheres of influence. These talks resulted in the secret Protocol Number One. A provision in the draft of this document completed on 13 November 1940 stated, "The Soviet Union declares that its territorial aspirations center south of the national

territory of the Soviet Union in the direction of the Indian Ocean."<sup>15</sup> A few days later, Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov added a more precisely defined description of Soviet ambitions, stating that "the area south of Batum and Baku in the general direction of the Persian Gulf is recognized as the center of aspirations of the Soviet Union."<sup>16</sup> The inability of the Germans to crush British resistance, however, delayed Soviet plans to advance southward. Ironically, the Soviets were soon to be provided with the ideal opportunity to intervene in northern Iran with the aid of the British.

### THE 1941 ANGLO-SOVIET INVASION

Following the unexpected German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, the hard-pressed British eagerly accepted the Soviets as allies. As German successes in Russia mounted, the British became increasingly determined to take whatever action was necessary to keep the Soviets in the war. Recognizing Iran's vital geopolitical position as a potential supply route to the Soviet Union, and concerned over apparent growing German influence in Iran, the British proposed that the Soviets cooperate in a joint occupation of Iran.

British concerns over Nazi infiltration of the Middle East were not without justification. In April 1941, the British were compelled to intervene in Iraq to crush a pro-Nazi coup. They also invaded Vichy-controlled Syria in June when it was discovered that the Germans were using Syria as a staging base for aircraft operating in the

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Captain Richard A. Stewart, USMC, is a Special Research Analyst for the Department of Defense, stationed in the Washington, D.C. area. He is a 1973 graduate of the Naval Academy and holds master's degrees in government from Georgetown University and in public administration from Pepperdine University. Captain Stewart's previous articles have included contributions to the US Naval Institute *Proceedings* and to *Armed Forces Journal*.



Middle East.<sup>17</sup> British Prime Minister Winston Churchill justified the decision to intervene in Iran by stating,

The need to pass munitions and supplies of all kinds to the Soviet government . . . made it eminently desirable to open the fullest communications with Russia through Persia. The Persian oil fields were a prime war factor. An active and numerous German mission had installed itself in Tehran and German prestige stood high. . . . We welcomed the opportunity of joining hands with the Russians and proposed to them a joint campaign. I was not without some anxiety about embarking on a Persian war, but the arguments for it were compelling.<sup>18</sup>

The Soviets eagerly accepted the British proposal and even attempted to persuade the British to include the right of transit of Soviet troops through Iran, a point the British opposed.<sup>19</sup> Only the Iranian military remained to oppose the entry of Soviet and British forces.

At that time, the Iranian Army numbered 126,000 men organized into nine divisions and five separate brigades equipped with artillery, tanks, and armored cars.<sup>20</sup> The small Iranian Navy consisted of two frigates and four small gunboats, while the air force numbered about 200 obsolete British aircraft.<sup>21</sup> The Iranian military suffered severe deficiencies in maintenance, motor transport, medical services, and engineer support; and incompetency and corruption were common in the officer corps.<sup>22</sup>

The two allies submitted repeated demands that Iran expel all German nationals, but the Shah repeatedly stalled for fear of offending the Germans. Finally, at 0400 on 25 August 1941, the British and Soviet ministers in Tehran informed the Iranian Prime Minister, Ali Mansur, that Allied forces were entering Iranian territory.<sup>23</sup> Accusing the Iranian government of failing to heed Soviet warnings about Nazi activities, the Soviets invoked article six of the 1921 treaty as justification for the action.<sup>24</sup>

In the west and south, two Indian divisions of the British 10th Army invaded Iran from Iraq. Shortly before dawn on the 25th, British forces sailed down the Shatt-al-Arab waterway to assault Khorramshahr and Abadan, sinking or capturing all the frigates and gunboats of the small Iranian Navy during the initial minutes of the attack. Indian troops moved ashore to seize the Iranian naval base at Khorramshahr and the refinery at Abadan. Although heavy fighting ensued throughout the day around the refinery, by evening both cities were firmly under British control.<sup>25</sup> At the nearby port of Bandar Shahpur, the British captured several German and Italian merchant ships that had been interned by the Iranians.<sup>26</sup> Near Ahwaz, British forces overcame brief resistance by a regiment of the Iranian 6th Division, while a company of Indian troops was airlifted into Haft Khel to protect the families of British oil employees.<sup>27</sup>

Farther north, British forces captured Qasr-e Shirin, bypassed the heavily defended Pataq Pass, and seized the city of Shahabad. Advancing toward Kermanshah, the British encountered some resistance until the Iranians sought a ceasefire on 28 August.<sup>28</sup> In general, British actions were characterized by restraint. As a correspondent explained,

The British . . . preferred, without undue risk to [their] troops, to gain objectives by maneuvering the Iranian forces out of positions with a minimum of casualties on both sides and of damage to property, rather than smashing them with a weight of metal.<sup>29</sup>

The Iranians conducted a brief but courageous display of face-saving resistance to the British advance. The Iranian attitude regarding the British occupation was perhaps best summed up by a comment made to a British journalist in Kermanshah: "Oh, well, you've been here before. We Iranians know you English are gentlemen."<sup>30</sup> What was happening during the Soviet intervention in northern Iran, however, was quite different.

The Soviets opened their offensive by bombing several Iranian cities. Although

mainly targeting military installations, the Soviets made little apparent effort to avoid civilian casualties.<sup>31</sup> Early on 25 August, two tank divisions, a mechanized cavalry division, and three infantry divisions of the 47th Mechanized Army crossed the Iranian border at Julfa and Astara and began a rapid advance toward Tabriz and Bandar Pahlavi.<sup>32</sup> At Bandar Pahlavi, the Caspian Sea flotilla bombarded the port and landed troops. The local Iranian commander quickly decided to surrender, but none of his men possessed sufficient courage to approach the Soviets. Finally, a Belgian port employee offered to conduct the parlay.<sup>33</sup> When other Iranian units in the northwest found themselves outflanked and facing overwhelming strength, they panicked and dispersed. On the second day of the drive, Tabriz was captured, and the Soviets continued their advance toward Tehran.

On 27 August, while northwestern Iran was being occupied, the Soviet 53d Independent Central Asian Army invaded northeastern Iran.<sup>34</sup> An infantry corps seized Gorgan, putting to flight the Iranian 10th Division, and then advanced to Shahrud and Semnan. A mountain infantry division from Ashkhabad secured the vital mountain passes with advanced motorized forces and then occupied Quchan. In the east, a cavalry corps crossed the border at Sarakhs. Meanwhile, Soviet aircraft bombed the airfield and barracks at Mashhad.<sup>35</sup> The Iranian 9th Division at Mashhad advanced to meet the Soviets at Quchan but, receiving word of the cease-fire, surrendered before engaging in combat. Its troops promptly deserted, and those captured were taken to the Soviet Union.<sup>36</sup>

Allied forces continued their advance despite the cease-fire, and the British linked up with the Soviets near Qazvin on 31 August. The advance was halted temporarily but was resumed on 16 September because the Iranian government had failed to take further action against the Germans. Receiving word that the Allies were approaching Tehran, the Shah hastily abdicated in favor of his son, Mohammed Reza, and then departed Iran in exile. On the following day, Soviet and

British forces entered Tehran, completing the occupation.<sup>37</sup>

Subsequently, most of the Allied forces were withdrawn from Tehran into designated zones of occupation. The Soviets occupied the northern portion of Iran, and the British occupied the southern and western portions. Under the terms of the tripartite treaty signed in January 1942, the Allied powers agreed not to interfere with the functioning of the Iranian government throughout the country. The Soviets, however, denied the central government any effective control in their zone. Instead, the Soviets selected all public officials from the communist Tudeh Party and excluded Iranian security forces altogether.<sup>38</sup>

Until 1944, when the outcome of the war against Germany became certain, Soviet activity in Iran was generally restrained. Once victory became inevitable, however, the Soviets undertook efforts to undermine and subvert the government of the pro-Western Shah. Those efforts included fostering the creation of Soviet-controlled republics in Azerbaijan and Kurdistan, as well as pressuring the central government to accept Tudeh members.<sup>39</sup>

The US government was unwilling to jeopardize its wartime relationship with the Soviets and thus did little to oppose growing Soviet influence in Iran. The British worked to promote Iranian nationalism and to gain support among the tribes but avoided direct confrontation with the Soviets. The problem, as explained by Professor Lenczowski, was that

the rather passive character of American policy eventually encouraged unilateral Soviet action, since the Russians were led to believe that the only real opposition to their schemes would come from war-weary Britain. Had the United States made its stand clear on several issues . . . it could have prevented many unwelcome events.<sup>40</sup>

#### THE AZERBAIJAN CRISIS

American inaction and perceived British impotence only served to nurture Soviet

ambitions. Evidence of Soviet intentions in the Middle East began to emerge in March 1945, when the Soviets put pressure on Turkey to return the eastern provinces of Kars and Ardahan, which had been ceded by the Soviets to Turkey in 1919, and to allow the Soviets to establish a base in the Dardanelles.<sup>41</sup> In December of that year, the Soviet-sponsored republics of Azerbaijan and Kurdistan were established in northwest Iran.

By joint agreement, all Allied forces were to be withdrawn from Iran no later than 2 March 1946.<sup>42</sup> The 30,000 American troops maintained in southwest Iran to handle lend-lease shipments to the Soviet Union were the first to withdraw, and they were followed shortly by the British.<sup>43</sup> As the withdrawal deadline approached, the Soviets withdrew forces only from northeastern Iran, however, maintaining their units in the northwest with no indication that additional withdrawal was imminent.

As Soviet intentions became clear, the United States was finally sparked to action. US Secretary of State James Byrnes issued a warning in a speech on 28 February, announcing that the United States "intends to defend the [United Nations] Charter . . . [and] will not . . . stand aloof if force or the threat of force is used contrary to the Charter."<sup>44</sup> Byrnes reinforced his warning by suggesting that a US naval task force might be dispatched to the Middle East.<sup>45</sup> The withdrawal deadline passed without Soviet action, however, and the British issued a vigorous protest to Moscow on 3 March.

At that time, Soviet occupation forces in northwest Iran consisted of three understrength infantry and cavalry divisions with a few Sherman tanks in Tabriz.<sup>46</sup> One day later, however, on 4 March, the Soviets undertook what amounted to a new invasion of Iran. The forces already in place were hastily redeployed toward Tehran and the Turkish border, and 15 armored brigades with a total of 500 tanks under the command of Marshal Bagramian, a tank warfare expert, began pouring into northwest Iran.<sup>47</sup>

Trains and truckloads of Soviet troops and equipment rolled into Tabriz for days. These forces were formed up and deployed toward the Turkish and Iraqi borders and

along the road to Tehran.<sup>48</sup> Meanwhile, a tank army under Marshal Tolbukhin moved through Bulgaria and deployed along Turkey's western border.<sup>49</sup>

On 6 March the United States issued a strong note urging the immediate withdrawal of all Soviet forces from Iran.<sup>50</sup> Meanwhile, in Tehran, reports spread that the Tudeh Party, supported by Soviet agents, would attempt an armed coup during the Iranian New Year holiday on 21 March.<sup>51</sup> In the UN Security Council, the Iranian Ambassador accused the Soviets of refusing to withdraw their forces and of interfering in Iranian affairs "through the medium of Soviet agents, officials, and armed forces."<sup>52</sup> On 8 March, in an apparent effort to reassure Turkey and Iran, the United States announced that the battleship *Missouri* was being dispatched to Istanbul to return the remains of the Turkish Ambassador.<sup>53</sup> The following day, after receiving alarming reports of the Soviet military buildup in Azerbaijan, Secretary Byrnes sent a note which, this time, demanded an explanation of Soviet intentions.

Although the Soviets admitted that forces already in place were being retained in the northwest until the situation became "clear,"<sup>54</sup> Soviet Ambassador Andrei Gromyko told the UN Security Council that no new Soviet troops had been introduced into northern Iran since 2 March. As his words were monitored by the US Consulate in Tabriz, 18 Soviet half-tracks rumbled past from the train station.<sup>55</sup>

Mention of the possibility of war began to appear in the Western press as journalists descended on Tehran. Nervous Iranians gathered their belongings and fled south.<sup>56</sup> President Truman confided to former Ambassador Averill Harriman, "We may be at war with the Soviet Union over Iran."<sup>57</sup>

The strength of the US and British responses evidently came as a surprise in Moscow. Under increasing diplomatic pressure in the UN and faced with the prospect of military confrontation, the Soviets balked. On 26 March, Gromyko informed the Security Council that all Soviet forces would be withdrawn from Iran within five or six weeks "if no unforeseen cir-



cumstances occur.”<sup>58</sup> When Iran and the United States objected to the announced delay and pressed the Security Council to take immediate action, a resolution was passed that called for monitoring the Soviet withdrawal to insure that the Soviets were not imposing special conditions on Iran.<sup>59</sup> Meanwhile, to impress upon the Soviets US resolve on the issue, President Truman secretly warned Stalin that if the withdrawal was not completed within six weeks, he would move the US fleet into the Persian Gulf and send US troops into Iran.<sup>60</sup> The withdrawal finally commenced on 22 April and was completed by 10 May.<sup>61</sup>

Robert Rossow, Jr., was US Consul in Tabriz at the time. Perhaps he best explains the reasons why the Soviets acted as they did and then backed down:

[The Soviets] apparently believed that by [a] diplomatic and propaganda offensive, accompanied by a show of force, they could produce a disequilibrium in both [Iran and Turkey] that would permit penetration and subjugation to Soviet will. It seems clear that they were counting heavily on the fact that the United States and Great Britain were weary of war and military affairs and wanted only to resume the pursuits of peace. From the outset, the Soviet leaders probably never had any intention of taking a serious risk of war, or even precipitating a global crisis, but rather thought they could get away with the Middle Eastern gambit while the West was not looking.<sup>62</sup>

The Soviets clearly wanted to avoid a conflict with the United States and Britain over Iran. Undoubtedly, the US nuclear monopoly was an important deterrent. The United States and Britain also had total control of the seas and superior air forces. Although most American ground forces were in disarray owing to the massive demobilization underway in early 1946, it is clear that President Truman was prepared to rapidly remobilize sufficient forces to face the Soviets in the event of a showdown. The rapid deployment of such forces into the

Persian Gulf would have been facilitated by the huge fleet of transport ships available at the end of the war.

Despite the Soviet withdrawal, festering problems remained that threatened renewed Soviet intervention in the Middle East. In August 1946, the Soviets again demanded that they share responsibility with Turkey for the defense of the Dardanelles.<sup>63</sup> The United States responded that defending the straits was purely a Turkish responsibility and, to back up this response, dispatched a carrier task force to the eastern Mediterranean for the first time.<sup>64</sup> Although US military strength had dropped by then from 11.6 million men in 1945 to less than 2.5 million, the United States retained sufficient power to persuade the Soviets to back off.<sup>65</sup> In mid-December 1946, the Soviets again threatened intervention when the Shah moved against the two rebellious republics in northwest Iran. The Iranians, however, confidently reoccupied the area with the backing of the United States.

By the end of 1946, Soviet aggressiveness in the Middle East was declining. The confidence of nations such as Iran was further bolstered by the declaration of the Truman Doctrine on 13 April 1947, promising US support against Soviet-inspired aggression and subversion. In late 1947, the Soviets pressed Iran to ratify an oil concession that had been granted in exchange for the Soviet withdrawal. The United States supported Iran on the issue, and the Iranian parliament voted almost unanimously to reject the agreement.<sup>66</sup> Accusing the United States of turning Iran into a “strategic base,” the Soviets threatened to break off relations with Iran. The Soviet press compared the presence of US advisors in Iran to the activities of Nazi agents in 1941, again raising the specter of intervention under the terms of the 1921 treaty.<sup>67</sup> The Iranian reaction, amid reports that refugee Tudeh agents were infiltrating the country, was to round up and arrest hundreds of Soviet sympathizers in northern Iran.<sup>68</sup> The United States responded by stepping up military assistance and providing additional advisers.<sup>69</sup> In the end,

the Soviets dropped their demands, again thwarted by the strength of Iranian and Western resolve.

### IN SUM

Since the time of Peter the Great, Russia has sought access to a warm-water port through Iran. Since 1920, the Soviets have employed both overt intervention and covert subversion in their schemes to gain control of that country. With additional military effort in 1921, they might have overcome determined Iranian resistance, but not without severe international condemnation and the likelihood of British intervention. In 1940, the Soviet intention to advance on the Persian Gulf was deterred by the knowledge that the hard-pressed British could still commit a sizeable contingent against them. The 1941 invasion demonstrated that Iran, without Western military backing, would easily collapse in the face of a major Soviet military advance. In 1946, the Soviets were willing to press military intervention only to the point at which the United States and Britain threatened a strong response.

From 1946 until recently, the Soviets have been more circumspect in their actions toward Iran. During the reign of the Shah, this was so primarily because of firm US backing. Since the Shah's downfall, however, conditions in Iran have changed dramatically. Not only is Iran now controlled by the militantly anti-American Moslem clergy, but the Shah's once impressive military has been seriously debilitated by purges and the conflict with Iraq. Political instability in Iran, combined with a balance-of-power shift toward the Soviet Union, has resulted in more aggressive Soviet actions, such as the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan.

As history indicates, the Soviets require little justification to invoke the 1921 agreement permitting intervention in Iran. Without the presence of anti-Soviet foreign forces in Iran, however, intervention would lead to immediate international condemnation, possibly combined with sanctions and military action. Only by making the potential cost of Soviet military aggression in Iran exceed the possible gains has such

aggression been effectively deterred. The means of deterrence that have proven successful are a firm policy opposing intervention based on the principles of the United Nations Charter and international law, coupled with the potential for a strong military response.

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44. Herbert Feis, *From Trust to Terror: The Onset of the Cold War* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970), p. 81.
45. Barry Rubin, *Paved with Good Intentions: The American Experience and Iran* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980), p. 32.
46. Rossow, p. 19; Mr. Rossow's estimates of Soviet strength in northwest Iran are supported by "Soviet Military Activity in Azerbaijan," OSS Report No. G-6859 of 5 January 1945, National Archives and Records, Washington.
47. Rossow, pp. 19-21.
48. *Ibid.*
49. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
51. Lenczowski, p. 298.
52. *Ibid.*
53. Rossow, p. 22.
54. *Foreign Relations of the United States, Vol. VII, The Near East and Africa, 1946* (Washington: GPO, 1969), p. 335.
55. Rossow, p. 23.
56. *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.
57. Feis, pp. 82-83.
58. *Ibid.*, pp. 84-85.
59. *Ibid.*
60. Herbert Druks, *Harry S. Truman and the Russians, 1945-1953* (New York: Speller, 1966), p. 125.
61. Rossow, p. 24.
62. *Ibid.*
63. Robert G. Kaiser, *Cold Winter, Cold War* (New York: Stein and Day, 1974), p. 139.
64. *Ibid.*, pp. 140-41.
65. *Ibid.*, p. 142.
66. Lenczowski, pp. 308-11.
67. *Ibid.*, p. 312.
68. *Ibid.*, pp. 312-13.
69. *Ibid.*, p. 313.

