



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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Published by H-Diplo on 5 October 1999

Francis Gavin’s engaging essay opens with a useful juxtaposition of two alternative perspectives on United States foreign policy, which may for simplicity’s sake be labeled the domestic politics explanation and the structural explanation (pp. 59-62). Gavin sets himself the task of arguing that with regard to US relations with Iran during the early 1950s, “domestic politics counted for a good deal less and structural factors mattered a good deal more” than existing accounts allow (p. 62).

As a way of making this case, Gavin reports that decision-makers in Washington believed that the US occupied a generally weak strategic position vis-à-vis the Soviet Union in Middle East as the decade got underway. He goes on to indicate that US military planners took pains to ensure that the Truman “administration would pursue cautious policies to avoid provoking the Soviet Union into actions that could lead to global war” (p. 64). This sets the stage for an insightful discussion of fundamental differences between the United States and the United Kingdom over how to deal with the reformist government of Muhammad Musaddeq in Tehran (pp. 69-72), which culminates in the novel suggestion that officials in Washington carefully moderated US policy toward Iran in 1950-51 in order to dissuade Britain from making any move that might have provoked Moscow to resort to force (pp. 65, 72-73).

Two empirical shortcomings undermine the credibility of this line of argument. First, Gavin makes virtually no effort to show whether or not the perceptions of US weakness that were evidently held by leaders in Washington were at all in line with reality. Just because Assistant Secretary of State George McGhee told his superiors that it was an “unpleasant fact that the United States capabilities are inadequate to protect our vital interests” (p. 65) does not mean that later scholars have to accept this statement at face value. Given the state of knowledge concerning strategic circumstances throughout the region it should be relatively easy to demonstrate whether or not US forces found themselves overmatched by those of actual or potential adversaries. Such evidence is vital if one is to make the case that McGhee and his colleagues were not driven to the views they held by domestic political pressures.

Second, Gavin offers no direct evidence that US military commanders ever argued that military confrontation with Iran should be avoided on the grounds that it might trigger a global war. It is of course plausible to suggest that US officials might have made such an argument, at least in private. But whereas claims regarding other dimensions of US policy-making are meticulously documented, this one remains notably speculative. The closest Gavin comes to documenting the point is to report that in a 1951 review of US overseas commitments, officials in Washington anticipated that if Britain were to resort to force in its dealings with Iran, “the USSR might occupy North Iran under its Treaty of 1921 with that country” (p. 69).

Gavin does provide at least indirect evidence that the strategic position of the United States in the Middle East started to improve in late 1952 and early 1953 (p. 76). But he also states that “US officials believed that the threat of a Soviet attack had subsided considerably” around the same time (p. 77). Which of these two factors precipitated the marked shift in American policy toward Iran that took place during the second half of 1952?

Gavin’s answer to this crucial question blurs the distinction between domestic politics and structural dynamics. He notes that “Military planners were confident, based on the changes in the worldwide balance of power, that a Soviet response could be deterred; and if the Soviet Union was not deterred, the US planners were convinced that the US would prevail in a global war” (p. 78). Whether or not US decision-makers were justified in their belief remains unknown. Gavin simply asserts that it was “the increased global power afforded by American rearmament [that] gave the Truman administration the confidence it needed to risk a confrontation with the Soviet Union” over Iran (p. 79). Neither evidence nor further argumentation in support of this important claim is adduced.

Gavin appears to share the conventional view that the incoming Eisenhower administration put considerably greater stock in air power than the outgoing Truman administration had done (p. 86). Given the case he is trying to make, it would have been helpful to demonstrate that US air forces in the Middle East were more numerous or more powerful in the fall and winter of 1952-53 than they had been before. Instead, Gavin once again claims that “US officials were convinced” of the greater effectiveness of the military units they had deployed in the region (p. 86). But can this conviction be shown to have been well-grounded?

In the end, the essay succeeds in demonstrating that there was no “sharp break between the Truman and Eisenhower administrations” with regard to Iran (p. 87). But it fails to make a convincing case that the structural explanation accounts for the constancy of US policy better than some sort of domestic politics explanation does. This is because Gavin never produces enough evidence or argumentation to convince the reader that it was a “shift in the global balance of power and threat” that generated change in Washington’s posture toward the Musaddeq regime (p. 89). Widely shared perceptions of the outside world, both within and across successive administrations, clearly played major role in shaping US foreign policy during the early 1950s. The key issue, however, is why the Truman administration ended up adopting a set of perceptions that would be matched by those of the Eisenhower administration. Answers to this question might take a variety of forms, of which the structural explanation is only one possibility.

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