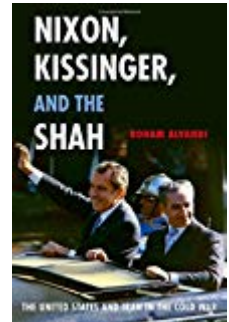


Roham Alvandi. *Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah: The United States and Iran in the Cold War.* Oxford University Press, 2014. ISBN 978-0-19-937569-1.



Reviewed by Marcus M. Witcher

Published on H-War (June, 2015)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Roham Alvandi's *Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah* reevaluates the role of the shah as a Cold War puppet. Far from being an instrument of Washington, Alvandi demonstrates that Mohammad Reza Pahlavi influenced the United States' foreign policy during the Nixon administration. The shah was able to use his special relationship with President Nixon and Henry Kissinger to get almost unlimited amounts of conventional arms from the United States. Likewise, the shah used his influence to convince Nixon and Kissinger that the United States had a Cold War interest in funding the Kurds in their war against Ba'athist Iraq. Finally, Alvandi asserts that after Watergate, the shah exhibited his independence when dealing with the Ford administration. While the United States desired to stop nuclear proliferation in the Middle East, Iran, fueled by oil revenues, was insistent on pursuing nuclear technology. Ultimately, the shah secured contracts with other Western nations when the United States refused to provide the technology without significant limitations. Alvandi joins a growing number of scholars who

place the Cold War in a global perspective and demonstrate the discursiveness of power.

Prior to the Nixon administration, the United States had considered Iran and Saudi Arabia as the two states that had to be balanced to ensure peace in the Middle East. Alvandi demonstrates, however, that Nixon rejected the idea of balancing the interests of Saudi Arabia and Iran. Instead, Nixon embraced Iranian primacy. This meant that restrictions on the sale of conventional arms to Iran were largely lifted. Furthermore, Alvandi details the special relationship that existed between the shah and Nixon. The shah had the president's ear and used the rhetoric of the Cold War to argue that the United States needed to support the Kurds in their struggle against a Ba'athist government that was "under the sway of a 'Red regime'" (p. 42). Alvandi illustrates that Pahlavi skilfully used Nixon's own rhetoric to argue for Iranian primacy in the Gulf and for Iranian interests in regards to Iraq. As a result, the Nixon administration began funneling arms from Israel to Iran and on to the Kurdish resistance in northern Iraq. From the on-

set of the operation, however, the goals of U.S. intervention were unclear. Instead, the United States largely relied on the shah to set the agenda and strategy for assistance to the Kurds, and he had no intention of allowing an independent Kurdistan to be established on Iran's border. Indeed, Alvandi argues, the shah used the Kurds and the United States as a means to get the Iraqis to acquiesce to Iran's claims to sovereignty over the eastern half of the Shatt. Instead of listening to the numerous pleas within the State Department, the CIA, and the Department of Defense, Nixon and Kissinger followed the shah's advice. According to Alvandi, the result was that the "Iranian tail ... wagged the American dog" (p. 123). In short, during the Nixon administration, Iran—not the United States—set policy in the Persian Gulf.

As Nixon and Kissinger were preoccupied with the fallout from Watergate, the shah was busy solidifying his position as the predominant power in the Gulf. Rich with oil revenues, he desired to catapult his nation into modernity by investing in domestic nuclear energy. At the same time that the shah was pursuing nuclear technology, however, sentiment in the United States was against nuclear proliferation in the region. Alvandi argues that the shah's quest for nuclear technology demonstrated the limitations of the United States in determining who would get nuclear capabilities. The rise of a global capitalist marketplace, itself an early Cold War goal of the United States, actually served to diminish America's control over nuclear technology. When the United States insisted that any Iranian nuclear sales would come with significant strings attached, the Iranians balked and entered into negotiations with West Germany. The United States was limited by competition from the global capitalistic market and also by public sentiment within the United States that would not allow the Ford administration to enter into negotiations with Iran without dramatic limitations. By recounting the shah's nuclear ambitions Alvandi has demonstrated the many limitations on US policymakers, the agency

of the shah, and reality that the relationship between the United States and Iran was in decline before President Carter came into office. Ultimately, Alvandi's work demonstrates the limitations that US presidents face in a complex world with numerous actors, all of whom have their own priorities and agendas.

Alvandi is writing in the tradition set by Odd Arne Westad of exploring the Cold War beyond the United States and the Soviet Union. Alvandi explains that while Iran was aligned with the United States, it was able to exert influence over not only its own foreign and domestic policy but also over the United States' policy positions in the region. Alvandi's work is the latest in a series of histories on the Cold War that emphasize the ability of Third World nations to exert influence on their superpower allies. He joins Piero Gleijeses, Chen Jian, Robert J. McMahon, and Lien-Hang T. Nguyen at the cutting edge of Cold War diplomatic history.

Unlike many of the scholars whose work he resembles, however, Alvandi does not utilize a plethora of non-English sources. Instead, his sources detailing many of the key Iranian decisions are from memoirs and oral histories. Despite the lack of official Iranian documents (that may have been impossible to access at this time), Alvandi has an impressive source base. He visited four presidential libraries, the National Archives, and the Library of Congress as well as countless other manuscript collections. He supplements his archival sources with memoirs, diaries, interviews, periodicals, and broadcasts. The result of his research is a very well documented account of US-Iranian diplomacy.

Putting some small criticisms aside, Alvandi has written a history of US-Iranian relations that demonstrates the power that a country of seemingly secondary importance in the Cold War had over the course of events. His work, along with that of the scholars mentioned above, should cause historians to reframe the narrative sur-

rounding the Cold War. Many countries exerted influence and all contributed to shaping the numerous conflicts that occurred from 1945 to 1991. Finally, with talks of a nuclear deal between the two nations being covered by the news daily, *Nixon, Kissenger, and the Shah* is essential reading for anyone hoping to understand the complex relationship that exists between the United States and Iran.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Marcus M. Witcher. Review of Alvandi, Roham. *Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah: The United States and Iran in the Cold War*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. June, 2015.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=43627>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.