Britain’s Role in the Security Construct for the Persian Gulf

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Abstract: The British withdrawal of 1968 is seen as the end of British influence and involvement in the Persian Gulf. Seeing how their presence in the Gulf was vital to the security and stability of the region, one is left with questions to why the region continued to remain stable after the withdrawal. Literature brings into discussion a transition from British to American influence in the region. However, it can be argued that this answer is somewhat unsatisfactory. Thus, this study investigates the role played by Her Majesty’s Government in the conception and maintenance of a security construct for the Persian Gulf, based on the ‘Pax Britannica’ model, which filled the British void between 1968 and 1980.

Keywords: British Policy, Security Construct, Persian Gulf, Islamic Revolution, Iran-Iraq War.

Introduction

“America is worse than Britain, Britain is worse than America, The Soviet Union is worse than both”¹.

According to former diplomat Christopher Rundle, those words were graffiti on the walls of the British Embassy in Teheran during the events of the Islamic Revolution². To someone who is not familiar with the Islamic Revolution, this paradoxical message rather indicates confusion in

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¹ Cristopher Rundle, “Iran-United Kingdom Relations Since the Revolution: Opening Doors”, in Anousharian Ehtushami, Zweiri Mahjoob (eds), Iran’s Foreign Policy from Khatami to Ahmadinejad, Reading, Ithaca Press, 2008, p. 89.

² Ibidem.
the minds of the revolutionaries than insight in the forces that were responsible for the turbulent events of those days.

The inclusion of the United States of America and the USSR in the message left on the British Embassy’s wall was quite understandable, as both represented the most visible and powerful external forces that were seen as trying to subvert Iran to keep or bring it in its sphere of influence. The inclusion of Britain however presents somewhat of a mystery. The location of the message signifies that it was left for Her Majesty’s Government, but neither Britain nor the British Embassy in Teheran was the prime target in any of the following events. Was it confusion or a reflex of old times?

Although a case can be made that centuries of British control over the Persian Gulf may not have contributed to lots of trust between Iranians and the British, this does not explain why the struggle against the Iranian monarch and the subsequent revolutionary actions would necessarily spill towards the United Kingdom, as the facts place the United States at the centre of most events. Also, the literature focuses almost entirely on the role of the US.

Surely, the unprecedented events in the United States’ Embassy in Tehran, known as the Hostage Crisis, can be held responsible for the abundance of attention for the role of the US. But, the security construct for the Persian Gulf that replaced the ‘Pax Britannica’ as of 1968 was clearly Anglo-American by design and Britain was assigned with an important role in it, suggesting a much more prominent role than generally perceived.

This study therefore aims to answer the question: ‘what is the role of the United Kingdom in the Security Construct for the Persian Gulf and what impact did it have on its international position?’

The results may also contribute to a better understanding of the present situation, as the context set by the Islamic Revolution still dictates the relation between Iran and the West. The tension between Iran and the West at the birth of the Islamic Republic may in part explain why the process of bridging the gap between the two is so difficult and why any
major development is, at the same time, saluted but also viewed with mistrust.

The Security Construct for the Persian Gulf

As of 1968, a Security Construct of Anglo-American design was developed for the Persian Gulf, replacing the ‘Pax Britannica’ as described in Chapter 5. According to Fain it was designed to maintain stability in the region and to prevent the USSR to expand its influence in the Persian Gulf. Obviously, the economic importance of the oil rich Persian Gulf was a strong motivation for the West to secure stability in the region. With Iran and Saudi Arabia as sworn enemies and an unstable Iraq, stability was all but natural. At the same time, the security construct could serve as part of a Middle East ‘front’ in the Cold War with the USSR. Again according to Fain, the security construct was built on 4 fundamental pillars developed by American strategists, as follows:

- Maintain British influence in the Persian Gulf for as long as possible.
- Resolve the differences between the two largest and most powerful actors in the region (Saudi Arabia and Iran);
- Support better economic and political cooperation between the Persian Gulf states;
- Avoid any military build ups by the Gulf’s littoral states.

As presented by Fain the construct was based on a framework that was to encourage the regional actors to cooperate and resolve their disputes so that any possible conflict could be resolved through political action. British influence was seen as essential for this strategy to work.

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4 *Ibidem.*
However, due to the withdrawal of the Britain troops, the United Kingdom lacked the directly available military power to solve crises in the region. As a consequence, a regional arbiter was required that had to be made strong enough to discourage any conflict in the area, as Hurewitz argues⁵, but that at the same time could be sufficiently controlled. The logical choice for this role was Iran, where at that time the pro-western Shah was consolidating his position, making Iran a reliable ally for the West.

Consequently, Iran needed to be supplied with sophisticated weapons systems to be provided by the US and its allies. In the eyes of the United States, the security construct was of such importance that it took major steps to substantiate it.

This is clearly demonstrated by the weapon systems that Iran had access to. As Stork and Paul argue, the US sold F-4 Phantom aircrafts (Israel being the only other state in the region that was in possession of this type of aircraft) to Iran in an effort to secure its place as the region arbitral⁶. Moreover, Alexander Moens states that from the Nixon administration onwards the US issued Iran with a “carte blanche”⁷ so that the Shah could acquire any weapon system he desired⁸.

The importance of the security construct can also be demonstrated by the fact that it even overwrote some of the US foreign policy doctrines. Moens argued that the importance of Iran and the Shah as an ally and gendarme for the Persian Gulf surpassed the Carter Doctrine and multiple other US directives that forbade the sale of arms to states that violated human rights⁹. Even more so, President Carter, during his visit in 1977,

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⁸ Ibidem.
⁹ Ibidem, pp. 214-216.
openly showed support for the Shah\textsuperscript{10} even though it was a known fact that the Iranian regime was violating human rights.

Summing up, the security construct that governed the Persian Gulf from 1968 to 1979 was envisioned to maintain political and economic stability and cooperation in the Persian Gulf and to prevent the spread of USSR influence within the region, mainly through the influence its initiators were supposed to have on the local parties in the region and through a strong and well-armed Iran to discourage any major conflict in the area.

**Britain’s Role in the Security Construct**

Britain’s historical relation with the Persian Gulf is a well established and a highly analyzed fact between the scholars. Most notably, Uzi Rabi argues that because of the Persian Gulf’s importance, the British installed a so called ‘Pax Britannica’ in the region as early the XIX century\textsuperscript{11}. Through this security construct, which gave complete autonomy to the regional states and only transferred control of the foreign policy to the British, the United Kingdom was able to maintain control of the Gulf’s security with a relative small number of troops\textsuperscript{12}. This construct was governed by the ‘Exclusive Treaties’ of 1892 stating that the Gulf States:

- Were forbidden to engage in any form of communication nor sign agreements with and other power except the British;
- Were forbidden to permit agents of foreign governments to take residence on their territory without prior British consent;


\textsuperscript{12} *Ibidem*, p. 354.
- Were forbidden to alter their borders except in the case that the alteration was for the British government\textsuperscript{13}.

Although the British hold on their foreign policies was very strong, this must not be understood as a colonial rule on the Persian Gulf states. According to Uzi Rabi, the British “kept out of [the] internal administration as far as possible”\textsuperscript{14} giving the states a “certain level of autonomy”\textsuperscript{15}. Within this framework the British could intervene in disputes between the Persian states (usually concerning frontiers), an involvement that was generally welcomed and accepted by local rulers\textsuperscript{16}. However, in 1968 this construct came to an end when the British announced their withdrawal from the East of Suez. The reasons for this decision are still being debated by academics. Some argue that the decision was dictated by domestic policy\textsuperscript{17}, others argue that this move represented a reorientation of Britain’s engagement within the international system from the ‘world’ towards ‘Europe’\textsuperscript{18}. But unlike the differences in views about the underlying reasons, there is a general consensus about the fact that the withdrawal left a security void in the region.

As the region undoubtedly was of strategic importance for the entire west, and as the United States on its own were unable to fill this void due to its involvement in Vietnam\textsuperscript{19}, this situation presented a growing problem, especially when multiple attempts to convince the United Kingdom to reconsider their decision failed. According to Fain, the United States’ pressure was such that it even created unprecedented friction between the

\textsuperscript{13} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibidem, p. 355.
\textsuperscript{18} Conor D. M. McCourt, “What was Britain’s ‘East of Suez Role?’ Reassessing the Withdrawal”, in \textit{Diplomacy & Statecraft}, Vol. 20, No. 3, 2009, p. 467.
\textsuperscript{19} Taylor Fain, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 181.
two allies. Ultimately, the solution was found in engaging Britain into the creation of the Security Construct as detailed in the previous chapter.

The new Security Construct differed in design from the previous ‘Pax Britannica’, most notably where the new Construct did not rely on the presence of any foreign troops and did not limit the Gulf States in their foreign policy anymore. British influence, however, was still defined as a cornerstone of the Construct.

The British had, of course, an unmistakable ‘footprint’ in the region, but they could not count anymore on a generally accepted role by all parties involved, as was demonstrated in Iraq. Obviously, Britain was capable to use its influence to stimulate cooperation between the local actors and solve disputes (as described by Fain), but, in the absence of British troops in the region, policing the states of the Persian Gulf and keeping peace was an impossibility. To give such a crucial role to Iran must have been based on the assessment that the West and the UK in particular would have enough influence on Iran to secure their goals. This, in fact, largely substitutes the question of Britain’s influence in the region into the question of Britain’s influence on Iran.

**Britain’s Influence on Iran**

The roots of British influence on Iran historically date back to 1622 when the British helped the Persian to recover Hurmuz from the Portuguese. The British extended their involvement in the XIX century and took control over the entire region including Iran with the establishment of their ‘Pax Britannica’, as argued in the previous chapter.

The discovery of oil in Iran deepened both the importance of and the British influence on Iran, especially after the foundation of the Anglo-

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Persian Oil Company (with British majority). The British dominated the technology to refine oil\textsuperscript{24}, making Iran dependent on their expertise.

The importance of the Iranian oil reserves became very imminent during World War II when the Western allies feared that they could be cut off of supplies due to German influence on Reza Shah, who had declared Iran to remain neutral\textsuperscript{25}. This, alongside the need to secure the transportation of arms to the USSR, was the main reasons for the occupation of Iran by British and Soviet troops\textsuperscript{26}. After the war, this lead to a territorial dispute between Iran and the USSR, as the Soviets refused to withdraw their troops until they would receive similar oil concessions as the British and Americans already enjoyed\textsuperscript{27}. With strong British and American support for Iran and pressure on the USSR, this crisis was solved and the Soviets withdrew their troops\textsuperscript{28}.

Even though British expertise was vital for Iran, in 1953 Mossadegh – the prime minister of Iran and popular leader –, made the decision to nationalize the Anglo-Persian Oil Company. This was not acceptable to the British\textsuperscript{29}. In response the British, backed by the United States, launched a coup d’état, removing Mossadegh, and putting the pro-western Shah in power\textsuperscript{30}. This British-designed and executed move clearly demonstrated the extent of British influence at that time. It also explains the Britain’s influence on the Shah, who, in the eyes of Iran’s population, was even synonymous with the UK’s man\textsuperscript{31}.

\textsuperscript{24} Ervand Abrahamian, \textit{A Modern History of Iran}, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 119.
\textsuperscript{26} Alethia H. Cook, Jalil Roshandel, \textit{The United States and Iran}, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 15
\textsuperscript{28} Steven R. Ward, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 183.
\textsuperscript{29} Ervand Abrahamian, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 119.
\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Ibidem}, p. 99.
\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Ibidem}, p. 122.
The removal of the prime minister allowed the British to open new negotiations leading to the creation of a consortium as owners of Anglo-Persian Oil Company. British Petroleum was to own 40%\textsuperscript{32} seconded by the Anglo-Dutch Shell with 14%\textsuperscript{33}, thus allowing the British to maintain control over the Iranian oil. In the years after, the consortium remained the largest oil producer in Iran\textsuperscript{34}, thereby further consolidating British influence in Iran.

British influence was also apparent in the formation of CENTO in 1955. In this NATO-like organization meant to contain the Soviet Union, Britain was the only western power to participate as a member. Although CENTO never matured into an influential organization, it allowed the Shah to expand its military forces and buy sophisticated new military equipment from the west\textsuperscript{35}, tying Iran technologically to the west.

As until 1978 no major crisis within the region occurred, the validity of the Security Construct’s assumptions were not really tested, making it more difficult to determine the level of British influence in the decade preceding the Islamic Revolution. But a growing number of (declassified) documents relating to events at the end of 1978 and 1979 reveal a fundamentally unchanged level of influence. Due to the limitations of the material these documents may not yet be seen as conclusive evidence, but they do establish its likeliness.

The instability generated by the Islamic Revolution forced the British government into action in an attempt to solve the situation and bring back stability, preferably with the Shah still in power.

In December 1978, just two months before the Shah would be forced to flee Iran, the British Foreign Office, in a discussion of the situation in Tehran on December 20\textsuperscript{th}, mentions what resources the British


\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Ibidem}, p. 665.

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Ibidem}, p. 668.

\textsuperscript{35} Steven R. Ward, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 192.
had on their disposal and what their intentions were. The summary of that meeting, reviewing the foreign policy towards Iran, gives an interesting insight into the extent of British influence:

“Mr Judd pointed out that the British Ambassador was now labelled as a close adviser to the Shah and this would cause trouble for us. Mr Weir said that this should not necessarily prove harmful. Everyone knew we had relations with the Government, Armed Services and members of the opposition. Mr Judd stated that it was time we cooled down our relations with the Shah. Dr. Owen said that this had in fact probably already happened, but Sir Anthony Parsons [the British ambassador to Teheran] could not refuse to see the Shah when he asked for him”³⁶.

This extract from the meeting draws attention to two important factors:

- First of all, the fact that the British ambassador is considered one of the Shah’s closest advisers points towards a kind of influence that usually is not established overnight or customary for an ambassador. The references made to the Army and the Opposition also show at least an assumed level of influence that goes beyond the ordinary. Even if the perceived influence is overrated, as some theories suggest³⁷, it seems likely that the relation between the two states greatly surpassed the relations that could be expected from a Britain which, as the McCourt argued, orientated away from its “Global Role”³⁸. The open discussion on what can be done to “steer the Shah in the right direction”³⁹ is fully in line with this.

³⁶ FCO 08/3351, Internal Political Situation in Iran (Part A.), 1979, doc. W64.
³⁷ Iran and Britain, Documentary produced by Christopher de Bellaigue, United Kingdom, BBC Four, 2009.
³⁸ Conor D. M. McCourt, op. cit., p. 467.
³⁹ FCO 08/3351, Internal Political Situation in Iran (Part A.), 1979, doc. W64.
• Secondly, the British apparently had the option to follow multiple leads, to not rely on just their relation with the Shah. A further analysis of the archival documents generated by British activities in the months following this meeting show a clear and promising engagement between Her Majesty’s Government and the Iranian opposition\textsuperscript{40}. This clearly suggests that Britain was interested in and believed it was able to play a role even in an Iran without the Shah.

Non-governmental officials seemed to have had the same perception. An internal letter from David Stephen, political adviser, addressed to the Private Secretary, gives us access to a broader understanding of British influence over Iran. Stephen considered: the “BBC Persian Service was universally regarded as the most reliable news source in Iran”\textsuperscript{41}. This position clearly takes some time to establish. He adds that, although it may take a couple of years before the situation would stabilize, “The involvement of American and British technological and industrial expertise was such that no Government would wish to throw out the Anglo-American overnight”\textsuperscript{42}.

Mr. Stephen’s analysis of the situation seems to fit well in the definition of smart power forwarded by Joseph Nye in his work \textit{The Future of Power}, in which he argues that a state can influence another actor’s decisions through the latter’s dependence on values and expertise (soft power) in combination with the threat of losing those (hard power)\textsuperscript{43}.

It is safe to conclude that at least the British perceived the Security Construct’s assumptions with regard to their level of influence on Iran as valid and a variety of available material suggests that this was not only the case in 1979, but during the entire existence of the Security Construct.

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\textsuperscript{40} Passim, FCO 08/3351, \textit{Internal Political Situation in Iran (Part A.)}, 1979. \\
\textsuperscript{41} FCO 08/3351, \textit{Internal Political Situation in Iran (Part A.)}, 1979, doc. W64. \\
\textsuperscript{42} Ibidem. \\
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Britain’s role in the Military Build-up of Iran in the seventies

As presented by Fain, the Security Construct was based on a framework that was to encourage the regional actors to cooperate and resolve their disputes so that any possible conflict could be resolved through political action. In the absence of British or American troops in the region, the role of regional arbiter was assigned to Iran. To realize this, Iran had to be strong enough to discourage any conflict in the area. The decision to equip Iran for this purpose is closely linked to the assessment that especially the United Kingdom had sufficient influence on Iran to control this ‘implanted force’.

Yet, the role of the United States in this area is better documented than that of the United Kingdom. As we know, the US sold F-4 Phantom aircrafts (Israel being the only other state in the region that was in possession of this type of aircraft) to Iran. And according to Alexander Moens, the Nixon administration issued Iran with a “carte blanche” so that the Shah could acquire any weapon system he desired.

Much of the British role in Iran’s military build-up is still covered by classified documents, so there is little hard material, like contracts, available that can be used for an analysis. However, clues may not so much be found in declassified defence contracts as well as in the correspondence between the British government and the one in Iran with regard to the cancellation of contracts after the Islamic Revolution.

When the Shah was forced to leave Iran, a power struggle began which was won by the Ayatollah Khomeini. The actions of the new

44 See Taylor Fain, op. cit., p.178
45 Jacob C. Hurewitz, op. cit., p. 115.
46 Joe Stork, James Paul, op. cit., pp. 5-6.
48 Ibidem.
government were designed to undo as much of the Iranians monarch’s policies as possible, including limiting the amount of weapons that Iran was purchasing. It is in the list of contracts enclosed in the telegrams to London, announcing the Iranian desire to cancel the contracts that valuable information can be found of what the British government was selling to Iran. The contracts cancelled were not only for tanks, armoured vehicles, support ships, hovercrafts, spare parts and ammunition for these types of weapons, but also for consultancy and construction of naval bases.50

Interestingly, in documents about discussions within the Cabinet Office for almost a year after the cancelation of the contracts, it is mentioned that Britain still remained the second largest defence equipment provider to Iran51. The connection between the two documents allows us to understand Britain’s importance to Iran as an arms supplier. Not only is the United Kingdom the second largest weapons supplier to Iran, but the contracts between the two cover all military sectors and are not restricted to just equipment, spare parts or ammunition.

In fact this is highly consistent with what one would expect as a result of the Security Construct. The British focused in the period between 1968 and 1979 on a broad military build-up of Iran. By contrast, they were not supporting any systematic military build-up of other countries in the region, such as Iraq, as is for instance demonstrated by the following telegram of the British Embassy in Iraq:

“The reputation we have gained over the years of being an unreliable supplier in that we appear to the Iraqis to be very selective about what we will and will not supply. They claim, with some justice, that the French, for example, are much more forthcoming and that they therefore see little

50 FCO08/3383, Future of Defence Contracts with Iran (Policy) Part A, 1979, London, National Archives, doc. 36a; also see DEFE24/1406 Defence Sales to Iran following the change of the regime, 1978, London, National Archives, doc. E11A.

alternative to seeking their requirements from them [the French] rather than us”^52.

A selective policy with regard to arms sales to other countries in the region is also highly consistent with the underlying principles of the Security Construct. Thus, it aimed at making only one country strong enough in order to discourage conflicts in the area.

Summing up, the British role in the military build-up of Iran in the seventies has remained underexposed in literature, probably due to lack of hard evidence, but there are enough indications to conclude that Britain’s role in the military build-up of Iran was pretty much according to the Security’s Construct’s plan.

The Collapse of the Security Construct

The western support that the Shah was enjoying under the Security Construct did not only manifest itself in his foreign policy, but also domestically. At the same time that the monarch was consolidating his regime^53 he was also modernizing and ‘westernizing’ Iran in an accelerated pace^54.

These domestic reforms, imposed by the Shah, represent the beginning of the end for the Security Construct. The monarch’s policy of modernization upset multiple segments of Iran’s population^55. Once the ‘Carter doctrine’ was signed, Iran’s citizens started to ask for more freedom^56. Faced with unrest, the Shah turns to his western allies for advice. Moens argues that because the American administration provided the Shah

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^55 Ervand Abrahamian, *op. cit.*, p.139-143.
^56 *Ibidem*, p. 159.
with inadequate advice, the monarch embarked on a strange carrot-stick policy (on the one hand granting freedoms and on the other cracking down on protesters hard), a policy that not only proved ineffective but even inflamed the situation further\(^57\). The situation became so grave that in January 1979, the Shah was forced to leave Iran\(^58\) which opened the way for the Islamic Revolution.

The government left by the Shah was unable to restore stability. Although the Bakhtiar administration tried to prevent Ayatollah Khomeini from returning to Iran, the religious leader arrived in Tehran and was greeted by large masses of people\(^59\). Once he returned he imposed, through referendum, a new constitution\(^60\), thus establishing the new Islamic Republic of Iran.

The internal struggle for power continued until the Hostage Crisis, which Khomeini used to rally the population around his cause against the United States\(^61\). Due to the United States’ decision to allow the Shah to enter the United States for medical treatment, on the 4\(^{th}\) of November 1979, a group of students assaulted the American Embassy in Tehran and took the diplomatic corps hostage\(^62\). This generated a 444 days crisis between the newly formed Republic of Iran and the USA, prompting the United States to sever diplomatic ties with Tehran and impose an arms and oil embargo\(^63\).

The embargo from the United States against Iran left the Islamic Republic without its most important arms suppliers. Furthermore, when the American consultants left Iran, they committed a series of sabotages, taking with them the avionics of the Iranian air force, leaving the Iranian Republic

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\(^{57}\) Alexander Moens, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

\(^{58}\) Heather L. Wagner, *op. cit.*, p. 61.


\(^{60}\) Ervand Abrahamian, *op. cit.*, pp. 162-165.


\(^{63}\) *Ibidem*, p. 106; also see Steven R. Ward, *op. cit.*, p. 245.
unable to deploy their planes\textsuperscript{64}. Thus, the strong and well-armed Iran that was supposed to counterbalance its neighbours was turned weak, militarily unorganized and unable to deploy its forces. In fact, this triggered the Iran-Iraq war.

Pelletiere observes that although the Iranian armed forces were already dysfunctional immediately after the Shah left (lacking central coordination)\textsuperscript{65}, Iraq was not ready at that time to engage in a conflict\textsuperscript{66}. However, the Hostage Crisis convinced the Iraqi leadership that the balance of power between the two countries had shifted\textsuperscript{67} due to the fact that Iran was not only unorganized but now also lacked the weapons to defend itself. When Her Majesty’s Government decided to close their Embassy in Tehran due to the instability and insecurity generated by the Hostage Crisis, despite maintaining diplomatic relations with the Islamic Republic open\textsuperscript{68}, the second pillar of the Security Construct –British influence– was starting to fail.

Within a year after the above mentioned events, the Iran-Iraq war started. Caused by Saddam Hussein’s desire to take control of the Shatt-al-Arab\textsuperscript{69}, to eliminate a regime hostile to his\textsuperscript{70} and to become the leader of the Arab world\textsuperscript{71}, the Iraqi invasion proves that Iran was no longer able to discourage the use of military power by its neighbours and that neither American nor British influence was instrumental anymore to solving regional problems in different ways. This meant a total collapse of the Security Construct.

\textsuperscript{64} Ibidem, p. 245.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibidem, p. 16.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{68} Cristopher Rundle, “Iran-United Kingdom Relations Since the Revolution: Opening Doors”, in Anousharavan Ehtushami, Zweiri Mahjoob (eds), \textit{Iran’s Foreign Policy from Khatami to Ahmadinejad}, Reading, Ithaca Press, 2008, p. 92.
\textsuperscript{69} Ervand Abrahamian, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 171.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibidem.
By design, the Security Construct was based on a strengthened Iran and British and American influence on Iran in order to control the ‘implanted’ force. In reality, the Security Construct appeared to be based, for a large part, on the position of the Shah.

British action during the final months of the Shah suggests that indeed a post-Shah era was evaluated. As British influence was extended to the leaders of the opposition, the British designed a contingency plan which involved identifying and contacting the main leader(s) of the opposition that would be friendly toward the west. Although the British still hoped that the Shah would resolve the situation, this contingency plan was meant to keep Britain in a good position with a possible different government and maintain their contracts and interests. These contracts included (but were not limited to) the sale of military equipment towards Iran. Thus, securing good relations with a possible opposition government would put the United Kingdom in a good position to continue its contribution to the Gulf’s Security.

However, the last discussion between the British ambassador and the Shah already indicates that the contingency plan envisioned by the British had limited chances of success. Lord Parsons’s notes in his telegram to London that:

“I was struck by the fact that he had obviously relinquished all power. We had some discussion of practical matters but his whole manner was that of a man who was talking about past events which no longer had personal relevance to him.

For example, he said that ‘I wonder whether Iran will go ahead with the purchase of your Shir tanks’. I said that we were doing our best to hang on but that it was a question of

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72 FCO 08/3351, Internal Political Situation in Iran (Part A.), 1979, London, National Archives, doc. W64.
73 Ibidem.
money. He laughed and said in a detached way that Iran had no money and could not help.

We also discussed the future foreign policy of any Iranian government. Again, his manner was that of a man who was prepared to take a mild but detached interest. We agreed that Iran’s foreign policy was likely to be more ‘Middle Eastern’ in terms of regional problems and attitudes towards problems of importance to the third world in general.”

This discussion with the Shah already contradicts British expectations that the new government would be inclined to maintain the same level of engagement and the Shah’s understanding of the situation seems pretty accurate. The return of Khomeini (the only leader with which the British could not establish dialogue) shifted Iran’s policy exactly along the lines that the Shah indicated and within 8 months after this discussion, the tank contracts were cancelled.

Equally relevant is the miscalculation regarding the importance of the Shah for the armed forces. As Pelletiere argues, the monarch’s role appeared to be of such vital importance for the armed forces, that once he departed from Teheran, they were completely unable to coordinate anymore.

Then, the Hostage Crisis forced the final shift in the British policy towards Iran. Before this crisis, the British position was still to focus on maintaining stability in Iran, but after the assault on the American Embassy the British were forced to take action to aid the United States in their efforts to release the hostages. This presented a dilemma, as the British

74 FCO 08/3351, *Internal Political Situation in Iran (Part A.)*, 1979, London, National Archives, doc. 33.
75 *Ibidem*, doc. 54E.
76 *Ibidem*, doc. 54.
77 *Ibidem*, doc. 63.
government had to choose between maintaining good relations with Iran and aiding their most important ally, the US. As the British felt obliged to choose the side of the US, they lost most of their influence on Iran.

As discussed, the British influence on Iran and the Shah was based on economic, political and military dependencies of the latter. When these dependencies were simply denied by the new Iranian government, British policymaking had to return to a dilemma with regard to their own interests.

Obviously, British interests were damaged by the nationalization of the National Iranian Oil Company by the new Islamic regime. The regime cancelled the Consortium Agreement of 1954 and all regulations associated with it, causing an exodus of foreign employees and thus leaving the industry in the hands of domestic employees.\(^{79}\)

But British interests were also to be viewed in relation to its allies. Within the Cabinet Office a debate was started about the value of Iran for the British economy vis-à-vis the obligation that they might have towards the US. It was stated that:

“These factors need to be balanced against the right of the Americans to look to us for all possible support and our interest in helping avoid any risk of them becoming resentful towards their allies or reckless in their policy towards Iran if helpful advice and support is not forthcoming”\(^{80}\).

In the end, the decision was made to fully support the United States in demanding the release of their diplomatic corps, despite the important implications this could have on the United Kingdom’s economic interests. According to Cabinet estimations, the potential loss of contracts might


\(^{80}\) Official Group on Iran: meetings 1-5, papers 1-3 (1979); meetings 1-12, papers 1-8, 1980, London, National Archives, p.40.
amount to a value of £150 million for the first year and £300 million per year subsequently as various other exports to Iran might be affected\textsuperscript{81}.

Next, the British support of the United States was substantiated by ‘administrative’ delays in arms supplying (effectively an arms embargo) and other economic sanctions in order to secure the release of the hostages. As stated by the British government:

“The MOD have contracted to supply some tanks spares and ammunition to Iran. Ministers agreed in June 1979 that, subject to satisfactory financial arrangements being made, these deliveries should proceed. Appropriate payments of sums due have now been made and necessary letters of credit opened and the MOD is ready to recommence supply. No spares and ammunition have been supplied since the hostages were taken in early November and Defence and FCO Ministers have agreed that for the time being no supplies should be declared for shipment and that administrative delays should be offered as the excuse if one is called for. This is the current position.

An overt Arms Embargo would do no immediate damage to the Iranian Government but the Armed Forces are eager to obtain delivery of spares and ammunitions which they must have if they are to be used as effective instruments of law and order. They can therefore be expected to press for supplies in due course\textsuperscript{82}.

These actions, that clearly and ostensibly placed the United Kingdom in the United States camp, together with the growing instability of the situation in Teheran, made it necessary for London to decide to close

\textsuperscript{81} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibidem.
the British Embassy in Teheran. Still, diplomatic relations with the Islamic Republic were maintained and the Iranian Embassy in London remained open\(^{83}\).

As none of the British actions had the required impact it is apparent that British influence over the new Khomeini administration was very limited if not non-existent, and even more so after the closure of the British Embassy.

Signs that the Iranian Islamic Revolution was also starting to destabilize the region were coming in soon after. In April that year, Lord Carrington required the stations (in Teheran and Bagdad) to immediately report if they “have indications that British shipping using the Shatt al-Arab or other Northern Gulf ports could be endangered by current hostilities”\(^{84}\).

The hostilities Lord Carrington referred to were the first signs of the upcoming Iraqi invasion of Iran later that year (September). Although this communication in itself is perfectly normal, it also clearly shows the shift in British concerns. Similarly, when later that year the war between Iran and Iraq was indeed threatening free shipping in the region, the British government reengaged militarily in the area deploying two war ships: HMS Coventry\(^ {85}\) and HMS Alacrity\(^ {86}\). They were instructed not to intervene in the war but to protect its interests and, as part of an international effort together with the US and the French, to guard and rescue any civilian ships caught in the crossfire of the conflict\(^ {87}\).

The combination of a war and an ongoing arms embargo to one of the belligerents (Iran) further limited whatever possibilities were left to influence the situation, as is shown by the following telegram that circulated inside the Foreign and Commonwealth Office:

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\(^{83}\) Cristopher Rundle, *op. cit.*, p. 92.


“In deciding what items to supply the Secretary of State will need to bear in mind our obligation as a neutral state to treat Iraq and Iran impartially. We are not obliged to prevent the export of arms or ammunition or ‘anything which can be use to an army’ (Article 7 of the 1907 Hague Convention on Neutral Powers and Persons in Land Warfare). But if we choose (for whatever reason) to restrict the supply of any of those things we must apply our restrictions impartially to both belligerents (Article 8)”\textsuperscript{88}.

Summing up, the sequence of events not only led to the collapse of the Security Construct, but also to serious damage to British interests. The Hostage Crisis forced Her Majesty’s Government to openly support the US and participate in the embargo. That embargo continuing after the Iran-Iraq started made it impossible to intervene in the war, even if they had wanted to. The remaining position for the British was to defend their own interests, wherever possible.

**Conclusions**

This study makes a case for a much more prominent British role in the Security Construct for the Gulf after the British withdrawal of 1968, than usually is perceived in literature.

The Security Construct was an American initiative prompted by the void left by the British after their decision to withdraw all of their troops East of Suez. The inability of the US to fill this void themselves brought them to design a system rooted in the concept of a ‘Pax Britannica’. Stability in the region was believed to be achievable by balancing local

\textsuperscript{88} FCO08/3477, *British Policy on Arms Sales to Iran and Iraq in the light of the War Part B.*, London, National Archives, doc. 73a.
military power and sufficient western influence on local actors, especially on the one with the policing role. In this design, pro-western Iran fulfilled the military role and British influence was deemed to be sufficient to achieve the required balance. Western controlled stability in the region could then be instrumental in blocking the USSR in this part of the world.

Although reluctant at first, the British decided to participate in this construct. It meant a transformation rather than a withdrawal from the ‘Global Role’, at least for this part of the world. Seemingly it came with less risk and fewer costs.

The construct held strong for almost a decade, but when it was put to a serious test in 1979 it showed a fatal weakness that, apparently, was not accounted for. The Islamic Revolution, led by the one person (Ayatollah Khomeini) that was not susceptible to western influence, erased the foundation of the construct by simply ignoring Iran’s dependency on its western allies, even if that was not in its best interest.

It could be argued of course that the security construct was leaning too much on the position of one person, the Shah. But this in itself was not uncommon and the US and the UK had extensive experience in dealing with ‘weaknesses’ of this type. The element that surprised all parties involved was religious radicalism that did not answer to known western logic.

The protests of 1978 and 1979 signified a desire for change in Iran that even the Shah was clearly seeing. But it turned into unprecedented change in the hands of the Ayatollah Khomeini as the actions of the new government were designed to undo as much of the Iranians monarch’s policies as possible, including limiting the amount of weapons that Iran was purchasing.

His reforms, therefore, were not only blocking western influence in Iran but also affecting Iran’s economic and military base. And his decision to support the action of the students that assaulted the American Embassy may have been instrumental in eliminating internal opposition but, by violating one of the most sacred rules of international relations, the sanctity
of the diplomatic missions, he alienated Iran from its former allies and triggered an arms and oil embargo against the newly formed Islamic Republic of Iran that severely implicated the country.

Thus, through this decision to ‘hold the United States hostage’ Khomeini brought the Security Construct to an end and with it stability in the region, as soon after became apparent with the start of the Iraq-Iran war. When we take Mr Steven’s view “that the involvement of American and British technological and industrial expertise was such that no Government would wish to throw out the Anglo-American overnight” as representative for western logic, then it is apparent that the chain of events in Iran was not anticipated and not included in any scenario that the Security Construct should have catered to.

Unfortunately, what was seen as impossible was exactly what happened and it did not only end the Security Construct and with it British influence in Iran, but it also meant severe damage to Britain’s interests, as all of its oil related assets were confiscated, arms sales were cancelled and all other economic relations between the UK and Iran were severely limited by the Hostage Crisis, the skirmishes and, later, the full war between Iran and Iraq.

Did Britain make a mistake by giving in to the US pressure to participate in the Security Construct? That is a question that each and all of the US allies had and have to find an answer to. In this case, relinquishing their involvement in the Gulf would have gone against the desires of Britain’s most important ally, the United States of America. Such an action might have had severe implications on British overall interests. If the larger context of the Cold war is taken into consideration, the negative implications of a refusal to comply with the American design might as well have overridden the negative effects of the failure of the Security Construct.

89 FCO 08/3351, *Internal Political Situation in Iran (Part A).* 1979, London, National Archives, doc. W64.
Interestingly enough, one of the Security Construct’s objectives was realized even after its collapse. As seen in the beginning of this study, the revolutionaries considered the USSR worse than both the British and Americans put together. As a consequence, it is not surprising that in the aftermath of the collapse of the Security Construct, the USSR was unable to bring Iran in its sphere of influence.

Taking everything into consideration, the paradoxical message that started this study can now be understood. As the revolution was directed against the Shah and the monarch was associated with the west (in this case both the United States and Britain), it is natural that Iranian frustration would manifest towards the Shah’s allies. Moreover, British involvement in the Security Construct allowed the UK to maintain influence in Iran’s internal policy. As a consequence their inclusion in the list is not only the result of historical domination of the Gulf, but a continuing presence (under a different form) in the internal workings of the Gulf.

Even more relevant, although an American construct was governing the security of the Gulf, British heritage made the revolutionaries unable to decide which power would be able to develop a stronger influence on Iran, putting both the British and the Americans on the same place. As a consequence, an argument can be made for the importance of the British for the construct and the level of influence they had. Furthermore, even after the Islamic Revolution, the two western states were viewed with the same mistrust until the US allowed the Shah to briefly stay in the US, pushing Iranian resentment towards the US over the limit.

Looking at the failure of the Security Construct from a British perspective adds to the understanding of the Islamic Revolution and allows us to look at events from another dimension. Within the span of a year, Iran has managed to transform itself from the west’s most important ally to its worst archenemy. This would naturally passion relations between Iran and the west.

However, seeing how, at the moment of its birth, the Islamic Republic had tense relation with the west, an argument can be made that
this would be translated within its political culture and make any rapprochement more difficult. Last year, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the West signed an important accord. Sings of a more open Iran are emerging, arguably bringing the two sides closer and allowing some chances for rapprochement. Seeing how opinions regarding this landmark accord are divided, these new perspectives on the founding moments of the Islamic Republic and its relations with the West are not only welcome but vital to understand and bridge the divide between the two sides.

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