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The Influence of the 1946 Iranian Crisis on Early US Cold War Strategies

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**From Alliance to Adversaries:
The Influence of the 1946 Iranian Crisis on Early US Cold War Strategies**

28 April 2019

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For three brief months in 1946, the Soviet Union (USSR) ignored its post-war treaty obligations and occupied a portion of Northern Iran. Known as the “Iranian Crisis,” the conflict involved 30,000 Red Army soldiers, 2,000 Iranian casualties, and three United Nations (UN) resolutions. During this same period, only months after the end of the Second World War, Allied troops were still deployed around the world, Berlin was being partitioned between the East and West, and Winston Churchill infamously stated that an “iron curtain had descended across the continent” of Europe. The 1946 Iranian Crisis now appears to be a historical footnote between the devastation of the Second World War and the 45-year Cold War, but the confrontation serves as a key juncture in Soviet-American relations from allies of convenience to total adversaries. For the US, the Iranian Crisis solidified the strategy of containment by confirming US fears of Soviet expansionism, established the UN as a US diplomatic instrument, confirmed the viability of threatening military intervention, and forced US policy to prioritize anti-communism over anti-colonialism.

The context of how the Second World War ended and the confrontation over Iran began is important for how the US approached a strategy of containment from the Iranian Crisis. When the war ended in May 1945, Russian and American troops were stationed in occupied territories throughout the world. Both countries, as well as the diminished European imperial powers of Britain and France, sought to establish the new world order in their favor, with control of Eastern Europe being the central tension. During this period of demobilization, the US and USSR agreed to a time-phased removal of their military forces in occupied regions. Stalin’s decision to ignore the withdrawal of Soviet troops in Northern Iran would be the first test of the former Allies’ resolve and determine the trajectory of events for the next few decades.

There was a long history of foreigners intervening in Iran prior to the Iranian Crisis. Persia had fought a war with Tsarist Russia in the early 1800's with tensions continuing through 1907 when Russia and Great Britain agreed to partition Iran between their spheres of influence. Great Britain had established a base of operations in southern Iran as an early oil producer and became heavily invested in the region. Both nations continued to exert influence over Iran from 1907-1940 but came to a special agreement in 1941 to jointly occupy the entire country.¹ Germany's invasion of Russia in 1941, Operation Barbarossa, brought Russia onto the side of the Allies and the Trans-Iranian railroad was the initial route for supplies and troops to flow into the Soviet Union. The Iranian Shah, Reza Khan, was thought to be a German sympathizer and his refusal to allow Allied troops to use the Trans-Iranian railroad was the impetus for the invasion. The Allies maintained control of Iran until the end of the war when the time came for the planned withdrawal of both British and Russian forces by 2 March 1946.²

Russia, however, still had interests in Iran that their troop presence could affect. First, the Soviet Union had been dissatisfied with the previous negotiations for oil production in the Azerbaijan region. Moscow feared that the oil extraction in northern Iran was tapping into their own reserves along the Caspian Sea and that they were paying more for Iranian oil than the British who more directly controlled oil production in southern Iran. Secondly, Stalin was interested in surrounding Russia with "friendly nations" to act as a buffer against a direct invasion into Russia. In meeting in 1945, Stalin was reviewing the soviet occupations presence

¹ Bruce R. Kuniholm, *The Origins of the Cold War in the Near East: Great Power Conflict and Diplomacy in Iran, Turkey and Greece* (Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1994), 132.

² Denna F. Fleming. *The Cold War and Its Origins, 1917-1960* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1961), 340.

in eastern Europe and Asia when he pointed at the Caucasus and exclaimed “I don’t like our borders right here!”³

After the war, the Truman administration was still struggling to understand the Soviet Union’s intentions and strategy. George Kennan, a senior State Department official working at the US embassy in Moscow, authored in a cable to Secretary of State James Byrnes that attempted to explain Russia’s mindset. This 5,500 word document came to be known as the “Long Telegram” and in it Kennan theorizes that Soviet policy was based on “a neurotic view of world affairs” and a “traditional and instinctive Russian sense of insecurity.”⁴ The telegram ended with a recommendation that communist expansion should be met with a firm American response wherever possible to keep the Soviet Union in check. The “Long Telegram” had an immediate effect within the State Department when only days later it was apparent that the Red Army was not preparing to withdraw from northern Iran but instead increased its presence there. Additionally, Moscow had incited a pro-communist rebellion in the northern region of Iran, using the Red Army to challenge Iranian sovereignty by fomenting the creation of the Azerbaijan Republic puppet government.

In response, the US and British governments sought to confront the brazen Soviet expansion by all means available. Iran was encouraged to submit a complaint in the nascent United Nations as a plea for the respect of minor nations. Additionally, Great Britain and the US equipped the Shah’s military with new arms and sent direct warnings to Stalin that they would military support Iran in reclaiming its lost territories if the Red Army would not withdraw.⁵ In reality, Truman’s administration was hesitant to engage the Soviet Union over Iran, but the bluff was

³ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York, New York: Penguin Press, 2005), 28.

⁴ Ibid., 28.

⁵ Bruce R. Kuniholm, *The Origins of the Cold War in the Near East: Great Power Conflict and Diplomacy in Iran, Turkey and Greece* (Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1994), 378.

successful and the Red Army withdrew from Iran within six weeks of the original departure date and did not interfere in December 1946 when Iranian troops reentered Azerbaijan and toppled the separatist government.

The Cold War may not have a specific start date, but the Iranian Crisis represents a shift in US thinking and policies towards the Soviet Union. President Franklin D. Roosevelt had managed an uneasy alliance with Joseph Stalin and the other Allied Nations, but that relationship was in doubt after Roosevelt's death and replacement by Harry S. Truman. Although the war had devastated Europe and Russia, the USSR was poised to be the most influential power in Europe and Asia. Fears of the spread of communism and Stalin's intentions grew near the end of the war, with multiple theories developing in the US leadership about how to deal with the USSR after the war. Containment may have been the most aggressive strategy being discussed, but Truman would test many of containment's tenets in dealing with the Russian occupation of Northern Iran. In many ways, the Iranian Crisis led to the US strategy of containment by confirming US fears of soviet expansionism, the use of the UN as means to apply diplomatic pressure, the viability of threatening military intervention, and the choice of anti-communism over anti-colonialist ideals.

Truman considered the Russian occupation of Northern Iran as a violation of the agreements Stalin had made during the war, despite the long history of foreign intervention in Iranian politics. For over one-hundred years, foreigners, notably Russia and Great Britain, had invaded or influenced Iran. In fact, Great Britain and Russia determined Iran's modern borders after winning the 1857 Anglo-Persian War.⁶ In the decades that followed, Iran was pulled between the imperial powers of Russia and Great Britain, resulting in numerous arrangements

⁶ Bruce R. Kuniholm, *The Origins of the Cold War in the Near East: Great Power Conflict and Diplomacy in Iran, Turkey and Greece* (Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1994), 130.

and treaties in 1907, 1915, and 1920 that divided Iran's natural resources.⁷ Throughout this period, Russia maintained political influence and trade rights with Iran while Great Britain heavily invested in oil production in Southern Iran. The British-controlled Anglo-Iranian Oil Company formed in 1908 and employed over 20,000 workers in 1940.⁸ The scale of these investments and Iran's geographic position as a link between these future war-time allies made Iran an important nation during the Second World War.

During the war, the Allied Nations signed treaties regarding Iran's status during and after the war. Following Germany's invasion of Russia in June 1941, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill offered Russia assistance in fighting their common enemy and an agreement was signed in July.⁹ They deemed the sea lanes in the North Atlantic too dangerous and, therefore, agreed that supplies, military equipment, and troops would transfer between the two nations through Iran over the Trans-Iranian railroad.¹⁰ This decision placed Iran as the single link between these two allies. Recognizing the importance of the railroad, Russia and Great Britain launched a military operation to ensure the safety of the railroad and to override any objections from the Iranian Shah. The coordinated Soviet-British invasion of Iran came from two fronts and divided the country along a pre-determined line of control.¹¹ Britain occupied southern Iran and the Soviet Union invaded Northern Iran with just an infantry battalion and a dozen armored cars, easily routing the ragged 10,000 troops of the Iranian military.¹² The Allied Nations, which now included the US, discussed the occupation during the Tehran Conference of November 1943. The conference had been held at Tehran because of Iran's status as a link between the

⁷ Bruce R. Kuniholm, *The Origins of the Cold War in the Near East: Great Power Conflict and Diplomacy in Iran, Turkey and Greece* (Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1994), 132.

⁸ Ibid., 136.

⁹ Ibid., 132.

¹⁰ Ibid., 132.

¹¹ Ibid., 134.

¹² Louise L'Estrange Fawcett, *Iran and the Cold War: the Azerbaijan Crisis of 1946*, (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 86.

Allied nations, allowing Stalin to avoid traveling by air. At this conference, among the larger war plans and concerns, Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin agreed to maintain control of Iran throughout the war but agreed to return Iran's independence, by maintaining its integrity and sovereignty, after the war.¹³ The July 1945 Potsdam Conference, which included Truman for the first time, further refined the commitment to Iran's sovereignty by establishing the planned withdrawal of British and Russian occupation forces by 2 March 1946.¹⁴ Regardless of the decades of imperial negotiations between Great Britain and Russia, the war-time agreements clearly established the desire for an independent Iran after the war. Stalin's refusal to adhere to the timeline for troop withdrawal fueled concerns in Washington of Russian expansionism and the need for a strategy to counter Stalin's ambitions.

Supporters of the containment approach saw Stalin's failure to remove the Red Army troops from Northern Iran as confirmation of their long-held fears of Soviet expansionism. Near the end of the Second World War, there were differing views in Washington as to how Russia would interact with the "Western Democracies," with some leaders hoping for open cooperation or a *détente*, but the proponents of containment would influence Truman's actions during the Iranian Crisis.¹⁵ Although Kennan did not coin the term "containment" until July 1947, the underlying theories originate with anti-communist sentiments as early as 1943, when then-Ambassador to the Soviet Union, William Bullitt, warned Roosevelt that Stalin's "participation in an anti-fascist coalition had not purged the Soviet dictator of his autocratic and expansionist tendencies."¹⁶ Bullitt explained the goal of the war was to "prevent the domination

¹³ Bruce R. Kuniholm, *The Origins of the Cold War in the Near East: Great Power Conflict and Diplomacy in Iran, Turkey and Greece* (Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1994), 138.

¹⁴ Denna F. Fleming, *The Cold War and Its Origins, 1917-1960* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1961), 340.

¹⁵ John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1997), 31.

¹⁶ John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment a Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War* 2nd ed. (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5.

of Europe by the Moscow dictatorship without losing the participation of the Red Army in the war against the Nazi dictatorship.”¹⁷ In essence, Bullitt was suggesting that the overall US objective of the Second World War in Europe was to defeat Nazi Germany while leaving the Soviet Union unable to expand communism. These classified discussions explained the fear of Soviet expansion that would later be the basis for the strategy of containment.

Shortly after the war, George Kennan, a senior official in the US Embassy in Moscow, described the fears of Soviet aggression and recommend a strategy to counter the spread of communism in a single, influential document. On 22 February 1946, only a week before the planned date of Russia’s withdrawal, George Kennan had sent a 8,000 word telegram from the US embassy in Moscow describing his misgivings about the Russian leadership and that the Soviet “neurotic” mindset was based on a “traditional and instinctive Russian sense of insecurity.”¹⁸ What came to be known as Kennan’s “Long Telegram,” further theorized that the “post-war Soviet outlook” was that the “USSR still lives in antagonistic capitalist encirclement” in which “there can be no peaceful existence.”¹⁹ The telegram continues to argue that this insecurity in the Russian mindset historically originates from an “agricultural people trying to live on vast exposed plain” that has seen countless invasions over the centuries.²⁰ Kennan’s view of Russian leaders is that they instinctively fear invasions, like the recent Operation Barbarossa, and the best defense against another incursion is to aggressively seek to control buffer states along their extensive border. In regard to Iran, Kennan specifically mentioned Northern Iran as an “immediate strategic necessity” that allowed the Soviets to expand their

¹⁷ John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment a Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War* 2nd ed. (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5.

¹⁸ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York, New York: Penguin Press, 2005), 28.

¹⁹ Kennan, George F. *The Charge in the Soviet Union to the Secretary of State*. Telegram. February 22, 1946. <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/coldwar/documents/episode-1/kennan.htm>, Part 1.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, Part 2 Para 6.

power in the region and establish a “friendly Persian Government,” describing Iran as the first test of Soviet expansion.²¹ Kennan’s analysis of the current Iranian situation and overall aggressive mindset of the Soviet leadership was widely read, discussed, and accepted within days of its transmission, despite the source being a relatively obscure State Department official. Cold War scholar John Gaddis argues that the Truman administration so readily accepted Kennan’s recommendations because the previous transactional or “quid pro quo” policies towards Russia were not working as desired and left a vacuum in Washington that was looking for new strategies.²² Kennan’s description of the Russian problem was accepted by the Truman administration and immediately implemented in the evolving Iranian Crisis.

With the acceptance of Kennan’s analysis of Soviet global expansionism, US strategists also feared Iran as the first move of a Soviet campaign into the Middle East that threatened American interests in the region. As discussed above, Great Britain established an oil exploitation industry in Iran in 1907, but the US was far behind the colonial powers in maintaining influence in the Middle East region before the Second World War. In May 1940, Roosevelt, recognizing the important role oil was going to play in the coming war, created the Office of Petroleum Coordinator to develop oil exploitation opportunities abroad for the US military.²³ Saudi Arabia was one of the few countries where American companies had agreements for oil prospecting, but was hesitant to expand access to the US government.²⁴ The US military was interested in Saudi Arabia not just for access to the oil reserves but also the strategic value of forward basing US bombers and support aircraft that could reach Russia’s

²¹ Kennan, George F. *The Charge in the Soviet Union to the Secretary of State*. Telegram. February 22, 1946. <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/coldwar/documents/episode-1/kennan.htm>, Part 3, Para 6.

²² John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment a Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War* 2nd ed. (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 21.

²³ Irene L. Gendzier, *Dying to Forget: Oil, Power, Palestine, and the Foundations of U.S. Policy in the Middle East* (New York, New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 5.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

southern border. By June 1945, numerous negotiations with the Saudi monarch had finally resulted in a fragile arrangement to allow limited oil production and air basing around Dhafran.²⁵ This agreement allowed an important foothold for the US in the region that allowed future developments and investments. The Iranian Crisis in March 1946, however, threatened the fragile relationship the US had established with the Saudi monarch. Discussions within the Pentagon at this time were fears that the destabilization of Iran was the first step by Russia to increase their presence in the Middle East by attempting to gain a Mediterranean port in Syria and coerce Saudi Arabia to expel the US presence from their country.²⁶ This fear continued even after the Iranian Crisis, when Truman stated in 1950 that the initial invasion by North Korea was most likely a diversion for another Soviet push into Iran and the Middle East.²⁷ The US military leadership may have overreacted to the Russian move into Northern Iran, but the effect was increased fears in the US military leadership that Soviet expansionism threatened the US's entry into the region.

A critical element of the containment strategy was the use of the United Nations (UN) as a diplomatic tool to apply pressure against the USSR. Although the effectiveness of the new international organization was in doubt in 1946, US leadership hoped that the UN could allow smaller nations to push back against the spread of communism. The Iranian Crisis established the UN as a central element of the containment strategy by successfully pressuring the Russian withdrawal and setting the example for future cold war containment actions.

The US sought to establish the UN to maintain security and stability by preventing the acts of aggressive nations. The US State Department first proposed the organization in 1939,

²⁵ Irene L. Gendzier, *Dying to Forget: Oil, Power, Palestine, and the Foundations of U.S. Policy in the Middle East* (New York, New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 10.

²⁶ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York, New York: Penguin Press, 2005), 28.

²⁷ John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1997), 165.

which led to President Roosevelt's 1941 proposal of the United Nations Charter to the leaders of Great Britain, China, and the USSR, comprising the other "four policemen" of world order.²⁸ Conscious of the failing League of Nations, Roosevelt constructed the UN around the war-time allies, who would be responsible for maintaining peace after the war. In doing so, he hoped that the UN could resolve the "fundamental causes of war" through the creation of a military and economic security framework that would hold nations accountable to international agreements.²⁹ It is unclear if Roosevelt had planned to use the UN specifically against the spread of communism, but throughout the planning of the new organization clear lines between democracy and communism were already forming. During the Yalta conference, Stalin attempted to gain more influence in the new organization by insisted that all 15 Soviet Socialist Republics join the General Assembly in addition to the Soviet Union, to which Roosevelt countered that he would submit the 50 US states as nations as well, resulting in a compromise.³⁰ Just as the wartime cooperation between the Allies had begun to fray, the final decisions to form the UN would also represent this growing divide. After years of negotiations and compromises, the UN was founded in October 1945 and would see its first use as a diplomatic tool shortly after.

The first test of the UN to support a minor nation against aggression from an invader came when Iran submitted a formal complaint to the UN Security Council (UNSC) in March 1946. Only five months into the life of the organization, US officials viewed this as a critical test of the new system and if the UN could not resolve the crisis then it would be "of small value in restraining aggression" in the future.³¹ American and British diplomats had encouraged the

²⁸ Townsend Hoopes, "Legacy of the Cold War in Indochina." *Foreign Affairs* 48, no. 4 (July 1, 1970), 610.

²⁹ John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1997), 36.

³⁰ US State Department, "The United States and the Founding of the United Nations, August 1941 – October 1945, Accessed April 9, 2020, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/pubs/fs/55407.htm>.

³¹ Denna F. Fleming. *The Cold War and Its Origins, 1917-1960* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1961), 344.

Iranian delegation, even maintaining the issue on the General Assembly agenda despite Iranian regrets that the move was too provocative against the Soviet Union.³² This would result in UNSC Resolution 2, the first non-procedural resolution by the committee, and simply called for Iran and the Soviet Union cooperate to resolve the occupation.³³ Since the Soviets denied the military build-up and fomenting of agitation against the Shah, Russia joined the other 10 members of the UNSC to pass the resolution. However, Russia did not progress negotiations with the Shah, prompting the US to send \$25 million of arms and equipment to Tehran and a public declaration to guarantee the protection of Iran.³⁴ Finally, the US encouraged Iran to bring two more resolutions to the General Assembly requesting the removal of the “USSR occupation forces.”³⁵ The UN denouncements made in the General Assembly continued to pressure Russia and left Stalin without a diplomatic alternative but to remove the Red Army troops from Northern Iran. To prevent further damage to the Soviet Union’s status within the nascent international organization, Stalin finally made the decision to withdraw all Soviet forces from Iran on May 8, the day before the next round of UNSC discussions on the Iran situation were scheduled to take place.³⁶ Despite the uncertainty of the new organization, the US was able to use the UN to apply diplomatic pressure against Soviet expansionism. Secretary of State Byrnes recalled the diplomatic victory as “proof of the strength and effectiveness of the UN in helping those countries which truly desire independence.” The Iranian Crisis was the first conflict

³² Denna F. Fleming. *The Cold War and Its Origins, 1917-1960* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1961), 344.

³³ United Nations. Security Council. *Resolutions Adopted and Decisions Taken by the Security Council in 1946*. UNSCR 2 (1946).

³⁴ Denna F. Fleming. *The Cold War and Its Origins, 1917-1960* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1961), 345.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 345.

³⁶ Harper, Benjamin F. "The Bridge to Victory: The Iranian Crisis and the Birth of the Cold War." Master's Thesis, The Florida State University, 2016. <https://search-proquest-com.lomc.idm.oclc.org/docview/1917461092?accountid=14746>.

brought to the UN and its successful resolution would be the model for future Cold War engagements.

The Iranian Crisis solidified the American strategy of containment through diplomatic pressure and the threat of military action. NSC-68 identified that the massive Soviet military in peacetime could coerce other nations and “serves as a deterrent to the victims of its aggression from taking any actions in opposition to its tactics which would risk war.”³⁷ To counter this coercion, the US implemented strong military alliances and diplomatic pressure through the UN. The UN would continually be used as the opening salvo for American responses to Soviet expansion throughout the Cold War. In 1950, the UNSC passed Resolution 82, calling for an end to the North Korean invasion, then Resolution 83 which recommended UN nations intervene in the Korean conflict to restore peace and the South Korean state, essentially starting the international involvement and justification for the Korean War.³⁸ During the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, the UN General Assembly would be the theater in which the US argued with the USSR over the claim that the Red Army was conducting secret operations in a minor nation, resembling the arguments from the Iranian Crisis 15 years before. Woodrow Wilson’s idealism and Roosevelt’s sense of collaboration had been superseded by Truman’s strategy of confrontation, and the UN would be another avenue for his administration to apply pressure against the spread of communism. This intertwining of UN diplomatic resolutions and military engagements continues to the present day, but it first occurred during the 1946 Soviet occupation of Iran and Truman’s strategy of containment.

Another lesson American strategists took away from the Iranian Crisis was that a US threat of military intervention or supporting proxies could deter the Soviet Union. The limited

³⁷ John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment a Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War* 2nd ed. (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 95.

³⁸ Ibid., 102.

US units in Iran during the war departed on 1 Jan 1945 when the program to send supplies to the Russians over the Trans-Iranian railroad terminated, but Truman sent increasingly direct threats of bringing forces back into the region.³⁹ The first threat came on 6 March, four days after the scheduled Soviet troop withdrawal, when the US State Department sent a diplomatic message to the Kremlin identifying that the US was aware of the build-up of Soviet forces and that the US would not “remain indifferent” to the Russian occupation.”⁴⁰ Two days later, the US State Department sent a second note inquiring about the logistical plans for removing 30,000 Soviet troops, putting further pressure on the Kremlin. Finally, Walter Bedell Smith, the US ambassador to the Soviet Union, hand-delivered another message to Stalin in late March and stated ominously that if pressed “the US would react exactly as we have in the past,” possibly referring to the use of nuclear weapons against Japan.⁴¹ Additionally, the US made public declarations in the UN surrounding the 29 March UNSCR 3 deliberations that the US and UK would guarantee Iranian sovereignty, as agreed upon at the Potsdam Conference.⁴² Indirect threats included the deployment of the battleship *Missouri* to Istanbul the same day as the second diplomatic message was sent to Stalin, and newspaper interviews with Truman administration officials about the realistic possibility of war over Iran.⁴³ While it is unclear which show of force convinced Stalin to change his decision about the occupation, he ordered the withdrawal of all 30,000 Red Army troops from Northern Iran which left the fledgling communist Republic of Azerbaijan to fend for itself against the Shah’s army.

³⁹ Harper, Benjamin F. "The Bridge to Victory: The Iranian Crisis and the Birth of the Cold War." Master's Thesis, The Florida State University, 2016. <https://search-proquest-com.lomc.idm.oclc.org/docview/1917461092?accountid=14746>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York, New York: Penguin Press, 2005), 29.

⁴³ Harper, Benjamin F. "The Bridge to Victory: The Iranian Crisis and the Birth of the Cold War." Master's Thesis, The Florida State University, 2016. <https://search-proquest-com.lomc.idm.oclc.org/docview/1917461092?accountid=14746>.

In addition to threats of military intervention, the US and UK were sending supplies and military equipment to Tehran throughout the crisis. The military aide amounted to over \$25 million and included tanks, trucks, and heavy mortars, which proved to be much more support than rifles and light machine guns supplied to the separatists by the Soviet military.⁴⁴ The Iranian army, armed with weaponry paid by American and British aide, re-entered the separatist province in December 1946 and routed the few, disorganized communist units in only four days and forced the short-lived government to flee to the Soviet Union.⁴⁵ In the first engagement of the Cold War, a threat of military intervention and the use of a proxy force had successfully countered Soviet expansion and allowed the host nation to restore its sovereignty without the need for US direct action.

The Truman administration concluded that the successful resolution of the Northern Iran occupation supported the containment strategy. Kennan had argued that Russian leaders were “highly sensitive to logic of force” and that “patient but firm and vigilant containment” would counter “Russian expansive tendencies.”⁴⁶ As Kennan hypothesized, the use of constant diplomatic and military pressure throughout the three month conflict had successfully forced Stalin to withdrawal his troops from Iran and cease expansion into the Middle East. While this strategy was effective, it is unclear if Truman’s threat was really just a bluff. In his farewell address, Truman insinuated that he was prepared to directly fight the Soviet Union over Iran, stating: “members of my cabinet came to me and asked if we were ready to take the risk that a

⁴⁴ Denna F. Fleming. *The Cold War and Its Origins, 1917-1960* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1961), 345.

⁴⁵ Bruce R. Kuniholm, *The Origins of the Cold War in the Near East: Great Power Conflict and Diplomacy in Iran, Turkey and Greece* (Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1994), 420.

⁴⁶ Kennan, George F. *The Charge in the Soviet Union to the Secretary of State*. Telegram. February 22, 1946. <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/coldwar/documents/episode-1/kennan.htm>, Part 5, Para 2.

firm stand involved, and I replied that we were.”⁴⁷ However, Sir Reader Bullard, the British Ambassador to Iran, stated in November 1945 that the US and UK “were not going to declare war on Russia over Azerbaijan.”⁴⁸ Kennan warned about the risk of bluffing in the implementation of “constant pressure” in that Soviet leadership was “by no means unamenable to considerations of prestige” and would exploit an exposed bluff as political weakness.⁴⁹ Either way, the success of the Iranian Crisis only furthered Kennan’s recommendation of firm pressure, and led to the further refinement and implementation of the containment strategy throughout the early Cold War.

The Iranian conflict was one of the first instances where the US decided to prioritize its new ideology of anti-communism over anti-colonial ideals, which shaped American foreign policy throughout the next four decades. The US was founded as a coalition of colonies separating from an imperial ruler in 1776 to establish a government “from the consent of the governed” (US 1776). However, the founding fathers also acknowledged that the US could be its own imperial power, such as George Washington calling the US a “rising empire” that could “have some weight in the scales of empire.”⁵⁰ This duality of ideals seemed to coexist throughout the 1800’s as the US grew in size and influence through the conquest of indigenous tribes, practice of slavery, and annexation of the Philippines following a war with Spain in 1898.⁵¹ While a small Anti-Imperialist party emerged in US politics against the control of the Phillipines, anti-colonialism would not be central to American foreign policy until President

⁴⁷ Harry S. Truman, “The President’s Farewell Address to the American People.” (Speech, January 15, 1953) <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/public-papers/378/presidents-farewell-address-american-people>.

⁴⁸ Bruce R. Kuniholm, *The Origins of the Cold War in the Near East: Great Power Conflict and Diplomacy in Iran, Turkey and Greece* (Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1994), 278.

⁴⁹ Kennan, George F. *The Charge in the Soviet Union to the Secretary of State*. Telegram. February 22, 1946. <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/coldwar/documents/episode-1/kennan.htm>

⁵⁰ Richard Seymour, *American Insurgents a Brief History of American Anti-Imperialism* (Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2011), 2.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

Woodrow Wilson's administration in the 1910's.⁵² Despite Wilson's deep-seated racism that "consent of the governed ... was inapplicable to politically undeveloped races," he still brought the issue of anti-imperialism to the forefront of US interactions with European colonial powers.⁵³ Wilson's *Fourteen Points* speech was an ambitious request to the European Imperial governments. In particular, Points V and XIV called for an "impartial adjustment of all colonial claims" and a "general association of nations must be formed ... [to afford] guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike," respectively.⁵⁴ These measures contributed to the creation of the League of Nations, as an international organization committed to maintaining world peace. Although the League of Nations was inspired by Wilson's talking points, the US Congress ultimately refused to ratify US participation in the organization due to the fear of entanglement in European politics.⁵⁵ Despite the turbulent history of American anti-colonialism, Wilson had formalized the US position against European empires abroad that subsequent administrations would adapt.

American anti-colonialism became an important tenet of US foreign policy again during the Second World War. The US entered the Second World War with anti-colonial ideals and sought to use the peace process to correct "a part of the world disfigured by old world great power rivalry."⁵⁶ President Roosevelt upheld Wilson's perspective on the world and stated: "we are not fighting this war to preserve the European imperialism." Roosevelt's closest foreign leader was Churchill, who was an unabashed imperialist who was focused on winning the war

⁵² Richard Seymour, *American Insurgents a Brief History of American Anti-Imperialism* (Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2011), 56.

⁵³ Ibid., 62.

⁵⁴ T. Woodrow Wilson, "Address of the President of the United States delivered at a joint session of Congress." (Speech, Washington, DC, January 8, 1918), <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-joint-session-congress-the-conditions-peace-the-fourteen-points>

⁵⁵ Richard Seymour, *American Insurgents a Brief History of American Anti-Imperialism* (Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2011), 90.

⁵⁶ Louise L'Estrange Fawcett, *Iran and the Cold War: the Azerbaijan Crisis of 1946*, (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 140.

but also keeping the British Empire intact. When England declared war on Germany in 1940, Churchill declared that the war was a matter of “survival for the British Empire.”⁵⁷ By this he meant that his duty was not to solely defend the island of Great Britain, but maintain control of the overseas colonies, even against internal revolt. An example of his strategy occurred in June 1940, with Nazi forces marching into Paris, Churchill recommended that 40,000 Indian troops in India be relocated to safeguard colonial holdings in the Middle East and the Indian soldiers should be replaced with 60,000 English troops, reasoning that this reduced the chance of “mutiny by the native soldiers.”⁵⁸ Throughout the war, however, Roosevelt was at odds with Churchill’s ambitions to defend Britain’s long-term access and control of its colonies and was determined to dismantle European Imperialism after the war. Roosevelt remarked in a March 1941 speech that “any nationality, no matter how small, has the inherent right to its own nationhood.”⁵⁹ Later that year Roosevelt confided to his son that “America won’t help England in this war simply so that she will be able to continue to ride roughshod over colonial peoples.”⁶⁰ Throughout the early war years, Roosevelt and Churchill continued to disagree about the viability of the British Empire after the war, which culminated in Roosevelt’s “grand design” concept he presented at the November 1943 Cairo Conference. Roosevelt’s “grand design” was a strategy to counter post-war British Imperialism by strengthening US alliances with Russia and China, creating the “Four Policemen” basis for the UNSC.⁶¹ With Russia and China agreeing with the US to dismantle European colonialism after the war, the British would be outnumbered and pressured

⁵⁷ Madhusree Mukerjee, *Churchill’s Secret War the British Empire and the Ravaging of India During World War II* (New York, New York: Basic Books, 2010), 3.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁹ Elliot L. Wolfe “The Other War: FDR’s Battle Against Churchill and the British Empire.” *The American Almanac*, (August 28, 1995). Archived, accessed March 22, 2020.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

to release control of the overseas colonies. However, Roosevelt's "grand design" to rid the world of imperialism ended with his death in April 1945.

Roosevelt's successor, Harry Truman, was less committed to ending European imperialism and more fearful of a future conflict with the Soviet Union. Truman changed very little of the US's stated foreign policy after becoming President, but his actions were a departure from the anti-colonialism strategy Roosevelt had built throughout the war. At the San Francisco conference, Truman's delegates voted with the European powers to not place overseas colonies under international supervision or to designate timelines for colonial independence. Seeking more European allies against communism, Truman agreed with British diplomats to lobby for France to join the UNSC as an additional opponent to communism.⁶² Additionally, Truman agreed to let France regain control of its colonies in Indochina in October 1945 and ended the US support of the Viet Mien forces which fought against the Japanese throughout the war and declared the independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam only weeks earlier.⁶³ While US foreign policy was still outwardly against colonialism, Truman was already posturing for the coming Cold War against communism. American support for self-governance by minor nations and anti-colonialism had wavered throughout US history, but it was Truman's administration that decided to prioritize the struggle against communism over breaking the old, colonial world order.

After the Second World War, Iran turned towards the US to aide its struggle against the interference from Great Britain and Russia. Prior to the Iranian Crisis, Iranian delegates sought US assistance to extricate their nation from coercive negotiations with Russia and Great Britain. Both British and Russian governments were pressuring the Iranian leadership for harsher oil

⁶² Elliot L. Wolfe "The Other War: FDR's Battle Against Churchill and the British Empire." *The American Almanac*, (August 28, 1995). Archived, accessed March 22, 2020.

⁶³ Ibid.

exploitation deals and threatening Iranian sovereignty.⁶⁴ Instead, the threat of communist expansion further aligned Truman's objectives for Iran with British aims. For instance, the US financially backed the British commercial interests in Iran and pushed Iran to declare Russia as an aggressor in the new UN diplomatic forum.⁶⁵ Following the successful expulsion of Soviet troops, the US executed a program of economic and military aid designed to build bolster Iran from further communist influence or insurrection, similar to the Marshall Plan for Europe and Asia countries, but would not support Iran's full independence from foreign influence.

The pleas for self-determination and independence went unanswered and the conflict with the Soviet Union over the occupation of Azerbaijan ended all hopes for an independent Iran free from foreign influence. Instead, following the crisis, the US heavily supported the young Shah and the transformation of the country into a proxy government that would oppose future Soviet influence. The American resolve against communism would eventually lead to the 1953 US-led coup against the popularly elected Prime Minister, Mohammad Mosaddeq, out of fears he was sympathetic to the Soviet Union.⁶⁶ In only eight years, the US relationship to Iran had transformed from a potential ally against imperialism to generating a coup in favor of an unpopular, but anti-communist, monarch. This result of supporting European alliances over self-determination of minor nations was a critical facet of the containment strategy and would occur in future Cold War conflicts.

The successful resolution of the Iranian Crisis transformed US policy towards the Soviet Union and the development of the containment strategy. Prior to 1945, Roosevelt had developed a working relationship with Stalin and there were multiple ideologies regarding the future of US-

⁶⁴ Bruce R. Kuniholm, *The Origins of the Cold War in the Near East: Great Power Conflict and Diplomacy in Iran, Turkey and Greece* (Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1994), 379.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 382.

⁶⁶ John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1997), 166.

Soviet relations. Additionally, the UN was still an untested international organization for protecting the sovereignty of minor nations. Furthermore, there were doubts in the US leadership that a threat of military action against Russia would have the desired effect without resulting in a broader conflict or nuclear war. Finally, prior to the Iranian Crisis, the US still proclaimed a foreign policy against colonialism and imperialism. After the Iranian Crisis, the Truman administration seemed convinced that successfully applying diplomatic and military pressure had worked in 1946, anti-communism was a higher priority than anti-colonialism, and Kennan's theory of containment would prevent communist expansion worldwide.

In conclusion, the Iranian Crisis of 1946 was a critical turning point for US foreign policy that solidified the strategy of containment by confirming US fears of Soviet expansionism, established the UN as a US diplomatic instrument, confirmed the viability of threatening military intervention, and force US policy to choose anti-communism over anti-colonialism. This first engagement of the Cold War only lasted for three short months, but the decisions made during and the conclusions drawn after the conflict altered US national policy for decades to come. The Cold War may have ended in the early 1990's, but the repercussions from the opening months of the Cold War in 1946 still impact us today.

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