Introduction

On 8 May 1974, an unexpected visitor arrived at Tehran's Mehrābād Airport. Despite the impromptu nature of the visit, efforts were made to make the guest feel welcome in Tehran. He was granted full military honours, and was met at the airport by the prime minister, Amir ʿAbbās Hoveydā, as well as several other important figures, including the Saudi ambassador to Iran.[1] This guest was the president of Uganda, the authoritarian military dictator Idi Amin. In February that year, during the Islamic Summit Conference in Lahore, Amin had spoken of his wish to establish a Ugandan embassy in Tehran.[2] He also spoke on that occasion about the need for rapprochement between Iran and Iraq, and even suggested that he be provided with a plane so that he could travel to Tehran to convince the shah to come with him in person to the Lahore conference to try and solve this problem together.[3] This offer was clearly not taken particularly seriously, because Amin's visit to Iran in May, which came at the end of a tour of the Middle East, caught everyone off guard. The visit was said in the press to have been 'completely unexpected and sudden', and there was a sense of bewilderment at Amin's arrival among Iranian officials.[4]

Eager to make the most of this unanticipated visit in terms of public relations – since such visits from foreign leaders substantiated the shah's credentials as a global statesman – the daily newspaper *Ettelāʿāt* printed an image of Prime Minister Hoveydā greeting Amin at the airport on its front page. Amin was the guest of the prime minister for lunch and in the evening a banquet was held in his honour by the shah. In spite of Iran's observations of the formalities of

[1] *Ettelāʿāt*, 18 Ordibehesht 1353/ 8 May 1974, 4.
[2] P. A. E. Renardel de Lavalette to minister of foreign affairs, 13 March 1974, Nationaal Archief (The National Archives of the Netherlands), The Hague (henceforth NA) 2.05.191/433.
[3] *Ettelāʿāt*, 19 Ordibehesht 1353/ 9 May 1974, 4. [4] Ibid.

receiving heads of state, Iranian officials were annoyed at Amin's attempts to meddle in Iran's affairs. The US ambassador in Tehran, Richard Helms, wrote that 'Iranian officials were not happy at [the] prospects of Amin's visit and his conduct here confirmed their expectations'.[5] One of these officials was the shah's court minister, Asadollāh ʿAlam, whose diary entry for that day reads:

> In the evening Idi Amin, the president of Uganda, who without any prior warning, decided to come from Jeddah to Iran, in order to reconcile Iran and Iraq, was the guest of the shah. It is most ridiculous; he was a boxer and a corporal in the British army, now he is a general! He says strange and ludicrous things...[6]

ʿAlam confirmed to Helms that 'Amin was on a self-appointed mission of mediation to resolve [the] difficulties affecting relations between Iran, Iraq and Syria'.[7] Amin's crude and unpolished manner also irritated the sensibilities of some of the Pahlavi political elite, particularly the cultivated and erudite prime minister. According to Helms, 'During [the] shah's banquet Amin's behaviour was so bumptious, boisterous and burpy that Hoveyda was heard to mutter to an aide, "get him out of [the] country by 10:00 tomorrow morning"'.[8]

In spite of how distasteful Amin seemed to the Pahlavi elite, his charm offensive was not entirely unsuccessful, for just five months later, on 12 October 1974, Iran announced that it had established diplomatic relations with Uganda.[9] Idi Amin's visit is exceptional for its spontaneity, but throughout the 1970s, the arrival of leaders or emissaries from Africa in Tehran was a very common occurrence. They

[5] Richard Helms telegram, 13 May 1974, WikiLeaks Cable 1974TEHRAN03762_b.
[6] Diary entry 18 Ordibehesht 1353, *Yāddāsht-hā-ye ʿAlam*, vol. 4, ed. ʿAli-Naqi ʿĀlikhāni (Tehran: Ketābsarā, 2014), 84.
[7] Helms telegram, 13 May 1974.
[8] Ibid. Hoveydā reported to the US ambassador Richard Helms that Amin told him that he wished to re-establish relations with the United States, which had just one year earlier recalled its ambassador in anger after Amin sent a message to Nixon wishing him a 'speedy recovery from the Watergate affair'. Hoveydā reacted with 'some surprise' at this and asked Amin why, in light of his 'insulting message', he felt the United States would want to re-establish relations with him. Hoveydā told the ambassador that 'Amin professed injured innocence and said that he intended no slight or insult but was simply expressing his "true" feelings.' Helms telegram, 19 May 1974, WikiLeaks Cable 1974TEHRAN03965_b.
[9] Helms telegram, 14 October 1974, WikiLeaks Cable 1974TEHRAN08633_b.

came to Iran to request economic or military aid, political support, trade deals and other agreements, and in a relatively short period of time Iran built up extensive political and trade connections across the continent. For example, Ethiopia under Emperor Haile Selassie developed a close relationship with Iran in the 1960s and was for a period Iran's key strategic ally in East Africa. Haile Selassie travelled to Iran in 1964 and 1971, and the shah himself travelled to Ethiopia in 1968, on what would be his only visit to sub-Saharan Africa during his reign. Iran developed a close relationship with Senegal in the 1970s, the culmination of which was the visit of Empress Farah in 1976 to lay the foundation stone of a Senegalese–Iranian city that would bear her name, Keur Farah Pahlavi. As one of only two monarchs with the title 'emperor' – the other was Emperor Hirohito of Japan – the shah was invited as a special guest to attend the coronation of the self-proclaimed emperor of Central Africa, Jean Bedel Bokassa, in December 1977.[10] The shah also cultivated close ties with the president of Zaire, Mobutu Sese Seko, to whom he gave military aid, as well as favourable prices for oil.

Despite efforts to build close ties with non-Arab Africa in the 1960s, the shah maintained a strong presence in North Africa, too. Egyptian president Gamal ʿAbd al-Nasser had severed ties with Iran in 1960 and became for the next decade the shah's main adversary. The shah thus developed strong ties with Tunisia and Morocco, conservative, pro-Western states that he felt could help to exploit frictions in the brand of Arab unity promoted by Egypt's firebrand president. With the decline of Nasser after the Six-Day War of June 1967, Iran re-established relations with Egypt. With Nasser's successor, Anwar Sadat, the shah developed a close personal and political relationship, and Egypt became Iran's closest ally in Africa during the 1970s. This remarkable turnaround was particularly striking considering the deep animosity between Iran and Egypt under Nasser. Iran's rapprochement with

[10] The shah and Emperor Hirohito were apparently at the top of Bokassa's invitation list, and he had been in contact with the shah as early as April 1977. Apparently, Bokassa also sought the help of Iran, Japan and Morocco in putting together an imperial constitution. *Ettelāʿāt*, 17 Farvardin 1356/ 6 April 1977; and Brian Titley, *Dark Age: The Political Odyssey of Emperor Bokassa* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1998), 84 and 92. The other emperor, Haile Selassie, had lost his throne in 1974.

Egypt removed a local threat and allowed the shah to pursue more boldly his ambitions beyond Iran's immediate geographical sphere.

As Haile Selassie's authority waned in the early part of the 1970s, and after his fall in 1974, Iran sought to develop ties with other countries in East Africa. Most important among these countries were Sudan under President Jaʿfar Nimeiry and Somalia under President Siad Barre. Such was the strategic shift in the Horn of Africa that Iran actually provided military support to Siad Barre's Somalia for use against its former ally Ethiopia. Barre even travelled to Iran in December 1977, just days before President Carter's visit that month, to implore the shah to use his influence with the US president to try to convince him to give military support to Somalia. President Carter's visit is often remembered for his infamous New Year message, in which, just weeks before the intensification of the protests that would result in the overthrow of the Pahlavi regime, he declared Iran to be 'an island of stability'. However, at the time, the issue at the top of the agenda during meetings between the shah and President Carter was the situation in the Horn of Africa. The issue was also discussed extensively and prominently in the Iranian press.

In spite of the extensive ties Iran developed with the countries of Africa during the 1970s, and despite the fascinating ways in which the interplay between decolonisation, the Cold War and Iran's sudden oil wealth influenced its foreign policy, there have been few studies on Iran's African relations in this period. One of the reasons for this is that the expansion of these relations occurred during a relatively short period between 1970 and 1978. Indeed, for most of the first five decades of Pahlavi rule, Iran had very few interactions with Africa beyond the Arab north. There were two main reasons for this: first, Iran's concerns were primarily local; and second, the vast majority of Africa was still under some form of colonial rule. The decolonisation of Africa, which began in earnest towards the end of the 1950s, changed the situation completely. By the 1960s, Africa was no longer divided between various European colonial powers; it was now made up of some fifty independent nations, each looking for allies to help them shake off the remnants of colonialism, and avoid being dragged into the Cold War. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, meanwhile, had faced a tumultuous first twelve years on the throne, but in the years following the removal of Mohammad Mosaddeq as prime minister in 1953, his position became more secure, his economy achieved stable growth, and

he was able to think more clearly about the role Iran could play on the global stage.

To put the vast expansion of Iran's ties across the African continent during the 1970s into perspective, in 1969, Iran had political relations with only five countries in the whole of Africa – just one of those, Ethiopia, outside the Arab north. By the mid-1970s, Iran had established links with over thirty countries, and by the revolution, Iran had a presence in most African countries.[11] Among the countries Iran established diplomatic relations with in this period were: Lesotho, Swaziland and South Africa in 1970;[12] Kenya, Malawi and Senegal in 1971; Sudan and Zaire in 1972; Chad, Mauritania, Nigeria, Somalia and Zambia in 1973; Ghana and Uganda in 1974; Gabon, Ivory Coast, Madagascar and Niger in 1975; and Mozambique and Seychelles in 1976. Iran's ambassadors were normally accredited in several countries. For instance, for most of the 1970s, the ambassador in Senegal was also accredited to Ivory Coast, the ambassador in Madagascar was also accredited to Mauritius, Mozambique and Seychelles, and the ambassador to Nigeria was also accredited in Ghana, Niger and Sierra Leone.

Of course, some of these relationships were stronger than others, and the closeness of ties often depended on how useful the specific country's resources or political influence could be to Iran. In a report on Iran–Africa relations submitted to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1974, the French ambassador in Tehran, Robert de Souza, observed that in spite of the 'tightening of ties with certain African countries . . . because of the often superficial nature of these relations, this "Iranian-African rapprochement" is nevertheless marked by a certain ambiguity'.[13] One of the reasons why Iran was apparently slow to develop substantive ties with African countries in the 1970s after the initial establishment of relations – the reason the French ambassador considered them to be superficial – was that it took time to develop the necessary expertise of Africa in Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and train diplomats who had the linguistic skills, understanding of African

[11] Shireen T. Hunter, *Iran's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era: Resisting the New International Order* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger), 226.
[12] Relations with South Africa were at the consular general level and remained so until the revolution.
[13] Robert de Souza to Michel Jobert, 5 March 1974, Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes (henceforth CADN) 437PO/1/55/ANL7.

affairs and willingness to relocate to Africa. For this reason, for much of the 1970s, Iran's Africa policy was to offer smart, targeted support to certain countries that could help Iran to achieve its broader economic or strategic goals, rather than give blanket support to large areas. Thus, for many countries in Africa, the establishment of relations with Iran did not bring expansive trade relations or development aid. In the mid- to late 1970s, when Iran's economy weakened and it became more difficult to invest in development projects in Africa, the Iranian government still tried to secure economic agreements with countries such as Gabon, in order to guarantee continued access to their uranium.

By examining the origins and development of Iran's expansive ties across Africa during the late Pahlavi era, this book seeks to answer several questions: What was the nature of the shah's Africa policy during this period? What strategies did the shah employ to expand its influence across the continent? Which countries or regions received special attention? How did Africa fit into the shah's broader strategic objectives? And how were these relations shaped by the two major global processes in the decades following the end of the Second World War: the Cold War and decolonisation?

The Cold War and Decolonisation

There is an important body of scholarship that has illuminated the position of the Third World in the context of the global Cold War. Correcting the Eurocentric nature of the scholarship of earlier Cold War history, modern historiography has 'helped forge a rare scholarly consensus', as Robert McMahon notes, 'that the Cold War constituted a truly global contest, in which the Third World served as a critical theatre, and that it was an event in which non-Western actors assumed a large and substantive role'.[14] Iran was on the front line of the Cold War from the very beginning in 1946, and its global interactions were

[14] Robert J. McMahon, 'Introduction', in *The Cold War in the Third World*, ed. Robert J. McMahon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 4. Recent examples of this scholarship include: Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Odd Arne Westad, *The Cold War: A World History* (London: Allen Lane, 2017); and Lorenz M. Lüthi, *Cold Wars: Asia, The Middle East, Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

shaped and at times restricted by the great power conflict until its end.[15] Nonetheless, the shah competently and at times skilfully navigated the complex world of big power politics. As Roham Alvandi has argued, by the late 1960s/early 1970s, he had become such an important player in Cold War politics, that he was able to negotiate with the United States on his own terms, becoming one of several leaders of the Global South in this period, 'who often abetted and manipulated the superpowers in the pursuit of their own local ambitions and interests'.[16]

Iran's foreign policy went through several phases during Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's rule, as a result of international and domestic developments. The shah had come to power during the Anglo-Soviet occupation of Iran during the Second World War, so during the early years of his rule, his primary objective for Iran was 'to liquidate the consequences of the war occupation' and ensure the survival of Iran as an independent entity.[17] During the premiership of Mohammad Mosaddeq (1951–1953), Iran's government adopted a policy of negative equilibrium (*siyāsat-e movāzeneh-ye manfi*) vis-à-vis the imperial powers. The premise of this policy was that favouring neither Britain nor Russia would lead to an equilibrium, in which neither side would be able to interfere in Iran's affairs.[18] Following the ousting of Mosaddeq in August 1953, the shah embraced a policy of 'positive nationalism', which was a direct contrast to Mosaddeq's 'negative equilibrium', and essentially meant that Iran should maintain positive relations and cooperate with the great powers to ensure Iran's security in the bipolar international order. This led, in 1955, to Iran joining the pro-Western Baghdad Pact, and in 1959, its entering into a formal alliance with the United States.[19]

[15] For an overview of Iran's position and role in the Cold War, and a useful summary of the historiography, see Roham Alvandi, 'Guest Editor's Introduction: Iran and the Cold War', *Iranian Studies*, vol. 47, no. 3 (2014), 373–378.
[16] Roham Alvandi, *Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah: The United States and Iran in the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3.
[17] Shahram Chubin and Sepehr Zabih, *The Foreign Relations of Iran: A Developing State in a Zone of Great-Power Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 36.
[18] Ibid., 2.
[19] Sepehr Zabih, 'Iran's International Posture: De Facto Nonalignment within a Pro-Western Alliance', *The Middle East Journal*, vol. 24, no. 3 (1970), 304.

By the early 1960s, the shah had consolidated his personal position after a tumultuous first twenty years on the throne, had launched a comprehensive set of social and political reforms, packaged as the White Revolution, and had established stable relations with the Soviet Union and the United States.[20] Consequently, he began to think more clearly about the role Iran could play in the Middle East and beyond and implemented what he termed his independent national policy (*siyāsat-e mostaqel-e melli*). The shah claimed that the reduction of the gap between rich and poor that had occurred as a result of land reform and the abolition of feudalism had contributed to a greater sense of national unity. Therefore, the shah argued, Iran was ready to initiate a new foreign policy to reflect this; a policy which was in essence both independent – in other words, not dictated by the United States or the Soviet Union – and national.[21]

The independent national policy provided the ideological basis for Iran's foreign policy from 1963 until the revolution and sought to bring about 'good relations with foreign countries … fruitful and peaceful co-existence and cooperation irrespective of the political or economic form of other governments'.[22] From the initiation of the White Revolution in 1963 onwards, the shah was the ultimate arbiter when it came to Iran's foreign relations; deciding priorities and making all of the major – and most of the minor – decisions, to the extent that the scholar William E. Griffiths observed in 1978 that, 'The Shah *is* Iranian foreign policy, has been so since 1953, and will in all likelihood remain so as long as he reigns.'[23] In their important study on Iranian foreign relations during the Pahlavi period, Shahram Chubin and Sepehr Zabih observed several limitations and advantages of such a

[20] On the White Revolution, see Ali M. Ansari, 'The Myth of the White Revolution: Mohammad Reza Shah, "Modernization" and the Consolidation of Power', *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 37, no. 3 (2001), 1–24; and Rouhollah K. Ramazani, 'Iran's "White Revolution": A Study in Political Development', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2 (1974), 124–139.

[21] Rouhollah K. Ramazani, *Iran's Foreign Policy, 1941–1973: A Study of Foreign Policy in Modernizing Nations* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1975), 313.

[22] *Decade of the Revolution: Resurrection of a Nation; A Miracle of Leadership, 1963–1973* (Tehran: Central Insurance of Iran, 1973), 172.

[23] William E. Griffith, 'Iran's Foreign Policy in the Pahlavi Era', in *Iran under the Pahlavis*, ed. George Lenczowski (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1978), 385.

system, in which the shah was the 'sole and ultimate source of decisions affecting foreign policy, in all its manifestations'.[24]

This situation was understood fully by foreign diplomats. A 1975 British Foreign and Commonwealth Office report read, for example:

> When speaking of 'Iranian' foreign policy one is almost always speaking of the Shah's foreign policy – and *vice versa*. As in most other areas of national life here, Monarch and State are virtually synonymous – though there are certain fields, such as religion, where popular attitudes may be a constraint on the Shah's freedom of action. This imperial pre-eminence makes an analysis at once more easy and more difficult – more easy, because the Shah speaks constantly in public and in private on foreign policy issues: more difficult, because he is a complex human being whose prejudices and emotions colour his thinking. The personal invades upon the national.[25]

However, such analyses do not tell the whole story, for while the shah's central role in matters relating to foreign policy was unquestionable, one should also consider the myriad factors and individuals that influenced his decision-making. For example, Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet has explored the influence that intellectual discussions of race and social justice had on the shah's approach to the Global South.[26] Several diplomats and political figures whom the shah trusted were also able to influence him and in effect help to shape foreign policy. The shah's son-in-law and minister of foreign affairs from 1966 until 1971, Ardeshir Zāhedi, describes in detail in his memoirs the role that he played in Iran's foreign relations. In Africa, for example, Zāhedi recalls that the shah at first wanted to establish Iran's first embassy in Black Africa in Ivory Coast, but he persuaded him instead to send an ambassador to Senegal.[27] Individuals such as Zāhedi were not merely tools of the shah's autocracy, but were active participants who were able to advise and influence him.

[24] Chubin and Zabih, *The Foreign Relations of Iran*, 18.
[25] Anthony D. Parsons, 'Iranian Foreign Policy', 1 May 1975, 3, The National Archives, Kew, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (henceforth FCO) 8/2501.
[26] See Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, 'Colorblind or Blinded by Color? Race, Ethnicity, and Identity in Iran', in *Sites of Pluralism: Community Politics in the Middle East*, ed. Firat Oruc (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 153–180; and Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, *Heroes to Hostages: America and Iran, 1800–1988* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 241–263.
[27] Ardeshir Zāhedi, *Khāterāt-e Ardeshir Zāhedi*, vol. 3 (Bethesda, MD: Ibex Publishers, 2020), 207.

Iran occupied an awkward position in the politics of the Global South. In the aftermath of the Second World War, when countries around the world gained independence from the European colonialists, Iran was generally an outsider in Third World solidarity movements. During the era of imperialism, it had not formally been colonised, but had ceded territory to the British and Russian Empires and had been forced to sign unequal treaties, which involved granting capitulatory rights to foreign merchants and selling off natural resources to enterprising foreign businessmen.[28] In short, Iran had remained a sovereign nation, but it had paid a price. Unlike the newly independent countries of the Global South, which saw Afro-Asian solidarity movements as a way to cooperate with like-minded allies to preserve their hard-fought sovereignty, Iran had no such motivation. Although the shah did send emissaries to solidarity movements, such as the Bandung Conference in 1955, Iran was a reluctant participant and did not embrace the spirit of these movements.[29] The shah did, however, join and sometimes lead movements that best suited his political agenda, such as the Islamic Conference in 1969.

Nonetheless, the global change brought about by decolonisation and the Cold War both shaped Iran's global interactions during this period, and profoundly influenced how the shah conceived Iran's position within the Global South. Although the shah was firmly on the side of the United States in the Cold War, Alvandi argues that 'the Pahlavi state sought to project an image of a resurgent Iran as an autonomous actor within the Western bloc'.[30] In the context of the changing world order that decolonisation presented, the shah attempted to 'serve as a bridge between East and West, North and South'.[31] Iran adopted a

[28] For discussion see Ali Gheissari, 'Unequal Treaties and the Question of Sovereignty in Qajar and Early Pahlavi Iran', *Durham Middle East Papers*, no. 106 (2023), 1–63.

[29] On the Bandung Conference and its legacy, see Christopher Lee, ed., *Making a World after Empire: The Bandung Moment and Its Political Afterlives* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2019). On Iran's participation in Bandung, see Thomas Bédrède, 'Iran's Foreign Policy and the Algerian War of Independence, 1954–1962', in *Iran and Global Decolonisation: Politics and Resistance After Empire*, ed. Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet and Robert Steele (London: Gingko Library, 2023), 169–170.

[30] Roham Alvandi, 'Iran in the Age of Aryamehr', in *The Age of Aryamehr: Late Pahlavi Iran and Its Global Entanglements*, ed. Roham Alvandi (London: Gingko Library, 2018), 17.

[31] Ibid.