A relationship beset with extraordinary acrimony, the US and Iran rarely see eye-to-eye – and then only to avoid war or nuclear catastrophe. What is at the core of this troubled rivalry that has stymied policymakers and scholars alike? Using a carefully selected collection of White House, CIA, State Department, and other records, Worlds Apart provides a reliable, evidence-based approach to this question: starting from the 1979 revolution and hostage crisis, through the Iran–Iraq War and the spread of radical Islam, to 9/11 and the nuclear impasse, to the 2009 Green Movement and the Obama and Trump presidencies. The records which form the heart of the book offer a rare unfiltered view into the perspectives and experiences of the American and Iranian governments over forty years. Providing timelines, glossaries, discussion questions, and a guide on reading declassified documents, Byrne and Byrne explore this complicated relationship accessibly and innovatively in this unique documentary history.

Malcolm Byrne is an award-winning author and editor of several books on US–Iran relations. Since 1997, he has run the nongovernmental National Security Archive’s multinational Iran documentation project, based at the George Washington University, and has made numerous trips to the Islamic Republic.

Kian Byrne coordinates the Middle East documentation project at the History and Public Policy Program of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars where he also co-edits and contributes to the program’s blog on new archival findings, Sources & Methods. He has researched and traveled through much of the region, including Iran.
WORLDS APART
A Documentary History of
US–Iranian Relations, 1978–2018

Malcolm Byrne
National Security Archive at
George Washington University

Kian Byrne
Woodrow Wilson International Center for
Scholars, Washington, DC
For Leila and Ellie
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Preface

This volume is primarily intended as a documentary introduction to US policy toward the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). As such, it is not a standard scholarly monograph. If anything, it turns that concept inside out. Instead of prioritizing the views and interpretations of an outside observer, accompanied by footnotes to documentary evidence, the historical records themselves take center stage, supported by descriptive materials to provide context.

Why make documents the focus? Over the decades since the creation of the Islamic Republic, hundreds of books and innumerable articles have been written (in English alone) about the country and its relations with the outside world, particularly the United States. Many are invaluable and deeply insightful. Yet, after more than forty years, the US–Iran rivalry still confounds policymakers and experts alike. Few serious observers are confident enough to make broad predictions about where the IRI is heading. Their task is complicated by spotty information, restricted interactions between the two countries, political sensitivities on both sides, and, often, personal preconceptions. The result is frequent disagreement – not just between Americans and Iranians but within the USA – about basic facts as well as a tendency toward polemics.

How is an interested reader not already steeped in the subject supposed to find their way through this thicket? There is no simple answer, but this volume proceeds from the idea, almost as old as the study of history itself, that an excellent place to start is to explore what the key actors – in this case, mainly American policy practitioners – were thinking. What were the issues they grappled with? What were their goals? What factors influenced their choices? How well did they understand what was happening in Iran? What were the ramifications of US policies?

Primary documents such as the ones featured here are essential for gaining a first-hand look at the evolution of US policy toward the IRI. Thankfully, as the 1979 revolution has faded in memory, parts of the available US historical record have expanded. Although government archival budgets are chronically inadequate and declassification systems can be infuriating, researchers now have access to a growing amount of material on the internal workings of most recent presidential administrations. These include memoranda to and from the president, notes of White House meetings, transcripts of conversations with foreign leaders, diplomatic
correspondence about secret negotiations, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) intelligence reports, Pentagon battlefield analyses, and international nuclear inspection reports. This compilation draws precisely on these kinds of once-inaccessible materials.

A principal reason for focusing on the American side of the relationship is the lack of equivalent official records from Iran or other countries. The IRI archives on internal government decision-making during the post-revolutionary period are effectively off-limits to foreigners. Access to other national repositories is highly uneven. British official sources, for example, include many useful materials, including some that reflect on the US–Iran relationship, but tend to be more open for earlier years (the 1953 coup being an extreme exception). On the other hand, quite a bit of valuable material can be found in public sources in Iran, notably its news media, which often print interviews with former officials about historical milestones like the Iran–Iraq War. Another useful source is memoirs of former leaders and senior government representatives, including the likes of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Ali Montazeri, and Ali Akbar Salehi. With the help of Persian-speaking experts, we have identified and included a number of these items to provide a counterpoint to – or reality check on – the American perspective at key junctures.

The contents of this book derived mainly from research at the US National Archives and Records Administration and its associated presidential libraries. Many are the product of Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) or Mandatory Declassification Review (MDR) requests filed either by the authors or other researchers over the years with the State Department, CIA, Pentagon, and elsewhere. Additional items were located in agency electronic reading rooms (the releases themselves often the result of FOIAs). Other sources mined include Congress, the federal courts, international organizations such as the United Nations and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and nongovernmental archives. We also combed through both of our organizations’ foreign archival holdings acquired over time – Iraqi, Russian, Azeri in addition to Iranian and British – and while they contain fascinating records the physical limits of the current publication forced us to prioritize sources that revealed high-level American thinking. Readers are encouraged to visit our respective websites for more in-depth research.

The aim of this particular collection is to give readers a grounding in how US policy toward Iran developed during and after the Iranian revolution, which peaked in early 1979. The records we have chosen are the product of our own work collecting documents on Iran as well as our own perspectives on the history. We have tried to reveal as many of the complexities of the
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issues as we could and provide a fair representation of the range of viewpoints that have existed about the scope of American interests, the nature of the Iranian challenge, and the preferred direction of US policy.

There are some obvious limitations to a compendium like this. First of all, it is impossible to go into great depth on the full range of issues covered here while keeping the page count reasonable. To stay within our allotted length, moreover, we have been obliged to reproduce extracts in many cases. Another inevitable hurdle is that while the American historical record is quite excellent for earlier periods, the closer one gets to the present the less is publicly available. Subjects like Iran, nuclear weapons, terrorism, and intelligence operations are highly sensitive and usually do not get declassified for decades. However, enough can be gleaned to allow for important insights up to and including the Obama presidency.

The book is divided into five main chapters that deal roughly with one decade apiece, except for the first chapter, which takes on the crucial period 1977–1981. Each chapter opens with a succinct essay that sets the stage historically and politically. Every document is preceded by a “headnote” that describes its context and significance. An epilogue and conclusion wrap up the main text, but a variety of accompanying features give additional background and guidance. These include a mini-seminar on how to read a government document; a chronology of events; and glossaries of names and organizations. Questions at the end of each chapter and a select bibliography will help those interested in further discussion and sources.

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Acknowledgements

This book is the culmination of years of documentary research on Iran, over the course of which we have benefited from contributions too numerous to count.

To begin with, we would like to thank members of the team who helped carry the load with their research and other skills: Sina Azodi, Alexander Chang, and Cheyn Shah. Sina was key to identifying, tracking down, and translating Persian-language sources, while Alexander and Cheyn contributed to general editing as well as to composing the glossaries, chronology, and reviewing other parts of the book. Clara Kaul provided expert copy-editing on the index.

While many of the documents in the collection came from our own research and FOIA requests over the years, several friends and colleagues graciously donated, or pointed us to, materials that deepened the pool. Alexandra Evans provided unstintingly from her research at the Reagan Library. Mark Gasiorowski has been a virtual lending library of documentation and expert advice over the years. Kambiz Fattahi has shared numerous records over time. Tom Blanton and Svetlana Savranskaya made available remarkable White House memcons uncovered during their research at presidential libraries.

Other scholars gave us invaluable suggestions for where to find materials on Iran, areas on which to focus our research, thematic suggestions, and other contributions. They include: Arash Azizi, Alan Eyre, Timothy Nunan, Siavush Randjbar-Daemi, Mahsa Rouhi. We are only sorry we could not fit more of their ideas into the manuscript.

We especially thank everyone who read some or all of our early drafts: Gregory Brew, Charles Kraus, Christian Emery, Farideh Farhi, Mark Gasiorowski, and Bruce Riedel. Bill Burr, Leah Richardson, and Mark Yoffe had helpful comments on “How to Read a Declassified Document.” Lisa Thompson provided invaluable support on the index and Rinat Bikineyev helped to design the jacket. Of course, any errors or shortcomings are our own.

Over time, we gained tremendously from the insights of policy practitioners and experts in the field whose interviews and participation in critical oral history conferences with both our institutions – the National Security Archive and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars – going back to the early 2000s helped shape our understanding of the complex relationship between the United States and Iran. These individuals – from the United States, Iran, the United Kingdom, Russia, and elsewhere – drew on decades of experience as diplomats, politicians, soldiers, and intelligence
officials and provided us and our colleagues with riveting perspectives that have frequently found their way into this book. We would like to thank our main partners in this multiyear exploration: John Tirman, Huss Banai, Jim Blight, and Janet Lang.

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We also express our appreciation to the dedicated archivists from the National Archives and Records Administration and its associated presidential libraries – of Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, William J. Clinton, and George W. Bush – along with the often overlooked FOIA and declassification officers at federal agencies who make it possible for all of us to begin to understand our recent history. A special shout-out to Brittany Parris at the Carter Library for her help with innumerable requests.

Many of the people named so far have come from the American side, but a project like this also relies heavily on the Iranian perspective, even if that is not reflected in the share of Iranian records in the Contents list. We gratefully recognize the many Iranian scholars who, often under difficult conditions, have pushed the field of modern Iranian history forward, and specifically the subject of US–Iran relations. We have personally benefited from the generosity of many of these experts since we first began engaging with scholarly counterparts in the Islamic Republic in the late 1990s.

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From Malcolm: As always, this is for Leila who makes it easy to forget how much I rely on her. From Kian: I’m thankful to all my friends and family for their love and support – especially Ellie, for everything she means to me.
How to Read a Declassified Document

For historians of diplomatic history or US foreign policy, archival documents are indispensable. Like an archeological relic, each has a story to tell. Historical records give clues to the thinking of the people who made policy and who carried it out. They shed light on presidential decision-making, interactions with foreign governments, intelligence collection, and the activities of diplomats and the military around the globe. Their immediacy and unfiltered information are what make them such valuable building blocks of history.

But how do you know what exactly you’re reading? How can you tell if a document is important, if it made an impact, or if anyone even read it? If it is objective? Truthful? Genuine? Where does it fit in the larger stream of events? Ultimately, documents are only as reliable as the men and women who write them, so readers need to approach with care.

Here we offer some helpful guidelines to aid readers in how to evaluate a government document – or, for that matter, any book or article one might read about the subject. The list starts with a document’s metadata – its surface features – which are immediately visible and critical for knowing the who, what, and when about the item. The rest of the questions involve deeper inspection, a search for contexts, and reading between the lines for meaning, purpose, and significance. That in turn requires some knowledge about the subject at hand, who the main players were, what else was taking place at the time, and ideally something about the policy process. This can all be a challenge, no doubt, but it is at the heart of what a historian does – attempt to understand and explain events and thinking from an earlier time.

Questions to ask yourself:

**What kind of document is it?** There are many different kinds of documents. The cataloguing system at the National Security Archive identifies 390 distinct types. The point is to know whether what you’re examining is supposed to be a factual record like a transcript, an advocacy piece, a private communication, a public statement, or something else. Every type has an intended purpose that can help you assess its value for your immediate purposes.

**When was it written?** This is important for placing the document in the context of other events happening at the time, whether in a person’s life, in
the course of a policy debate, or on a global scale. Was it written in response to an internal memo, prior to an important UN vote, immediately after a terrorist attack? Nothing happens in a vacuum.

**Who is the author?** What do you know about them? Do they have a track record of objectivity or, conversely, political or personal partiality? If s/he is not a familiar figure, it may be worth exploring their background to understand something about their perspective or motivations.

**Is the document signed?** Initialed? Marked “Received”? If not, these are indications it is a draft and not a finished version or an official record, which affects the conclusions we can draw about how it turned out and its potential impact. (It could still be of value for understanding how certain people viewed an issue or how policy thinking evolved, for example.)

**Was the document reviewed or approved by others?** State Department memos and cables are typically drafted and reviewed by several people who are named at the end of the document. These reflect the position of a particular department, whereas items written by an individual often contain personal opinions. Similarly, major intelligence products like National Intelligence Estimates are signed off on by most or all of the agencies that make up the intelligence community; so they are useful for identifying issue areas of broad consensus but not where one would find out-of-the-box analyses or controversial views.

**Who is the intended recipient?** Who the audience is inevitably influences how a person presents their case, including their level of candor. A message to a foreign official will be far more formal and guarded than an email to a close colleague. So will a diplomatic cable with a long list of recipients, as opposed to one marked “Eyes Only” or “Personal.”

**Was it originally classified?** A Top Secret memo is more likely to include information the government considers sensitive or to reflect an official’s thinking than an unclassified press release aimed at swaying public opinion. Beyond the standard classification levels, codewords and dissemination controls – for example, GAMMA indicating communications intelligence, or NOFORN not to be shared with foreigners – further define limits on distribution.

**Are there additional markings made by others?** Did anyone add remarks that can serve as a clue as to who read the document or how it was received? Jimmy Carter routinely wrote in the margins of his aides’ memos, providing relatively unguarded commentary of a sort that is prized by historians.
Is the document meant to inform or persuade? This could be the author’s expressed objective or a hidden aim; either should influence how you assess her/his arguments.

Is the author writing for history? Memoirs, interviews, and published articles can be invaluable but call for abundant caution because of the temptation for an author to put herself in a positive light; contemporaneous, unpublished documents are subject to the same phenomenon.

Is there less there than it seems? There is a tendency when researching government documents to treat them with more reverence than they might deserve. Ordinary people wrote most of these materials and their work may be respected without its significance being overblown simply because it is highly classified or located in a restricted file.
Like any text, government records such as this State Department cable contain clues to understanding the authors' intent as well as the broader context of the document.
Chronology

1977
January 20 – Jimmy Carter is inaugurated president of the United States.
December 31 – In Tehran, Carter toasts the Shah’s “great leadership.”

1978
January 8 – The government-backed Ettela’at publishes an inflammatory article against Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, sparking a cycle of protests and suppression that builds throughout the year.
November 2 – After months of rising turmoil in Iran, the Carter administration’s high-level Special Coordinating Committee (SCC) meets for the first time on the crisis.

1979
January 16 – The Shah leaves Tehran for Cairo, Egypt.
February 1 – Khomeini returns to Iran.
February 5 – Khomeini appoints Mehdi Bazargan to head the Provisional Government.
February 14 – Members of the leftist group Fedayeen attack the US Embassy in Tehran.
April 1 – The Islamic Republic is declared following a national referendum.
October 22 – The Shah arrives in New York for medical examinations.
November 1 – National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski meets with Bazargan in Algiers.
November 4 – The US Embassy in Tehran is overrun, marking the beginning of the 444-day Iranian hostage crisis.
November 6 – The Bazargan government resigns and the Revolutionary Council takes over.
November 14 – Carter freezes Iranian assets.
December 3 – A new constitution including the concept of velayat-e faqih is approved. Khomeini is named Supreme Leader shortly afterwards.
Chronology • xxvii

1980
January 23 – Carter delivers the State of the Union address announcing the USA will use military force, if necessary, to defend its interests in the Persian Gulf.
April 7 – The US severs diplomatic ties with Iran.
April 25 – Operation Eagle Claw, an attempt to rescue the hostages, ends in disaster. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance resigns over the rescue decision.
July 27 – The Shah dies in Cairo.
September 22 – Iraq invades Iran, marking the beginning of the eight-year Iran–Iraq War.

1981
January 20 – Ronald Reagan is inaugurated president. Iran releases the hostages on the same day.
June 28 – A bombing at the Islamic Republic Party headquarters kills Secretary General of the IRP Mohammad Beheshti and seventy-two other officials. It is one of several violent attacks on Islamic Republic officials that summer.
October 2 – Ali Khamenei is elected president of Iran.

1982
May 24 – Iran liberates Khorramshahr from Iraqi forces, setting the stage for a counter-invasion.
June – Following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Iran dispatches more than 1,000 Revolutionary Guards personnel to the country, where they play a part in the formation of Hezbollah.

1983
April 18 – A suicide bombing targets the US Embassy in Beirut.
October 23 – A truck bomb explodes at the US Marine barracks in Beirut.

1984
January 23 – The Reagan administration places Iran on a list of governments supporting terrorism.

1985
June 3 – CIA officer William Buckley dies in captivity in Lebanon.
August 14 – Israel ships the first tranche of TOW antitank missiles to Iran as part of the Reagan-approved arms-for-hostages deals.
xxviii • Chronology

1986
May 25–28 – Former National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane leads a delegation to Tehran for secret talks as part of the arms-for-hostages deals.

November 3 – The Lebanese news magazine *Ash-Shiraa* exposes the secret Reagan arms deals.

1988
July 3 – The USS *Vincennes* shoots down an Iranian passenger plane after mistaking it for an Iranian fighter jet.

August 20 – The Iran–Iraq War enters a UN-brokered ceasefire.

1989
January 20 – George H.W. Bush is inaugurated president.

February 14 – Khomeini issues a fatwa calling for the death of British author Salman Rushdie.

March 28 – Khomeini rescinds the designation of Hossein Ali Montazeri as his successor.

June 3 – Khomeini dies. Ali Khamenei becomes Supreme Leader the following day.

August 3 – Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani is elected president of Iran.

1990
August 2 – Iraq invades Kuwait.

1991
December 4 – The last American hostage in Lebanon is freed with Iranian assistance.

1993
January 20 – William J. Clinton is inaugurated president.

1995
May 6 – Clinton imposes comprehensive economic sanctions on Iran.

1996

August 4 – Clinton signs the Iran and Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) into law.
1997
April 10 – A German court finds the Iranian government responsible for killing Kurdish leaders at the Mykonos Restaurant in Berlin in 1992.
May 23 – Mohammad Khatami is elected president of Iran.
July 8 – The USA designates the Mujahedin-e Khalq as a terrorist organization.

1998
January 7 – Khatami on CNN calls for a dialogue among civilizations.

1999
June – Clinton sends a letter to Khatami via the Omani foreign minister.

2000
March 17 – Secretary of State Madeleine Albright acknowledges US involvement in the 1953 Iranian coup.

2001
January 20 – George W. Bush is inaugurated president.
September 11 – Terrorist attacks by al-Qaeda take place in the USA.
Khamenei and Khatami condemn the events.

2002
January 29 – Bush labels Iran a member of the “Axis of Evil” in his State of the Union address.

2005
June 24 – Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is elected president of Iran.

2007
October 25 – The US imposes the most sweeping unilateral sanctions on Iranian entities since 1979.
November – A National Intelligence Estimate concludes that Iran halted its nuclear weapons program in 2003.

2008
July 19 – Under Secretary of State William Burns joins a P5+1 session that includes Iranian lead negotiator Saeed Jalili.
xxx • Chronology

2009
January 20 – Barack Obama is inaugurated president.
March 20 – Obama sends a videotaped Nowruz greeting to the people of Iran. Khamenei responds the next day.
June 12 – Ahmadinejad is declared the winner in a widely disputed presidential election, sparking the formation of the Green Movement.
October 21 – Iran initially agrees to a UN-sponsored nuclear fuel swap deal.

2010
May 17 – Iran, Brazil, and Turkey sign the Tehran Declaration.
June 9 – UN Security Council Resolution 1929 further increases sanctions on Iran.

2011
February 14 – Protests break out in Iran in response to the Arab Spring.
December 6 – The State Department launches “Virtual Embassy Tehran.”

2013
March 1–3 – High-level American and Iranian negotiators meet as part of the secret back channel facilitated by Oman.
June 15 – Hassan Rouhani is elected president of Iran.
November 24 – The intermediate Joint Plan of Action nuclear accord is signed.

2015
July 14 – The P5+1 and Iran sign the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

2017
January 20 – Donald Trump is inaugurated president.

2018
May 8 – Trump announces the United States’ withdrawal from the JCPOA.
Introduction: A Measure of Context

We sat on opposite sides of a long table, too weighted down by history to enjoy the view or the moment.

William J. Burns, *The Back Channel*, p. 363

The focus of this volume is the period 1978–2018, the months leading up to the Iranian revolution and the years that followed. But history, of course, does not unfold in neat, self-contained units. Everything that happens has antecedents that are often murky and require context in order to be properly understood. (This is the purpose of the “headnotes” accompanying each document.) It is not possible in this confined space to do justice to the complexities involved in this story. For rich detail and expert analysis, we refer readers to the relevant sources in the Select Bibliography, starting with Abbas Amanat’s history of Iran. Our aim here is simply to note a few points of background information that are worth keeping in mind as you put yourself in the shoes of decision-makers over the years who had the hard task of devising effective approaches toward the Islamic Republic.

One of the keys to developing a successful policy and understanding Iranian attitudes and character is to be aware of the country’s remarkable history and the impact of that bygone greatness on the worldview of its people. Persia, as it was known to the West for centuries, established the world’s first empire more than 2,500 years ago. The Achaemenid empire’s most illustrious ruler, Cyrus the Great, was renowned not only for his military conquests, from the Eastern Mediterranean to Central Asia, but for his reputation for wisdom, justice, and tolerance. The high point of ancient Persian civilization came during the Sassanid period from the early third century CE to the mid-seventh century. Advances and innovations in government, the arts and architecture, science and technology, medicine, education, and other areas, not to mention the rise of one of the world’s oldest religions, Zoroastrianism, were among the many achievements of pre-Islamic Iran and are still sources of great pride to Iranians today.

The advent of Islam is another key to grasping the complexity of modern Iran. Iranians are mostly Shiites but the sect makes up only 10–15 percent of all Muslims, while the Sunnis constitute 85–90 percent of the Islamic world. The differences between the two sects originated with a dispute over who were...
the rightful heirs to the Prophet Muhammad. Shiites believe the mantle should have followed bloodlines, passing to Ali, Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law. (The term Shiite is short for Shi’a, or followers of Ali.) The killing of not only Ali but later his two sons, Hassan and especially Hussein, has elevated the concepts of fighting injustice and seeking martyrdom to sacred levels. The impact can be seen in the virulence of revolutionary antipathy toward the Shah and the readiness for self-sacrifice during the Iran–Iraq War.

Iranian Shiites further differentiate themselves by their belief in the existence of twelve divinely ordained imams, descendants of Muhammad, who are owed unquestioning obedience. They hold that the Twelfth Imam disappeared but will return to usher in the final judgment. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini introduced a radically new innovation under Shiism called velayat-e faqih that allowed for a cleric, in the absence of the final imam, to assume all temporal power in the Islamic Republic. The position of Supreme Leader remains the final arbiter of Iranian official policy.

Iranian worldviews were shaped yet again in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries under the rule of the Qajar dynasty. A succession of mostly weak and corrupt rulers and disastrous conflicts led to significant losses of territory and attempts by feckless monarchs to compensate by granting heavily lopsided commercial concessions favoring outside powers, notably the UK and Russia. A growing sense of humiliation and anger sparked an extraordinary revolution in 1905 that united merchants, intellectuals, and mullahs, and produced a new constitution as well as a parliament. This was a rare positive development, however, during a period that mainly instilled, or intensified, a deeply rooted Iranian suspicion of outside powers, resistance to external interference in the country’s sovereign affairs, and resentment toward foreign exploitation of the country’s resources. These attitudes are all easily recognizable today.

It is in this context that the earliest sustained contacts between the USA and Iran occurred during the first half of the nineteenth century. Formal diplomatic relations were soon established, but the main interactions involved American missionaries who by and large left positive impressions by building hospitals and schools and generally showing a sensitivity to local customs. Two prominent Americans, Howard Baskerville, a missionary and teacher, and Morgan Shuster, who had been invited by the government to modernize the country’s financial systems, backed the 1905–11 Constitutional Revolution. Other notable American advisors and educators played constructive roles through the first half of the twentieth century.

After these initial, low-level interactions, World War II brought Iran squarely onto America’s radar. Bordering the Soviet Union to the south, it became a key transportation route for the Red Army, bypassing the Eastern
front. When Moscow reneged on a pledge to withdraw from the country after the war, President Harry Truman reacted vocally and, even though the actions of Iranian political figures were the real difference, the United States was hailed for defending the sovereignty of a smaller state. In short, Americans enjoyed a highly positive reputation in Iran at least through mid-century.

After the war, US strategists, alarmed at the possible spread of Soviet-led Communism, determined that Iran was “vital to the security of the United States.” The designation reflected Washington’s assessment that its interests were worldwide, effectively claiming for American leaders the right to intervene anywhere they deemed necessary – a premise that did not sit well in many locales. When a popular politician named Mohammad Mosaddeq became premier of Iran in 1951, he nationalized the country’s petroleum industry, which – under yet another concession – had been under UK control for fifty years. Mosaddeq claimed, as many other Iranians felt, that the terms of the oil deals struck with Britain were not only unfair but demeaned Iran and undermined its sovereignty.

In 1953, US and British intelligence combined with local Iranian actors to overthrow Mosaddeq, forever changing Iranian politics. A number of basic facts about the coup are still being debated, but the ouster had several repercussions worth noting. It reinstated to power an ally, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who would be a stout defender of American interests for the next quarter century, an outcome that led US officials to see it as a major success. But the American role had been a poorly kept secret, and as the Shah became increasingly autocratic this fact prompted growing popular resentment based on the belief that the prospects for democracy in the country had been dealt a major blow.

While it is risky to make assumptions based on a single historical variable, even as momentous as a coup, there is no doubt that steadfast US backing of Mohammad Reza Shah for the next twenty-five years had an enormous impact. To be sure, there were nuances to the relationship. For example, until President Richard Nixon in 1969, American leaders felt little enthusiasm for the monarch because of his hesitancy to enact meaningful reforms. But those concerns paled next to Cold War fears of Communism. More specifically, the urgency of devising an exit strategy from the Vietnam War (which ultimately involved proxies like Iran taking on the primary burden of regional defense) made him indispensable for American interests. Therefore, even when Iranian troops opened fire on crowds and the government became openly dependent on the repressive SAVAK secret police, US presidents mainly offered gestures of support. When the Shah finally did launch reforms, they were coincidentally followed by surges in oil revenues, which created a rosy picture of the country. As a State Department Iran
expert put it: “Iran was a success for American policy and we didn’t want to know” about its “weaknesses.”

By the time the luckless Jimmy Carter entered the White House in January 1977 on a promise to hold dictators accountable, it was too late to avoid revolution, especially after he reversed course and wound up becoming closer to the Shah. Khomeini, who had emerged as public enemy number one for the monarchy in 1963 and was expelled from the country the following year, homed in on offenses that evoked old historical sensitivities: American hegemony and interference in Iran’s affairs, kowtowing by the Shah to a foreign power, and contamination of Islamic values by Western culture. Those views have continued to animate the Islamic Republic’s behavior to this day even though they have failed demonstrably to improve the situation.

Readers of this volume will have a close-up view of developments from the height of the revolution, over frequent ups and downs, to the (temporary) resolution of one of the thorniest problems in the bilateral relationship. The portion of the record reproduced here provides direct, unfiltered evidence about what happened, how officials reacted, where they stumbled or succeeded, and how the two governments somehow managed to return essentially to where they began over forty years ago. The documents offer fascinating insights into the challenges of dealing with deeply hostile states and raise fundamental questions about how to move forward – questions policymakers themselves continue to struggle with.

Notes

3. Khomeini was especially galled by the regime’s signing of a so-called Status of Forces Agreement in 1964 granting US soldiers legal and other privileges not available to local citizens; he said that it “reduced the Iranian people to a level lower than that of an American dog.” The memory remained so raw that it was explicitly mentioned in the preamble to the Islamic Republic’s 1979 constitution. (Bager Moin, Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah [New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2000], p. 123; see generally, Kenneth Pollack, The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict between Iran and America [New York: Random House, 2004], pp. 93–100.)