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U.S. PUBLIC OPINION ON IRAN

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Iran in the Public Eye

Until fairly recently, public attention in the United States has rarely been directed toward affairs in Iran. In recent decades, Europe, the Far East and Latin America have drawn much more interest than the strange and little-known Near and Middle East. Iran's role in World War II received publicity at the time and in the spring of 1946 the presence of Soviet troops in Iran, as debated in the UN Security Council, attracted major attention. The Security Council question was the first great post-war crisis involving potential or actual Communist aggression. It attracted attention as the first move by the West to arrest the tide of Communist expansion. In this context, Iran per se was less important than the basic principle involved.

Between 1946 and 1951, when the Anglo-Iranian oil dispute broke, Iran had not occasioned much public attention, in comparison with other areas in the forefront of world politics. Since the spring of 1951, however, public interest, as measured in news attention, press and radio discussion, etc., has been active and sustained. The successive developments in the oil dispute have usually received prominent and serious attention. While the amount of attention has naturally varied according to the relative newsworthiness of events, interest has remained, on the whole, on a fairly high level.

A recent national opinion survey indicates that Iran's international problems have made a dent upon the man in the street. This survey asked respondents how important it was for the United States "to cooperate closely" with five given countries. Iran was rated third in order of importance, ahead of Israel and Yugoslavia, and behind France and Western Germany. In fact, almost as many said it was very important to cooperate with Iran (42%) as in respect to France (45%).

Significance of Iran on World Scene

The prime significance of Iran as a foreign policy problem is considered to rest in her strategic propinquity to the Soviet Union and in her rich oil resources. To a lesser extent, Iran receives prominent attention as an area in need of economic development and as a focal point in the world-wide movement of nationalism.

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The possibility of Soviet control of Iran has been the major element present in practically all public discussion concerning that country. Ever since the close of World War II, commentators have seen Iran as one of the two or three world positions against which Soviet pressure is steadily directed. Iran's rich oil deposits have also been often stressed, although as the Anglo-Iranian oil dispute has continued, the importance of Iran's oil has been more and more discounted.

Attitudes Toward Iranian Personalities:

The Shah: In contrast to the "flamboyant" personality of Mossadegh, the Shah at no time has made a very vivid impression on American observers. On the occasion of his six-week visit to the U.S. at the end of 1950, he drew only light, though on the whole friendly, press and radio comment. Then as now, the young King, in the view of most commentators, appeared likeable and well-intentioned. His peak position in the public esteem was probably reached during the summer of 1952, when the initiation of the royal land reform program caused the Shah to be widely and favorably compared with his neighbor, the deposed Farouk. For a time, some hope was even expressed that he might assume personal leadership in Iran, possibly establishing a military dictatorship in the fashion of Egypt's Naguib. But as editors saw the Iranian situation going from bad to worse, they very soon "wrote off" the Shah as a force to be reckoned with, and many now believe that his days are numbered.

Mossadegh: Premier Mohammed Mossadegh, on the other hand, has achieved a fame among the American public that is equaled by few other faces on the contemporary international scene. Actually, in spite of, or perhaps because of his "exasperating" diplomatic tactics and odd foibles, "Mossey" or "The Weeper" has deeply intrigued American observers, most of whom at first regarded the old man in the frayed dressing-gown as a figure of comic relief. But at the beginning of 1952, Time regretfully announced its choice of Mossadegh as the "Man of the Year", explaining, "because his rapid advance from obscurity was attended by the greatest stir." He "increased the danger of a general war, impoverished his country and brought it and some neighbor lands to the brink of disaster."

In the wake of events since January, observers have shown increasing impatience with Mossadegh's "intransigence" and with his "blackmail" threats, and the belief that he is "playing fast and loose with the destiny of his people" is extremely widespread. Nevertheless, most of those commenting adhere to the conclusion that any foreseeable alternative to Mossadegh could only be worse.

Kashani: The "fabulous" Mullah Ayatollah Kashani, would-be-unifier of the entire Moslem world and unofficial ruler of Iran's political street gangs, is dreaded as just such an eventuality. His election as speaker of the lower house of the Iranian Parliament evoked widespread references to that "violent anti-Westerner", and his utterances since then have done little to amend his sinister reputation. In the majority view, the "ambitious" Mullah would not hesitate to collaborate with the National Front to further his aims.

Attitudes Toward Oil Dispute

Importance Attached to Dispute

When the Anglo-Iranian oil dispute first hit the front pages in the spring of 1951, American editors and commentators took a very serious view of the situation. Initially, a grave threat was seen in the possibility that the West might lose access to Iran's oil deposits. Iran's oil output was widely believed to be vital to both the economic well-being and military potential of Western Europe. The possibility of the Soviets gaining access to or control of the oil also caused serious concern.

Subsequently, comment has revealed much less anxiety on this aspect of the problem. Commentators often noted that physical factors would seriously hinder, if not prevent, the Soviets from effectively exploiting the oil resources. Moreover, after a few months, it was generally realized that other oil-producing areas could easily replace, to a large extent, the oil formerly obtained in Iran.

Throughout the oil controversy, a grave threat, in the view of U.S. commentators, was the possibility of an economic and political upheaval, and of a Communist-oriented regime coming to power. For the most part, a Red Army invasion of Iran has not seemed likely to U.S. observers. But they have believed that there continues to exist a real possibility of an internal Communist coup which would result in Iran becoming a satellite of Moscow.

Attitudes Toward U.S. Policy in Oil Dispute

From the outset U.S. commentators took the view that the United States could not stay out of the Anglo-Iranian dispute, in view of the importance of the matter, and of our responsibilities in the Near East. At first, the role of a "mediator" as between London and Tehran was widely supported. Editors and

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other spokesmen urged that the government utilize every opportunity to assist the two parties to reach a solution.

On the merits of the problem, opinion throughout the controversy has been somewhat mixed. It was widely accepted that the Iranians had the right to nationalize their oil; indeed, U.S. observers in recent years have expressed a basic sympathy for nationalistic movements which seek greater local autonomy in political and economic matters. Moreover, initially, the British received considerable criticism for their alleged "ineptness" in not taking adequate measures to forestall the oil controversy.

As the months of controversy and negotiation dragged on, comment tended to become more sympathetic to the United Kingdom side and more impatient with the Iranian position. Commentators firmly upheld the principle of adequate compensation for the British interest, and the successive British offers usually were regarded as "fair" and "just". Similarly, Iranian policy, as developed under the "temperamental" Mossadegh, has more and more displeased editors and commentators. After eighteen months, the impression is widespread that Mossadegh's policy is simply one of "blackmail", resting on a snug assumption that the Western powers cannot allow Iran's position to deteriorate further.

Against this background, the tendency has been to support U.S. policy which is seen as generally in tune with the United Kingdom position. The joint U.S.-UK offers in recent months received wide support and Mossadegh's "summary" rejection of these offers brought considerable criticism of his attitude.

In recent months American commentators have come to regard prospects of an oil settlement as virtually hopeless. Consequently they have examined other possibilities of preventing a complete economic and political disaster in Iran.

Considerable support is evident for large-scale U.S. economic aid to Iran, as a "last-ditch" measure. Commentators have been resentful at Mossadegh's "blackmail" tactics. But some of them would nevertheless favor extending him help if the situation became more desperate. At the same time opposition would also be apparent, particularly if the aid looked like a "stop-gap" or a "bribe" measure.

Recent discussion has also indicated that opinion would welcome an arrangement for the operation of Iran's oil refineries by United States companies. While American commentators have in the past preferred a U.S. approach to Iran along lines of cooperation with the UK, they now see the situation so deadlocked that some U.S. action, independently of the UK, may be necessary.

Popular Opinion

Early in the oil dispute, few among the general public were aware of the problem, and among those the dominant reaction was that the U.S. "should stay out of it." In May 1951 a Gallup poll found that 32% of a national cross-section had some knowledge of the oil problem. Of this "aware" group, one-half (17% of the total) believed that the U.S. should not become involved, and the remainder were very much divided as to what role the U.S. should play.

Six months later, in November 1951, Elmo Roper found that twice as many Americans--61% of a national cross-section--claimed some basic knowledge of the Iranian situation, i.e., were aware of the fact that Iran's oil resources had been nationalized. This "knowledgeable" group were asked what policy the U.S. should follow, with these results:

- 30% favored U.S. mediation
 - 21 said, the U.S. should stay out of it
 - 2 favored supporting the UK
 - 1 favored supporting Iran
 - 3 had no opinion
- 61%

Criticisms of U.S. Policy

Despite wide public support for specific U.S. steps taken in various stages of the oil dispute, criticism and dissatisfaction over U.S. policy toward Iran have persistently been put forward. Much of the criticism and dissatisfaction reflects a feeling of frustration and unhappiness over overall developments in the Arab-Moslem world. During the past year or two a variety of observers have analyzed the "inadequacy", "tragic failure", "too little and too late" aspects of our policies in the Near and Middle East. Commentators have often linked Iran with Egypt, North Africa and other Moslem areas where U.S. policy has allegedly "failed".

Specific criticisms of U.S. policy toward Iran, however, have not been numerous. Former Ambassador Grady's criticism, following his retirement, that U.S. aid to Iran had been inadequate, received considerable publicity but not much comment. Other criticisms, for the most part, have been sporadic and directed at details--for example, the criticism of the "heavy-handed" manner of presenting the U.S. \$10 million aid offer to Iran.

Most of the criticism directed at U.S. policy in respect to Iran--as in respect to other Near Eastern areas--appears to reflect simply a post hoc, ergo propter hoc type of reasoning. As in respect to China and other places where things have "gone wrong", there is a natural propensity for opinion spokesmen to conclude that the policies have been at fault. Some in extreme terms charge that "we have had no policy"; more moderate observers merely observe that the policies evidently have been "inadequate". But in any event few point out with confidence what policies would have worked in the past or would work today.

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