

## The Reluctant Realist: Jimmy Carter and Iran

Written by Robert W. Murray and Stephen McGlinchey

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# The Reluctant Realist: Jimmy Carter and Iran

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Reflections on Jimmy Carter's one term as US president (1977-1981) often place him as a principled idealist who fell prey to geopolitical events and gradually converted to a more strategically minded president midway through his term. The events that mark this out are usually seen as the November 1979 Iranian hostage crisis and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan the following month. Following these events, Carter seemed to harden in his language, tone and policymaking – most visible in the creation of the Carter doctrine. Announced officially in Carter's State of the Union Address in 1980 in response to the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan, the Carter Doctrine made it very clear to the Soviets and to the entire world that US foreign policy was very much dedicated to containing the Soviet Union, and that the US would use force, if necessary, to defend its interests in the Persian Gulf.

This approach by Carter was a marked departure from the initial tenets of what Carter had intended his foreign policy to be. Early in his tenure, Carter wanted to take focus away from the strategy of containment and to move American focus to issues such as human rights. Upon taking office, however, Carter realised just how difficult such a move would be, and more, that abandoning or eroding containment would threaten America's interests abroad and provide the Soviet Union with the opportunity to spread its sphere of influence into key areas of US geostrategic interest. In essence, Carter quickly understood that foreign policy could not ignore the realities of the international system, and that realism rather than idealism would have to be the driving force behind foreign policy decisions. The Carter Doctrine in many ways epitomised realism by identifying an area of American national interest and promising to effectively balance against Soviet aggression if the Soviets demonstrated an intention to expand into the region. Further, the bolstering of regional allies through economic payoffs, arms deals, and the promise of American military intervention if regional allies were threatened heralded back to the ideas originally proposed in National Security Council Report 68 (NSC-68) and the Truman Doctrine, but Carter updated both the language and context for his own time.

This chapter seeks to explore one key aspect of Carter's realism, being American relations with Iran. The decisions made during the Carter Administration regarding arms sales towards Iran more broadly reflect the balancing act that leaders must navigate in the divide between domestic and international politics. It is not enough to dismiss Carter's foreign policy as a tale of utopian beliefs in human rights becoming scattered in the midst of the Cold War. Instead, closer study of the Iran case demonstrates a foreign policy that was motivated by a realist sense of strategic necessity far more than domestic, or personal, political ideology. In this light, this chapter shows but one example that regardless of the circumstance, all leaders' decisions are limited in foreign policy-making due to the constraints posed by the anarchic structure of the international system. Regardless of personal ideology, party affiliation, or driving personal motivation, realist ideas about the role of the system in foreign policy decision making have timeless value, and Carter's sale of the Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) to Iran – used as an example later in this chapter – is a valid example of realism's core tenets. Together with the broader focus on Carter advanced here, the AWACS case opens up a new understanding of Carter as a president who displayed realist tendencies, albeit

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reluctantly, much earlier in his tenure than is typically observed. In assessing Carter's approach to Iran through a realist lens, it becomes clear that, despite an overall expectation that he would reduce arms sales, his grander ambitions for arms limitation would be doomed. Consequently, Carter's Iran policy, rather than resembling one of a liberal mind-set, came to reflect the more strategically minded policy path inherited from his predecessors.

### Arming Iran: Accident or Reluctant Realism?

Iran had become America's largest arms customer long before Carter's emergence as a presidential candidate. Due to Iran's geographical location it became a focal point in US containment policy in the 1940s. It was a frontier state that stood between the Soviet Union and the oil reserves of the Persian Gulf. A US-UK coup was staged in 1953 to ensure that Iran remained governed in a way favourable to the western powers, with the Shah at the centre of affairs. Soon afterward, a pattern of economic and military aid became entrenched with Iran becoming a client state of the US. This support for the Shah's regime was enhanced by a series of arms sales in the mid 1960s as the Shah began to use his growing oil income to build beyond prior arrangements (McGlinchey 2013a, 2014). Two decades after the coup, in 1972, Richard Nixon travelled to Tehran with Henry Kissinger and agreed to unlimited and unmoderated arms sales with Iran – with the exception of nuclear weapons. This gesture, the so-called *blank cheque*, gave the Shah the freedom to buy whatever advanced US weaponry he chose, so long as he could pay for it. It was a unique arrangement for a foreign leader due to the lack of any effective domestic oversight for the arrangement in the US. It was also a test case for Nixon's reimagining of US Cold War strategy based on outsourcing the costs of Cold War containment to able allies and clients – the so-called Nixon doctrine (McGlinchey 2013b). The agreement catapulted Iranian arms purchases from approximately \$150 million dollars in the late 1960s to being measured in the multi-billions per annum from 1972 onwards (State Department Report). Nixon's imperial style of leadership left Congress in the dark for several years on the finer details of arming Iran, something that would eventually haunt Carter as Congress sought to exercise its *advice and consent* role more effectively in later years.

The pattern Nixon set in place was cognisant of the strategic realities the US found itself in during the 1970s. The Vietnam War had shown the limits of the direct application of US military power. It had left America overstretched militarily, and also economically due to structural problems in the US economy that would fester through the 1970s. Passing the costs of US security to able allies in selected cases, such as Iran, was therefore a sound strategic decision. Nixon's successor Gerald Ford agreed and continued the multi-billion dollar arms sales pattern that Nixon had established with Iran. This cemented a path that a new president would find hard to break. As a result, Carter's general predilection towards arms control was overruled in the case of Iran, as were his human rights concerns. Both these positions were the cornerstones of Carter's election campaign, a signal that he was a different candidate. Hence, the seemingly contradictory picture of the Carter administration continuing a high profile arms relationship with the Shah can be accounted for due to Carter's willingness to overrule his principles in the face of a policy that had become deeply entrenched.

The idealism of Carter's campaign promises regarding foreign policy failed to take into account the reality of the international environment in which the US was operating, and more, the constraints placed on American foreign policy options by a bipolar international system. Given the well-entrenched strategy of containment throughout US foreign policy preceding Carter, it was highly unlikely to assume or believe he would, or even could, depart from the fundamental realisation reached by his predecessors that containment would remain America's primary national interest in a bipolar conflict. As Hans Morgenthau notes:

A realist theory of international politics will also avoid the other popular fallacy of equating the foreign policies of a statesman with his philosophic or political sympathies, and of deducing the former from the latter. Statesmen, especially under contemporary conditions, may well make a habit of presenting their foreign policies in terms of their philosophic and political sympathies in order to gain popular support for them. Yet they will distinguish with Lincoln between their '*official duty*,' which is to think and act in terms of the national interest, and their '*personal wish*,' which is to see their own moral values and political principles realised throughout the world. (Morgenthau 2006, 6)

In a more general sense, much has been said about the nature of Carter's foreign policy behaviour, and its failure both in terms of achieving objectives the president himself valued, such as human rights, and its overall

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ineffectiveness. Sometimes characterised as a liberal in the midst of a very realist Cold War, reflection actually tells a different story. Carter's foreign policy was very much built on the realist assumptions of his predecessors, whether it was intentional or not. Selling vast quantities of advanced arms to Iran is only one example of a foreign policy developed on assumptions of American self-interest and containment, rather than the rhetorical values of human rights and détente espoused by Carter during his presidency. The Carter era of foreign policy was supposed to be different, or at least that was what Carter wanted to believe. What became evident during the Carter years was the difficulty he would have in trying to promote an international policy package that mirrored his personal liberal beliefs during the constraints of the Cold War. Paul Kennedy summarises this notion by arguing:

Imbued with the most credible of Gladstonian and Wilsonian beliefs about the need to create a 'fairer' global order, Carter breezily entered an international system in which many of the other actors (especially in the world's 'trouble spots') had no intention of conducting their policies according to Judeo-Christian principles ... For all its worthy intentions, however, the Carter government foundered upon the rock of a complex world which seemed increasingly unwilling to abide by American advice, and upon its own inconsistencies of policy. (Kennedy 1987, 409-410)

To put it another way: due to the structural constraints of the Cold War, Carter 'came in like a lamb and went out like a lion' (see Lebow and Stein 1993; Aronoff 2006).

The arms trade was a particularly sensitive area for US policy during the Carter era and the administration's approach to arms, and its juxtaposition to other normative issues, are a key aspect of Carter's policy failure. As Gaddis stresses:

The difficulty here was that Carter never related his moral and domestic political commitment to human rights to his geopolitical and (given the alternative) humane commitment to arms control. (Gaddis 1982, 348)

As such, Carter's policy towards Iran during the final phase of the Shah's rule has been referred to as his 'most glaring and costly [foreign policy] inconsistency' (LaFeber 1985, 288). This is best encapsulated in the New Year's Eve toast Carter delivered in 1977 in Tehran in which he toasted the Shah for turning Iran into an 'island of stability' and for deserving 'the respect and the admiration and love which your people give to you' (Carter 1977). It was a fateful moment for Carter as one year later the Shah was forced to flee his own country, and Iran quickly turned into a revisionist, and regionally destabilising, force. The lack of translation from domestic attitudes to the international realm is certainly not unique to the Carter Administration. All national leaders are forced to make decisions and make policy in a system that often provides little opportunity for novelty or significant change. The strategic environment in which Carter was making decisions was not very different at all from his predecessors'. It is certainly easy to claim that changes were necessary in campaign rhetoric but the issue remains that presidents have a limited ability to radically alter foreign policy, especially considering that the US was one of two superpowers dominating a bipolar international system. Like all national leaders, Carter was constrained by the Cold War balance of power that was successful in preventing the outbreak of major war between the two superpowers.

For many years, the Carter arms trading policy was a topic of insult and the go-to case for successive administrations in cautionary tales about arms sales. The Reagan administration was quick to start the effort to paint Carter as naively ideal-based on its own desire for a more liberal arms sales policy. In a 1981 address to the Aerospace Industries Association, Undersecretary of State for Security Assistance James Buckley argued that Carter's policy 'substituted theology for a healthy sense of self-preservation' (Hartung 1993, 58). What is most interesting about the vilification of Carter's policy is that arms sales were actually not restrained in any large-scale manner, and in the case of Iran, actually increased to record levels during Carter's presidency. Even as the Shah entered his final days in mid-1978, another multi-billion dollar arms deal was being tabled with Iran – and the Cold War was once again growing hotter, creating a need for increased US defence spending. In addition, a major facet of Carter's Camp David accords between Egypt and Israel was a multi-billion-dollar package of arms sales to both nations (and to Saudi Arabia) which Carter advanced to make each nation feel more secure and thereby more inclined to sign on to his peace plans. In short, despite rumours to the contrary, Carter was not shy of selling arms.

The key to understanding why Carter was so vested in selling arms to Iran is found in American perceptions of

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regional and international balances of power. At the international level, Carter and his advisers knew they needed to maintain Iran as a strong ally in a tumultuous region where the US had few other reliable allies of note. The regional dynamics were naturally a part of the US' larger view of the international balance of power, where the Soviets and Americans did their best to establish and maintain respective spheres of influences. With both Israel and Iran as militarily strong allies in the region, and Saudi Arabia as a powerful economic ally, the Americans felt secure knowing they had strategic assets in the region. There was also a perception that the US had a responsibility to promote democratic values, and the Shah appeared willing to at least appease the US when it made demands regarding the Shah's actions (Moens 1991, 221). Going back to the early 1960s, the Shah had established a series of domestic reforms to overcome growing questions in Washington over the validity of his autocracy. When that proved successful in winning the support of the liberal-minded Kennedy administration, despite it being no more than a token gesture in reality, the Shah became confident that he could rule largely as he saw fit and maintain his autocratic style of governance (McGlinchey 2014, 22-38). It was reassuring to the ego of certain liberal minded presidents – such as Kennedy and Carter – when the Shah appeared to make gestures towards liberalisation and reform. It made the realisation more palatable that it was more important than anything else that Iran remained pro-Western and an instrument of containment via its advanced military. The Shah, with all his faults, was the best way to ensure that – and that is why he endured through eight US presidencies.

### **The AWACS Sale and Carter's Realism**

The Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) was a modified Boeing 707 jet that served as a high altitude airborne command centre. The system did not carry weapons and was outwardly defensive, allowing for the monitoring and location of enemy stationing and battlefield movements, both ground and airborne. Yet, implicitly (and simultaneously) it enabled the offensive coordination of the user's forces. For example, Iran could use the system to direct a squadron of fighter jets to an attack target. The AWACS was the most advanced system of its kind available at the time and was a generational leap in terms of technology when compared with rival systems.

Despite placing arms sales on hold in the first half of 1977 pending the launch of a wholesale arms policy review, Carter decided to sell Iran a fleet of AWACS in May. In allowing the sale, Carter was riding roughshod over two key pillars of his arms policy rethink which were subsequently outlined in Presidential Directive 13 (PD-13) (1977). Firstly, one of the central controls introduced in PD-13 was the decision not to introduce paradigm changing military technology into a region, thereby setting the precedent for arms escalation. The AWACS sale clearly violated this principle. Secondly, the heart of PD-13 was the establishment of a progressively lowering annual arms ceiling. To retain flexibility, NATO nations, plus Japan, Australia, and New Zealand were exempted due to existing US treaty obligations. PD-13 also excluded Israel, albeit abstrusely, but Iran was conspicuous via its absence from the policy paper as America's largest arms customer. Despite this, Cyrus Vance, Carter's Secretary of State, privately reassured Iran that it would also be exempted from PD-13. This led to arguments and frustration within the administration. NSC Staffer Leslie Denend summed it up in a memorandum to Carter's National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, as follows:

Though this may seem like a good way to ease the Shah's disapproval of our policy, it seems to me shortsighted in the extreme. Either we mean what Vance has said, in which case we are never going to decrease arms transfers...or else we don't mean it. (Memorandum for Brzezinski from 'Global Issues' 1977)

What these points highlight is the extent of the realist attitudes embedded at the upper end of the Carter administration – and how early in the administration that foreign policy realism had set in. Whilst the staffer levels were getting their collective heads around the new arms regime and working hard to establish the policy momentum for PD-13, Vance – and as it would later turn out Carter and Brzezinski – were already introducing fluidity into the process as the structural constraints of the Cold War pressed upon them. This begged the question of why Carter bothered to add the specific countries listed in PD-13 as exceptions when he intended to exempt more nations on an ad-hoc basis, such as Iran. The language and attitude towards PD-13 and the exemption of states such as Iran again drove home the fundamental idea of conflict within the Carter Administration about arms sales and foreign policy decisions more broadly. Regardless of what PD-13 said, Carter was fully aware of the fact that the US would be forced to break his own directive to achieve the regional goals in the Persian Gulf to protect American interests.

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When Carter approved the sale of the AWACS to Iran he not only went against the spirit and the letter of his own arms control doctrine, he also found himself acting as an advocate for a foreign leader against a hostile Congress. Congress blocked the sale on concerns of the technology falling into the hands of the Soviets and of the aircraft being too advanced for Iranian crews to operate. Iran was still a developing nation and was suffering from underinvestment in infrastructure and education, thanks to the Shah's preference for military expenditure. However, Carter successfully resubmitted the deal after an intense lobbying effort. The episode placed Carter in strange waters considering the anti-arms rhetoric of his 1976 campaign. Few would have expected Carter and Congress at this time to fall on opposing sides of an arms issue. Yet, the AWACS issue was the first in what would become a series of battles Carter fought with Congress over significant arms sales to a range of Middle Eastern nations. After less than one year in office, the new President had come to appreciate the value, and often the strategic necessity, of arms sales as tools of US policymaking.

Much like his predecessors, Carter used the power of the executive to manoeuvre successfully around Congressional roadblocks. However, the AWACS affair exposed a climate of doubt over US relations with Iran, and did so in a very public setting on Capitol Hill as the AWACS hearings played out. That ambiguity seriously threatened US-Iran relations, and most probably contributed to the Shah's decline by exposing cracks in his armour and allowing domestic opposition groups to gain traction. In addition, Carter subjected himself to an ordeal that indicated strongly that his team approach – engineered to re-establish administrative diversity in decision-making – could be inefficient and burdensome. This can be best seen by members of Carter's own administration, principally CIA Director Stansfield Turner, expressing doubts in private testimony to Congress over the sale, giving Congress more ammunition to initially oppose it. Following the AWACS episode, Carter gradually dissolved his team approach in favour of one reminiscent of the Nixon/Ford system where decision making was ever more controlled from within the White House. This eventually allowed the strategically minded Brzezinski to reorient the administration towards a more traditional East/West mind-set that fitted with the realist bipolar view of the Cold War. While scholars recognise this shift, the AWACS case shows that Carter was already displaying a reluctant realism mere months into his tenure, as he assumed office and fully recognised the challenge of making foreign policy decisions in the bipolar context of the Cold War.

Focusing on Carter specifically, he cited a diary entry in his memoirs from 31 July 1977 where he noted apathetically (as the AWACS sale had been initially rejected by Congress) that he did not care whether or not the Shah bought the AWACS. He added that the Shah was welcome to pursue alternative systems that he was considering (Carter 1982, 435). If such a sale occurred, those alternatives would not contravene PD-13's controls, as they were *not* paradigm changing systems. Carter's curious reflection, when examining the reality of the intense administration scramble to push the AWACS sale through the summer of 1977 is therefore contradictory and outwardly confusing. What can be said for sure is that Carter's professions to Congress, to the Shah, and to his cabinet were quite the opposite from the position noted in his diary. The fact that Carter chose that one diary entry to carve his own history of the AWACS affair may be attributed to the proximity of the Iranian revolution at the time of writing and Carter's desire to give the appearance that he had maintained objectivity in his dealings with the Shah. However, the historical record shows this account to be less than accurate and perhaps highlights Carter's own unease with the choices he had to reluctantly make, given the constraints facing him in this case. Further adding to the discrepancies found in Carter's personal account, he prefaced the decision to approve the AWACS sale in the following way:

I was attempting to reduce the sale of offensive weapons throughout the world, but it was not possible to make excessively abrupt changes in current practices, because of the contracts already in existence. (Carter 1982, 435)

This statement is interesting in two ways: Firstly, he does not refer to the AWACS as a defensive weapon. Yet, this was a central defence of the sale to Congress despite the spurious nature of that claim. Presumably this had become a frail position to remain insistent on. Secondly, there were no contracts in existence in any sense for an Iranian purchase of the AWACS prior to Carter's offer in mid-1977. The AWACS was not ready for sale until 1977.

With these points in mind, Carter's recollection of the AWACS affair is strange, and perhaps even uncharacteristic of a figure who is almost universally admired for his honesty and humanity. Explaining the contradiction goes to the heart of the quandary Carter found himself in with Iran – where the wider needs of American security placed him at

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odds with his personal preferences, thus channelling Max Weber's famous observation that 'Interests (material and ideal), not ideas, dominate directly the actions of men' (Weber 1926, 347).

## Conclusion

By maintaining, and expanding, the arms relationship with the Shah as witnessed most explicitly in the AWACS example, Carter's experience exemplifies the lack of alternatives that existed for US regional policy in the Persian Gulf in the late 1970s. More broadly, it also displays the limitations posed by the international system on national leaders in foreign policy making. Upon taking office, Carter's inexperience and lack of knowledge in foreign policy making quickly became evident. Carter's seemingly 'absolute' commitment to human rights and arms control created an inconsistent and often ineffective foreign policy agenda. The case of arming Iran presents the earliest evidence of that inconsistency as Carter not only ignored the Shah's less than commendable human rights record, but also bolstered the selling of arms to Iran in both quantitative and qualitative measures. The AWACS was only one part of a package of arms sales in 1977 that amounted to a total higher than in any year prior. Taken strictly historically, it is difficult to explain why an arms control and human rights idealist sold a dictator with a proclivity for torturing his political opponents billions of dollars' worth of sophisticated arms. And, why he did so mere months into his presidency when presumably his ideals would have been at their most potent. Yet, this result becomes easier to explain through a realist lens by examining the strategic environment in which Carter was making decisions and the perceptions of Iran's essential role as a regional ally in the broader context of the Cold War and the overarching goals of the Carter Doctrine.

Carter's reluctant realism, and his pragmatism towards Iran, speaks volumes about how he came to understand regional stability and security once in office. Carter was content to openly admonish regimes in Brazil, Argentina and Chile for their rights records and to reduce aid to those states in an effort to compel better behaviour on human rights protection. But, when push came to shove with more valuable allies, the 'absoluteness' of Carter's human rights agenda quickly became fickle. In the case of Iran, the cause of human rights ranked lower than a strong ally in a tumultuous region, and thus Carter did what he could to maintain the pattern of relations with the Shah in the hopes of ensuring the continuation of a strong sphere of influence in the region. Carter's approach toward Iran, exemplified by the AWACS sale, demonstrates that he ultimately became more concerned with perpetuating the strategy of containment than following through on his liberal tendencies. The fact that it took only months in office for Carter to make that transition from a principled liberal to a reluctant realist is testament to the binding that the Cold War, and the structural constraints of bipolarity, placed on US presidents and foreign policy making more generally.

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