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The only person Henry Kissinger flattered more than President Richard Nixon was Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran. In the early 1970s, the Shah, sitting atop an enormous reserve of increasingly expensive oil and a key figure in Nixon and Kissinger’s move into the Middle East, wanted to be dealt with as a serious person. He expected his country to be treated with the same respect Washington showed other key Cold War allies like West Germany and Great Britain. As Nixon’s national security adviser and, after 1973, secretary of state, Kissinger’s job was to pump up the Shah, to make him feel like he truly was the “king of kings.”

Reading the diplomatic record, it’s hard not to imagine his weariness as he prepared for his sessions with the Shah, considering just what gestures and words would be needed to make it

clear that his majesty truly mattered to Washington, that he was valued beyond compare. “Let’s see,” an aide who was helping Kissinger get ready for one such meeting [said](#), “the Shah will want to talk about Pakistan, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf, the Kurds, and Brezhnev.”

During another prep, Kissinger was told that “the Shah wants to ride in an F-14.” Silence ensued. Then Kissinger began to think aloud about how to flatter the monarch into abandoning the idea. “We can say,” he began, “that if he has his heart set on it, okay, but the President would feel easier if he didn’t have that one worry in 10,000 [that the plane might crash]. The Shah will be flattered.” Once, Nixon asked Kissinger to book the entertainer Danny Kaye for a private performance for the Shah and his wife.

The 92-year-old Kissinger has a long history of involvement in Iran and his recent opposition to Barack Obama’s Iran nuclear deal, while relatively subdued by present Washington standards, matters. In it lies a certain irony, given his own largely unexamined record in the region. Kissinger’s criticism has focused mostly on warning that the deal might provoke a regional nuclear arms race as Sunni states led by Saudi Arabia line up against Shia Iran. “We will live in a proliferated world,” he [said](#) in testimony before the Senate. In a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed co-authored with another former secretary of state, George Shultz, Kissinger [worried](#) that, as the region “trends toward sectarian upheaval” and “state collapse,” the “disequilibrium of power” might likely tilt toward Tehran.

Of all people, Kissinger knows well how easily the best laid plans can go astray and careen toward disaster. The former diplomat is by no means solely responsible for the mess that is today’s Middle East. There is, of course, George W. Bush’s 2003 invasion of Iraq (which Kissinger supported). But he does bear far more responsibility for our proliferated world’s disequilibrium of power than anyone usually recognizes.

Some of his Middle East policies are well known. In early 1974, for instance, his so-called shuttle diplomacy helped deescalate the tensions that had led to the previous year’s Arab-Israeli War. At the same time, however, it [locked in](#) Israel’s [veto](#) over U.S. foreign policy for decades to come. And in December 1975, wrongly believing that he had worked out a lasting pro-American balance of power between Iran and Iraq, Kissinger withdrew his previous support from the Kurds (whom he had been using as agents of destabilization against Baghdad’s Baathists). Iraq moved quickly to launch an assault on the Kurds that killed thousands and then implemented a program of ethnic cleansing, forcibly relocating Kurdish survivors and moving Arabs into their homes. “Even in the context of covert action ours was a cynical enterprise,” [not](#)

[ed](#)

a Congressional investigation into his sacrifice of the Kurds.

Less well known is the way in which Kissinger’s policies toward Iran and Saudi Arabia accelerated the radicalization in the region, how step by catastrophic step he laid the groundwork for the region’s spiraling crises of the present moment.

Guardian of the Gulf

Most critical histories of U.S. involvement in Iran rightly began with the joint British-U.S. coup against democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953, which installed Pahlavi on the Peacock Throne. But it was Kissinger who, in 1972, greatly deepened the relationship between Washington and Tehran. He was the one who began a policy of unconditional support for the Shah as a way to steady American power in the Persian Gulf while the U.S. extracted itself from Southeast Asia. As James Schlesinger, who served as Nixon’s CIA director and secretary of defense, [noted](#), if “we were going to make the Shah the Guardian of the Gulf, we’ve got to give him what he needs.” Which, Schlesinger added, really meant “giving him what he wants.”

What the Shah wanted most of all were weapons of every variety -- and American military trainers, and a navy, and an air force. It was Kissinger who overrode State Department and Pentagon objections and gave the Shah what no other country had: the ability to buy anything he wanted from U.S. weapons makers.

“We are looking for a navy,” the Shah [told](#) Kissinger in 1973, “we have a large shopping list.” And so Kissinger let him buy a navy.

By 1976, Kissinger’s last full year in office, Iran had become the largest purchaser of American weaponry and housed the largest contingent of U.S. military advisors anywhere on the planet. By 1977, the historian Ervand Abrahamian [notes](#), “the shah had the largest navy in the Persian Gulf, the largest air force in Western Asia, and the fifth-largest army in the whole world.” That meant, just to begin a list, thousands of modern tanks, hundreds of helicopters, F-4 and F-5 fighter jets, dozens of hovercraft, long-range artillery pieces, and Maverick missiles. The next year, the Shah bought another \$12 billion worth of equipment.

After Kissinger left office, the special relationship he had worked so hard to establish blew up with the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the flight of the Shah, the coming to power of Ayatollah Khomeini, and the taking of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran (and its occupants as hostages) by student protesters. Washington's political class is still trying to dig itself out of the rubble. A number of high-ranking Middle East policymakers and experts held Kissinger directly responsible for the disaster, especially career diplomat George Ball, who called Kissinger's Iran policy an “[act of folly](#) .”

Kissinger is deft at deflecting attention from this history. After a [speech](#) at Annapolis in 2007, a cadet wanted to know why he had sold weapons to the Shah of Iran when “he knew the nature of his regime?”

“Every American government from the 1950s on cooperated with the Shah of Iran,” Kissinger answered. He continued: “Iran is a crucial piece of strategic real estate, and the fact that it is now in adversarial hands shows why we cooperated with the Shah of Iran. Why did we sell weapons to him? Because he was willing to defend himself and because his defense was in our interest. And again, I simply don't understand why we have to apologize for defending the American national interest, which was also in the national interest of that region.”

This account carefully omits his role in greatly escalating the support provided to the Shah, including to his infamous SAVAK torturers -- the agents of his murderous, U.S.-trained secret police-cum-death-squad -- who upheld his regime. Each maimed body or disappeared family member was one more klick on the road to revolution. As George Ball's biographer, James Bill, [writes](#) : considering the “manifest failure” of Kissinger's Iran policy, “it is worthy of note that in his two massive volumes of political memoirs totalling twenty-eight-hundred pages, Kissinger devoted less than twenty pages to the Iranian revolution and U.S.-Iran relations.”

After the Shah fell, the ayatollahs were the beneficiaries of Kissinger's arms largess, inheriting billions of dollars of warships, tanks, fighter jets, guns, and other materiel. It was also Kissinger who successfully urged the Carter administration to grant the Shah asylum in the United States, which hastened the deterioration of relations between Tehran and Washington, precipitating the embassy hostage crisis.

Then, in 1980, Saddam Hussein's Iraq invaded Iran, beginning a war that consumed hundreds

of thousands of lives. The administration of Ronald Reagan “tilted” toward Baghdad, providing battlefield intelligence used to launch lethal [sarin gas](#) attacks on Iranian troops. At the same time, the White House illegally and infamously trafficked high-tech weaponry to revolutionary Iran as part of what became the [Iran-Contra affair](#).

“It’s a pity they can’t both lose,” Kissinger is reported to have said of Iran and Iraq. Although that quotation is hard to confirm, Raymond Tanter, who served on the National Security Council, [reports](#) that, at a foreign-policy briefing for Republican presidential nominee Ronald Reagan in October 1980, Kissinger suggested “the continuation of fighting between Iran and Iraq was in the American interest.” Having bet (and lost) on the Shah, Kissinger now hoped to make the best of a bad war. The U.S., he counselled Reagan, “should capitalize on continuing hostilities.”

Saudi Arabia and the Petrodollar Fix

Kissinger’s other “guardian” of the Gulf, Sunni Saudi Arabia, however, didn’t fall and he did everything he could to turn that already close relationship into an ironclad alliance. In 1975, he signaled what was to come by working out an arms deal for the Saudi regime similar to the one he had green-lighted for Tehran, including a \$750 million contract for the sale of 60 F-5E/F fighters to the sheiks. By this time, the U.S. already had more than a trillion dollars’ worth of military agreements with Riyadh. Only Iran had more.

Like Tehran, Riyadh paid for this flood of weaponry with the proceeds from rising oil prices. The word “petrodollar,” according to the *Los Angeles Times*, was coined in late 1973, and introduced into English by New York investment bankers who were courting the oil-producing countries of the Middle East. Soon enough, as that paper wrote, the petrodollar had become part of “the world’s macroeconomic interface” and crucial to Kissinger’s developing Middle Eastern policy.

By June 1974, Treasury Secretary George Shultz was already [suggesting](#) that rising oil prices could result in a “highly advantageous mutual bargain” between the U.S. and petroleum-producing countries in the Middle East. Such a “bargain,” as others then began to argue, might solve a number of problems, creating demand for the U.S. dollar, injecting needed money into a flagging defense industry hard hit by the Vietnam wind-down, and using

petrodollars to cover mounting trade deficits.

As it happened, petrodollars would prove anything but a quick fix. High energy prices were a drag on the U.S. economy, with inflation and high interest rates remaining a problem for nearly a decade. Nor was petrodollar dependence part of any preconceived Kissingerian “plan.” As with far more of his moves than he or his admirers now care to admit, he more or less stumbled into it. This was why, in periodic frustration, he occasionally daydreamed about simply seizing the oil fields of the Arabian peninsula and doing away with all the developing economic troubles.

“Can’t we overthrow one of the sheikhs just to show that we can do it?” he [wondered](#) in November 1973, fantasizing about which gas-pump country he could knock off. “How about Abu Dhabi?” he later asked. (Imagine what the world would be like today had Kissinger, in the fall of 1973, moved to overthrow the Saudi regime rather than Chile’s democratically elected president, Salvador Allende.) “Let’s work out a plan for grabbing some Middle East oil if we want,” Kissinger said.

Such scimitar rattling was, however, pure posturing. Not only did Kissinger broker the various deals that got the U.S. hooked on recycled Saudi petrodollars, he also began to promote the idea of an “oil floor price” below which the cost per barrel wouldn’t fall. Among other things, this scheme was meant to protect the Saudis (and Iran, until 1979) from a sudden drop in demand and provide U.S. petroleum corporations with guaranteed profit margins.

Stephen Walt, a scholar of international relations, [writes](#) : “By the end of 1975, more than six thousand Americans were engaged in military-related activities in Saudi Arabia. Saudi arms purchased for the period 1974-1975 totaled over \$3.8 billion, and a bewildering array of training missions and construction projects worth over \$10 billion were now underway.”

Since the 1970s, one administration after another has found the iron-clad alliance Kissinger deepened between the House of Saud’s medieval “moderates” and Washington indispensable not only to keep the oil flowing but as a balance against Shia radicalism and secular nationalism of every sort. Recently, however, a series of world-historical events has shattered the context in which that alliance seemed to make sense. These include: the catastrophic war on and occupation of Iraq, the Arab Spring, the Syrian uprising and ensuing civil war, the rise of ISIS, Israel’s rightwing lurch, the conflict in Yemen, the falling price of petroleum, and, now, Obama’s Iran deal.

But the arms spigot that Kissinger turned on still remains wide open. [According](#) to the *New York Times*,

“Saudi Arabia spent more than \$80 billion on weaponry last year -- the most ever, and more than either France or Britain -- and has become the world’s fourth-largest defense market.” Just as they did after the Vietnam drawdown, U.S. weapons manufacturing are compensating for limits on the defense budget at home by selling arms to Gulf states. The “proxy wars in the Middle East could last for years,”

[write](#)

Mark Mazzetti and Helene Cooper of the *New York Times*,

“which will make countries in the region even more eager for the F-35 fighter jet, considered to be the jewel of America’s future arsenal of weapons. The plane, the world’s most expensive weapons project, has stealth capabilities and has been marketed heavily to European and Asian allies. It has not yet been peddled to Arab allies because of concerns about preserving Israel’s military edge.”

If fortune is really shining on Lockheed and Boeing, Kissinger’s prediction that Obama’s de-escalation of tensions with Tehran will sooner or later prompt Saudi–Iranian hostilities will pan out. “With the balance of power in the Middle East in flux, several defense analysts said that could change. Russia is a major arms supplier to Iran, and a decision by President Vladimir Putin to sell an advanced air defense system to Iran could increase demand for the F-35, which is likely to have the ability to penetrate Russian-made defenses,” the *Times* [report](#)
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“This could be the precipitating event: the emerging Sunni-Shia civil war coupled with the sale of advanced Russian air defense systems to Iran,” said one defense analyst. “If anything is going to result in F-35 clearance to the gulf states, this is the combination of events.”

Into Afghanistan

If all Henry Kissinger contributed to the Middle East were a regional arms race, petrodollar addiction, Iranian radicalization, and the Tehran-Riyadh conflict, it would be bad enough. His legacy, however, is far worse than that: he has to answer for his role in the rise of political Islam.

In July 1973, after a coup in Afghanistan brought to power a moderate, secular, but Soviet-leaning republican government, the Shah, then approaching the height of his influence with Kissinger, pressed his advantage. He asked for even more military assistance. Now, he said, he “must cover the East with fighter aircraft.” Kissinger complied.

Tehran also began to meddle in Afghan politics, offering Kabul billions of dollars for development and security, in exchange for loosening “its ties with the Soviet Union.” This might have seemed a reasonably peaceful way to increase U.S. influence via Iran over Kabul. It was, however, paired with an explosive initiative: via SAVAK, the Shah’s secret police, and Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI), extremist Islamic insurgents were to be slipped into Afghanistan to destabilize Kabul’s republican government.

Kissinger, who knew his British and his Russian imperial history, had long considered Pakistan of strategic importance. “The defense of Afghanistan,” he wrote in 1955, “depends on the strength of Pakistan.” But before he could put Pakistan into play against the Soviets in Afghanistan, he had to perfume away the stink of genocide. In 1971, that country had launched a bloodbath in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), with Nixon and Kissinger standing “stoutly behind Pakistan’s generals, supporting the murderous regime at many of the most crucial moments,” as Gary Bass has [detailed](#). The president and his national security adviser, Bass writes, “vigorously supported the killers and tormentors of a generation of Bangladeshis.”

Because of that genocidal campaign, the State Department, acting against Kissinger’s wishes, had cut off military aid to the country in 1971, though Nixon and Kissinger kept it [flowing](#) covertly via Iran. In 1975, Kissinger vigorously pushed for its full, formal restoration, even as he was offering his tacit approval to Maoist China to back Pakistan whose leaders had their own reasons for wanting to destabilize Afghanistan, having to do with border disputes and the ongoing rivalry with India.

Kissinger helped make that possible, in part by the key role he played in building up Pakistan as part of a regional strategy in which Iran and Saudi Arabia were similarly deputized to do his dirty work. When Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who had backed the 1971 rampage in East Pakistan, visited Washington in 1975 to make the case for restoration of military aid, Kissinger [assured](#) President Gerald Ford that he “was great in ’71.” Ford agreed, and U.S. dollars soon started to flow directly to the Pakistani army and intelligence service.

As national security adviser and then secretary of state, Kissinger was directly involved in

planning and executing covert actions in such diverse places as Cambodia, Angola, and Chile. No available information indicates that he ever directly encouraged Pakistan's ISI or Iran's SAVAK to destabilize Afghanistan. But we don't need a smoking gun to appreciate the larger context and consequences of his many regional initiatives in what, in the twenty-first century, would come to be known in Washington as the “greater Middle East.” In their 1995 book, [*Out of Afghanistan*](#)

, based on research in Soviet archives, foreign-policy analysts Diego Cordovez and Selig Harrison provide a wide-ranging sense of just how so many of the policies Kissinger put in place -- the empowerment of Iran, the restoration of military relations with Pakistan, high oil prices, an embrace of Saudi Wahhabism, and weapon sales -- came together to spark jihadism:

”It was in the early 1970s, with oil prices rising, that Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi of Iran embarked on his ambitious effort to roll back Soviet influence in neighboring countries and create a modern version of the ancient Persian empire... Beginning in 1974, the Shah launched a determined effort to draw Kabul into a Western-tilted, Tehran-centered regional economic and security sphere embracing India, Pakistan and the Persian Gulf states... The United States actively encouraged this roll-back policy as part of its broad partnership with the Shah... SAVAK and the CIA worked hand in hand, sometimes in loose collaboration with underground Afghan Islamic fundamentalist groups that shared their anti-Soviet objectives but had their own agendas as well... As oil profits sky-rocketed, emissaries from these newly affluent Arab fundamentalist groups arrived on the Afghan scene with bulging bankrolls.”

Harrison also wrote that “SAVAK, the CIA, and Pakistani agents” were involved in failed “fundamentalist coup attempts” in Afghanistan in 1973 and 1974, along with an attempted Islamic insurrection in the Panjshir Valley in 1975, laying the groundwork for the jihad of the 1980s (and beyond).

Much has been made of Jimmy Carter's decision, on the advice of National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, to authorize “nonlethal” aid to the Afghan mujahedeen in July 1979, six months before Moscow sent troops to support the Afghan government in its fight against a spreading Islamic insurgency. But lethal aid had already long been flowing to those jihadists via Washington's ally Pakistan (and Iran until its revolution in 1979). This provision of support to radical Islamists, initiated in Kissinger's tenure and continuing through the years of Ronald Reagan's presidency, had a number of unfortunate consequences known all too well today but seldom linked to the good doctor. It put unsustainable pressure on Afghanistan's fragile secular government. It laid the early infrastructure for today's transnational radical Islam. And, of course, it destabilized Afghanistan and so helped provoke the Soviet invasion.

Some still celebrate the decisions of Carter and Reagan for their role in pulling Moscow into its own Vietnam-style quagmire and so hastening the demise of the Soviet Union. “What is most important to the history of the world?” Brzezinski infamously asked. “The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some stirred-up Moslems or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the cold war?” (The rivalry between the two Harvard immigrant diplomats, Kissinger and Brzezinski, is well known. But Brzezinski by 1979 was absolutely Kissingerian in his advice to Carter. In fact, a number of Kissinger’s allies who continued on in the Carter administration, including Walter Slocombe and David Newsom, influenced the decision to support the jihad.)

Moscow’s occupation of Afghanistan would prove a disaster -- and not just for the Soviet Union. When Soviet troops pulled out in 1989, they left behind a shattered country and a shadowy network of insurgent fundamentalists who, for years, had worked hand-in-glove with the CIA in the Agency’s longest covert operation, as well as the Saudis and the Pakistani ISI. It was a distinctly Kissingerian line-up of forces.

Few serious scholars now believe that the Soviet Union would have proved any more durable had it not invaded Afghanistan. Nor did the allegiance of Afghanistan -- whether it tilted toward Washington, Moscow, or Tehran -- make any difference to the outcome of the Cold War, any more than did, say, that of Cuba, Iraq, Angola, or Vietnam.

For all of the celebration of him as a “grand strategist,” as someone who constantly advises presidents to think of the future, to base their actions today on where they want the country to be in five or 10 years’ time, Kissinger was absolutely blind to the fundamental feebleness and inevitable collapse of the Soviet Union. None of it was necessary; none of the lives Kissinger sacrificed in Cambodia, Laos, Angola, Mozambique, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, East Timor, and Bangladesh made one bit of difference in the outcome of the Cold War.

Similarly, each of Kissinger’s Middle East initiatives has been disastrous in the long run. Just think about them from the vantage point of 2015: banking on despots, inflating the Shah, providing massive amounts of aid to security forces that tortured and terrorized democrats, pumping up the U.S. defense industry with recycled petrodollars and so spurring a Middle East arms race financed by high gas prices, emboldening Pakistan’s intelligence service, nurturing Islamic fundamentalism, playing Iran and the Kurds off against Iraq, and then Iraq and Iran off against the Kurds, and committing Washington to defending Israel’s occupation of Arab lands.

Combined, they’ve helped bind the modern Middle East into a knot that even Alexander’s sword couldn’t sever.

Bloody Inventions

Over the last decade, an avalanche of documents -- transcripts of conversations and phone calls, declassified memos, and embassy cables -- have implicated Henry Kissinger in crimes in Bangladesh, Cambodia, southern Africa, Laos, the Middle East, and Latin America. He’s tried to defend himself by arguing for context. “Just to take a sentence out of a telephone conversation when you have 50 other conversations, it’s just not the way to analyze it,” Kissinger said recently, after yet another damning tranche of documents was declassified. “I’ve been telling people to read a month’s worth of conversations, so you know what else went on.”

But a month’s worth of conversations, or eight years for that matter, reads like one of Shakespeare’s bloodiest plays. Perhaps *Macbeth*, with its description of what we today call blowback: “That we but teach bloody instructions, which, being taught, return to plague the inventor.”

We are still reaping the bloody returns of Kissinger’s inventions.