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## Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi's Autocracy: Governmental Constraints, 1960s–1970s

*Even when Mohammad Reza Shah became an autocrat by the early 1960s, systemic constraints on his power persisted. One was government officials. They certainly accepted the shah's governmental centrality. But in parallel they inventively created more elbowroom for themselves than they are normally credited for, shaping everyday administration and co-shaping policies. The article substantiates this argument in two steps. First, it looks at Iran's Sāzmān-e bimeh-hā-ye ejtemā'i-ye kārgarān (Workers Social Insurance Organization [SBIK]), drawing principally on French-language International Labor Organization (ILO) archival files. Although the shah had a well-publicized stake in social insurance expansion, the SBIK influenced policy strategy, sometimes against his explicit wishes; also, it handled routine operations and relations with the ILO independently from him. Second, the article zooms out to analyze Persian-language Harvard University Iranian Oral History Project interviews with high-ranking officials, alongside other published and unpublished sources, to show how government officials maintained some autonomy vis-à-vis the shah. Their strategies included self-effacement, the agreement on a unified cabinet policy position before a royal audience, resignation threats, open pushback, and gifts, including favors, to third parties.*

**Keywords:** Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi; Autocracy; Government; Workers Social Insurance Organization; International Labor Organization; Harvard University Iranian Oral History Project

This article addresses a persistent issue in studies of modern Iran: the nature of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi's rule (1941–79). Focusing on the period starting in the late 1950s with his decisive reach for autocracy, which matured in 1963 and lasted until his fall in 1979, I contend that his powers knew constraints even then.<sup>1</sup> One important constraint was high-ranking government officials, doubly as government policy portfolios and ministries' manpower mushroomed in the 1960s.<sup>2</sup> Statements like “[the shah] determines, or approves, all important government actions,” by the US state department in 1965, oversimplified reality. To be sure, the

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shah approved mid- to high-level political, bureaucratic, and military appointments and “direct[ed] ... internal security,” and “economic development proposals ... [were] referred to [him].” Still, officials created and maintained considerable elbowroom vis-à-vis the autocratic monarch to help formulate policies and, with lower ranking officials, to run everyday administrative affairs.<sup>3</sup>

I substantiate this argument in two steps. I start with a case study: social insurance,<sup>4</sup> analyzing operations of the *Sāzmān-e bimeh-hā-ye ejtemā'i-ye kārgarān* (Workers Social Insurance Organization [SBIK]). Despite the shah's explicit wishes, social insurance expanded much more slowly than he wanted in the 1960s, mainly because of technically formulated reservations by SBIK officials. I have selected the SBIK case because social insurance was one of Pahlavi Iran's oldest social policies, dating back to the 1930s, and impacted many: 1.8 million in 1967, 7.2 percent of Iran's population.<sup>5</sup> Also, the shah frequently pronounced social insurance a key to Iran's socio-economic progress, time and again proclaiming a personal stake in its success and expansion. In addition, SBIK operations are well documented: five International Labor Organization (ILO) advisors to the SBIK in 1964–68 wrote reams of files, archived at ILO headquarters in Geneva.<sup>6</sup>

To show that the SBIK case was not exceptional, in a second step I use the Harvard University Iranian Oral History Project (IOHP): 134 interviews conducted in the early 1980s with Pahlavi-era officials. To optimize similarity with the SBIK, I focus on officials working in socio-economic fields in the 1960s and 1970s. I complement those interviews with IOHP interviews with high-ranking military officers, with SAVAK (*Sāzmān-e ettelā'āt va-amniyat-e keshvar*, the shah's primary security and intelligence agency) reports published after the 1979 revolution, and with a few files from the recently opened Ardeshir Zahedi Papers. Together, these sources give us a broad view of strategies that high-ranking officials used to create and maintain some autonomy vis-à-vis the shah. These strategies included self-effacement, to minimize the chance that the shah would start perceiving a person as a threat; cabinet ministers' agreement on a unified position before a royal audience, to present the shah with a single policy choice; resignation threats; open pushback; and gifts, including favors, to third parties.

My argument builds on secondary sources showing that even after 1963, government organizations enjoyed some decision-making autonomy. Studying the Ministry of Economy, Vali Nasr has demonstrated that while the shah strongly affected its fate, the nitty gritty of policy-making was the bailiwick of the minister, who moreover entertained direct relations with other institutions like the Plan Organization and the Central Bank.<sup>7</sup> Like Nasr, I qualify studies that have “focused on the highly personalized nature of vertical relations of power between the [Pahlavi] ruler and political actors and administrators,”<sup>8</sup> and question whether Iran's “administrative system was completely unintegrated and lacked independence.”<sup>9</sup> However, unlike Nasr, I use archives documenting the inside operations of “my” government organization, the SBIK, and I take a step beyond to make a broader argument about ministerial constraints on the shah's powers. Moreover, my text adds to wider qualifications of the shah's rule—whether called “autocratic” or something else<sup>10</sup>—as absolute. As Tim

McDaniel has stated, autocracy has no “unchangeable essence ... that can exist apart from historical and institutional circumstance,” and this has been seconded by Hou-chang Chehabi and Juan Linz.<sup>11</sup> Nor, McDaniel added, does autocracy mean “absolute control of society or the ability to transform it at will.”<sup>12</sup> Talking of the shah’s “authoritarian” rule, Abbas Milani has noted “absolute power” but also “vulnerabilities,” citing a 1961 British consular report to the effect that the “complexities of the modern state are inevitably beyond the control of a single individual.”<sup>13</sup>

In what follows, I first provide an introduction to social insurance and to the shah’s stake in it in the 1960s; then examine the SBIK case; and finally turn to my broader analysis of government officials’ strategies vis-à-vis the shah.

### *Social Insurance and the Shah’s Stake in It*

The years around 1960 marked a turning point in the history of Iran’s social insurance. While respective bills had passed from 1936 and while the 1953 Mosaddeq-era Workers Social Insurances Bill inter alia established the SBIK, these moves largely remained ineffective.<sup>14</sup> Although a 1955 *majles* law improved the 1953 bill and “social insurance [was] a rare field in which an attempt [was] made to neutralize at least somehow [Iran’s] strong social tensions” following the 1953 coup, it was only for a few thousand people, and almost all in Tehran, that the SBIK managed accounts through the late 1950s.<sup>15</sup> Then, in May 1960, a new law revised that of 1955. More realistic, it dropped unemployment, a scheme never carried out, while improving insurance terms for accidents and illness, maternity, invalidity, retirement, death, weddings, and provisions for children.<sup>16</sup> In April 1963, a decree regularized the de facto existence of a partial, beside a full, social insurance regime.<sup>17</sup> Finally, in the autumn of that year Iran’s most concerted effort yet to expand social insurance started. The ILO specialist Jean Paléologos visited SBIK to prepare the aforementioned 1964–68 mission.<sup>18</sup> He found SBIK unable to properly implement extant regulations. The 1960 reorganization had improved the SBIK’s transparency and operations.<sup>19</sup> But much remained inadequate, in accounting, data gathering, identifying workshops and factories to be covered, signing up and administratively keeping track of tens of thousands of employee records, and collecting employers’ dues.<sup>20</sup> In the following years, while problems persisted, matters improved, too. Insurance enrollment skyrocketed, pension payments were successfully reformed in 1967, the bank handling SBIK payments, *Refāh-e kārgarān*, reformed its operations, and the SBIK medical branch, running dispensaries and hospitals, grew and came to be fairly well organized.<sup>21</sup> Two additional major changes occurred up to the late 1960s. In 1968, the *majles* passed a new general social insurance law. It revised protection against disease, maternity, invalidity, old age, death, professional accidents and family charges like marriage, and further expanded coverage, especially in cities. At this point, about 520,000–540,000 Iranians were insured, including about two million dependents. “The build-up of social insurance in Iran can now be said to enter a new stage,” the ILO reported. “The Government’s ambition, confirmed by the Head of State, is to expand the social security system so as to cover all segments of the population.” And in 1969 parliament passed an

“interim basic law ... provid[ing] social security to about 5,000 families belonging to farmers’ cooperatives. The law is later to be reviewed and its application gradually extended to the whole rural population.” This indeed happened in 1970, capping a good decade of social insurance expansion.<sup>22</sup>

From the 1950s, the shah saw social insurance as an important part of a broader endeavor to socio-economically modernize Iran; he often addressed it in public, committing to its expansion, and in this sense made it part of his legitimacy as a self-described social reformer, if not revolutionary.<sup>23</sup> He took full ownership of the 1960 social insurance law. In a major address to parliament marking *Eid-e Qorbān*, in June, he emphasized that “to the extent possible, we have made progress for peasants and villagers ... Regarding workers and labor and social insurance laws, we have undertaken fortunate steps.” Then, on 19 August, he praised the law in a radio broadcast commemorating the seventh anniversary of Mosaddeq’s overthrow.<sup>24</sup>

Time and again, the shah also pledged rapid improvements in and expansions of social insurance. In a decree issued on 10 September 1962, he pronounced that “in all other countries, the worker today benefits from a number of privileges, including health services, family assistance, pension funds, etc. In our country, an undeniable improvement has taken place for the last few years, but it needs to be acknowledged that our labor law does not correspond with the present evolution. ... First and foremost, the worker’s subsistence must be insured.”<sup>25</sup> The shah appropriated social insurance most powerfully in speeches about the White Revolution, including the historic one of 26 January 1963, and in royal addresses. Inaugurating the twenty-second session of the *majles* in 1967, for instance, he declared that

[S]ocial justice requires that by means of different types of insurance the future of every Iranian be insured from the time of his birth to the time of his death. These should cover education, sickness, accident, retirement, old age, and life insurance. This program will be carefully and conscientiously followed.<sup>26</sup>

He struck a similar tone when opening the newly convened Senate three years earlier, in 1964.<sup>27</sup> The Senate’s grateful response illustrated the autocrat’s by then firm grip on the political system and affirmed that he was keen to be seen as personally leading social progress in Iran. “The projects the application of which the shah has decided, i.e. social insurance and the right to a pension fund [enjoyed by] workers and peasants, bear eloquent testimony to the sovereign’s care for the nation, and especially for the classes that assure the country’s prosperity,” the senate stated.<sup>28</sup> Last but not least, the shah talked in similar tones about social insurance before non-political audiences, too. Addressing 500 physicians at the Iranian Association of Clinical Physicians in 1966, he affirmed that

I believe that ... the principle of the mutual aid societies or health social insurance will most likely produce the best results. Regarding the other classes of the popu-

lation [other than workers], we have to establish a similar insurance ... With regard, particularly, to the peasants, they have to be insured either by the new organization which we plan to create, or by mutual aid societies, or by the already existing cooperatives.<sup>29</sup>

Interested in the SBIK's work, the shah often tried to intervene in it. He pushed for more social insurance for more people even if, as he knew, the SBIK's technical abilities had not quite matured. Sometimes, he succeeded. In 1966, 366,000 urban eligible employees or workers together with 642,000 independent workers, artisans, merchants, and free professionals remained uncovered by existing social insurance measures.<sup>30</sup> In November that year, the shah ordered a scheme targeting those groups. "On the orders of the Sovereign," a surprised Paléologos reported, "the government decided to introduce, in the OAS [SBIK], a voluntary social insurance covering the risks of old age and decease, benefiting salaried and independent workers."<sup>31</sup> The ILO specialist "did not hide [his] dissatisfaction" about having been kept in the dark. Although ultimately favoring the scheme, his misgivings about the propagandistic character of a "too hastily launched" scheme persisted. Minister of Labor Ataollah Khosrovani

had asked [SBIK head Khadjenouri] to look into the question and to define the principles on which the voluntary insurances would be designed. These principles were to be immediately communicated to a press conference. Dr. Khadjenouri had explained to me [Paléologos] that in view of the very short time [span given to him], and due to the fact that the minister had formulated his demand outside the working hours of the organization, he had been incapable to contact me.<sup>32</sup>

### *Governmental Constraints on the Shah's Autocracy: The SBIK Case*

A different outcome of royal intervention concerned the main beneficiaries of the 1963 land reform, middling peasants. Foreseen as a future necessity already in the 1960 law, rural social insurance was pushed by the shah from then on and with even greater vigor from 1963. He often made declarations about imminent reforms. At the inauguration of the Development Corps in September 1964, for instance, he underlined that "like the workers, so the peasants, too, need to benefit from social insurances." In a typical turn of phrase, Prime Minister Hassan Ali Mansour then praised the "pact concluded between the shah and the cultivators."<sup>33</sup> The extension of social insurance to rural areas was publicly presented as the shah's bold initiative, to be carried out in the near future. But the ILO and SBIK opposed quick action, citing insufficient funds and organizational, accounting, and geographical access problems.<sup>34</sup> Paléologos brought up the issue following his preliminary visit to Iran in 1963. The matter gathered steam from 1964. It loomed large in an interview the ILO headquarters in Geneva conducted with Paléologos in August 1964; and was the reason for a visit to the headquarters' technical service department in March

1966.<sup>35</sup> In internal ILO correspondences Paléologos singled out the shah for his impatience, though also mentioning Khosrovani. In 1964 he reported that “Khosrovani has informed me that his office has drawn up a draft law and that the shah wishes to absolutely prioritize this subject. ... I believe that this difficult and complex problem is addressed somewhat hastily, without taking into account the technical sides, exclusively for political opportunity.”<sup>36</sup> Still, the expansion was not carried out at the time. Khosrovani at first kept insisting of this measure’s urgency, but by 1967 grew more cautious about the need or possibility of rural extension.<sup>37</sup> Most important, the shah himself did not force the matter. He waited until 1969. Even then his initial move was cautious: the aforementioned interim basic law covering circa 5,000 families who were members of farmer cooperatives. Through the 1960s, then, the SBIK’s and ILO’s caution prevailed—a fact remarkable given the political climate yet telling for the reality of governmental constraints on the shah’s autocratic style.

A related point concerns the ILO mission at large. In hundreds of ILO documents, the shah never appears and is almost never mentioned by ILO or SBIK officials; and the entire ILO mission correspondence evolved exclusively between the SBIK and the ILO. On 9 February 1964, Khosrovani—who had the last word in SBIK and whose “personal intervention” had in 1960 expedited parliament passing that year’s social insurance law<sup>38</sup>—sent out two crucial letters. One was to ILO representative J. Ross in Tehran, the other to ILO deputy director W. Yalden-Thomson in Geneva. They formally requested the ILO to follow up on Paléologos’ preparatory SBIK visit in 1963 and to agree to send a multi-year, multi-member social insurance advisory mission to Iran. Remarkably, the letter to Geneva, although crucial, did not mention the shah at all; and the letter to Tehran referred to him only in a formulaic opening sentence: “following his Majesty’s the Shahenshah’s Six Point program [the White Revolution], the social aspect of our country’s development program has acquired great importance.” The rest of the two-page long epistle was its real business: what specialists Iran needed, when and why, referring to Paléologos’ report. The shah played no role. Nor did he write separately to the ILO. In its formal response to Khosrovani, on 26 February, the ILO—Caballero noted—did not mention the king. Similarly, when on 13 January 1968 Khosrovani formally asked the ILO to prolong its mission, he mentioned the shah only in a short introductory sentence to a detailed, three-page-long letter.<sup>39</sup>

ILO mission members’ work and life in Iran mirrored this picture. Not a single ILO document so much as hints at a meeting or direct correspondence with the shah. In contrast, various ILO experts—not only Paléologos but also Xavier Caballero and Michel Salbreux—habitually met Khosrovani, the SBIK head Khadjenouri, and dozens of SBIK officials. Moreover, in internal ILO documents and reports sent to the Iranian government, including the final 1964–68 mission report, they repeatedly expressed their appreciation of the “cordial atmosphere and mutual trust” with SBIK experts. Again, they never mentioned the shah.<sup>40</sup>

The ILO reports also show that the SBIK had great scope to devise and execute policies, and reflect the complexity of SBIK operations. Within SBIK, a committee

decided on how and whether to implement ILO specialists' specific recommendations.<sup>41</sup> Further, in 1964, deep into the first year of his mission, Paléologos reported to Geneva that he was "impressed by the [the SBIK's] spirit of initiative and innovation": it was improving its performance. By 1967, Caballero went so far as to call Iran—in comparison with other "developing" countries—"orderly conducted." SBIK officials had accumulated serious technical *savoir faire* and increasingly implemented that knowledge, continuing problems notwithstanding.<sup>42</sup> ILO experts also often mentioned middle-ranking, not only high-level, SBIK specialists; thus, Salbreux praised one Sabahi for his "competence" in his technical field of accounting.<sup>43</sup> The sheer complexity of SBIK operations was driven home, too, by a range of additional matters: the large number of SBIK administrators whom the ILO specialists met both in the capital and the provinces; the variety of expertise relevant to and needed for running nationwide social insurance schemes; the SBIK and ILO specialists' interactions with other government organizations like the Central Bank and the Iran Petroleum Company or with Tehran's Business School; and the SBIK's purchase, from 1965, of IBM punch card machines for statistical data gathering and processing.<sup>44</sup>

#### *Governmental Officials' Constraints on Autocratic Rule: Key Strategies*

A close reading of thousands of pages of IOHP interviews with high-level Pahlavi officials shows that the SBIK case was not exceptional. Sometimes the ambiguous reality of royal rule and ministerial constraints emerges in a single sentence. Abolhassan Behnia, minister of roads in 1960–61, stated that the shah "did not often intervene in the ministers' work, but, well, sometimes, in appointments and so on, he did not not intervene (*bi-dekhālat nabudand*), that is, he ultimately did voice his opinion." In fact, the complexity of the shah's autocratic rule is often brought out by the very form of the interview, which tends to favor unfiltered and interestingly meandering expressions: an advantage of working with oral history sources.<sup>45</sup>

Interviewees certainly did not disregard the shah's deep imprint on Iran's governmental process. Ramzi Abbas-Attaie, Iran's navy commander in 1973–76, was crystal-clear: the shah "decided"; and he explained the revolution as the outcome of "the concentration of power in one area, in one point, in one man."<sup>46</sup> Also, the monarch knew his officials well. He attended cabinet meetings of Jafar Sharif-Emami's government, 1960–61, once a week, Behnia related; during Mohammad Yeganeh's time in the Economy Ministry in the late 1960s, top officials met him almost daily.<sup>47</sup> There was regular direct reporting to the monarch. When Iran's oil income mushroomed in 1973 ministries sent very costly expenditure plans directly to the shah, not to Amir Abbas Hoveyda, Iran's prime minister in 1965–77.<sup>48</sup> Abbas-Attaie complained that security organs directly answered to the shah, "bypassing" any inter-service chain of command.<sup>49</sup> Fereydoun Djam, chief of the Supreme Commander's Joint Staff in 1969–71, made the same complaint, also about the Foreign Ministry.<sup>50</sup>

The shah's power emerged most clearly during Hoveyda's prime ministership. (Some interviewees suggest the shah listened to, and discussed issues with, officials in the 1960s more than the 1970s.<sup>51</sup>) Here, SAVAK reports make for fascinating reading, illuminating perceptions of Hoveyda's limited power. In 1967, a confidential file reported on a visit by high-ranking officials from Shiraz, one a senator, Namazi, to the Tehran home of an ex-minister, Baqer 'Amili. When talk turned to a possible cabinet reshuffle, all agreed that even Hoveyda was in the dark. The same year, a rumor circulated among journalists in Tehran that the shah had dressed down Hoveyda in public, at the airport, before leaving for a visit to the Soviet Union.<sup>52</sup> In fact, Hoveyda himself made light of his role. Once, when Yeganeh met him to complain about problems with several ministers and demand a cabinet meeting in which he expected Hoveyda to make a decision, the latter answered "I am only the *chef de cabinet*, the prime minister is on the wall," pointing to a picture of the shah. Abbas-Attaie remembered a similar gesture. So did Khodadad Farmanfarmaian, in the build-up to his resignation as head of the Plan Organization in 1973. "With his [Hoveyda's] head he gestured towards the shah's picture which was hanging in his office ... to indicate that it was not his fault that this was being done, implying that this was the shah's desire."<sup>53</sup>

Only it was not. At Farmanfarmaian's last audience with the shah, the latter said "I'm told this [resignation] is of your own choice."<sup>54</sup> Hoveyda apparently invoked the monarch as a screen for his own plans. His self-effacement, while genuine, was also strategic: a lesson drawn from the fate of earlier prime ministers, like Amini, whom the shah had seen as a challenge and who did not last.<sup>55</sup>

Similarly complex were recurrent rumors that Hoveyda was clashing with ministers. On the one hand, this showed his powers were, and were perceived as, limited: he had trouble imposing ministerial discipline. On the other hand, Hoveyda clearly felt comfortable to confront his ministers; a mere *chef de cabinet* would not have done so.<sup>56</sup> He also repeatedly used the threat of resignation vis-à-vis the shah to get the monarch accept his position.<sup>57</sup> The fact that people with a grievance approached Hoveyda—for instance postal workers in 1967—suggests, too, that despite his self-effacing style he was not seen as simply powerless.<sup>58</sup>

Officials sometimes also openly argued with the shah, certainly in the 1960s. In 1960, incoming Prime Minister Sharif-Emami refused to accept the shah's foreign minister nomination. In 1961, he clashed with the court and the shah during that year's parliamentary election. He and an aide, Dhu al-Faqari, ordered the Tehran mayor to remove *Melliyun* party election posters. As these bore the shah's picture, the court accused Dhu al-Faqari of behaving like a *tudeh'i* (communist), and the shah ordered him court-martialed, but Sharif-Emami defused the situation.<sup>59</sup> In 1962, when Amini was prime minister, Farmanfarmaian, Central Bank Governor Cyrus Samii, and Central Bank Deputy Governor Gholam-Reza Moghadam sent an open letter to the shah criticizing his excessive arms purchase plans. "We ... thought we could convince the shah. ... [He] would show us great favor in receiving us, listening to our arguments. ... [Hence,] we would dare to write such a letter."<sup>60</sup>



Direct ministerial reporting to the shah, too, turns out to be an ambiguous issue. Not all governmental bodies reported to him: for instance, the Central Bank in the 1960s did not do so, its responsibilities notwithstanding.<sup>61</sup> What is more, prime ministers before Hoveyda tended to be less ready to roll over. (Manuchehr Eghbal, prime minister in 1957–60, was the exception.<sup>62</sup>) Sharif-Emami forced his ministers to report to him when they saw the shah. Amini allowed only the defense and foreign ministers to see the shah without his prior permission, and the shah saw his cabinet only infrequently, once or twice a month.<sup>63</sup>

This brings us to the core of this and the last section's argument: that government organizations enjoyed considerable decision-making power. To start with, Yeganeh insisted that "the shah was not in a position to be in the know about the affairs of the state to the same degree that Hoveyda knew them."<sup>64</sup> Similarly, the shah used to "complain that his workload increases day by day and that he can no longer hope to cover it all."<sup>65</sup> Similarly, as Abdolmadjid Madjidi—minister of agricultural products and consumer affairs in 1967–68, minister of labor and social affairs in 1968–73, and minister of state and director of the Plan and Budget Organization in 1973–77—noted, even in the 1970s "every problem had not to be brought before [the shah]. We ... could bring a problem before him really only if it was something he had to decide."<sup>66</sup> Yeganeh reported that even as the ministers with socioeconomic portfolios met the shah weekly in the 1970s, they coordinated their positions beforehand to "remove prior disagreements." "[I]f a new matter arose in the shah's presence, they did not talk then [but] went [to their respective government bodies] to study the matter more." Once, a minister talked out of turn at a royal audience. Hoveyda dressed him down severely when the shah was out of earshot: "It was not agreed that you would say these things, in the preparatory meeting we had not said these things."<sup>67</sup>

In this context, it is fascinating that many IOHP interviewees with socio-economic careers—Behnia; Farmanfarmaian; Madjidi; Yeganeh; Gholam-Reza Moghadam, vice minister of commerce in 1961, Central Bank deputy governor in 1961–63, and Plan Organization deputy director in 1969–73; and Mohammad-Mehdi Samii, Central Bank governor in 1963–68 and 1970–71 and Plan Organization director in 1968–70—distinguished between "political" and "professional" government work, *siyāsi* and *herfeh'i*.<sup>68</sup> They characterized their own work as the latter—and indicated they enjoyed considerable autonomy. Given that they were interviewed following the revolution, they had a personal motive to signal a certain distance from the shah. Still, the very existence of *siyāsi* versus *herfeh'i* and its recurrence among so many interviewees suggests this was a lens through which government work styles were understood.

However, even in *siyāsi* matters particularly close to the shah's heart—oil, foreign affairs, security, his image—some officials argued with him. A case in point is Yeganeh's 1973–75 tenure as Central Bank governor. The Canadian government inquired of the shah whether he would be ready to have Iran's crown jewels exhibited in Canada. He and court minister Asadollah Alam (1967–77) were enthusiastic. The shah ordered the Central Bank, which held the jewels, to arrange the matter. Yeganeh refused flat-out, stating it was not in the country's "interest,"

*maslahat*, and the bank's legal adviser ruled that at any rate the jewels could leave Iran only with parliamentary consent. The shah was incensed. These were his jewels, he ruled; besides, he knew Iran's *maslahat* best. But Yeganeh put down his foot. He pulled out the ultimate strategy to get his way: he threatened to resign and talked with Hoveyda, who in turn helped to talk the shah out of the idea.<sup>69</sup>

Similarly, Mohammad Khatam, Iranian air force general until his death in 1975, could discuss military matters with the shah, and stand up to him.<sup>70</sup> Being the monarch's brother-in-law certainly helped, but other high-ranking officers did the same. Abbas-Attaie, for instance, insisted that the shah listened when reasoned with. The problem, he argued, was that by the 1970s many people would not do so even when they knew an order was senseless, for instance "if the shah had ordered that a mulberry tree grows cherries next year." He had clashes with the shah, who however always accepted his opinions when reasoned with. "The shah's word was not a Quranic sura from my point of view."<sup>71</sup>

A last strategy that high-ranking officials used to create and maintain some autonomy vis-à-vis the shah was gifts, including favors, to third parties. In some cases, the aim apparently was to protect oneself and/or to facilitate direct horizontal inter-agency interaction (rather than vertical interaction via the shah). When SAVAK general Nematollah Nassiri was in Washington, DC, for a medical operation in September 1976, he called the shah to thank him for covering his medical and travel expenses. Soon thereafter, the Iranian ambassador to the United States, Ardeshir Zahedi, called, too, saying that Nassiri had also received money from Hoveyda and "that he's now bewildered whether he has HIM [His Imperial Majesty] to thank for this second payment. 'The PM said nothing about it to me,' HIM remarked with a smile," Alam reported in his diary.<sup>72</sup>

Gifts were also used to build personal relationship systems parallel to the shah's. The example par excellence was Zahedi. Alam, who called him "a pushy, ambitious sort of fellow," reported that in 1969, as foreign minister, he had his ministry buy, among other things, "900 Vacheron et Constantin watches, merely as gifts." He put them to good use. In late 1969 or early 1970, Alam reported, US "Vice-President Spiro Agnew wrote thanking HIM for various gifts, amongst them a splendid gold watch. As he had never sent him a watch of any description, HIM asked me to make inquiries via our ambassador in Washington." It turned out Zahedi had sent the watch. Like Hoveyda with Nassiri, the foreign minister certainly did not challenge the shah, but presumably hoped Agnew would find out who had sent the watch. (It is unclear whether Agnew did.) Alam protested to the shah: "it was unbecoming of his ministers to bestow gifts on those already honoured by HIM." The shah agreed. "You're right—it's foolish, wasteful." But then, "he said nothing more about it"—just as in the Hoveyda–Nassiri case.<sup>73</sup>

Zahedi used gifts and other favors, including (in)famously ostentatious parties, liberally as well when he served as ambassador in Washington from 1973 to 1979. The newly opened Ardeshir Zahedi Papers in the Hoover Institute at Stanford University contain material on the subject, though they also show that Zahedi coordinated with

the shah and the royal family, too. Thus, his embassy helped organize and distribute gifts to Americans, including silver boxes, photographs, and Pahlavi gold coins, when Queen Farah Diba visited in early 1978. But it was on his own initiative that Zahedi sent the vice president of Walt Disney World, Robert C. Allen, a carpet after the latter had facilitated the queen's visit to Florida. To Langhorne Washburn, vice president of EPCOT World Showcase, he wrote:

I know that her Majesty really welcomed this opportunity ... to learn some more about the Disney organization and your plans for the future. ... I am also so grateful to you *personally* for the particularly important part which you played in making all the arrangements for our visit and I do hope that I shall have an early opportunity to repay at least a little of your hospitality.<sup>74</sup>

### Conclusion

This article has argued that the shah's autocracy knew certain systemic constraints. A principal one was officials shaping everyday administration and long-term policy-making. Iran was much too complex, certainly by the 1960s, to be run by an all-powerful, all-knowing monarch. I have substantiated this argument in two steps: a case study of the Iran Workers Social Insurance Organization, drawing on the International Labor Organization archives in Geneva; and, more broadly, an analysis of Iranian Oral History Collection interviews with a good dozen highest-ranking state officials, together with other unpublished archival documents and published sources.

There is no denying that the shah powerfully shaped Iran's governmental process. The point, rather, has been to show that his impact has to be seen in the larger framework of hundreds of officials collectively and often individually knowing more than him, managing everyday administrative matters without him, planning policies for their own sake and with their own interests in mind, keeping things from him, indirectly or directly pressuring him, coordinating their positions before meeting him, even arguing with him and opposing him—and all of this not only in the 1960s but even in the 1970s, when the shah's autocratic image and power was at its peak.

### Notes

1. For this periodization, see e.g. Ansari, *Modern Iran since 1921*, 125, arguing that even after the 1953 coup the shah was until the late 1950s basically "first among equals." See also *ibid.*, 128–9, 139; Milani, *The Shah*, 202, 225; Chehabi and Linz, "Sultanism," 19; and Halliday, *Iran*, 56. However, the shah had never accepted being merely a constitutional monarch: see e.g. Milani, *The Shah*, 104.
2. There were twelve ministries and 150,000 employees in 1963, nineteen ministries and 304,000 employees in 1977: Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 438.
3. All quotes: Department of State, "Studies in Political Dynamics in Iran," [1965], in Milani, *The Persian Sphinx*, 178.
4. For social policies more broadly, see Prigmore, *Social Work in Iran*; Savory, "Social Development in Iran," 116–21; Floor, "Bima"; Rejali, *Torture and Modernity*, 93–100; Messkoub, "Social Policy." For

- the post-revolutionary period, see Harris, *A Social Revolution*. Iranian texts focus on technical aspects; see e.g. Akbari, *Barresi-ye barnāmeḥ-rizi-ye dawlati*.
5. Camillo Cuccodoro, "Programme des Nations Unies pour le développement, Secteur assistance technique, (confidentiel), Rapport au gouvernement de l'Iran sur les soins médicaux dans le cadre de la sécurité sociale," 1968, 16–17, in Technical Assistance Program (hereafter, TAP) 0-48-4-6, ILO Archives, Geneva (hereafter, ILO).
  6. The 1964–68 mission's head, Jean Paléologos, had worked in Iran in 1957. (Other missions in the 1950s were by C. Abel, in 1955, and F. Pavard, in 1959). André Proust (organization and methods) joined the mission in 1965–66, Michel Salbreux (accounting) in 1966, Camillo Cuccodoro (medical insurance) in 1966, Robert Grossenbacher (accounting mechanization) in 1968. As for the ILO sources, they comprise internal reports and correspondence between ILO's Geneva headquarters, the Istanbul regional office, and the Tehran mission, and correspondence with, and reports to, Iranian authorities. ILO's Iran missions were long term; the experts were openly critical while closely collaborating with their SBIK counterparts; and they regularly visited the provinces rather than simply staying in Tehran. Thus, they got to know the SBIK well. For an introduction to ILO, see van Daele et al., *ILO Histories*.
  7. Nasr, "Politics." See also e.g. Afkhami, *The Shah*, 230, 322.
  8. Nasr, "Politics," 98.
  9. McDaniel, *Autocracy*, 68. See also Fatemi, "Leadership by Distrust," 48–9; Sheikholeslami, "Administration," I: 467–8; Abrahamian, *History of Modern Iran*, 130; Keddie, *Modern Iran*, 134; Bakash, *Turban for the Crown*, 73. They all rightly point out "the strengthening of [the Shah's] personal rule" (ibid.); Abrahamian, *History of Modern Iran*, 134, even quotes a foreign diplomat to the effect that "the shah treated Hoveida and other ministers 'as if they were office boys—and they loved it'". But they do not quite analyze the other side of the coin, which is the subject matter of this text.
  10. Scholars have described the shah's rule with different terms. For authoritarian power, see Milani, *The Shah*, 306. For autocracy, see Abrahamian, *History of Modern Iran*, and McDaniel, *Autocracy*; Keddie, *Modern Iran*, 134, talks of "autocratic powers." For sultanism, see Chehabi and Linz, "Sultanism," 3–25, a text that treats the shah's regime as one case among many. For arbitrary rule, see Katouzian, *Iranian History and Politics*, esp. ch. 1; earlier, he used the term despotism: Katouzian, *Political Economy*. For royal dictatorship, see Keddie, *Modern Iran*, 132–69; for monarchic bourgeois-capitalist dictatorship, see Halliday, *Iran*.
  11. McDaniel, *Autocracy*, 7. Similarly, Chehabi and Linz, "Sultanism," 9, state that sultanistic regimes are "evolutionary ... develop[ing] out of other forms of rule."
  12. McDaniel, *Autocracy*, 7.
  13. Milani, *The Shah*, 306. The British report also exaggeratedly stated, though, that "no public situation ... no senior appointment, no promotion, transfer, reward, or punishment takes place" without the shah's approval: ibid.
  14. The 1953 bill covered accidents, diseases, invalidity, retirement, death, and unemployment in enterprises with minimum eleven workers, and asked employers to deduct 4 percent from regular workers' salaries and add 8 percent of their own.
  15. West German Legation, "Sozialversicherungswesen in Iran," Tehran, January 26, 1954, file 6240, Av, Neues Amt, Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, Berlin (hereafter, Av/NA/PA). See also West German Legation, "Sozialpolitik der Regierung Zahedi," Tehran, November 5, 1953, file 6240, Av/NA/PA. The 1955 bill elevated the 1953 quota from 12 percent (4 plus 8) to 18 percent (5 plus 13).
  16. For the law, see "Qānun-e bimeh-hā-ye ejtemā'i-ye kārgarān;" Paléologos, "Rapport à la sous-commission de planification N°1," April 1966, pp. 3–5, TAP 0-48-4-3, ILO.
  17. Paléologos, "Rapport sur la situation existante dans certains secteurs de gestion des assurances sociales iraniennes," n.d. [Fall 1963], 1, TAP 0-48-4-3, ILO.
  18. "Iran is very indebted" to Paléologos, Khosrovani later noted: Ataollah Khosrovani, Harvard University Iranian Oral History Project (hereafter, IOHP), tape 2, 4.

19. British Embassy/A. Read to Foreign Office/W. Treganowan, Tehran, April 22, 1961, LAB13/1501, The National Archives, Kew (hereafter, TNA); Read, "Notes on Labor Attaché's Visit to Tabriz, 4–9 January 1961," 2, FO371/157659, TNA.
20. Paléologos to (ILO Istanbul regional director) Xavier Caballero and accompanying note, Tehran, October 1, 1963, TAP 0-48-4-3 (box 256), ILO; also (ILO deputy director) W. Yalden-Thomson to (Iranian Labor Minister) Khosrovani, December 13, 1963, 1–2, TAP 0-48-4 (box 253), ILO; Caballero to Khosrovani, February 26, 1964, 1–2, TAP 0-48-4 (box 253), ILO.
21. Paléologos, "Rapport d'avancement No. 12," April 30, 1967, 5, TAP 0-48-4-6 (box 257), ILO; Cucodoro to M. Khadjenouri, January 22, 1967, 1–2, TAP 0-48-4-6 (box 257), ILO. For an overview, see also "Rapport au gouvernement de l'Iran sur le développement des mesures de sécurité sociale. Projet de rapport final sur la mission accomplie par M. J. Paléologos," 1969, TAP 0-48-4 (box 253), ILO.
22. Three quotes: Request for Country Project No. ILO/69/8, 1969, 2, 2–3, TAP 0-48-4 (box 253), ILO. For Iran's social insurance in the 1970s, see Messkoub, "Social Policy," 236–8.
23. For the shah's self-view, see Ansari, "Myth," 1–24. Key texts by the shah himself include Pahlavi, *Mā'muriyat barā-ye vatanam; Mission for My Country*; "Enghelab-e Sefid-e Shahenshah"; January 1963 speech, reprinted in "Diplomatic and Court Perspectives," 633–4; and *Iran: The Philosophy behind the Revolution*. An insightful discussion of *Mission for My Country* is Afkhami, *The Shah*, 221–6.
24. Quote: "Diruz dar marāsem-e salām-e 'eid-e qorbān wa-sharafyābi-ye nemāyandegān," *Ettelā'āt*, June 6, 1960, 4. For the broadcast, see British Embassy/Read to Ministry of Labor/Wallis, Tehran, September 1, 1960, LAB13/1417, TNA. For the government pronouncement, see "Ezhārāt-e wazir-e kār pirāmun-e qānun-e jadid-e ejtemā'i-ye kārgarān," *Ettelā'āt*, May 15, 1960, 1, 17.
25. Monthly report, September 1962, pp. 16–17, C48-2-135, ILO, quoting the shah's decree.
26. Aryanpour, "His Imperial Majesty's Address," 14.
27. "Discours du trône inaugurant la nouvelle législature du Sénat," *Journal de Téhéran*, October 7, 1964, 2.
28. "Les sénateurs répondent au discours du trône," *Journal de Téhéran*, October 11, 1964, 2.
29. "Allocation prononcée par le Souverain le 29.10.44 à l'Association des cliniciens de l'Iran," annex n° 3 to Paléologos to [ILO social security director] Peter Thullen, Tehran, January 26, 1966, TAP 0-48-4-3, ILO.
30. Paléologos, "Rapport sur la sécurité sociale des populations rurales," October 1966, p. 59, TAP 0-48-4-3, ILO.
31. Paléologos to regional office/Istanbul, Tehran, November 21, 1966, 1, TAP 0-48-4-3, ILO.
32. *Ibid.*, 1, 3.
33. "Le chahinchah annonce une armée de développement," *Journal de Téhéran*, September 24, 1964, 1; "Message de M. Mansour pour la fête du paysan," *Journal de Téhéran*, September 24, 1964, 2.
34. Paléologos, "Document de travail sur la sécurité sociale des travailleurs agricoles," December 1964, pp. 3–8, TAP 0-48-4-3, ILO; Paléologos to [ILO social security director] Anton Zelenka, Tehran, April 25, 1965, TAP 0-48-4-3, ILO.
35. Report, Paléologos to ILO/Geneva, Tehran, October 1963, pp. 1–6, TAP 0-48-4-3, ILO; "Entretiens d'orientation de l'expert M. Jean Paléologos," Geneva, August 1964, TAP 0-48-4-3, ILO; Paléologos to Caballero, Tehran, March 10, 1966, TAP 0-48-4-3, ILO. See also Paléologos, "Rapport d'avancement no. 12," 1.
36. Paléologos to Zelenka, Tehran, October 24, 1964, 2, TAP 0-48-4-3, ILO (my italics). See also Paléologos, Annexe No. 2 to "Avant-propos de travail," Tehran, October 23, 1964, TAP 0-48-4-3, ILO. For headquarters' concerns, see Zelenka to Paléologos, February 3, 1965, TAP 0-48-4-3, ILO.
37. Thullen to ILO head, Geneva, August 1, 1966, 2, TAP 0-48-4 (box 253), ILO; Paléologos, "Rapport d'avancement no. 12," 3.
38. Caballero, "Mission report. Iran, 17–28 June 1960," 4, TAP 0-48-4 (box 254), ILO.

39. Khosrovani to J. Ross, Tehran, February 9, 1964, 1, TAP 0-48-4 (box 253), ILO. Also Khosrovani to Yalden-Thomson, February 9, 1964, TAP 0-48-4 (box 253), ILO; Caballero to Khosrovani, February 26, 1964, TAP 0-48-4 (box 253), ILO; Khosrovani to [Tehran UN Development Program representative] E. Collin, January 13, 1968, TAP 0-48-4 (box 253), ILO.
40. Paléologos, "Rapport d'avancement N° 2," February 7, 1965, 5, TAP 0-48-4-3, ILO. See also "Rapport au Gouvernement de l'Iran sur la reorganisation des services comptables" [mission Salbreux], 1966, 1, TAP 0-48-4-5, ILO; Paléologos, "Rapport d'avancement No. 12," 11; "Rapport au gouvernement de l'Iran sur le développement des mesures de sécurité sociale," 1969, 5; and "Compte rendu sommaire de l'exposé fait par M. Wallin à la suite de sa mission en Tehran," November 24, 1969, 1-11, TAP 0-48-4 (box 253), ILO.
41. Paléologos, "Rapport d'avancement No. 12," 7.
42. Two quotes: Paléologos to Zelenka, Tehran, October 24, 1964, 3, TAP 0-48-4-3, ILO, and Caballero to ILO Istanbul regional branch, Tehran, February 25, 1967, 2, TAP 0-48-4-6, ILO.
43. Salbreux, "Projet de plan comptable," Tehran, May 3, 1966, 2, TAP 0-48-4-5 (box 257), ILO.
44. Ibid., 1-2, 15-16; Paléologos to Zelenka, Tehran, October 24, 1964, 5, 6, TAP 0-48-4-3, ILO; Caballero, "Rapport de mission. Iran 22-27 August 1964," 7, TAP 0-48-4 (box 253), ILO; Paléologos, "Rapport d'avancement No. 2," 6; Caballero, "Rapport sur la mission effectuée à Isfahan et Chiraz du 14 au 17 Mars 1967," 1-7, TAP 0-48-4-6, ILO.
45. Abolhassan Behnia, IOHP, tape 1, 9.
46. Ramzi Abbas-Attaie, IOHP, tape 1, 17, tape 3, 7. See also *ibid.*, tape 1, 20.
47. Behnia, IOHP, tape 1, 9; Mohammad Yeganeh, IOHP, tape 7, 15.
48. Madjid Madjidi, IOHP, tape 7, 4. On Hoveyda, see Milani, *The Persian Sphinx*.
49. Abbas-Attaie, IOHP, tape 1, 20.
50. Fereydoun Djani, IOHP, tape 4, 6-7.
51. Khodadad Farmanfarmaian, IOHP, tape 7, 8, tape 8, 4-5, tape 11, 7-9; Gholam-Reza Moghadam, IOHP, tape 2, 11. Milani, *The Shah*, agrees.
52. Markaz-e barresi-ye asnād-e tārikhi-ye wezārat-e ettelā'āt, *Hoveyda*, I: 349, 208.
53. Yeganeh, IOHP, tape 3, 6; Abbas-Attaie, IOHP, tape 1, 20; Farmanfarmaian, IOHP, tape 11, 7-8.
54. Farmanfarmaian, IOHP, tape 11, 9.
55. For this point, see also Milani, *The Persian Sphinx*.
56. Markaz-e barresi-ye asnād-e tārikhi-ye wezārat-e ettelā'āt, *Hoveyda*, I: 238, 364, 408, 439, 454, 516.
57. *Ibid.*, 240, 441.
58. *Ibid.*, 204.
59. Jafar Sharif-Emami, IOHP, tape 8, 5, 16.
60. Farmanfarmaian, IOHP, tape 7, 11, tape 8, 2.
61. Yeganeh, IOHP, tape 7, 15.
62. Farmanfarmaian, IOHP, tape 9, 11.
63. Sharif-Emami, IOHP, tape 8, 8; Ali Amini, IOHP, tape 3, 14; Khosrovani, IOHP, tape 3, 3; Farmanfarmaian, IOHP, tape 7, 5.
64. Yeganeh, IOHP, tape 12, 2.
65. See the diary Alam, *The Shah and I*, 189 (entry: January 8, 1971). Alam, court minister in 1967-77, was the man in whom the shah confided most.
66. Madjidi, IOHP, tape 6, 19.
67. Yeganeh, IOHP, tape 12, 2-3. See also *ibid.*, tape 9, 16-17, and tape 10, 10-11.
68. Behnia, IOHP, tape 1, 6 (talking about the Sharif-Emami government); Farmanfarmaian, IOHP, tape 9, 2; Madjidi, IOHP, tape 2, 6-7; Moghadam, IOHP, tape 2, 14, tape 3, 9; Mohammad-Mehdi Samii, IOHP, tape 2, 6; Yeganeh, IOHP, tape 12, 2-3.
69. Yeganeh, IOHP, tape 10, 16-17 and tape 11, 1-2; quote on tape 11, 1.
70. Madjidi, IOHP, tape 6, 23.
71. Abbas-Attaie, IOHP, tape 1, 17, 19.
72. Alam, *The Shah and I*, 509.

73. Ibid., 157, 166, 124.
74. Zahedi to Washburne, 16 January 1978, box 106/6, Ardeshir Zahedi Papers, Hoover Institute, Stanford University (my italics). See also Letter, Zahedi to Allen, Washington, 2 February 1978, and three pages of gift lists, both in the same folder. Other boxes containing material on gifts, including such received by Zahedi and the embassy, are 78/3, 5, 6, 98/14–16, 99/4–6, and 153/5–8, 10–11. I thank Dr. Jenny Fichmann for photographing these gift-related files on my behalf. For Zahedi's Washington parties, see Ghazvinian, *Iran and America*.

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