

The Iranian Withdrawal Crisis: Looking Beyond American Deterrence

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Introduction

On March 4, 1946, fifteen Soviet armored brigades entered northern Iran's Azerbaijan region, moving in to reinforce their countrymen who had occupied the area since 1941.¹ This was extremely disturbing news for United States and United Kingdom; they had signed a tripartite pact with Stalin in which they agreed to fully evacuate the country by March 2, 1946. The last American divisions left on January 1, and the last British divisions left on March 1.²

However, it seemed that Stalin had big plans for Azerbaijan and no intentions of removing Soviet military garrisons. In summer of 1945, just weeks after the Allies had victoriously concluded the end of the European portion of World War II, the Soviet leader issued three top-secret decrees that outlined his plans for the provinces. On June 21, the first of these decrees ordered Soviet forces in Iran to begin a geological survey for possible oil supplies. The second decree on July 5 ordered the organization of a political party, the Democratic Party of Azerbaijan (DPA), whose purpose it would be to organize the people against Tehran. Two weeks later, a third decree further instructed the newly formed DPA to create a "Society of Friends of Soviet Azerbaijan" and "to use the press to systematically illustrate the achievements of the economy, culture, and art of Soviet Azerbaijan and the historical friendship of the peoples of Southern Azerbaijan and the peoples of Soviet Azerbaijan."³ Surprisingly on March 24, 1946, not even three weeks after the additional armored brigades entered the country, the Soviet Union started its evacuation of Iran. By May 9, 1946, all of its occupying forces were gone.⁴

¹ Rossow, Jr., Robert. "The Battle of Azerbaijan, 1946." *Middle East Journal* 10, No. 1 (1956). 17.

² Pollock, Kenneth M. *The Persian Puzzle*. New York: Random House, 2005. 44.

³ Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. "Cold War International History Project 1945-46 Iranian Crisis." Accessed January 4, 2009.

<http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=va2.browse&sort=Collection&item=1945-46%20Iranian%20Crisis>.

⁴ Pollock 47

Although no shots were fired, the Iranian Withdrawal Crisis was one of the first cracks in the Grand Alliance that had defeated Hitler. Many politicians, scholars, and historians view this event as one of the first and most successful examples of US deterrence to Soviet post-war expansion, depicting US military threats sending the USSR scurrying out of Iran. Although the Soviet withdrawal from Azerbaijan occurred just after the United States attempted to exert diplomatic and military pressure, these retellings of the crisis over-emphasize the American role. In fact, US diplomatic pressure was relatively light compared to subsequent clashes with the Soviet Union. To call the Iranian Crisis a telltale example of US deterrence to Soviet expansionism would be a drastic oversimplification. There is no clear record of heavy-handed threats, and the evidence that does exist suggests a relatively flexible US posture.

The USSR pulled out of Azerbaijan for different reasons. By the late spring of 1946 the costs of staying simply outweighed the benefits. The a more friendly Iranian government under Prime Minister Ahmad Qavam worked to diffuse tensions with the Soviet Union and appeased the USSR with a critical oil agreement. Also, the USSR abandoned its hopes of uniting the Iranian Azeris with their ethnic kin in Azerbaijan SSR. Whether they deemed the campaign too costly or destined to fail, they realized that that Soviet-supported popular front was crumbling from below. And finally, rather than invoke the costs of escalation in Iran, the Soviets decided to settle for the oil agreement and pull out, saving themselves for more pressing ambitions in Eastern Europe and elsewhere. Of course, the US implications of diplomatic and military ramifications were a factor in the costs of the Soviet Union leaving. Forfeiting even more of its diplomatic pull with the US was certainly one of the factors that convinced Stalin to leave. However, this paper argues that the diplomatic pressure was merely one of many reasons for the Soviet Union's withdrawal.

Refuting the “Ultimatum” Theory

In a 1957 *New York Times* article, former President Truman explained: “I personally saw to it that Stalin was informed that I had given orders to our military chiefs to prepare for the movement of our ground, sea, and air forces. Stalin then did what I knew he would do. He moved his troops out.”⁵ The existence of such an “ultimatum” is disputed. Some scholars argue that there was no such threat, while others claim that there was indeed a threat, although it was verbal and not written.⁶ In any case, this paper argues that even if there were an ultimatum issued, the manner and context of its delivery had undermined any threatening power it may have had. The diplomatic messages that did come out of the White House, a softly worded official note and a quiet unofficial message, were surely not very convincing given the US domestic political situation. These factors all contributed to the secondary role of this “ultimatum” in spurring the Soviet withdrawal.

The official notes and messages that the US did send included language that was vague and non-committal. On March 6, 1946, four days after the agreed withdrawal date, Truman sent a written note to Stalin through Secretary of State James A. Byrnes. The note protested Soviet failure to withdraw from Azerbaijan. However, it was by no means an “ultimatum.” Its passages contained weak language: “[The US] can not remain indifferent” to the Soviet delays and “expresses the earnest hope that the Government of the Soviet Union will do its part, by withdrawing immediately all Soviet forces from the territory of Iran.”⁷ Expressing “earnest

⁵ Thrope, James A. “Truman’s Ultimatum to Stalin: The Making of a Myth.” *The Journal of Politics* 40, No. 1 (1978). 190.

⁶ See Thrope, above, and Rosenberg, J. Phillip. “The Cheshire Ultimatum: Truman’s Message to Stalin in the 1946 Azerbaijan Crisis.” *The Journal of Politics* 41, No. 3 (1979), for more on the debate over Truman’s messages to Stalin.

⁷ Thorpe 189-190

hope” that a country will “do its part” is hardly a military threat. Moreover, such language is vague and undermines the credibility of any threat.

Some scholars also point to evidence that Truman sent a verbal message through diplomatic channels during the period of March 21-23. Evidence suggests that the message voiced disappointment with Stalin for not fulfilling his commitments to the withdrawal agreement.⁸ Whether this message contained a military threat is unclear. Some scholars (along with Truman himself) contend that it did, declaring that the Soviet Union’s abrupt announcement of withdrawal on March 24 was proof enough. This timing notwithstanding, the effectiveness of this supposed ultimatum is dubious. Even assuming that Truman’s verbal message contained military threats, the conditions surrounding the message greatly undermined the message’s potential effectiveness. Unofficial verbal messages are extremely non-committal. Making a speech or sending an official document would have let the US stance be known publicly and further obligate the US to deliver on its threat. By sending the message quietly, Truman left open the option of backing down quietly. In turn, leaving this option open undermined the credibility of the threat.

Moreover, Truman had problems in America to worry about. In 1946, he was dealing with demobilizing and re-assimilating to civilian life 12 million military personnel, an expensive and time-consuming task. On top of that, unions were becoming discontent with the post-war ending of price controls. This unrest resulted in nationwide railroad strikes that summer.⁹ In midst of domestic unrest and the colossal task of deconstructing the US armed forces, all the while leaving enough troops in Europe and Japan to support post-war regimes, it surely seemed unlikely to Soviet leadership that the US would be ready to commit a significant amount of its

⁸ Rosenberg 936

⁹ PBS. *The Presidents*. “Truman, The Post War Economy.” Accessed January 7, 2009. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/presidents/video/truman_19.html#v176>.

resources to a location so remote for most Americans, northern Iran. In fact, the US repeatedly told the Iranians that US support would be through Iran's presentation to the UN Security Council. They gave no military guarantees.¹⁰ Of course, Truman was commander-in-chief and did take some military action to pressure the USSR. For example, he put three divisions in Austria, fresh from the war, on alert for possible redeployment. But this action seems small, compared to other actions he could have taken. When dealing with the Turkish Straits Crisis in August of 1946 for instance, Truman sent into the Eastern Mediterranean an American fleet including then the world's most advanced aircraft carrier.¹¹ The context and manner of delivery of his action regarding Iran—including the toothless official note, the quiet unofficial message, and the unsettling US domestic situation—discredited whatever threat Truman could have made. Thus, it seems unlikely that any such threats, diplomatic or military, played the critical role in Russia's decision to pull out of Azerbaijan. Although provoking the US may have been one more reason for Russia to back off, it was a minor one and one of many.

A New Friendly Government

One must then ask, if not for US deterrence, then for what reasons did Russia withdraw? One critical factor was the rise of a seemingly sympathetic government in Iran. In January 1946, Ahmad Qavam rose to the premiership. His ascendancy signaled a more friendly government toward the Soviet Union, one that mollified Soviet fears of a Western-backed, militaristic Iran on the border of Soviet oil reserves in the Caucasus and gas reserves in Central Asia. In December 1945, the Soviets denied the Iranian army entry into the Azeri provinces to quell separatists. Although World War II had come to an end, the Soviet army still had the right to remain in Iran for another three months. Anxious to solve the growing separatist issue, the Majlis (Iranian

¹⁰ Mark, Eduard M. "Allied Relations in Iran, 1941-1947: The Origins of a Cold War Crisis" *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 59, no. 1. 1975. 61.

¹¹ Ovendale, Ritchie. *The English-Speaking Alliance*. London: Routledge, 1985. 41.

Parliament) elected the experienced Qavam to office.¹² Qavam had been part of the early 20th century movement to modernize Iran during its Constitutional Revolution and had served as Prime Minister in 1921.¹³

Qavam's diplomacy made great progress in placating Soviet fears of a Western backed antagonistic Iran. He made moves to demonstrate that Iran was ready to take a more moderate stance toward the Soviet Union and the separatists. On March 19 1946, Qavam took Iran's case to the UN Security Council.¹⁴ The body recommended Soviet-Iranian bilateral negotiations. Following the recommendation, he engaged the Soviet government vigorously. Immediately, he took action to signal Iran's sincerity to work with the USSR. These moves included the reinforcement of free expression rights for the communist Tudeh party and the implication that he would conduct talks with the leader of the Azeri separatists, Ja'far Pishevari.¹⁵ By April 4, 1946, Qavam struck a deal with Stalin. Rather than offering a direct oil concession to the Soviets, he committed Iran to forming a joint Soviet-Iranian oil company with 51% Soviet interest.¹⁶ Once the agreement was signed, the Soviets had achieved at least one of their objectives for Azerbaijan: they made sure that the significant oil reserves that they believed were in Azerbaijan would be at least in part theirs.¹⁷ Soon after signing the oil agreement, Qavam moved to demonstrate that Iran was sympathetic to the leftists. He started talks with the Azeri separatists to negotiate some of their autonomy demands and, by August of 1946, he appointed

¹² Pollack 45-47

¹³ Ladjevardi, Habib. "The Origins of U.S. Support for an Autocratic Iran." *Int'l J. of Middle Eastern Studies* 15, No. 2 (1983). 231.

¹⁴ Howard, Harry N. "The Soviet Union in the Middle East." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 263, (1949). 186.

¹⁵ Paine, Chris and Erica Schoenberger. "Iranian Nationalism and the Great Powers: 1872-1954" *MERIP Reports*, No. 37. (1975). 20. Interestingly, once the Soviets had left, the Majlis refused to ratify the agreement. Some scholars believed Qavam purposely duped the Soviet Union, knowing that the agreement would never be approved. Others, however, contested that the agreement was made in earnest. For more on this, see Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, above in note 2. Also note that the separatists had their own party, the DPA, separate from Tudeh.

¹⁶ Mark 63

¹⁷ Pollack 47

three Tudeh party members to his cabinet.¹⁸ The Iranian government's oil concession, openness to negotiations, relatively moderate stance dealing with communists surely signaled to the Russians that Iran was less of a threat than expected. In Qavam, Stalin had received oil and a relatively friendly Iranian government to his south, placating any fears he may have had of a Western-armed belligerent Iran.

The Azeri Cultural Integration Agenda Stalled

However, rise of Qavam and his skillful diplomacy alone cannot explain why Stalin would give up extra territory where it seemed relatively easy to take. Indeed, the USSR did have troops on the ground without a significant armed threat nearby. To explain the Russian withdrawal without a fight, one must examine the progress of Russian-directed attempts to integrate the two Azeri nations. By the spring of 1946, the Soviet Union realized that its attempts to culturally integrate Iranian Azerbaijan into Azerbaijan SSR were not successful. Without the popular base the separatist movement that would grow from cultural integration, the Russians realized that Iranian Azerbaijan would require a concentration of resources that, in light of the recent oil agreement, simply was not worth it.

The critical issue that the integration plan would have to overcome was the Azeri connection to Iran. Although the Azeris were not Persian, they were still part of Iran's large population of Turkish speaking people and shared a common history in the Iranian nation. The two Azeri areas had been divided since the 1828 Treaty of Turkmenchay, which split Azerbaijan between the Persian and Russian Empires at the Arax River.¹⁹ The Azeri provinces in Iran had in the past revolted against rule in Tehran, but those revolts consistently failed. One factor responsible was that many Azeris identified with Iran. In the early 20th century there were

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Shaffer 4

movements among middle class Azeris for the “Persianization” of Turks and other minorities in Iran. Even moderates who campaigned for cultural autonomy oftentimes identified themselves as part of a larger Iranian nation.²⁰ Moreover, Iranian Azeris could assimilate into mainstream Persian culture in Iran if they chose to. Both peoples were non-Arab Middle Eastern cultures that practiced Shia Islam. In contrast, Azeris in the Soviet Union could not realistically assimilate into the Russian majority group in the USSR. The government discriminated against Muslims, and the physical, linguistic, and religious differences between Slavic Russians and Turkic Azeris hindered chances at such assimilation.

In spite of the complex status of the Azeri identity, Stalin tried to bring Azeris of Azerbaijan SSR together with the ethnic brethren to the south. In his third top-secret decree, Stalin had ordered the creation of a “Society of Friends of Soviet Azerbaijan” and for the organization to do all in its power highlight the cultural achievements of Soviet Azerbaijan and the mutual ties between the two countries. It also instructed the party to implement of Azeri language instruction in schools and increase access to public services that were set up separately from those of the central government.²¹ With the recent 25th anniversary of the founding of Azerbaijan SSR, the Soviet government believed that Azeri celebrations of entering the Soviet Union in the north might be able to rub off on efforts at cultural integration in the south.

However, by March of 1946, the Soviets were extending their occupation past the agreed upon withdrawal date and the cultural integration movement did not have substantial success. Although the Iranian Azeris had been instructed to entice the local population with economic and social benefits, those benefits failed to materialize, in part because the Soviet government

²⁰ Shaffer 39

²¹ Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Document 2

provided relatively little financial support.²² Without the promised economic and social benefits, the attempt to bolster cultural connections was not enough. That March the American consul in Tabriz noted that the Soviet-supported rebels had entirely alienated their local support.²³ This situation demonstrated that although the Iranian Azeri identity was separate from that of Persians, their connection to Iran was strong enough that the Soviets would need more than a hastily reconstructed Pan-Azeri identity to incite a popular revolt.

Indeed, later Soviet inaction on behalf of its clients signaled that by late spring of 1946, the Azeris were little more to the Russians than a bargaining chip for oil. Having served that purpose, the Soviets no longer needed to defend them in the hope of integrating the region with Azerbaijan SSR. That summer, the Shah sent the Iranian army against the Azeri rebels, who were no longer backed by Soviet forces. The Azeri front collapsed with little resistance, and the army started to arrest separatist group leaders to suppress the movement.²⁴ The Soviet Union, however, did not move in to defend them. Ambassador George V. Allen noted with surprise how the Russians left their Azeri agents without supplies or other material means to defend themselves from the government troops.²⁵ The Soviet Union did not so much as issue a formal complaint regarding the Iranian government's crackdown.²⁶ The timing of this government crackdown and Russia's inaction are both crucial. Because Russia let the crackdown take place after the oil deal, it suggests that after settling the oil question Russia had abandoned plans to reunify the region with Azerbaijan SSR. Had it entertained these future plans, Moscow would have at least tried to appear as if it was helping the Azeri leaders. Rather, it allowed the Iranian central government

²² Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Document 2.

²³ Mark 62-3

²⁴ Pollack 46

²⁵ Mark 63

²⁶ Mark 62

ruthlessly crack down its former allies in Iran. Simply put, once the Russians had received what they needed from the Azeri bargaining chip, they left the separatists to defend themselves.

Pressing Issues in Elsewhere

Another question still lingers. Even with the new seemingly sympathetic government in Tehran and stalling cultural integration process, why wouldn't Stalin use force to take territory where he might be able to get it? He did so in other areas, such as Poland, despite the powerful Polish resentment of Russian rule. However, in light of recent agreements with Qavam, Soviet aspirations in Northern Iran were probably subordinated for bigger projects like solidifying control in Eastern Europe. The Soviets wanted buffer states against future invasions and many Eastern and Central European countries had robust socialist movements that could be used to solidify popular control. The high costs of taking Iranian Azerbaijan made the USSR's potential net gains much larger in Eastern Europe than in Iran. In Europe, the USSR could woo countries that had socialist traditions with relatively little effort. And, although other European countries lacked popular support for communism, the USSR still considered them key buffer states against Germany and the West, warranting the extra effort required to forcefully take these areas. In light of the recent agreements with Iran, it made more sense for Stalin to save his diplomatic clout and military resources for his plans in Eastern Europe.

An important case to consider is Czechoslovakia. After World War II, Czechoslovakia at first had a national front coalition that seemed like it could become a viable democracy. However, by 1948, the Soviets had brought it firmly into their orbit. Why would Stalin want to focus on reinforcing communists here rather than in Iran? Czechoslovakia had a significant communist and social presence for decades. Moreover, Czechs and Slovaks are Slavic and have at least minor cultural and even linguistic connections with Russia. Unlike Northern Iran, these

areas would not require as intense an effort to integrate politically and culturally. During the interwar period, Czechoslovakia had the second largest Communist Party in Europe, with 125,000 registered members.²⁷ In 1935, the Communist Party there had taken over 10% of the seats in both the parliament and the senate, making them the fourth largest party in the country. Although they were a minority, they were a substantial one (the largest party had scarcely 15% of the vote).²⁸

After the war, an emerging anti-German, pro-Russian sentiment prevailed among many Czechs and Slovaks.²⁹ This sentiment helped to reinforce support for the party from the bottom up. In contrast, the Soviets had to support the communist movement in Northern Iran from the top down. The US consulate in Tabriz noted that without Soviet support the communist separatists would collapse.³⁰ In contrast to Iranian Azerbaijan, the homegrown communist movement in Czechoslovakia enjoyed significant popularity. Moreover, the Russians did not have to worry about a cultural integration campaign as they did in Iran. Although the Central European Czechoslovaks had a culture distinct from Russia, they were European, Slavic, and historically Christian people. Compared to the Turkish-speaking Islamic Azeris, integrating Czechoslovakia into the Soviet Bloc would be reasonable task.

Also, Russia considered these Eastern European countries to be vital buffer zones against a possible German resurgence. Thus, they warranted the effort of forcing unpopular communism upon the people of countries in which communism was not popular. The USSR lost as many as 20 million of its citizens, slightly more than half of that total being civilians.³¹ It had much to

²⁷ Chamberlain, William Henry. *Soviet Russia*. Boston: Little Brown, 1930. 270

²⁸ Rothschild, Joseph. *East Central Europe Between the Two World Wars*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1974. 126.

²⁹ Kořalka, Jiří. "Czechoslovakia." *The American Historical Review* 97. No. 4, (1992). 1027.

³⁰ Mark 62

³¹ Parker, Robert. *The Second World War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. 281

resent and fear from its Eastern European neighbors for either failing to stop or even aiding in an invasion of its territory. One must recall that Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria were all allies of the Germans. Moreover, citizens of the Baltic States and Ukraine had played significant roles in aiding the Germans during Operation Barbarossa by not resisting the coming Nazi armies but greeting them as liberators.³² It made sense that Russia desired almost complete control of these areas after the war. Even though many of these countries were severely resentful of Russia and despised the Soviet system (examples include Poland, the Baltic States, Ukraine), Stalin considered these areas top strategic priorities that warranted the effort of forcefully propping up Soviet rule.

In contrast, the USSR had relatively little to resent from Iran, and by 1946 were not in dire need of a buffer against a Western threat. During the war, the Iranians had borne the Anglo-Soviet occupation that allowed for the shipment of American Lend-Lease aid. Some scholars do suggest that the Soviet moves in Azerbaijan were in part a reaction to Western consolidation in the Persian Gulf, mainly the US acquisition of an airbase in Saudi Arabia at Dhahran.³³ Truman had indeed constructed this airbase in part to threaten recently relocated Soviet industry in case of a future war with the USSR. A working paper of the Joint Intelligence Staff explained: “Destruction by air of the Caucasian and Ploesti oil fields and the Ukraine and Ural industrial centers would prevent the Soviet prosecution of war”³⁴ However, when Truman did not reinforce the airbase in Dhahran during in March of 1946, the Soviets realized that they had overestimated the US intentions in the Middle East. Thus, whether it was intentionally or not, the US had sent a signal to Stalin that for the time being, a Soviet buffer zone in Iranian Azerbaijan was

³² Berkhoff, Karel. *Harvest of Despair*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004. 20. and Newland, Samuel. *Cossacks in the German Army 1941-1945*. London: Cass, 1991. 27.

³³ Lawson, Fred H. “The Iranian Crisis of 1945-1946 and the Spiral Model of International Conflict.” *Int’l J. of Middle Eastern Studies* 21. (1989). 317-323

³⁴ Lawson 319

unnecessary. Certainly the lingering US troops in Germany and the rest of Europe seemed like more of a threat than a single unreinforced airbase on Saudi territory. And so, the Soviets focused their resources on Europe and withdrew from Iran, where diplomacy had won for them oil concessions and relatively friendly government.

Conclusion

Many retellings of the Iranian Withdrawal Crisis emphasize the role of US threats in pushing the Soviet Union out of Iran. A closer examination of these “threats” and other motives that the Soviet Union had for leaving reveals a different story. Although the US did exert diplomatic pressure and may have even may have issued a secret military threat, these actions were relatively weak given the manner and context of their delivery. The Soviets were, in fact, reacting to much more than American intimidation. A new and seemingly friendly Iranian government had allayed Soviet fears of a belligerent Iran and given the USSR the oil it sought. Moreover, Soviet attempts to integrate Iranian Azerbaijan and Azeribaijan SSR became more difficult than expected. Thus, when the last Soviet occupying forces withdrew on May 9, 1946, the Soviet Union was indeed retreating from Azerbaijan. However, its actions were not motivated by fear but by anticipation, anticipation for more pressing and more easily attainable objectives in Eastern Europe and elsewhere.

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