FROM NEUTRALITY TO ALLIANCE:

AN ANALYSIS OF IRAN'S ENTRY INTO THE BAGHDAD PACT

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Abstract: This study examines the emergence, evolution, and eventual failure of the Baghdad Pact within the broader context of post–Second World War Middle Eastern politics, with particular emphasis on Iran's accession to the pact on 3 November 1955. It situates the pact against the backdrop of decolonization, rising Arab nationalism, superpower rivalry, and the enduring Arab–Israeli conflict, all of which reshaped the region's security environment. The analysis demonstrates that alliance formation in the Middle East was driven less by abstract balance-of-power considerations than by perceived regional threats, regime security concerns, and expectations of external military and economic assistance. The article traces early Western efforts to construct regional defence frameworks, from the Middle East Command (MEC) and Middle East Defence Organization (MEDO) to the Northern Tier Project, highlighting their political and strategic limitations. It argues that the Baghdad Pact emerged as a compromise solution reflecting overlapping but asymmetrical objectives: Britain sought to preserve influence with limited resources, the United States aimed to contain Soviet expansion while avoiding alienation of Arab states, and regional members pursued security guarantees and material aid. The study shows how the Shah's decision was shaped by domestic stability concerns, fear of Soviet reactions, and the pursuit of Western economic and military support. Iranian participation ultimately reflected regime security calculations and developmental expectations rather than confidence in a robust collective defence mechanism. Finally, the article assesses the transformation of the Baghdad Pact into CENTO and explains its decline.

Keywords: *Iran, Baghdad Pact, CENTO, Cold War, Middle East Defence.*

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TARAFSIZLIKTAN İTTİFAKA:

İRAN'IN BAĞDAT PAKTI'NA GİRİŞİNİN ANALİZİ

Öz: Bu çalışma, İkinci Dünya Savaşı sonrası Ortadoğu siyasetinin daha geniş bağlamında Bağdat Paktı'nın ortaya çıkışını, evrimini ve nihai başarısızlığını, özellikle İran'ın 3 Kasım 1955'te pakta katılımına odaklanarak inceliyor. Paktı, sömürgecilikten kurtulma, yükselen Arap milliyetçiliği, süper güç rekabeti ve süregelen Arap-İsrail çatışması gibi bölgenin güvenlik ortamını yeniden şekillendiren faktörlerin arka planına yerleştiriyor. Analiz, Ortadoğu'daki ittifak oluşumunun soyut güç dengesi değerlendirmelerinden ziyade algılanan bölgesel tehditler, rejim güvenlik endişeleri ve dış askeri ve ekonomik yardım beklentileri tarafından yönlendirildiğini göstermektedir. Makale, Ortadoğu Komutanlığı (MEC) ve Ortadoğu Savunma Organizasyonu (MEDO)'ndan Kuzey Kuşağı Projesi'ne kadar bölgesel savunma çerçeveleri oluşturmaya yönelik erken Batı çabalarını izleyerek, bunların siyasi ve stratejik sınırlamalarını vurgulamaktadır. Bu çalışma, Bağdat Paktı'nın örtüşen ancak asimetrik hedefleri yansıtan bir uzlaşma çözümü olarak ortaya çıktığını savunmaktadır: Britanya sınırlı kaynaklarla etkisini korumayı amaçlarken, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri Arap devletlerinin yabancılaşmasından kaçınarak Sovyet genişlemesini kontrol altına almayı hedeflemiş, bölgesel üyeler ise güvenlik garantileri ve maddi yardım peşinde koşmuştur. Çalışma, Şah'ın kararının iç istikrar kaygıları, Sovyet tepkilerinden duyulan korku ve Batı'nın ekonomik ve askeri desteğinin peşinde koşulmasıyla nasıl şekillendiğini göstermektedir. İran'ın katılımı nihayetinde güçlü bir kolektif savunma mekanizmasına duyulan güven yerine, rejimin güvenlik hesaplamalarını ve kalkınma beklentilerini yansıtmıştır. Son olarak, makale Bağdat Paktı'nın CENTO'ya dönüşümünü değerlendiriyor ve gerilemesini açıklıyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *İran, Bağdat Paktı, CENTO, Soğuk Savaş, Ortadoğu Savunması.*

Introduction

After the Second World War, Middle Eastern history came to be shaped by three closely connected problems. The first concerned Egypt's transformation of its regional influence into lasting dominance within the Arab world, notably through the doctrine of Arab unity or Pan-Arabism. The second problem involved the steady expansion of superpower involvement across the region. Although both the United States and the Soviet Union committed a number of errors following the war, by 1967 Egypt, Syria, and North Yemen were loosely aligned with the Soviet Union. The United States, by contrast, had forged significant security relationships with Israel, Jordan, Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq. The superpowers and their local allies were connected by distinct yet generally compatible objectives: while the superpowers aimed to counterbalance one another, their clients sought external backing to offset dangers posed by rival regional states. The third problem was the enduring Arab–Israeli conflict and the continued failure of Arab states to establish a genuinely effective alliance against Israel. Although the rhetoric of Arab solidarity helped maintain a loose Arab front opposing Israel, mutual distrust among Arab states severely limited cooperation. Consequently, reliance on superpower assistance became inevitable. When balancing against regional rivals proved too difficult or hazardous, seeking support from a major external power remained the only viable option.[2]

The post-war security environment of the Middle East emerged from four principal developments. First, the imperial system constructed by Britain and France rapidly deteriorated as the colonial powers surrendered authority over territories obtained from the Ottoman Empire after the First World War. Second, a widespread revival of nationalism swept the region. Originating in the nineteenth century, Arab nationalism developed through resistance to prolonged foreign domination. Furthermore, Arab fragmentation was widely interpreted as an artificial consequence of imperial rule, and restoring Arab political unity became a powerful nationalist aspiration. Third, the establishment of Israel and its victory in 1948 generated a permanent source of conflict. From that point onward, commitment to Arab nationalism required uncompromising opposition to Israel. The Arab defeat also undermined traditional ruling elites and strengthened the conviction that Arab unity was essential for recovering Palestine and safeguarding Arab independence. Fourth, Soviet and American strategic interest in the region expanded rapidly. The United States began assuming Britain's former position, and both superpowers played decisive roles in Israel's creation. After the 1948 war, Washington

[2] Stephen M. Walt (1992), *The Origins of Alliances,* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 50-53.

pursued neutrality in the Arab–Israeli dispute while promoting a new Western-oriented security framework. Meanwhile, Moscow gradually recognized Arab nationalism as the primary anti-imperialist force and shifted its policy accordingly. Having previously neglected the Middle East, both superpowers prepared for deeper engagement.[3]

By the early 1950s, the regional arena was populated by diverse actors pursuing frequently incompatible goals. Existing rivalries intensified because many newly independent states were experiencing rapid social transformation and struggling with fragile domestic legitimacy. This dynamic significantly raised the stakes, as foreign-policy achievements promised major rewards, while external setbacks risked complete political collapse.[4]

The initial phase of post-war alliance formation in the Middle East began in 1955 with the ill-fated Baghdad Pact. This arrangement emerged from the overlapping aims of the United Kingdom, the United States, and Iraq. For London and Washington, the pact offered a means to preserve declining influence in the region while protecting Western interests from Soviet pressure. For Iraq, membership promised security against the Soviet Union and an opportunity to strengthen its standing within the Arab world.[5]

These ambitions quickly encountered resistance from other Arab states, particularly Egypt. Nasser's opposition stemmed from several considerations. First, he viewed the pact as another mechanism for great-power intrusion into Arab affairs. Second, he rejected the notion that the Soviet Union posed a serious threat. Third, Iraqi participation risked marginalizing Egypt in Arab politics, potentially elevating Iraq to regional leadership. Thus, the dispute over the pact constituted another chapter in the rivalry between the Arab world's two most influential states. Fundamentally, the question was whether Nuri's vision of a Western-linked security framework would surpass Nasser's alternative of a united, nonaligned Arab bloc.[6] Egypt skilfully exploited superpower competition and nationalist sentiment to organize Arab resistance to the Baghdad Pact.

Egypt achieved a decisive victory. Even before the Iraq–Turkey–Britain treaties were concluded in early 1955, a blend of Egyptian propaganda, Saudi financial incentives, and effective

[3] Stephen M. Walt (1992), *The Origins of Alliances*, pp. 50-53; Behçet K. Yeşilbursa (2001), "The American Concept of the Northern Tier Defence Project and the Signing of the Turco-Pakistani Agreement, 1953-54", *Middle Eastern Studies*, 37(3), pp. 59-110.
[4] Stephen M. Walt (1992), *The Origins of Alliances*, pp. 58-59; Behçet K. Yeşilbursa (1999), "Turkey's Participation in the Middle East Command and Its Admission to NATO, 1950-52", *Middle Eastern Studies,* 35(4), pp. 70-102.
[5] Stephen M. Walt (1992), *The Origins of Alliances*, pp. 58-59.
[6] *Ibid*., pp. 60-61.

diplomacy persuaded Syria to reject the pact. Saudi Arabia's hostility reflected its historic rivalry with Iraq's Hashemites, disputes with Britain over the Buraimi Oasis, and concerns about revolutionary pressures at home. Syria's refusal resulted from widespread support for neutralist Pan-Arabism, lingering fears of Iraqi territorial ambitions, the ascent of a leftist coalition opposed to Western alignment, and Egypt's encouragement of these tendencies through media and personal diplomacy.[7]

The final phase of Nasser's campaign targeted Lebanon and Jordan. Jordan's brief consideration of joining the pact provoked an aggressive propaganda offensive from Radio Cairo, while subsequent unrest forced the collapse of the Jordanian government in late 1955 and early 1956. King Hussein soon declared neutrality and appeased nationalist forces by dismissing General John Glubb, the British commander of the Arab Legion. By early 1956, Iraq stood isolated, and Egypt had clearly emerged as leader of a broad Arab coalition.[8]

The formation of alliances in the Middle East can largely be explained by four factors. First, alliances most commonly arise in response to external threats. Second, balancing behaviour predominates over bandwagoning. Third, states do not balance solely against power but against perceived threats. While superpowers primarily balance each other, regional actors focus less on global power distributions and more on dangers posed by neighbouring rivals. Finally, aggressive intentions and offensive capabilities increase the likelihood of counter-alliances forming.[9]

Typically, states attempt to neutralize threats by supplementing their own power with that of allies. Consequently, superpowers seek partners to restrain rivals or prevent alliance expansion, while regional states pursue external backing, usually from superpowers, during intense rivalries or armed conflicts. Middle Eastern states are therefore more sensitive to nearby threats than to overall systemic power. Proximate dangers generate balancing rather than bandwagoning behaviour, while concern for the global balance remains limited.[10] Foreign assistance has accordingly become a favored policy instrument. Since 1955, both superpowers have delivered extensive economic and military aid throughout the region.

For an alliance to endure, it requires a clearly defined threat and adversary. Forming a pact entail sharing intelligence, coordinating diplomacy, planning military operations, and

[7] *Ibid*., pp. 60-61.
[8] *Ibid*., pp. 148-149.
[9] *Ibid.*
[10] *Ibid*., pp. 158-159; Panagiotis Dimitrakis (2012), *Failed Alliances of the Cold War,* London: I.B. Tauris, pp. 1-5.

conducting joint exercises. Shared values, ideologies, interests, and balance-of-power calculations also encourage cooperation, facilitate aid programs, and support the creation of institutionalized alliance structures, such as standing military committees.[11]

Alliance success further involves cohesion under adversity, shared threat perceptions, unified security policies, resilience in the face of potential defeat, and unwavering loyalty. Effective alliances are characterized by joint planning, compatible structures, shared technology, and trust in handling sensitive information. Genuine partners act in good faith and refrain from exploiting one another for excessive military or economic advantage.

The strategic importance of the oil-producing Middle East was always evident to Britain and the United States, paving the way for strong American commitment to protecting the region from communist influence. Consequently, anti-communist alliances such as NATO were designed to block Soviet expansion.

Following the Second World War, American defence, security, and aid initiatives in the Middle East were driven primarily by containment of Soviet and communist influence. Washington encouraged bilateral agreements as well as regional collective-defence organizations. From the American perspective, the fall of a single state to communism risked triggering a chain reaction of defections.[12]

British motivations for alliance-building were twofold: preserving influence in the region and securing external assistance to do so. London expected Washington to provide critical financial backing. However, the Middle East proved a difficult environment for anti-communist coalitions. For Britain, the region represented a crucial hub linking Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Commonwealth. American policymakers similarly believed Soviet control over the Middle East would gravely endanger U.S. security interests.[13]

This study makes several clear and defensible contributions to the existing literature on Cold War alliances and Middle Eastern international relations:

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[11] Kevin Ruane (2005), "SEATO, MEDO and the Baghdad Pact: Anthony Eden, British Foreign Policy and the Collective defence of Southasia and the Middle East, 1952-1955", *Diplomacy and Statecraft,* 16(1), pp. 169-199; Panagiotis Dimitrakis (2012), *Failed Alliances of the Cold War*, pp. 7-38; Stephen M. Walt (1992), *The Origins of Alliances*, p. 3.

[12] Kevin Ruane (2005), "SEATO, MEDO and the Baghdad Pact: Anthony Eden, British Foreign Policy and the Collective defence of Southasia and the Middle East, 1952-1955", pp. 169-199; Panagiotis Dimitrakis (2012), *Failed Alliances of the Cold War*, pp. 7-38.

[13] TNA/FO371/173314, Contacts between NATO, CENTO and SEAT, 4 June 1963; Panagiotis Dimitrakis (2012), *Failed Alliances of the Cold War*, pp. 7-38; Cihat Göktepe (2003), *British Foreign Policy towards Turkey, 1959-1965*, London: Frank Cass, pp. 26-59.

Firstly, Iran-centred reassessment of the Baghdad Pact While most studies treat the Baghdad Pact primarily through Anglo-American strategy or Arab opposition, this article places Iran's accession at the analytical core. By tracing Tehran's hesitant path from neutrality to alliance, it provides a systematic reconstruction of Iranian decision-making that goes beyond descriptive accounts and shows how regime security, domestic vulnerability, and threat perception shaped alignment choices. In doing so, it fills a relative gap in a literature that often treats Iran as a secondary or passive actor.

Secondly, explicit and consistent application of the balance-of-threat framework to the Middle East The study offers one of the more methodologically explicit applications of Stephen M. Walt's balance-of-threat theory to early Cold War Middle Eastern alliance formation. Rather than invoking realism implicitly, it demonstrates concretely how perceived intent, proximity, and regime insecurity mattered more than raw power. This sharpens and empirically grounds realist explanations that are often asserted rather than demonstrated in regional studies.

Thirdly, integration of domestic regime security with alliance behaviour. The article advances the literature by showing that regime survival and internal stability were not supplementary variables but central drivers of alliance decisions. In the Iranian case, neutrality, hesitation, and eventual accession are shown to be instruments for managing domestic legitimacy, neutralist sentiment, and elite consolidation. This contributes to a growing body of work that bridges international relations theory with authoritarian politics, without resorting to constructivist or liberal explanations.

Fourthly, reinterpretation of alliance failure beyond institutional weakness. Rather than attributing the collapse of the Baghdad Pact and CENTO to poor institutional design alone, the study argues that the absence of a shared, credible threat and convergent regional priorities fatally undermined the alliance. This challenges liberal-institutionalist readings and reframes failure as structural and political, rooted in nationalism, mistrust, and asymmetric expectations among members.

Fifthly, empirically rich synthesis grounded in archival material. Drawing extensively on British, American, and Iranian archival sources, the article reconstructs elite perceptions and diplomatic calculations with a high level of detail. This strengthens the evidentiary base of existing narratives and allows the study to move beyond retrospective theorization toward contemporaneous threat perception and policy reasoning.

Sixthly, broader implications for Cold War alliance politics in the Global South. Beyond the Middle East, the findings contribute to comparative Cold War scholarship by illustrating how alliances imposed or encouraged by great powers were continually reshaped by local political constraints. The Baghdad Pact emerges not as an anomaly but as a representative case of the limits of externally designed security architectures in post-colonial regions.

In sum, the study contributes to the literature by recentring Iran as a strategic actor, rigorously applying balance-of-threat theory, linking alliance behaviour to regime security, and offering a structurally grounded explanation for alliance fragility in the Middle East. These contributions collectively move the debate beyond descriptive history toward theoretically informed historical analysis.

1. Methodology

This article is primarily written according to Neorealist (Structural Realist) theory of international relations. It also overlaps, to a limited extent, with Classical Realism and the Balance of Threat approach; however, it does not explicitly rely on liberal, constructivist, or Marxist/critical frameworks. The article's backbone is based on Stephen M. Walt's *The Origins of Alliances*[14], a version of Kenneth Waltz's Neorealist theory applied to the Middle East. Throughout the text, the following assumptions are systematically used: a) The international system is anarchic: The text explains the behaviour of states in terms of survival and security concerns without relying on a higher authority. Alliances are based not on norms, but on threat perceptions and power balances. This is a fundamental proposition of Neorealism. b) States maximize security: Iran's participation in the Baghdad Pact is explained not by ideological preferences, but by the expectation of military and economic aid, regime security, and the perception of the Soviet threat. The text explicitly states that Iran's internal stability is equivalent to the survival of the regime, and the survival of the regime is equivalent to external security and military aid. This perfectly aligns with the Neorealist assumption that the state is a unitary and rational actor. c) Alliances are a product of the balance of power: The Baghdad Pact was established between NATO and SEATO to create a "*northern tier*" and contain the USSR. The alliance was not established as institutional cooperation, but as a functional and temporary security tool. This is the instrumental value that Neorealists attribute to alliances.

The article uses not only the concept of "*balance of power*" but also the concept of "*balance of threat*". This is Stephen Walt's original contribution to Neorealism. The four Walt criteria

[14] See; Stephen M. Walt (1992), *The Origins of Alliances*.

explicitly adopted by the article are geographical proximity, capacity for attack, perceived aggressive intent, and regime security. The article emphasizes the perception of the USSR's intentions rather than its military capacity, Soviet pressure on Iran, Iran's perception of the USSR rather than India as a threat, and the perception of Israel and each other by Arab states as threats. This is a direct application of the balance of threat approach. To say that the article is entirely Neorealist would be incomplete, because it also contains elements of classical realism. For example, perceptions of leaders (the Shah's personal calculations), diplomatic manoeuvring, the role of ambassadors and individual decision-makers, trust, suspicion, and prestige. However, these are not at the centre of the analysis. They are considered as secondary consequences of structural pressures. Therefore, the article is not classical realist, but it is compatible with classical realism. The article is not consistent with liberal theory. Because it does not believe in the independent influence of institutions, does not see economic interdependence as a cause for peace, and considers law and norms as secondary elements. CENTO's failure is explained not by institutional weakness, but by the absence of a real threat. This is a clear rejection of the liberal approach. Why is the article not constructivist? Because the article is not based on identity, discourse, norm construction, and meaning production. Pan-Arabism and nationalism are treated not as constructed identities, but as strategic tools. Therefore, there is no methodological link with constructivism. Consequently, this study examines the formation of alliances in the Middle East during the early Cold War within the framework of Stephen M. Walt's Neorealist Balance of Threat approach; it explains Iran's participation in the Baghdad Pact in the context of perceived external threats, great power competition, and regime security, rather than ideological preferences. In short, the article is based on the balance of threat approach, consistent with neorealist theory, and is partly classical realist.

2. Iran's Accession to the Baghdad Pact (3 November 1955)

From the moment the Turco-Iraqi Pact was concluded, the Shah of Iran repeatedly indicated his support for participation, although neither he nor his administration believed that conditions were yet appropriate. Their position was that accession should take place "*on an equal footing*", namely when Iran's military forces had achieved sufficient strength and were able to offer a meaningful contribution. The Shah considered it essential that Iranian forces should not lag behind those of Turkey and Pakistan in either equipment or training, and that they should be capable of standing alongside other members as equals. At the same time, he was obliged to consider domestic stability and possible Soviet responses. In his view, national security could

not be separated from internal security, which itself was inseparably linked to the survival of his regime. Prior to accession, the Shah demanded clarity concerning the benefits Iran would derive from the pact. British officials concluded that he would not commit Iran unless assured of substantial military and economic assistance, and that Tehran's apparent reluctance was intended to increase the returns for membership. From the Iranian perspective, as assessed by the Foreign Office, a defence connection with the West implied arms deliveries, the strengthening of Iran's armed forces, and guarantees of protection against attack, but did not entail providing bases or facilities to allies.[15]

In March 1955 the Shah informed Sir Roger Stevens, the British Ambassador in Tehran, that he was under no immediate pressure to accede to the Turco-Iraqi Pact. His priority was to ensure solid public backing for his government, alongside the implementation of social, economic and administrative reforms. He also wanted to determine the assistance available from Turkey, Iraq and Pakistan, and subsequently to secure commitments from the United States and Britain regarding Iran's defence, which would give him sufficient confidence to proceed. During the same period, the Iranian Foreign Minister expressed concern about the timing of adherence, particularly given the unresolved Soviet-Iranian Financial and Frontier Agreement. He wished this agreement to be ratified by Moscow before any further commitment. He also feared negative effects on public opinion should the Soviets resort to sabotage, pointing out that neutralist sentiment inside Iran remained strong. According to him, enthusiasm for joining the pact was minimal, while potential opposition was substantial, especially at a time when international tensions appeared to be easing and domestic priorities centred on development.[16]

The Foreign Office suspected that the Shah might actually welcome external pressure to join the pact, either because of indecision or because such pressure could later be cited to justify demands for aid or to deflect blame if internal or external reactions proved more severe than anticipated. Responsibility for premature accession could then be attributed to Western advice.

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[15] TNA/FO371/115511/V1073/804, Minute by Shuckburgh, 10 May 1955; TNA/FO371/115499/V1073/513, Minute by Shuckburgh, 15 March 1955; TNA/FO371/115500/V1073/521, Stevens to FO, 20 March 1955; TNA/FO371/114815/EP10338/5, Minute by Stewart, 25 March 1955. Rouhollah Ramazani (1975), *Iran's Foreign Policy, 1941-1973: a study of foreign policy in modernizing*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, p. 276; Panagiotis Dimitrakis (2012), *Failed Alliances of the Cold War,* pp. 7-38; Behçet Kemal Yeşilbursa (2005), *The Baghdad Pact: Anglo-American Defence Policies in the Middle East, 1950-1959,* London: Frank Cass.

[16] TNA/FO371/115511/V1073/809, Kimber to James, 11 May 1955; TNA/FO371/115500/V1073/521, Stevens to FO, 20 March 1955; TNA/FO371/115520/V1073/1032, Wright to Macmillan, 15 September 1955; TNA/FO371/115499/V1073/511, Bowker to FO, 18 March 1955; NARA RG 59 780.5/3-2255, Aldrich (London) to Secretary of State; NARA RG 59 780.5/9-2755, Philip Clock (American Embassy in Tehran) to the Department of State. Panagiotis Dimitrakis (2012), *Failed Alliances of the Cold War*, pp. 7-38; Cihat Göktepe (2003), *British Foreign Policy towards Turkey, 1959-1965*, pp. 26-59.

Consequently, British policy aimed to avoid giving any impression of pressing Iran, ensuring that responsibility rested entirely with Tehran. Additional reasons favoured delay. Immediate Iranian membership, Shuckburgh argued, would yield little military benefit. Iran's forces were incapable of resisting a Soviet assault, and even if they attempted resistance, civil administration would likely collapse and the Shah might flee. Furthermore, Iran might refuse access to bases or pre-stocking facilities. Accession would thus do little to bridge the gap between Iraq and Pakistan. Political gains inside Iran were also doubtful, since most Iranians were instinctive neutrals and would blame the West if threatened by Russia. The primary advantage lay in sustaining the pact's momentum, already maintained by Pakistan, and marginally enhancing its prestige by reducing its Western appearance. However, British officials doubted that Iranian accession would decisively influence other Arab states. Overall, Britain continued to favour Iranian membership but avoided pressure or significant inducements, a position broadly shared by the United States.[17]

Iran's accession to the Baghdad Pact in November 1955 must be situated within the broader framework of Cold War international relations and, more specifically, within the post-1953 restructuring of Iranian foreign and domestic policy. In the Cold War literature, Iran occupies a paradigmatic position as a "*frontline state*" whose strategic alignment was shaped less by ideological affinity than by geopolitical vulnerability, regime insecurity, and superpower competition. The Shah's gradual abandonment of a policy of cautious neutrality and Iran's eventual integration into a Western-sponsored security system were neither abrupt nor inevitable; rather, they reflected a calculated response to the changing balance between internal fragility and external threat following the CIA and MI6-backed overthrow of Mohammad Mossadegh in August 1953.[18]

In the immediate postwar years, Iranian foreign policy was characterised by a form of pragmatic neutrality that bore resemblance to what Cold War scholars later described as Middle Eastern

[17] TNA/FO371/115511/V1073/809, Kimber to James, 11 May 1955. TNA/FO371/115500/V1073/521, Stevens to FO, 20 March 1955; TNA/FO371/115520/V1073/1032, Wright to Macmillan, 15 September 1955; TNA/FO371/115499/V1073/511, Bowker to FO, 18 March 1955; NARA RG 59 780.5/3-2255, Aldrich (London) to Secretary of State; NARA RG 59 780.5/9-2755, Philip Clock (American Embassy in Tehran) to the Department of State; Panagiotis Dimitrakis (2012), *Failed Alliances of the Cold War*, pp. 7-38; Cihat Göktepe (2003), *British Foreign Policy towards Turkey, 1959-1965*, pp. 26-59.

[18] See; Joyce Kolko & Gabriel Kolko (1972), *The Limits of Power: The World and the United States Foreign Policy, 1945-1954,* New York: Harper; Walter Lafeber (1976), *America, Russia and the Cold War,* New York: John Wiley; John Lewis Gaddis (1976), *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941-47*, New York: Columbia University Press; Joseph R. Starobin (1969), "Origins of the Cold War", *Foreign Affairs*, 47(July), pp. 287-278; Daniel Yergin (1977), *Shattered Peace: The Origins of the Cold War and the National Security State,* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

neutralism or non-alignment *avant la lettre*. Although Iran was not formally part of the Non-Aligned Movement, its leadership sought to avoid entanglement in rigid alliance systems, particularly those that might provoke Soviet retaliation. This stance was reinforced by Iran's geographical proximity to the USSR, the existence of the 1942 Tripartite Treaty legacy, and lingering memories of Allied occupation during the Second World War.[19]

From the perspective of Cold War theory, Iran's early posture can be understood through a realist lens as an attempt by a relatively weak state to maximise autonomy in a bipolar system. Neutrality functioned less as an ideological commitment than as a survival strategy, aimed at balancing relations between the superpowers while preserving domestic stability. However, this strategy rested on fragile foundations, as Iran lacked both the institutional coherence and military capacity required to sustain credible independence from external influence.[20]

The overthrow of Mossadegh marked a decisive turning point. Although the 1953 coup did not immediately transform Iran into a fully subordinate client state, it fundamentally altered the Shah's perception of security. The coup underscored two interrelated lessons: first, that regime survival depended heavily on Western, particularly American, support; and second, that domestic instability could be exploited by both internal opponents and external powers. In the post-coup period, the Shah increasingly conflated internal dissent, neutralist discourse, and leftist mobilisation with Soviet expansionism.[21]

Cold War scholarship frequently identifies this moment as the point at which Iran transitioned from balancing to bandwagoning behaviour. While the Shah continued to articulate the language of independence and sovereignty, his external policies increasingly aligned with Western strategic priorities. The consolidation of authoritarian rule at home, through the strengthening of the security apparatus and the marginalisation of opposition forces, was

[19] Behçet K. Yeşilbursa (2020), "From Friendship to Enmity Soviet-Iranian Relations (1945-1965)", *History and Modern Perspective,* 2(1), pp. 92-105; TNA/FO371/115511/V1073/804, Minute by Shuckburgh, 10 May 1955; NARA RG 59 780.5/3-2155, Dulles to Tehran.

[20] TNA/FO371/115498/V1073/496, Stevens to FO, 15 March 1955; TNA/FO371/115511/V1073/809, Kimber to James, 11 May 1955; NARA RG 59 780.5/9-2755, Memorandum of Conversation: Iranian adherence to the Baghdad Pact.

[21] TNA/FO371/115502/V1073/580, FO to Washington, 24 March 1955; NARA RG 59 780.5/3-2255, Aldrich (London) to Secretary of State; TNA/FO371/115502/V1073/580, Makins to FO, 26 March 1955; and minute by Rose, 4 April 1955; TNA/FO371/115511/V1073/809, Kimber to James, 11 May 1955. NARA RG 59 780.5/3-2155, Dulles to Tehran; TNA/FO371/114815/EP10338/13, Minute by Stewart, 10 May 1955. TNA/FO371/115511/V1073/804, Minute by Shuckburgh, 10 May 1955; TNA/FO371/115514/V1073/883, Pickard to James, 21 June 1955; TNA/FO371/115513/V1073/870, Makins to FO, 16 June 1955; FRUS, 1955-1957, Vol. XII, pp. 755-57.

mirrored externally by a gradual acceptance of Iran's role within a Western-led security architecture.[22]

Iran's accession to the Baghdad Pact represented the culmination of this shift. Although Iranian officials remained careful to frame membership as compatible with national sovereignty and defensive necessity, the pact signified a clear departure from the earlier policy of cautious neutrality. Within Cold War alliance theory, this move can be interpreted as a response to perceived threat rather than ideological alignment: Iran did not join the pact out of enthusiasm for collective defence as such, but because neutrality was no longer regarded as a viable option in the face of Soviet proximity and domestic vulnerability.[23]

Importantly, Iranian elites did not abandon neutralist thinking entirely; rather, they redefined its limits. Whereas neutrality had previously implied distance from formal alliances, after 1953 it was increasingly seen as insufficient to guarantee regime survival. The Shah's insistence on equality within the pact, refusal to grant bases, and demand for substantial military assistance all reflected an attempt to reconcile alliance membership with residual concerns about autonomy and domestic legitimacy. In this sense, Iran's foreign policy after the coup evolved into a form of asymmetrical alignment, combining formal participation in Western security structures with efforts to minimise the visible costs of dependency.[24]

From the standpoint of Cold War literature on authoritarian allies, Iran's behaviour fits a broader pattern in which alliance decisions were driven as much by regime security as by national defence. The Shah's repeated emphasis on internal stability, public opinion, and the danger of political backlash indicates that foreign policy choices were inseparable from domestic considerations. Baghdad Pact membership was expected not only to deter external aggression,

[22] FRUS, 1955-57, Vol. XII, pp. 103-122, 135-151, 765-66, 773-75; TNA/FO371/115533/V1073/1392, Minute by Hadow, 8 December 1955; TNA/FO371/115520/V1073/1020, Minute by Rose, 29 August 1955; TNA/FO371/115519/V1073/1012, Report by Brigadier T. E. Williams, 18 August 1955; TNA/FO371/115519/V1073/1015, Minute by Rose, 5 September 1955; TNA/FO371/115520/V1073/1020, Wright to FO, 23 August 1955.

[23] TNA/FO371/115519/V1073/1015, FO to Tehran, 6 September 1955; TNA/FO371/115520/V1073/1028, FO to Tehran, 14 September 1955; TNA/FO371/115520/V1073/1027, Wright to FO, 10 September 1955; TNA/FO371/114820/EP1071/21, Minute by L. A. Fry, 4 August 1955; TNA/FO371/115521/V1073/1048, Minute by Stewart, 24 September 1955; FRUS, 1955-57, Vol. XII, pp. 773-75, 778-80; TNA/FO371/115520/V1073/1038, Stevens to FO, 21 September 1955; TNA/FO371/115519/V1073/1015, FO to Tehran, 6 September 1955; TNA/FO371/114816/EP10344/7, Stevens to Macmillan, 29 September 1955; TNA/FO371/115521/V1073/1074, Minute by Hadow, 5 October 1955.

[24] TNA/FO371/118830/JE1011/1, Trevelyan to Lloyd, 31 January 1956; Harold Macmillan (1969), *Tides of Fortune, 1945-1955*, London: Macmillan, p. 639.

but also to symbolise Western commitment to the Shah's rule, thereby discouraging both internal challengers and external interference.[25]

At the same time, British and American reluctance to pressure Iran highlights a shared awareness of the risks associated with premature or overt alignment. Western officials feared that excessive visibility of Iran's departure from neutrality might provoke Soviet countermeasures or strengthen neutralist and nationalist opposition within the country. Thus, Iran's entry into the pact was managed as a gradual and carefully calibrated process, consistent with what Cold War historians describe as incremental integration of peripheral states into alliance systems.[26]

As a result, Iran's accession to the Baghdad Pact must be understood within the broader context of the Cold War and the security architecture established by Western powers in the Middle East during the 1950s. The pact was primarily designed to contain Soviet expansion and to integrate Middle Eastern states into the Western-led security system.

The Baghdad Pact was initially formed on 24 February 1955 through an agreement between Turkey and Iraq. Its strategic purpose was to establish a defensive belt along the southern borders of the Soviet Union. The United Kingdom soon joined the pact, and it actively encouraged other regional states to participate. Although the United States supported the initiative politically and militarily, it chose not to become a formal member.[27]

Iran's interest in the Baghdad Pact was shaped by its own security concerns. Following the Second World War, Iran had experienced direct Soviet pressure, including the presence of Soviet troops in northern Iran and support for separatist movements in Azerbaijan and Mahabad. These experiences deeply influenced Iranian threat perceptions and reinforced the belief that national security depended on external support.[28]

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[25] TNA/FO371/115521/V1073/1051, Dixon to FO, 28 September 1955; TNA/FO371/115522/V1073/1182, FO to Washington, 6 October 1955; TNA/FO371/115469/V1073/975, Middle East Policy in the light of the Egyptian-Czechoslovak arms deal, 6 October 1955; TNA/FO371/115521/V1073/1074, Minute by Hadow, 5 October 1955; FRUS, 1955-1957, Vol. XII, pp. 158-68, 778-86.

[26] TNA/FO371/115526/V1073/1190, Stevens to Macmillan, 26 October 1955; Rouhollah Ramazani (1975), *Iran's Foreign Policy, 1941-1973: a study of foreign policy in modernizing*, p. 278; FRUS, 1955-57, Vol. XII, pp. 158-69, 780-89.

[27] TNA/FO371/115526/V1073/1190, Stevens to Macmillan, 26 October 1955; Rouhollah Ramazani (1975), *Iran's Foreign Policy, 1941-1973: a study of foreign policy in modernizing*, pp. 274-278; FRUS, 1955-57, Vol. XII, pp. 168-71, 178, 403, 788-89; TNA/FO371/140706/EB10334/3, Harrison to Lloyd, 19 February 1959; TNA/FO371/120710/EP1011/1, Stevens to Lloyd, 1 January 1956; John C. Campbell (1960), *Defence of the Middle East: Problems of American Policy,* New York: Frederick A. Praeger, p. 61.

[28] TNA/FO371/115526/V1073/1190, Stevens to Macmillan, 26 October 1955; Rouhollah Ramazani (1975), *Iran's Foreign Policy, 1941-1973: a study of foreign policy in modernizing,* pp. 274-278; FRUS, 1955-57, Vol. XII, pp. 168-71, 178, 403, 788-89. TNA/FO371/140706/EB10334/3, Harrison to Lloyd, 19 February 1959.

A crucial turning point in Iranian foreign policy occurred in 1953, when Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh was overthrown in a coup supported by the United Kingdom and the United States. After the coup, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi consolidated his power and aligned Iran more closely with the Western bloc. This alignment increased Iran's willingness to participate in collective defense arrangements promoted by Western powers.[29]

Despite initial hesitation due to fears of provoking the Soviet Union and concern over regional reactions, Iran gradually moved toward membership in the Baghdad Pact. Diplomatic pressure from Turkey and the United Kingdom, together with assurances of military and economic assistance from the United States, played an important role in this decision. As a result, Iran officially joined the Baghdad Pact on 3 November 1955.[30]

For Iran, membership in the pact provided significant benefits. It offered a framework for military cooperation and modernization, enhanced Iran's international standing, and reinforced the Shah's domestic authority through Western support. Strategically, Iran became part of a chain of allied states stretching from Turkey to Pakistan, forming a key component of the Western containment policy in the Middle East.[31]

The Baghdad Pact underwent a major transformation after the 1958 military coup in Iraq, which led to Iraq's withdrawal from the organization. Following this development, the pact was renamed the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), with its headquarters moving to Ankara. Iran remained a member of CENTO until the Islamic Revolution of 1979, which marked a fundamental shift in Iranian foreign policy.[32]

In sum, Iran's accession to the Baghdad Pact cannot be understood simply as a diplomatic episode or a response to regional developments. It was the product of a deeper transformation

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TNA/FO371/120710/EP1011/1, Stevens to Lloyd, 1 January 1956; John C. Campbell (1960), *Defence of the Middle East: Problems of American Policy,* p. 61.

[29] TNA/FO371/115526/V1073/1190, Stevens to Macmillan, 26 October 1955; Rouhollah Ramazani (1975), *Iran's Foreign Policy, 1941-1973: a study of foreign policy in modernizing,* pp. 274-278; FRUS, 1955-57, Vol. XII, pp. 168-71, 178, 403, 788-89; TNA/FO371/140706/EB10334/3, Harrison to Lloyd, 19 February 1959; TNA/FO371/120710/EP1011/1, Stevens to Lloyd, 1 January 1956; John C. Campbell (1960), *Defence of the Middle East: Problems of American Policy,* p. 61.

[30] TNA/FO371/115526/V1073/1190, Stevens to Macmillan, 26 October 1955; Rouhollah Ramazani (1975), *Iran's Foreign Policy, 1941-1973: a study of foreign policy in modernizing* pp. 274-278; FRUS, 1955-57, Vol. XII, pp. 168-71, 178, 403, 788-89. TNA/FO371/140706/EB10334/3, Harrison to Lloyd, 19 February 1959; TNA/FO371/120710/EP1011/1, Stevens to Lloyd, 1 January 1956; John C. Campbell (1960), *Defence of the Middle East: Problems of American Policy,* p. 61.

[31] Behçet K. Yeşilbursa (2009), "The Formation of RCD Regional Co-operation for Development", *Middle Eastern Studies*, 45(4), pp. 637-660.

[32] Behçet K. Yeşilbursa (2020), "CENTO: The Forgotten Alliance (1959-1979)", *Middle Eastern Studies,* 56(6), pp. 854-877.

triggered by the 1953 coup, which reshaped the Shah's understanding of security, sovereignty, and survival in a bipolar world. The gradual abandonment of neutrality reflected the perceived exhaustion of non-alignment as a viable strategy under conditions of geopolitical exposure and domestic fragility. Within the Cold War framework, Iran's experience illustrates how alliance choices in the Middle East were driven less by ideological convergence than by regime insecurity, superpower intervention, and the structural pressures of bipolarity.[33]

In conclusion, Iran's accession to the Baghdad Pact was driven by security concerns, Cold War geopolitics, and the Shah's reliance on Western political and military support. The decision firmly positioned Iran within the Western alliance system in the Middle East and shaped its regional role throughout much of the Cold War period.

Conclusion

This study has explored the origins, evolution, and decline of the Baghdad Pact within the complex political and strategic environment of the post–Second World War Middle East, with particular emphasis on Iran's accession on 3 November 1955. The analysis demonstrates that the pact was a product of intersecting global and regional forces, most notably decolonization, the rise of Arab nationalism, Cold War superpower rivalry, and the enduring instability generated by the Arab–Israeli conflict. Far from being a straightforward instrument of collective security, the Baghdad Pact reflected a fragile compromise between Western strategic ambitions and the diverse, often contradictory, priorities of regional states.

One of the central conclusions of this research is that alliance formation in the Middle East cannot be adequately explained by global balance-of-power logic alone. While the United Kingdom and the United States viewed the pact as part of a broader strategy to contain Soviet influence and safeguard access to vital oil resources, regional actors assessed the alliance primarily through the lens of immediate threats, regional rivalries, and, crucially, regime survival. The absence of a clear, imminent external enemy comparable to the Soviet threat faced by NATO members deprived the Baghdad Pact of a unifying strategic purpose. Its deliberately vague legal commitments and lack of automatic defence obligations further weakened its credibility and deterrent value.

[33] TNA/FO371/115526/V1073/1190, Stevens to Macmillan, 26 October 1955; Rouhollah Ramazani (1975), *Iran's Foreign Policy, 1941-1973: a study of foreign policy in modernizing*, pp. 274-278; FRUS, 1955-57, Vol. XII, pp. 168-71, 178, 403, 788-89. TNA/FO371/140706/EB10334/3, Harrison to Lloyd, 19 February 1959. TNA/FO371/120710/EP1011/1, Stevens to Lloyd, 1 January 1956; John C. Campbell (1960), *Defence of the Middle East: Problems of American Policy,* p. 61.

Iran's accession to the pact illustrates these dynamics particularly well. For the Shah, joining the Baghdad Pact was less an ideological commitment to collective defence than a calculated decision aimed at strengthening domestic stability, securing Western military and economic assistance, and anchoring his regime more firmly within the Western camp. Iranian hesitations, demands for guarantees, and concerns over Soviet reactions highlight the extent to which internal security considerations shaped foreign policy choices. In this sense, Iran's participation underscores a broader pattern among Middle Eastern states: alliances were often perceived as instrumental tools to extract resources and political support rather than as binding frameworks for shared defence.

The transformation of the Baghdad Pact into CENTO did little to resolve these underlying structural problems. Divergent interests among members, reluctance by Western powers to commit substantial forces, and the persistence of regional conflicts steadily eroded the alliance's relevance. The Egyptian–Czechoslovak arms deal of 1955 further exposed Western limitations and demonstrated that Soviet influence could penetrate the Middle East without direct military confrontation. Ultimately, the lack of a credible deterrent, combined with shifting regional and domestic priorities, culminating in events such as the Iranian Revolution of 1979, rendered CENTO obsolete.

Iran's accession to the Baghdad Pact in 1955 expanded its geographical scope, contributing to the completion of a "*Northern Belt*" stretching along the Turkey-Iraq-Iran-Pakistan line. However, this development did not bring the expected stability at the regional level. On the contrary, Iran's participation reinforced the perception in the Arab world that the pact was a Western-driven arrangement alien to Arab interests, further strengthening the Arab nationalist opposition led by Egypt. While Iran perceived the Soviet Union as the primary threat, many Arab states identified Israel and regional rivals as the primary threats, making the discrepancy in threat perceptions within the alliance more visible. This situation weakened the regional legitimacy of the Baghdad Pact and prevented it from producing a shared understanding of security. Consequently, although Iran's entry into the pact symbolically strengthened the West's containment strategy in the region, it deepened the fragmentation of security perceptions in the Middle East, revealed the fragility of alliance politics, and contributed to the long-term ineffectiveness of the Baghdad Pact.

In conclusion, the experience of the Baghdad Pact and CENTO reveals the inherent difficulties of imposing externally designed security architectures on a region characterized by intense nationalism, fragmented threat perceptions, and fragile state structures. The case underscores

that durable security arrangements in the Middle East have been constrained less by the absence of external power and more by the absence of shared regional consensus. As such, the Baghdad Pact remains a key historical example of the limits of Cold War alliance politics in the Middle East and offers enduring lessons for understanding both past and contemporary efforts at regional security cooperation.

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