



US Centre Summer Research Grant

Recipient name: Jack W. Roush

Project title: Friends of the Family: Informal actors in Iran-US relations during the late Pahlavi period

Summary of project:

My PhD dissertation examines the role of informal actors in relations between the United States (US) and Iran between the 1946 Soviet withdrawal and the 1979 revolution. It utilises a range of sources (in both English and Persian) to analyse how a transnational network of Pahlavi courtiers, US arms and oil industry executive, and international financiers shaped diplomatic initiatives and significant policy decisions. Specifically, it engages with US-led development projects in the 1940s, Iran's evolution into a US security partner through the 1960s, Iranian investment and formation of a political lobby in the US, and efforts to protect the Shah after the revolution. It seeks to transcend long-standing assumptions in the field, regarding patron-client dynamics between the US and Iran and the primacy of the Shah within Iranian politics.

Through this approach, my research also offers insight on broader themes in the study of the global Cold War. By adopting a pericentric framework, it demonstrates how small states like Iran influenced the actions and objectives of powers like the US. Furthermore, it seeks to demonstrate the importance of both ideological considerations and economic interests in US policymaking during the Cold War and examine the tensions between the two. Ultimately, by de-centring formal policymakers, my dissertation offers a unique account of a significant bilateral relationship in Cold War history and evaluates its implications for later decades.

Research Report:

The support of the US Centre enabled me to make two significant research trips over the past summer. The first was a visit to the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library in Ann Arbor, Michigan, from June 22 until June 30. The second included visits to the Yale University Library in New Haven, Connecticut, and the Rockefeller Archive Centre in Sleepy Hollow, New York and between August 11 and September 8. During these visits, I was able to access documents relating to US policy toward Iran from 1973-1977, with particular focus on the influence of Chase Manhattan executive David Rockefeller and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. This research sheds new light on Iran-US relations and provides key evidence for the final chapters of my PhD dissertation.

During my visit to the Ford Library, I accessed the National Security Council Files, Council of Economic Advisors Files, personal documents relating to various administration officials, presidential briefing materials, and several other collections. Most notably, I uncovered information relating to the Iran-US Joint Commission, a body established in 1974 by the Ford administration to facilitate the alignment of interests between both states, and to engender stability in relations through enhanced economic interdependence. I also gleaned insights on how this body supported Kissinger's strategy to counter an assertive OPEC, US Middle East policy, and Cold War détente more broadly. Notably, I found that Rockefeller participated in the commission's activities by leading its private sector component and wielded a significant degree of influence over Kissinger's decision-making. Mention of this commission – let alone Rockefeller's involvement – is effectively absent from existing literature. In addition to this research, I found information on how Iran influenced US participation in the 1975 International Women's Year campaign of the United Nations, which is discussed in my penultimate chapter. Through this visit, Rockefeller's central role in the Ford administration's policymaking was made clear.

The visit to Yale brought both disappointment and success. I was unable to access most of Henry Kissinger's records, due to restrictions imposed by his estate for the foreseeable future. However, I was able to access the Joseph Verner Reed Papers, which proved fruitful. Reed was Rockefeller's close personal friend and professional associate, and his papers included several important insights into Iran-US relations. They especially dealt with Rockefeller's efforts to

influence US policy during Iran's 1979 revolution (dubbed 'Project Eagle') – by lobbying against the Carter administration's potential pursuit of relations with revolutionary figures, coordinating efforts to provide the Shah with asylum in the US, and supporting the imposition of sanctions and asset blocks. To varying degrees, these actions protected Rockefeller's private interests, in ways I plan to examine in my dissertation. These documents provide significant insights into Rockefeller's motivations and depth of involvement in Iran-US relations during the late 1970s, a topic which has received little attention in existing scholarship. Verner's notes and records of correspondence also provide a personal angle to Rockefeller's activities that is not found in other repositories. In the future I hope to return to the Yale Library to utilise the papers of Cyrus Vance, Secretary of State under Carter, to seek further sources on this topic. Due to time constraints, I was unable to access them during this visit.

This was my second visit to the Rockefeller Archive Centre – during my first visit, in 2024, I utilised documents of the Asia Society, Population Council, and the Nelson Rockefeller Papers regarding Iran. However, this year I focused on David Rockefeller's activities, much like my visits to the Ford Library and Yale. I accessed his personal papers, office files, remarks and minutes at Chase Manhattan events, and relevant philanthropic records. I found key information about Rockefeller's perspectives on US economic and monetary issues in the early 1970s, and how they intersected with his involvement in Iran policy. These documents also offered insights into his relationship with Henry Kissinger, including Kissinger's work for the Rockefeller Brothers Fund prior to joining the Nixon administration. Beyond the 1970s, I found documents discussing how John J. McCloy inspired Rockefeller's early interest in Iran in the 1950s, records from his early conferences in the country through the 1960s, and insights on his perspectives toward economic development aims as part of a long-term investment strategy. These will all provide important texture and context as I revise the chapters of dissertation that I have already written.

Overall, my research visits over the past summer were very productive. I have come away from these archives with a few preliminary observations, which will be deepened and refined as I complete my PhD research. First, it is clear that David Rockefeller's private interests had an outsized influence on US policy toward Iran during the 1970s, especially under the Ford and Carter administrations – through both the Iran-US Joint Commission and his personal ties to key policymakers. Second, as bilateral relations broke down from 1978 onward, Rockefeller's role moved from mediator to spoiler in order to protect those interests.

Finally, Rockefeller leveraged his network, role at Chase Manhattan, and leadership within philanthropic institutions to wield informal diplomatic influence in a dynamic manner. Considering little has been written about Rockefeller's involvement in Iran-US relations, aside from a brief section of James Bill's *The Eagle and the Lion* (1988), these insights will be immensely valuable. They also provide a depth that is not found in Rockefeller's heavily edited memoirs. Beyond incorporating these findings into my PhD dissertation, I hope that they will be incorporated into at least one publication. They will certainly be included in my planned presentation at Symposia Iranica in spring of 2026. My research visits to Michigan, Connecticut, and New York were also very personally rewarding. They provided a wonderful opportunity to explore the impressive campuses of the University of Michigan and Yale University, and Kykuit, the Rockefeller family estate. I am grateful for the assistance and support afforded by each institution and their respective archival teams, and to the Phelan US Centre for facilitating this experience.