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Paper Abstract:
From Accommodation to Conflict: Amnesty International and Iran, 1965-79

This paper examines the role of Amnesty International in focusing international criticism on the regime of Muhammad Reza Pahlavi in Iran. Although Amnesty International was a small and obscure organization in the mid-1960s, by the late 1970s it had grown dramatically in size and visibility. Amnesty used its newfound influence to attack the human rights record of the Shah's government. Amnesty reports played a critical role in publicizing the imprisonment of political dissidents and intellectuals in Iran. Amnesty's critique of the Shah undermined the image of the Pahlavi regime around the world, and it encouraged opposition to the Shah both in Iran and abroad. In particular, by the mid-1970s the Iranian government was facing increasing criticism from the media even of its longtime ally the United States. Amnesty's actions helped convince the Shah to embark on a series of liberalizing reforms in the late 1970s in order to forestall further criticism, reforms that helped set the stage for the final collapse of the Pahlavi state in 1978-79.

By exploring Amnesty International's role in weakening the international position of the Pahlavi regime, this paper is intended to contribute to our understanding of U.S.-Iranian relations and the coming of the Iranian Revolution. It also tells an important story about the rise of non-state actors in global politics. The 1960s and 1970s witnessed the rise of non-governmental organizations like Amnesty, along with a new emphasis on universal standards of human rights. These developments altered the character of international politics and complicated the relationship between the United States and many of its traditional Cold War allies like Iran.

This paper is based primarily on original research conducted in the records of Amnesty International U.S.A. at Columbia University. It also incorporates contemporary press reports, memoirs, and secondary sources.