

The Motheral Report and Land Reform in Iran, 1952-1963

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Abstract

In 1957, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi commissioned US agricultural economist Joseph R. Motheral to study Iran's land tenure system and propose reforms. The resulting Motheral Report laid the foundation for later land redistribution programs, which sought to address, through rural development, the issue of political instability. The report drew upon the Shah's pre-existing objectives and efforts to advocate for US support in implementing large-scale land reform, including financial assistance and technical training, and outlined a five-year timeline for redistribution. While the report failed to spur immediate action, its key points shaped subsequent efforts by both the US and Iranian governments, including Prime Minister Ali Amini's land reform efforts in 1961 and the Shah's White Revolution in 1963.

In 1957, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi commissioned United States agricultural economist Joseph R. Motheral to conduct a comprehensive study on land distribution in Iran. Drawing upon Motheral's extensive research on land tenure, the study's final report sought to provide both "general and specific recommendations" on reforming and modernizing the economy of rural Iran.¹ Though not a binding policy, the Motheral Report laid the foundation for land reform efforts in the subsequent period – under the direction of both US-backed Prime Minister Ali Amini in 1961, and the Shah under the auspices of the White Revolution beginning in 1963.

Various US actors encouraged the Iranian government to modernize the rural economy throughout the mid 1940s and into the early 1950s. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as the Near East Foundation (NEF), sought to improve health, sanitation, education, and the implementation of agricultural technology through a range of initiatives beginning in 1944. Their efforts often advanced through pilot projects and cooperative arrangements with relevant Iranian ministries.² However, these US-led efforts were insufficient in radically improving conditions in rural Iran. Despite some successes, they failed to address the prevailing socio-economic structure, which was dominated by an aristocracy that owned most of the country's arable land and leased it to poor tenant farmers under an entrenched system of land tenure. According to one survey, up to 60% of the Iranian population lived and worked as tenant farmers within this system until the early 1960s.³ Given the scale of land tenure in Iran, opposition movements such as the Tudeh Party and the National Front began to advocate for comprehensive land reform, as part of a broader agenda that included oil nationalization.⁴

The issue of land tenure became a source of consternation for the Shah, who recognized its political salience and potential for fomenting challenges to his rule if left unaddressed. He also held the concurrent perception that reforming this system could be a means of enhancing his own power relative to both the aristocracy and the left-wing opposition, through a new class alignment with the peasantry.⁵ Starting in 1949, he began to articulate his own program of land redistribution that would enable the state to purchase land from the aristocracy and apportion it to tenant farmers under a

favorable credit arrangement. Land already under state or crown ownership would also be re-distributed without cost, through an agency called *Amlak*.⁶ This was furthered through an official edict, or *firman*, in 1951 – in which he ordered that the land in 2,100 villages within his own landholdings be divided among the local population.⁷

With the creation of the Point Four program by President Harry S. Truman, US policymakers became increasingly involved in coordinating and advancing the activities of NGOs in Iran, including the NEF.⁸ As US-led development activities became more centralized, this provided the Shah with a new opportunity to promote his program of land redistribution. In 1951, during his first meeting with the administrator of Point Four activities in Iran, the Shah requested US assistance in implementing the program, arguing it was necessary to “give the peasants a stake in their country,” as part of the modernization process. After a period of negotiation, the Shah’s request was incorporated into the Point Four remit in 1952.⁹

Despite its ambitions, the 1952 land redistribution program encountered several roadblocks. It had a limited start, only seeking to redistribute land in 3,000 of Iran’s estimated 50,000 villages – a pattern which followed the US practice of utilizing pilot projects.¹⁰ Even in the villages where the program was implemented, progress was slow, as a panel appointed by the Shah (comprised mostly of landholding aristocrats) negotiated with peasants and landholders to determine purchase and reapportionment practices. The program also came under scrutiny by Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, who introduced his own more ambitious rural development legislation into parliament. This parallel proposal, compounded by existing political tensions, caused Mossadegh to scrap the Shah’s program by early 1953.¹¹ After his ouster later that year, elements of the program were resumed, with aspects of Mossadegh’s program adopted in 1956 through further parliamentary legislation.¹² Nevertheless, these changes failed to resolve the other challenges facing the land reform program, particularly its slow pace and limited scope. Though Mossadegh’s ouster removed a key threat to the Shah’s power, the land tenure system remained a significant political issue moving into the late 1950s.

Therefore, in 1957, the Shah sought to lay the groundwork for a more ambitious land reform program with the support of US expertise – namely that of Joseph R. Motheral, a researcher affiliated with the US Department of Agriculture and the International Cooperation Administration (ICA).¹³ The specific process by which Motheral was commissioned is uncertain, but it is clear that was identified as an authority whose suggestions would be credible for both the US and Iranian governments. Indeed, by 1957, Motheral had already attained a wide breadth of experience on the issue of land tenure over nearly two decades. In 1940, he worked with the US Census Bureau to identify trends in the sharecropping economy, which was followed by a comprehensive report issued to the Texas state government in 1944.¹⁴ After briefly teaching at Texas A&M, Motheral worked with the ICA, and its successor agency, the US Agency for International Development, to study and remediate the issue of land tenure in countries including Pakistan, South Korea, Afghanistan, and the Philippines, among others.¹⁵

Over a two-month period, Joseph Motheral studied Iran’s land tenure system and compiled his report for the Shah.¹⁶ After being received by the Shah, a version of the report was revised by another agricultural specialist, before being distributed to various NGOs and policymakers by the ICA.¹⁷ Within the report, Motheral reviewed the issues underlying the need for land reform, suggested policies to implement, and articulated the need for further US assistance as part of this process – including financial support. The revised version of report also included key resources within the appendix, such as lists of land and water titles, edicts from the Shah regarding land reform, and maps of the lands designated for redistribution.¹⁸

Though it was ostensibly produced at the behest of the Shah to inform both the Iranian and US governments, the Motheral Report was clearly intended primarily for its US audience. This was implied from the outset, as he opened the report with a broad definition of land reform that aligned with the Shah’s motivations. According to Motheral, the term embraced redistribution of landholdings for “more efficient operating scale or social justice,” “regulation of landlord-tenant relations,” “increased security of tenure,” “reformation of tax systems which are uneconomic or unjust,” “provision of credit to farmers at reasonable interest rates,” and the “application of

technical and educational skills to the agricultural economy.”¹⁹ Based upon this definition, he argued that one of the “first consequences” of land reform was political stability. He further claimed that Iran was in a unique position to transform its rural economy through land reform, solely enabled by the Shah’s “power and imagination.”²⁰ While this definition was similar to the one Motheral adopted in his 1956 report on land tenure in the Philippines, the deferential tone toward the Shah and his political aims was unique to his research on Iran.²¹

This deference was also apparent in Motheral’s methodology. Rather than first conduct the land survey and use it to inform policy suggestions, Motheral and his team began their study by interviewing the Shah – allowing him to outline his objectives, which the subsequent research would be used to support.²² As described in the report, these objectives amounted to a more ambitious version of the 1952 program, including provisions for accelerating the reapportionment of land under crown ownership and public lands, the expropriation and redistribution of lands under religious trust, and the redistribution of land under private ownership. Motheral identified ways in which the US could support these objectives, including through direct participation, expanded financial assistance, and additional technical training initiatives.²³ In adopting this approach, he attached his technical credibility to plans the Shah had already formulated, thereby helping to “sell” ambitious land reform to US NGOs and policymakers and encourage the provision of additional aid.

In the report’s subsequent sections, Motheral described Iranian agricultural practices, including crop diversity, irrigation techniques, and growing efforts to incorporate modern farming technology.²⁴ Then, he went on to discuss the historical roots of Iran’s system of land tenure, including in the pre-Islamic period, and explained the peasant-landholder dynamics therein. Motheral argued that these dynamics essentially amounted to feudalism, which had the effect of inhibiting the development of a strong middle class and perpetuating an inefficient system of high cost and low productivity.²⁵

Motheral engaged with a range of solutions to the land tenure issue as part of a proposed reform program, including raising taxes on landholders to encourage voluntary redistribution, rationalizing the “clumsy” land title system, and upgrading

the legal rights of peasants to penalize absentee landlordism.²⁶ Along these lines, Motheral also defended the Shah's approach to land reform, identifying and dismissing alternative approaches taken by states like the United Kingdom, Denmark, Japan, and the US.²⁷ He argued that the Shah's program was uniquely effective for Iran as it was "straightforward and easily understood" for the beneficiaries, facilitated "desirable adjustments in operating scale," would enact permanent change, would stabilize class politics, and would have minimal net cost in implementing.²⁸ Motheral also listed reasons why the Shah's program had the potential to be ineffective. However, rather than offering substantive criticism, his points provided the impetus for expanded US support. These included a recognition of the lack of technical knowledge among the peasantry (implying a need for further training initiatives) and the need for land reform to be combined with investments into the burgeoning industrial production sector.²⁹

Following these sections, Motheral's report discussed the reasons behind the failure of the 1952 redistribution effort. In addition to its slow pace and the challenges presented by political tensions with Mossadegh, he argued that greater investment into development banks in Iran was needed, in order to finance both land reform and other initiatives.³⁰ His advocacy for expanded development banking activities was continued in the report's later sections – particularly the creation of an agriculture-focused development bank.³¹ Motheral went on to describe challenges presented by the 1952 program's suspension, including the loss of key survey data, litigation over stalled reallocation agreements, and attempts by landholders to exploit the negotiating process.³² The key conclusion he made in his review of the 1952 program was that "non-economic values" had to "take precedence over purely economic considerations."³³ This led into Motheral's overarching point, which was that the Shah wished for the renewed land reform program to be "one in which human welfare comes first and balance-sheet considerations second" – i.e., the US needed to spare no expense to support it.³⁴ Motheral offered additional information regarding cost to the US later on in the report.³⁵

In addition to calling for increased expenditure and supporting a more robust US-backed development bank, Motheral advocated for the land reform program in Iran to have "exceptionally high priority among United States objectives," and for immediate

coordination on the matter between ICA administrators, the US ambassador, and representatives of the Shah's government. He also called for the ICA to clearly divide the "chain of responsibilities" within the "operational matrix" of US agencies and NGOs to streamline operational support.³⁶ Further honing his policy recommendations, the report listed specific roles Motheral thought should be created under the aegis of the ICA, including land tenure specialists, agricultural economists, and other technicians to assist in the land transfer process.³⁷ Similarly, he asserted the importance of involving Iranian technicians in the land reform program, particularly those who had received US training, as a means of enhancing its efficacy and longevity. Together, these US and Iranian experts would form field teams to administer the program.³⁸

Based on these policy suggestions, Motheral created a five-year timeline for land reform. He discerned that teams of US and Iranian technicians would be able to redistribute land in over 15,000 villages over the 1958-1962 period – amounting to nearly one third of Iranian villages. This process was to begin firstly with lands under crown ownership. By the end of that period, teams were to be entirely comprised of Iranian technicians, with their US counterparts having adopted a fully advisory role.³⁹ The program was then to be evaluated and expanded as needed. It would have effectively removed the aristocratic class from land redistribution efforts and instead, would have placed it under the auspices of a technocratic process.

In the report's final pages, Motheral listed additional considerations for the implementation of the land reform program. These considerations included ensuring that the issues facing the 1952 program, such as exploitation by landholders, were not repeated; carefully surveying each village prior to the redistribution of land; and tailoring credit arrangements to ensure that farmers could pay off the land and receive limited reprieves as needed. Motheral warned that continued communication with farmers was necessary, to ensure they received educational opportunities, implemented proper agricultural practices, and understood that the land they had been allocated was not free of charge.⁴⁰ Furthermore, he advised that field teams needed to set aside land for community purposes and nomadic grazing.⁴¹

Overall, Motheral's report established a clear framework for how a program of land reform could be implemented in Iran. Though he drew upon the plan put forth by the Shah in 1952, he included proposals that were much more in-depth and refined. This was a self-conscious effort to resolve the challenges facing the 1952 efforts and made large-scale land reform a palatable initiative for US actors. Though the Motheral Report failed to immediately spur immediate action in Iran, the overarching aim of the document – seeking political stability through land reform – came through in a series of actions taken by the US and Iranian governments in the six years following its production.

The initial challenge facing the implementation of Motheral's suggestions was that they were not adopted by the Iranian government as unified policy. Despite 1958 legislation authorizing the redistribution of state land and the Shah issuing further edicts regarding his own holdings, US policymakers noted that progress on Iranian land reform was moving at an inexorably slow pace, bogged down by economic challenges and mounting political tensions.⁴² Nevertheless, during this interim period, US and Iranian actors did further key elements of the Motheral Report, particularly, the call for development banking activities in Iran to be expanded. In 1958, with the urging of the US and Iranian governments, private capital in both countries established the Industrial Development Bank (later the Industrial and Mining Development Bank) as an offshoot of Iran's Bank Melli.⁴³ The Iranian government also consulted with US-educated economists in 1958 through 1960 to establish the Central Bank of Iran – which took an active role in financing development projects, like land reform efforts, moving into the 1960s.⁴⁴

With the ascension of the Kennedy administration in 1961, advocating for land reform became a key priority for the US policy toward Iran, as advised by Motheral. In response to the country's mounting instability, the White House Iran Task Force issued a series of objectives for the administration, of which land reform was central.⁴⁵ As a series of political crises and changing US expectations made direct rule untenable, the Shah appointed veteran politician Ali Amini as prime minister and withdrew from managing the day-to-day affairs of state, while retaining control over the military and security apparatus.⁴⁶ With support from the Kennedy administration, Amini finally

implemented a large-scale land improvement and redistribution campaign led by the minister of agriculture, including the reallocation of private land.⁴⁷ Amini also sought to elevate Iranian technicians rather than rely solely upon those from the US, as Motheral had outlined in his report's five-year timeline.⁴⁸

Amini's premiership lasted only six months, however, due primarily to financial pressure caused by the Shah's unwillingness to cut defense expenditure.⁴⁹ After reasserting direct control, the Shah continued the land reform program Amini had initiated, maintaining much the same agenda and leadership for short period.⁵⁰ In 1963, he expanded and accelerated the program in conjunction with the initiation of the White Revolution, a set of social and economic reforms that he claimed would initiate the process of "emancipating fifteen million Iranians."⁵¹ Despite the ambitious nature of land reform under the White Revolution, the program did little to enhance political stability in the short term, as the Motheral Report suggested. Rather, it created new inequalities, prompted backlash from the landholding and clerical classes, and brought new material and social dislocation. Nevertheless, it was a transformative moment for the country with significant long-term implications.⁵²

In conclusion, the Motheral Report reveals a turning point in the decade-long effort to reform the system of land tenure in Iran, from emphasizing an incremental approach supplemented by NGO-based initiatives toward the embrace of structural change led by the Shah's own proposals. It further demonstrates how the Shah moved into a more assertive political position in the years after Mossadegh was deposed, seeking to directly influence US policymaking and assume an increasingly active role in Iranian development efforts. Though some historians argue that the Shah first formulated the policies that would become the White Revolution in 1958, the Motheral Report indicates that this process likely began earlier – especially given that Joseph R. Motheral and his team centered their survey upon the Shah's pre-determined objectives.⁵³ The gradual implementation of these objectives into the early 1960s also correlated with the Shah's increasing power during this period, vis-à-vis both US actors and his domestic opponents.

¹ During my time at the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) in Sleepy Hollow, New York in the summer of 2024, I researched a range of topics. In particular, I focused on the activities of the Population Council in Iran during the 1970s, and Iran's involvement in the 1975 International Year of the Woman. I also examined documents regarding a range of other topics, including the activities of the Near East Foundation, Ford Foundation, and other US organizations in Iran during the 1950s and 1960s. I intend to incorporate a wide breadth of RAC materials into writing my doctoral thesis, spread across multiple chapters. This report contextualizes and summarizes the previously neglected Motheral Report, which I found to be a unique source on an important aspect of 20th century Iranian history. It is my hope that it will be utilized by either myself or other scholars in a future publication. My experience at the RAC was incredibly productive, and I would like to thank both the staff and fellow researchers for their kindness, patience, and assistance.

² These efforts are summarized in "A speech delivered by Theodore H. Noe, Acting Director, Iranian Area at the Iranian-American Relation Society," Iran - Theodore H. Noe 1949, Near East Foundation records, Accessions 2009:104, RG 1, Project Files, Series 4, Contracts, Reports, and Correspondence, Subseries 2, RAC.

³ Daniel Craig, "The Impact of Land Reform on an Iranian Village," *Middle East Journal* 32, no. 2 (1978), p. 144.

⁴ Gregory Brew, *Petroleum and Progress in Iran: Oil, Development, and the Cold War*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022, pp. 72, 86-88.

⁵ James A. Bill, *The Politics of Iran: Groups, Classes, and Modernization*, Columbus: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1972, 144-145.

⁶ Siavush Randjbar-Daemi, "The Tudeh Party of Iran and the Land Reform Initiatives of the Pahlavi State, 1958–1964," *Middle Eastern Studies* 58, no. 4 (2021), pp. 618-620; William E. Warne, *Mission for Peace: Point IV in Iran*, Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1956, pp. 37-38.

⁷ "Land Reform in Iran – Problems and Possible Solutions," p. 5, Iran - Land Reform in Iran: Problems and Possible Solutions, Joe R. Motheral, 1958, Near East Foundation records, Accessions 2009:104, RG 1; Project Files, Series 4, Contracts, Reports, and Correspondence, Subseries 2, RAC.

⁸ James Somerville to Theodore H. Noe, Iran - Theodore H. Noe 1949, Near East Foundation records, Accessions 2009:104, RG 1, Project Files, Series 4, Contracts, Reports, and Correspondence, Subseries 2, RAC.

⁹ Warne, *Mission for Peace: Point IV in Iran*, pp. 37-38, 58, 190.

¹⁰ Warne, *Mission for Peace: Point IV in Iran*, pp. 190-193; "A speech delivered by Theodore H. Noe, Acting Director, Iranian Area at the Iranian-American Relation Society," Iran - Theodore H. Noe 1949, Near East Foundation records, RAC.

¹¹ Craig, "The Impact of Land Reform on an Iranian Village," p. 144; Warne, *Mission for Peace: Point IV in Iran*, pp. 190-193; Draft National Intelligence Estimate, August 12, 1953, document 259, Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1952-1954, Iran 1951–1954.

¹² Randjbar-Daemi, "The Tudeh Party of Iran and the Land Reform Initiatives of the Pahlavi State, 1958–1964," p. 618.

¹³ International Bank Notes - September 1960, volume 14, number 9, reference 01842692, Internal communication and staff engagement, Records of the office of external relations, World Bank Archive; "News Notes," *Journal of Farm Economics* 39, no. 3 (1957): 839-847; "Land Reform in Iran – Problems and Possible Solutions," p. 5, Iran - Land Reform in Iran: Problems and Possible Solutions, Joe R. Motheral, 1958, Near East Foundation records, Accessions

2009:104, RG 1; Project Files, Series 4, Contracts, Reports, and Correspondence, Subseries 2, RAC.

¹⁴ “Joe R. Motheral,” *Austin American-Statesman*, November 10, 1992; Joe R. Motheral, *Recent Trends in Land Tenure in Texas*, Texas Agriculture Experiment Station bulletin 641 (1944); for analysis of Motheral’s study in Texas see: Keith J. Volanto, “Leaving the Land: Tenant and Sharecropper Displacement in Texas during the New Deal.” *Social Science History* 20, no. 4 (1996): 533-351.

¹⁵ “Joe. R. Motheral,” *Austin American-Statesman*, November 10, 1992; Joe R. Motheral, “Land Tenure in the Philippines,” *Journal of Farm Economics* 38, no. 2 (1956): 465-474.

¹⁶ Joe R. Motheral, “Land Tenure in the Philippines,” *Journal of Farm Economics* 38, no. 2 (1956): 465-474.

¹⁷ “Land Reform in Iran – Problems and Possible Solutions,” Iran - Land Reform in Iran: Problems and Possible Solutions, Joe R. Motheral, 1958, Near East Foundation records, Accessions 2009:104, RG 1; Project Files, Series 4, Contracts, Reports, and Correspondence, Subseries 2, RAC; Charles T. White to Executive Director, New York, Joe R. Motheral, 1958, Near East Foundation records, Accessions 2009:104, RG 1; Project Files, Series 4, Contracts, Reports, and Correspondence, Subseries 2, RAC.

¹⁸ “Land Reform in Iran – Problems and Possible Solutions,” p. 4, Iran - Land Reform in Iran: Problems and Possible Solutions, Joe R. Motheral, 1958, Near East Foundation records, Accessions 2009:104, RG 1; Project Files, Series 4, Contracts, Reports, and Correspondence, Subseries 2, RAC.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²¹ Joe R. Motheral, “Land Tenure in the Philippines.”

²² “Land Reform in Iran – Problems and Possible Solutions,” p. 4, Iran - Land Reform in Iran: Problems and Possible Solutions, Joe R. Motheral, 1958, Near East Foundation records, Accessions 2009:104, RG 1; Project Files, Series 4, Contracts, Reports, and Correspondence, Subseries 2, RAC.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-9.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-14.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-17.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 18, 24-26.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 24, 30-31.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 35-36.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

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