

US Intelligence Assistance to Iran, May–October 1979

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This article describes a US initiative to provide intelligence to Iran in 1979, as radical Islamists were becoming increasingly powerful there and tensions were escalating with the United States. This initiative began in May 1979, when Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan and other Iranian officials asked US embassy personnel for information on ethnically based uprisings that threatened the new Islamic regime. It culminated when a CIA officer gave two briefings in mid-October warning Iran's leaders that Iraq was making preparations for a possible invasion of Iran. It ended abruptly in November 1979, when radical Islamist students seized the US embassy in Tehran. Iran's leaders did not heed the US warning and were entirely unprepared for the Iraqi invasion of September 1980, which had a devastating impact.

In mid-October 1979, a CIA officer gave two briefings in Tehran to top officials in the government of Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan. The main themes of these briefings were that Iraq was making preparations for a possible invasion of Iran and that Iran could use a US-built electronic surveillance system to monitor and counter these preparations. These briefings were the culmination of months of discussion between the two governments about sharing intelligence on matters of mutual interest. This nascent intelligence exchange was cut short by the seizure of the US embassy in Tehran by radical Islamist students on November 4, 1979, which severely disrupted US-Iran relations and led Bazargan to resign. The Bazargan government did not inform its successor of the US warning. Iraq did, indeed, invade Iran in September 1980, starting an eight-year war that devastated both countries and transformed the region.

This article explains the events that led up to these briefings and the details of the briefings themselves — topics that have not been covered adequately in the many published accounts of US-Iran relations in this period.¹ It is based mainly on classified US documents published by the students who seized the US embassy and discussions with key US and Iranian officials, including all four participants in the October brief-

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1. James A. Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 290–293; and Babak Ganji, *Politics of Confrontation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 142–146, give sketchy accounts of these events but omit many key details, including the main themes of the October briefings. The briefings are mentioned briefly in Mark J. Gasiorowski, “The Nuzhah Plot and Iranian Politics,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (November 2002), p. 662; and Malcolm Byrne, “The United States and the Iran-Iraq War: The Limits of American Influence,” in Max Guderzo and Bruna Bagnato, eds., *The Globalization of the Cold War* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 119–136. Some US and Iranian newspaper articles (cited below) provide a few details. To my knowledge, no other account even mentions these events.

ings. Although a few details remain murky, a clear enough picture emerges to permit us to draw important conclusions about US-Iran relations and Iranian domestic politics in this crucial period. This article also clarifies the circumstances surrounding the arrest of Abbas Amir Entezam, Iran's most prominent political prisoner in recent decades, who was a key participant in these events.

US-IRAN RELATIONS IN EARLY 1979

After Islamic revolutionaries seized power in February 1979, Iran remained chaotic and unstable. The revolution's preeminent leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, appointed Bazargan to lead a provisional government pending the enactment of a new constitution and nationwide elections. Bazargan was a professor at Tehran University and head of the Islamic modernist Liberation Movement of Iran (LMI) party. He appointed a cabinet of like-minded moderates, who sought to restore order and resume essential government services. The revolution had unleashed a variety of radical Islamist and radical leftist factions, which were now heavily armed, brimming with revolutionary fervor, and determined to implement their own ideological agendas. These various radicals continually challenged and attacked Bazargan and his colleagues. Indeed, radical Islamists assassinated armed forces commander Valiollah Qarani and circulated hit lists naming Entezam, who was Bazargan's deputy, and Foreign Minister Ibrahim Yazdi as targets for assassination.² Khomeini respected Bazargan but wanted to move more rapidly to implement his vision of an Islamic regime, putting him squarely in the radical Islamist camp. Bazargan and his colleagues were increasingly marginalized during 1979, unable to implement their moderate agenda or stop the chaos and radicalization that were engulfing the country.

Iran also faced growing threats from abroad. The biggest came from Iraq, whose Ba'athist leaders were angered by Iran's incitement of their Shi'a population and harbored territorial claims against Iran. Iraq had undertaken a massive military buildup since 1973, doubling its ground forces personnel and armored vehicles, expanding its tank-transport capabilities five-fold, increasing its air force fleet by 65%, and improving its air defense and naval capabilities. Iran's armed forces had also undergone a massive buildup in this period, but they had been weakened by extensive desertions and purges since the revolution. Iraq, therefore, had "a substantial advantage in the size and capabilities of the forces it could deploy against Iran," according to a June 1979 US National Intelligence Estimate. Border clashes and a harsh propaganda war were occurring between the two countries. Iran's leaders believed Iraq was inciting rebellions among Iranian Arabs and Kurds.³ To the east, Afghanistan's communist government faced a growing insurgency that would bring Soviet military intervention in December. Iran's Qashqai, Turkoman, and Baluch minorities also began to rebel, raising additional fears of foreign incitement. On top of that, monarchists and other opponents of the Is-

2. "Les obsèques de l'ayatollah Moutahari ont eu lieu dans un climat anticommunist savamment orchestra" ["The Funeral of Ayatollah Motahari Took Place in a Cleverly Orchestrated Anti-Communist Climate"], *Le Monde*, May 5, 1979, p. 8.

3. Shaul Bakhash, "The Troubled Relationship: Iran and Iraq, 1930-1980," in Lawrence G. Potter and Gary G. Sick, eds., *Iran, Iraq, and the Legacies of War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 11-27; Director of Central Intelligence, "Iraq's Role in the Middle East," National Intelligence Estimate 36.2-1-79, June 21, 1979, pp. 8-9, D1-D4, http://www.foia.cia.gov/docs/DOC_0001115785/DOC_0001115785.pdf.

lamic regime were plotting from abroad, further alarming Iran's leaders.

The revolution had fostered intense anti-American sentiment, due to the close US relationship with the deposed monarchy and the widespread belief that the US had tried to prevent the revolution and was now trying to reverse it. This anti-Americanism was manifested in several harrowing attacks on US personnel in February 1979, including the brief seizure of the US embassy compound in Tehran by radical leftist guerrillas, the near-lynching of an official at the US consulate in Tabriz, and the abduction of 20 US technicians at one of the Tacksman electronic surveillance sites in northeastern Iran, which monitored Soviet missile tests in Central Asia. Although embassy officials and the Bazargan government managed to resolve these crises and prevent further attacks in the following months, the embassy was regularly subjected to gunfire, demonstrations by hostile crowds, and threats by radical Islamist and radical leftist leaders.⁴

Under these chaotic, dangerous conditions, US officials began to forge a new US posture toward Iran. They knew there was no chance of reestablishing the monarchy or the close relationship they had maintained with it. They realized that the Bazargan government represented the best hope for moderation in Iran and constructive bilateral relations. They also understood that intense anti-Americanism would prevent Bazargan from working closely with the United States and endanger any Iranian who did so. Accordingly, the new US posture that emerged in this period called for supporting the Bazargan government, refraining from actions that might destabilize Iran or further enflame anti-Americanism, working constructively to improve bilateral relations, and waiting for conditions to improve.⁵

These themes guided US policy toward Iran during the Bazargan era. The United States quickly recognized the Bazargan government. President Jimmy Carter publicly pledged not to interfere in Iran's internal affairs. US embassy officials met regularly with Iranian officials to exchange views and resolve bilateral problems, including the many outstanding arms sales agreements and other commercial transactions and concerns about the safety of US citizens and personnel in Iran. They also hoped to resume operation of the Tacksman sites, which were vital for monitoring Soviet compliance with nuclear arms control agreements. US officials tried to meet with top Iranian clerical leaders, but most refused. Although US diplomats and intelligence officers maintained contact with various Iranian opposition groups inside the country and abroad, they pointedly declined to provide support or encouragement to any of these groups in this period, including the ethnic guerrilla movements that began to emerge. The CIA maintained a small team of officers in the US embassy and occasionally sent others to Iran for temporary assignments, but their activities were limited in scope and not aimed at destabilizing the new regime. US officials encouraged US citizens to leave Iran and

4. William H. Sullivan, *Mission to Iran* (New York: Norton, 1981), pp. 258–275. On the Tacksman sites, see William Branigan, “U.S. Loses Iran Sites,” *Washington Post*, March 1, 1979.

5. See Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983), pp. 470–471; Moslem Students Following the Line of the Imam, *Documents From The U.S. Espionage Den, Vol. 16* (Tehran: Entisharat-e Daneshjuyan-e Piru-ye Khatt-e Imam, n.d.), pp. 70–71, www.archive.org/details/DocumentsFromTheU.s.EspionageDen. The latter source and other volumes in this series, hereafter cited as *Espionage Den*, contain documents taken from the US embassy in Tehran when it was seized in November 1979. All citations here refer to the versions of these volumes available on this website.

instructed the small contingent of US personnel there to maintain a low profile.⁶

US embassy officials had established contact with Bazargan's LMI party in May 1978, as the revolution was beginning to unfold. State Department political officer John Stempel met with LMI member Mohammad Tavasoli in early May and discussed current conditions. Tavasoli introduced Stempel to Bazargan and LMI co-founder Yadollah Sahabi a few weeks later. Tavasoli was soon designated the LMI's main contact with the embassy. Stempel met regularly with him and occasionally with other LMI leaders in the months following to discuss the evolving situation.⁷

Stempel first met with Abbas Amir Entezam on January 9, 1979 at the suggestion of Richard Cottam, a well-known academic specialist on Iran who had been a CIA officer during 1952–1958 and had good contacts in the LMI and other moderate opposition circles. Entezam was a 46-year-old engineer and businessman who had studied at Tehran University and then in Paris and Berkeley. He later worked as an entrepreneur in the United States for several years. He had first met Cottam in 1953 when he delivered a protest letter to the US embassy on behalf of the National Resistance Movement, a small democratic nationalist organization. In the following years Entezam, like many other politically active Iranians, met occasionally with embassy officials, including a young CIA officer named George Cave, who served under diplomatic cover in Iran during 1958–1963. Entezam returned to Iran from the United States in 1970 and undertook various business activities, including a venture of some sort with Bazargan, who had been his mentor at Tehran University. In December 1978, Bazargan appointed Entezam to head the LMI's political office, replacing Tavasoli. It was in this capacity that Entezam first met Stempel in early January. Entezam and Stempel met frequently in the following weeks, and Entezam soon replaced Tavasoli as the LMI's main contact with the US embassy. When Bazargan became prime minister, he appointed Entezam deputy prime minister and government spokesman.⁸

Entezam and Stempel met regularly in early 1979, discussing the chaotic situation in Iran and problems in US-Iran relations. Entezam kept the embassy informed about major events and occasionally asked for US help, such as in persuading Prime Minister Shahpour Bakhtiar to resign and arranging the peaceful return of Ayatollah Khomeini. After Bazargan was appointed prime minister on February 4, these discussions began to focus on the many urgent bilateral problems. Although Entezam was probably their most frequent contact, US embassy officials had similar discussions with other Iranian officials in this period, including Bazargan himself, Foreign Minister Yazdi, Minister of Information Nasser Minachi, Minister of Defense Ahmad Madani, and even Revolutionary Council chairman Ayatollah Mohammad Beheshti.⁹

6. Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1982), p. 433; *Espionage Den*, Vol. 16, p. 74; and Vol. 68, pp. 129–130; Mark Gasiorowski, "US Covert Operations in Iran, February–November 1979: Was the United States Trying to Overthrow the Islamic Regime?" (unpublished paper, 2012).

7. *Espionage Den*, Vol. 24, pp. 1–40; and Vol. 27, pp. 57–60, 66–69, 109–110.

8. *Espionage Den*, Vol. 10, pp. 110, 125; "Biography," www.entezam.org; Mark Gasiorowski, "Obituary of Richard Cottam," *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 30, Nos. 3–4, (Summer/Fall 1997); Fariba Amini, "Perseverance and Honor: Interview with Abbas Amir-Entezam," www.iranian.com. Note: *Espionage Den*, Vol. 10 is not page-numbered and the documents it contains are presented in reverse order. I therefore cite the Adobe Acrobat page numbers for this volume only.

9. *Espionage Den*, Vol. 10, pp. 86–127; Vol. 18, pp. 12–14; and Vol. 27, pp. 22–23, 66–69.

INITIATING THE INTELLIGENCE EXCHANGE

As unrest began to emerge among Iranian Arabs, Kurds, and other minorities in the spring of 1979, Iran's leaders became increasingly concerned that foreign powers might be involved. The most likely culprit was Iraq, but many suspected that the United States, Israel, the Soviet Union, Palestinian guerrilla factions, and/or other Arab countries were fomenting this unrest. Many Iranians also believed that the United States was backing monarchist opposition groups and that the Soviet Union was backing radical leftists, who were becoming increasingly aggressive. Entezam and others raised these concerns in their discussions with US embassy officials. On May 6, Bazargan and Entezam met with Stempel and US Chargé d'Affaires Charles Naas and raised these issues. Bazargan asked for information that would "help Iran defend its independence from its enemies," requesting that such information be channeled through Entezam. Bazargan, Entezam, and Yazdi may have made similar requests for information earlier. US officials were reluctant to provide sensitive intelligence to Iran at this time, fearing it might fall into the wrong hands. Nevertheless, on May 16 they gave Entezam a relatively innocuous paper on conditions in Afghanistan. In a meeting on May 24, Entezam told an embassy official that this paper had been useful but that Iran really needed information on threats to its internal security.¹⁰

On May 26, Entezam again met with Naas and Victor Tomseth, a political officer with the State Department. Entezam told them that the Bazargan government was concerned that Iraq, Libya, and the Palestine Liberation Organization were meddling in Iran's southwestern Khuzestan Province, whose residents were mainly Shi'a Arabs. Naas said he would look into giving Entezam information on these activities. He then cabled Washington, requesting that a paper on this topic be prepared. Entezam met with Naas and Tomseth again on June 18 and requested information on Iraqi intentions toward Iran.¹¹ It is not clear how Washington responded to these requests, nor whether it provided any intelligence in response.

In late June, Naas was replaced as chargé by Bruce Laingen, who was expected to remain in Iran only briefly, pending the appointment of a new US ambassador. Laingen first met with Entezam on July 7, accompanied by Tomseth. Entezam again asked for information on Iraqi intentions and subversive activities in Iran. Laingen gave him a verbal overview of the current US assessment of Iraq's posture toward Iran, including information from an early June cable from the US interests section in Baghdad reporting rumors and visual evidence of large movements of Iraqi armored units from north-eastern Iraq to the southeast, where Iran was most vulnerable to an attack. Laingen then cabled Assistant Secretary of State Harold Saunders on July 8 urging him to consider providing Iran with intelligence of the sort Entezam sought. As an example of what might be provided, he mentioned a recent analysis by the Baghdad interests section which concluded that Iraq did not seem likely to invade Iran but that "a quick punch-out of an infebled Iran" could not be ruled out.¹²

10. Telephone interviews by the author with John Stempel, June 14, 2010; and Victor Tomseth, July 9, 2010; *Espionage Den*, Vol. 18, pp. 22–23; and Vol. 10, pp. 84–85. For the paper on Afghanistan and additional updates, see *Espionage Den*, Vol. 29, pp. 91–97, 110.

11. Interview, Tomseth; *Espionage Den*, Vol. 10, pp. 80, 84–85.

12. *Espionage Den*, Vol. 10, pp. 70–76; Interview by the author with Bruce Laingen, May 20, [Continued on next page]

Entezam had been appointed Iran's ambassador to the Scandinavian countries and left Iran in late July. His main assignments in this position were to continue his contact with US officials, which could be done more easily outside of Iran, and to persuade Iranian exiles to return home. Soon after arriving at his post in Stockholm, Entezam met with a US embassy official there and asked for "information of mutual interest."¹³

Laingen's July 8 cable to Saunders seems to have persuaded top US officials to respond positively to Entezam's requests for information. About three weeks later, Undersecretary of State David Newsom asked Stempel, who was now teaching at the US Naval Academy, and Cave, who had recently served as CIA station chief in a key Middle Eastern country, to meet with Entezam in Stockholm. Their main purpose was to set up a series of US intelligence briefings for the Bazargan government as a venue for providing useful information and building bilateral trust and cooperation. Newsom was the key US official orchestrating this initiative. It is not clear which other top US officials were involved in the decision to pursue it.¹⁴

Stempel and Cave met with Entezam in Stockholm on August 5–6. Entezam remembered Cave from their meetings in the early 1960s and greeted him warmly. He again requested information on external threats to Iran's internal security, saying this was the most important thing the United States could do to improve bilateral relations. He also said that Ayatollah Khomeini had approved these discussions, though Stempel doubted this. Cave proposed that the United States provide a series of intelligence briefings on key issues to top officials in Tehran, occurring every three to six months. He also suggested that important time-sensitive information could be provided more often when necessary. He emphasized that intelligence of the sort Iran wanted was very sensitive and could be provided only verbally. Entezam welcomed Cave's proposal and assured him that the only recipients would be Bazargan, Yazdi, an unnamed senior intelligence official, and himself. He asked that a US embassy staff member be designated as a regular contact for this exchange, but Cave demurred.¹⁵

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2010, Bethesda, MD; "Iraqi Armor Movements," Baghdad cable 1213, May [June?] 3, 1979; and "Iraqi-Iranian Relations," Baghdad cable 1362, June 21, 1979, both obtained by the author under the Freedom of Information Act and available at www.scribd.com/doc/104034796. These cables say the Iraqi armed forces were using 55 tank transporters to move armored vehicles within the country and may have redeployed as much as a division of troops to Iraq's southeastern border.

13. *Espionage Den*, Vol. 56, p. 12; and Vol. 10, pp. 62–63, 78–79.

14. *Espionage Den*, Vol. 10, p. 64; Interview, Stempel; Interview by the author with George Cave, April 5, 2010 and August 14, 2010, Silver Spring, MD. Stempel and Cave both told me Newsom was the main US official they dealt with on this initiative. Newsom probably would have discussed a sensitive initiative of this sort with Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Assistant Secretary of State Saunders, National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, CIA Director Stansfield Turner, and possibly President Carter. Vance died in 2002. Turner now is very ill. Newsom, who died in 2008, told Malcolm Byrne he could not recall anything about this initiative (email message to author, March 31, 2010); and he does not mention it in David D. Newsom, *Witness to a Changing World* (Washington: New Academia Publishing, 2008). I contacted Saunders, State Department Director of Iranian Affairs Henry Precht, Newsom's deputy Roscoe Suddarth, Brzezinski, NSC staffer Gary Sick, CIA Deputy Director Frank Carlucci, CIA Near East Operations Director Charles Cogan, and President Carter, but none could recall how this decision was made.

15. *Espionage Den*, Vol. 10, p. 60; Interview, Stempel. The unnamed intelligence official was probably Mostafa Chamran, who was working to rebuild Iran's intelligence capabilities at the time.

The first briefing occurred in Tehran on August 22. It was given by Robert Ames, a CIA operations officer then serving as the National Intelligence Officer for the Near East — a position that made him essentially the top US intelligence analyst for the region. Laingen and Tomseth accompanied Ames. The only Iranians present were Bazargan, Yazdi, and Entezam, who traveled from Stockholm for the briefing. Ames' objectives were to initiate the briefing series, assess the response of the Iranian participants, and encourage closer bilateral relations. Consequently, instead of focusing on the issues Entezam had asked about, he gave a broad, rather vague presentation on current trends and US policy objectives in the region. The Iranians reacted positively; Bazargan even asked that the briefings occur more often than planned. Ames did not reveal his identity, but the Iranians apparently assumed he was a CIA officer.¹⁶

In the following weeks, State Department and CIA officials took steps to provide additional intelligence to Iran. A September 5 memo from Assistant Secretary of State Harold Saunders to Secretary of State Cyrus Vance noted that the Ames briefing had been well-received and recommended that the United States “continue to develop an intelligence exchange with the Iranians.” On September 14, the State Department sent a cable instructing Laingen to establish a dialogue with Iranian officials about growing Soviet involvement in Afghanistan, which would “flow naturally from previous discussions [the] embassy has had.” A few days later, CIA headquarters sent a cable to the Tehran CIA station explaining that Laingen had been instructed to provide intelligence on Afghanistan to Iranian officials “as part of [the] effort begun by the 22 August briefing” and that this intelligence would be sent to Laingen through the station. This cable contained the first such batch of intelligence, describing growing Soviet military involvement in Afghanistan. It also stated that Laingen should ask his interlocutors for any corroborating information they might have, emphasizing that Washington hoped this would encourage a two-way dialogue on intelligence matters with Iranian officials. At about the same time, CIA headquarters sent a cable to the Tehran station saying something about Soviet support for Iranian Kurdish guerrillas. The station chief replied that he was not aware of any evidence of this, but that if such evidence existed, it would be “ideal” for use in discussions with Entezam. It is not clear whether additional steps occurred on either of these initiatives.¹⁷

IRAQ'S INVASION PREPARATIONS

By late August 1979, some members of the US intelligence community had come to believe that Iraq was preparing for a possible invasion of Iran. An early analysis in this vein was conducted by Howard Teicher, a Pentagon analyst who produced a paper in March 1979 showing that Iraq's military capabilities had grown substantially and raising questions about the intentions of its leaders. In June, a National Intelligence Estimate concluded that Iraq had a substantial military advantage over Iran, and the US interests section in Baghdad speculated that Iraq might seek a “quick punch-out” of Iran.

16. *Espionage Den*, Vol. 56, p. 8; Interview, Tomseth; Interview, Cave. Cave told me Ames also met with Ayatollah Beheshti while in Tehran. Ames was one of six CIA officers killed when terrorists bombed the US embassy in Beirut in April 1983.

17. *Espionage Den*, Vol. 16, p. 75; Vol. 30, pp. 67, 162; and Vol. 32, p. 136. In the latter document, Entezam is identified by his cryptonym “SDPLOD/1.” I discuss what the CIA knew about foreign support for Iranian Kurds during this period in the unpublished paper cited in footnote 6, above.

At about the same time, Foreign Service Officer David Mack, who had just completed a two-year tour in the Baghdad Interests section, told a State Department audience that the Iraqi government seemed to be preparing the country for a confrontation with Iran. Teicher wrote a more detailed paper focusing on the implications of Iraq's large buildup of armored forces and tank-transport capabilities, evidence it was seeking nuclear weapons, its rapidly growing oil income, and the aggressive pan-Arabist rhetoric of Saddam Hussein, who had been Iraq's *de facto* ruler for several years and who had seized sole power in July 1979. Teicher concluded that Iraq was preparing to invade Iran and seize the Khuzestan oilfields. His paper, completed in November 1979, was read by Defense Secretary Harold Brown and National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, who rejected its conclusions.¹⁸ Teicher's prediction was an inference based on trends in Iraq's military and financial capabilities and the rhetoric of its leaders, rather than intelligence about Iraqi invasion preparations. Although this prediction proved accurate, skepticism about it was perhaps understandable.

Stronger evidence that Iraq was preparing for a possible invasion of Iran began to appear in the summer of 1979. As mentioned above, rumors and visual evidence emerged in June that Iraq was moving large armored units to its southeastern border. In the following months, intercepted communications among high-ranking Iraqi officials and reconnaissance photos of Iraqi military exercises and other activities in this border region led some CIA analysts to believe that Iraq was making preparations for a possible invasion of Iran, although they had no evidence that Iraq's leaders had actually decided to invade. These analysts disseminated reports about these activities. By late August, some top officials in the CIA and State Department had read these reports and were concerned about their implications. Beginning in early December 1979, Western observers in Iraq reported that Iraq was planning to invade Iran's oilfields. In April 1980, the National Intelligence Council's Strategic Warning Staff wrote a memo stating "[e]vidence indicates that Iraq has probably planned to initiate a major military move against Iran with the aim of toppling the Khomeini regime." However, for reasons that are not entirely clear, other US officials working on Iraq and Iran at this time did not see these reports and did not believe Iraq was preparing to invade Iran until shortly before the invasion occurred, in September 1980.¹⁹

18. Howard Teicher and Gail Radley Teicher, *Twin Pillars to Desert Storm* (New York: William Morrow, 1993), pp. 60–71; David Mack, "Iraq-Iran War – A mid-Level US Diplomat's View," paper presented at the "The Iran-Iraq War: The View from Baghdad" conference at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, October 2011.

19. Confidential interviews with a Middle East military analyst in the CIA's Office of Strategic Research and a deputy to National Intelligence Officer Robert Ames; Gary Sick, *All Fall Down* (New York: Random House, 1985), p. 245; Strategic Warning Staff, "Possible Iranian-Iraqi Conflict, Memorandum for NIO/W," April 11, 1980 (declassified document provided by Andrew Emery and available at www.scribd.com/doc/104034796). The intelligence on Iraqi invasion preparations that emerged in August 1979 formed the basis for the October briefings in Tehran and is explained below, in the text accompanying footnote 25. David Newsom, George Cave, and Bruce Laingen saw this intelligence and were persuaded by it, as discussed below. Wayne White, an Iraq specialist in the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, and Gary Sick of the National Security Council told me they did not see these reports and saw no persuasive evidence of Iraqi invasion preparations until shortly before the invasion occurred. Recent research based on Iraqi government documents indicates that Saddam Hussein broached the idea of invading Iran in February 1979 and subsequently

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One of the officials who saw these reports was David Newsom. Alarmed about the prospect of war between these two strategically important countries, Newsom and presumably other top US officials decided that the United States should provide intelligence on Iraq's activities to the Bazargan government so it could take steps to deter an invasion and thus prevent war from breaking out. An obvious way to do this was through the briefing series initiated by Robert Ames. Accordingly, Newsom asked George Cave to meet with Entezam again in Stockholm in late August to set up the next briefing, which would focus on Iraq's invasion preparations.²⁰

As mentioned above, US officials were looking for ways to resume operation of the Tacksman electronic surveillance system in this period. One idea that emerged was to encourage Iranian officials to restart another electronic surveillance system, code-named IBEX, and then try to persuade them to restart Tacksman once they saw how useful IBEX could be. A major US defense contractor had begun to install IBEX in Iran in 1975 under a contract with the Iranian government overseen by the CIA. Whereas Tacksman was designed to monitor Soviet missile tests, IBEX was designed to gather intelligence on troop movements, radio communications, and other conventional military activity by Iran's neighbors near its borders. Although some parts of IBEX could be used elsewhere, it was configured mainly for monitoring military activity inside Iraq, which had been very hostile toward Iran when IBEX was conceived in the early 1970s. Most of the IBEX system had become operational before Iran's revolution, including ground-based electronic listening posts and three C-130 aircraft capable of monitoring radio transmissions and taking "oblique" photos from Iranian airspace of sites up to 70 miles inside Iraq. Iranian military personnel had been trained to operate IBEX. Although many had left the armed forces by this time, several key officers and most of the technicians trained to run IBEX were still in Iran. US officials therefore decided to tell their Iranian counterparts about IBEX and how they could restart it, both to give them a way of monitoring Iraqi invasion preparations without relying on US intelligence and in the hope that this might lead them to restart Tacksman.²¹

Cave traveled to Stockholm and met with Entezam on August 30–31. They discussed plans for continuing the intelligence exchange relationship and agreed that the next briefing would be held in early October. Entezam told Cave that Ames' briefing had been well received, though he had not addressed all of the issues in which the Bazargan government was interested. Cave used this opportunity to bring up IBEX, telling Entezam it could provide useful information on some of these issues. Entezam knew nothing about IBEX. Cave, therefore, gave him an overview of its capabilities,

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discussed this idea but did not decide conclusively to invade until early July 1980. See Hal Brands, "Why Did Saddam Invade Iran? New Evidence on Motives, Complexity, and the Israel Factor," *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 75, No. 3 (July 2011), pp. 870–871.

20. Interview, Cave. As with the decision to initiate the briefing series (see footnote 14, above), I have not been able to determine which US officials made this decision. Newsom, however, seems to have been the main proponent.

21. *Espionage Den*, Vol. 16, p. 74; Interview, Cave. On the controversies surrounding IBEX, see Bob Woodward, "IBEX: Deadly Symbol of U.S. Arms Sales Problems," *Washington Post*, January 2, 1977. Cave told me IBEX was designed to be run entirely by Iranian personnel and was not configured to provide intelligence to the US government. US officials therefore were not pursuing this initiative to make use of IBEX themselves.

emphasizing that Iran could use it to gather intelligence without having to rely on the United States. He also told Entezam the names of two Iranian military officers who had overseen the IBEX program and were still in Iran. Entezam then asked for documentation on the technical aspects of IBEX and that an overview of IBEX be included in the October briefing. Cave agreed, and the CIA assembled a set of briefing books and manuals on IBEX and delivered them to Entezam on October 5. Cave then brought up the Tacksman system, saying the intelligence it could provide would be very useful to Iran and telling Entezam the United States very much wanted access to it. Entezam promised to raise the issue and help reestablish US access to Tacksman.²²

THE OCTOBER BRIEFINGS

Newsom and his colleagues decided Cave should provide the briefings on Iraq's invasion preparations and the IBEX system. CIA personnel began assembling material for these briefings. This proved time-consuming, so the briefings were delayed until mid-October. Cave was given a thorough overview of the intelligence on Iraqi invasion preparations and the current status of IBEX. He then flew to Tehran with CIA officer Ron Smith, who was to give a separate briefing on Soviet energy policy.²³

On October 15, Cave, Smith, and Laingen met with Yazdi and Entezam, who again traveled from Stockholm to Tehran for the occasion. Defense Minister Mostafa Chamran was scheduled to attend the meeting but had been wounded in Kurdistan and hospitalized. No one else was present. Smith first gave a briefing about declining Soviet oil exports and other matters. He then left the meeting and returned to Washington. The four remaining participants then discussed the situation in Khuzestan and Kurdistan. Cave gave his interlocutors information about Iraqi support for rebels in Khuzestan. He also indicated that the United States had no evidence of foreign support for Iran's Kurdish rebels, who had seized large quantities of weapons from Iran's security forces and therefore did not necessarily need outside support. Yazdi stated that Iran had information that the United States, Israel, and Iraq were jointly supporting the Kurdish uprising. Laingen replied that the United States strongly opposed any action that might destabilize Iran and thus disrupt its oil exports, which were vital for the world economy, and he reminded Yazdi that the United States did not even have diplomatic relations with Iraq. Yazdi also speculated that the CIA might be trying to overthrow the Bazargan government without the knowledge of top US officials.²⁴

22. *Espionage Den*, Vol. 10, p. 25; and Vol. 56, pp. 13–16; Interview, Cave. Cave had overseen the IBEX program when he was stationed in Iran during 1973–1976 and therefore was very familiar with it. He told me US personnel in Tehran had recently visited the Iranian officer who had headed IBEX before the revolution and learned it was still functional. Secretary of State Vance and David Newsom intended to discuss expanding the intelligence exchange and restarting Tacksman when they met with Yazdi in New York on October 3. However, this meeting was rather tense, and it is not clear whether these issues were raised. See *Espionage Den*, Vol. 16, pp. 74, 80–81; and Vol. 34, pp. 163–174. In late October, the CIA station chief in Tehran was pursuing an alternative, clandestine approach to restarting Tacksman. See *Espionage Den*, Vol. 55, p. 22.

23. *Espionage Den*, Vol. 56, p. 22; Interview, Cave.

24. *Espionage Den*, Vol. 10, pp. 28–30; and Vol. 31, p. 137; Interview, Cave. The CIA obtained a report in early September 1979 about Iraqi assistance to Iranian Kurds and another such report in late September. It then received two more, very credible reports on Iraqi support for Iranian Kurds in early

Cave then briefed Yazdi and Entezam on Iraq's invasion preparations. He told them the United States had concrete evidence that Iraq was carrying out military exercises that could only be explained as preparations for a possible invasion of Iran, such as large combined-unit maneuvers and exercises to send large units quickly across the Shatt al-Arab [Arvand River], which marks the southernmost portion of the Iran-Iraq border. He said Iraq was practicing sending large armored units rapidly to the border area from bases elsewhere, timing these exercises to increase their effectiveness, and doing this at night so Iranian and US surveillance capabilities could not easily observe them. Iraq also was pre-positioning large amounts of materiel in the area, concealing and camouflaging this materiel, and undertaking military engineering projects that would facilitate an invasion. Cave also said that Iraqi military intelligence had created an organization called the Arab Liberation Front that would launch an uprising among the Arabs of Khuzestan in conjunction with Iraq's invasion. Finally, he said the United States had learned that Iraq's leaders believed Iran's armed forces were still fairly powerful and were waiting for more purges and revolutionary chaos to weaken Iran further before invading. So, while Iraqi leaders were making preparations for a possible invasion, they were deterred from invading Iran at that time and had not yet made a final decision to do so. At the end of the meeting, Cave briefly mentioned the IBEX system, saying "the kind of tactical information [Yazdi and Entezam wanted] was in great part collectible by technical means," and urging them to make use of this capability.²⁵

Cave then met alone with Entezam on October 18. Entezam said he and Yazdi had told Bazargan about the substance of the October 15 briefings. He said that while the briefings had been interesting, they had hoped for more information about the Kurdish uprising and suggestions about how they might resolve it. Cave then gave a detailed briefing about IBEX to Entezam, who apparently had not yet read the briefing books and manuals given to him in Stockholm. Cave emphasized that IBEX would enable Iran to monitor Iraq's invasion preparations without US assistance. Cave had hoped Defense Minister Chamran would attend this briefing, but he was still unavailable.²⁶

While Cave was in Tehran, the State Department learned that Iran's deposed monarch, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, was seriously ill and his doctors were rec-

[Continued from previous page]

October, just before Cave's briefing. See Gasiorowski, "US Covert Operations in Iran." Cave told me he had not seen any of this intelligence. It is not clear why this information was not included in Cave's briefing material, especially since he discussed Iraqi support for rebels in Khuzestan. It is possible that the two reports in September were not conclusive enough and that the early October reports arrived too late to be included in the briefing.

25. Interview, Cave; *Espionage Den*, Vol. 10, p. 20. The CIA military analyst mentioned in footnote 19, above, confirmed that these were the sorts of invasion preparations he observed at this time, though he could not confirm the specific details. Laingen confirmed the gist of Cave's presentation and said he was "very much impressed" with the intelligence. Yazdi also confirmed the gist of Cave's presentation (Interview by the author, June 23, 1999, Tehran; email message to the author, October 27, 2005). Entezam also confirmed this (email messages to the author sent through Fariba Amini, January 23 and July 12, 2010). Bazargan confirmed this as well; see the text accompanying footnote 31, below. Cave told me he described this briefing in a cable to Washington afterward and then destroyed the embassy's copy of this cable, so it does not appear in the *Espionage Den* documents.

26. *Espionage Den*, Vol. 10, pp. 17–18; Interview, Cave. On October 22, Yazdi asked Laingen for more intelligence on foreign activities in Kurdistan and Khuzestan and made clear that he valued the intelligence exchange that had taken place. See *Espionage Den*, Vol. 34, p. 197.

ommending that he be admitted into the United States for treatment. US officials had been considering admitting the Shah for months. Laingen and others had warned that doing so might lead radicals to again seize the US embassy, as had occurred in February 1979, or take other hostile actions. The State Department informed Laingen of the new developments, and he discussed them with Cave. Laingen was concerned that Cave's presence in Tehran was becoming known and might enflame suspicions in the tense atmosphere that prevailed, especially if Washington decided to admit the Shah. He therefore recommended that Cave leave Iran as soon as possible. Cave flew to Paris on October 19. While there, he received a cable from Newsom asking him to return to Tehran to join Laingen in discussing the Shah's admission with the Bazargan government. Cave contacted Laingen, who recommended that he not return to Tehran. He also called Entezam, who said he could no longer maintain contact. Cave remained in Europe for a few days and then returned to Washington.²⁷

THE AFTERMATH

On October 20, President Carter decided to admit the Shah into the United States and instructed the embassy to notify the Bazargan government. Laingen and State Department Director of Iranian Affairs Henry Precht, who happened to be in Tehran, met with Bazargan, Yazdi, and Entezam on October 21 and told them of the decision. The Shah arrived in New York on October 22.²⁸

The Shah's admission into the United States came at a time of severe factional tension in Iran. Bazargan and other moderates were clashing bitterly with radical Islamists over the new constitution, which was then being drafted. At Entezam's initiative, the cabinet even voted to ask Khomeini to dissolve the body drafting the constitution; Khomeini angrily dismissed their request. Ethnic guerrillas and radical leftists and Islamists were carrying out terrorist attacks and clashing with the security forces. Khomeini made a series of inflammatory speeches attacking the moderates and leftists, linking them to foreign powers, and encouraging young Iranians to turn against them. After the Shah was admitted into the United States, radical Islamists and leftists denounced the move and called for him to be extradited and put on trial. Khomeini joined in the criticism, denouncing the "filthy creatures" serving in the US government, calling for a purge of "traitors" in the Iranian government, and imploring young Iranians to take action. Millions of Iranians demonstrated on October 26 and November 1, denouncing the United States and reaffirming their loyalty to Khomeini. Bazargan, Yazdi, and Chamran met with Brzezinski in Algiers on November 1, producing harsh criticism in the radical Islamist newspapers *Kayhan* and *Jomhuri-ye Islami*.²⁹

27. Carter, *Keeping Faith*, pp. 454–455; *Espionage Den*, Vol. 10, pp. 1, 5, 10; Interview, Cave; Email message to author from Bruce Laingen, July 20, 2011.

28. Carter, *Keeping Faith*, pp. 455–456; *Espionage Den*, Vol. 7, pp. 282–284.

29. Fariba Amini, "The Forgotten Prisoner: Abbas Amir-Entezam, Iran's Longest-Serving Political Prisoner," *The Iranian*, November 5, 2003, <http://www.iranian.com/FaribaAmini/2003/November/Entezam>; Tehran Domestic Service, October 28, 1979, in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report, Middle East and North Africa*, October 29, 1979; "Les tensions en Iran" ["Tensions in Iran"], *Le Monde*, November 6, 1979, pp. 1, 7. Brzezinski and his interlocutors discussed additional intelligence cooperation at the Algiers meeting. See Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, pp. 475–476.

Around the time the Shah was admitted into the United States, a group of radical Islamist students from several universities in Tehran began planning to seize the US embassy. They were devoted to Khomeini and emboldened by his recent speeches and therefore called themselves “Moslem Students Following the Line of the Imam.” Their main goals in seizing the embassy were to undermine the Bazargan government, which they saw as an obstacle to the revolution, stop the plots against the Islamic regime they thought were being prepared in the embassy, and humiliate the United States. They made elaborate preparations and recruited hundreds of other students to join them. On November 4 they stormed the embassy compound and quickly forced their way into the main building. They took 61 Americans hostage and seized a large quantity of sensitive documents the embassy staff had not destroyed. Laingen, Tomseth, and another embassy official were visiting the foreign ministry at the time and soon became hostages there.³⁰

The Students and their supporters then contacted several key officials in an effort to persuade Khomeini to back the embassy seizure. They also quickly organized large crowds outside the embassy and appealed to the media to build support for their actions. Bazargan and Yazdi strongly opposed the embassy seizure and tried to persuade Khomeini to order the hostages released. However, after several hours of deliberation, Khomeini issued a statement backing the embassy seizure. Most other key figures and factions in Iran also quickly backed the Students. When it became clear the embassy seizure could not be reversed, Bazargan and most of his colleagues resigned on November 6. With the breach in US-Iran relations and the collapse of the Bazargan government, the US intelligence assistance initiative abruptly ended.

After Bazargan resigned, Khomeini announced that the Revolutionary Council would govern until a new constitution was enacted and elections could be held. The draft constitution was approved in a December referendum. Presidential elections were held in January 1980. Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr, a relatively moderate Islamist who was close to Khomeini, won with 76% of the vote. Parliamentary elections were held in March and May. Radical Islamists swept the elections and chose one of their own as prime minister in August, completing the installation of a new, more radical government.

Entezam returned to Stockholm after the Cave briefings. Following Bazargan’s resignation, he was offered asylum in Sweden but declined. He returned to Iran on December 20, following instructions from the foreign ministry. By this time, the Students had found a trove of State Department and CIA documents detailing his meetings with US officials and his involvement in the intelligence assistance initiative. He was promptly arrested on the basis of these documents and held in solitary confinement, without access to a lawyer. He was brought to trial on March 18, 1981 on charges of espionage and “waging war against God” — a reference to his effort to dissolve the body drafting the constitution. The trial was rife with irregularities. Bazargan testified that he had authorized Entezam’s contacts with US officials and that they had made similar approaches to the Soviet embassy. He described the valuable intelligence they had received, including information from Cave’s briefings about large Iraqi troop movements and a network of US spy posts, which apparently was a reference to the IBEX

30. Mark Bowden, *Guests of the Ayatollah* (New York: Grove Press, 2006), pp. 8–15, 28–67; Massoumeh Ebtekar, *Takeover in Tehran* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2000), pp. 50–53; Interview by author with Ibrahim Asgharzadeh, February 2, 1998, Tehran; and by author with Abbas Abdi, June 23, 1999, Tehran, who were among the students who planned the embassy seizure.

system. Despite Bazargan's testimony, Entezam was convicted and sentenced to life in prison. He was repeatedly tortured and threatened with execution. He remained in prison until 1997, when pressure from international human rights organizations helped win his release. He was then rearrested in 1998 after criticizing the former warden of Evin Prison, Assadollah Lajevardi, and remained in prison for most of the next eight years, making him Iran's longest-serving political prisoner under the Islamic regime.³¹

After they resigned, Bazargan and his colleagues did not pass on to their successors the information from Cave's briefings about Iraqi invasion preparations and how IBEX could enable them to monitor these preparations. Oblivious to the threat from Iraq, Iran's leaders continued to purge the armed forces and take other steps that undermined its morale and readiness. They also made no effort to strengthen their defenses in the border region, despite frequent clashes with Iraqi forces in the months before the invasion. Incredibly, Iran had no major combat units, artillery battalions, armored battalions, or attack helicopter units in the border areas where Iraq invaded in September 1980. At this time, Iran had only two armored divisions and two mechanized infantry divisions in its western region, all deployed some distance from the border. These units faced five armored divisions, two mechanized infantry divisions, and five regular infantry divisions on Iraq's side. Iraqi forces did not encounter any Iranian units of brigade size during the first two days of the invasion. Iran suffered thousands of casualties and lost hundreds of square miles of territory in the first few weeks of fighting, after which Iraqi mistakes and heroic action by Iranian irregular forces managed to halt Iraq's thrust.³² By the time the war ended in August 1988, Iran's economy had been devastated. Some 200,000 Iranians had been killed, and at least twice that number had been wounded.

If Iran's leaders had acted on the information provided in Cave's briefings by maintaining the strength of their armed forces, monitoring Iraqi military activities with IBEX, and deploying adequate defensive forces along the border, Iraqi leaders might have remained deterred from invading Iran — as they were at the time of the Cave briefings. Indeed, the brutal eight-year war might never have occurred.

CONCLUSIONS

This article sheds new light on an important, little-known episode in US foreign

31. Amini, "The Forgotten Prisoner;" Ramin Ahmadi, "Violations of Human Rights in Iran: The Case of Abbas Amir-Entezam," (unpublished master's thesis, Yale University, 1997), pp. 10–28; "From the Prosecutor's Point of View," *Enqelab-e Islami* [Tehran], Esfand 27, 1359 [March 18, 1981]; "Details of the Trial of Amir-Entezam," *Kayhan* [Tehran], Esfand 27, 1359 [March 18, 1981], in *FBIS Daily Report, South Asia*, March 25, 1981, p. 14; "Ex-Iranian government spokesman Amir-Entezam to be freed on payment of fine," *Iranian Labor News Agency*, August 6, 2006. For Entezam's account of his US contacts, which matches the account given here, see Abbas Amir Entezam, *An Su-ye Etteham: Khatirat-e Abbas Amir Entezam, Shahrivar 57 ta Khordad 60* [Beyond the Charges: Memoirs of Abbas Amir Entezam, September 1978-June 1981] (Tehran: Nashr-e Ney, 1381 [2002]), pp. 236–241. Entezam appears to have been prosecuted rather than Yazdi or Bazargan because the embassy documents showed he was more closely involved with CIA personnel than they were and because he was less prominent.

32. Interviews by author with Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr, July 8, 1999, Versailles, France; Interview, Yazdi; Anthony H. Cordesman and Abraham R. Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War, Volume II: The Iran-Iraq War* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), pp. 34–36, 84–90.

policy. The intelligence assistance US officials were providing to the Bazargan government was helpful to Iran and might have been extremely valuable had it not been cut short by the seizure of the US embassy. The most important step in this relationship was the mid-October briefings in which a US official warned Iran's leaders of Iraqi invasion preparations and told them how they could monitor these preparations and thus take steps to counter them. These actions demonstrate that the United States had benign, rather than hostile, intentions toward Iran at this time. The tragic irony is that the radical Islamists who seized the US embassy in early November did so partly because they thought US officials were plotting a coup or engaging in other nefarious activities there. In fact, US officials were warning Iran's leaders about Iraqi activities that culminated in the devastating invasion of September 1980.

This article also provides a compelling illustration of the destructive consequences of the radicalization occurring in Iran during this period. The seizure of the US embassy was both a manifestation of this radicalization and a catalyst for further radicalization. It removed from power the Iranian officials who had received the US warning of Iraqi invasion preparations and caused the abrupt end of the intelligence exchange relationship, preventing US officials from reiterating this warning. Moreover, the radicalization that occurred in this period, especially the Students' use of US embassy documents to incriminate moderates, created a climate in which any Iranian known to have close relations with US officials was liable to be arrested — like Entezam and several others mentioned in the documents. Under these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that the recipients of the US warning did not pass it on to their successors: Entezam had been arrested and was desperate to downplay evidence of his connection to US officials, while Yazdi and Bazargan might have shared Entezam's fate if they had passed on the US warning at this time.³³ Moreover, even if Entezam, Yazdi, or Bazargan had reported the US warning, most Iranian leaders had become intensely anti-American by this time and would have likely doubted its veracity, quite possibly interpreting it as a hostile plot or provocation.³⁴ Therefore, it was ultimately the radicalization occurring in Iran during this period that prevented its leaders from heeding the US warning and taking steps to deter the September 1980 invasion.

Finally, this article clarifies the nature of the activities for which Abbas Amir Entezam was arrested and imprisoned. Rather than spying for the United States, as the prosecution alleged at his trial, he was engaged in sensitive discussions with US officials that yielded information potentially very valuable for Iran. Entezam certainly knew the risks he was taking under the prevailing circumstances. His life was largely destroyed as a result. He was a brave, patriotic Iranian consumed by a revolution that had spun tragically out of control.

33. Although Bazargan explained details of Cave's briefing in his testimony at Entezam's March 1981 trial, he does not seem to have presented them as invasion preparations. He certainly took a big risk in providing this testimony, and the risk would have been even greater a year earlier.

34. Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr, *My Turn to Speak* (Washington: Brassey's, 1991), pp. 13–16, says Iran learned in advance of Iraq's invasion plans from several sources, though not from US officials. If this is true, domestic political conditions clearly prevented Iran from taking adequate steps to deter or repel the invasion.