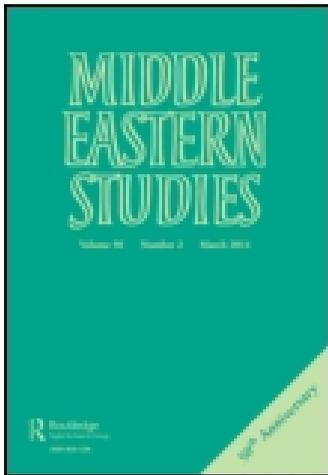


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US Covert Operations toward Iran, February–November 1979: Was the CIA Trying to Overthrow the Islamic Regime?

MARK GASIOROWSKI*

Most of the radical Islamists who seized power in Iran in February 1979 believed the United States had extensive influence in their country and was plotting to overthrow the nascent Islamic regime. Much of this concern dated from 1953, when the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) overthrew Iran's popular prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddeq. After the 1953 coup, the United States established close diplomatic, military, and intelligence connections with the autocratic regime of Iran's monarch, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, and developed a wide range of contacts among Iranian elites, including both supporters of the monarchy and moderate opponents. In 1979, most radical Islamists – and many moderate Islamists and secularists as well – believed the CIA was working with its Iranian contacts to overthrow the Islamic regime and re-establish the monarchy or create a pro-Western republic of some sort.

The radical Islamist students who seized the US embassy in Tehran and took most of its staff hostage on 4 November 1979 shared these concerns; indeed, they seized the embassy partly because they suspected the CIA was plotting another coup there. These students, who called themselves the Moslem Students Following the Line of the Imam, found a large trove of documents inside the embassy from the CIA, the State Department, and other US government agencies. These documents contained a wealth of information about the embassy's activities and identified hundreds of Iranians – some with mysterious CIA cryptonyms – who had been in contact with the embassy over the years. The Moslem Students believed these documents contained proof of the embassy's malevolent activities and the treachery of certain Iranians and therefore began to publish them, along with commentary about their contents. Ultimately they published 73 volumes of these documents between 1979 and 1991. These volumes have been available in specialized libraries for years and now are available on the internet.¹

The embassy documents give an incomplete account of US activities in Iran before the embassy seizure because the embassy did not have copies of many documents

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dealing with Iran, embassy personnel destroyed many documents before they were seized, and some documents were not included in the volumes or are unreadable. Nevertheless, the published documents provide considerable insight into US policy toward Iran. They are especially useful for understanding the nature of US contact with Iranian officials and opponents of the Islamic regime in the crucial period from February to November 1979, when the Islamic regime was being created and US-Iran relations were in flux. The commentary included in some of the volumes exaggerates and distorts the contents of the documents, reflecting the Moslem Students' zealotry and inexperience. A few articles and books based on the documents have appeared, providing a partial description of their contents.² But the published volumes were difficult to obtain until recently and many did not appear until well after the hostage crisis ended, when interest waned. The embassy documents therefore remain an under-utilized resource for scholars interested in US-Iran relations during this period.

This article examines US covert operations toward Iran from February to early November 1979. It is based mainly on the embassy documents, supplemented by interviews with some of the key people involved. It focuses especially on whether the CIA was trying to undermine or overthrow the Islamic regime, as many Iranians believed. The article begins with a discussion of the general goals of US policy toward Iran in this period and the limitations under which embassy personnel operated. It then examines US contact with Iranian government officials, Iranian moderates, radical leftists and Islamists, ethnic guerrillas, and the exile opposition groups that were beginning to emerge at this time. Although much of this contact was carried out by US officials based in the Tehran embassy, US officials in embassies elsewhere and in Washington also had contact with various Iranians. The main conclusion is that US covert operations toward Iran during this period were aimed mainly at gathering intelligence rather than undermining or overthrowing the Islamic regime.

US Policy Toward Iran in 1979

After a broad coalition of revolutionaries seized power in February 1979, Iran remained chaotic. The revolutionaries' paramount leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, appointed a moderate Islamist, Mehdi Bazargan, to lead a provisional government until elections could be held. Bazargan and the other moderates in the provisional government were increasingly undercut and marginalized by Khomeini's radical Islamist followers, who established a 'parallel government' that supplanted their authority and wielded considerable influence over the crowds and armed bands that dominated the streets. Radical leftist guerrillas had seized large quantities of arms and recruited many new members during the revolution and now began to clash with radical Islamists. The anti-clerical radical Islamist group *Forqan* began an assassination campaign targeting prominent clerics and laymen it considered too moderate. Rebel movements emerged among Iran's Kurdish, Arab, Qashqai, Baluch, and Turkoman minorities, demanding autonomy and clashing with the security forces. Small groups of monarchists and other secularists plotted against the new regime. The security forces had partially disintegrated, fostering lawlessness. The economy was paralysed by strikes, absenteeism, capital flight, and the near-collapse of public services. Rumours of plots and conspiracies flourished, fed

by the feverish rhetoric of radical Islamist and radical leftist leaders. Anti-Americanism was widespread.³

Under these harrowing conditions, US officials began to formulate a new approach toward Iran. The country's vast oil resources and proximity to the Soviet Union meant that US officials, above all, wanted to see Iran's territorial integrity preserved and political stability re-established there. They also hoped to build a constructive working relationship with Iran's new rulers that might lead to a resumption of bilateral cooperation on issues of mutual interest. US embassy personnel had gotten to know Bazargan and other members of the provisional government and believed they offered the best hope for achieving these goals. However, they understood that Bazargan and his colleagues were weak and might soon be replaced by more radical elements. Therefore, during the ten months Bazargan was in power, US officials tried to avoid actions that would undermine his government or further destabilize Iran and worked with Bazargan to resolve outstanding problems. They also tried to prepare for the future by learning as much as possible about Iran's rapidly changing political environment and establishing ties with groups and individuals that might prove useful as conditions in Iran continued to evolve.⁴

With these goals in mind, the US embassy in Tehran was tasked with gathering information about a wide range of topics, including the Bazargan government's prospects, the identity and strength of key radical Islamist and radical leftist actors, the status of Iran's armed forces and other institutions, the clergy's growing influence, and the nature of the emerging opposition. The main embassy offices charged with gathering intelligence on these topics were the political section, usually staffed by four Foreign Service officers, and the CIA station, staffed by 2–4 covert operations officers serving under diplomatic cover. Both offices saw extensive turnover in this period, with new personnel gradually replacing those who had served in the embassy during the revolutionary uprising. Several of the new political officers had considerable experience in Iran, including two who were brought to Tehran from the US consulates in Shiraz and Tabriz in early 1979. Two had been Peace Corps volunteers in Iran and spoke Persian fluently. The CIA station's activities had been severely disrupted by the revolution, leading the CIA to withdraw all of its personnel from Iran and replace them initially with officers on temporary-duty assignments. As it began to re-establish a permanent presence, the CIA decided it was too dangerous to assign officers who had served in Iran previously, since their identities might have been compromised. Four officers eventually were assigned to the CIA station, with two arriving only in the weeks or days before the embassy was seized. None had served previously in Iran or spoke Persian, and two had no prior field experience. Consequently, while the political section was fairly well-staffed, the CIA station was small and its personnel were not well-prepared for assignments in Iran.⁵

Two other factors limited the embassy's ability to operate. First, neither the political section nor the CIA station had access to a broad range of Iranian political actors. Both offices had had little contact with opposition elements before the revolution, when Iran seemed stable and the shah strongly opposed such contact. Although they began to seek out opposition activists as the revolution unfolded in 1978, their contacts were mainly with moderates rather than the radical Islamists and radical leftists leading the revolution. Many embassy contacts fled into exile in 1978 and 1979. And as tensions grew and anti-American sentiment flared, it became

increasingly dangerous for moderates and especially radicals to meet with embassy officials.⁶ Consequently, while the embassy documents show that embassy personnel had considerable contact with members of the Bazargan government and other moderates in 1979, they provide little evidence of embassy contact with radical Islamists or radical leftists.

Second, US officials working on Iran at this time were keenly aware that any US effort to establish close contact with Iranian political actors or give them financial assistance or other support could, if exposed, create severe problems for the United States, for the actors involved, and for the Bazargan government. Although this concern did not preclude close US contact with moderate supporters of the Islamic regime and even certain opponents, it meant that such contact had to be kept discreet. And while US officials did not rule out providing financial assistance or other support to Iranian actors, the great risks involved meant they could do so only in very compelling cases. During the Bazargan era, US officials believed there were no Iranian actors acceptable to the United States that posed a realistic alternative to Bazargan and his colleagues and therefore might warrant US support.⁷ Consequently, as discussed below, US officials during this period were careful not to encourage Iranians to work against the Islamic regime, and they rebuffed the many plotters who approached them for assistance, both inside Iran and abroad.

Iranian Government Officials

Many of the embassy documents describe contact between US embassy personnel and members of the Bazargan government or other Iranian officials. As one would expect, these documents show that US officials met frequently with Foreign Minister Ibrahim Yazdi and somewhat less often with Prime Minister Bazargan, Deputy Prime Minister Abbas Amir Entezam, and other Iranian officials. Almost all of the material in these documents is quite innocuous, describing routine diplomatic interactions among the US and Iranian officials involved. However, a few of the interactions described in the documents are not at all innocuous, though none involved efforts to undermine or overthrow the Islamic regime.

The most blatant and well-known was an unsuccessful CIA effort to recruit Revolutionary Council member Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr as an informant. The CIA sent a senior officer posing as a businessman to meet with Bani-Sadr first in January 1979, when he was living in Paris, and then three times in August and September 1979 in Tehran. The officer offered Bani-Sadr a fee of \$1,000 per month to provide occasional information on the Iranian economy to the company he claimed to work for. Bani-Sadr was elected president in January 1980 and soon became enmeshed in a bitter confrontation with radical Islamists. The Moslem Students pieced together shredded CIA documents on Bani-Sadr's recruitment and, in May 1981, presented them to Ayatollah Khomeini, who told them not to publicize the documents. Bani-Sadr is identified with the cryptonym SDLURE/1 in many of these documents. He was soon forced out of office and fled underground. In an obvious effort to incriminate him, the Moslem Students then released the documents and claimed Bani-Sadr had accepted money from the CIA, though he denied this and there is no evidence of it in the documents. Bani-Sadr eventually escaped to Paris, where he became a prominent exile opposition leader.⁸

The embassy documents show that the CIA tried to recruit several other Iranian officials as informants – though not to carry out covert political operations – during the Bazargan era. Potentially the most useful was General Hamid Shirazi, who apparently contacted the CIA while on a trip to Hong Kong in late August 1979 and offered to provide intelligence on Iranian military matters without financial compensation, as his ‘contribution to freedom’. CIA headquarters was very interested in Shirazi, especially because he expected to receive a top position in the air force, and gave him the cryptonym SDCAT/1. Headquarters quickly sent a list of topics of interest to the Hong Kong CIA station for Shirazi and arranged contact for him with the Tehran CIA station. However, after he returned to Tehran in early September, he refused to meet with a CIA case officer. He did not receive a top position, so the CIA abandoned efforts to contact him.⁹

A similar case involved Iranian Army Colonel Hashem Kambakhsh, who approached the US embassy in Rome on 5 September while on vacation with his family and offered to cooperate. A CIA officer met with him the next day, obtaining information on his background. He then passed a personality test of some sort and was encrypted as SDTUNDRA/1. The CIA officer made arrangements for Kambakhsh to take an ‘SGSWIRL’ exam, which probably refers to a lie detector test. On 10 September, Kambakhsh told the CIA officer that his wife was upset about his long absences from their hotel and that he therefore would not be able to spend much more time with the officer while in Rome. Both the officer and CIA headquarters suspected this was an excuse to avoid the SGSWIRL exam, and headquarters decided to end the effort to recruit Kambakhsh. Kambakhsh apparently was arrested after the Moslem Students found documents describing these activities in the Tehran embassy. His fate is unclear.¹⁰

Another Iranian official the CIA established contact with in this period was Rahmatollah Moqadam-Maraghe’i, who served as governor of East Azerbaijan province in the early Bazargan era and was elected to the constitutional assembly in August 1979. Moqadam-Maraghe’i was well-connected with moderate Islamists and secularists and headed a small secularist party. He was a ‘longtime friend’ of the CIA station and had provided intelligence and disseminated propaganda for the station in the early 1960s under the cryptonym SDPROBE/1. He met frequently with US embassy political officers in 1978 and 1979 to discuss events. The Tehran CIA station re-established contact with Moqadam-Maraghe’i in September 1979. He provided information to his case officer on the inner workings of the Bazargan government and the constitutional assembly, his own political activities, and the activities of other moderates. He also recommended that the US embassy arrange a meeting with Ayatollah Khomeini to express US acceptance of the Islamic regime.¹¹

The CIA station also had contact with a mid-level foreign ministry employee, Victoria Bassiri, who had been recruited by the CIA while working in Iran’s embassy in India. She returned to Iran in 1979 and was assigned to oversee Iranian students studying abroad. An officer in the Tehran CIA station met with her several times in the early autumn of 1979, obtaining information of little value but nevertheless paying her \$300 per month in the hope she might prove useful in the future. The Moslem Students pieced together shredded documents detailing these activities and obtained confirmation of them by interrogating the CIA officer, who was among the embassy

hostages. Bassiri was arrested on espionage charges in March 1980 and later executed.¹²

Beginning in August 1979, CIA officers tried to re-establish contact with Petroleum Minister Hassan Nazih, who had had unspecified contact with the CIA station before the revolution and was encrypted as SDPUTTY/1. Nazih was sharply attacked by radical Islamists and forced into hiding in late September before escaping into exile. The CIA station was unable to make contact with him before the embassy was seized in November.¹³

Finally, the embassy documents indicate that the CIA maintained contact with Deputy Prime Minister Amir Entezam in this period. Bazargan had appointed Amir Entezam to be his main contact with US embassy officials in December 1978. Amir Entezam and Bazargan met frequently with embassy political officers in the following months and repeatedly asked them for intelligence about domestic and external threats to the Islamic regime. As these requests continued, US officials in Washington decided to comply. In early August they sent one of these political officers and a CIA officer to meet with Amir Entezam in Stockholm, where he had been appointed Iran's ambassador. At this meeting they developed plans for US personnel to travel regularly to Iran to brief Iranian officials on matters of mutual interest. Two such briefings eventually occurred. In the second, held in mid-October, a CIA officer warned Amir Entezam, Bazargan, and Yazdi that Iraq was preparing for a possible invasion of Iran. The US embassy was seized three weeks later, precluding further discussion of this issue and further briefings. Iraq then invaded Iran in September 1980, starting a brutal eight-year war. The Moslem Students found documents describing Amir Entezam's role in these events and had him arrested in December 1979. He was convicted of espionage in 1981 and spent some 25 years in prison. There is no indication in the documents that Amir Entezam engaged in espionage or other improper activities.¹⁴

The Moderate Opposition Inside Iran

Various moderate factions inside Iran began to plot against the Islamic regime during the Bazargan era. Some had opposed the revolution and were hoping to restore the deposed monarchy. Others had supported the revolution to varying degrees but then turned against it as tensions grew, favouring either a secular republic or a monarchy with limited powers. Some were willing to work with moderate Islamists like Bazargan; others were not. Most of these moderate factions were small and soon faded away. Few posed much of a threat to the Islamic regime. US officials had to be very careful about contacting opponents of the Islamic regime, as discussed above, so the task necessarily fell mainly to CIA covert operations officers.

Moderate opposition factions sought encouragement or assistance from the US embassy 'all the time' during the Bazargan era, according to an undated note appearing in the embassy documents. These documents describe many such approaches. From March through September, Firuz Sharifi, a US-educated businessman, approached embassy political officers repeatedly, seeking support for various plans he and others were developing to overthrow the regime. In June, Cyrus Elahi, an aide to former education minister Manuchehr Ganji, met with a political officer and solicited US assistance for an opposition faction centred around Ganji. In August, a

US-educated geology professor named Fereyduun Afshar approached a political officer with a plan to assemble a large force of armed men in north-western Iran to overthrow the regime. The political officer noted that Afshar was not capable of doing this but nonetheless found him to be more impressive than the other plotters he had met, whom he disparaged as 'Persian military peacocks whose will failed them in February [1979] or upper class dilettantes who plot from Paris or Los Angeles or the psychological adolescents who streak around Tehran's back streets in their BMW's and for whom conspiracy is a game'. In each case, the political officers who met with these plotters told them explicitly that the United States would not assist them.¹⁵

Although US officials avoided close contact with most moderate opposition factions during this period, they did seek closer ties with two that seemed promising.¹⁶ The first and more significant was a group of people associated with Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Kazem Shariatmadari, a widely followed Shi'a cleric of the highest rank and long-time rival of Khomeini. Shariatmadari was relatively liberal and opposed clerical involvement in government, which was central to Khomeini's plan for an Islamic republic. He emerged as a leading critic of the radical Islamists early in the Bazargan era and represented a serious threat to them because of his high rank and broad following. His associates established a political party, the Moslem People's Republican Party, which espoused moderate views and was especially popular among Iranians who shared Shariatmadari's Azeri Turkic ethnicity.

The CIA station's contact with the Shariatmadari faction began in late April 1979 when Frank Burrows, a private US citizen living in Tehran, met with Shariatmadari and then reported to US chargé d'affaires Charles Naas that Shariatmadari seemed interested in obtaining information from the embassy about current events in Iran. Naas reported this to the acting CIA station chief, whose codename was Glegoroff. Glegoroff cabled CIA headquarters, which expressed strong interest in establishing contact with Shariatmadari and suggested that he find an appropriate intermediary. In the following weeks two Iranian CIA contacts met with Shariatmadari and his associates. These were General Ali Akbar Farazian, a top official in Iran's SAVAK intelligence service before the revolution, and a person identified in the embassy documents only with the cryptonym SDVALID/1. These meetings went well, prompting Glegoroff to recommend to headquarters that he expand contact with Shariatmadari with the goal of 'split[ting] and weaken[ing] the Islamic movement so that more rational voices can be heard'. Headquarters replied that the US goal was not to split the Islamic movement but to strengthen moderate forces within it to promote a government favourable to US interests. Shariatmadari seemed promising for this purpose, but headquarters wanted more information about his capabilities and whether he really wanted close contact with the United States before approving covert efforts to support him.¹⁷

During the next few months the CIA station continued to seek contact with Shariatmadari. SDVALID/1 met with Shariatmadari on 26 May and asked him to name an intermediary to meet with his 'American friends'. Shariatmadari suggested his son Hassan. SDVALID/1 then contacted Hassan and brought Glegoroff to meet him on 10 June. The embassy documents do not indicate any additional US government contact with Hassan. On 7 June, Farazian told Glegoroff that a close associate, Morteza Musavi, had recently met with Shariatmadari, who asked for millions of dollars in US assistance. Glegoroff replied that the United States 'categorically' was

not prepared to provide assistance to Shariatmadari at this time. Glegoroff's successor, Thomas Ahern, met with Farazian and Musavi on 16 July and again refused to provide assistance. In early August, Farazian suggested that Ahern meet with Ayatollah Seyed Reza Zanjani to establish a better channel to Shariatmadari. Ahern pursued this in the following months but was not able to meet with Zanjani before the embassy was seized in November.¹⁸

There is no indication in the embassy documents or other credible sources that US officials encouraged or assisted Shariatmadari or his associates in this period. Nevertheless, when severe fighting erupted between supporters of Shariatmadari and Khomeini in December 1979, Khomeini declared that incriminating documents had been found in the embassy on some of Shariatmadari's associates and that they were being helped by 'American spies'. Shariatmadari's supporters briefly seized control of Tabriz and other cities in Azerbaijan but then were routed by Khomeini supporters in early January, in clashes that left dozens dead. Shariatmadari was put under house arrest; most of his associates were arrested; and the Moslem People's Republican Party was disbanded. In 1982, Shariatmadari was implicated in a plot led by Sadeq Qotbzadeh, a former foreign minister, and some of the embassy documents on Shariatmadari were used to incriminate him. He was then stripped of his clerical rank and kept under house arrest until he died in 1986.¹⁹

The second moderate faction the CIA maintained close contact with in this period consisted of Khosrow Qashqai and his associates. Qashqai was one of three brothers who led the Qashqai tribe of southern Iran. Khosrow Qashqai had been a prominent secular nationalist politician and opponent of the Pahlavi dynasty in the late 1940s and early 1950s, before being forced into exile in 1954. Despite his political orientation, he was very pro-American and had close ties to the CIA during this period. He returned to Iran in early 1979 and re-established ties with his tribesmen and with the secular nationalists of this era, who were increasingly alarmed about the radical Islamists' growing power. One of his close associates in this period was Ahmad Madani, a former admiral who had been dismissed from the Iranian navy in 1972 for opposing the shah and, under Bazargan, served briefly as defence minister and then governor of Khuzestan province. In early 1979, Qashqai and Madani began efforts to set up a newspaper with a secular nationalist orientation. Qashqai supported the Bazargan government but believed it was weak and that civil war might soon emerge. He therefore began purchasing arms by early July to defend the Qashqai people.²⁰

US embassy political officers had met with Qashqai leaders in late 1978, and Khosrow Qashqai visited the State Department in January 1979 before returning to Iran. He met with a CIA officer in Tehran in February 1979, explaining his plan to set up a newspaper and asking for covert US support. CIA headquarters doubted the newspaper would have much impact and apparently refused to offer support. Qashqai continued to meet with CIA officers in Tehran in the following months, updating them on his plans and discussing political conditions. In mid-May, before Qashqai began plotting against the Islamic regime, Acting Station Chief Glegoroff encouraged him to begin 'full-scale political activity', suggesting that he strengthen his ties with secular nationalists and with Ayatollah Shariatmadari. At about the same time Glegoroff proposed to CIA headquarters an approach to Shariatmadari to split and weaken the Islamic movement (discussed above), he proposed that the CIA station work toward bringing together Qashqai, Shariatmadari, and other 'pro-

U.S. moderates'. In this initiative, Qashqai would serve as both a source of intelligence about these moderates and a channel for covertly strengthening and influencing them. Headquarters replied on 6 June that conditions in Iran were still too uncertain to undertake this sort of activity, though it agreed to supply articles for Qashqai's newspaper and possibly expertise to help him establish it. Glegoroff left Iran soon after, and nothing came of these proposals.²¹

On 1 August, CIA headquarters sent a cable to the new station chief, Thomas Ahern, directing him to begin developing covert action mechanisms that could be used to influence events in Iran if this became necessary. However, the only recommendation made in this cable was for Ahern to meet with Qashqai and inquire about the status of his plan to start a newspaper. The cable authorized Ahern to tell Qashqai the United States was interested in using the newspaper to disseminate propaganda in Iran and ask him what kind of assistance he might need, but it did not authorize him to offer any assistance. There is no record in the embassy documents that Ahern and Qashqai discussed this matter, and the CIA station had not offered Qashqai any support by the time the embassy was seized.²²

Ahern continued to meet with Qashqai in September and October to gather intelligence about Qashqai's political activities, the Arab rebellion in Khuzestan province, and other matters. On 5 September, Qashqai told Ahern he had encouraged Madani to undertake a military coup against both Khomeini and Bazargan, but Madani believed this was premature. Qashqai also said he was preparing his tribal forces 'to contribute military force to Khomeini's overthrow when the time is right' and expanding his contacts with military commanders and the younger generation of secular nationalists. In addition, Qashqai told Ahern in September and October that former prime minister Shahpour Bakhtiar, who was now living in Paris, was seeking his support and offering him financial assistance. Ahern had several more meetings with Qashqai in mid- and late October in which the latter gave his views about the current situation in Iran and said he was building contacts with Iranian Arab dissidents and with military commanders. On 13 October, Ahern told Qashqai that the United States would not encourage any activity that might make conditions in Iran worse. There is no indication in the embassy documents or other credible sources that any US official encouraged or assisted Qashqai's opposition activities.²³

Admiral Madani ran for president in the January 1980 election, taking 15 per cent of the vote and placing second. During the campaign, the Moslem Students tried to discredit him by releasing innocuous documents on his contact with US officials. Madani and Khosrow Qashqai were elected to parliament in May 1980. The Moslem Students then released more documents about them. Madani went into hiding and fled into exile a few months later. Qashqai was arrested, released, and then rearrested. He escaped from prison and returned to the Qashqai region, where he organized an armed uprising by Qashqai tribesmen. Revolutionary Guard units suppressed the uprising and arrested Qashqai in April 1982. He was put on trial, confessed that he had received money from the CIA, and was executed in October 1982.²⁴

The CIA station in Paris maintained indirect contact in this period with a prominent Shi'a cleric in Iran encrypted as SDFORGIVE/1, who almost certainly was Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Qomi. SDFORGIVE/1 supported Ayatollah Shariatmadari, staunchly opposed the Islamic regime, and was arrested briefly in March 1979 by gunmen associated with Ayatollah Sadeq Khalkhali. The Paris station

maintained contact with him through an Iranian identified only by the cryptonym UNTROUT/1, who had been working for the CIA since 1953, was now living in Paris, and was travelling to Iran regularly to see SDFORGIVE/1. Qomi's son Abdullah met with UNTROUT/1 in Paris in September and offered to put him in contact with former prime minister Bakhtiar, knowing he was connected to US officials. CIA headquarters insisted that UNTROUT/1 decline this offer, fearing that Bakhtiar might interpret this as a sign of US support. SDFORGIVE/1 himself then travelled to Paris and met with UNTROUT/1 on 28 September, saying he wanted to play an active role in a 'movement to remove Khomeini' and asking UNTROUT/1 to obtain a clear statement about US policy toward the Islamic regime. UNTROUT/1 met again with SDFORGIVE/1 a few days later and told him the United States would not support any kind of opposition movement in Iran at that time. SDFORGIVE/1 became very indignant, saying he no longer wanted to maintain contact with US officials and refusing to answer a series of questions posed by CIA headquarters. He said he believed the CIA had brought Khomeini to power and he would cooperate only if persuaded otherwise. The embassy documents show no further US contact with SDFORGIVE/1.²⁵

Two other Iranians provided valuable intelligence to the Tehran CIA station on the moderate opposition and other matters. The first was Cyrus Ramtin, a former top official in the state-owned National Iranian Radio and Television organization, who was recruited by the CIA in January 1979 and given a salary and the cryptonym SDQUICK/1. Ramtin provided valuable intelligence based on his diverse contacts, which ranged from SAVAK officials to Islamists like Deputy Prime Minister Mostafa Chamran, who was creating a new intelligence service at this time, and Deputy Interior Minister Sadeq Tabatabai'e, who was an advisor and relative of Ayatollah Khomeini. Ramtin also was connected to Hassan Shariatmadari and to Mehdi Taleqani, the son of a prominent liberal cleric. In August 1979, one of Ramtin's SAVAK contacts asked him for information on the location of radio and television transmitters in Iran, apparently with the intention of sabotaging them. Ramtin's CIA case officer told him not to divulge this information but to maintain this contact. In mid-September, Ramtin was approached by a group of prominent former military and SAVAK officials who were planning to foment an armed uprising against the Islamic regime and claimed to have extensive US backing. They invited him to join their organization and run a clandestine radio station they planned to establish. Ramtin's case officer told him to decline the invitation. CIA headquarters told the Tehran station it knew of no US backing for this group and dismissed its plan as 'wishful thinking'. It is not clear what happened to Ramtin after the US embassy was seized.²⁶

The second was Bahram Bahramian, a businessman and high-ranking member of Bazargan's Liberation Movement of Iran party, who had been providing the CIA information on 'terrorist and dissident activities' since June 1977 without financial compensation, under the cryptonym SDURN/1. In 1979 he became a 'vital' source of intelligence on the Bazargan government and began receiving payments and other assistance from the CIA. He grew increasingly pessimistic about conditions in Iran in the late summer of 1979, reduced his contact with the CIA station, and apparently left the country.²⁷

Finally, Station Chief Ahern relied on a long-standing CIA contact named Simon Farzami for general information about Iranian politics and the Shi'a clergy, though

there is no indication in the embassy documents or other credible sources that Farzami provided specific intelligence on these topics. Farzami, whose cryptonym was SDTRAMP/1, was an elderly Iranian Jewish journalist with mysterious connections to SAVAK, Soviet intelligence officers, and possibly also Israeli intelligence, though his primary allegiance seems to have been to the CIA. He was arrested after the Moslem Students found documents incriminating him and was executed in December 1980.²⁸

Radicals in Iran

The Moslem Students and other radical Islamists often charged that the United States was backing their radical leftist opponents. This charge made little sense in light of the strong anti-Soviet emphasis in US foreign policy, the radical leftists' deeply anti-American views, and the fact that radical leftists had assassinated six Americans in Iran in the mid-1970s and briefly seized the US embassy compound in February 1979. Indeed, the embassy documents show that US officials considered the radical left a major threat to US interests.²⁹ There is no evidence in the documents or other credible sources that the United States supported or even had direct contact with Iranian radical leftists at this time.

Nevertheless, US officials were interested in gathering intelligence about Iran's radical leftists. The embassy documents show that several CIA sources provided fragmentary intelligence about the radical left during the Bazargan era. The first was an Iranian Kurdish petroleum engineer identified only with the cryptonym SDTRANSIT/1, who was living in Los Angeles in mid-1979 but planned to return to Iran shortly to seek employment in the oil industry in Khuzestan. He was recruited by the CIA in June and given rudimentary training and a salary. SDTRANSIT/1's late brother had been a member of the radical leftist *Fedayan-e Khalq* guerrilla organization. His CIA handlers hoped he would provide intelligence on this organization and, after he moved to Khuzestan, on Iran's oil industry and unrest among Iranian Arabs. He arrived in Tehran in late July and met with a case officer in the CIA station. He mentioned that friends of his brother had invited him to Kurdistan to meet Fedayan and Kurdish guerrillas. The case officer encouraged him to go. He spent most of August and early September in Kurdistan and was wounded in a clash with Revolutionary Guards. In mid-October he gave the case officer an overview of Fedayan and Kurdish forces in Kurdistan, as well as hundreds of photographs he had taken.³⁰

Another CIA source on Iran's radical left, who also reported on radical Islamists and various other topics, was an official in the Palestinian nationalist organization Fatah, identified in the embassy documents only with the cryptonym MJBARGE/1. MJBARGE/1 apparently had been a paid CIA informant for some time. He was a member of, and possibly the commander of, a Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) team sent to Iran in the spring of 1979 to train Revolutionary Guard personnel. He evidently had close contact with top Iranian officials. He reported to a case officer in the Beirut CIA station both directly, when he was in Beirut, and indirectly through another Palestinian encrypted as MJMARTYR/1. MJBARGE/1 provided intelligence on the activities of his training team and other Palestinians working in Iran; the structure and activities of the Revolutionary Guards and the Islamic regime's top leadership; Iran's efforts to export its revolution; the activities of Ayatollah Shariatmadari and other moderates; and the activities of certain radical

leftist and radical Islamist factions. In early September he gave his CIA case officer a detailed report on the pro-Soviet *Tudeh* Party, including its efforts to infiltrate the Iranian army and its connections with Soviet bloc countries. He also reported that the *Tudeh* and *Fedayan-e Khalq* were going underground. In addition, he provided brief reports about the radical Islamist *Fedayan-e Islam* faction and the radical Islamist 'committees' that proliferated in this period.³¹

One other CIA source on Iran's radical left is identified in the embassy documents only as SDPARTNER/1. In late September 1979, SDPARTNER/1 reported that *Fedayan* members and unidentified Kurdish nationalists had recently met and decided that the *Fedayan* should establish a political party in Iran, though its leaders would be based outside the country. This meeting apparently took place in Washington, and SDPARTNER/1 seems to have reported on it to a CIA officer based there.³² The embassy documents say nothing else about SDPARTNER/1.

In early 1980, the Moslem Students and other radical Islamists charged that US embassy officials had been in contact with and subsidized the anti-clerical radical Islamist group *Forqan*. An official from the revolutionary courts questioned one of the hostages, Political Officer Victor Tomseth, about documents allegedly linking him to *Forqan*. The only documents published by the Moslem Students that mention *Forqan* give no indication that US officials had contact with the group and, in fact, portray it as a threat to the United States. Indeed, very few radical Islamists were willing to meet with US officials in this period. The only radical Islamist leader who met regularly with US officials was Revolutionary Council chairman Ayatollah Mohammad Beheshti, who met several times with Tomseth and other US officials. The Moslem Students found documents in the embassy mentioning these meetings but decided not to publish them.³³

Ethnic Minority Groups

Of the ethnic minority rebellions that emerged in Iran in 1979, those among Iranian Arabs and Kurds were the largest and most worrisome. Both began in the spring of 1979 and grew rapidly, creating major problems for the Bazargan government by midsummer.³⁴

US officials were alarmed about the Arab and Kurdish rebellions and did not want to encourage them, for several reasons. First, they wanted to maintain Iran's territorial integrity and promote political stability there, especially so Iran would remain an effective barrier to Soviet expansionism. Second, they wanted to help the Bazargan government and improve US relations with Iran, which would be severely damaged by revelations about US contact with Arab or Kurdish rebels. Finally, US officials were concerned that these rebellions might destabilize the region and thus harm US interests. Iranian Kurds had close ties to the restive Kurdish minorities in Iraq and Turkey, and clashes were increasing between Kurdish guerrillas and Iraqi security forces in the summer of 1979. US officials were especially concerned that Iran's Kurdish rebellion might spread to Turkey, which was a vital US ally and was pressing the United States not to encourage Iran's Kurds. The nature and consequences of the Arab rebellion in Khuzestan were less clear, but close US allies in the region certainly were concerned about it.³⁵

Although US officials did not want to encourage the Arab and Kurdish rebellions, they wanted to gather intelligence on them, both for their own purposes and because

Prime Minister Bazargan and his colleagues had been requesting information about them. The CIA station could barely operate within Tehran at this time and was unable to recruit or communicate with intelligence sources based in Iran's distant Arab and Kurdish regions.³⁶ The CIA therefore relied mainly on sources based outside Iran to gather intelligence about these rebellions.

The embassy documents show that the CIA made various efforts to gather intelligence on the Arab rebels in Khuzestan. As discussed above, the CIA hoped Khosrow Qashqai and SDTRANSIT/1 would provide intelligence on the Arab rebels, but neither did. The CIA's PLO informant, MJBARGE/1, provided some intelligence about Palestinian activities in Khuzestan, reporting in May 1979 that the PLO was acting as a mediator between Iranian Arabs and the Bazargan government and that its policy was to back the government rather than the rebels. In late July, the Tehran CIA station asked the Beirut station to question MJBARGE/1 about Iraq's activities in Khuzestan, but no response appears in the embassy documents. In early September, MJBARGE/1 stated that the situation in Khuzestan 'is not stable and could explode', but gave no further details. An unsourced, undated report included in the embassy documents states that the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine had contact with 'dissidents in Khuzestan' and Iranian leftists during the Bazargan era and may have been arming and training oil workers in Khuzestan. The CIA learned through electronic surveillance that Iraq was arming and organizing Arab rebels in Khuzestan by the late summer of 1979, but this is not mentioned in the embassy documents.³⁷

The embassy documents contain considerable material on the CIA's efforts to gather intelligence about Iranian Kurdish rebel activity. As mentioned above, SDTRANSIT/1 reported on Fedayan and Kurdish rebel forces in August and September 1979. MJBARGE/1 reported in early September that Iraq was supporting Iranian Kurdish rebels and that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein was directly involved in this. MJBARGE/1 described recent fighting in Kurdistan and said a PLO representative had 'helped a great deal to halt the fighting'. In mid-October, he reported that the Iranian government believed Iraq was the only foreign power agitating among Iranian Kurds.³⁸

The CIA's best source on Iranian Kurdish rebels at this time was Ali Homan Qazi, whose cryptonym was CATOMIC/19. Qazi was an Iranian Kurd who had been living in Berlin since before the revolution and was well-connected both to the leftist Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI), the largest Iranian Kurdish organization at this time, and to his brother-in-law Sardar Jaf, who commanded some 1,500 Kurdish guerrillas in the region west of Kermanshah and favoured a restoration of the monarchy. In April 1979, CIA headquarters told the Bonn CIA station to ask Qazi for information on the KDPI and related matters. He already had a cryptonym, indicating that he previously had had covert contact of some sort with the CIA. The embassy documents do not indicate what information, if any, Qazi provided at this time.³⁹

On 1 September, CIA headquarters asked the Bonn station to set up a meeting between Qazi and a CIA officer who would travel to Germany for this purpose. In early September, Qazi told this officer that a delegation of Iranian Kurdish leaders had recently travelled to Moscow seeking support for their rebellion, since they believed the United States and its allies would not support them. This officer or a colleague told Qazi that the United States had no intention of assisting the Kurdish rebel movement. Soon after, CIA headquarters authorized monthly payments to Qazi, and

he was assigned to a case officer based in Stuttgart. He then began meeting with this case officer, who reiterated that the United States would not assist the Kurds.⁴⁰

In late September, Qazi told his case officer that Sardar Jaf was now working with Iraqi military intelligence to assist Iranian Kurdish rebels and that Jaf would travel to Germany shortly to enrol his children in school. The case officer proposed to CIA headquarters that they offer to pay the children's tuition to gain Jaf's cooperation. Headquarters agreed. On 10 October, the case officer met with Qazi and Jaf, who told him Iraq was 'cooperating in every way' with both the KDPI and Jaf's guerrillas and that Iraq was now the Iranian Kurds' 'only friend', with the Soviet Union refusing to help. He said Iraqi President Saddam Hussein had met recently with Iranian Kurds, who greeted him as 'a hero'. The case officer made plans to meet with Jaf a few weeks later and again proposed to headquarters that they pay his children's tuition, but the embassy documents say nothing further about these matters. Qazi met again with the case officer on 2 November and told him Czechoslovakia or another Soviet bloc country had agreed to provide arms to Iranian Kurdish rebels, but the documents do not indicate whether this actually occurred.⁴¹

Another CIA source on the Iranian Kurds, identified only as SDFICKLE/1, was a KDPI member and had been a SAVAK informant before the revolution, acting as a double agent against the Soviet Union. In mid-1979 he was continuing to meet with a Soviet intelligence officer in Germany and – inexplicably – reporting on these meetings to his former SAVAK case officer. An officer in the Bonn CIA station recruited him as a paid informant in June 1979. In August this officer asked him to travel to the Kurdish regions of Turkey and Iran to gather intelligence about the Iranian Kurdish rebellion, offering him a bonus but warning that the CIA could not help him if he encountered trouble. He spent the second half of September in the region and was imprisoned for four days in Iran for illegally crossing the border. He returned to Bonn in early October and gave his case officer a detailed overview of the four main Iranian Kurdish rebel groups operating at that time, including the KDPI and the Kurdish section of the Fedayan-e Khalq. He said that while Kurdish rebels had captured large quantities of weapons from Iranian security forces, they were also receiving arms from Iraq, as well as humanitarian assistance from East Germany, Romania, and Cuba. He also reported that the Kurds had established a special organization to liquidate Kurds who collaborated with the Islamic regime.⁴²

The embassy documents also contain fragmentary material from various other sources on the CIA's efforts to gather intelligence on Iranian Kurdish rebels. In February 1979, SDGABLE/1 provided a report about the KDPI's recent general congress. From April through June, the Tehran CIA station was making plans for UNCA-MEL/1, a Paris-based journalist, to visit Iranian Kurdistan, though it is unclear whether this occurred. In early September, an Iraqi Kurd named Ahmed Rauf al-Naqib gave a CIA officer at the US consulate in Munich an overview of Kurdish rebel activities in Iraq and Iran. On 15 September, the Tehran station sent a cable to CIA headquarters saying it knew of no evidence of Soviet support for Iranian Kurdish rebels. On 24 October, headquarters informed the Tehran and Bonn stations that GNGRAPH – apparently a cryptonym for Britain's MI6 intelligence service – had recently reported that Iran was giving weapons and financial support to the Iraqi Kurdistan Democratic Party, led by Massoud Barzani. On 29 October, CIA headquarters reported that an unidentified source had said the Iraqi government was

resettling over 10,000 Iraqi Kurds it had previously displaced back into their original villages and was giving them housing, food, and financial assistance. The source said Iraq was doing this to enlist the support of these Kurds in possible future hostilities with Iran. The same source had previously reported that Iraq also was assisting Iranian Kurdish refugees to enlist their support against Iran. Finally, on 1 November an unidentified Israeli intelligence service told the CIA that Iraq was providing weekly arms shipments and other assistance to Iranian Kurdish rebels and that many guerrillas from the Iraqi Patriotic Union of Kurdistan had gone to fight in Iran.⁴³

The Exile Opposition

During 1979, small groups of Iranian exiles began plotting against the Islamic regime from their places of refuge in Europe and elsewhere. Most of these exiled plotters hoped to reinstate the monarchy, though some were ambivalent about this and a small but growing number favoured a secular republic. All of these plotters had contacts of various kinds inside Iran with whom they hoped to foment uprisings against the regime. Many sought encouragement and support from the United States. US officials, both in Washington and in the Tehran embassy, believed these exiles had little popular support inside Iran and were incapable of overthrowing the regime, and they pointedly refused to offer them encouragement or support at this time.⁴⁴

The most important of these exiled plotters was Shahpour Bakhtiar, who had been the shah's last prime minister in January and February 1979 and then went underground. Bakhtiar resurfaced in Paris on 30 July and began to denounce the Islamic regime. He started a newspaper and began to assemble a Paris-based opposition movement called *Nehzat-e Moqavamat-e melli-ye Iran* (National Movement of Iranian Resistance), whose goals were to overthrow the Islamic regime, restore the pre-revolution constitution, and hold a referendum on reinstating the monarchy. He met with other prominent exiles in early August to discuss coordinating their activities. Bakhtiar and other exiled leaders then contacted the deposed shah, his influential twin sister Princess Ashraf, and other wealthy Iranians, who began to finance them. Bakhtiar also soon approached Iraq and other wealthy Arab states for support, even travelling to Baghdad in late October; he then began to receive extensive financial support from Iraq and probably other Arab countries. In the late summer of 1979, Bakhtiar began efforts to organize a counterrevolutionary movement inside Iran, approaching Ayatollah Shariatmadari, who rebuffed him; Khosrow Qashqai, to whom he offered 'unlimited' financial support; Sardar Jaf and other Kurdish leaders; and a group of military officers and civilians that later carried out the 'Nozheh' coup attempt with his support.⁴⁵

In late August, Bakhtiar asked his friend and relative, General Habibollah Mokhateb-Rafi'i, who was living in Washington, to approach the CIA on his behalf. On 29 August, Mokhateb-Rafi'i met with two CIA officers, who told him the United States was 'not in a position to fund, assist, or guide [Bakhtiar's] movement' but that the CIA wanted information about his activities. They suggested that Mokhateb-Rafi'i serve as the channel for contact between Bakhtiar and the CIA, and he was encrypted as SDPEPPER/1. Mokhateb-Rafi'i met with Bakhtiar in Paris in late September and conveyed this message. He told a CIA officer on 5 October that Bakhtiar had said he was very short of funds and his movement would not succeed

without US financial support and guidance. The embassy documents contain no further material on Mokhateb-Rafi'i.⁴⁶

The CIA had many other clandestine sources of information on Bakhtiar in this period. A case officer in the CIA's Geneva station had previously served in a CIA base in Isfahan, spoke Persian, and was acquainted with several close associates of Bakhtiar. In late August, CIA headquarters asked this officer to travel to Paris and meet with some of these associates in order to 'penetrate' Bakhtiar's nascent organization. An officer in the Geneva station identified in the embassy documents as GUNION – presumably a cryptonym for this case officer – then travelled to Paris on 5–7 September. GUNION met twice with an old acquaintance whose cryptonym was SDSTAY and described himself as Bakhtiar's 'political strategist'. GUNION emphasized that he was merely seeking information about Bakhtiar's activities and that his meeting with SDSTAY should not be interpreted as US support for Bakhtiar. SDSTAY then gave GUNION an overview of Bakhtiar's views about the situation in Iran, the various factions that might support him, and his current resources and activities. CIA headquarters asked GUNION to approach SDSTAY again in early November, but there is no record of such a meeting in the embassy documents.⁴⁷

On 31 August, a source identified only as SDFACE/1 gave a CIA officer in London information about Bakhtiar's efforts to establish offices in London, Sweden, Germany, and Switzerland. SDFACE/1 also said that a 'money problem' was preventing Bakhtiar from unveiling his planned government-in-exile. In late October, CIA headquarters decided to give SDFACE/1 a monthly stipend to report on Iranian expatriate activities. Another CIA officer met at least twice in August and early September with a source identified only as SDPRETEXT/1, who provided information on the activities of Bakhtiar and other exiled leaders and also indicated that Bakhtiar had serious financial problems. In mid-September, a former SAVAK officer identified only as SDJANUS/38 told a CIA officer in Paris that Bakhtiar was hoping to receive substantial aid from the United States. On 21 September, an unidentified non-Iranian businessman gave a CIA officer in Paris a detailed overview of Bakhtiar's emerging organization. On 3 October, a source identified only as SDPRAWN/1 told a CIA officer in Brussels that Bakhtiar was no longer looking for money because he was receiving support from Princess Ashraf. Ali Homan Qazi, a CIA source on Kurdish affairs mentioned above, reported in October and early November that Bakhtiar was meeting with various Kurdish leaders and that he travelled to Iraq at the end of October to meet with top Iraqi officials. Finally, the CIA station in London met at least once in this period with General Fereydoun Jam, who was working with Bakhtiar.⁴⁸

At about the same time Bakhtiar surfaced in Paris, Houshang Nahavandi, a former cabinet minister and protégé of Empress Farah Pahlavi, met with Cultural Attaché Richard Arndt of the US embassy in Paris and gave him an overview of Iranian opposition activity. Two weeks later, Nahavandi met again with Arndt, expressing his support for General Gholam Ali Oveissi, who had begun to plot against the Islamic regime, and asking for a US 'green light' for their activities. Arndt demurred, telling him the United States had entered an 'era of non-intervention' regarding Iran. Political Officer Tomseth from the Tehran embassy replied to a cable about this meeting that Nahavandi was an 'opportunist' who had been 'widely hated' in Iran, and recommended that future contact with him should occur 'at the concierge level'.

State Department desk officer Precht agreed that Nahavandi had been 'widely unpopular' in the mid-1970s but asked the Paris embassy to maintain contact with him and other exiles without encouraging them. A month later, Nahavandi told Arndt that he was about to travel to Mexico to meet with the deposed shah to tell him about a 'government in exile' being established by Bakhtiar, Oveissi, himself, and other exiles. He asked to meet with US officials in Washington after meeting the shah. A few days later, the State Department sent a cable to five major US embassies in Europe instructing them to tell Iranian exiles 'explicitly' that the United States had no intention of interfering in Iranian internal affairs or supporting plots against the current government. This cable also described Nahavandi as 'one of the least promising figures on the [Iranian] exile scene'. The CIA then circulated a cable reiterating this policy guidance.⁴⁹

The CIA station in Paris established contact in this period with Ayatollah Mehdi Rouhani, a prominent Iranian Shi'a cleric who was living in Paris and whose brothers, Sadeq and Mohammad, were grand ayatollahs in Iran. The CIA encrypted Mehdi Rouhani as SDULTIMATE/1. In early October, he told his case officer that conditions in Iran might soon deteriorate sufficiently to permit the emergence of an effective opposition movement and that he would be willing to participate in such a movement only if it received US guidance. Rouhani also gave his case officer limited information about the activities of his brother Sadeq, who was a member of Iran's Revolutionary Council. In mid-October, CIA headquarters told the Paris station it was concerned that Rouhani might use his CIA connection to further his own interests and that his main value was not as an opposition leader but rather as a channel for information about his brother Sadeq. Mehdi Rouhani remained a prominent opponent of the Islamic regime until his death in 2000. Both of his brothers lived under house arrest for long periods in the 1980s and 1990s.⁵⁰

Finally, several CIA sources provided titbits of information about Iranian exile activity. Beginning in late August, two CIA officers met several times with an Iranian living in the United States, who is identified only as SDRAP/1 and appears to have been a top military officer – possibly General Oveissi. SDRAP/1 told them he was considering organizing military activity against the Islamic regime, possibly in cooperation with Bakhtiar. The case officers emphasized that their contact with SDRAP/1 should not be construed as an indication of US support. On 12 September, a CIA officer in Paris met with an Iranian identified only as SDUPBEAT, who was involved with an exile group that was publishing a newsletter called 'Iran Libre' and plotting against the Islamic regime independently of Bakhtiar. SDUPBEAT asked for US support but was rebuffed. Also in mid-September, a CIA officer in Paris began trying to recruit a French journalist and novelist named Kenize Mourad, who had briefly been a paid CIA source in 1973 under the cryptonym UNPOLO/1 and was well-connected in Iranian political circles. She provided minor comments on Bakhtiar and other exiled figures and was about to travel to Iran to report on conditions there. No further material on Mourad appears in the embassy documents. Finally, an unidentified source reported on a 19 October meeting in London between General Mohsen Mobasser, the former head of Iran's national police, and a group of high-ranking SAVAK officials. They discussed forming an opposition organization in coordination with Kurdish leader Sardar Jaf but independent of Bakhtiar, with whom Mobasser had been working.⁵¹

This article has examined US covert operations toward Iran from February to early November 1979, based mainly on documents from the US embassy in Tehran published by radical Islamist students who seized the embassy. It found no evidence that the United States was carrying out covert operations to undermine or overthrow Iran's nascent Islamic regime, as many Iranians believed. US officials occasionally talked about undertaking covert operations that would undermine the regime, notably when a CIA officer suggested using Ayatollah Shariatmadari to split and weaken the Islamic movement and encouraging Shariatmadari, Khosrow Qashqai, and other moderates to work together against the regime. But CIA headquarters rejected these suggestions. The embassy documents do not provide a complete picture of US actions toward Iran in this period, so we cannot say conclusively that the United States did not try to undermine the Islamic regime. But no credible evidence has emerged that it did. Covert efforts to undermine the Islamic regime might have further destabilized Iran and even threatened its territorial integrity, perhaps reducing Iran's oil exports and increasing Soviet influence in the region. US officials certainly wanted to avoid these outcomes.

Rather, the embassy documents indicate that the CIA was carrying out a wide range of covert operations aimed mainly at gathering intelligence about the rapidly changing situation in Iran in this period. CIA officers and other US embassy personnel were using their covert and overt contacts to gather intelligence about the Bazargan government, other revolutionary leaders, Iran's armed forces and other institutions, the clergy, domestic and exiled opposition factions, and ethnic guerrillas. Covert operations aimed at gathering intelligence certainly are intrusions into the internal affairs of the target country, but they are far less intrusive than covert operations aimed at undermining or overthrowing a regime.

Of course, the CIA could have used some of the contacts it developed under these covert operations not only to gather intelligence but also in future political operations to undermine the Islamic regime. Indeed, CIA officers on several occasions speculated about how certain contacts could be useful in future political operations.⁵² However, two factors suggest that this was not a priority for US officials during the Bazargan era.

First, as detailed above, CIA officers or agents or other US personnel on at least 16 occasions either told Iranians plotting against the regime that the United States would not support their activities or discouraged them in other ways. This message was conveyed to at least 11 aspiring opposition leaders, including several who were among the most powerful of this era: Ayatollah Shariatmadari, Khosrow Qashqai, Sardar Jaf, and Shahpour Bakhtiar. In several cases these US rejections angered the recipients, led them to break off contact with the United States, or discouraged them from plotting. If US officials had encouraged these factions to work together against the Islamic regime rather than discouraging them, they might have coalesced into a formidable opposition movement. Clearly US officials during the Bazargan era were being careful not to undermine the Islamic regime or destabilize Iran and prioritized this approach over the prospect of developing contacts that might be useful in future political operations.

Second, although the United States did begin to support Iranian opposition groups after the embassy was seized in November 1979, none of its connections with these groups seem to have grown out of contacts made during the Bazargan era. The first recipient of US support apparently was Ahmad Madani, who fled Iran in the summer of 1980. He was then approached by the CIA, which gave him several

million dollars during the next year or two to support guerrilla forces and other exiles with whom he was connected. The CIA also apparently supported the activities of General Bahram Aryana, who headed an exile military organization called *Azadegan* (Freedom) in the early 1980s. In 1981, Ali Amini and Ali Fatemi established *Jebhe-ye Nejat-e Iran* (Front for the Liberation of Iran), which initially tried to unite the various exile factions but soon came to support Reza Pahlavi, son of the deposed shah. The CIA provided most or all of the funding for this organization and its Cairo-based radio station until the mid-1990s and replaced Amini and Fatemi with Manuchehr Ganji in 1986. There is no evidence that Madani, Aryana, Amini, Fatemi, or Ganji had covert contact with the CIA during the Bazargan era.⁵³

Consequently, it seems clear that US covert operations toward Iran from February to early November 1979 were aimed at gathering intelligence rather than undermining or overthrowing the Islamic regime. And when the United States later did begin covertly to support opposition groups seeking to overthrow the regime, those efforts were not a direct outgrowth of these earlier intelligence-gathering operations and occurred only after the US embassy had been seized and Iran had become extremely hostile toward the United States.

Notes

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1. M. Ebtekar, *Takeover in Tehran* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2000), pp.51–3, 97–116; interviews with Ibrahim Asgharzadeh (Tehran, 2 Feb. 1998) and Abbas Abdi (Tehran, 23 June 1999). Asgharzadeh and Abdi were key leaders of the Moslem Students. The documents were published in Moslem Students Following the Imam's Line, *Documents from the U.S. Espionage Den* (Tehran: Entisharat-e Daneshjuyan-e Piru-ye Khatt-e Imam, 1979–91). Volumes 1–72 are available online at <http://www.archive.org/details/DocumentsFromTheU.s.EspionageDen>. A volume 77 is available elsewhere, but volumes 73–76 do not seem to exist. I downloaded these documents on 9 June 2010 and cite them below as '*Espionage Den*'.
2. See especially J. Limbert, 'Nest of Spies: Pack of Lies', *Washington Quarterly*, Vol.5, No.2 (Spring 1982), pp.75–82; E.J. Epstein, 'Secrets from the CIA Archive in Tehran', *Orbis*, Vol.31, No.1 (Spring 1987), pp. 33–41; J.A. Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988); A. Tahiri, *Nest of Spies* (London: Hutchinson, 1988); Z. Karabell, "'Inside the US Espionage Den': The US Embassy and the Fall of the Shah", *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol.8, No.1 (Jan. 1993), pp. 44–59; and C. Emery, *US Foreign Policy and the Iranian Revolution: The Cold War Dynamics of Engagement and Strategic Alliance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). For good examples of the Moslem Students' commentary on the documents, see *Espionage Den*, Vol.2, passim.
3. The best account of this period remains S. Bakhsh, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).
4. *Espionage Den*, Vol.14, pp.31–7, Vol.15, pp.96–7, Vol.16, pp.48–52, 57–61, 71–8.
5. *Espionage Den*, Vol.6, pp.1–2, Vol.16, pp.98–9; M. Bowden, *Guests of the Ayatollah* (New York: Grove Press, 2006), pp.29–30; W.J. Daugherty, *In the Shadow of the Ayatollah* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2001), pp.10–13.
6. Daugherty, *In the Shadow of the Ayatollah*, pp.67–71; Bowden, *Guests of the Ayatollah*, p.178; *Espionage Den*, Vol.2, pp.18–19.
7. *Espionage Den*, Vol.16, pp.79–80, 132–5.
8. *Espionage Den*, Vol.9, pp.1–20, Vol.38, pp.72–83; *Kayhan* (Tehran), Tir 7, 1360 (28 June 1981). See also *The Washington Post*, 31 Jan. 1982. The 'SD' prefix on Bani-Sadr's cryptonym and others mentioned below indicates they were based in Iran. Note that people who have CIA cryptonyms are not necessarily paid by the CIA, in direct or witting contact with CIA officers, or even aware that they have cryptonyms.

9. *Espionage Den*, Vol.68, pp.1–31; Bowden, *Guests of the Ayatollah*, p.180.
10. *Espionage Den*, Vol.68, pp.68–101.
11. *Espionage Den*, Vol.55, pp.42, 89–108, Vol.2, p.155, Vol.25, pp. 9–13, 19–22, 34–8, 47–9.
12. Bowden, *Guests of the Ayatollah*, pp.181–3; *Christian Science Monitor*, 19 March 1980. The material on Bassiri does not seem to be included in the embassy documents.
13. *Espionage Den*, Vol.55, pp.109–15, Vol.23, pp.90–91.
14. See M. Gasiorowski, 'US Intelligence Assistance to Iran, May–October 1979', *Middle East Journal*, Vol.66, No.4 (Autumn 2012), pp.613–27. Amir Entezam's cryptonym was SDPLOD/1.
15. *Espionage Den*, Vol.68, pp.125, 131–43, 151–4, Vol.28, pp.38–40. In late June, Ganji met with State Department Iran desk officer Henry Precht, who told him none of the opposition factions had much promise. See *Espionage Den*, Vol.68, pp.148–50. Ganji and Elahi later became prominent exile opposition leaders. Elahi was assassinated in Paris in 1990.
16. A retired CIA officer with extensive knowledge about the Tehran station's activities in this period told me in a 19 October 2011 interview that these two were the only significant opposition factions CIA officers met with in Iran during the Bazargan era.
17. *Espionage Den*, Vol.55, pp.24–45. Farazian's cryptonym was SDJANUS/13. He remained in Iran during the Bazargan period and was helping Iranian officials establish a new intelligence service. CIA officials were reluctant to use him as a channel to Shariatmadari because of his SAVAK background. See *Espionage Den*, Vol.55, pp.44, 86–7. SAVAK is an acronym for "Sazeman-e Ettela'at va Amniyat-e Keshvar" (Organization for Intelligence and National Security). SDVALID/1 was a business executive who also provided intelligence on the activities of the Bazargan government. See *Espionage Den*, Vol.56, pp.109–10.
18. *Espionage Den*, Vol.55, pp.46–89. Hassan Shariatmadari told me his father had not authorized these contacts with US officials, did not know any of the intermediaries, and did not need US financial support (personal interview, Hamburg, Germany, 19 Dec. 1997).
19. *The Washington Post*, 11 Dec. 1979; *Islamic Republic News Agency*, 29 April 1982, in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service Daily Report, South Asia*, 29 April 1982.
20. *Espionage Den*, Vol.26, p.105, Vol.56, pp.80, 84–5, 89–90, Vol.55, pp.40–41. Qashqai's cryptonym was SDROTTER/4. On Qashqai ties with the CIA in the 1940s and 1950s, see M. Gasiorowski, 'The CIA's TPBEDAMN Operation and the 1953 Coup in Iran', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol.15, No.4 (Fall 2013), pp. 4–24.
21. *Espionage Den*, Vol.26, pp.78–81, 102–5, Vol.9, p.70, Vol.56, pp.84–90, Vol.55, pp.40–41, 52–3.
22. *Espionage Den*, Vol.56, pp.89–102; interview with the retired CIA officer mentioned in note 16.
23. *Espionage Den*, Vol.56, pp.92–3, 96, 101. Mark Bowden, in *Guests of the Ayatollah* (p.298), states that the CIA 'encouraged and funded [Qashqai] in his efforts to rouse local resistance to the emerging mullah-led regime'. Although Acting Station Chief Glegoroff encouraged Qashqai to start a newspaper and establish ties with moderate nationalists in May 1979, as discussed above, there is no indication in the embassy documents that the CIA encouraged or assisted his subsequent efforts to foment resistance. The retired CIA officer mentioned in note 16 told me Bowden was mistaken about this.
24. Interview with Madani, San Jose, CA, 10 Aug. 1997; *The New York Times*, 7 March 1982; *The Washington Post*, 19 Nov. 1986; L. Beck, *The Qashqai of Iran* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), pp.326–38.
25. *Espionage Den*, Vol.38, pp.104–35. SDFORGIVE/1's identity is given on pages 105–6 in a way that strongly implies, but does not conclusively prove, that he was Mohammad Taqi Qomi.
26. *Espionage Den*, Vol.68, pp.33–67. The group that approached Ramtin was headed by the brothers Hormoz and Nowzar Razmara. Hormoz Razmara told Ramtin that the group included retired General Fereyduun Jam and active-duty General Amir Bahman Bagheri, commander of the air force. Nowzar Razmara was a former high-ranking SAVAK official living in the United States at this time. He told CIA officials about a variant of this plan.
27. *Espionage Den*, Vol.68, pp.26–66. The embassy documents also give brief accounts of the CIA station's ties with Ali Fatemi and the brothers Touraj and Fereidun Nassiri, whose cryptonyms were SDMAR-KET/1, SDCARAWAY/1, and SDPECAN/1. All three provided intelligence to the station before the revolution but apparently not during the Bazargan era. See *Espionage Den*, Vol.56, pp.111–31.
28. Bowden, *Guests of the Ayatollah*, pp.297–8; *Espionage Den*, Vol.36, pp.220–29, Vol.52, p.32.
29. *Tehran Domestic Service*, 29 June 1980, in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service Daily Report, South Asia*, 30 June 1980; *Espionage Den*, Vol.24, pp.125–46.

30. *Espionage Den*, Vol.32, pp.65–96. Note that the last 21 pages of Volume 32 contain clearer versions of some of the documents published earlier in this volume.
31. *Espionage Den*, Vol.44, pp.1–56.
32. *Espionage Den*, Vol.32, p.140.
33. *Tehran Domestic Service*, 27 Feb. 1980 and 29 June 1980, in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service Daily Report, Middle East & North Africa*, 28 Feb. 1980 and 30 June 1980; *Christian Science Monitor*, 19 March 1980; telephone interview with Victor Tomseth, 9 July 2010; *Espionage Den*, Vol.24, pp.121–46; interview with Abbas Abdi. The retired CIA officer mentioned in note 16 told me the CIA did not seriously consider establishing contacts with radical leftists in this period and that it wanted contacts with radical Islamists but was unable to establish any.
34. D. Menashri, *Iran: A Decade of War and Revolution* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1990), pp.89–92.
35. *Espionage Den*, Vol.16, pp.70–71, Vol.31, pp.16–28, 105–6.
36. Interview with the retired CIA officer mentioned in note 16.
37. *Espionage Den*, Vol.44, pp.13, 20, 36, Vol.42, pp.92–3; Gasiorowski, ‘US Intelligence Assistance to Iran’.
38. *Espionage Den*, Vol.44, pp.37–8, 54–5.
39. *Espionage Den*, Vol.32, pp.25–8, 64; [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jaff_\(Kurdish_tribe\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jaff_(Kurdish_tribe)) (accessed 15 June 2012); http://www.jaff.biz/e_Jaff_Leaders/E_Sardar%20Bek.htm.
40. *Espionage Den*, Vol.32, pp.31–43.
41. *Ibid.*, pp.44–60.
42. *Ibid.*, pp.97–110.
43. *Ibid.*, pp.111, 116–36, 150–53. Pages 1–26 of this volume contain material on another CIA source, SDTHROB/1, who was living in California in mid-1979. SDTHROB/1 had been a high-ranking SAVAK officer working on Kurdish affairs and hoped to return to Iran to work for SAVAK’s successor. The CIA initially planned to send him to Europe to gather intelligence on Iranian Kurdish activities. But with several other good sources on the Kurds, CIA officials decided instead to try to have him infiltrate SAVAK’s successor. Apparently no progress had been made on this by the time the embassy was seized.
44. *Espionage Den*, Vol.16, pp.77–8, 133. For an overview of the exile opposition, see A. Sreberny-Mohammadi and A. Mohammadi, ‘Post-Revolutionary Iranian Exiles: A Study in Impotence’, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol.9, No.1 (Jan. 1987), pp.108–29.
45. C. Bakhtiar, *Ma fidélité* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1982), pp.187–94; *Le Monde*, 17 Aug. 1979; *Espionage Den*, Vol.32, pp.57, 60, 157–8, Vol.38, p.44, Vol.55, p.93, and Vol.56, p.94; M.J. Gasiorowski, ‘The Nuzhieh Plot and Iranian Politics’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol.34, No.4 (Nov. 2002), p.650. On Bakhtiar’s opposition organization, see M. Khonsari, ‘The National Movement of the Iranian Resistance 1979–1991’ (PhD thesis, London School of Economics, 1995).
46. *Espionage Den*, Vol.38, pp.5–14.
47. *Espionage Den*, Vol.38, pp.15–22, Vol.32, p.63.
48. *Espionage Den*, Vol.38, pp.28–31, 35, 42, 45, 53–5, Vol.32, pp.47, 57–8, 60.
49. *Espionage Den*, Vol.68, pp.108–30, Vol.38, p.4.
50. *Espionage Den*, Vol.38, pp.63–5, 83–7.
51. *Espionage Den*, Vol.38, pp.6–7, 23–7, Vol.32, pp.157–8.
52. See *Espionage Den*, Vol.55, pp.21–2, 30–31, 50–53.
53. Interviews with Madani and Hormoz Hekmat (Bethesda, MD, 28 Aug. 1997); *New York Times*, 7 March 1982; *Washington Post*, 19 Nov. 1986. As discussed above, the CIA had covert contact with Fatemi before the revolution but not during the Bazargan period (see note 27, above); and State Department personnel met once with Ganji and once with his associate Cyrus Elahi during this period and refused to give them support. US embassy personnel also probably met overtly with Madani when he was defence minister in early 1979. The US National Security Council apparently gave Shahpour Bakhtiar a small amount of money in 1986 to help develop a plan to overthrow the Islamic regime. But the United States did not support this plan further and had not supported Bakhtiar earlier, most notably when he was backing the Nozheh coup attempt in 1980. See Khonsari, ‘National Movement of the Iranian Resistance’, pp.185–235; and Gasiorowski, ‘The Nuzhieh Plot’, pp.649, 652.