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Iran: Exporting the Revolution

An Intelligence Assessment

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*PA 80-10121
March 1980*

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Iran: Exporting the Revolution



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An Intelligence Assessment

*Research for this report was completed
on 10 March 1980.*

This assessment was prepared by 
Iran Task Force. Comments and queries are welcome
and should be directed to the Chief, Iran Task
Force, on 

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This paper has been coordinated with the Office of
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Iran:
Exporting the Revolution [Redacted]

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Key Judgments

Iranian leaders, including Ayatollah Khomeini and President Bani-Sadr, are ideologically committed to aiding other Islamic revolutionaries. The Iranians see their revolution as an example for other "oppressed" peoples and believe that the organizational and ideological techniques they developed to topple the Shah can be used by others.

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[Redacted]

Tehran's efforts to export its revolution have been complicated by the confusion that has marked all facets of Iranian politics since the fall of the Shah. Iranian leaders and groups often have acted independently of the government and have embarrassed the Foreign Ministry's efforts to maintain correct relations with Iran's neighbors.

If Iran's internal problems ease in the next year, Tehran probably will step up efforts to destabilize its neighbors. Bani-Sadr appears to be taking steps to increase support for unrest in Iraq and Afghanistan. Iranian support to Afghan insurgents could give the Soviets an excuse to intervene in Iran.

Iran's efforts to export its revolution are a threat to key US interests. US allies in the area would have reason to be nervous if the Iranians were to play a more active role. Iranian-supported unrest could lead to sabotage and strikes by oil workers, since Shias inhabit many of the oil-producing areas of the Persian Gulf states.

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**Iran:
Exporting the Revolution**



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One year after the fall of the Shah, Iran's leaders appear more determined than ever to export their Islamic revolution to other countries in the Near East and South Asia. Although internal problems continue to limit Iran's ability to export the revolution, Tehran radio broadcasts a steady stream of propaganda every day to Iran's neighbors. The country's leaders—including Ayatollah Khomeini and President Bani-Sadr—often express their commitment to the liberation of oppressed peoples throughout the Muslim world. Khomeini, for example, said on 20 February:



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I hope that (Iran) will become a model for all the meek and Muslim nations in the world and that this century will become the century for smashing great idols . . . O meek of the world, rise and rescue yourselves from the talons of nefarious oppressors; O zealous Muslims in various countries of the world, wake from your sleep of neglect and liberate Islam and the Islamic countries from the clutches of the colonialists and those subservient to them.

Ideological Basis

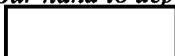
The leaders of Iran have consistently believed that their revolution should be a model for other countries in the region. Former Foreign Minister Yazdi commented right after the fall of the Shah's government in February 1979 that the monarchy's collapse signaled a "new era of Islamic struggle triggered by our revolution."



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Bani-Sadr was quoted on 4 February:

Our revolution will not win unless it is exported. We are going to create a new order in which deprived people will not always be deprived. As long as our brothers in Palestine, Afghanistan, the Philippines, and all over the world have not been liberated, we Iranians will not put down our arms. We give our hand to deprived people all over the world.



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Iran's revolutionary rhetoric and its actions in the last year have greatly alarmed its neighbors. The Arab states of the Persian Gulf region have been the most visibly disturbed. Iraq has initiated a program of aid to dissidents inside Iran in order to weaken the Khomeini regime and prevent it from actively subverting Iraq's majority Shia Muslim population.



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Iran's leaders argue—with some justice—that their revolution is unique in the modern history of the Middle East. Rather than seizing power through a military coup, they achieved their goal through the mass mobilization of society. Their people are first reminded of the virtues of Islam, which alienates them from their corrupt rulers. Armed with faith in Allah and the justice of their cause, this argument goes on, the people as a whole are ready to confront the regime.



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The revolutionary leadership believes that if Iran fails to export its revolution, the country will be isolated in an unfriendly environment of hostile regimes. Most of

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PLO chief Yasser Arafat, Ayatollah Khomeini's son Ahmad, and President Bani-Sadr expressing solidarity with the world's "oppressed" at the celebrations marking the first anniversary of the Iranian revolution.

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these leaders are preoccupied with the example of Prime Minister Mossadegh's government in 1953, which, they believe fell because it lacked allies against the United States and the United Kingdom. The survival of the Islamic Republic is closely tied, in this view, to the overthrow of pro-Western regimes in the Middle East. [redacted]

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Moreover, many Iranian leaders spent years in exile as leaders of the anti-Shah opposition during which they developed close ties with a broad range of Middle Eastern radical movements. Khomeini, for example, was one of the earliest supporters of Yasir Arafat's Fatah movement, and Bani-Sadr has long had close ties with the radical Lebanese Shia movement formerly led by Imam Musa Sadr. The Iranians clearly feel obligated to support their fellow revolutionaries.

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Most Iranian leaders, including Khomeini and Bani-Sadr, have been careful to say in public that Tehran has no intention of interfering in the internal affairs of its neighbors and that since a revolution is primarily a spiritual awakening, it must begin in the hearts and minds of the oppressed. As such it cannot be simply exported by Iran, and no quantity of external aid can act as a substitute for the mobilization of each nation's own internal forces. Nonetheless, the Iranians believe that they can teach other Islamic peoples the necessary revolutionary techniques and organizational theory.



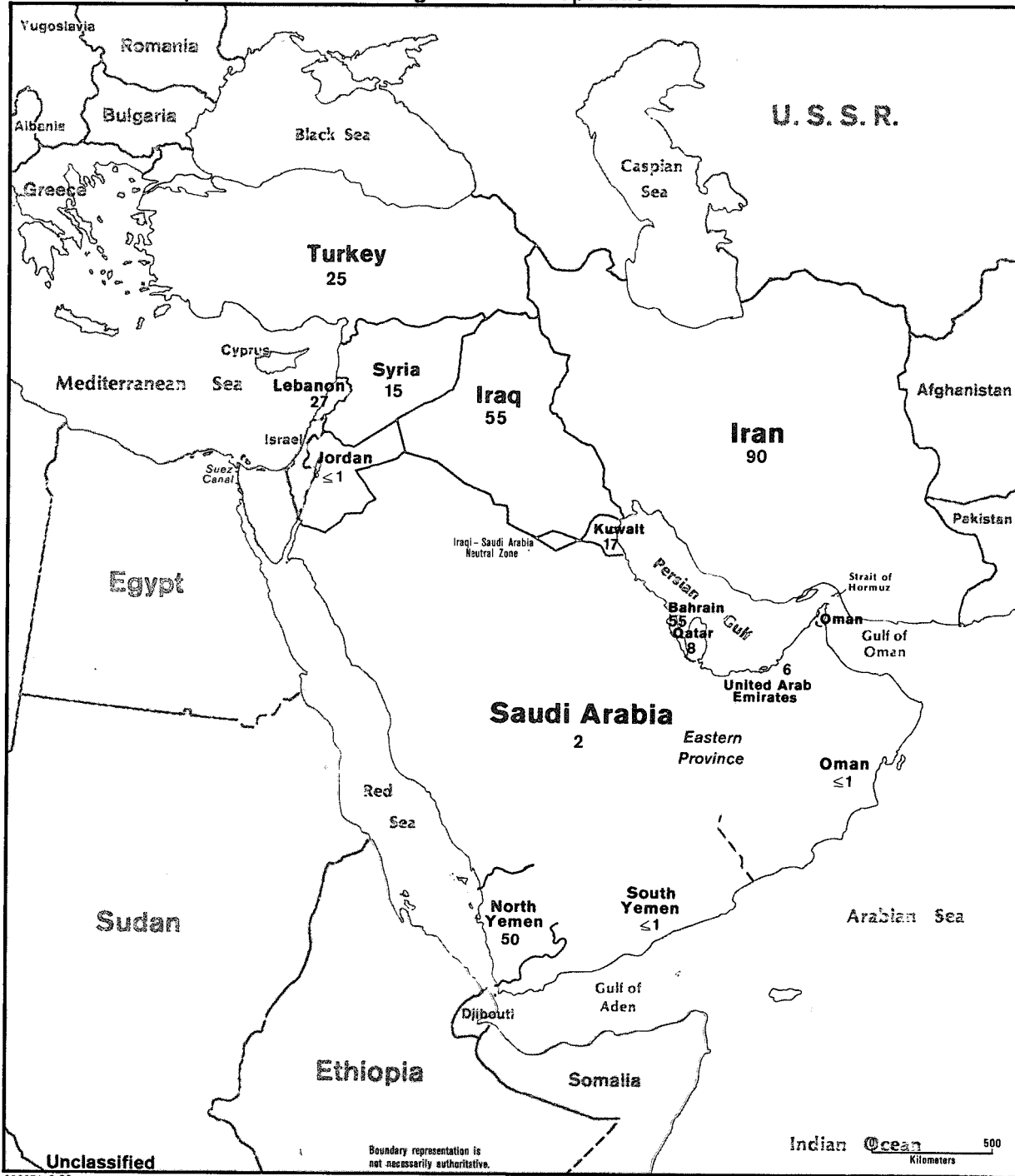
Iran so far has provided mostly rhetoric and propaganda to other revolutionaries, safe haven for foreign dissidents, and a meeting place for radicals. In part, this reflects the ideological basis of their world view. It also reflects, however, the weakness of the central government in Tehran which has been preoccupied with consolidating its power and lacks the means to more actively export revolution. [redacted]

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Shia Muslim Population as Percentage of Total Population



626671 3-80

Unclassified

Boundary representation is not necessarily authoritative.

Indian Ocean 500 Kilometers

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Confusion and Ambiguity in Tehran

Although there is a broad consensus in principle among Iranian leaders favoring support for other revolutionaries in the area, some have argued that Iran should devote its attention primarily to its own problems and should not waste energy and resources on exporting the revolution at this time. Former Prime Minister Bazargan was often identified with this argument, while Iran's clerical leadership has generally been far more militant. [redacted]

[redacted]

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Iranian policy in the future is likely to put more emphasis on exporting the revolution. Some traditionalist Foreign Ministry officials and diplomats will argue for maintaining correct relations with Iran's neighbors, but their voices are not likely to have much resonance in Tehran. [redacted]

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The collapse of the Bazargan government last November largely—but not entirely—removed the ambiguity in Iranian attitudes. Bazargan's successors in Tehran including President Bani-Sadr and Foreign Minister Ghotbzadeh are far more inclined to aid other revolutionaries than was Bazargan. They have spent years in exile working with other radicals, and their own political beliefs are much more radical than Bazargan's. [redacted]

[redacted]

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These differences in emphasis have been accompanied by uncoordinated actions typical of the confusion that has plagued Iran since the fall of the Shah. Iran's support for foreign revolutionaries has occasionally appeared to be less the work of the government than of individual Iranian leaders and groups. The militants

US Policy Implications

If the internal chaos in Iran persists in the near term—as seems likely—Iranian support for groups and causes inimicable to US policies and interests will continue to be limited primarily to propaganda and perhaps some increased financial backing. One press report indicates that Iran plans to provide \$14 million to liberation movements this year. [redacted]

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[redacted]

Even limited Iranian support and propaganda will unnerve US allies in the area and complicate US efforts to improve ties with Tehran. [redacted]

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But the government, inspired by revolutionary fervor, has progressively expanded Iranian contacts with a wide variety of revolution-minded groups in the Middle East. Tehran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has established an Office of National Liberation Movements, headed by Sodebeh Sodeifi, to identify revolutionary groups worthy of Iranian support. In late

If Iranian leaders succeed in consolidating their hold on the country in the next year, the threat to neighboring regimes—especially pro-US regimes—is likely to increase. Iran could then devote more attention and resources to sponsoring subversion. [redacted]

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[redacted]

Iran's efforts to destabilize its Iraqi and Afghan neighbors also pose dangers for US interests. Increased tensions between Tehran and Baghdad threaten to disrupt oil production in the area, since many of both

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25X6 countries' facilities are located close to the border. If Iran succeeds in promoting increased Shia unrest in Iraq—the strongest Arab country in the Gulf—the threat to other countries in the area, especially Saudi Arabia, would be greatly increased.

25X1 A deterioration in Afghan-Iranian relations also could pose problems for the United States. While the United States might benefit from further deterioration in Tehran's already strained ties with Moscow, widespread Iranian support for the Afghan insurgency might give the Soviets an excuse to intervene in Iran.

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Appendix

Country Case Studies

Iraq: The Baathist Target

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Tehran believes Iraq is its most promising target for subversion in the Arab world. Shias constitute approximately 55 percent of Iraq's population, but they traditionally have been ruled by Sunni Arabs who compose only 25 percent of the country's 12.5 million people. The Shias are concentrated in southern Iraq. Major oil pipelines, strategic installations such as the port of Basrah, and the Persian Gulf oil terminals are located in this area, and the southern oilfields depend heavily on Shia labor. [redacted]

among the Shias calling for the overthrow of the Baathist regime. [redacted]

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Iranian media have also focused on Iraq, making the Baghdad regime Iran's second major target of hostile propaganda after the United States. Tehran radio features a 45-minute daily program directed at Iraq and highlighted by an anti-Iraqi commentary entitled "The Baath in the Dock." The main themes of Iranian propaganda are:

- Iraq secretly supports the United States and Israel against Iran.
- Iraq is fomenting sedition in Iran.
- Iraqi Shias are oppressed and should rise against the Baathist leadership.

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Iran has long had close ties with the Iraqi Shias. About 250,000 Shias of Iranian ancestry reside in Iraq, most near the two Shia holy cities of Karbala and Najaf. One of Iran's most respected clerical leaders, Ayatollah Khoi, resides in Najaf, and Ayatollah Khomeini spent 13 years in exile there. [redacted]

The programs directed toward Iraq occasionally include messages from little known Iraqi dissident organizations supporting Tehran and attacking the Baathists. [redacted]

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The Iranian leadership sees the Baathist regime in Baghdad as a militarist regime devoid of popular legitimacy and insufficiently Islamic. Khomeini doubtless recalls with some bitterness that Iraqi leaders ousted him from his Najaf exile in October 1978 because of their desire to keep relations with the Shah on an even keel. [redacted]

Iran also has provided some training and arms for Iraqi Shia dissidents. According to one account Iran had given military training to about 1,000 Iraqi militants by February 1980. There have been several small border clashes between the two countries, and some have probably been caused by dissidents crossing the

Moreover, Tehran views the Iraqi Government as a threat to the Islamic Republic. Tehran is well aware that the Iraqis are supporting dissident groups in Iran, including the Kurdish, Arab, and Baluchi minority

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[redacted] Iran also recognizes that Iraq is its major competitor for influence in the Persian Gulf. [redacted]

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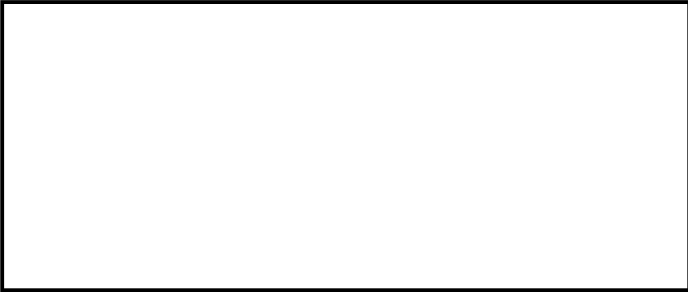
Since early 1979, the Iranians have provided some limited support to Iraqi Shia dissidents. This support primarily has been propaganda—leaflets and tape cassettes advancing Khomeini's views have circulated

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Baghdad has assets of its own to counter Iranian support for the Iraqi Shia dissidents. Iraqi President Saddam Husayn has not hesitated to order Iraqi security forces to pursue Shia rebels, and his Information Minister said last June that "if there are those in Iraq who seek martyrdom, the government is prepared to accommodate them." Baghdad also seeks to exploit Persian-Arab differences and uses economic and welfare programs to improve the Shias' standard of living and loyalty. [redacted]

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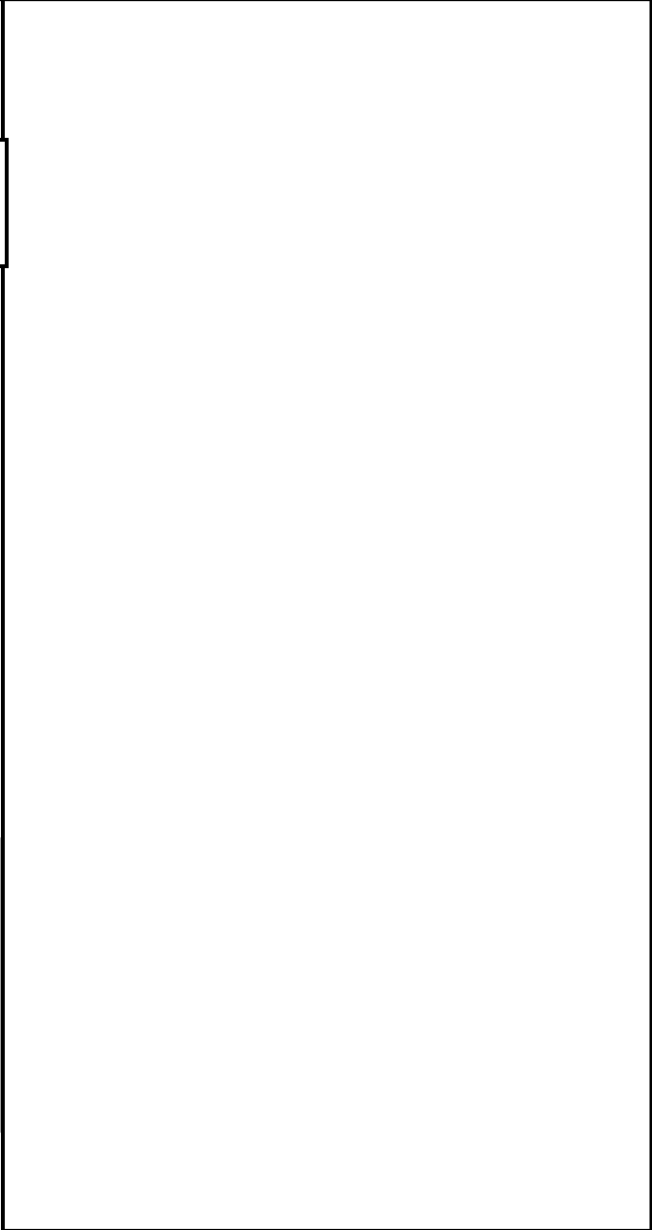
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Tehran's support for the Iraqi Shias also has been hindered by the Shias' traditional inability to unite.



Tehran will probably continue to provide propaganda backing to the Iraqi Shias and may increase direct assistance. Bani-Sadr probably will seek to prevent relations with Baghdad from deteriorating too far, however, because he recognizes that the Iranian military is far inferior to the Iraqis'. Iranian revolutionary leaders hope that limited support for the Iraqi Shias will keep Baghdad off balance, prevent Iraq from interfering in Iran, and ultimately create the revolutionary mobilization of the Iraqi masses necessary for the creation of an Islamic Republic to replace the Baathists. [redacted]

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Saudi Arabia

Tehran's relations with the Saudi monarchy have been predictably uneasy since the fall of the Shah. To many



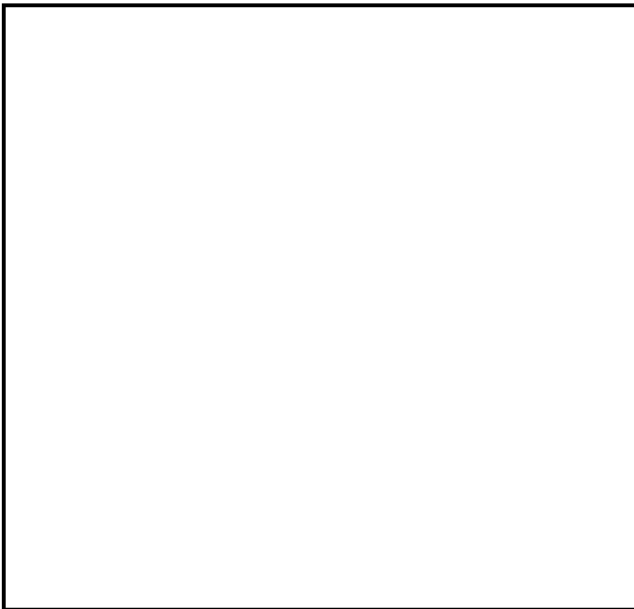
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Iraqi, Afghan, and Palestinian delegates to a liberation conference in Tehran praying with Iranian clerics.

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United States. Government officials have stressed that Iran would like to maintain good relations with the Gulf states, but have also argued—as Bani-Sadr said in early February—that “we are not responsible for other peoples oppressed by rapacious and unpopular governments (in the Gulf) who are attracted by our deeds to follow our example.”

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Tehran’s attention has focused largely on Bahrain because about half of its population is Shia and because until 1971 the island was claimed as part of Iran. One Iranian cleric, Ayatollah Sadiq Rouhani, has been especially outspoken in his support for Bahraini Shias and on occasion has demanded the return of Bahrain to Persian sovereignty. Rouhani’s statements had caused considerable embarrassment for former Prime Minister Bazargan’s government and never appeared to have had full support in Tehran. Since the fall of the Bazargan government, Rouhani has continued to call for the overthrow of the regime in Manama, but it remains unclear how much support he enjoys among his fellow clerics.

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Bahrain, Kuwait, and the Gulf States

Iran’s relations with the small Persian Gulf monarchies also have been troubled by Tehran’s support for Shia unrest. Iranian propaganda often has criticized the Gulf states for failing to support Iran against the

Nonetheless, some Bahraini Shia dissidents and clerical leaders have made several trips to Tehran and Qom to meet with Iranian officials including Ayatollah

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Khomeini. Some have been arrested or expelled upon their return to Bahrain. Radio Tehran, moreover, has broadcast statements from the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain praising the Iranian revolution and appealing for support to overthrow "internal and foreign despots." Antigovernment leaflets also have been sent to Bahrain from Iran. [redacted]

members of his family [redacted]

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[redacted]

[redacted]

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Afghanistan—the Communist Menace

Iran has viewed the government in Kabul as a threat since the Marxist military coup in April 1978. Even before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, Iranian leaders were providing some support to insurgents opposed to the Kabul regime. The Soviet intervention has only increased Tehran's concern about the problem. The Iranians particularly fear that Afghanistan may be used as a base for subverting Iran, especially the Baluchi minority in southeast Iran. [redacted]

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The level of Shia unrest in Bahrain has been relatively low since last fall, and support for Ayatollah Khomeini has apparently fallen off because of the hostage crisis. Tehran probably will continue to try to maintain correct but cool relations with Manama while giving some low-level support to dissidents. Individual Iranian leaders like Ayatollah Rouhani may be more active on the dissidents' behalf, and given the confusion in Iran, they will be able to do what they please.

[redacted]

Kuwaiti-Iranian relations also have been strained by the Shia revolution in Tehran. The US Embassy in Kuwait has been the target of several pro-Khomeini demonstrations that may have been organized at least in part by the Iranian Embassy. Kuwait has a Shia population estimated at approximately one quarter to one-fifth of the country. As in other Gulf states many Kuwaiti Shias are of Iranian background, and some are also Iranian citizens. [redacted]

Tehran radio has broadcast a steady stream of attacks on the Marxist government, branding it an atheistic enemy of Islam and a tool of Soviet designs in the region. Several Afghan leaders have visited Tehran and Qom appealing for aid from the Iranians. Ayatollah Khomeini last August appealed to the Afghan people to "take a lesson from Iran" and "kick out" its Communist rulers. President Bani-Sadr has been especially outspoken and has often promised to provide aid to the rebels, including military training and arms, financial support, propaganda, diplomatic assistance, and even volunteers to fight with the rebels. [redacted]

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As in Bahrain, some religious leaders in Iran have supported Shia unrest in Kuwait. There have been several pro-Khomeini demonstrations in the country, and a major Kuwaiti Shia leader, Sayyid Abbas al-Mihri, was deported on 26 September along with 18

Substantial evidence indicates that since the revolution toppled the Shah in early 1979 Iran has been providing some limited support to Afghanistan:

- [redacted]

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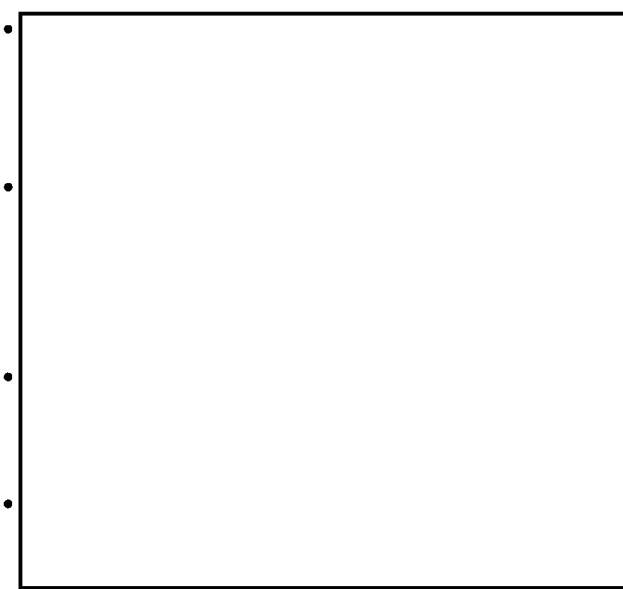
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Afghan insurgents near Herat along the Afghan-Iranian border.

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There are now about 100,000 Afghan refugees in eastern Iran, and some are reportedly using the refugee camps near Zahedan and Mashhad to train militants and mount cross-border operations into Afghanistan. The border is more than 400 kilometers long and poorly supervised. Tribal groups like the Baluchis live on both sides of the border and have traditionally passed back and forth with ease. Smuggling is a major business in the area. [redacted]

Iranian aid appears to have had little impact on the Afghan insurgency. Although dissident tactics in Herat have at times been patterned after those used in Iran to bring down the Shah, there is no good evidence to support Afghan Government charges of direct Iranian involvement. The Shia Hazaras (Shias compose only 12 percent of Afghans) look to Khomeini for leadership, but their success in limiting government control to some towns is chiefly due to their own efforts and to the low priority Kabul has given to the Hazara insurgency. [redacted]

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