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National
Foreign
Assessment
Center

Iran:
Unrest in the Military

An Intelligence Memorandum

NSA review(s) completed.

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Iran:
Unrest in the Military

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Summary

Unrest in the Iranian military appears to be growing as senior officers become increasingly disenchanted with Ayatollah Khomeini and the clerics who dominate Iran. Coup plotting apparently has become widespread. In July the regime uncovered a plot involving some 400 to 500 officers.

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Officers planning a coup face numerous difficulties, including a lack of support among enlisted men and numerous pro-Khomeini informers among the junior officers. The regime has sought to prevent a coup by purging the military of dissidents, monitoring the officers' activities through numerous revolutionary committees, and establishing the Revolutionary Guard as a counterweight to the regular military.

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A successful coup appears unlikely at present, but dissident officers could try to kill Khomeini, hoping that chaos would ensue and bring down the regime.

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This paper was written by Southwest Asia Analytic Center, Near East–South Asia Division, Office of Political Analysis. It was coordinated with the Office of Strategic Research, the Directorate of Operations, and the National Intelligence Officer for Near East–South Asia. Information available as of 3 September 1980 was used in its preparation. Questions and comments are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Southwest Asia Analytic Center, Near East–South Asia Division, OPA, or

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Iran: Unrest in the Military

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Iran's professional military officers are becoming increasingly restless and dissatisfied with Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic Republic. Reports of unrest in the officer corps have become more widespread in recent months, and the regime has become increasingly alarmed about the threat of a military coup.

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More than 18 months after the fall of the Shah the Iranian military remains in a state of disarray. The Army, which had almost 300,000 personnel under the Shah, now numbers only about 150,000 men. Major equipment such as armor is only 50 to 75 percent operational, while the helicopter fleet is only 30 to 50 percent ready. The Air Force has dwindled from 130,000 personnel to some 70,000, and only about half its aircraft are ready for action. The Navy has dropped from 32,000 men to around 20,000.

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The military—especially the Army—has been hard hit by desertions, poor morale, a lack of leadership, and poor discipline. The leadershp has been purged down to the field grade level, and the latest purges will extend even further. Disregarding orders is common.

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Causes of Unrest

The decline in the military's effectiveness has been one cause of the unrest among the officer corps. Professional military men are appalled by the clerics' disdain for their profession, which many see as the country's main defense against foreign—especially Soviet and Iraqi—interference in the country's internal affairs.

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The military was a privileged class under the Shah and the last bastion of the Pahlavi monarchy. Most of the senior officers sided with the Shah until the last days before Khomeini took power. The military is still tied in the public mind with the Shah, and its loyalty to the clerics who seized control in February 1979 has always been questionable.

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The Shah recruited his officers primarily from the upper and middle classes. By background and education the officer corps is inclined to be less sympathetic to the Shia clergy than most Iranians. Many officers believe the clergy is "ruining" Iran and opening the door to an eventual Communist and Soviet takeover.

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The purges of the officer corps have served to increase unhappiness while intimidating those who remain. Senior officers in every service have been purged, tried, and executed. Virtually every officer in the military probably

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has seen friends killed by the regime. (The annex lists prominent officers executed since the revolution.) 25X1

Junior officers and the enlisted ranks are much more sympathetic to the Islamic Republic than the senior officers. Most are drawn from the lower classes and tend to be more pious. Some played a key role in the fighting in February 1979 that brought down Prime Minister Bakhtiar's government, and most have fought loyally against Khomeini's enemies in Kordestan and other troubled areas. Nonetheless, the enlisted ranks and the junior officers are divided, like the majority of Iranians. 25X1

The July Plot

The Islamic regime has claimed repeatedly that it has broken up military coup plots. In December 1979, for example, Tehran claimed to have destroyed a plot among Azarbayjani officers in Tabriz. President Bani-Sadr claims to have foiled six plots since he took power in January. We cannot confirm how many of these claims are based on serious plots and how many are efforts to rally support for the regime. The Khomeini regime almost always blames coup plotting on foreign governments—usually the United States, Israel, Egypt, and Iraq—in an effort to discredit its enemies and appeal to Persian nationalism. 25X1

By far the most serious plot was unraveled in July. On 10 July Bani-Sadr announced that a coup had been discovered at the Shahroki Airbase near Hamadan where about a half dozen officers were shot while preparing to take off to bomb Bani-Sadr's office, Khomeini's home, the Revolutionary Guards' headquarters, and the Qom Theological Seminary. The regime blamed the United States, Iraq, Egypt, and Israel for fomenting the plot.

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The regime initiated a massive purge of the military in reaction to the plot. More than 80 officers have been executed for alleged participation in the plot, and over 600 have been arrested. Those arrested included the commander of the 92nd Armored Division located in Khuzistan Province, the commander of the Khorramshahr Naval Base, a former commander of the Gendarmerie, and a former commander of the Air Force. 25X1

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that the plot was centered around some 400 to 500 field-grade officers led by Air Force Lieutenant General Mehdiyun and Gendarmerie commander General Mohaqeqi. Their plan called for airstrikes on Khomeini's home, Bani-Sadr's office, the Revolutionary Guard headquarters, and the Qom Theological Seminary, followed by ground attacks on the President's office and Revolutionary Guard units in Tehran. The plotters planned to invite former Prime Minister Bakhtiar to return

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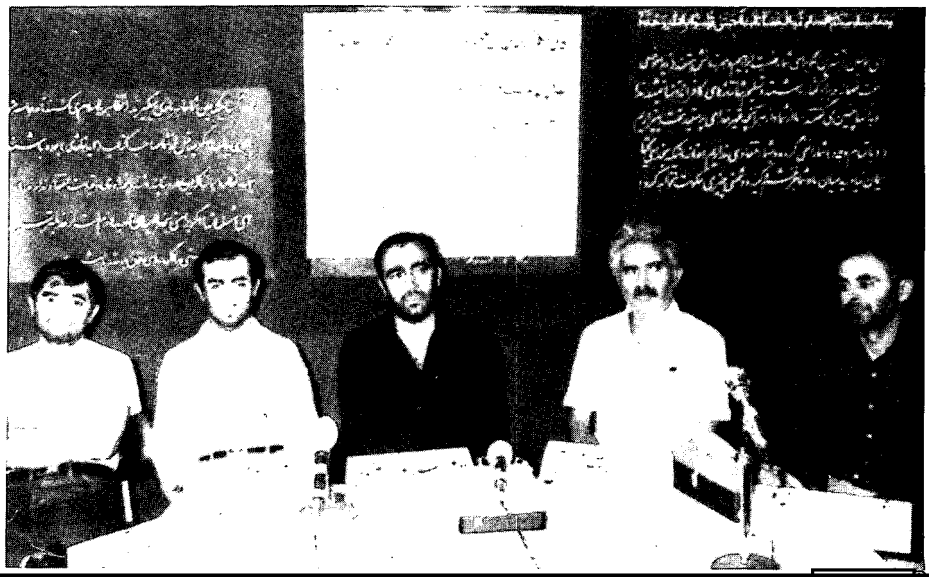

Officers arrested in July plot meet the press in Tehran before their execution

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25X1 to Iran to head a new government, but it is unclear how involved Bakhtiar was in the plot.

Iraq, which supports Bakhtiar, may also have been involved in the plotting, but there is no evidence that Baghdad played a central role in the conspiracy.

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There is no good evidence that the plotters commanded the loyalty of a significant number of enlisted personnel. 25X1

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The plot apparently failed because the conspirators were infiltrated by 25X1
a number of regime supporters. the pro-
Soviet Tudeh Party, which backs the Khomeini regime, played a key 25X1
role in helping the regime uncover the conspiracy. Bani-Sadr acknowledged
that the Tudeh helped uncover an earlier plot, and
25X1 Tudeh leader Nureddin Kianouri informed the regime about the
July plot four days before Bani-Sadr announced it had been broken up.

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The conspirators reportedly tried to maintain the security of their plans by excluding younger officers from the plot. They were aware that the Tudeh and the independent leftist group, the Mujahedin, have recruited numerous junior officers.[1] 25X1

The Regime's Countermeasures

The Islamic regime has taken numerous measures to prevent a successful military coup. The abortive July plot illustrates some of the difficulties plotters face, including the lack of a significant base among enlisted men and junior officers and the numerous spies among them. 25X1

The regime clearly hopes that the mass arrests and executions of senior officers will intimidate the military as a whole. 25X1

Immediately after the revolution the clerics sought to defend their hold on power by imposing a system of revolutionary committees to monitor military activities throughout the armed forces chain of command. In many units the committees include enlisted men, officers, and clerics, who can overrule the commands of the senior officers. 25X1

At the top of the chain of command, Khomeini has appointed his own representatives to report on the activities of the military. After the July plot was uncovered, the government reportedly added a new directorate to the joint chiefs under the direction of a cleric to formalize the revolutionary committee structure in the military and ensure its oversight of the officer corps.

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Under the Iranian constitution Khomeini is commander in chief of the armed forces. He delegated this power to Bani-Sadr in February 1980, but the President has been unable to gain full control over the military. The clerics have successfully resisted giving Bani-Sadr control over the Revolutionary Guards, and some senior fundamentalists, including Ayatollah Khamanei and former Defense Minister Chamran, have played key roles in the past in assuring clerical oversight of the military. 25X1

Revolutionary Guards

The establishment of the Revolutionary Guards (Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Engelab) in May 1979 was also intended in part to serve as a deterrent to coup plotters. The regime hopes that the Pasdaran can serve as a praetorian guard. 2

[1] For more information on the Tudeh's military apparatus see *Iran: Update on the Tudeh Party*, PA 80-103650, August 1980, 25X1

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Revolutionary Guards parading outside the occupied US Embassy in Tehran

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The Pasdaran's relations with the military are poor. The Guards have a well-deserved reputation for poor discipline and brutality, and regular military pesonnel chafe under the Guards' oversight. 25X1

25X1 The military have been reluctant to participate in joint operational planning with the Guards, and there have been numerous incidents during the fighting in Kordestan where Army units have refused to support Pasdaran in clashes with the Kurdish rebels. 25X1

Despite their combat experience against the Kurds and other dissidents, the Pasdaran are still largely untested. Their capabilities have been undermined by extensive factionalism and infighting among the clerical leadership. The Guards' training has been uneven—many are little more than

25X1 militiamen.[2]

[2] For more information on the Revolutionary Guard see *The Iranian Revolutionary Guard,* PA 80-10001C, January 1980, 25X1

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Prospects

Despite the regime's efforts, plotting involving the military almost certainly is continuing in Iran. The rightist exile groups, the leftists such as the Tudeh and Mujahedin, and other dissidents all recognize the value of an apparatus in the military. 25X1

In order to succeed both in toppling Khomeini and creating a new government, however, coup plotters would have to deal with the Ayatollah's charismatic hold on millions of Iranians. There is no good evidence that dissidents among the officer corps have a significant following among the rank and file—many of whom are loyal to the Islamic regime. 25X1

On the other hand disgruntled officers could stage a coup, planning to kill Khomeini, create chaos, and hope that eventually anti-Khomeini forces would prevail. Such a move could plunge Iran into civil war pitting loyal military units and the Revolutionary Guards against dissidents. 25X1

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Annex

Prominent Iranian Military Officers Executed Since the Revolution

1979

February	
Gen. Nematollah Nasiri	Former Chief of SAVAK
Maj. Gen. Mehdi Rahimi-Larijani	Former Chief, National Police and Martial Law Administrator
Maj. Gen. Manuchehr Khrosrowdad	Chief of the Army Aviation Command
Maj Gen. Reza Naji	Martial Law Administrator, Isfahan
Maj. Gen. Parviz Amini-Afshar	Commander, Imperial Guard
March	
Lt. Gen. Abdollah Khajenuri	Chief, J-3
Gen. Jafar Qoli Mostofi-Sadri	Former Chief, National Police
Lt. Gen. Nader Jahanbani	Deputy Commander for Plans and Programs, Imperial Air Force
Brig. Gen. Vali Mohammad Zand-Karimi	Chief of Prison System
April	
Lt. Gen. Amir Hosein Rabii	Former Commander, Imperial Air Force
Lt. Gen. Ali Mohammad Kahjenuri	Chief, J-3
Lt. Gen. Naser Moqadam	Last Head of SAVAK
Gen. Ali Neshat	Imperial Guard
Maj. Gen. Hashem Berenjian	Chief, Counterintelligence, Imperial Air Force
Gen. Jahangir Esfandiari	Martial Law Administrator, Western Iran
Lt. Gen. Fazlollah Jafari	Former Deputy Chief, National Police
May	
Brig. Gen. Fazollah Nazemi	Imperial Guard
December	
Maj. Gen. Esmail Estahrom	Former Military Governor, Sistan and Baluchestan Province

1980

January	
Maj. Gen. Hasan Behzadi	Gendarmerie
March	
Maj. Gen. Kamal Nezami	Former Military Governor of Qom
July	
Lt. Gen. Hushang Hatam	Former Deputy Chief, Supreme Commander's Staff
Gen. Ahmad Ali Mohaqeqi	Former Commander of the Gendarmerie
August	
Lt. Gen. Seyed Sajad Mehdiyun	Former Commander, Republic Air Force

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