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The Kurds of Iran: A Rugged People in a Rugged Land

A Research Paper

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February 1980

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The Kurds of Iran: A Rugged People in a Rugged Land (U)

A Research Paper

Research for this report was completed on 5 February 1980.

This paper was prepared by analysts in the Middle East–Africa–Latin America Branch of Geography Division, Office of Geographic and Cartographic Research. It was coordinated with the Iran Task Force and with the National Intelligence Officer for the Near East and South Asia. Comments and queries are welcome and may be addressed to the Branch Chief at [redacted] (U)

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The Kurds of Iran: A Rugged People in a Rugged Land (U)

Overview

Three million Kurds live in the little developed, mountainous northwestern corner of Iran called Iranian Kurdistan. They form one of Iran's largest (9 percent of total population) and most troublesome ethnic minorities. Most are Sunni Muslims, but some living in the southern part of the region are Shiites, like the Persians. (U)

Imprecisely demarcated Kurdistan comprises territory in Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and the Soviet Union, in addition to Iran. The Kurdish people now number between 9 million and 12 million. For more than 4,000 years the intransigent Kurds have resisted all efforts by outsiders to subjugate them. Their fierce independence, however, has also torpedoed occasional attempts by inspired or ambitious leaders to unite them into a single state. (U)

Although the Shah instituted development programs that benefited the poorly educated and economically retarded Kurds, most welcomed his downfall. They saw in it an opportunity to renew demands for greater autonomy. (C)

After Khomeini proved unsympathetic, Kurdish autonomist political groups sprang up to resist renewed domination by a government increasingly identified with Shiism. Armed Kurdish dissidents overran some Iranian Army outposts. The posts, however, were retaken by Revolutionary Guards sent by Khomeini. (C)

When, in late November, the acting government indicated willingness to negotiate, the Kurds declared a unilateral cease-fire. At first, negotiations went nowhere, so the Kurds boycotted the national constitutional referendum on 3 December 1979. The central government then made some concessions; it agreed, for example, to withdraw Revolutionary Guards from certain Kurdish cities. Not satisfied, the Kurds also boycotted the presidential election held on 25 January 1980. Clashes between dissident Kurds and Revolutionary Guards occurred with increasing frequency and intensity in January, signaling the end of the cease-fire. (C)

President Bani-Sadr of Iran has acknowledged that his government cannot impose a military solution on the Kurds; he has called on Kurdish leaders to continue negotiations. Longstanding Kurdish demands for autonomy, however, are fundamentally incompatible with Tehran's views of its authority as embodied in the new constitution. This leaves little scope for negotiations. Reports that the Kurds have received arms and other supplies from Soviet-bloc countries suggest that they are gearing up for a protracted struggle. (S NF)

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The Kurds of Iran: A Rugged People in a Rugged Land (U)

Iranian Kurdistan: A Geographic Primer

The Land

Iranian Kurdistan, a rugged mountainous region that stretches for more than 1,000 kilometers along Iran's western border with Iraq and Turkey, consists roughly of three provinces: Azarbayjan-e Bakhtari (West Azerbaijan), Kordestan, and Kermanshahan. Together these provinces cover an area of some 92,000 square kilometers. (U)

The northern part of Iranian Kurdistan lies in the Azerbaijan Highland, a region of high mountains with jagged, rocky peaks separated by narrow, deep gorges and well-defined valleys and basins. There are plains in the extreme north along the Aras River and in the basin of Lake Urmia, Iran's largest lake. (U)

Southern Kordestan and Kermanshahan are dominated by the northwestern end of the Zagros Mountains, a region of rugged, folded mountains and hills punctuated by well-defined valleys and intermontane basins. Throughout Iranian Kurdistan the mountain peaks average between 2,000 and 3,000 meters in elevation. A few are higher: in the north the highest elevation is a 3,608-meter peak west of Reza'iyeh; in the south the highest elevation is a 3,357-meter peak northeast of Kermanshah. (U)

Iranian Kurdistan is part of the broad zone of crustal instability that stretches from Europe across the Middle East to the Himalayas. Earthquakes are not uncommon in the region, and over the years several severe ones have struck there, causing considerable casualties and destruction. (U)

The mountain divide that separates the drainage basins of streams flowing southward into the Persian Gulf from those flowing northward into the Caspian Sea passes through Iranian Kurdistan. There are, however, no major rivers in the region, other than the Aras, which forms the border between West Azerbaijan and the Soviet Union. A few small streams empty into Lake Urmia, and others disappear into the dry plateau east of the mountains. (U)

Climate and Weather

The climate in the northern part of Iranian Kurdistan is somewhat colder than in the south. The mountainous regions of West Azerbaijan and northern Kordestan experience long, snowy winters; the higher elevations are covered with snow for six or more months each year. Precipitation averages about 12 inches annually, most of it falling during the winter and spring. During the winter months, mean daily maximum temperatures range from 3° to 8° Celsius(C), and mean daily minimum temperatures range from −2° C to −7° C. The lowest temperature ever recorded in the north was −30° C, at Khvoy. In the summer, mean daily maximum temperatures range from 28° C to 33° C. The highest temperature ever recorded in the north was 42° C, also at Khvoy. (U)

In the south the winters are usually milder, although snow still covers the higher elevations during the coldest months. The summers are generally hotter and drier than in the north; although the south gets more precipitation, about 16 inches annually, almost none of it falls in the summertime. In the winter, mean daily maximum temperatures range from 6° C to 10° C, and mean daily minimum temperatures range from 0° C to −7° C. The lowest temperature ever recorded in the area was −34° C, at Hamadan, near the southeastern border of Kordestan. In the summer, mean daily maximum temperatures range from 30° C to 37° C. The highest temperature ever recorded in the south was 45° C, at Sanandaj. (U)

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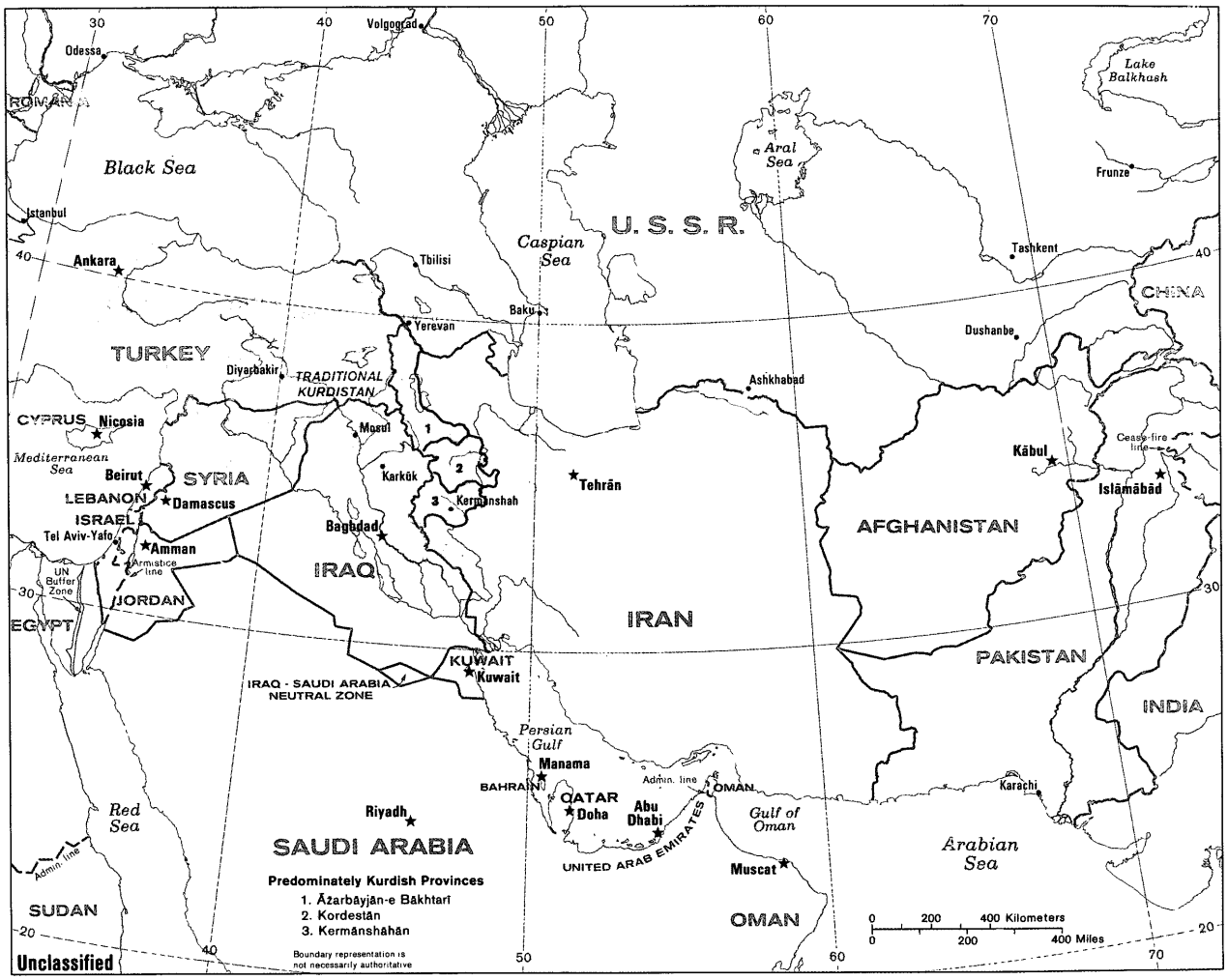
Kurdish Areas in the Middle East and the U.S.S.R.



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The People

The Kurds are generally thought to be descendants of Indo-European tribes that first settled in the mountains of Kurdistan about 4,000 years ago. The Kurds themselves claim to be descended from the ancient Medes, who conquered Ninevah in 612 B.C. but were in turn defeated by the Persians 62 years later. The Assyrians, and later the Greeks, told tales of tribes called "Kur-ti-e," or "Kardukai" (but not Medes), whose warriors descended from mountain strongholds to battle and harass those who intruded into the area. (U)

There are some 3 million Kurds in Iran; they compose about 9 percent of Iran's total population and between one-fourth and one-third of all Kurds in the Middle East. Most of them live in West Azerbaijan (which they share with Azerbaijanis, Armenians, and Persians), Kordestan, and Kermanshahan. There are also small Kurdish communities in Ilam Province, south of Kermanshahan; along the Soviet border northwest of Mashhad; near Shiraz; near Birjand in eastern Khorasan Province; and south of Zahedan in Baluchestan va Sistan Province. Some of the younger and more ambitious Kurds have emigrated to the larger cities, notably Tehran. (U)

Although most Kurds live in small mountain villages and rural settlements, there are a few important Kurdish cities. Kermanshah, the capital of Kermanshahan, has a population of some 291,000, mostly Kurds. The city is an important commercial and agricultural center where southern Kurds market their wares. Reza'iyeh, the capital of West Azerbaijan, is an Iranian melting pot; its 164,000 inhabitants include Kurds, Azerbaijanis, Persians, and Armenians. Reza'iyeh is also an important regional market center. Sanandaj, the capital of Kordestan and another key regional trading center, has a population of about 100,000, almost entirely Kurdish. Saqqez and Mahabad are fiercely Kurdish cities with populations ranging between 30,000 and 40,000; the latter city has historically been a center of Kurdish nationalist activities. Even small towns, such as Sar Dasht, a stronghold near the Iraqi border with a population of less than 10,000, may be locally important simply because there are no other towns for many kilometers around. (U)

Social Structure, Language, and Religion. Kurdish society traditionally has been tribally based, with chieftains known as *aghas*, or *khans*, wielding considerable power over large clans. The clans were staunchly loyal to their khans, and looked to them for guidance, support, and protection. For their part, the khans handled intertribal business: they supervised the conduct of feuds, arranged alliances, and resolved disputes, which were common among the warlike Kurds; and they represented the interests of their clans in negotiations with local officials of the outside powers claiming sovereignty over their homelands. In return for leadership and protection, the various tribes supported their khans with gifts and deeds, such as sharecropping on the sometimes extensive lands owned by the khans in the name of their clans. (U)

Programs enacted during the Pahlavi era, designed to "Persianize" the Kurds and reduce their ethnic consciousness, undermined the traditional authority of the Kurdish tribal leaders and weakened tribal loyalties and bonds. Before 1962, according to Kurdish sources, 0.3 percent of the Kurds owned 64 percent of the land, while 72 percent of the Kurds owned no land at all. In the 1960s and 1970s the Shah implemented land reforms that broke up and redistributed the large estates of the khans among the formerly landless peasants. This reduced the wealth, power, and authority of the khans; as one Kurd commented afterward, "The days when a khan could order one of his peasants to walk 10 kilometers to bring him a dish of yogurt are over." (U)

Another Persianization program, this one much less popular among the Kurdish masses, was an effort to suppress the Kurdish language, perhaps the most important bulwark of Kurdish culture. At first, the Shah banned all official use of Kurdish—in schools and public media, for example. In the 1960s he relented somewhat, and again allowed the broadcasting of radio programs in Kurdish. (Such programs are currently transmitted by Tehran Domestic Service, by radio stations in Qasr-e Shirin, Kermanshah, Marivan, Sanandaj, and by other smaller stations. Kurdish-language broadcasts from Baghdad Domestic Service are also received clearly in Iran.) (U)

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Kurdish belongs to the Iranian branch of the Indo-European family of languages and is thus related to Farsi (Persian); the linkage, however, is ancient, and currently the two languages are mutually unintelligible. One dialect of Kurdish spoken in southern Kermanshahan and in Ilam does contain a good number of Farsi words, reflecting the fact that the Kurds living in this area have become more Persianized than their northern brethren. Many of them are Shias, like the Persians; some of the northerners refer to these southerners disdainfully as "Fars" (Iranians). (U)

The northern Kurds, or "true Kurds," as they style themselves, are almost all Sunni Muslims. About a quarter of them are dervishes, members of an offshoot of Sufism who use devotional movements (whirling, for example) to put themselves into trances in which they perform "miracles" such as eating glass or walking on hot coals as expressions of their faith. Thus, besides their cultural distinctiveness and long tradition of xenophobic insularity, the northern Kurds are alienated from the mainstream of Iranian society by a difference in religion that is becoming ever more pronounced as the Iranian Revolution becomes more closely identified with the Shiite sect. (U)

Education. Few Kurds are well educated; many are functionally illiterate. The educational level is especially low in the rural areas, where physical isolation, dispersion of the population into small villages, and low investment in education have limited the number and quality of schools. Furthermore, most of the teachers have been non-Kurds who taught in Farsi even though many Kurdish children could not understand Farsi. Beginning in the 1970s the Shah's government increased educational investments in Iranian Kurdistan, but since the revolution, progress has probably ceased. On the other hand, since the Shah departed, schools in many parts of the region have begun using and teaching Kurdish. (U)

There is only one university-level institution in the region, Razi University in Kermanshah. Two other universities are located not far away, however, in Tabriz and Hamadan. As there are few jobs in Iranian Kurdistan that require a college education, most of the university graduates have left the region for greener pastures. During the Shah's reign, many educated Kurds chose government or military service. Over the years, this outflow of educated Kurds has kept the average intellectual level of the Kurdish population even lower than it would otherwise have been. (U)

The Economy

Agriculture. Before the agrarian reforms that began in the 1960s, most Kurds either sharecropped on land owned by the khans or made their livings as nomadic herdsmen, in the summer taking flocks of sheep and goats to pastures in the upland valleys, in the winter bringing them back to villages and plains at the lower elevations. As a result of the Shah's land reforms most Kurdish families now live in or near rural villages or towns and farm their own land; only a few still cling to the nomadic life. (U)

The Kurds depend largely on snow melt and spring rains to provide water for agriculture. The seasonal water shortage, the difficult terrain, and the continued use of traditional, inefficient farming methods combine to limit the amount and type of crops that can be grown. Conditions in the region are not suitable for the development of large-scale irrigated agricultural projects, but under the Shah's rule two small irrigation projects were completed; they provide water for farming near Mahabad and north of Saqqez. The main crops are winter wheat, barley, tobacco, fruits, and opium. (U)

Industry and Commerce. Although the cities of Iranian Kurdistan are little more than overgrown market towns and regional administrative centers, they do support some industry. There is a sugar mill at Reza'iyeh, for example, and an oil refinery at Kermanshah. But most of the region operates on a barter economy that has changed little over the centuries. Farmers and herdsmen come to the towns and cities to exchange among themselves the food and handicrafts they have produced and then disappear back into the mountains. (U)

Kurds also participate in the traditional Iranian cottage industry of rugmaking. Hand-knotted rugs from Bijar and Sanandaj in Kordestan Province are especially prized by collectors for the fineness of their knots, their durability, and their unique designs which, unlike those of many other oriental carpets, have not been widely copied. Sonqor and other villages in

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eastern Kordestan and Kermanshahan produce coarser rugs of lower quality, similar to rugs made in the nearby Hamadan area; in fact, these Kurdish rugs are usually marketed as Hamadans. (U)

Natural Resources. Although the region has never been thoroughly surveyed, it is likely that Iranian Kurdistan contains deposits of useful minerals such as, for example, the copper deposits in neighboring Azarbayjan-e Khavari (East Azerbaijan) Province. There is a small oilfield at Naft-e Shah in western Kermanshahan near the Iraqi border; a pipeline carries the crude oil from the field to the refinery at Kermanshah. (U)

Illicit Activities. International boundaries in many parts of Kurdistan are little more than lines on maps, lines drawn by outsiders and ignored whenever possible by Kurds on both sides of the border. In such an environment smuggling endeavors thrive. Currently, the most frequently smuggled commodities are weapons, livestock, and drugs, particularly opium and its derivatives. (U)

In parts of West Azerbaijan and northern Kordestan opium poppies are a traditional crop, grown both by Kurds and by other Iranians living in the region. In recent years opium production there—and elsewhere in Iran—has been rising. Iran is now producing about 400 tons of opium per year. Another 400 tons enter Iran annually from Afghanistan and Pakistan. Although some of this opium is consumed by Iranian addicts, most of it is headed for illicit narcotics entrepots in Turkey and the Middle East. Almost all of the opium exported from Iran is smuggled into Turkey from West Azerbaijan. The main crossing points are in the valley northwest of Reza'iyeh through which passes the international rail line to Turkey. (S NF)

Transportation

Railroads. The only rail line in Iranian Kurdistan is a single-track, low-capacity, standard-gauge line that traverses the rugged Azerbaijan Highlands north of Lake Urmia. It extends from Sufian, a town on the Tabriz-Jolfa line in East Azerbaijan Province, westward across the Turkish border to Van, the eastern terminus of the Lake Van Rail Ferry. This unprepossessing railroad is the sole rail link between Europe and Iran that does not transit the USSR. (U)

The Sufian-Van line has a freight-carrying capacity of about 5,000 tons per day in each direction but rarely carries that much, partly because the Lake Van rail ferry can only handle about 2,000 tons per day and partly because it chiefly carries passengers rather than freight. Most winters the track is blocked by snow for extended periods. Four trains per day are currently scheduled in each direction but apparently none are now running. The nearest rail yard is at Tabriz, although a few cars per day can be classified (sorted and routed) at Sufian. (S)

Roads. The road network is sparse and of generally low capacity. Most of the roads in the region are mere dirt or gravel tracks. There are a few two-lane, bituminous roads with capacities of 20,000 tons per day. One extends practically the entire length of West Azerbaijan, from Bazargan, near the Turkish border in the north, through Khvoy, Shahpur, and Reza'iyeh to Mahabad, south of Lake Urmia. A somewhat lower capacity spur leads from a junction south of Bazargan southeastward to Marand in East Azerbaijan Province. Another bituminous, two-lane road leads from a junction at Benab, a town east of Lake Urmia, southward through Kordestan to Kermanshah. (U)

Only in southern Kermanshahan are there any east-west roads of significance. A two-lane, bituminous road runs southeastward from Qasr-e Shirin, near the Iraqi border, through Shahabad-e Gharb to Khorramabad in Lorestan Province. At the Iraqi border this road links up with the highway to Baghdad. From Shahabad a branch leads northeastward through Kermanshah to Hamadan. (U)

Even these few good roads, however, are characterized by sharp curves, steep grades, low-capacity bridges, tunnels with limited vertical clearances, and chokepoints in the towns and villages through which they pass. Moreover, they are subject to blockage by snow in the winter and flooding in the spring. (C)

Airfields. There are 29 airfields (or airstrips) in or near Iranian Kurdistan. Most of them, however, have relatively short, gravel or graded-earth runways; only nine of them can accommodate anything more demanding than a C-47. Most of the latter do have runways strong enough to bear loads at least as heavy as those imposed by C-130 aircraft, and four of them

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have runways long enough to accommodate B-747 and C-5A aircraft. There are civil air terminals at Reza'iyeh, Tabriz, Sanandaj, Hamadan, and Kermanshah. An Iranian Air Force helicopter base is also located at Kermanshah, and there are F-4 fighter bases at Tabriz and at Shahrokhi, north of Hamadan. (S)

Telecommunications

Telephone service in Iranian Kurdistan is pretty much limited to the larger urban areas. There are main telephone exchanges at Khvoy, Reza'iyeh, and Kermanshah, and smaller ones at Shahpur, Mahabad, Saqqez, Sanandaj, and Sonqor. Nearby Tabriz, in East Azerbaijan, contains one of the country's five central telecommunications exchanges. (The others are in Tehran, Ahvaz, Mashhad, and Esfahan.) Microwave telephone bands link Reza'iyeh and Kermanshah with Tabriz and Tehran. There is also a telegraph link between Kermanshah and Tehran. (U)

Iran's entire telecommunications system underwent rapid improvement beginning in the 1970s, and the Kurdish provinces benefited from this expansion. Since the revolution, however, Iran's internal communications have fallen into some disarray; currently, direct telephone calls can only be made between Tehran and some of the larger cities. Government plans to further upgrade and expand the telecommunications system—the number of telephones in use was to more than double between 1977 and 1980—have probably been set aside. Construction of additions to the domestic network was at a standstill as of June 1979. (U)

A Renewed Quest for Autonomy

Throughout history, the fiercely independent tribespeople inhabiting the never precisely demarcated, mountainous region called Kurdistan have intransigently resisted outside interference in their affairs. In their attitude toward outsiders the Kurds do not differ all that much from mountain-dwellers in many other parts of the world; one may compare the determined neutrality of the Swiss, the separatist demands of the Basques, the lawlessness of the untameable Pathans on the Pakistan-Afghanistan frontier. (U)

But even among the mountaineers of the world, the Kurds stand out as rugged individualists. In more than 4,000 years, they never united in a viable, greater Kurdish state, mostly because the loyalty of the Kurd has been chiefly to his own tribe and the khan who led his tribe. Although various leaders tried, from time to time, to establish such a state, their efforts usually foundered on provincial concerns—quarrels over grazing rights, leadership, or marital arrangements—or were rather easily suppressed by central-government forces. (U)

Historical Perspective

On several occasions in modern Kurdish history, charismatic leaders have been able to command loyalties that extended beyond the immediate tribal structure, but on each occasion their confederations proved ephemeral. (U)

In the 1880s the Turkish Kurd Obeidullah, seeking to unite all of the Kurds, led a revolt against the Turkish and Persian empires, by then both in decline. Since the 16th century, Kurdistan had served as a buffer between the two empires, both of which claimed sovereignty over the region. Some Kurdish tribes were allied with the Turks, others with the Persians, and some had tried to remain neutral. Obeidullah's attempt at Kurdish unification failed, partly because not enough Kurds joined his cause and partly because the Turks and Persians suspended their mutual enmity long enough to cooperate in putting down the threat. (U)

Following World War I, when the authority of the Iranian central government was weak (and many Kurds were starving), a group of Kurdish khans formed a confederation of independent clans under the leadership of Ismael Agha Simko, one of the more prominent among their number. Their headquarters were in the small Kurdish city of Mahabad (in West Azerbaijan), then as now a hotbed of Kurdish autonomist sentiment. The group fell to quarreling over which clans should dominate, however, and the revolt was eventually put down by forces under Reza Khan, the future Shah and father of the recently deposed Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. (U)

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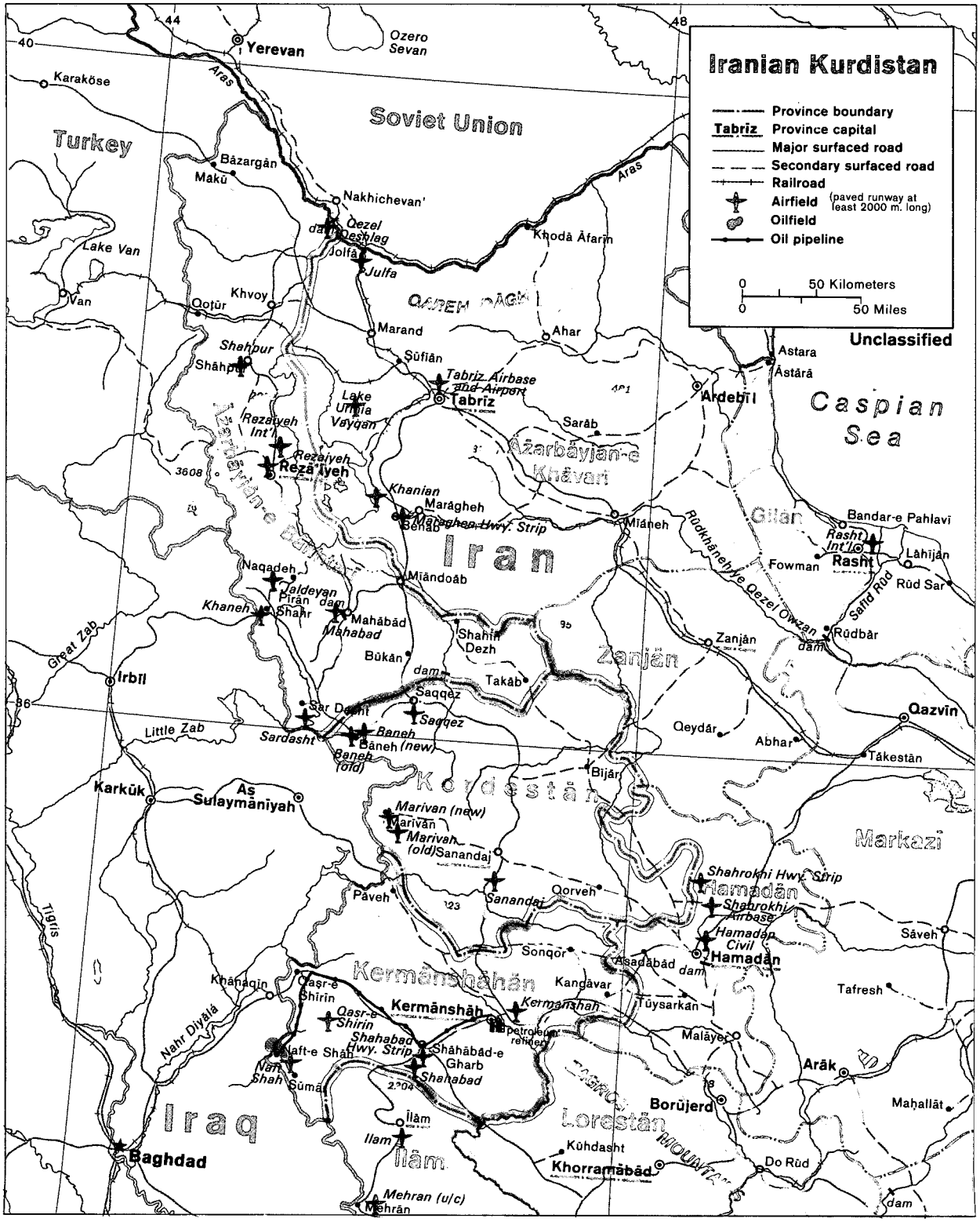

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By the end of World War II, the authority of the central government in Tehran had again attenuated. Supported by the Soviet Union, a group of Kurdish intellectuals proclaimed the founding of the "Kurdistan Autonomous Republic" at Mahabad. The President of the "Mahabad Republic" was Qazi Muhammad, a member of a prominent local religious family. Qazi Muhammad claimed to speak for all Kurds, although the republic occupied only a small corner of northwestern Iran, and Kurds came from Iraq, Turkey, and Syria (but not from the USSR) to offer their services. An Iraqi Kurd, Mullah Mustapha Barzani, was named commander of the Kurdish armed forces. Independence was short lived, however. By December 1946 the Soviets had yielded to world pressure and withdrawn. The republic fell to the Iranian Army almost immediately thereafter, less than a year after it had been founded. The leaders of the republic were executed, except for Barzani, who escaped to the Soviet Union. (U)

On any of these occasions, had all of the Kurds united and vigorously fought for the establishment of a viable, independent greater Kurdish state, it is possible they would have succeeded, for the opposition in each case was weak. But unite they never did and apparently never would. Thus, when Barzani rematerialized in Iraq some years later to lead a rebellion there, the Shah had no compunctions about supporting his former enemy as long as he considered it to be in Iran's interest to promote trouble in Iraq; he was confident that the rebellion in Iraq would not spill over into Iran. And when, in 1976, the Shah mended his fences with Iraq and ceased supporting Barzani's forces, this rebellion quickly withered away, just like the others had. (U)

Recent Developments

After the Mahabad Republic was crushed, the Iranian Kurds remained relatively quiescent for more than three decades. They were intimidated on one hand by the Shah's massive security apparatus, and mollified on the other by increased government expenditures for economic and educational programs in Kurdish areas. Furthermore, the Shah's land reforms had earned the gratitude of many formerly landless Kurdish peasants. And the increasing economic opportunities in the larger cities, fed by burgeoning oil revenues, attracted and co-opted many of the younger, more energetic, better educated Kurds who might otherwise have stayed behind to foment resistance. (U)

Nonetheless, because they chafed under the Shah's tight control, the Iranian Kurds initially welcomed the fall of the Pahlavi regime and the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini. During the early phases of the revolution a variety of Kurdish political factions sprang up, and Kurdish leaders proclaimed their support for Khomeini. For his part, Khomeini referred to the Kurds as "brothers" and intimated he sympathized with their desires for regional autonomy. (C)

After the Shah fell, Kurds seized the Iranian Army garrison at Mahabad, which offered little resistance. When the armed forces in other outposts throughout the Kurdish area proved disinclined to actively oppose the revolution, the Kurds found themselves in effective control of most of their region. Taking immediate advantage of this unusual situation, they proclaimed the Kurdish language "official" and began using and teaching it in the schools in Mahabad, Sanandaj, Kermanshah, and probably other cities as well. (C)

In the general discussion over the future shape of the country that ensued after the revolution, the Sunni Kurds called for the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish province, comprising the Kurdish areas of the three existing provinces of Iranian Kurdistan, to be led by a freely elected assembly. Furthermore, they wanted a constitutional guarantee that Kurdish would remain their official language. They opposed the establishment of Shiism as the official Iranian state religion, as well as the vesting of ultimate formal political authority in a Shiite religious figure such as Ayatollah Khomeini. (C)

As it gradually became clear that Ayatollah Khomeini's views and goals were diametrically opposed to theirs, the Kurds took action. Inspired by Shaikh Ez-ed-din Hoseini, a popular Sunni spiritual leader in Mahabad, and Abdol Rahman Qasemlu, the Secretary-General of the leftist Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), by midsummer Kurdish irregulars had

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overrun or neutralized most of the central government's military outposts between Shahpur and Sanandaj and were threatening several large towns in the area. (In this endeavor they apparently received both encouragement and some material assistance from their Iraqi cousins.) The government responded by rushing reinforcements to the region, and soon regained most of the lost outposts. Contingents of Revolutionary Guards loyal to Ayatollah Khomeini were stationed in Mahabad and Sanandaj and other urban areas to help maintain order. When, in late November, the government appeared willing to negotiate with the Kurds over their demands, Hoseini and Qasemlu declared a unilateral Kurdish cease-fire, which was to end in mid-December unless acceptable progress was made in the negotiations. (C)

Preoccupied with preparations for the 3 December referendum on the new national constitution, and threatened by vigorous demands for autonomy by other minority peoples, particularly the Azerbaijanis, the acting central government made no concessions to the Kurds. In response, most of the Kurds boycotted the referendum on the constitution. The cease-fire continued to hold after the mid-December deadline, however, although skirmishes in Sanandaj and other Kurdish cities between rebellious Kurds and Revolutionary Guards highlighted its fragility. Perhaps the Kurdish leaders had been given reason to believe the government would become more flexible, for in late December and early January some concessions were forthcoming. The Revolutionary Council agreed to amend the new constitution to permit Sunni minorities to set up their own courts; it also agreed to withdraw the Revolutionary Guards from Sanandaj and Mahabad. At the same time, however, Khomeini disqualified all candidates from the 25 January presidential election who had not voted in favor of the constitution. The Ayatollah's decision eliminated Masoud Rajavi, the candidate endorsed by the Kurds. Consequently, the Kurds boycotted the election. (C)

The semi-Persianized Shiite-Kurdish minority living in southernmost Kermanshahan and in Ilam Province took little part in any of these doings. Most of the Shiite Kurds apparently support Khomeini's policies, in general if not every specific, and probably voted both in the constitutional referendum and in the presidential election. (C)

Outlook

To some extent, the Kurds are already enjoying their long-sought autonomy, since the central government has yet to reconstitute the civil and military institutions necessary to reestablish and maintain control. There is, however, no legal basis for this autonomy; to provide one, the new constitution would have to be heavily amended, and this does not appear likely, at least not very soon. (C)

The future of Iranian Kurdistan, like that of Iran as a whole, is hostage to a number of imponderables, among them the attitudes, capabilities, and powers of President Bani-Sadr's yet-to-be-formed government; the declining vigor of Ayatollah Khomeini; the continuing problem of the prisoners at the US Embassy; the degree, nature, and impact of Soviet meddling; and the amount of pressure brought to bear on the central government by other national minorities seeking special arrangements with Tehran. (U)

Well aware that their fortunes are at least partly tied to those of the other minorities, the Kurds have tried to make common cause with their neighbors, the ethnic-Turkish, Shiite Azerbaijanis. In December, Kurds participated alongside Azerbaijanis in the huge demonstations in Tabriz in support of political autonomy for Iranian Azerbaijan and in defense of Khomeini's beleaguered rival, Ayatollah Shariatmadari. And in recent months KDP leaders have gone to great lengths to defuse and discourage conflicts between the Kurds and Azerbaijanis in West Azerbaijan Province. It is too soon to tell whether these efforts will bear fruit in the form of Azerbaijani support for Kurdish autonomy. (S NF)

By the end of January 1980 there were frequent reports of renewed armed conflict in Iranian Kurdistan, including one battle in which at least 50 people allegedly were killed, and such clashes are continuing. Some have been between dissident Kurds and Revolutionary Guards, but others were apparently between rival Kurdish factions. The Kurdish dissidents reportedly have been obtaining Soviet-made weapons from sympathizers in Turkey and Iraq; furthermore,

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several Soviet-bloc countries are allegedly providing food, clothing, and medical supplies indirectly, via Iraq. Apparently, the Kurds are amassing provisions for a long struggle. Meanwhile, President-elect Bani-Sadr has acknowledged publicly that the government cannot impose a military solution on the Kurds and has called on Kurdish leaders to continue negotiations. (S NF)

The reports of armed clashes between rival Kurdish factions are not surprising, considering the long history of Kurdish disunity and political fragmentation. It is questionable whether even an autonomous Kurdish government could maintain effective control over this truculent people. (C)

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Geographic and Photo Supplement for OGCR
Research Paper, GC 80-10012
entitled
"The Kurds of Iran: A Rugged People in a Rugged Land"

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Urban Photos:

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4. Mahabad
5. Sar Dasht
6. Saqqez
7. Sanandaj
8. Kermanshah

NOTE: This info was compiled in Geography Division, OGCR. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Middle East/Africa/Western Hemisphere Branch, [redacted]

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Geographic Supplement

Appendix A -- Iranian Kurdistan: Suitability for Military Operations
Appendix B -- Airfields in or near Iranian Kurdistan

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Appendix A

Iranian Kurdistan: Suitability for Military Operations (C)

Owing to high relief and rugged, dissected terrain, Iranian Kurdistan is generally unsuited for large-scale military operations by conventional ground forces. Only in the scattered plains areas--northwest of Jolfa, west of Lake Urmia, north and south of Sanandaj, and immediately west of Kermanshah--is cross-country movement of large mechanized or motorized forces even remotely feasible. In most of the region, cross-country movement and off-road dispersal of vehicular traffic is possible only on the floors of narrow, deep valleys; elsewhere, these forces must stay on the roads. (C)

The road network, however, is sparse and of generally low capacity; moreover, it could not long sustain heavy military traffic. Most of the roads are narrow, winding, dirt or gravel-surfaced tracks that would quickly deteriorate to near-impassibility under the impact of sustained, heavy traffic; even the few good roads would need considerable maintenance. Other limitations include short turning radii, low-capacity bridges, and chokepoints in tunnels, mountain defiles, and urban settlements. Finally, from December through April, deep snow in highland areas and extensive flooding and wet ground in lowland areas would present additional obstacles to conventional ground forces. (C)

The rugged mountains are no better suited for airborne or airmobile operations. Only the scattered plains and airfields near many of the larger towns offer appropriate parachute drop zones and helicopter landing areas. (C)

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The corrugated terrain of Iranian Kurdistan is best suited for unconventional, small-unit military operations. In most of the area there is ample cover from flat-trajectory fire, and for much of the year natural vegetation provides fair to good concealment from ground and aerial view. Cross-country movement on foot is difficult in much of the region but possible almost everywhere. (C)

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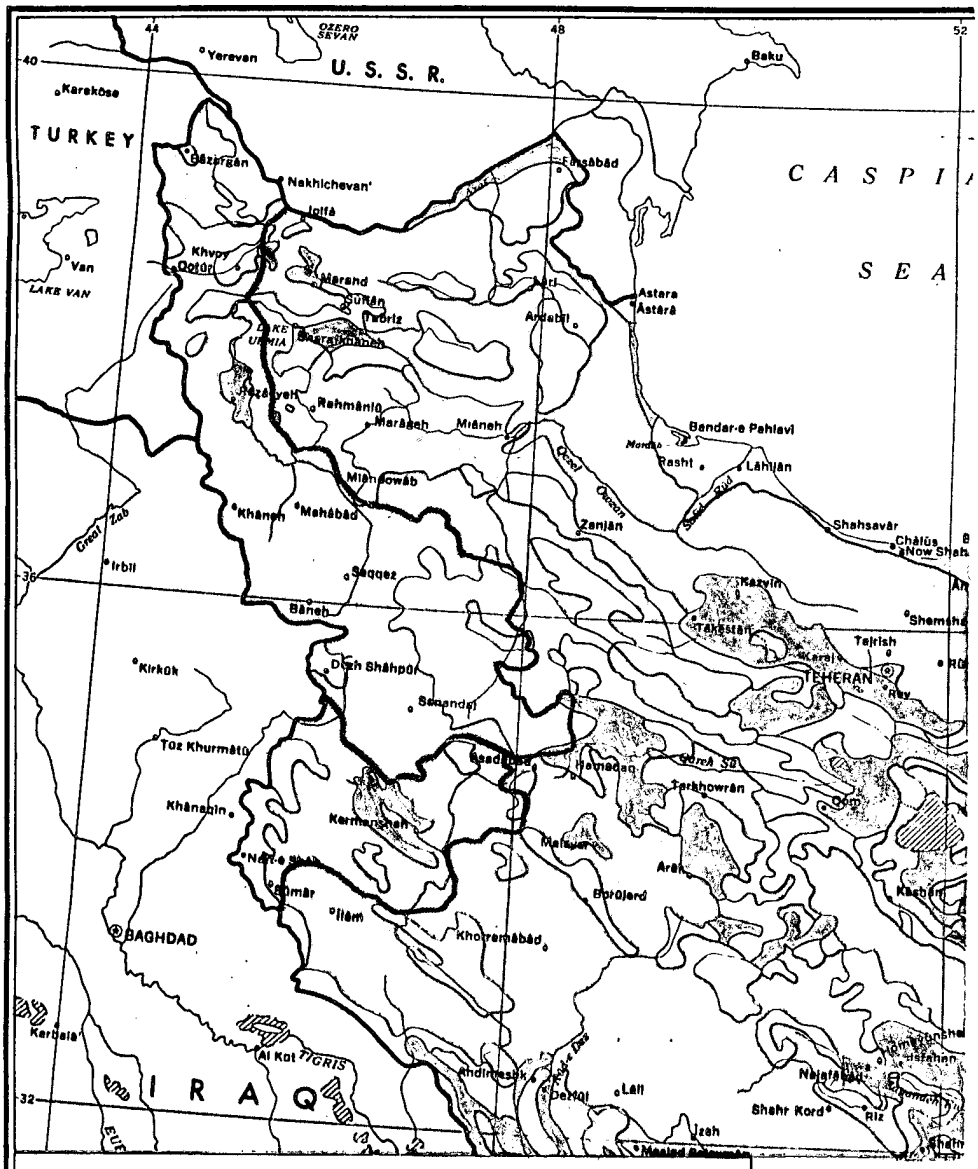

IRAN
CROSS COUNTRY MOVEMENT CONDITIONS

EVALUATION	DESCRIPTION
1 GOOD	Flat to rolling plains; slopes <30%. Firm soil. Surface clear and unobstructed.
2 FAIR	Flat to rolling plains; some areas moderately dissected having minute surface irregularities. Vegetation commonly brush, open scrub or crops; locally, open vineyards.
3 POOR	Sandy, rocky, boulder strewn or intensively irrigated plains; minute surface irregularities and/or thick scrub common. Irrigated areas seasonally trafficable but channelized and compartmentalized by ditches and canals.
4 UNSUITED	Hills, mountains, severely dissected plains and lava fields, unstable sand and dunes, miry surfaces, and/or dense trees, orchards or scrub.

0 50 100 150 200 Statute Miles

0 50 100 150 200 Kilometers

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Appendix B

SECRET NOFORN

Airfields in or near Iranian Kurdistan

Province Name/Site	Coordinates	Number of Runways	Dimensions (meters)	Surface	Condition	Capacity	Date of Info
West Azerbaijan							
Jaldeyan	36 51N/45 06E	1	1,067 x 28	gravel	good	C-47	6/75
Khaneh	36 44N/45 09E	1	1,353 x 30	gravel	good	C-47	6/75
Mahabad	36 46N/45 43E	1	914 x 17	gravel	fair	C-47	4/76
Qezel Qeshlag	39 07N/45 20E	1	1,200 x 35	graded earth	fair	C-47	10/77
Reza'iyeh Intl.	37 40N/45 04E	1	2,900 x 45	asphalt	good	C-141	6/78
Reza'iyeh	37 34N/45 05E	1	981 x 32	gravel	poor	C-47	5/70
Sardasht	36 09N/45 32E	1	671 x 23	gravel	good	C-47	7/73
Shahpur	38 13N/44 46E	1	914 x 38	graded earth	poor	C-47	7/73
Kordestan							
Baneh (old)	35 59N/45 53E	1	762 x 32	graded earth	not usable		1/80
Baneh (new)	36 00N/45 52E	1	1,000 x 45	graded earth	U/C about 600 usable	C-47	5/78
Marivan (old)	35 31N/46 10E	1	1,219 x 37	graded earth	not usable		1/80
Marivan (new)	35 31N/46 09E	1	650 x 20 (approx)	graded earth	fair	C-47	5/78
Sanadaj	35 15N/47 01E	1	2,050 x 45	asphalt	good	C-130	9/78
Saqqez	36 13N/46 18E	2	1)1,920 x 52	graded earth	fair	C-47	12/75
			2)1,280 x 52	graded earth	fair	C-47	12/75
Kermanshahan							
Kermanshah	35 21N/47 09E	1	2,700 x 45	asphalt	good	C-130	8/77
Naft Shah	34 00N/45 29E	1	1,158 x 48	gravel	fair	C-47	12/75
Qasr-e Shirin	34 15N/45 50E	1	1,432 x 21	gravel	fair	C-47	12/75
Shahabad	34 03N/46 31E	1	1,295 x 27	gravel	good	C-47	8/70
Shahabad Highway Strip	34 04N/46 36E	1	4,633 x 30	asphalt	good	C-130 C5A	9/72
East Azerbaijan							
Jolfa	38 55N/45 36E	1	1,015 x 45	graded earth	fair	C-47	10/77
Khanian	37 29N/45 55E	1	1,130 x 30	gravel	good	C-47	5/75
Margheh Highway Strip	37 21N/46 08E	1	2,957 x 29	asphalt	good	C-130	9/77
Tabriz Air Base and Airport	38 08N/46 15E	2	1)3,658 x 45	asphalt	good	B-747,C-5A	11/77
			2)1,899 x 45	asphalt	good	C-130	11/77
Vayqan	38 04N/45 41E	1	545 x 46	graded earth	fair	C-47	5/78

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Appendix B (Continued)

SECRET NOFORN-

Airfields in or near Iranian Kurdistan

Province Name/Site	Coordinates	Number of Runways	Dimensions (meters)	Surface	Condition	Capacity	Date of Info
Hamadan							
Hamadan Civil	34 52N/48 33E	1	2,330 x 45	asphalt	good	C-123	12/77
Shahroki	35 13N/48 39E	2	1)4,458 x 45	asphalt	good	B-747,C-5A	2/78
Air Base			2)4,023 x 45	asphalt	good	B-747,C-5A	2/78
Shahroki Highway Strip	35 14N/48 37E	1	4,877 x 27	asphalt	good	C-141,C-5A	12/74
Ilam							
Ilam	33 37N/46 25E	1	1,588 x 30	Bituminous	fair	C-47	9/77
Mehran	33 06N/46 17E	1	1,494 x 30	U/C	not usable	C-47	3/77

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