U.S.-Iran Links Still Strong

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TEHERAN, Iran — During the last 20 years the United States has sold more than $18 billion worth of arms to Iran and has helped organize and equip a vast security system that gives its ruler, Shah Mohammed Riza Pahlevi, absolute control of the country.

In exchange for that support the Shah has committed his country to protect the vital routes out of the Persian Gulf that carry more than half the oil used by Western countries. Furthermore, the income from his arms purchases plus the American technology he buys to help develop his country return to the United States almost $2 annually for every $1 the United States spends on Iranian oil.

Move Toward Libereralization

The mutually profitable arrangement has forged bonds that are much stronger than American ties to any other developing country. At the same time the relationship has been sharply criticized, both by domestic opponents of the Shah and by Americans, some of them in Congress, who condemn his autocratic rule and are fearful that growing Iranian military strength will tempt him into aggressive actions that might drag the United States along.

During three visits to Iran totaling more than five weeks, the depth and implications of the United States' involvement were examined in dozens of interviews with American and European diplomats, military and intelligence experts, high Iranian officials and Americans and Europeans working here, as well as with Iranian students, intellectuals, merchants and Moslem religious leaders who have joined the mounting opposition to the 58-year-old sovereign.

The American diplomats hope that some of the criticism will be deflected by the current liberalization program, which is said to include cessation of the torture — long officially denied — of polit-

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U.S.-Iran Ties Strong but Controversial

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ical prisoners, curtailment of the use of military courts and improved prison conditions. Recently the Shah replaced Gen. Nematollah Nassiri, for 12 years the iron-fisted leader of Savak, the secret police force, who built it into the largest force of its kind outside the Communist bloc.

These changes have not appeased the Shah's opponents, who have organized huge demonstrations that have caused the loss of more than 100 lives since the beginning of the year in Teheran, Tabriz and the holy city of Qum. Explaining the demonstrations, Medhi Barzegan, an opposition leader, said, "When you see a little light, you can't stand the darkness any more."

The opposition credits President Carter's human rights campaign with the light that has been shed, but it blames Washington as much as the Shah for the darkness that persists. "The Shah can't remain a dictator without American support," said E. K. Lahidji, a lawyer who is an opposition leader. American officials deny culpability, saying that they are trying to encourage further liberalization and are not involved in internal security.

Their response is accurate as far as it goes. American officials are trying to promote liberalization, but not if it conflicts with the Shah's objectives. "Iran is too important for us to risk that," a diplomat acknowledged. Furthermore, while the contention that Americans are not directly involved as advisers in internal security is generally accepted even by leading members of the opposition, it is also known that American advisers helped organize the security forces, particularly Savak, trained their ranking officers and provided them with the latest police equipment. Among American supplies that helped the security forces quell the demonstrations were 50,000 tear-gas grenades, 356,000 gas masks and 4,300 handguns.

Savak is reported to have more than 4,000 career agents and more than 50,000 paid informants, who, according to Government sources, have infiltrated not only opposition groups but also all ministries and most foreign missions, including the United States Embassy. "There are little shadows everywhere," an Iranian minister remarked.

Set up in 1957 by the Central Intelligence Agency and later assisted by Mossad, the Israeli intelligence service, Savak was managed at its inception by 20 officers retired from the Iranian military who, intelligence sources say, received special training at the Marine base in Quantico, Va., and attended orientation programs at C.I.A. headquarters at Langley, Va. More Savak agents received American training under police programs financed by the Agency for International Development, which spent more than $2 million on "public safety."

Torture of Political Prisoners

In the late 1960's criticism of Savak's methods, including torture of political prisoners, moved American officials to end their assistance to the police and to curtail the number of Iranian security officers going to the United States for training. Since 1973 the only policemen known to have received training are some 20 narcotics officers who attended special Drug Enforcement Administration courses.

However, more than 250 military officers are trained in the United States every year, and it is believed that some, particularly those attending counterinsurgency courses, are affiliated with Savak. The new head of the agency, Gen. Nasser Moghadam, came to the job from the command of the intelligence branch of the armed forces.

Moreover, while American officials no longer advise or train the security forces, they exchange information with them. The Americans insist that this is restricted to the subjects of drug traffickers and of terrorists whose targets may be Americans, several of whom have been killed by guerrillas. Well-placed Iranian sources say the information also deals with opposition movements and their leaders.

The C.I.A. maintains the closest contact with Savak, often undertaking joint operations with it involving third countries, particularly the Soviet Union, Iraq and Afghanistan. Despite such contacts, or perhaps because of them, American intelligence experts have a low opinion of Savak, describing it as big, clumsy and not particularly effective, and recalling that it did not foresee the riots in Tabriz last February that involved 25,000 people and obviously required a good deal of planning. (Savak did predict the Communist coup in neighboring Afghanistan last April, which the C.I.A. did not.)

Just How Retired Are They?

Fifty agents are in the C.I.A. station here. At least 100 retired intelligence specialists work for private American companies hired by Iran to set up and operate a sophisticated monitoring network. How retired some of these specialists are is questioned, even by Western diplomats. "What civilian would spend a year in a monitoring station high up in the mountains seven miles from the Russian border without friends, without women?" a European attaché asked rhetorically.

Since Turkey, retaliating for the Congressional arms embargo after the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974, shut down American bases used to monitor the Soviet Union, Iran has become a center for intelligence-gathering on the Soviet Union. It also serves as the main listening post for countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan, where Soviet influence has been strong, and even for friendly nations in the Middle East such as Saudi Arabia that sometimes pursue policies that diverge from those of the United States.

Within Iran the C.I.A.'s main goal is to monitor the loyalty of the armed forces, on whose support the Shah's power rests. It has concluded that the higher levels of the officer corps are solidly behind the Shah, who scrutinizes the records of anyone to be promoted above the rank of major, but they are less certain about younger officers, many of whom come out of the universities, where hostility to the Shah from both leftist and Moslem students has been intense.

Perhaps overshadowing the intelligence and security operations is the matter of arms supplies. For many years the United States was Iran's primary source, but as criticism of the sales has intensified in the United States, the Shah has turned increasngly to European countries, particularly West Germany (for submarines), Britain (tanks) and the Netherlands (frigates). The United States now accounts for only 20 percent of arms sales to Iran, but it remains the principal supplier to the air force, which has bought the most advanced jet fighters, including 141 F-4E's, 40 F-14A's and 20 F-14's; on order are 20 F-14's and 160 F-16's, the latter to be delivered over the next seven years.

Active and Former Military Men

Some 1,100 American military men are teaching Iranians how to use and maintain the sophisticated arms they have purchased. The large number of retired American military officers working for private companies that have sold military equipment here brings the total providing military training close to 8,000, or a fifth of the Americans in Iran.

Rather than purchasing equipment designed to perform best with particular tanks, planes and ships, the Iranians often buy accessories for them from companies or countries other than the originators. This happens, according to intelligence sources, because the payoffs that accompany such sales, amounting to 10 percent of the price, must be spread among a number of generals, ministers and palace contacts, each supporting a different interest.

As for the apprehensions that Iran might undertake a military adventure that would drag the United States along with it, the Shah, in interviews, has scoffed at them. Iran, he said, has enough mineral wealth — not just oil but vast deposits of gas and copper — so that it does not need to tap its oil-rich neighbors to the south, and any move to the east would only bring in hordes of hungry and uneducated people who would drain Iranian resources. He has made it clear, however, that he would intervene if he perceived a threat to Iran in a change in the area, such as "the further disintegration of Pakistan," which he views as a buffer against the Soviet Union.

Such talk causes anxiety in the Western diplomatic community but is quickly rationalized when the strategic importance of Iran is considered. "After the Vietnam disaster the United States would find it difficult to get involved in direct fighting, even to protect oil resources and transportation routes in this area," a high American official said. "Iran has accepted that role for us."

Joint Control of Vital Strait

So far Iran has been called upon to play the role only once, in Oman, where, over several years, it sent 35,000 troops to crush a Communist-supported rebellion in the southern region of Dhofar. Last December Iran and Oman declared that they would be jointly responsible for protecting the Strait of Hormuz, the 20-mile channel through which two-thirds of the oil for the non-Communist world passes. Although Iran has not engaged in any fighting in Iraq, it has helped counter the efforts of that country, long backed by the Russians, to export revolution to the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar—all lying on the Persian Gulf.

Iran has carried out American policy objectives in the Red Sea area as well, supplying arms to Somalia after that country ordered the Russians out, economic aid to Ethiopia before it warmed up to Moscow and material and diplomatic support to both the Sudan and Egypt, and the Shah enthusiastically supported President Anwar el-Sadat's Middle Eastern peace initiative from the start. In the view of American diplomats, the developments in Afghanistan, where a Communist-supported faction has seized power, add even more to the need of the United States to stand solidly with the Shah.

The Shah's pragmatic attitude toward Israel is another reason given by American diplomats for maintaining such a close relationship with him; they point out that he continued supplying oil to Israel during the 1973 Arab-Israeli war and to the United States during the Arab oil embargo that followed. "We sell oil to anyone who wants to buy it," the Iranian Prime Minister, Jamshid Amouzegar, has said in explaining Iranian policy. "We don't mix politics with oil."

The usefulness of the Shah as a surrogate policeman for Washington depends on the effectiveness of his armed forces. In Oman, the only place where Iranian troops have been battle-tested, their performance has not been rated high. American military experts say that the armed forces are improving, not least at using the sophisticated armaments the Shah buys them. But others feel that the air force, on which victory against a formidable foe like Iraq would depend, could not operate without direct American support. "Without Americans to maintain balance and load our fighters, we would be grounded within two days in a war situation," an Iranian general confided. "Unfortunately our own people do not have the technical skills to keep us in the air."

Clear Economic Benefit to U.S.

Not only strategic but economic considerations figure in Iran's value to the United States, and on that score the benefits are clear. Added together, the military purchases, the products and services imported for the industrialization of the country and the money Iranians spend on investment, education and travel in the United States tally up to a tidy profit. Last year the United States took in about $6 billion from Iran and paid out $3.5 billion, mostly for oil.

Furthermore, whenever the Americans sell anything to Iran, they also sell the services of experts who can teach Iranians to operate and repair the product. When Bell sold the Iranians 491 helicopters for $500 million, it signed a contract to teach the operation and service of the craft, which brought in another $500 million.

Despite the heavy economic and military interest of the United States in Iran, Mohammed Riza Pahlevi does not feel secure about its support. Like the Russian exile Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, he has doubts about the will of the West to oppose Soviet aggression. In recent conversations he has expressed fears that the Americans would allow the Russians to take over some of Iran's northern provinces if they guaranteed that they would stay out of the southern areas where most of the oil reserves are.

To avoid exacerbating those fears, American diplomats have been extremely cautious about establishing substantive contacts with the opposition, many of whom express pro-American sentiments because they credit the liberalization in Iran to President Carter's emphasis on human rights, although, in fact, it started before he won office.

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Shah Mohammed Riza Pahlevi during an interview in his palace

Contacts 'Very Low Key'

"We maintain some contacts — very informal, very low key — but it's just not worthwhile to go beyond that," an American diplomat said. "The strength of the opposition and its future are both limited."

Illustrating the small importance given the opposition is that the United States Embassy's only contact with the Moslem leaders who have led the anti-Shah demonstrations is carried out by a second sceretary who makes infrequent visits to their stronghold in Qum, which is 90 miles from Teheran.

Many critics of the Shah feel that it would be in the American interest to encourage the development of a responsible opposition. "It is the only way for the United States to prevent eventual revolution in this country," said Hedayat Matine-Daftary, a lawyer and grandson of Mohammed Mossadegh, who almost succeeded in driving the Shah from the throne in 1953.

Mr. Barzegan, a leader of what remains of the Mossadegh movement, said that the Shah's opponents were disappointed but not disheartened by the strong support that President Carter expressed for the Shah when he visited Teheran on New Year's Day.

"President Carter's words on human rights were what originally raised the people's hopes and gave them courage to defy the dictatorship," he said. "Now, no matter what Mr. Carter says, the people will not become silent again. They're not afraid any more."