

2023

## The Double-Edged Sword: Examining the Contradictory Nature of SAVAK and The U.S.-Iran Clidency Relationship

Braedon McGhee  
CSUSB

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making>



Part of the [International Relations Commons](#), and the [Islamic World and Near East History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

McGhee, Braedon (2023) "The Double-Edged Sword: Examining the Contradictory Nature of SAVAK and The U.S.-Iran Clidency Relationship," *History in the Making*: Vol. 16, Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making/vol16/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the History at CSUSB ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in History in the Making by an authorized editor of CSUSB ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@csusb.edu](mailto:scholarworks@csusb.edu).

# **The Double-Edged Sword: Examining the Contradictory Nature of SAVAK and The U.S.-Iran Clidency Relationship**

By Braedon McGhee

*Abstract: The Iranian Revolution of 1979 marked the end of the diplomatic relationship between Iran and the United States. This relationship, cultivated by the United States throughout the Cold War, served the interests of the United States' hegemonic quest to contain communism while also appealing to the Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's political goals. This paper analyzes the complex and contradictory nature of the U.S.-Iran relationship during the reign of the Shah, specifically focusing on the role of the Shah's brutal secret police force Sâzemân-e Ettelâ'ât va Amniat-e Kešvar (SAVAK), created, directed, and funded by the United States to consolidate the Shah's regime. Using Mark J. Gasiorowski's framework of client-state relationships, this paper argues that SAVAK embodied the inherent contradictions of the autonomous state (autonomous from their people) and that its bloody tactics of repression are primarily responsible for the ultimate downfall of the Shah's regime - enabled by the United States.*

## **Introduction: An Island of Stability**

From 1953 to 1979, Iran's subservience was one of the United States' most valuable assets in the Middle East. Iran fulfilled the United States' vital national security interests during the Cold War (1947-1991), the containment of communism.<sup>1</sup> Given Iran's geographic location, just southwest of the Soviet Union, the state

---

<sup>1</sup> Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present* Harper Perennial (1990), 448.

was used as a bulwark against Soviet and communist influence. The Truman Doctrine (1947) set a precedent for the United States' Cold War policy, which asserted that the United States would aid any country in threat of potential communist influence and intended to limit the Soviet Union's sphere of influence.<sup>2</sup> Though the United States often claimed that containment of the Soviet Union and communism necessarily enhanced democratic and liberal practices, the means employed (as demonstrated in this paper) often involved covert operations, the support of insurgencies, and the stifling of democratic processes in foreign countries.<sup>3</sup> All of these are evident when examining the relations between the United States and Iran from 1953 to 1979.

The United States installed and propped up a sympathetic leader, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1919-1980), as the Shah, who in turn employed any means necessary to solidify his throne and advance Washington D.C.'s national security interest, alienating and repressing the Iranian people. The most useful tool in this repression was a Gestapo-like security organization—*Sâzemân-e Ettelâ'ât va Amniat-e Kešvar* (SAVAK)—an unnatural hybrid monstrosity that ultimately undermined the dual interests it served, neither of them the Iranian people. Amnesty International reported in 1974 “no country in the world has a worse record in human rights than Iran” under the Shah's rule.<sup>4</sup> Yet, only three years later, on New Year's Eve of 1977, United States President Jimmy Carter (b. 1924) met with the Shah of Iran as a testament to the well-established relationship between the two countries. President Carter, accompanied by his wife Rosalynn (b. 1927), enjoyed an elaborate dinner with Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and his wife Farah

---

<sup>2</sup> Harry Truman, “Truman Doctrine (1947),” National Archives and Records Administration (National Archives and Records Administration, March 12, 1947), <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/truman-doctrine>

<sup>3</sup> Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present*, 440.

<sup>4</sup> Amnesty International, Annual Report, 1974-1975, p. 8; Amnesty International, Amnesty International Briefing: Iran (November 1976), pp. 2-5; Butler and Levasseur, Human Rights and the Legal System in Iran.

Pahlavi (b. 1938).<sup>5</sup> Despite reports like Amnesty International's, President Carter and the United States media hailed the Shah as a liberal reformer on track to transform Iran into a secular state that mirrored Western ideals.<sup>6</sup>

In retrospect, Carter's toast is remembered as one of his greatest diplomatic blunders. As Carter raised a glass to honor his host, the Shah. With his stomach full of all the luxuries typical of a royal Pahlavi feast, Carter stated, "Iran, because of the great leadership of the Shah, is an island of stability in one of the more troubled areas of the world."<sup>7</sup> While the United States (and the Carter Administration) praised the Shah's leadership, the Shah's security apparatus *Sâzemân-e Ettelâ'ât va Amniat-e Kešvar* (SAVAK), funded and created by the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), worked hard to manufacture a cult of fear through the torture and surveillance of every day Iranian people.<sup>8</sup> Along with the CIA, Israel's intelligence agency MOSSAD also assisted, enabled, and enhanced SAVAK's repressive capabilities.<sup>9</sup>

Considering the Shah's brutal track record of human rights abuses, Carter's toast symbolized the commitment of the United States government to turn a blind eye to its client states' actions as long as that state continued to advance the United States' national security interests. A good relationship with the Shah also served Carter's hopes of securing peace talks between Israel and Egypt, putting an end to the decades of war between Israel and

---

<sup>5</sup> Jimmy Carter, "Tehran, Iran Toasts of the President and the Shah at a State Dinner," Tehran, Iran Toasts of the President and the Shah at a State Dinner. | The American Presidency Project, December 31, 1977, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/tehran-iran-toasts-the-president-and-the-shah-state-dinner>

<sup>6</sup> Jimmy Carter, "Tehran, Iran Toasts of the President and the Shah at a State Dinner."

<sup>7</sup> Carter, "Tehran, Iran Toasts of the President and the Shah at a State Dinner."

<sup>8</sup> Carter, "Tehran, Iran Toasts of the President and the Shah at a State Dinner."

<sup>9</sup> Mike Wallace, Open Source Transcript, "CIA's Role in Forming SAVAK," Published by CBS Network, Released by the Central Intelligence Agency, Maryland: March 2, 1980.

neighboring countries since the establishment of the state in 1948.<sup>10</sup> Yet, even while praising the Shah from one side of his mouth, President Carter knew he could not ignore the reality of the Shah's autocratic rule. In the same speech, Carter read a quote from one of Iran's great poets, Saadi Shirazi (1210-1292):

Human beings are like parts of a body, created from the same essence. When one part is hurt and in pain, others cannot remain in peace and quiet. If the misery of others leaves you indifferent and with no feeling of sorrow, then you cannot be called a human being.<sup>11</sup>

With this statement, Carter subtly directed the Shah to look inward at his rule and begin reform. The Shah was responsible for a litany of heinous crimes, including political repression, kidnapping, torture, and many more, discussed further in this paper. SAVAK was instrumental in carrying out these human rights violations at the Shah's demand with CIA instruction and assistance.<sup>12</sup>

Despite, or, as this paper argues, because of the repressive capabilities of the Shah's state, what Carter termed an island of stability in 1978 was wracked by the Islamic Revolution a year later, which brought Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1900-1989), out of exile and into power. By all measures, the Shah's oppression of his people is to blame for the Iranian Revolution; however, the aid given by the United States made the Shah's regime far more capable of taking oppressive action. Moreover, the Shah's security organization, SAVAK, served both the United States and the Shah's interests within Iran. Therefore, this vessel of repression is a physical manifestation (or embodiment) of the relationship's unnatural and contradictory elements deserving of research. The following demonstrates the role SAVAK played in consolidating

---

<sup>10</sup> Carter, "Tehran, Iran Toasts of the President and the Shah at a State Dinner."

<sup>11</sup> Carter, "Tehran, Iran Toasts of the President and the Shah at a State Dinner."

<sup>12</sup> Mike Wallace, Open Source Transcript, "CIA's Role in Forming SAVAK."

the Shah's regime, the methods of which subsequently undermined both the Shah's and the United States' goals in Iran.

### ***Historical Background***

Mark J. Gasiorowski's 1991 book *United States Foreign Policy and The Shah: Building a Client State in Iran* provides the framework this research expands on. Gasiorowski explores what he termed the U.S.-Iran cliency relationship, stating that such relationships are problematic by their very nature and, for that reason, produce shortsighted decisions by both actors.<sup>13</sup> These cliency relationships inevitably fail because the client state becomes highly autonomous from their own people's political pressure and needs, leading to revolt. Gasiorowski notes that this is not the intended goal of this relationship but a consequence of the patron's attempt to secure a politically stable environment within the client state.<sup>14</sup> Gasiorowski's theory and established characteristics of the U.S.-Iran cliency relationship are implemented in this study by examining SAVAK's role in such a relationship, concluding that it is ultimately most responsible for the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's oppressive rule of Iran leading up to the Iranian Revolution is well documented by works like Ervand Abrahamian's 1982 book *Iran Between Two Revolutions* and the 2008 *A History of Modern Iran*, as well as Gholam Reza Afkhami's 2008 book *The Life and Times of the Shah*. However, little research has been done on the Shah's intelligence agency's role in enhancing the Shah's autonomy from his people through the U.S.-Iran cliency relationship. However, information on SAVAK's actions during the Shah's rule is limited because of the clandestine nature of the organization itself; much of the information gathered on SAVAK's covert actions rely on former members' admissions, victim testimonials, and cross-analysis of declassified CIA

---

<sup>13</sup> Mark J. Gasiorowski, *United States. Foreign Policy and the Shah: Building a Client State in Iran* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1991), 8.

<sup>14</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 2.

documents. Without these accounts, the dystopian nature of SAVAK would remain largely unknown. The Iranian revolutionaries who overtook the U.S. embassy in 1979 uncovered shredded CIA documents, later published in *The True Nature of The Great Satan*, which exposed SAVAK's expansive liaison network within Iran and its collaboration with foreign intelligence agencies such as the CIA and MOSSAD.

### ***The Cliency Relationship***

According to Mark Gasiorowski, a cliency relationship is a mutually beneficial security-based relationship between two countries that differ greatly in wealth, power, and size.<sup>15</sup> The patron country, the larger and more powerful of the two, seeks to ensure political stability within the client state, the weaker country, and provides assistance through infrastructure support, military aid, and intelligence aid to protect its national security interests.<sup>16</sup> In order to ensure political stability within a client state, the patron country typically aids the client's repressive abilities, including domestic police forces, security forces, and intelligence networks, all aimed at silencing political opposition, which enables the client state to become autonomous.<sup>17</sup> Key to Gasiorowski's theory of the "highly autonomous state," is that the client is not autonomous from the patron or other states but rather from the needs and pressures of its very own citizens.<sup>18</sup> This means that the client state can act without representing its own citizens, which creates a disenfranchised class that leads to revolt.<sup>19</sup> It is the contradictory nature of cliency relationships that is their undoing, and the client states autonomy that seals the regime's own fate.

The United States pursued such a relationship with Iran during the Cold War because Iran's geographical location was

---

<sup>15</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 2.

<sup>16</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 3.

<sup>17</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 9-10.

<sup>18</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 9.

<sup>19</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 9.

deemed crucial to the interests of the Dulles brothers. Allen Dulles (1893-1969), former Director of the CIA, along with his brother John Foster Dulles (1888-1959) as Secretary of State, drove United States foreign policy during most of the Eisenhower Administration (1953-1961). The Dulles' hardline anti-communist stance informed, what they called, the perimeter defense strategy intended to limit Soviet expansion.<sup>20</sup> Their close connections to the business world—especially to the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, which the Dulles brothers helped form as lawyers for the corporate law firm Sullivan & Cromwell—likely informed or coincidentally dovetailed with their calls for containment.<sup>21</sup> In line with Gasiorowski's theory, SAVAK and the United States then heightened the Shah's autonomy and crushed democratic systems or open opposition, which created the conditions for revolt.

### **SAVAK: *Clidency Theory In Action***

In 1953, The United States assisted in overthrowing the democratically elected prime minister of Iran, Mohammad Mossadegh (1882-1967), with the help of the newly established Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).<sup>22</sup> Mossadegh attempted to nationalize Iranian oil to undo Great Britain's imperialist ownership of Iran's oil reserves. However, it wasn't just a stake in Iranian oil that inspired the United States to overthrow Mossadegh; the British government's propaganda campaign painted Mossadegh as a communist-Soviet puppet which spurred the CIA to action.<sup>23</sup> Mossadegh's popularity came from his nationalist appeal and

---

<sup>20</sup> James A. Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion the Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 113.

<sup>21</sup> Intervention in other countries' affairs became the United States status quo; to name a few incidents Guatemala in 1954, Indonesia 1957, the Congo in 1960, Chile in 1973. Each of these interventions resulted in the unnecessary deaths of civilians and subsequent authoritative rule of whichever puppet leader the United States saw as fit. Vijay Prashad, *Washington Bullets*, (LeftWord Books, 2020), 14.

<sup>22</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 82.

<sup>23</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 83.



commitment to the Iranian middle class, characterized by Gasiorowski as “One of Iran’s few honest politicians.”<sup>24</sup> It should be noted that Mossadegh never advocated for an economic model in which the means of production are held in common; Mossadegh’s primary goal was to release Great Britain’s imperial grip on Iranian oil, but this propaganda campaign successfully played on the Eisenhower Administration’s willingness to intervene wherever it feared Soviet expansion or communist tendencies.<sup>25</sup> The Iranian coup of 1953 successfully ousted Mohammad Mossadegh and solidified the U.S.-backed Mohammad Reza Pahlavi’s position on the throne.<sup>26</sup>

The primary goal of the United States was to secure its global hegemonic interests, done via an Iranian puppet state, and that required the Shah to remain in power to keep a politically stable and Western-oriented Iran on the Soviet border.<sup>27</sup> The United States-backed regime in Iran also ensured European markets continued to benefit from Iran’s large oil supply, which likewise promoted stability against communist encroachment in the post-World War II world.<sup>28</sup> The United States assisted its client with military aid, infrastructure development, and, most importantly, intelligence, which led to the creation of the Shah’s infamous *Sâzemân-e Ettelâ’ât va Amniat-e Kešvar* (SAVAK) in 1957.<sup>29</sup> Nicknamed the Shah’s eyes, SAVAK’s depravity became a center of attention for human rights organizations such as Amnesty International.<sup>30</sup> The United States developed SAVAK as a mirror of its own intelligence agencies, the CIA and FBI, which had direct

---

<sup>24</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 58.

<sup>25</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 82.

<sup>26</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 82.

<sup>27</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 83.

<sup>28</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 83.

<sup>29</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 126.

<sup>30</sup> Amnesty International, *Annual Report, 1974-1975*, p. 8.

contact with the Shah and trained SAVAK personnel.<sup>31</sup> Though the Shah was initially offered two separate intelligence branches to mirror the CIA and FBI, he opted for one singular branch.<sup>32</sup>

SAVAK enhanced the Shah's autonomy from regular Iranians through repressive and violent action (which will be examined in more detail later), but this did not lead to a politically stable environment.<sup>33</sup> The ultimate instability was a product of the Shah's oppressive regime and its comprehensive intelligence network that harshly marginalized dissent.<sup>34</sup> According to the revolutionaries that stormed the United States embassy and took several American diplomats hostage in 1979, the Shah no longer served his people and was merely an imperial tool of the United States,

The Muslim revolutionaries of Iran considered it their utmost responsibility to occupy the Den of Espionage and confiscate its property and documents (to expose) the role the US Embassy played in acts of sabotage and intrigue in Iran- and all acts of injustice and oppression committed by the U.S. in Iran and all over the world.<sup>35</sup>

As noted earlier by those directly involved in the storming of the embassy, the revolution's primary goal was to rid Iran of foreign intervention, namely by the United States, recognized for manufacturing the Shah's repressive capabilities. The very methods and organs of control the Shah and the United States

---

<sup>31</sup> Mark Asnad, "How CIA, Mossad Helped Form SAVAK," Iranian Revolution Documents Center (irdc.ir, November 11, 2016), <https://irdc.ir/en/news/26/how-cia-mossad-helped-form-savak>

<sup>32</sup> Asnad, "How CIA, Mossad Helped Form SAVAK."

<sup>33</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 118.

<sup>34</sup> *The True Nature of the U.S Regime, the "Great Satan."* (Tehran, 1984), 67.

<sup>35</sup> *The True Nature of the U.S Regime, the "Great Satan,"* 64.

relied on to ensure his autonomy over his people backfired tremendously, alienating his citizens en masse.<sup>36</sup>

### **SAVAK's Origins**

By the time the United States successfully overthrew Mohammad Mossadegh in late 1953, the Iranian military had already established a liaison with the CIA.<sup>37</sup> The CIA cultivated a prototype of *Sâzemân-e Ettelâ'ât va Amniat-e Kešvar* (SAVAK) through the training of a particular branch of the Iranian military intelligence establishment led by General Teimur Bakhtiar (1914-1970), a devout anti-communist and thus a natural fit for the Eisenhower Administration.<sup>38</sup> Originally the intelligence branch had a far more limited scope; however, United States officials urged the Shah to expand the branch's purview to safeguard his throne.<sup>39</sup>

The establishment of a well-funded and trained intelligence agency served both parties of the U.S.-Iran cliency relationship.<sup>40</sup> SAVAK expanded the Shah's natural lust for power, and this served the United States who depended on Iran to remain within the "Western camp" to oppose the Soviet Union.<sup>41</sup> Teimur Bakhtiar was then named chief of SAVAK and was considered the second most powerful man within Iran.<sup>42</sup> However, Bakhtiar plotted against the Shah and was ultimately forced to flee the

---

<sup>36</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 152.

<sup>37</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 91.

<sup>38</sup> Asnad, "How CIA, Mossad Helped Form SAVAK."

<sup>39</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 117.

<sup>40</sup> Nikki Ragozin Keddie and Mark J. Gasiorowski, *Neither East nor West: Iran, the Soviet Union, and the United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 154.

<sup>41</sup> Eitan Meisels, "The Shah's 'Fatherly Eye'" April 13, 2020, 8.

<sup>42</sup> Hyun Sang Yoo, "An Analysis of United States Security Policy towards a Third World State during the Cold War Era : Case Study of US-Iran Relations," British Library EThOS - Search and order theses online (Durham University, January 1, 1996), <https://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.295685>

country in the early 1960s.<sup>43</sup> Replaced by Ali Amini (1905-1991) as chief of SAVAK, Bakhtiar lived the rest of his life in exile and died in a supposed “hunting accident” in 1970.<sup>44</sup> There is general consensus that SAVAK orchestrated Bakhtiar’s death.<sup>45</sup>

SAVAK’s first goal after its consolidation was to take control of the Shah’s most formidable opposition, the Tudeh party. Created in 1941, the party concerned not only the Shah but also the United States due to its ties to the Soviet Union, and Washington then further increased its assistance to the Shah and SAVAK.<sup>46</sup> The Tudeh party was made up mainly of the middle-working class of Iran, which meant the Shah would have to take oppressive action against a large portion of the state.<sup>47</sup> SAVAK did not hesitate and quickly implemented repressive tactics against the working class of Iran, Tudeh members lost their jobs, and many were imprisoned.<sup>48</sup> Imprisoned Tudeh members were kept for unspecified amounts of time and typically tortured to gather information.<sup>49</sup> Torture quickly became one of the most infamous characteristics of SAVAK (which will be detailed later) that stifled the Shah’s opponents.<sup>50</sup>

SAVAK’s campaigns of media infiltration began in tandem with the assault against the Tudeh Party. SAVAK published an abundance of false rumors about the Tudeh party, including one claim that the Tudeh was behind the coup of Mossadegh.<sup>51</sup> Despite the irony of SAVAK’s cultivation by Washington D.C., and the CIA’s role in the overthrow of Mossadegh, SAVAK was able to manipulate public opinion against the Tudeh. Ultimately, after the

---

<sup>43</sup> Yoo, “An Analysis of United States Security Policy towards a Third World State during the Cold War Era,” 299.

<sup>44</sup> Yoo, “An Analysis of United States Security Policy towards a Third World State during the Cold War Era,” 299.

<sup>45</sup> Yoo, “An Analysis of United States Security Policy towards a Third World State during the Cold War Era,” 299.

<sup>46</sup> Meisels, “The Shah’s ‘Fatherly Eye,’” 9.

<sup>47</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 176.

<sup>48</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 451.

<sup>49</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 451.

<sup>50</sup> Meisels, “The Shah’s ‘Fatherly Eye,’” 16.

<sup>51</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 452.

organization had either imprisoned, tortured, murdered, or simply scared members of the Tudeh party, the group lost its influence in Iran.<sup>52</sup> The U.S.-Iran cliency relationship depended on political stability within Iran, and the fall of the Tudeh was just one of the first steps the Shah took in order to create a regime that could not be challenged.

### ***The Characteristics of “The Shah’s Eyes”***

The Shah’s complete security apparatus consisted of SAVAK, the national police, the Gendarmerie, and the Armed Forces. Of these, SAVAK proved to be the most effective and secured his domination of the domestic sphere of Iran.<sup>53</sup> At its peak, *Sâzemân-e Ettelâ’ât va Amniat-e Kešvar* (SAVAK) employed around 7,000 full-time staff and about 20,000-40,000 part-time informants.<sup>54</sup>

The agency was organized into eight different departments. The first department was the administration department, run by the director of SAVAK, who reported directly to the Shah.<sup>55</sup> The foreign operations department handled all overseas intelligence gathering operations that involved cooperation with the CIA and MOSSAD.<sup>56</sup> Department three was SAVAK’s domestic security department, by far the most infamous of all the departments.<sup>57</sup> Department seven, the covert operations department, according to Alimardan Azimpour, a former SAVAK member, “dealt with Middle Eastern affairs which were controlled by Israel’s MOSSAD.”<sup>58</sup> Two more departments were added that covered training and a central records department that kept files on every targeted Iranian.<sup>59</sup> The Royal Intelligence Organization, controlled

---

<sup>52</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 452.

<sup>53</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 152.

<sup>54</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 154.

<sup>55</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 153.

<sup>56</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 153.

<sup>57</sup> IRI Center, “SAVAK: Fathered by the CIA - YouTube,” August 19, 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qau-V9-0\\_vc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qau-V9-0_vc) 7:41.

<sup>58</sup> IRI Center, “SAVAK: Fathered by the CIA 7:41.

<sup>59</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 154.

by the Shah, supervised all of these departments.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, while SAVAK was supposedly under the direct supervision of the Prime Minister, an already weakened position following the 1953 coup, the Shah's routine meetings with the director of SAVAK undermined the Prime Minister's claims or ability to control SAVAK.<sup>61</sup>

With United States aid and instruction, the Shah unleashed SAVAK to its full potential, and the organization infiltrated nearly every aspect of Iranian daily life. The domestic security department of SAVAK, or department three, was the most capable at this task.<sup>62</sup> The department first set out to monitor and arrest any suspected Marxist, specifically members of the Tudeh party.<sup>63</sup> Soon after the Tudeh party was neutralized, the third department branched out to target every potential opposition force within Iran.<sup>64</sup> To do this effectively, the third department split into four separate branches.<sup>65</sup> The first branch carried out investigations of key opposition groups, such as the Tudeh and The National Front, a political stronghold of Mossadeghists representing the middle class.<sup>66</sup> Branch two covered public institutions and public opinion, oversight of SAVAK's infiltration of Iranian media.<sup>67</sup> Branch three focused on keeping records of domestic security interests, and the

---

<sup>60</sup> IRI Center, "SAVAK: Fathered by the CIA - YouTube," 7:55.

<sup>61</sup> "WikiLeaks," The Global Intelligence Files - [MESA] Pre-Comment: Intelligence Services, Part 2: Iranian strategies of internal stability, external destabilization and deception, April 5, 2010, [https://wikileaks.org/gifiles/docs/10/105055\\_-mesa-pre-comment-intelligence-services-part-2-iranian.html](https://wikileaks.org/gifiles/docs/10/105055_-mesa-pre-comment-intelligence-services-part-2-iranian.html)

<sup>62</sup> "JPRS ID: 9523 USSR Report Political and ... - Cia.gov," February 4, 1981, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP82-00850R000300080006-4.pdf> 15.

<sup>63</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 452.

<sup>64</sup> Gholam R. Afkhami, *The Life and Times of the Shah* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 2009), 382.

<sup>65</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 153.

<sup>66</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 153.

<sup>67</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 153.

final branch was used for nebulous “specialized activities” such as indoctrination.<sup>68</sup>

Department three, or the domestic security department, employed ten percent of SAVAK employees, or 300 in total, and carried out an advanced infiltration campaign throughout Iranian society.<sup>69</sup> For example, department three planted members into popular labor unions to search for any form of “collectivist ideology.”<sup>70</sup> In practice, the term’s ambiguity allowed members to imprison suspects with little to no evidence. Illegitimate imprisonment became one of the many tools SAVAK used to install fear into Iranian society; it is estimated that in 1976 alone, there were between 25,000-100,000 political prisoners within Iran.<sup>71</sup> The Iranian state justified the organization’s heinous record and activity when the Shah approved a 1957 bill that granted SAVAK the authority of “military magistrates,” which essentially wiped its slate clean of any liability.<sup>72</sup> The virtual impunity granted by the Shah encouraged SAVAK to take any measure necessary, however brutal, to ensure the opposition was not capable of any serious political threat.

Compounding the injustice of arrest and imprisonment on flimsy politically motivated charges, SAVAK also infiltrated Iran’s judicial system to ensure that anyone who opposed the Shah would not receive a fair trial.<sup>73</sup> Trials were conducted by military tribunals rather than an impartial authority, and victims were

---

<sup>68</sup> The National Front, “A Portion of The Secrets of the Security Organization SAVAK,” 1971. The National Front, “Portion of the Secrets.”

<sup>69</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 153.

<sup>70</sup> Yoo, “An Analysis of United States Security Policy towards a Third World State during the Cold War Era,” 291.

<sup>71</sup> Yoo, “An Analysis of United States Security Policy towards a Third World State during the Cold War Era,” 291.

<sup>72</sup> Yoo, “An Analysis of United States Security Policy towards a Third World State during the Cold War Era,” 291.

<sup>73</sup> Yoo, “An Analysis of United States Security Policy towards a Third World State during the Cold War Era,” 291.

typically arrested on purposefully vague charges and laws.<sup>74</sup> Defendants at these tribunals were not afforded the right to a jury, provided a small list of retired military officials to serve as their lawyers, who were then given a maximum of ten days to prepare their case.<sup>75</sup> SAVAK handled each case's investigation, and according to Amnesty International, there is not a single known case of a defendant being acquitted.<sup>76</sup>

Department three also had full access to Iran's telephone system, which allowed the organization to monitor any and all phone calls if needed.<sup>77</sup> SAVAK's ability to monitor personal phone calls exemplified the Shah's deep reach into the everyday life of Iranians. The organization's comprehensive filing system on citizens even turned inwards and took note of its own members. According to former SAVAK member Haseen e'tedali Ali-abadi, the organization even kept a blacklist file of members it planned to "deal with."<sup>78</sup>

The extensive filing system of department three was used to screen applicants for private and government jobs.<sup>79</sup> This meant that *Sâzemân-e Ettelâ'ât va Amniat-e Kešvar* (SAVAK) functionally determined who worked for which company, in turn keeping political opposition out of meaningful employment. SAVAK's filing system also tracked Iranians applying for passports, and any evidence that an applicant took part in anti-Shah activity, or was connected to someone who did, automatically rejected their eligibility.<sup>80</sup> The ability to keep anyone who opposed the Shah from working or receiving a passport was an effective tool that ultimately kept many Iranians silent. Silence became

---

<sup>74</sup> Yoo, "An Analysis of United States Security Policy towards a Third World State during the Cold War Era," 291.

<sup>75</sup> Yoo, "An Analysis of United States Security Policy towards a Third World State during the Cold War Era," 291.

<sup>76</sup> Yoo, "An Analysis of United States Security Policy towards a Third World State during the Cold War Era," 291.

<sup>77</sup> IRI Center "SAVAK: Fathered by the CIA," 14:41.

<sup>78</sup> "SAVAK: Fathered by the CIA," 14:41.

<sup>79</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 153.

<sup>80</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 153.



evidence of the organization's effectiveness during the late 1960s; this is when the Shah's regime entered its "highly autonomous state," as stated by Gasiorowski.<sup>81</sup>

SAVAK's cultivation by, and integration with, foreign intelligence agencies proved to be one of its greatest strengths. While the CIA's motive for aiding SAVAK was to monitor the Soviet Union, SAVAK had its own intelligence interests within the United States.<sup>82</sup> Iranian military officers received special training within the United States, an estimated 250 officers per year. It is reasonable to assume that at least some of these military officers were also members of, or informants to, the Shah's security organization—which the CIA itself suspected and determined was likely.<sup>83</sup> Beyond informing and training, these two agencies took on joint operations, typically surveilling neighboring countries, such as the Soviet Union, Iraq, and Afghanistan.<sup>84</sup> These joint operations ensured the Shah's grasp on the Persian Gulf, which strengthened his regional status.<sup>85</sup>

Besides its patron country, the United States, SAVAK's most crucial partner was Israel's MOSSAD agency (which Israel itself could be argued to be a client state of the United States). In 1965 when the Shah exiled Bakhtiar for conspiring against him, many CIA agents were also sent back to the United States.<sup>86</sup> Soon after, MOSSAD agents took their place in Tehran to train SAVAK members in domestic surveillance and interrogation techniques.<sup>87</sup> Department three's successful domestic infiltration campaigns were largely attributed to MOSSAD's direct oversight.<sup>88</sup> Beyond domestic concerns, Israel's agency was also interested in conducting joint operations with SAVAK in neighboring Arab

---

<sup>81</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 160.

<sup>82</sup> Asnad, "How CIA, Mossad Helped Form SAVAK."

<sup>83</sup> Nicholas Gage Special, "U.S.-Iran Links Still Strong," (The New York Times, July 9, 1978), 1.

<sup>84</sup> Nicholas Gage Special, "U.S.-Iran Links Still Strong," 1.

<sup>85</sup> Nicholas Gage Special, "U.S.-Iran Links Still Strong," 1.

<sup>86</sup> Meisels, "The Shah's 'Fatherly Eye,'" 9.

<sup>87</sup> "SAVAK: Fathered by the CIA," 7:35.

<sup>88</sup> "SAVAK: Fathered by the CIA," 7:35.

countries.<sup>89</sup> This was part of the Israeli policy, the Periphery Doctrine, which intended to create a triangular alliance with non-Arab countries in its geographical area.<sup>90</sup>

The Shah's security organization kept immense records on media within and outside of Iran. Due to this oversight, any media that was critical of the Shah's rule was circulated in secretive underground networks.<sup>91</sup> The Iranian press lacked the freedom to critique the Shah directly, so the most formidable voices of criticism came from foreign media.<sup>92</sup> The Shah and *Sâzemân-e Ettelâ'ât va Amniat-e Kešvar* (SAVAK) worked alongside The United Kingdom's Information Research Department (IRD) to curb outside criticism of the Iranian regime.<sup>93</sup> The United Kingdom and Iran already established friendly relations under the Baghdad pact of 1955; however, to ensure Iran continued to act as a Western puppet, the IRD took further action against the Shah's critics.<sup>94</sup> The first step of this joint operation was to monitor Soviet critiques of the Shah's regime.<sup>95</sup> Both organizations then took a "positive means" approach and published media sympathetic to the regime.<sup>96</sup> The IRD also took it upon themselves to further train SAVAK in advanced propaganda capabilities to counter any negative media.<sup>97</sup> While this relationship diminished the forums in which the Shah's regime could be critiqued, SAVAK allowed for some criticism to get through.<sup>98</sup> One such example, Reza

---

<sup>89</sup> "SAVAK: Fathered by the CIA," 7:50.

<sup>90</sup> Leon Hadar, "The Collapse of Israel's 'Periphery Doctrine'," *Foreign Policy*, June 27, 2010.

<sup>91</sup> Iranian Student Association, "U.S. & France Support Shah's Fascism," November 16, 1976, 3.

<sup>92</sup> Gholam R. Afkhami, *The Iranian Revolution: Thanatos on a National Scale*, (Washington, DC: Middle East Institute, 1985): 160.

<sup>93</sup> Darius Wainwright, "Equal Partners? The Information Research Department, SAVAK and the Dissemination of Anti-Communist Propaganda in Iran, 1956–68," Shibboleth authentication request, 2017.

<sup>94</sup> Wainwright, "Equal Partners?"

<sup>95</sup> Wainwright, "Equal Partners?"

<sup>96</sup> Wainwright, "Equal Partners?"

<sup>97</sup> Wainwright, "Equal Partners?"

<sup>98</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 157.

Baraheni's 1977, *The Crowned Cannibals*, described SAVAK's brutality and was circulated throughout Iran.<sup>99</sup> SAVAK likely allowed this work to circulate strategically to reinforce its reputation of fear, indicating the organization's ability to utilize positive and negative propaganda to benefit the Shah.

One of the organization's most significant surveillance operations happened to be within the United States, legitimizing the basis of the CIA's suspicions that Iranian agents trained in the United States may be informants. Multiple news agencies reported on Iranian students being harassed on college campuses, such as Eric Ringham of the *Minnesota Daily* 1978 reported that multiple students were approached by apparent CIA members who asked the students to monitor their classmates and report back to their assigned handlers.<sup>100</sup> Don Fraser (1924-2019), the Representative of Minnesota's 5th Congressional District from 1963-1979, even commented that "There's not much question that SAVAK has been making efforts to keep track of Iranian students."<sup>101</sup> On one account, a student named Reza Zanjani's visa and financial aid was revoked by the Iranian embassy, functionally holding him hostage unless he presented a list of his anti-Shah peers to SAVAK.<sup>102</sup> In January 1978, new information was brought to light through correspondence between Aryeh Neir (b. 1937), executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union, and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance (1917-2002), that the FBI identified Iranian students suspected of rioting and reported them to SAVAK.<sup>103</sup> Further evidence exposed the organization's collaboration with the

---

<sup>99</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 157.

<sup>100</sup> Eric Ringham, "CIA Said to Want Students to Monitor Iranians," *Minnesota Daily*, November 21, 1978.

<sup>101</sup> Ringham, "CIA Said to Want Students to Monitor Iranians."

<sup>102</sup> Richard Sale "SAVAK Said at Work in Washington," *The Washington Post* (WP Company, May 10, 1977).

<sup>103</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, Neir-Vance Correspondence. June 29, 1977, P770175-1784, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1973-79/P-Reel Printouts, RG 59: General Records of the Department of State, National Archives.

Chicago police department and FBI to undermine and document anti-Shah protests.<sup>104</sup>

Following the arrest of Iranian students in the United States in 1978, Senator Birch Bayh (1928-2019) wrote to the FBI Director, William Webster (b. 1924), suspicious of the relationship between the FBI and SAVAK.<sup>105</sup> Bayh was given information by Webster that the Chicago Police Department had, in fact, collaborated with SAVAK and that the FBI's close relationship was worthy of his suspicion and constituted, in Bayh's words, "improper conduct."<sup>106</sup> Despite such conclusions about the organization's blackmail and harassment of students within the United States, it received relatively little pushback from the United States government. While the extent to which the FBI and SAVAK cooperated remains largely uncovered, it is reasonable to suspect that this liaison network greatly aided the Shah.

### ***SAVAK as a Tool of Domestic Political Consolidation***

After toppling the Tudeh party, SAVAK's next target was the National Front. While a vast number of its members were arrested and forcibly retired from politics during the 1953 coup, many returned to the political scene and advocated for their original goal: a state free of imperial influence.<sup>107</sup> One of the most influential members of the National Front, or the national resistance movement, was Mehdi Bazargan (1907-1995).<sup>108</sup> Bazargan maintained close relations with Mossadegh after the coup and helped establish the Iran Party and Islamic Student Society, which became a prominent vessel for revolutionaries leading up to

---

<sup>104</sup> United States Senate, *Memorandum from FBI Director William Webster to Senator Birch Bayh*, Washington D.C., 1978, FOIPA #1364010-0, 1978.

<sup>105</sup> United States Senate, *Memorandum from FBI Director William Webster to Senator Birch Bayh*.

<sup>106</sup> United States Senate, *Memorandum from FBI Director William Webster to Senator Birch Bayh*.

<sup>107</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 457.

<sup>108</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 457.

1979.<sup>109</sup> The Islamic Student Society was the only non-governmental organization allowed at Tehran University, which attracted communist members despite Bazargan's anti-communist stance and communism's ostensibly atheistic bent.<sup>110</sup>

The National Front initially seemed promising when guided by politically experienced leaders with a nationalist appeal like Mossadegh, but by 1956 most of the National Front's leaders were arrested, and SAVAK's repression forced the opposition to be orchestrated covertly.<sup>111</sup> Rather than castigate the United States for aiding the Shah's dictatorial rule, Bazargan's Iran Party believed that if the United States restrained SAVAK, then Mossadegh supporters could gain a prominent position within the *Majles*—a consultative assembly that serves as Iran's legislative body.<sup>112</sup> However, this contradicted the cliency relationship's primary goal, establishing a politically stable environment in the client state, the reason SAVAK was created, and the ends to which its savagery was justified.<sup>113</sup> Simply put, it was not in the United States' interest to restrain SAVAK because it was created as a means to ensure the Shah remained on the throne. While the National Front lost momentum in the late 1950s, its message continued to resonate with many Iranian students and Mossadegists.<sup>114</sup>

During the John F. Kennedy (1917-1963) presidency (1961-1963), the United States pressured the Shah to pull back on his oppressive style.<sup>115</sup> To maintain the cliency relationship, the Shah took on a more liberal persona in order to shape his public image; however, *Sâzemân-e Ettelâ'ât va Amniat-e Kešvar* (SAVAK) had already infiltrated the most formidable forms of official political opposition.<sup>116</sup> The Shah appointed Ali Amini

---

<sup>109</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 458.

<sup>110</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 458.

<sup>111</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 459.

<sup>112</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 459.

<sup>113</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 18.

<sup>114</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 459.

<sup>115</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 185.

<sup>116</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 98-205.

(1905-1992) to the position of Prime Minister in 1961 with the goal of establishing liberal reforms within Iran.<sup>117</sup> Despite the Shah's notions towards reform, this did not soothe the National Front; while Amini made a plea for cooperation with the National Front he was met with an ultimatum to disband SAVAK, demonstrating the widespread contempt for SAVAK as a repressive tool.<sup>118</sup>

However, an internal dispute split the National Front into two separate parties in 1959.<sup>119</sup> The Second National Front was aligned with Bazargan's Iran party and published the prominent newspaper *Bakhtar-i Emruz*.<sup>120</sup> The other break in the National Front, named the Third National Front, consisted of the Liberation Movement and the Socialist Society, and handled political activity outside of Iran in countries like France and the United States.<sup>121</sup> The Third National Front published newspapers, such as *Iran Azad*, and attempted to coordinate with Khomeini and other exiled religious leaders who ultimately played a significant role in the revolution.<sup>122</sup> While the newspapers and groups mentioned above played a key role in organizing against the Shah, the budding Liberation Movement seemed to be the most formidable opponent to the Shah's autocratic rule.

The Liberation Movement enjoyed the membership of devout Muslims as well as secular socialists primarily because of the message of one particular scholar, Shari'ati (1933-1977).<sup>123</sup> Shari'ati was a well-educated sociologist who gained widespread support for his wisdom and anti-imperialist perspective, which he connected to his religious convictions.<sup>124</sup> Shari'ati's lectures at the Husseinieh (typically a building or dedicated space within a

---

<sup>117</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 182.

<sup>118</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 183.

<sup>119</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 459.

<sup>120</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 459.

<sup>121</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 460.

<sup>122</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 460.

<sup>123</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 462.

<sup>124</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 463.

mosque or Islamic center designed to host religious lectures and Quranic studies) attracted a wide range of listeners, contributing to the Liberation Movement's diversity.<sup>125</sup> Though SAVAK's overt brutality relaxed at the request of the Kennedy presidency, SAVAK did not stop working covertly to gather intelligence on organizations that threatened the Shah's throne.<sup>126</sup> SAVAK's violent repression continued overtly as well when necessary, often during public demonstrations such as the Bloody Riots of 1963, in which thousands of Iranians took to the streets to protest the arrest of Khomeini.<sup>127</sup> The people clashed with SAVAK, and the event concluded with the death of hundreds of Iranians, many of them National Front and Liberation Movement members.<sup>128</sup> After Khomeini's arrest, SAVAK intensified its pursuit of Shari'ati, first closing his popular place of teaching the Husseinieh and banning all of his works, eventually successfully arresting him in 1972.<sup>129</sup> Though the Algerian government appealed for his release, Shari'ati remained under house arrest and eventually accepted a move to London, where he died of a heart attack in 1977.<sup>130</sup> His supporters believed SAVAK murdered him, considering SAVAK's track record and reputation, it seemed a reasonable conclusion.

With Shari'ati's arrest and death, the Liberation Movement lost one of its prized intellectuals and driving forces; ultimately, its many students splintered into multiple guerrilla groups that subsequently targeted the Shah.<sup>131</sup> The two most prominent of these militant guerrilla groups were the Mojahideen-e Khalq (MEK) and the Feda'i.<sup>132</sup> Both groups were founded by and made up largely of students from Tehran University.<sup>133</sup> Despite rising salaries for early graduates, young academics also organized

---

<sup>125</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 465.

<sup>126</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 466.

<sup>127</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 473.

<sup>128</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 466.

<sup>129</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 466.

<sup>130</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 473.

<sup>131</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 473.

<sup>132</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 194.

<sup>133</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 180.

against the Shah's callous rule.<sup>134</sup> Each group gained support from the disenfranchised class of students and teachers who recognized that the Shah no longer acted in the people's interest, enabled by his oppressive U.S.-funded security apparatus.<sup>135</sup>

The appeal of these, and a number of other militant groups, marks a significant turning point in the Shah's rule; the repressive nature of the state and liberal use of SAVAK led politically active members of society to take arms to achieve liberation. As stated by the MEK,

The Regime is trying to place a wedge between Muslims and Marxists. In our view, however, there is only one major enemy-imperialism and its local collaborators. When SAVAK shoots, it kills both Muslims and Marxists. When it tortures, it tortures both Muslims and Marxists. Consequently, in the present situation there is an organic unity between Muslim revolutionaries and Marxist revolutionaries.<sup>136</sup>

The shared goal of these guerrilla groups was not to establish a Marxist leadership or Muslim theocracy but to destroy the systems of oppression and imperial rule that both groups were subject to by the Shah. The fascinating reality of these guerrilla groups was their ability to organize despite their different ideologies (including Maoist perspectives), demonstrating the consequence of a repressive state uniting its forces of opposition.<sup>137</sup>

---

<sup>134</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 481.

<sup>135</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 482.

<sup>136</sup> Mujahideen Organization *Pasokh Beh Etemat-i Ekhar-i Rezhim: An Answer to The Regime's Latest Slanders*, n.p. 1975 p.10-13.

<sup>137</sup> Peyman Vahabzadeh, *A Guerrilla Odyssey: Modernization, Secularism, Democracy, and the FADAI Period of National Liberation in Iran, 1971-1979* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2010), 12.



During 1964-1977, the Shah's "highly autonomous state" was well established, and SAVAK effectively infiltrated and arrested many of the opposition group's members.<sup>138</sup> SAVAK often killed members of these groups in shootouts or from the brutal torture prisoners were subjected to.<sup>139</sup> Only ten out of the 306 murdered guerrillas killed in direct confrontation with state forces in shootouts or from brutal torture during SAVAK imprisonment were over the age of thirty-five, demonstrating the appeal to younger populations and students.<sup>140</sup> SAVAK was able to track down and kill dissidents even in rural parts of Iran through collaboration with the Gendarmerie (a domestic police force of the Shah).<sup>141</sup> The many shootouts and kidnappings that resulted in SAVAK's pursuit of these anti-Shah groups would most likely have been avoided if the state did not reach such a level of negligence enabled via the Shah's autonomy.<sup>142</sup> While SAVAK was able to neutralize the organizing potential of these groups in the early 1970s, their dissident message resonated with many Iranians who later took part in the Iranian Revolution of 1979.<sup>143</sup> While the ideological ends of groups such as the MEK and Feda'i did not materialize after the Shah's rule, the efforts provided by these groups laid the foundations for a greater anti-Shah movement to come.<sup>144</sup>

### ***Elections and Political Participation***

*Sâzemân-e Ettelâ'ât va Amniyat-e Kešvar* (SAVAK) oversaw all political engagements within Iran and manipulated Iran's electoral system, the key to ensuring the Shah's continued rule.<sup>145</sup> In 1975,

---

<sup>138</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 483.

<sup>139</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 187.

<sup>140</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 480.

<sup>141</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 487.

<sup>142</sup> Vahabzadeh, *A Guerrilla Odyssey*, 12.

<sup>143</sup> Reza Behrani, "SAVAK Documents." *The Nation*, February 23, 1980, 2.

<sup>144</sup> Peyman Vahabzadeh, *A Guerrilla Odyssey*, 15.

<sup>145</sup> Meisels, "The Shah's 'Fatherly Eye,'" 14.

the Shah officially established a one-party state, though only a decade earlier, the Shah claimed one-party states were reserved for leaders such as Adolf Hitler.<sup>146</sup> This decision was a testament to the sense of security the Shah felt, in other words, autonomy from his people thanks to his expansive security apparatus—or it could be argued it demonstrated his assumed need to acquire such autonomy and isolate himself from building political pressure. Before the Shah established a one-party state, SAVAK ensured the Shah's two-party system was just as rigged. Regarding the supposedly free elections of the Twentieth *Majles* in 1960, the Shah told the United States Ambassador Edward T. Wailes (1903-1969) that SAVAK was given the order to rig these elections.<sup>147</sup> To establish his one-party state, the Shah relied heavily on SAVAK's vast intelligence network to ensure his newly created Resurgence Party grasped onto the salaried middle class of Iran.<sup>148</sup>

The Resurgence Party acted as a body of repression rather than a free political body of the people. With SAVAK's help, it infiltrated the Ministries of Labor, Housing, and Mines, which employed a vast swath of the Iranian middle and working classes, and therefore the Resurgence Party became a substantial part of everyday Iranian life.<sup>149</sup> Predictably, the state's ability to monitor Iranians and control their daily life increased under the Shah's new one-party political system. Members of the party could not belong to any other political organizations (not that those organizations would be allowed in the first place) and could not criticize the Shah.<sup>150</sup> This meant that an average Iranian had the choice to be part of the Shah's political body or no part of the political system in any official matter.<sup>151</sup> While there were a handful of artists and

---

<sup>146</sup> Reza Pahlavi Shah of Persia, *Mission for My Country* (London, 1961), 173.

<sup>147</sup> US Embassy Tehran, to Secretary of State "Political Parties Prepare for Coming Elections," March 5th, 1960 "Interim Report on Iran's 20th Majils Elections," September 24th, 1960.

<sup>148</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 442.

<sup>149</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 442.

<sup>150</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 442.

<sup>151</sup> Yoo, "An Analysis of United States Security Policy," 295.

writers that spoke out against the Shah's Resurgence Party, one of the most influential groups to speak out was the Iranian Student Association (ISA), which the Shah banned in 1971.<sup>152</sup>

The ISA called upon the citizens of France and the United States to recognize the plight of Iranians under Pahlavi's totalitarian rule. Their 1976 publication, "U.S. and France Support Shah's Fascism," asked "all progressive freedom-loving people to be alert to the joint conspiracy of SAVAK and the French government," and urged "everyone to phone the French embassy and consulates in the US."<sup>153</sup> In the same publication, the ISA argued that SAVAK's vast surveillance and control over Iran's political system was one of the deepest grievances within Iranian society and that the United States and France were guilty of propping up the Shah's regime.<sup>154</sup> Perhaps the most significant aspect of the ISA, it exposed the lack of political freedom within Iran and linked the repression to SAVAK. Crucially, the ISA operated throughout Europe and the United States, where it was able to speak on these issues freely, unlike many Iranians within Iran. SAVAK heightened the Shah's autonomy by establishing a one-party state but also cut the Shah off from his population. SAVAK sealed the regime's fate during this period of political consolidation by stoking widespread fear and hatred, which forced organized resistance underground, where the Shah's opposition grew into a revolutionary force.<sup>155</sup>

### ***The Cult of Fear and the Inevitable Revolution***

Although *Sâzemân-e Ettelâ'ât va Amniat-e Kešvar* (SAVAK) only employed 7,000 full-time agents at its peak, the organization was

---

<sup>152</sup> Iranian Student Association, "U.S. & France Support Shah's Fascism," November 16, 1976, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP88-01315R000300380055-1.pdf> 2.

<sup>153</sup> Iranian Student Association, "U.S. & France Support Shah's Fascism," 2.

<sup>154</sup> Iranian Student Association, "U.S. & France Support Shah's Fascism," 3.

<sup>155</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 446.

the embodiment of terror to many everyday Iranians.<sup>156</sup> The organization operated on such a large scale nobody would have guessed it only had 7,000 full-time agents, but what it lacked in membership, it made up for with bloody intimidation. Their brutality and all-encompassing surveillance were the two most effective characteristics of the organization and fostered SAVAK's feared reputation. Ironically, with its widespread and harsh abuse, this "cult of fear" that SAVAK cultivated made the agency a primary target during the Iranian Revolution.

SAVAK's reputation for brutality largely came from its barbaric torture methods. As described by former SAVAK member and interrogator, Ali Akbar Dehqani, there were "no limits" with regard to the organization's rules, which meant any method of torture deemed necessary to extract information from prisoners was applicable.<sup>157</sup> SAVAK's barbaric methods became a joke amongst British officials simply for the absurd lengths the organization went to extract information.<sup>158</sup> As stated in 1971 by British officials in a telegram after SAVAK ignored an inquiry on the well-being of a Tudeh activist, "presumably it takes a little while for the first to be resurrected and the second to be disemboweled."<sup>159</sup> Future messages about torture continued in a joking fashion, such as, "SAVAK, having twisted his balls off, were having difficulty putting them back on again!"<sup>160</sup>

In the late 1960s, after the Shah appointed Nematollah Nassiri (1910-1979) director of SAVAK, the organization expanded its use of torture, training its members to "maximize pain without killing detainees."<sup>161</sup> As described in a 1980 pamphlet

---

<sup>156</sup> "SAVAK Fathered by the CIA," 27:00.

<sup>157</sup> "SAVAK: Fathered by the CIA," 27:07.

<sup>158</sup> Meisels, "The Shah's 'Fatherly Eye,'" 16.

<sup>159</sup> The Bakhtiar Plot," British Embassy to UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, January 1, 1971. British Embassy Telegram. M2042 Box 10, Abbas Milani Research Collection, Stanford University.

<sup>160</sup> "Terrorism," British Embassy to UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, April 5, 1971, British Embassy Telegram, M2042 Box 11, Abbas Milani Research Collection, Stanford University.

<sup>161</sup> Meisels, "The Shah's 'Fatherly Eye,'" 16.

published by the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran authored by former prisoner Mehdi Reza'i, some of the most brutal methods included; acid burning followed up with hot plates placed on the raw skin, the whipping of feet with steel cables, and another method frequently employed used cattle prods.<sup>162</sup> The use of whipping cables was one of the most feared methods of torture, not only for its blunt harm, but it was usually used in combination with an iron bucket strapped around the prisoner's head to amplify their screams into their own ears.<sup>163</sup> Former prisoner Mehdi Malekolketab Khiabani's accounts demonstrate the variety of methods employed in recounting one of his most brutal memories;

After they lashed us with cables the interrogator would ask us, 'are you thirsty?' There was a jar this big containing one or two liters of water. They would give us the water, and we would drink it to the bottom nonstop. Later they would take us to the main circle and tie us up on the bars. They would then close up our urination pathways. We didn't immediately need to be relieved. But after some time, the closure would hugely press on our kidneys. It was so horrible, excuse my language, but it would make us scream like a horse.<sup>164</sup>

Along with physical torture, SAVAK employed psychological torture on their detainees. Since most prisoner cells were relatively small and close in proximity, many of the prisoners could hear the torture of their cellmates, who were even subjected to mock executions to further frighten those listening.<sup>165</sup> Furthermore many of the prisoners went without sleep for multiple days (a method of psychological torture used in many

---

<sup>162</sup> Mehdi Reza'i, *The Defenses of Martyred Mojahed* (The People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran, 1980), 12.

<sup>163</sup> "SAVAK: Fathered by the CIA," 37:04.

<sup>164</sup> Meisels, "The Shah's 'Fatherly Eye,'" 16.

<sup>165</sup> "SAVAK: Fathered by the CIA," 42:00

interrogations to the present day, including by United States forces during The War on Terror).<sup>166</sup> Fake medical records were produced for any detainee that died in SAVAK captivity as a cover-up of the organization's gruesome practices, which absolved torturers of any responsibility for their actions and provided cover from international criticism.<sup>167</sup>

Eventually, though, the brutality of the Shah's security agency could not be ignored, and his allies pressured the Shah, most importantly its patron in the cliency relationship, the United States, to end these practices.<sup>168</sup> Although the Shah banned torture in 1976, the damage to his regime's reputation was thorough and overlooked for too long.<sup>169</sup> According to the Geneva-based International Commission of Jurists, human rights violations, including torture, "are alleged to have taken place on an unprecedented scale."<sup>170</sup> By 1980, it was estimated that at least half a million Iranians had been assaulted, or at the very least interrogated by SAVAK members, which produced a large class of Iranians with an ever-growing feeling of animosity that culminated in the Iranian Revolution the previous year.<sup>171</sup>

The discontent many Iranians felt towards SAVAK was deepened by its ability to infiltrate everyday Iranian life while being simultaneously impossible to catch. While the characteristics of the organization's surveillance practices and infiltration capabilities have already been discussed, it is crucial to recognize just how these actions impacted the psyche of everyday Iranians prior to the revolution. SAVAK created such a climate of fear that the average Iranian was scared to speak critically of the regime within their own home with their own family.<sup>172</sup> Furthermore, the

---

<sup>166</sup> Meisels, "The Shah's 'Fatherly Eye,'" 16.

<sup>167</sup> "SAVAK: Fathered by the CIA," 31:07.

<sup>168</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 187.

<sup>169</sup> Meisels, "The Shah's 'Fatherly Eye,'" 50.

<sup>170</sup> "Human Rights: Torture as Policy: The Network of Evil," Time (Time Inc., August 16, 1976),

<https://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,914534,00.html>

<sup>171</sup> Reza Behrani, "SAVAK Documents." The Nation, February 23, 1980, 2.

<sup>172</sup> Yoo, "An Analysis of United States Security Policy," 295.

Shah's international boasting of his "liberalizing" regime left many Iranians with a sour taste.<sup>173</sup> All the actions SAVAK had taken to cement the Shah's throne ironically created a group of dissatisfied Iranians, made dire when the alienated middle and working classes aligned themselves with radical students, like those who made up the majority of militant groups and the clergy.<sup>174</sup>

### ***The Iranian Revolution***

Although *Sâzemân-e Ettelâ'ât va Amniat-e Kešvar* (SAVAK) ruthlessly suppressed the Shah's most formidable opposition groups in the early 1970s, the groups' revolutionary message carried on and rebounded with the help of the clergy.<sup>175</sup> Many of the anti-Shah groups differed in terms of ideological approach yet were united by their common enemy. Ultimately, the Shah alienated too wide a swath of Iranian society, culminating in a diverse force of Shi'ite clergy, Marxists of different sects, workers, teachers, and students that were able to overthrow him.

In an attempt to manage inflation, which was running high in 1977, and hopefully calm public opinion, the Shah ordered SAVAK to set up a system of guild courts.<sup>176</sup> These guild courts were designed to chastise Iran's Bazaar class, also known as the merchant class, while at the same time providing the government with much-needed funds.<sup>177</sup> At the Shah's direction, SAVAK used these courts to fine over 250,000 traders, ban around 80,000, and sentence a couple thousand to prison, all while the Shah was being pressured by his allies to alleviate the countless human rights abuses his regime was responsible for.<sup>178</sup>

---

<sup>173</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 457.

<sup>174</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 187.

<sup>175</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 214.

<sup>176</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 498.

<sup>177</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 499.

<sup>178</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 498.

In order to keep his greatest ally, the United States, happy, the Shah began to restrain SAVAK's actions.<sup>179</sup> The pullback of SAVAK's actions led to a major buildup of groups critical to the Shah's regime, such as the Writer's Association and the Group for Free Books and Free Thought.<sup>180</sup> The Writers Association consisted of many novelists, poets, Mossadegists, and former Tudeh members.<sup>181</sup> This association, headed by sixty-four lawyers, drafted a manifesto against the Shah's regime describing the Shah's hypocrisy.<sup>182</sup> The association argued that the Shah dishonestly presented himself on the world stage as a liberalizing reformer despite his consistent use of SAVAK to stifle all cultural aspects of Iranian life and censor the media.<sup>183</sup>

Furthermore, with the revival of the National Front, opposition forces began a paper called *Khabarnameh* in 1978, which listed the dissolution of SAVAK as one of its primary goals.<sup>184</sup> The opposition forces stated this as one of their primary goals because the Shah's autonomous rule relied directly on SAVAK's ability to suppress the people. As these opposition groups grew, they began to hold public demonstrations, including reading and writing groups.<sup>185</sup> When police arrived to break up the tenth session of one such writing group at Aryamehr University in 1977, they were met with over 10,000 discontent students.<sup>186</sup> The resulting protest signified the growing tide of revolution, and despite widespread police shootings and arrests of demonstrators from this point forward, Iranians chose liberation over fear.

The radical clergy made up one of the most, if not the most, instrumental groups leading the Iranian Revolution, partly because mosques and religious schools were some of the only places

---

<sup>179</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 500.

<sup>180</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 187.

<sup>181</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 500.

<sup>182</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 501.

<sup>183</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 503.

<sup>184</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 504.

<sup>185</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 504.

<sup>186</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 505.



relatively free of SAVAK spying.<sup>187</sup> Although the future figurehead of the Revolution and soon-to-be leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini was exiled to Iraq years previously, where he recorded sermons on cassette tapes to be smuggled into Iran and shared amongst his sizable following.<sup>188</sup> Khomeini managed to keep the distribution of these tapes mostly secret, which then contributed to the organization of opposition groups during the revolution. A 1977 United States State Department report stated that despite Khomeini's efforts through his tapes, Iran would remain under the Shah's control for many years to come, thanks to SAVAK's actions.<sup>189</sup> This report shows that while Khomeini's outside organizing was known to the United States, its influence was greatly underestimated.

Following police crackdowns on student demonstrations, many theology students took to the streets to protest and chanted, "We demand the return of Ayatollah Khomeini!"<sup>190</sup> This intense political climate only escalated upon the death of Khomeini's son, Mostafa, in 1977, which many of his supporters believed *Sâzemân-e Ettelâ'ât va Amniat-e Kešvar* (SAVAK) played a role in.<sup>191</sup> Khomeini encouraged further demonstrations, which the state initially responded to in a mixed fashion of repression and restraint; however, this restraint proved to be short-lived as the clergy and student body organized riots in Mashhad on July 23rd, 1978 which quickly turned bloody.<sup>192</sup> These riots reached a deadly climax when arsonists set fire to the Rex Theater and locked the front doors, which killed over four hundred innocent Iranians.<sup>193</sup> Rumor quickly spread that the fire was a SAVAK operation,

---

<sup>187</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 216.

<sup>188</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 216.

<sup>189</sup> "State Department, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Report No. 704, 'The Future of Iran: Implications for the US,' Secret, January 28, 1977," | National Security Archive, 1977, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/18190-national-security-archive-doc-01-state> 5.

<sup>190</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 505.

<sup>191</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 216.

<sup>192</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 218.

<sup>193</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 218.

widely believed because of the organization's brutal reputation, leading even more Iranians to take to the street in opposition to the Shah and his security apparatus.<sup>194</sup> The United States embassy in Tehran wrote to the State Department in 1978, further clarifying that SAVAK played a crucial role in safeguarding the Shah and expected a military takeover to maintain the Shah's position.<sup>195</sup> However, the Shah took a different approach which most likely sealed his fate.

In an attempt to win back support, the Shah took multiple actions to appease his opposition, including freeing political prisoners and arresting corrupt officials—among them Nassiri, the chief of SAVAK.<sup>196</sup> However, these concessions were far too late. Opposition forces had already taken the British Embassy, and they had no desire to compromise with the Shah.<sup>197</sup> To make matters worse for the Shah, Washington D.C. lost all confidence in his regime and encouraged him to compromise with the opposition.<sup>198</sup> With no options left, the Shah turned to Shapour Bakhtiar (1914-1991), a leader of the National Front who appealed to the Shah because Bakhtiar refused to work with Khomeini.<sup>199</sup> Bakhtiar gave the Shah an ultimatum; if he were to establish a government, the Shah must leave Iran, release all political prisoners, and, most importantly to this research, dissolve SAVAK.<sup>200</sup> On December 30th, 1978, Bakhtiar became Prime Minister of Iran; however, his administration was short-lived.

---

<sup>194</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 218.

<sup>195</sup> "U.S. Embassy Tehran, William Sullivan, Telegram to State Department, 'Looking Ahead: The Military Option,' Secret, November 2, 1978," U.S. Embassy Tehran, William Sullivan, Telegram to State Department, "Looking Ahead: The Military Option," Secret, November 2, 1978 | National Security Archive, November 2, 1978, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/18194-national-security-archive-doc-06-telegram> 1.

<sup>196</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 221.

<sup>197</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 221.

<sup>198</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 524.

<sup>199</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 524.

<sup>200</sup> Gasiorowski, *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 221.

The National Front and Khomeini denounced the new government and called for a militant approach, which resonated with many dissatisfied Iranians.<sup>201</sup> When Khomeini returned to Tehran on February 1st, 1979, he was greeted by a crowd of three million supporters, ready to organize general strikes and protest on his behalf.<sup>202</sup> It is important to note that during this period, the Iranian and the United States' relationship was not yet severed; President Carter believed that as one of the West's top oil suppliers, it was crucial to maintain Iranian relations.<sup>203</sup> As Bakhtiar's government atrophied, many of the same groups SAVAK previously persecuted began to mobilize, such as a teacher's association, which organized to create its own armed militia.<sup>204</sup> On February 11th, 1979, the militant groups successfully combated the police forces within Iran, and SAVAK's headquarters was one of the first government buildings laid to siege.<sup>205</sup> Nassiri, the organization's former director, was executed shortly after, and the organization's three safehouses throughout Tehran were discovered.<sup>206</sup> The brutal conditions these safehouses were left in, which Reza Behrami describes, included "pieces of human flesh still stuck to torture instruments, shocked most of the spectators."<sup>207</sup> The tipping point of U.S.-Iranian relations came on October 29th, 1979, when the Shah was admitted into the United States for cancer treatment.<sup>208</sup> Many Iranians wanted the Shah to stand trial for his crimes against Iranians, and coupled with Iran's history of foreign intervention, this decision added insult to injury.<sup>209</sup> Shortly after this, Iranians stormed the United States

---

<sup>201</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 525.

<sup>202</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 525.

<sup>203</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 524.

<sup>204</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 527.

<sup>205</sup> The True Nature of the U.S Regime, the "Great Satan," 10.

<sup>206</sup> Yoo, "An Analysis of United States Security Policy," 295.

<sup>207</sup> Reza Behrani, "SAVAK Documents," 2.

<sup>208</sup> Liz Dee, "Admitting the Shah to the U.S.: Every Form of Refuge Has Its Price," Association for Diplomatic Studies & Training, August 23, 2016.

<sup>209</sup> Liz Dee, "Admitting the Shah to the U.S."

embassy in Tehran and took the diplomats inside hostage, marking an end to the U.S.-Iran cliency relationship.

Inside the embassy, revolutionaries discovered the full extent to which the United States and the Shah worked together to secure the Shah's throne and advance the United States' foreign policy interests via SAVAK. These findings, uncovered by piecing back together shredded documents within the embassy, were published in 1984 as *The True Nature of the U.S Regime, the "Great Satan."*<sup>210</sup> These documents included confirmation of the CIA's role in the construction of and assistance given to SAVAK, as well as proof that the embassy secured special visas and extra financial aid to SAVAK members.<sup>211</sup> The findings also affirmed that the United States was committed to keeping SAVAK operational within Iran, despite its reputation, because the organization kept the Shah in power, who in turn kept Iran within the Western camp.<sup>212</sup> The documents found in the United States embassy demonstrate that the U.S.-Iran cliency relationship depended on strengthening the Shah's security apparatus. However, the aid and support for the Shah's security organization did not secure Iran in the long run. Ultimately, SAVAK's repressive capabilities inspired many Iranians to oppose the Shah rather than submit to the regime's intimidating nature.

## **Conclusion**

The Islamic Revolution marked a definitive end of the cliency relationship and the beginning of seemingly unending hostility between the United States and Iran. The strategic role of the policeman of the gulf on the Soviet border was lost, and with it, a change to the United States' entire strategy regarding the Middle East. The decades of strategic blunder that propped up the Shah began with the assumption that the cliency relationship's wants

---

<sup>210</sup> The True Nature of the U.S Regime, the "Great Satan." (Tehran, 1984), 67.

<sup>211</sup> The True Nature of the U.S Regime, the "Great Satan." 68.

<sup>212</sup> The True Nature of the U.S Regime, the "Great Satan." 55.

(the Shah's wants) could be prioritized to ensure continued friendly relations and thus override the people's needs.

This relationship started in 1953 with the overthrow of democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh and U.S. support of the Shah, a crime against the Iranian people made worse by the decision to repress any other democratic sentiment by creating and then bolstering *Sâzemân-e Ettelâ'ât va Amniat-e Kešvar* (SAVAK). The military, surveillance, and intelligence aid the United States provided Iran throughout the Shah's rule, embodied by SAVAK, allowed him to act with indifference towards his people. This is what Mark J. Gasiorowski considered a highly autonomous state, or a state that can act without depending on its constituents by repressing their needs and regulating political participation.

SAVAK played a major role in heightening the state's autonomy. The organization controlled or monitored nearly every aspect of Iranians' lives, from their job screenings and passports to the media they consumed, and even left Iranians fearful of what they could say in their own homes. SAVAK's brutal reputation became more evident when equipped with all the surveillance technology it desired; the organization infiltrated every prominent opposition group and tortured thousands of Iranians, creating more dissidents in the process. Ultimately the repressive nature of the Shah's regime became its downfall, sowing the seeds of the Iranian Revolution led by the radical clergy and student groups, both previously persecuted by SAVAK. Once middle and working-class Iranians had enough of the Shah's boot on their necks, and all other forms of opposition were repressed, they joined with the radical and militant groups of various ideological and theological bents united by the common enemy. Evident through the above examination of SAVAK -the tool of autonomy- and its repressive methods, the U.S.-Iran cliency relationship and the resulting autonomy of the client state are to blame for its collapse.

Although many of SAVAK's members were executed during the revolution, the capabilities of this security apparatus did not wither away. The intelligence network the organization created

became a useful asset to the Islamic Republic of Iran, and SAVAK was quickly rebranded into *Veżarat-e Ettela'at Jomhuri-ye Eslami* (SAVAMA), which differed only in name and ownership.<sup>213</sup> SAVAMA exists as a testament to the repressive potential of *Sâzemân-e Ettelâ'ât va Amniyat-e Kešvar* (SAVAK), serving as a haunting reminder of the Shah's authoritarian rule and the repressive tools birthed from the U.S.-Iran cliency relationship.

---

<sup>213</sup> Pre-Comment: Intelligence Services, Part 2: Iranian Strategies of Internal Stability, External Destabilization and Deception," The Global Intelligence Files - [MESA], 2010, [https://wikileaks.org/gifiles/docs/10/105055\\_-mesa-pre-comment-intelligence-services-part-2-iranian.html](https://wikileaks.org/gifiles/docs/10/105055_-mesa-pre-comment-intelligence-services-part-2-iranian.html)

## **Bibliography**

- Abrahamian, Ervand. *A History of Modern Iran*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2019.
- Abrahamian, Ervand. *Iran between Two Revolutions*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983.
- Afkhami, Gholam R. *The Life and Times of the Shah*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009.
- Afkhami, Gholam Reza. *The Iranian Revolution: Thanatos on a National Scale*. Washington: The Middle East Institute, 1985.
- Alvandi, Roham. *Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah: The United States and Iran in the Cold War*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Asnad, Mark. "How CIA, Mossad Helped Form SAVAK." Iranian Revolution Documents Center. irdc.ir, November 11, 2016. <https://irdc.ir/en/news/26/how-cia-mossad-helped-form-savak>
- Bill, James A. *The Eagle and the Lion the Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.
- Carter, Jimmy. "Tehran, Iran Toasts of the President and the Shah at a State Dinner." Tehran, Iran Toasts of the President and the Shah at a State Dinner. | The American Presidency Project, December 31, 1977. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/tehran-iran-toasts-the-president-and-the-shah-state-dinner>
- "CIA's Role in Forming SAVAK." Central Intelligence Agency. Central Intelligence Agency, March 2, 1980. <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp90-00552r000505290007-5>
- Dee, Liz. "Admitting the Shah to the U.S.: Every Form of Refuge Has Its Price." Association for Diplomatic Studies & Training, August 23, 2016.

<https://adst.org/2016/08/admitting-shah-u-s-every-form-refuge-price/>

Gasiorowski, Mark J. *United States Foreign Policy and the Shah: Building a Client State in Iran*. Ithaca u.a.: Cornell University Press, 1991.

Hadar, Leon. "The Collapse of Israel's 'Periphery Doctrine'." *Foreign Policy*, June 27, 2010.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/06/26/the-collapse-of-israels-periphery-doctrine/>

"Human Rights: Torture as Policy: The Network of Evil." *Time*. Time Inc., August 16, 1976.

<https://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,914534,00.html>

Iranian Student Association. "U.S. & France Support Shah's Fascism." November 16, 1976.

<https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP88-01315R000300380055-1.pdf>

IRI Center. "SAVAK: Fathered by the CIA - Youtube," August 19, 2019. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qau-V9-0\\_vc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qau-V9-0_vc)

"JPRS ID: 9523 USSR Report Political and ... - Cia.gov," February 4, 1981. <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP82-00850R000300080006-4.pdf>

Keddie, Nikki Ragozin, and Mark J. Gasiorowski. *Neither East nor West: Iran, the Soviet Union, and the United States*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

Meisels, Eitan. "The Shah's 'Fatherly Eye' Iranian Espionage in the United ," April 13, 2020.

[https://history.columbia.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2020/05/Meisels-Eitan\\_SNR-Thesis\\_web.pdf](https://history.columbia.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2020/05/Meisels-Eitan_SNR-Thesis_web.pdf)

"Neir-Vance Correspondence." U.S. Department of State. U.S. Department of State, June 29, 1977.

<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v24/ch11>

Persia, Reza Pahlavi Shah of. *Mission for My Country*. London, 1961.



“Pre-Comment: Intelligence Services, Part 2: Iranian Strategies of Internal Stability, External Destabilization and Deception.”

The Global Intelligence Files - [MESA] Pre-Comment: Intelligence Services, Part 2: Iranian strategies of internal stability, external destabilization and deception, 2010.

[https://wikileaks.org/gifiles/docs/10/105055\\_-mesa-pre-comment-intelligence-services-part-2-iranian.html](https://wikileaks.org/gifiles/docs/10/105055_-mesa-pre-comment-intelligence-services-part-2-iranian.html)

Ringham, Eric. “CIA Said to Want Students to Monitor Iranians.” *Minnesota Daily*, November 21, 1978.

Sale, Richard T., Special to The Washington Post; The writer, a former reporter for Life magazine, and recently spent more than a month touring Iran. Ma. “SAVAK Said at Work in Washington.” The Washington Post. WP Company, May 10, 1977.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1977/05/10/savak-said-at-work-in-washington/5ea92a0a-6d3c-46f5-bf9e-7e4c3c1926f9/>

“SAVAK: Fathered by the CIA.” YouTube. YouTube, August 19, 2019. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qau-V9-0\\_vc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qau-V9-0_vc)

Special, Nicholas Gage. “U.S.-Iran Links Still Strong.” The New York Times. The New York Times, July 9, 1978.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1978/07/09/archives/usiran-links-still-strong-move-toward-liberalization.html>

“State Department, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Report No. 704, ‘The Future of Iran: Implications for the Us,’ Secret, January 28, 1977.” State Department, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Report No. 704, “The Future of Iran: Implications for the US,” Secret, January 28, 1977 | National Security Archive, 1977.

<https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/18190-national-security-archive-doc-01-state>

The National Front. “A Portion of The Secrets of the Security Organization SAVAK,” 1971.

*The True Nature of the U.S. Regime, the “Great Satan.”* Tehran, 1984.

- Truman, Harry. "Truman Doctrine (1947)." National Archives and Records Administration. National Archives and Records Administration. Accessed April 5, 2023. <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/truman-doctrine>
- "U.S. Embassy Tehran, William Sullivan, Telegram to State Department, 'Looking Ahead: The Military Option,' Secret, November 2, 1978." U.S. Embassy Tehran, William Sullivan, Telegram to State Department, "Looking Ahead: The Military Option," Secret, November 2, 1978 | National Security Archive, November 2, 1978. <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/18194-national-security-archive-doc-06-telegram>
- United States Senate. "Memorandum from FBI Director William Webster to Senator Birch Bayh." Washington D.C., 1978, FOIPA #1364010-0, 1978.
- Vahabzadeh, Peyman. *A Guerrilla Odyssey: Modernization, Secularism, Democracy, and the FADAI Period of National Liberation in Iran, 1971-1979*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2010.
- Wainwright, Darius. "Equal Partners? The Information Research Department, SAVAK and the Dissemination of Anti-Communist Propaganda in Iran, 1956–68." Shibboleth authentication request, 2017. <https://www-tandfonline-com.libproxy.lib.csusb.edu/doi/full/10.1080/13530194.2017.1409100>
- "WikiLeaks." The Global Intelligence Files - [MESA] Pre-Comment: Intelligence Services, Part 2: Iranian strategies of internal stability, external destabilization and deception, April 5, 2010. [https://wikileaks.org/gifiles/docs/10/105055\\_-mesa-pre-comment-intelligence-services-part-2-iranian.html](https://wikileaks.org/gifiles/docs/10/105055_-mesa-pre-comment-intelligence-services-part-2-iranian.html)
- Yoo, Hyun Sang. "An Analysis of United States Security Policy towards a Third World State during the Cold War Era: Case Study of US-Iran Relations." British Library EThOS - Search and order theses online. Durham University,

*The Double-Edged Sword*

January 1, 1996.

<https://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.295685>

Zinn, Howard. *A People's History of the United States*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1990.

***Author Bio***

Braedon McGhee is currently earning his single subject teaching credential from California State University, San Bernardino after completing a Bachelor of Arts in history in Spring 2022. His research interests include U.S. intervention abroad during the Cold War, political science, and existentialism. He also has a strong interest in raising awareness about the consequences of United States intervention and the need for thoughtful and ethical foreign policy decisions. Braedon hopes to inspire his students to use history as a tool to develop their critical thinking skills and guide them on their paths in life. Braedon plans to return to California State University, San Bernardino to work on his Masters in either history or education.



*History in the Making*