

“ . . . the Nixon Doctrine more than any other U.S. or Iranian policy contributed directly to the rise and fall of Shah Muhammed Reza Pahlavi.”

IRAN AND THE NIXON DOCTRINE

American Arms and the Rise and Fall of the Shah

ALEX GUITTARD

THE 1969 NIXON DOCTRINE—WHICH CALLED FOR EMPOWERING AMERICAN ALLIES IN ORDER TO REDUCE THEIR DEPENDENCE ON THE UNITED STATES FOR SECURITY—HAS LONG BEEN TIED TO PRESIDENT NIXON'S AIM OF REDUCING THE AMERICAN MILITARY PRESENCE IN VIETNAM. HOWEVER, NOTES FROM NIXON'S 1967 MEETING WITH THE SHAH OF IRAN SUGGEST THAT THE MONARCH HEAVILY INFLUENCED FOREIGN POLICY PURSUED BY THE FUTURE PRESIDENT. THE DOCTRINE ALSO ALLOWED THE SHAH TO FULFILL HIS REGIONAL POLITICAL AMBITIONS BY FACILITATING THE SALE OF BILLIONS OF DOLLARS WORTH OF THE MOST SOPHISTICATED AMERICAN WEAPONRY TO IRAN. HOWEVER, AS OIL PRICES BEGAN TO DROP IN THE LATE 1970s, THE SHAH'S DEFENSE SPENDING BEGAN TO HAVE AN INCREASINGLY ADVERSE EFFECT ON THE IRANIAN ECONOMY, ULTIMATELY CONTRIBUTING TO THE OVERTHROW OF THE PAHLAVI DYNASTY.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NIXON DOCTRINE

In 1969, newly elected President Richard Nixon laid the cornerstone of his presidency's foreign policy when he announced an initiative which would become known as the Nixon Doctrine. Aimed at reducing the United States' military commitments in Southeast Asia, the Doctrine called on America's allies to provide for their own defense, rather than depending solely on the United States for their security. Breaking with the past containment strategies that engaged American forces in long and costly conflicts in Korea and Vietnam, the new doctrine stipulated,

In cases involving other [non-nuclear] types of aggression we shall furnish military and economic assistance when requested and as appropriate. But we shall look to the nation directly threatened to assume the primary responsibility of providing the manpower for its defense.¹

"The United States would become the arsenal rather than the policeman of the non-Communist world,"ⁱⁱ providing weapons and training to regional allies to contain the Soviet threat.

"Eventually, his ambitions became 'considerably more grandiose' as the Shah began to see himself as the regional hegemon—the ruler from whom all had to seek permission and indulgence."

Though this course of action was originally framed as a shift in U.S. policy towards Southeast Asia, the Nixon Doctrine had its real roots in Tehran. There, in 1967, former Vice President Nixon met with the Shah of Iran, who argued that it would be "better for U.S. to have Iran able to defend [it]self than have [a security] guarantee and another Vietnam."ⁱⁱⁱ This counsel from America's foremost Middle Eastern ally predates the Doctrine by over two years and undoubtedly played a critical, formative role in the development of Nixon's foreign policy.

In making his suggestion, the Shah was not merely offering advice, but was also seeking American support for his ambitions to play a more dominant role in the Middle East, especially in the Persian Gulf. Such ambitions were long in the making and were the product of the Shah's ardent Persian nationalism and distrust of "the motives of his American admirers."^{iv} Muhammad Reza Pahlavi knew he had only come to the Peacock Throne after his father was deposed by the Allies in 1941. His restoration by the CIA in 1953 further added to his insecurity by demonstrating the influence that outside powers wielded over his kingdom.

It was in this vein that the Shah's early military goals started as being defensive, "seeking to deter a Soviet invasion" so that he may "ultimately become strong enough to withstand any foreign pressure."^v However, as the Iranian economy developed in the mid-1960s, "Iran's growing oil wealth . . . allowed [the Shah] to think about playing a bigger role in the Middle East."^{vi} Eventually, his ambitions became "considerably more grandiose" as the Shah began to see himself as *the* regional hegemon—"the ruler from whom all had to seek permission and indulgence."^{vii}

When Great Britain announced that it would withdraw its forces "east of the Suez" by 1971, the Shah did not pass up the opportunity to replace Britain as guardian of the Gulf. Speaking with Nixon in 1967, the Shah made a thinly veiled comparison to Britain's imminent withdrawal and America's problems in Vietnam, telling Nixon that "the British are spread too thin to be strong enough every-

Shah:

Defence Need: (Better for U.S. to have Iran able to defend self - then to have guarantee to another U. Power)

RN Doctrine

1. Adequate force will deter Russia from attack + blackmail
 @ He has told E. Casper - they will shoot those who cross border
2. By 70 or 71 - Iran ~~to~~ will be able to help Saudis if requested. (over optimistic)
 @ British should ~~stay~~ control the East eventually must leave.
 1. Colonial control will not be tolerated.
 2. British spread too thin to do strong enough anywhere -

Iran's system of Govt:

1. "Not imprisoned by any 'ism'" -

NIXON'S NOTES FROM HIS 1967 MEETING WITH THE SHAH OF IRAN INCLUDING AN EXPLICIT REFERENCE TO THE NIXON DOCTRINE IN THE LEFTHAND MARGIN.

where."^{viii} Instead, the Shah argued, Iran could become an "adequate force to deter Russia from attack and blackmail" and that with increased U.S. support, "by 1970 or 1971, Iran will be able to help the Saudis, if requested."^{ix} U.S. Ambassador Armin Meyer hypothesized how the Shah might have framed his position when he spoke with Nixon:

I don't want another Vietnam here. In Vietnam, the Russians get behind one side, you get behind the other. In the end, there is a negotiation—and I lose part of my oil resources Let me do the job myself.^x

America's foreign policy situation in 1967 made Nixon amenable to the Shah's proposal. When the British announced their intention to withdraw forces from the Persian Gulf, the U.S. military was bogged down by the conflict in Vietnam and unable to fill the void of the regional protector. The Six-Day War had made the situation in the Middle East even more delicate, pushing anti-American Arab nationalists further into the arms of the

Soviet Union. Fearing the absence of the British navy would allow a Nasserite revolution to sweep into Saudi Arabia and the littoral states, America needed a pro-Western guarantor of regional stability. In addition to straining the American military's ability to exert force in the Gulf, the Vietnam conflict also made such a deployment a political liability, both with conservatives who sought to limit America's involvement overseas and liberals who were opposed to such exertions of American force altogether.^{xi} Empowering the Shah was Nixon's only feasible means of maintaining stability in the Persian Gulf without straining the U.S. military or his own political position. In Ambassador Meyer's estimation, this calculus led to the Doctrine's germination when Nixon visited Iran in 1967.^{xii}

Nixon's actions and words following his return to the United States support Ambassador Meyer's assertion. At some point between Nixon's discussion with the Shah and the unveiling of the Doctrine in 1968, Nixon consulted his notes from the meeting, writing and underlining "RN

Doctrine” in the margin to the left of the Shah’s request for increased U.S. support for the defense of Iran. In an October 1967 article in *Foreign Affairs*, Nixon echoed the Iranian monarch’s earlier statements, arguing that “other nations must recognize that the role of the United States as world policeman is likely to be limited in the future.” Instead, nations should be prepared to “contain the threat by themselves” with assistance from the United States.^{xiii} In July 1969, when Nixon announced his new doctrine in a televised address, he also made similar comments to the Shah, saying, “When you are trying to assist another nation defending its freedom, U.S. policy should be to help them fight the war but not to fight the war for them.”^{xiv}

Even Henry Kissinger’s own account of the development of the Doctrine also places the impetus of America’s massive military sales to Iran on the Shah. According to Kissinger, both the British withdrawal and America’s situation in Southeast Asia forced the Shah to realize “that Iran would have to rely on its own strength” and that his country needed “to carry its share of the defense burden.”^{xv} According to Kissinger, U.S. policy was intended “to help Iran arm itself,” so that it could continue to contribute “importantly to the stability of the region and to international security.”^{xvi}

THE REGIONAL IMPACT OF THE DOCTRINE

The significance of the origin of the Doctrine is heightened by the dramatic effect it had on the Middle East, namely the massive influx of U.S. arms and sophisticated military technology into Iran. From 1950 to 1970, the total U.S. military aid to Iran amounted to \$1.8 billion.^{xvii} “By the time of the British departure from the Persian Gulf in 1971, Iran had already emerged as a formidable military power in the area” and was “more than a match” for the combined Arab forces of the Gulf.^{xviii} In 1974, the Shah’s military purchases swelled to over six billion dollars in American weapons, comprising over seventy percent of the total U.S. arms sales that year.^{xix}

“As the Shah’s military power grew, so too did Washington’s reliance on Iran’s ability to act as the region’s gendarme.”

Far from investing in land-based weaponry to repel a potential Soviet or Iraqi offensive, the bulk of these purchases were for air and sea-based systems that were intended to enhance Iran’s position in the Gulf. In 1973 alone, Iran purchased over 200 attack helicopters, 248 fighters and fighter-bombers, 24 surface vessels, 100 C-130 transports, and 14 Hovercraft.^{xx} In addition to these massive orders, Iran also began constructing a large harbor-dry dock facility at Chabahar, outside of the shallow waters of the Persian Gulf and beyond the possible entrapment of the Arab navies.^{xxi} Additional naval bases were built at Khark and Kish islands, as well as Bandar Abbas and Bushir. In 1974, Iran and the United States agreed to focus especially on the further development of Iran’s air force and navy by adding 6 *Spruance*-class destroyers and 250 F-17s to Iran’s military.^{xxii} This focus on naval and air weapons indicates that the Shah used the pretext of the Nixon Doctrine—deterring Communist forces from the region—to pursue his own goal of controlling the Persian Gulf.

“The dramatic increase in Iran’s military capability” was “of great importance in enabling Iran to exert its increasing influence as a regional power.”^{xxiii} The first exercise of this newly developed capability and the Shah’s propensity to act as a regional power occurred in November 1971, on the eve of the British withdrawal, when the Iranian military seized Abu Musa and the Tunbs islands. Within months of occupying the disputed islands, which lie in close proximity to the Strait of Hormuz, Iran had already erected gun emplacements which it equipped with sophisticated anti-ship

missile batteries. Rather than upbraid the Shah for breaching international law and seizing the islands by force, Nixon instead acquiesced, describing the Shah shortly afterwards as “our best friend.”^{xxiv}

As the Shah’s military power grew, so too did Washington’s reliance on Iran’s ability to act as the region’s gendarme. When King Faisal of Saudi Arabia was assassinated by a member of his coterie in 1975, the United States was deeply concerned that further instability in the Kingdom could exacerbate the already serious energy crisis plaguing the West. Fearing a “Qaddafi-like development,” President Ford, at the insistence of Kissinger (“whose power arched across the Nixon and Ford administrations”^{xxv}), affirmed the Secretary of State’s earlier support in July 1973 for the Shah to conduct “a paratroop operation in Saudi Arabia in a crisis.”^{xxvi} From the transcript of the Shah’s conversation with Ford and Kissinger, it is clear that such an idea did not originate on the American side. Ford told the Shah that he was familiar with the Iranian contingency planning and was in support of the measure, whereas the Shah “was clearly anxious to discuss operational logistics,” specifically the inclusion of Egypt in the assault in order to mitigate any resistance to a “totally non-Arab” force.^{xxvii}

Remembering the Shah’s earlier warning that “colonial control will not be tolerated” in the Persian Gulf,^{xxviii} Nixon

was eager to avoid the appearance in the Arab world that the United States had turned over control of the Gulf to the Persian “*Ajamiin*.” To achieve this, the United States relied on a “twin pillar” strategy that “paired Saudi Arabia with Iran” as the two pillars of American policy.^{xxix} However, this arrangement was disingenuous, as “Saudi Arabia was neither willing nor able to act as a ‘pillar’ of the U.S. regional security policy in the sense that Iran did.”^{xxx} Saudi

Arabia never invested the funds that Iran did into its military, preferring instead to focus on domestic modernization.^{xxxi} Indeed, Kissinger and the Shah’s contingency plans to seize the Saudi oil fields suggests that the Americans recognized that the Saudis were significantly weaker than their Iranian “partners,” as no similar planning was undertaken regarding Iran.^{xxxii} Additionally, Saudi Arabia was “hardly keen about acting under U.S. and Iranian auspices,” who were perceived as threats to the pan-Arabist sentiments of the Gulf and the Middle East. Lee Hamilton summarized the United States’ position in 1973: “One of our prime challenges in the Persian Gulf will be to avoid any confrontation between our two close friends.”^{xxxiii}



SHAH MUHAMMED REZA PAHLAVI.

Despite these significant differences with his Arab neighbor, the Shah was transformed into the Persian Gulf’s regional policeman by the Nixon Doctrine, a role that earned him “considerable praise in U.S. government circles.”^{xxxiv} Enforcing Iran’s position as a status quo power, the Shah

deployed three thousand counterinsurgency troops, backed by artillery and sophisticated air support, to Oman between 1972 and 1977 in an attempt to assist the sultanate in crushing the Soviet and Chinese-backed rebellion in Dhofar. In addition to providing the “untested Iranian military [with] valuable field practice,”^{xxxv} the campaign also reflected “the shah’s concern about the stability of the sultanates in the Gulf region.”^{xxxvi}

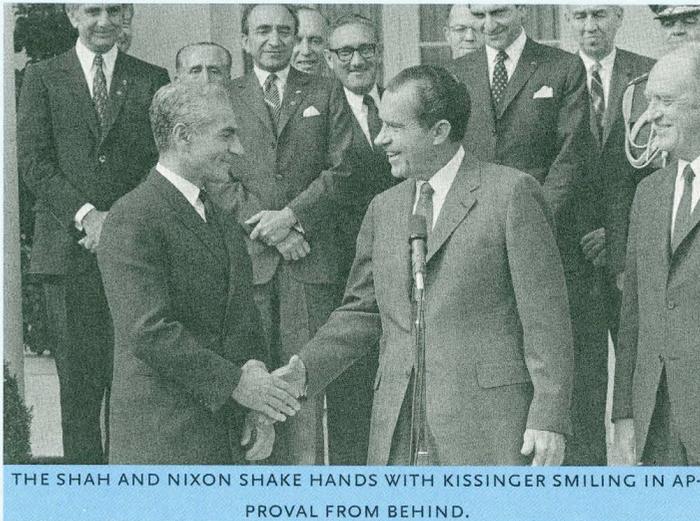
THE TAIL WAGS THE DOG

Although the Shah was a driving force behind the development of the Nixon Doctrine, in the early years of its implementation Iran remained very much a client state that conveniently “fit into” the Doctrine.^{xxxvii} In fact, as late as 1967, Iran was still the recipient of large amounts of U.S. economic and military aid. According to an April 1967 State Department memorandum, most of Iran’s weapons purchases from the United States were made on credit. (The same report also stated that the “most dynamic relation” between the two countries “continues to be a military one.”^{xxxviii})

By 1972, however, the tables had effectively turned, and Iran assumed a position of dominance in its relationship with the United States. Several incidences best characterize this development and indicate that, in U.S.-Iran relations during the mid-1970s, “the tail was in fact wagging the dog.”^{xxxix} The foremost area in which the Shah directly challenged his American benefactors was oil. As one of the

leading price hawks in OPEC, the Shah had long sought to drive up the price of oil by suppressing the cartel’s quotas (and subsequently “cheating” by overproducing and selling an increased quantity at artificially increased prices). Faced with a more finite supply of oil than most of the other OPEC members, the Shah’s long-standing position was to maximize Iran’s short-term profits in order to finance his lavish defense spending.^{xl}

After the West was plunged into the energy crisis following the 1973 Arab boycott, such a hawkish position on oil prices was viewed by Western governments as inimical to global



THE SHAH AND NIXON SHAKE HANDS WITH KISSINGER SMILING IN APPROVAL FROM BEHIND.

economic and political stability. Though the Shah earned a reputation for pragmatism by his willingness to provide oil despite the boycott, he was also responsible for “the December 1973 Tehran Oil Agreement that saw oil prices quadruple within twelve months.”^{xli} When Ford publicly called for a reduction in prices in September

1974, the Shah openly challenged his American patrons, “No one can dictate to us. No one can wave a finger at us, because we will wave a finger back.”^{xlii} The Shah’s intransigence went further. On May 17, 1975, just one day after meeting with Ford in Washington and promising further cooperation with the United States on energy, the Shah announced to the press, only a few blocks from the White House, that Iran would seek another increase in the price of oil as high as thirty-five percent.^{xliii} Such rhetoric was reminiscent of Mossadegh and his bid to achieve oil independence a generation earlier. The major difference be-

tween 1953 and 1974, however, was that the Shah now commanded the largest and most modern military force in a region devoid of a sizable U.S. military presence. One intelligence official remarked at the time, “He was our baby, but now he has grown up.”^{xliv}

As the Shah’s military and economic clout grew, “he embarked on his political ego trip in the early 1970s.”^{xlv} The exchange of draft versions of the joint communiqué issued by the American and Iranian governments during Nixon’s visit to Tehran in May 1972 illustrates the Shah’s increased desire to assert Iran’s role in the region, as well as the U.S. government’s increased willingness to accede to the Shah. The proposed American text of the communiqué read:

The President and His Imperial Majesty agreed that the security of the Persian Gulf and the continued availability of its vital natural resources were of the utmost importance to the free world. Both were of the view that the countries of the region bore the principal responsibility for providing for their security and defense. His Imperial Majesty noted Iran’s determination to bear its share of this responsibility. The President promised the United States would, as in the past, continue to assist Iran in strengthening its own security.^{xlvi}

However, the draft approved by the Iranian government narrowed the parties responsible for the security of the Persian Gulf from “the countries of the region” to “the littoral states.”^{xlvii} The Iranian version also removed the reference to the assistance provided by the United States, stating that “GOI [Government of Iran] wants to stress determination to build up defensive capabilities.” The GOI also found the reference to the continued availability of Persian Gulf resources to be “troublesome” and removed it from the final draft.^{xlviii}

The most notable power reversal in the U.S.-Iran relationship occurred when Nixon visited Iran on May 30 and 31, 1972. According to Gary Sick, the two and a half hours Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah spent in formal meetings

“radically restructured the U.S.-Iranian relationship” by “guaranteeing the shah access to some of the most sophisticated non-nuclear technology in the U.S. military arsenal.”^{xlix} The weakness of the U.S. position was encapsulated by Nixon’s near pleading at the end of the meeting, when the president “looked across the table to the Shah and said simply, ‘Protect me.’”^l

This was truly a stunning development. As Tyler commented, Nixon and Kissinger had effectively ceded the security role of a major superpower to a “regional autocrat.”^{li} Also, by providing the Shah with *carte blanche* to obtain virtually any U.S. weapons system he desired, the United States further enhanced Iran’s power in the Gulf, thereby weakening its ability to exert influence over the Shah. As the Shah’s military power increased without challenge, so too did his willingness to act on Iranian feelings of distrust of the United States and pursue an increasingly nationalistic foreign policy. By 1976, the inspector general of the U.S. Foreign Service concluded that “the Government of Iran exerts the determining influence” in its relationship with Washington.^{lii} In Sick’s estimation, the Nixon Doctrine placed “U.S. security interests in the Persian Gulf almost exclusively in the hands of the shah” who held U.S. security policy “hostage to the social and economic experiment that [he] was conducting in Iran. Whether one liked it or not, Iran was the regional tail wagging the superpower dog.”^{liii}

THE NIXON DOCTRINE AND THE ROAD TO REVOLUTION

Ultimately, the Shah’s addiction to military spending and desire to dominate the Gulf were to be central components of his downfall. After Nixon and Kissinger opened the “candy store” to the Shah in 1972, Iran became the world’s largest importer of arms.^{liv} As noted above, from 1973 to 1974, Iran purchased six billion dollars worth of “the most sophisticated and expensive weapons systems sold by the United States to a foreign country.”^{lv} When the Iranian economy was buoyed by the massive increase in oil prices in 1973, the Shah actively pursued the strategy of short-term maximization of oil revenues and encouraged mas-

“By relaxing his control on Iranian society, the Shah opened the valve of public expression that he would never again be able to close.”

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sive overspending on the military. However, “by the spring of 1975, Iran was spending well in excess of its oil revenues; \$30 billion worth of commitments had been made against \$21 billion in revenues.”^{lvi}

When the astronomical oil prices of 1973 triggered a recession in the West in 1974, oil demand and price declined considerably. As Iran followed the West into recession, the Shah’s government was faced with a considerable challenge to its legitimacy. As income disparities increased, the Iranian public began to regard their government’s defense spending as “unnecessary if not altogether harmful to the economic prosperity of the country” and chiefly designed to “benefit the US arms industry.”^{lvii} Additionally, “Iranians believed, rightly or wrongly that the shah’s foreign policy [for which they were paying with their oil revenues] did not serve Iranian interests; that it only served to perpetuate his own regime and United States influence on Iran.”^{lviii} Such sentiments contributed to the belief that the Shah was complicit in U.S. imperialism, which further weakened his legitimacy to rule.^{lix}

The Shah’s costly military imports leaked billions of dollars out of the Iranian economy each year. If that money had stayed in Iran where it would have been subject to a multiplier effect, it would have enabled hundreds of billions of dollars in domestic growth. Instead, the Shah’s weapons purchases left the Iranian economy too underdeveloped to cope with an overall macroeconomic crisis which pushed inflation past thirty percent in 1975. By 1976, this astronomical inflation led to food shortages, power blackouts, and a sizable influx of rural Iranians flocking to cities in search of work—all of which placed an incredible strain on the Iranian people.^{lx} Faced with these challenges to his le-

gitimacy and pensively watching the presidential victory of Jimmy Carter in 1976, the Shah decided to ease censorship and reign in his security establishment. By relaxing his control on Iranian society, the Shah opened the valve of public expression that he would never again be able to close. The unrest that originally manifested as a response to the Shah’s unpopular foreign policy and economic mismanagement evolved into a revolutionary movement that eventually deposed the Pahlavi dynasty.

From its beginnings in Tehran in April 1967 to its heyday from 1973 to 1974, the Nixon Doctrine played a profound role in U.S.-Iran relations. In addition to enhancing the position of Iran as the chief client state of the United States in the Middle East, the Doctrine also became the means through which the Shah developed into the dominant power in the region. The Shah’s military ascendance permitted him a level of political and economic clout which he used to enforce his vision of a stable and prosperous Iran. Unfortunately for the Shah, this vision was only tenable in the short-term: his nation’s massive military spending led to an economic crisis that brought about revolution and his exile from power. In this respect, the Nixon Doctrine more than any other U.S. or Iranian policy contributed directly to the rise *and* fall of Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi.

ENDNOTES

- i. Acharya (21)
- ii. Rubin (128)
- iii. Richard Nixon’s handwritten notes from his meeting with Muhammad Reza Pahlavi (April 21, 1967)
- iv. Cooper (575)
- v. Pollack 2004 (104)
- vi. Ibid.
- vii. Ibid.
- viii. Richard Nixon’s handwritten notes from his meeting with Muhammad Reza Pahlavi (April 21, 1967)

- ix. Ibid.
- x. Afkhami (303)
- xi. Kissinger (669)
- xii. Afkhami (303)
- xiii. Nixon, "Asia after Viet Nam" (114)
- xiv. Nixon, "Vietnamization"
- xv. Kissinger (668)
- xvi. Kissinger (669)
- xvii. Rubin (128)
- xviii. Banuazizi (495)
- xix. Ibid.
- xx. Ibid.
- xxi. Rubin (129)
- xxii. Banuazizi (495)
- xxiii. Banuazizi (494)
- xxiv. Cooper (570)
- xxv. Bill (203)
- xxvi. Cooper (576)
- xxvii. Ibid.
- xxviii. Richard Nixon's handwritten notes from his meeting with Muhammad Reza Pahlavi (April 21, 1967)
- xxix. Pollack 2004 (103)
- xxx. Acharya (27)
- xxxi. Acharya (28)
- xxxii. When the Saudis learned of the US-Iran contingency planning, they furiously warned that, "If Iran should succeed in occupying part of the Arabian coast, it would find only smoking ruins, and the Western oil consumers would face catastrophe." Cf. Cooper (579)
- xxxiii. Acharya (27)
- xxxiv. Acharya (26)
- xxxv. Acharya (27)
- xxxvi. Banuazizi (494)
- xxxvii. Tyler (218)
- xxxviii. State Department memorandum (1967)
- xxxix. This phrase was first used to describe US-Iran relations under the terms of the Nixon Doctrine by Gary Sick in *All Fall Down*.
- xl. Pollack 2008 (18)
- xli. Cooper (570)
- xl. New York Times (September 27, 1974)
- xl. Cooper (578)
- xl. The Washington Post (November 1, 1974)
- xl. Bill (197)
- xlvi. Haig Cable (11)
- xlvi. Haig Cable (8)
- xlvi. Haig Cable (5)
- xl. Sick (13)
- l. This account was provided to Gary Sick by Alexander Haig. Cf. Sick (14)
- li. Tyler (125)
- lii. Sick (20)
- liii. Sick (21)
- liv. Banuazizi (495)

- lv. Ibid.
- lvi. Cooper (588)
- lvii. Ansari (247)
- lviii. Rubin (160)
- lix. Gasiorowski (209)
- lx. Cooper (589)

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