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THE NUZHIIH PLOT AND IRANIAN POLITICS

On the night of 9–10 July 1980, several hundred active-duty and retired Iranian paratroopers made their way to the Nuzhiih air-force base near the city of Hamadan to initiate a coup d'état against Iran's fledgling Islamic regime. The Iranian government had learned of the plot, and many of the paratroopers were arrested as they arrived at the base. Several hundred additional participants in the plot were arrested in the following days. Those arrested were soon put on trial, and many were executed. Fearing that other military personnel were linked to the plot or sympathized with it, the government carried out an extensive purge of the armed forces in the following months. Hundreds of other participants in the plot were never apprehended, however, and many continued to plot against the Islamic regime, though they never again posed a serious threat to it.

The Nuzhiih plot was significant in several ways. First, its leaders and most lower-level participants were drawn from two segments of Iranian society that had been on opposite sides in the political struggles of the preceding decades: the armed forces and secular democratic-nationalists. The armed forces had been a pillar of the monarchical regime that was overthrown in the Islamic Revolution of 1978–79, and the secular democratic nationalists had staunchly opposed this regime. That these two segments of society could work together in this capacity indicated that secularist opposition to the Islamic regime had coalesced enough by July 1980 to overcome the deep distrust that had separated them.

The Nuzhiih plot also affected Iranian politics and regional affairs in significant ways. Together with several other real or perceived threats that emerged in this period, it helped persuade Iran's radical Islamist leaders that powerful forces were trying to destroy the Islamic regime, leading them to take increasingly harsh steps to weaken their opponents and consolidate the regime. Thus, the Nuzhiih plot helped fuel the radicalization that was engulfing Iran at this time. In addition, the Iraqi government was involved in the Nuzhiih plot, and the arrests and purge of the armed forces that followed significantly weakened Iran's armed forces precisely in the period that Iraq was preparing for its September 1980 invasion of Iran. The Nuzhiih plot therefore played a significant role in the events that led to the Iran–Iraq War—a devastating conflict that shook the region for eight years and deeply affected Iranian politics.

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This article provides a detailed account of the Nuzhieh plot and examines its implications for Iranian politics and regional affairs. Very little has been written about Nuzhieh, either in Iran or in the West, and most of the accounts that have appeared are inaccurate.¹ This article therefore is based mainly on interviews I conducted with five key leaders of the plot and with six other knowledgeable figures.² I interviewed these people intensively, spending 10–20 hours each with several of the plot's leaders, and cross-checked their accounts carefully. Although some inconsistencies initially emerged in these interviews, I was able to resolve all of the important ones by re-interviewing my sources, determining that these inconsistencies were due either to misunderstandings that had occurred in the initial interviews or to gaps in the knowledge of my interviewees. These people were candid, sometimes telling me things about themselves that were unflattering, and even incriminating. Consequently, I am confident about the veracity of the information I obtained in these interviews.³

I also spoke with six other people I thought would know important details about Nuzhieh, including a former high-ranking Iranian intelligence officer who helped interrogate those arrested in connection with the plot; Abol-Hassan Bani-Sadr, who was president of Iran at the time; a historian in the research office of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, who is very knowledgeable about security-related matters in this period; and three key U.S. officials who worked on Iran at this time.⁴ Surprisingly, none of them had more than a limited understanding of the plot.⁵ The main details of Nuzhieh were a closely guarded secret known only to a few key leaders and given to other participants strictly on a need-to-know basis. I interviewed all of the surviving leaders of the plot who might have known the main details. Although I could have interviewed other participants, it seemed clear that nothing substantial would come from doing so.⁶

Despite my efforts, one important question about Nuzhieh remains unanswered: how did the Iranian government learn the essential details of the plot? It became clear during the course of my research that I would not be able to answer this question conclusively with the sources available to me. Nevertheless, enough information emerged to enable me to sketch the main details of the plot and draw useful conclusions about its consequences.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the aftermath of Iran's February 1979 revolution, the radical Islamist followers of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini began a concerted effort to weaken their various opponents and establish an Islamic regime. They quickly arrested most of the prominent supporters of the deposed Shah, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, who had not yet fled into exile. In March 1979, they held a controversial referendum that allowed Iranians to choose between the monarchy and an Islamic republic; no other choices were offered, and an overwhelming majority voted for an Islamic republic. The radical Islamists soon began to attack moderate members of the revolutionary coalition, most notably by undermining and then sweeping away the provisional government of Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan and marginalizing Ayatollah Kazem Shariatmadari, a leading moderate clergyman. They also began to attack the Mujahedin-i Khalq, Fidayan-i Khalq,

and other militant leftist groups that had participated in the revolution, weakening their bases of support and driving them partially underground.

As their rivals grew weaker, the radicals drew up a new constitution and secured its approval in a popular referendum, creating the foundations of an Islamic state. Although the moderate Islamist Bani-Sadr was elected president in January 1980, radical Islamists swept the March 1980 parliamentary election, bringing this body firmly under their control. The radicals had already taken over most of the state bureaucracy by this time and established control over the radio and television media and much of the press. They had also created a series of powerful revolutionary institutions, including a network of revolutionary courts; a network of *kumitihs* (committees), which maintained security and enforced revolutionary doctrine in neighborhoods and government offices; and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, a paramilitary force created to defend the Islamic regime against its many opponents.⁷

The radicals also sought control over Iran's armed forces in this period. The armed forces had been devastated by the revolutionary uprising in late 1978 and early 1979, when an estimated 60 percent of its personnel deserted. Fearing that the officer corps was a bastion of counter-revolution, Iran's new leaders then carried out an initial military purge and executed some eighty-five officers and enlisted men in the first half of 1979, although they resisted militant leftist demands to dissolve the armed forces altogether. A second, more extensive purge began in September 1979, resulting in the dismissal of some 8,000–10,000 officers by July 1980. Junior officers and enlisted men had established *kumitihs* at military bases throughout the country during the revolutionary uprising to undermine the control of senior officers and bring the armed forces into line with the revolution. These *kumitihs* were gradually replaced with a Political–Ideological Directorate and a series of Imam's Representatives appointed by Ayatollah Khomeini, whose purpose was to watch over and indoctrinate the armed forces. These actions, together with the growing prominence of the Revolutionary Guards, sharply undermined morale and produced a growing climate of fear and uncertainty among the many officers who did not fully support the radical Islamists.⁸

As they increased their control over the state apparatus, the radical Islamists carried out extensive social, cultural, economic, and foreign-policy changes. They implemented elements of Islamic law, including prohibitions on alcohol and gambling and Islamic punishments for theft, prostitution, and other crimes. They restricted women's rights and imposed Islamic dress codes. They began to Islamicize the educational system. They seized the assets of many wealthy families and undertook other redistributive measures. They also transformed Iran's foreign relations, attacking the United States and neighboring countries in increasingly venomous terms, taking the staff of the U.S. embassy hostage in November 1979, and trying to export their Islamic Revolution.⁹

These actions had produced considerable chaos by July 1980. The radicals had arrested thousands of people and executed more than 800 by this time, creating a climate of fear and uncertainty. The armed forces and other branches of the security apparatus had been severely weakened. Lawlessness abounded, with leftist guerrillas, tribal dissidents, Islamic extremists, and common criminals clashing with the security forces and among themselves and carrying out assassinations, bombings, robberies, and extortion. The revolutionary institutions duplicated many functions of state agencies,

fostering corruption and turf battles. The economy had deteriorated severely, with extensive capital flight, a sharp drop in output, and growing inflation and unemployment.¹⁰

Iran also faced increasing threats from abroad at this time. The main threat was from Iraq, which came fully under the control of Saddam Hussein in July 1979. Relations between the two countries had soured shortly after the Shah was overthrown, as Iraq began to support Iranian Arab and Kurdish guerrillas and send agents into Iran to carry out bombings, and as both countries incited popular uprisings across their mutual border. By October 1979, the Iranian government had learned that Iraq was making preparations for a full-scale invasion. Tensions grew in April 1980, when an Iraqi of Iranian ancestry tried to assassinate Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz. Iraq then ordered the execution of Ayatollah Muhammad Bakr al-Sadr, an Iraqi Shi'i clergyman with close ties to Khomeini, and the deportation of tens of thousands of Iraqi Shi'i to Iran. Border clashes occurred regularly in the following months, and many observers thought war was imminent. Iran blamed the United States for most of this tension, portraying Iraq as a U.S. puppet serving U.S. and Israeli interests.¹¹

The success of the radical Islamists and the deepening chaos created growing discontent and polarization in Iran. Roughly 75 percent of Iran's 20 million eligible voters had approved the December 1979 constitutional referendum, and a little more than half had voted for moderate or radical Islamist candidates in the presidential and parliamentary elections of January and March 1980, indicating that the Islamic regime remained fairly popular at this time. However, many middle-class Iranians and many Kurds and other minorities were becoming deeply concerned about the course of events and increasingly opposed to the Islamic regime. Moreover, as discussed earlier, many members of the armed forces had become deeply disillusioned. With the defeat of liberals such as Bazargan and Shariatmadari, some opponents of the Islamic regime began to support moderate Islamists such as Bani-Sadr in the vain hope that they could stop the radical Islamists. Others secretly supported the Mujahedin-i Khalq, which had distanced itself from the radical Islamists and was preparing for armed struggle, or even the Kurdish guerrillas and Fidayan-i Khalq, which had begun a full-scale uprising in the summer of 1979. Many others distrusted the moderate Islamists and militant leftists and hoped that a military coup or foreign intervention would sweep away the Islamic regime and restore the monarchy, establish a Western-style democracy, or even create a military dictatorship that would bring order and prosperity.

In this increasingly chaotic and polarized environment, small groups of Iranian civilians and military officers began plotting against the Islamic regime, both inside and outside the country. Many of these groups approached the United States for support but were rebuffed.¹² By the fall of 1979, several of these groups had become quite serious and were actively working against the Islamic regime.

The most important of these opposition groups was led by Shahpour Bakhtiar, a long-time critic of the Shah and a key figure in the Iran Party and National Front, which had been the main secular democratic-nationalist opposition organizations under the Shah's regime. Bakhtiar had agreed to serve as prime minister during the final weeks of the Shah's reign in an effort to prevent an Islamist takeover. He went into hiding when his government collapsed in February 1979 and resurfaced in Paris in July 1979, announcing that he would lead an opposition movement aimed at over-

throwing the Islamic regime. He then began to contact various Iranian exiles in Europe, seeking financial support and recruits for his movement. He also approached the United States for support but was rebuffed. However, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) established liaison relationships with him and with some of his associates, and it even tried to recruit agents in his organization. By early October, Bakhtiar had begun to receive financial assistance from the Shah's sister, Princess Ashraf Pahlavi, and other wealthy Iranians, enabling him to publish a newspaper and establish a Paris-based organization. During the following months, he contacted Iraq and other wealthy Arab states, who began to give him much larger amounts of financial support. Iraq also provided him with transmission facilities for his Radio Iran radio station, which began to broadcast in May 1980. These capabilities enabled Bakhtiar to become the most prominent opponent of Iran's Islamic regime in this period.¹³

Several other exile groups were also working against the Islamic regime. In the fall of 1979, General Gholam Ali Oveissi, who had become known as the "butcher of Tehran" for his harsh efforts to crush the revolution in 1978, began to work with General Javad Muinzadieh, who had established a small network of exiled Iranian military officers. Oveissi and Muinzadieh went to Iraq in March 1980 and met with Iraqi leaders, who agreed to give them money, bases, weapons, and transmission facilities for Oveissi's Free Voice of Iran radio station. They then began to establish a network inside Iran with the aim of seizing territory near the Iraqi border to use as a base to foment a nationwide uprising, and their radio station broadcast coded messages to this network and appeals for military desertions and a popular uprising. By May 1980, they claimed to have a cadre of 7,000 retired military officers and 90,000 additional volunteers ready to launch an armed uprising, though it is doubtful that their network contained more than a few hundred men. Princess Ashraf's son, Shahriar Shafiq, a former Iranian naval officer, began to plan an amphibious invasion of Iran but was assassinated in December 1979. General Mustafa Palizban established ties with Oveissi and assembled a small group of Kurdish guerrillas. General Bahram Aryana created an organization called *Azadigan* (Free Men) and established a base in Turkey near the Iranian border to launch attacks into Iran.¹⁴

The radical Islamists were aware of these activities and were concerned about them. By the fall of 1979, Khomeini and other leaders were issuing frequent warnings about plots and conspiracies, using them to legitimize their radical actions and fueling the hysteria that was rapidly building. The students who seized the U.S. embassy in November 1979 acted partly because they believed the CIA was plotting a coup there, as it had in 1953. During the following months, these students began to release documents from the embassy that, in their view, showed that certain moderates had been plotting with embassy officials against the Islamic regime, leading several to be arrested and at least two to be executed. When U.S. commandos tried to rescue the U.S. hostages in April 1980, many Iranians believed this operation was part of a broader plot against the Islamic regime involving mysterious domestic collaborators. Iran's leaders issued frequent warnings about plots and even created a special committee to investigate them in the following weeks, adding to the growing hysteria. Many suspected plotters were arrested or purged from the armed forces in this period. Ironically, some of Oveissi's people were caught up in these arrests and purges, although they had not been involved in the rescue mission. In May and June, the government

uncovered at least two coup plots linked to Oveissi and arrested dozens of military personnel, further weakening Oveissi and making Iran's leaders even more fearful. Shortly before Nuzhah collapsed, President Bani-Sadr stated that six plots had been uncovered in the armed forces during the previous four months.¹⁵

THE ORIGINS OF THE PLOT

It was in this tense and chaotic environment that the leaders of the Nuzhah plot began their activities. The head of the plot's military branch, Colonel Muhammad Baqir Bani-Amiri, who had retired from the Iranian gendarmerie (a rural police force) in early 1978, began to plot against the Islamic regime shortly after it was established. Bani-Amiri was opposed to the Islamists who had seized power, and his goal—at this time—was to restore the monarchy. He began to discuss organizing a coup with his close friend, Colonel Ataullah Ahmadi, an army intelligence officer who had gone into hiding after the Shah's regime fell. They decided to seek support from the Shah for their efforts. Accordingly, Ahmadi secretly left Iran and made his way to Europe, where he hoped to contact the Shah. In the meantime, Bani-Amiri quietly approached several other active-duty and retired officers about undertaking a coup, assembling a group of six to eight men by late summer 1979.¹⁶

Ahmadi spent several months in Europe in the spring and summer of 1979 trying unsuccessfully to contact the Shah, who moved from Iran first to Egypt and then to Morocco, the Bahamas, and Mexico. In August 1979, Ahmadi met Fazlullah Amir-Fazli, a former Iranian air force general, who told him that Shahpour Bakhtiar was recruiting people to work against the Islamic regime. Ahmadi met with Bakhtiar and told him about Bani-Amiri's activities. Bakhtiar asked to meet with Bani-Amiri, so Bani-Amiri flew to Paris in September 1979. Bani-Amiri and Bakhtiar agreed to work together, with Bani-Amiri planning and organizing the operation and Bakhtiar financing it, lending his name to it, and maintaining the necessary contacts with foreign governments. Bakhtiar arranged for Bani-Amiri to meet with Abul-Qasim Khaddim, a close friend and Iran Party leader, when he returned to Iran. Khaddim gave Bani-Amiri 300,000 tumans (about \$30,000) from Bakhtiar. They then began to build a secret movement inside Iran, with Bani-Amiri organizing the military branch, which was called *Nizamiyan-i Vatanparast* (Patriotic Officers), or NUPA (its Persian acronym), and Khaddim organizing the civilian branch. Ahmadi and Amir-Fazli remained in Paris as Bakhtiar's military advisers and Bani-Amiri's main channels of contact with Bakhtiar. Khaddim's son, Javad, who had been a minister in Bakhtiar's government, worked with Bakhtiar in Paris to build the civilian branch of the movement. He arranged to have his friend Riza Marzban help his father organize the civilian branch inside Iran.¹⁷

During the following months, Bani-Amiri developed a plan for a military coup and recruited active-duty and retired military personnel into NUPA, bringing in some 300 people by March 1980. To maintain security, Bani-Amiri and other NUPA leaders adopted pseudonyms and gave NUPA a highly compartmentalized "cell" structure, with most members knowing only a few others. Among Bani-Amiri's first recruits in this period apparently were two active-duty military-intelligence officers who had access to military personnel files and thus were able to run background checks on all

potential recruits, screening out people who supported the revolution or otherwise were untrustworthy. Bani-Amiri also managed to recruit two members of the Revolutionary Guard's intelligence branch, who kept him informed about the government's efforts to uncover plots against the regime. Bakhtiar gave Bani-Amiri about 2 million tumans (\$200,000) in this period to rent safehouses, pay communications and travel expenses, and buy weapons, cars, and trucks. Bani-Amiri began to acquire light arms and ammunition, buying some from black marketeers in Iran and having NUPA members steal some from military arsenals.¹⁸

During the same period, two civilians named Said Taymuri and Parvin Shaybani also began to work against the Islamic regime. Taymuri ran a large engineering firm; Shaybani had been a diplomat in the Foreign Ministry. Although neither had been politically active before the revolution, they both joined the Iran Party after the Shah fell, supporting its secular democratic-nationalist platform. They then became increasingly concerned about the growing power of the radical Islamists and gravitated toward the more activist members of the party, including Abul-Qasim Khaddim, although they did not know at the time that he was plotting with Bani-Amiri. Taymuri began to develop an organizational plan for a popular insurrection and campaigned for a seat in the March 1980 parliamentary election. Shaybani began to work clandestinely with Khaddim and a few others on behalf of Bakhtiar, distributing cassettes of Bakhtiar's speeches and writing pro-Bakhtiar graffiti on Tehran walls. During this period they met Bani-Amiri and air-force Lieutenant Nassir Rukni, who was organizing a secret movement of his own in the air-force.¹⁹

Khaddim and Marzban made little progress in organizing the civilian branch of the movement, and they were both arrested on unrelated charges in February or March 1980. At about this time, Bakhtiar was approached by Parviz Qaddisi, a former mayor of Abadan who had recently established a small opposition network named *Nijat-i Qiyam-i Iran-i Buzurg* (Insurrectionary Movement for a Greater Iran), which was commonly known as *Niqab* (Mask). Bakhtiar asked Qaddisi to take over the civilian branch of the movement. Javad Khaddim then arranged a meeting between Qaddisi and Shaybani in late March or early April 1980, and they decided to work together under the *Niqab* name. Shaybani suggested that they bring Taymuri into *Niqab*, and Qaddisi agreed. Taymuri and Qaddisi then developed a detailed plan to overthrow the Islamic regime, and they began to seek like-minded people to join the movement. Shaybani suggested that they invite Bani-Amiri and Rukni to organize the military branch of *Niqab*. Bani-Amiri agreed to merge NUPA into *Niqab*, and he worked closely with Rukni to recruit additional personnel and develop the military part of the plan. The leaders of *Niqab* intended to overthrow the Islamic republic and install a transitional government led by Bakhtiar, which would then hold a referendum to choose a new regime. Unlike the March 1979 referendum—and despite the secular democratic-nationalist orientation of *Niqab*'s leaders—Iranians would be free in this referendum to choose a monarchy, an Islamic republic, a secular democratic republic, or any type of regime they wished.²⁰

Niqab was initially headed by a central committee consisting of Bani-Amiri, Shaybani, Qaddisi, and Taymuri. Sirus Adib of the Iran Party and Javad Khaddim's friends Yahya Firuzi and Mihran Kulbadi later joined the central committee. The *Niqab* organization had three branches, each of which was organized in a compartmentalized

“cell” structure. The military branch was an outgrowth of NUPA and was led by a military council headed by Bani-Amiri and including Lieutenant Rukni, the retired air-force Generals Ataullah Muhaqiqi and Said Mahdiyun, army Colonel Hadi Izadi, army Captain Hassan Guhari, retired army Major Kurus Azartash, and a police commander whose identity remains secret. The civilian branch consisted of a committee for recruiting new members (headed by Taymuri and Shaybani), a committee for preparing informational material (headed by Firuzi), a committee for distributing this material (headed by Adib), and a committee for maintaining contact with certain tribal and bazaar leaders (headed by Qaddisi). The third branch of Niqab was in charge of financial and logistical preparations, including the purchase of weapons, cars, and safehouses. It was headed by Manuchihr Qurbanifar, who owned a shipping company and was recommended to Niqab’s leaders by Bakhtiar. Bani-Amiri and Qaddisi maintained contact with Bakhtiar’s office by telephone. The headquarters of Niqab was located in the office of Taymuri’s engineering firm.²¹

Bakhtiar stayed in touch with various foreign governments during this period. His main foreign contact was with Iraq, which provided most or all of the financing for Nuzhah, though no weapons, bases, or other material support. He also maintained contact with the United States through his CIA liaison but never mentioned anything about Nuzhah, presumably because he assumed the United States would not support such an operation while the U.S. hostages remained captive. He did, however, ask his liaison officer in early 1980 whether the United States would supply him with helicopters, and he indicated that he did not need financial support. The liaison officer turned down the request for helicopters but understood from this that Bakhtiar was planning some sort of military operation. Although Bakhtiar therefore never received U.S. support or encouragement for Nuzhah, he told Bani-Amiri in general terms that the United States was supporting it, leading Bani-Amiri to assume that the United States was providing financial support and a “green light” for the operation. This presumed green light from the United States was very important in giving Bani-Amiri and other Niqab leaders confidence that the operation would succeed. Bakhtiar also maintained contact with the Israeli, British, and French governments throughout this period, but there is no credible evidence that they provided significant support for Nuzhah.²²

Bani-Amiri traveled again to Paris soon after Niqab was formed to present the coup plan to Bakhtiar, Ahmadi, and Amir-Fazli. Bakhtiar approved the plan and agreed to give Bani-Amiri another 12 million tumans (\$1.2 million) to cover Nuzhah’s remaining expenses, which included limited financial support for some of the participants’ families, payments to certain tribal groups participating in the operation, and the purchase of additional cars and motorcycles. Bakhtiar tried to persuade Bani-Amiri to carry out a series of non-lethal bombings inside Iran that would create further chaos that might facilitate the coup. Bakhtiar’s Iraqi contacts had been encouraging him to do this, and he even arranged for Bani-Amiri to meet with an Iraqi intelligence officer in Paris to discuss the matter. Bani-Amiri opposed the idea, arguing that such bombings would make the Iranian government more vigilant and perhaps enable it to discover the plot. Bakhtiar and the Iraqi intelligence officer eventually agreed, and no such bombings were carried out in conjunction with Nuzhah.²³

After Bani-Amiri returned to Iran, he recruited several hundred more participants, eventually assembling a group of 700–750 active-duty and retired commissioned and

non-commissioned officers from the armed forces and police. Many other military personnel apparently agreed to support the plot once it was under way. Taymuri and Shaybani continued to recruit civilians, eventually lining up approximately 100 people in Tehran and 200–300 in other parts of the country. The leaders of Niqab also carefully approached three prominent Iranians about the plot. Ayatollah Shariatmadari apparently agreed to back the plot and recorded a supportive speech that was to be played on radio and television after the operation succeeded. Ahmad Madani, a retired admiral who had served as defense minister and governor of Khuzestan Province under Bazargan and was elected to Parliament in March 1980, also agreed to support the plot, although he believed that the Islamic regime was still too popular to be overthrown. Yahya Firuzi told his cousin, the Mujahedin-i Khalq leader Masud Rajavi, in very general terms about the plot, but Rajavi refused to support it.²⁴

In early July, the Niqab central committee decided to carry out the operation on 9–10 July. A day or two before it was to begin, the committee told the military participants who were to initiate it when and where to meet. They agreed not to reveal these details to any other participants—either in Iran or in Paris—until the operation was under way.²⁵

THE COUP PLAN

The first step of the coup plan called for tribal groups in various parts of the country to stage diversionary uprisings in the weeks before 9–10 July to draw Revolutionary Guard units away from Tehran, making it easier to carry out the coup. These tribal groups consisted of Bakhtiyaris, Buyir-Ahmadis, Baluchis, and Qashqais, who had been recruited by Bani-Amiri, Qaddisi, and Rukni and paid for their services. Bakhtiar may also have arranged to have Iraq launch diversionary attacks at various locations along the border, although he did not tell the leaders of Niqab about this.²⁶

With the Revolutionary Guards distracted by these activities, a team of some 300 active-duty and retired paratroopers based in Tehran and led by Major Azartash were to travel in small groups to locations near the Nuzhah air base on the night of 9–10 July and take over the base. At the same time, some twenty air-force pilots led by General Muhaqiqi and Lieutenant Rukni would meet at Lalih Park in Tehran and travel to Nuzhah, where they would join some thirty other pilots based there. The pilots would then commandeer F-4 and F-5 fighter-bombers based at Nuzhah and attack a series of targets at dawn, including Ayatollah Khomeini's home in Tehran, the Fiyziyih seminary in Qom, the headquarters of the revolutionary court system, the prime minister's office, the Revolutionary Guard intelligence branch, two other Revolutionary Guard bases in Tehran, several Tehran *kumitih* bases, and air-force runways in Tehran and other cities. Khomeini's home, the Fiyziyih seminary, and the revolutionary court headquarters were targeted in order to destroy key symbols of the Islamic regime and demoralize the regime's supporters. To ensure Khomeini would be killed, three planes were assigned to bomb his home. The Revolutionary Guard and *kumitih* bases were targeted because the leaders of Nuzhah expected most of the regular armed forces to support them, leaving the Revolutionary Guard and the *kumitih*s as their main adversaries. Although they expected most of the air-force to support them, they planned to bomb the air-force runways to prevent loyalist pilots from

disrupting the operation. Several of the planes at Nuzhah were to be kept in reserve to defend the base from attacks by loyalist air or ground units.²⁷

When the planes from Nuzhah reached Tehran, one of them was to break the sound barrier to signal the ground units there, led by Colonel Izadi, to begin their activities. A team of some 200 commandos consisting of active-duty and retired army commandos led by Captain Guhari were to seize the Tehran television station, which was normally guarded by about sixty men. They were to wear standard army uniforms and pretend they were securing the television station against a coup attempt. A similar team of twenty commandos was to take the radio station, which was lightly guarded. A team of fifty commandos was to go to Khomeini's home and kill him if he had survived the bombing, because he was the central symbol of the Islamic regime. Other units were assigned to arrest, but not kill, all prominent revolutionary leaders and seize smaller targets, such as communications facilities and key ministries. Once these activities were under way, armored units from the 1st Division would occupy strategic locations throughout Tehran, and units from army base J would seize Tehran's Mehrabad airport. These units, assisted by police units, would confront and disarm any Revolutionary Guard, *kumitih*, or loyalist army elements that might oppose the coup. Helicopters from the Isfahan base would assist in any fighting that might occur. Bani-Amiri also apparently had arranged for some 200 butchers and 1,000 women to march from south Tehran into central parts of the city, chanting anti-regime slogans and trying to attract other anti-regime protesters. He instructed the army units occupying the city to break up all other demonstrations.²⁸

After the radio and television stations had been seized, members of the civilian branch of Niqab would take them over and broadcast statements that martial law had been declared. This was a signal for the coup participants in other parts of the country to begin their activities. The armored division based at Ahvaz, together with marine units, would seize Iran's oil-production facilities and the Dezful air force base. Army units in Isfahan, Mashad, and Zahedan would take over these cities. Bani-Amiri had also developed a contingency plan in case the operations in Tehran were unsuccessful. Under this plan, the coup participants in Ahvaz and at the Dezful air base would seize a large area in southwestern Iran and use it as a base for activities intended to take over Tehran and the rest of the country.²⁹

Once the military units had established control over Tehran, the civilian branch of Niqab would begin making radio and television broadcasts aimed at stabilizing the country. The information committee had prepared programs explaining Niqab's long-term objectives, calling for people to stay calm and remain in their homes, asking bazaaris and businessmen to keep their shops and businesses open, and appealing to Revolutionary Guards and other security personnel to join them. These programs would be broadcast repeatedly, as would Shariatmadari's speech expressing support for the coup. Planes or helicopters would drop leaflets in Tehran urging people to stay off the streets. Niqab members in key government ministries would take over the ministries and keep them operating. Telephone service in certain areas would be cut. A team of Niqab medical personnel would help the wounded. Members of the Niqab civilian branch in other parts of the country would carry out similar activities. Bakhtiar would return to Iran within a few days and preside over an interim cabinet consisting of Niqab members, although the military council would run the country under

martial law. Once order had been established, a referendum would be held in which Iranians would be asked to choose the type of regime they wanted. Free elections would then be held for a new government. The revolutionary leaders arrested during the coup would be given fair trials under international supervision.³⁰

THE COLLAPSE OF THE PLOT

During the night of 9–10 July, the paratroopers assigned to seize the Nuzhah air base made their way by car to assembly points near the base, including a small village and a sandpit near the entrance to the base. At about 10 p.m., a small group of Revolutionary Guards from Hamadan set up a checkpoint near the base's entrance and began to arrest the paratroopers as they arrived. These Revolutionary Guards were soon joined by others from the town of Savih. They arrested fifty to sixty of the paratroopers during the night, including Major Azartash, who was to lead the assault on the base, and a paratroop instructor named Haydari, who had recruited many of the paratroopers. Bani-Amiri, who was to command the entire operation from the Nuzhah base, saw some of the paratroopers being arrested as he approached the base late that night; he turned around and sped away in a hail of bullets. The Revolutionary Guards immediately interrogated Azartash, Haydari, and others. One or more of these men then revealed the names of other participants, presumably under torture.³¹

The pilots who were to travel from Tehran to the Nuzhah base assembled at Lalih Park and drove by bus and car to a teahouse near the base, where they were to meet two air-force technicians from Nuzhah who would take them to the sandpit. The technicians never arrived, probably because the road leading to the base had already been blocked by Revolutionary Guards. The pilots therefore returned to Tehran early in the morning, not knowing that the paratroopers had been arrested. Because the pilots did not signal the ground units in Tehran by breaking the sound barrier, none of the remaining steps in the coup plan were implemented. Lieutenant Rukni, who knew many key details of the plot and had been on the bus with the pilots, was arrested when he arrived at his home, apparently on the basis of information revealed by some of the paratroopers. Rukni was interrogated and forced to reveal additional information about the plot, presumably under torture.³²

As a result of these and subsequent interrogations, 284 participants in the plot were eventually arrested, including more paratroopers, about thirty pilots, additional air-force support personnel, ten to twelve of the Tehran commandos, twenty to thirty officers in the Ahvaz armored division, one officer in the Zahedan army base, several Bakhtiari tribesmen, twenty to thirty additional civilians with minor roles in the plot, and all members of the military council except Bani-Amiri and the police commander. As many as ten people were killed during these arrests. Hundreds of others who were not involved in the plot were arrested, as well, including some 250 commissioned and non-commissioned officers in the Ahvaz division. However, most of the 700–750 military participants and 300–400 civilian participants were never arrested. Only a few of the 200-odd commandos (including Captain Guhari), one officer in the Tehran 1st Division (Colonel Izadi), and one from Zahedan were arrested. None of the participants from Tehran base J, the Isfahan and Mashad army bases, the police, or the navy were arrested. None of Niqab's civilian leaders were arrested, either. Some of the

pilots and paratroopers and some of the Ahvaz participants survived.³³ Niqab's compartmentalized "cell" structure protected the identities of many participants and enabled others to go into hiding before they could be arrested.

In the days after Nuzhah was broken up, Iran's leaders explained publicly how the plot had been discovered. A book about the plot published in Iran in 1989 gives a similar account and provides additional details. These accounts claim that Iran's security forces had learned sketchy details of the plot from the communist *Tudih* (Mass) Party and other sources in the preceding months. One account claims that the operation was initially scheduled for late June, and that some ten to twenty unidentified participants were arrested then, stopping this initial effort; the Nuzhah book makes no mention of this and states that the security forces thought the operation would occur two to four weeks *after* 9–10 July. The security forces then obtained more precise information in the early morning of 9 July, according to these accounts, when one of the pilots from Tehran went to the home of the Tehran Friday prayer leader Hojjat ol-Islam Ali Khamenei and revealed key details of the operation. Several hours later, a non-commissioned officer involved in the operation allegedly told members of a Tehran *kumitih* about it, as well. The Nuzhah book states that the security forces relied mainly on the pilot's revelations to break up the plot; the information they had obtained earlier apparently was too vague to be useful. Nevertheless, the accounts that appeared in July 1980 claimed that the plot had never posed a serious threat, because the security forces had been monitoring it and easily stopped it on 9–10 July. All of these accounts state that the United States, Israel, Iraq, and various domestic opponents of the Islamic regime were deeply involved in the plot, although they give no concrete evidence supporting these allegations.³⁴

The surviving leaders of Niqab give a very different explanation of the plot's collapse. They deny that it was initially scheduled to occur earlier and that some participants were arrested in June. They argue that if one of the pilots had betrayed the plot in the early morning of 9 July, Iran's security forces would have had at least twelve hours to respond and therefore would have made a much more determined effort to arrest the pilots at Lalih Park and the paratroopers traveling to the Nuzhah base. Niqab's surviving leaders made a detailed investigation of the plot's collapse in the following months. They learned that two Niqab central committee members independently made unauthorized phone calls in the early evening of 9 July to Bakhtiar and a member of his team in Paris, disclosing when and where the plot would begin—information that the committee had decided not to give to Bakhtiar and his team before the operation began. They believe that one of the recipients of these calls gave this information to someone else, who then passed it on to the Iranian government without the recipient's knowledge, leading to the collapse of the plot. Two confidential sources with detailed knowledge of these events told me that this intermediary was an Israeli intelligence officer and that the Israeli government provided this information to Iran, hoping that the destruction of Nuzhah would undermine the Iranian military and thus encourage Iraq to invade Iran, thereby weakening two of Israel's main adversaries. These sources both believe this occurred, but they could not give me any concrete evidence to corroborate this account.³⁵

I have not been able to determine whether either of these explanations is correct, and neither seems entirely persuasive. If one of the pilots did reveal the plot on the

morning of 9 July, Iran's security forces would have had time to make a much more determined effort to arrest the pilots and paratroopers, as Niqab's leaders argue. It therefore seems unlikely that the plot was exposed in this way. However, according to two of Niqab's leaders,³⁶ only about three hours elapsed between the phone calls to Paris and the first arrests outside the Nuzhah base. If an Israeli intelligence officer or some other intermediary did tell the Iranian government when and where the plot was to begin, this information would have had to go from Bakhtiar's office through this intermediary to Iran, perhaps passing through other intermediate points (such as the Israeli government), as well. The Iranian recipients of this information would have had to make the decision to send Revolutionary Guards from Hamadan to Nuzhah, and the Revolutionary Guards then would have had to make the journey. In addition, if the Israeli government was involved, high-ranking officials—quite possibly even the cabinet itself—probably would have had to make the decision to pass this information on to Iran. It seems very unlikely that all of this could have taken place within three hours. It also seems doubtful to me that Israel would reveal the plot in order to encourage Iraq to invade Iran.

Although both of these explanations therefore have serious drawbacks, no other credible explanation has emerged. However, regardless of how the plot was revealed, two important points seem clear. First, it seems certain that Iran's security forces had not learned the essential details of the plot before 9 July. If they had, they undoubtedly would have arrested Bani-Amiri and the other leaders of Niqab, who were at their headquarters almost continuously in the days before 9 July. They also undoubtedly would have arrested the commando team in Tehran, which spent the entire night of 9–10 July in a safehouse near the television station, and they would have made a more determined effort to arrest the pilots at Lalih Park and the paratroopers traveling to Nuzhah.³⁷ Second if indeed it was not vigilant action by the security forces that exposed the essential details of the plot, it is hard to escape the conclusion that only an act of fate prevented the plot from proceeding much further than it did.³⁸

THE AFTERMATH

Soon after the Nuzhah plot was broken up, Ayatollah Khomeini declared that everyone arrested in connection with it should be executed. As a result, 144 participants were executed after perfunctory trials. In Paris, five men tried unsuccessfully to assassinate Bakhtiar on 18 July, killing a French policeman and wounding three innocent bystanders instead. When Iraq invaded Iran in September 1980, many of the pilots and some of the other military personnel who had not yet been executed were released from prison on the condition that they join the war effort.³⁹

In addition to the arrests and executions, the discovery of the plot produced a wave of recriminations inside Iran. Radical Islamists sharply attacked the leadership of the armed forces and called for a new round of purges, leading to the dismissal of an estimated 2,000–4,000 military personnel in the following months. They also demanded that the Revolutionary Guard Corps be strengthened to protect the Islamic regime against further plots. Bani-Sadr tried to defend the armed forces against these attacks, leading his radical opponents to attack him and even link him to the plot. Radical Islamists also used the plot as an opportunity to attack the few moderate elements

that remained in Iran at this time, seizing and ransacking the offices of the Iran Party and the National Front and closing the National Front's newspaper. They even briefly closed the offices of the Tudih Party, which strongly supported the Islamic regime at this time and had given the authorities some information about the plot.⁴⁰

Most of the Niqab leaders who had not been arrested went into hiding. Qaddisi took a commercial flight to Europe a few days after the plot was broken up. Bani-Amiri, Taymuri, Shaybani, Qurbanifar, and others were secretly taken across the border into Turkey a month later by a network of smugglers with whom they had previously made arrangements for this contingency. They then made their way to Europe. They spent the next several months helping other participants leave Iran and investigating how the plot had been exposed. Bakhtiar provided financial assistance to the families of some participants who had been executed or fled into exile.⁴¹

During the next two years, the surviving leaders of Niqab continued to work with Bakhtiar and with remnants of their network inside Iran against the Islamic regime. They set up an office in Paris and began to organize another coup attempt. Bani-Amiri assembled a group of some sixty military personnel, including many participants in the Nuzhah plot, and tried to find a base closer to Iran where they could prepare for the coup. He set up offices in Turkey and Pakistan that smuggled people and money into Iran and helped people leave the country. He also made arrangements to buy weapons in the arms bazaars of Pakistan. Taymuri and Shaybani drifted away and began to organize their own activities. To demonstrate to Bakhtiar that they still had effective operational capabilities inside Iran, they helped some of their contacts set off two non-lethal explosions in Tehran in late 1980 or early 1981. Ahmadi also drifted away and tried to undertake armed operations against the Iranian government in revenge for the execution of his sister, but he had little success.⁴²

After Iraq invaded Iran in September 1980, Bakhtiar remained very close to the Iraqi government. He was reluctant to pursue aggressive operations against the Islamic regime at this time because he thought the Iran–Iraq War would weaken the regime and facilitate operations against it in the future. The leaders of Niqab therefore became increasingly disillusioned with Bakhtiar. Taymuri and Shaybani proposed a new coup plan to Bakhtiar, but he refused to finance it, so they broke with him. Bakhtiar became increasingly reluctant to provide financial support to the families of Nuzhah participants, and he refused to pay for the arms Bani-Amiri had arranged to buy in Pakistan. He also tried unsuccessfully to persuade Bani-Amiri that the military personnel he had assembled should be based in Iraq. As a result of these disagreements, Bani-Amiri and Qaddisi broke with Bakhtiar in 1982 and struck out on their own. Bakhtiar then developed another military network inside Iran, but it did not accomplish much.⁴³

Bakhtiar remained a visible symbol of opposition to the Islamic regime until he was assassinated in August 1991, although his activities declined considerably after the early 1980s. After Bani-Amiri and Qaddisi broke with Bakhtiar, they were approached by the CIA, who wanted to use their contacts inside Iran to gather intelligence. When it became clear that the CIA would not finance their efforts to overthrow the regime, they decided not to work with it. They subsequently continued their efforts but had little success. Taymuri and Shaybani continued to plot against the Islamic regime, but they, too, had little success. Ahmadi continued to work against the regime until he was assassinated in the early 1990s. Hadi Aziz-Muradi, the deputy com-

mander of the Ahvaz armored division and an important participant in the plot, continued to work with Bakhtiar and also was assassinated. Qurbanifar began to work for the Iranian government and later became a key figure in the Iran–Contra affair, after which he dropped out of sight.⁴⁴

CONCLUSIONS

Several conclusions can be drawn from the foregoing discussion. First, it seems clear that the Nuzhah plot posed a significant threat to Iran's nascent Islamic regime. Some 700–750 military personnel and 300–400 civilians were directly involved in the plot, demonstrating that considerable opposition to the Islamic regime existed at the time, especially in the armed forces. Many other Iranians apparently had agreed to support the plot, and its leaders believed that most civilians, most of the armed forces, and even some Revolutionary Guards would back them once the operation began.⁴⁵ The plot was meticulously planned and apparently had participants throughout the country. Although Iran's security forces claimed to have been monitoring the plot for some time, it seems clear that they learned its essential details only by chance shortly before the operation began. Even then, they made only a haphazard effort to stop the operation, and they failed to arrest most of its leaders. Khomeini's demand that all those arrested in connection with the plot be executed indicates that he regarded the plot as a serious threat. Moreover, the large number of military personnel subsequently arrested or purged suggests that Iran's leaders concluded from the plot that counter-revolutionary sentiment was still widespread in the armed forces.

Second, the Nuzhah plot demonstrated that secularist opposition to the Islamic regime had strongly coalesced. The armed forces had been a pillar of the Shah's regime and had been instrumental in overthrowing Prime Minister Muhammad Mosaddeq—the father of Iran's democratic-nationalist movement—and restoring the Shah to power in 1953. Most of the civilian participants in Nuzhah were associated with the Iran Party, which had been a leading secular democratic-nationalist organization and bastion of opposition to the Shah since Mosaddeq's time. The willingness of these secular democratic-nationalists to cooperate with members of the armed forces in the Nuzhah plot indicates that they had overcome the deep distrust of the armed forces that they had felt for several decades. If this secularist alliance had emerged earlier, it might have been able to do much more to stop the radical Islamists from seizing power.

Third, the Nuzhah plot had a significant impact on the course of Iranian politics. Together with the Kurdish uprising, Iraq's hostile actions, the April 1980 U.S. hostage-rescue mission, and the activities of Oveissi and other opposition groups, the plot helped persuade Iran's radical Islamist leaders that powerful domestic and foreign actors were trying to destroy the nascent Islamic regime. This fueled the hysteria that was sweeping Iran at the time and led Iran's leaders to undertake increasingly radical measures to consolidate the Islamic regime. The main victims of this growing radicalization were Bani-Sadr and other moderate Islamists, who were attacked harshly during this period and later swept aside. Thus, while the Nuzhah plot posed a significant threat to the Islamic regime and demonstrated that opposition to the regime was widespread and deeply felt, its collapse very much benefited the radical Islamists and

weakened their opponents. Indeed, after Nuzhah, moderate opponents of the Islamic regime never again posed a serious threat to it.⁴⁶

Fourth, the collapse of the Nuzhah plot also very much benefited Iraq. The arrests, executions, and purge that followed further undermined the strength and morale of Iran's armed forces immediately before the September 1980 Iraqi invasion. Moreover, some thirty fighter pilots and several hundred commissioned and non-commissioned officers in the Ahvaz armored division were among those arrested. The air force and the Ahvaz division were crucial to Iran's defense against the Iraqi invasion but played almost no role in the first several weeks of fighting, enabling Iraq to penetrate well into Iranian territory.⁴⁷ Without the arrests, executions, and purges that followed Nuzhah, Iran almost certainly would have been able to stop the Iraqi invasion sooner and more effectively. Thus, the Nuzhah plot may have significantly affected the course of the Iran–Iraq War.

Finally, it is worth considering what might have happened if the Nuzhah plot had not been stopped on the night of 9–10 July. Even if the pilots and ground forces involved in the plot had achieved their tactical goals on the following day, they still would have faced considerable resistance from loyalist military units and members of the Revolutionary Guard and *kumitih*s. The latter, in particular, were deeply devoted to the Islamic regime and skilled in urban guerrilla warfare, and they almost certainly would have fought tenaciously to stop the coup attempt. Many members of the Mujahedin-i Khalq, Fidayan-i Khalq, and other militant leftist groups—who were deeply devoted to their own radical causes and also skilled in urban guerrilla warfare—probably would have opposed the coup as well. In addition, there might have been a stronger popular reaction against the coup than its leaders had anticipated. Although popular opposition to the Islamic regime had grown considerably by July 1980, roughly half of Iran's 20 million eligible voters had chosen moderate or radical Islamist candidates in elections earlier that year, indicating that the regime remained fairly popular. Thus, although it is impossible to say with any certainty what might have happened if the plot had not been stopped, there probably would have been substantial resistance to it. Whatever its outcome, it might well have produced considerable chaos and instability. Indeed, it might even have plunged Iran into civil war.

It is also worth considering what Iraq might have done if the coup attempt had progressed further. As discussed earlier, Iraq had begun preparations to invade Iran almost a year earlier, and relations between the two countries had become extremely tense by July 1980. Many observers at the time assumed that Iraq's hostility toward Iran was caused by Iraq's desire to contain the spread of radical Islam, implying that this hostility would have ceased if secular moderates—such as the leaders of Niqab—had overthrown the Islamic regime. However, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait a decade later suggests that its hostility toward Iran in 1980 may instead have reflected Saddam Hussein's desire to seize Iran's Khuzestan province, which borders Iraq, contains most of Iran's oil reserves, and is populated mainly by Iranian Arabs.⁴⁸ If so, Iraq probably would have invaded Iran soon after Nuzhah, even if the plot had succeeded. Moreover, any chaos or instability produced by Nuzhah would have made an Iraqi invasion even more likely—and more successful—regardless of whether Nuzhah ultimately failed or succeeded. Thus, Iraq would have benefited from almost any outcome of the Nuzhah plot.

This conclusion has several important implications. First, it suggests that Iraq's leaders probably supported the Nuzhīh plot not because they wanted Iran to be ruled by secular moderates such as Bakhtiar and the leaders of Nuzhīh—whose liberal views, after all, were no more palatable to them than radical Islam—but because they thought the plot would weaken Iran and facilitate the invasion they had been planning. They probably supported Oveissi for similar reasons. Second, this conclusion may explain why Iraq's leaders waited so long to carry out the invasion of Iran they had been planning at least since October 1979: they may have delayed the invasion hoping that the Nuzhīh plot, and perhaps also Oveissi's plot, would weaken Iran and facilitate the invasion. This is precisely what happened, as has been shown. In other words, the existence of the Nuzhīh plot and the subsequent arrests, executions, and purge of military personnel may have partly determined the timing of Iraq's invasion, delaying it for many months.⁴⁹ Finally, if Iraq did intend to invade Iran even if Nuzhīh succeeded, we can only conclude that Bakhtiar—though not the Niqab leaders inside Iran, who were unaware of Iraq's extensive role—was extremely naive in seeking Iraqi support.⁵⁰ Indeed, if the plot had gone much further, Iraq's September 1980 invasion might have been even more devastating to Iran than it actually was.

NOTES

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¹The only major publication about Nuzhīh is Mu'asisih-yi Muta'at va Pazuhishha-yi Siasi (Foundation for Political Studies and Investigation), *Kudita-yi Nuzhīh* (Nuzhīh Coup d'État), 2nd ed. (Tehran, 1989/1368). This book contains some accurate details of the plot but also many glaring inaccuracies, some of which seem to have been included to discredit opponents of the Islamic regime (see n. 24). It is fairly easy to judge which details given in the book are accurate and which are inaccurate: some are attributed to key participants in the plot or other reliable sources, while others are either unattributed or based on unreliable sources. Most Iranian newspaper accounts and other published sources dealing with Nuzhīh contain many inaccuracies, as well, and many are clearly self-serving or otherwise politically motivated.

²The leaders of the plot I interviewed were Muhammad Baqir Bani-Amiri (London, 14–17 July 1999 and 7 and 30 May 2000), Parviz Qaddisi (Geneva, 13 May 2000), Said Taymuri and Parvin Shaybani (Paris, 6 July 1999 and 15 May 2000), and Javad Khaddim (Henley, U.K., 30 May 2000). Another key source was Sirus Amuzigar (Paris, 4 January 1998, 5 and 7 July 1999, and 25 May 2000), who had been a cabinet minister under Shahpour Bakhtiar and worked closely with him in Paris after Nuzhīh.

³In some cases, I use multi-source citations to save space and, in a few cases, because my interviewees did not want to be identified as the source of certain information. I cite only those sources that were consistent with other sources I consulted or were important to my argument in other ways. Except where indicated, I have corroborated all of the major details given here with a second source.

⁴The U.S. officials were Gary Sick, who covered Iran at the U.S. National Security Council; Henry Precht, who was the Iran desk officer in the State Department; and a high-ranking CIA officer who worked in the Near East division of the CIA's Directorate of Operations. I promised not to reveal the identities of the CIA officer, the former Iranian intelligence officer, and the historian.

⁵The biggest surprise was that the former Iranian intelligence officer had learned so little from the interrogations. This was probably a result of the inexperience of the interrogators, who had little background in police or intelligence work, and the evasiveness of those being interrogated. In addition, most of the interrogations were carried out hastily, both because the interrogators' main focus was to identify and arrest additional participants as quickly as possible and because many of those arrested were soon executed. I have seen a videotape of excerpts from the interrogation of one of the participants, General Said Mahdi-

yun, which was recorded from Iranian television. These excerpts reveal no important details of the plot; they also show that the interrogators did not ask insightful questions and that Mahdiyoun was evasive. The same is true of the trial transcript cited in n. 35. The book *Kudita-yi Nuzhih*, cited earlier, relies heavily on the interrogations of Nuzhih participants. The glaring errors in that book suggest that the interrogations failed to reveal many important details of the plot. Bani-Sadr gave me an account similar to that presented in his book, *My Turn to Speak* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 1991). The U.S. officials probably learned little about the plot because its leaders did not tell them about it beforehand and because little information emerged about it afterward.

⁶I made an effort to contact other appropriate Iranian officials and Israeli officials about Nuzhih, but I was unsuccessful. For obvious reasons, I did not approach Iraqi officials about the subject.

⁷For good overviews of this period, see Shaul Bakhash, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); David Menashri, *Iran: A Decade of War and Revolution* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1990); Mohsen M. Milani, *The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1994).

⁸Nikola B. Schahgaldian, *The Iranian Military under the Islamic Republic* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1987), 20, 30–31; William F. Hickman, *Ravaged and Reborn: The Iranian Army, 1982* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1982), 8–18; Bakhash, *Reign of the Ayatollahs*, 255–56.

⁹See Menashri, *Iran*, 192–210.

¹⁰*Washington Post*, 21 March, 9 April, and 27 May 1980; *Le Monde* (Paris), 7 May 1980; *PARS News Agency* (Tehran), 7 May 1980, in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report, South Asia* (hereafter, *FBIS-SA*), 8 May 1980.

¹¹Stephen C. Pelletiere, *The Iran–Iraq War: Chaos in a Vacuum* (New York: Praeger, 1992), chap. 2; *Washington Post*, 9 November 1980. Ibrahim Yazdi, who was Iran's foreign minister at the time, told me that by October 1979 the Iranian government had learned through its intelligence sources that Iraq was preparing for an invasion (personal interview, Tehran, 23 June 1999). A retired high-ranking CIA officer told me in a confidential interview that the CIA by this time had learned through its own sources that Iraq was preparing for an invasion. The CIA then briefed the Iranian government about this. This was later confirmed by Bazargan in testimony at the trial of Abbas Amir-Entezam: See *Kayhan*, 18 March 1981/28 Isfand 1360.

¹²Although U.S. officials considered supporting some of these groups, they did not think any were viable, and they were reluctant to antagonize the Bazargan government and later the radical Islamists who held the U.S. hostages. So many of these groups had approached the United States by September 1979 that the State Department sent a telegram to the U.S. embassies in Iran and several European countries stating that any Iranians seeking U.S. support should be told “explicitly” that none would be forthcoming; see Moslem Students Following the Line of the Imam, *Documents from the U.S. Espionage Den* (Tehran: Intisharat-i Danishjuyan-i Piru-yi Khat-i Imam, 1989), 68:129–30. This is one of some eighty volumes of documents seized from the U.S. embassy and published by radical Islamist students. For other plots and approaches to the United States, see vols. 28, 38, 55, and 56. From all the evidence I have seen, it was not until after the Nuzhih operation that the United States began to support groups plotting against the Islamic regime, and none of the groups it supported ever posed a serious threat to the regime.

¹³*Le Monde*, 17 August 1979; Moslem Students, *Documents*, esp. 38:5, 38:13, 38:15, 38:42, 55:93, 56:94; interview with the retired CIA officer mentioned earlier, who had extensive experience with Iran and was in close contact with Bakhtiar and other Iranian exile leaders in this period; Mehrdad Khonsari, *The National Movement of the Iranian Resistance 1979–1991: The Role of a Banned Opposition Movement in International Politics* (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, 1995), 117–35. On Bakhtiar's background and political views, see Chapour Bakhtiar, *Ma fidélité* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1982), and Khonsari, *National Movement*, chap. 2. Bakhtiar openly admitted his close relationship with Iraq at this time: see, for example, *Washington Post*, 17 May 1980. The retired CIA officer thinks Saudi Arabia provided considerable financial support to Bakhtiar in this period. *Kudita-yi Nuzhih*, 130, states incorrectly that Bakhtiar's radio station was based in Egypt.

¹⁴Interviews with General Javad Muinzadieh (London, 1 January 1998) and Ahmad Madani (San Jose, Calif., 10 August 1997); *London Now!* (London), 25–31 July 1980; *Sunday Times* (London), 18 May 1980; *Le Monde*, 24 June 1980; *Washington Post*, 17 May 1980; Menashri, *Iran*, 142.

¹⁵*Le Monde*, 24 June and 2 July 1980; interviews with Muinzadieh and with Abbas Abdi (Tehran, 23 June 1999), who was a leader of the students who seized the U.S. embassy; *Washington Post*, 8 May and 10

and 27 June 1980; Menashri, *Iran*, 143; Dilip Hiro, *Iran under the Ayatollahs* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 155–56; *Ittila'at* (Tehran), 14 June 1980/24 Khurdad 1359. On the 1953 coup, see Mark J. Gasiorowski, "The 1953 Coup d'État in Iran," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 19 (1987).

¹⁶Bani-Amiri, interview. The civilian leaders of the plot later persuaded Bani-Amiri that it would be better to hold a referendum to choose a new regime rather than simply restore the monarchy, because this would ensure that the new regime would have popular support.

¹⁷*Ibid.*; Khaddim, interview. Abul-Qasim Khaddim was a Sufi mystic from Isfahan.

¹⁸Bani-Amiri, interview. This money was transferred into Iran through black marketeers who bought Iranian currency from people leaving the country and gave them Western currency when they arrived abroad. The trucks were purchased to transport arms from the Iraqi border to Tehran. They were never used, however, because Iraq never actually provided any weapons. Bani-Amiri paid the two Revolutionary Guards for their services.

¹⁹Taymuri and Shaybani, interviews.

²⁰Khaddim, Qaddisi, Taymuri, and Shaybani, interviews. After Abul-Qasim Khaddim was arrested, he revealed that Bani-Amiri and Shaybani were in contact with Bakhtiar, though he did not reveal any details of the plot. Bani-Amiri's two Revolutionary Guard intelligence officers told him this, enabling him and Shaybani to go into hiding and avoid arrest. At about the same time, Colonel Muhammad Zad-Nadiri, one of Bani-Amiri's original recruits, was also arrested. Revolutionary Guards searched his house and found a cache of weapons intended for the operation. Bani-Amiri's two military-intelligence officers monitored his interrogation and informed Bani-Amiri that he also had not revealed the plot. Khaddim, Marzban, and Zad-Nadiri were still in prison when the plot was broken up and were later executed for their early ties to it. No other participants in the plot were arrested before 9–10 July 1980: Bani-Amiri, interview.

²¹Bani-Amiri, Taymuri, Shaybani, and Qaddisi, interviews; *Kudita-yi Nuzhah*, 110–23, 143–45.

²²Bani-Amiri and retired CIA officer, interviews. Javad Khaddim confirmed that Bakhtiar had asked the CIA for helicopters, although he did not know why. He also said that he was Bakhtiar's liaison with Israel and that Israel had helped smuggle Bakhtiar out of Iran, put Bakhtiar in touch with Iraq, and trained several Nuzhah participants. Bani-Amiri said he had not asked Bakhtiar for helicopters and did not know why Bakhtiar wanted them. The retired CIA officer said that the CIA knew nothing about the Nuzhah plot when it occurred. *Kudita-yi Nuzhah*, 130, states, without attribution, that the United States and Britain pressured Bakhtiar to undertake the operation and financed it, together with Iraq.

²³Bani-Amiri, interview.

²⁴*Ibid.*; Taymuri, Shaybani, and Qaddisi, interviews; Ahmad Madani, telephone interview, 12 September 1999. Bani-Amiri said that Shariatmadari was never actually approached, but Taymuri, Shaybani, Qaddisi, and Khaddim said he was. Shariatmadari's son Hassan (personal communication, 23 October 2001) said that he did not know about any contact between his father and the plotters, but he did not rule it out. Bani-Amiri said he did not recruit any gendarmierie personnel, but he was confident they would support him. *Kudita-yi Nuzhah*, 109, 119–21, 125, 128, 178–82, states that the Muslim People's Republican Party, Khosrow Qashqai, Oveissi, Palizban, Ayatollahs Hassan Qumi, Mihdi Ruhani, and Sayyid Riza Zanjani, the Mujahedin-i Khalq, and the leftist guerrilla groups Kurdish Democratic Party and *Kumalish* were all involved in the plot, although it does not provide reliable sources for these allegations. I have not seen any credible evidence that any of them were involved.

²⁵Bani-Amiri, Taymuri, Shaybani, and Qaddisi, interviews.

²⁶Bani-Amiri and Amuzigar, interviews. Amuzigar said that Bakhtiar later told him about the plan for Iraqi diversionary attacks, and that some of these attacks actually took place before Iraq realized that the plot had been stopped. Iraq did carry out a number of attacks during this period. See *Tehran Domestic Service*, 10 July 1980, in *FBIS-SA*, 10 July 1980; *Le Monde*, 12 July 1980; and *Keesing's Contemporary Archives*, 7 August 1981, 31006. None of the Niqab leaders I interviewed knew about these Iraqi diversionary attacks. According to Bani-Amiri, the Qashqais involved in the plot were *not* associated with Khosrow Qashqai, as claimed in *Kudita-yi Nuzhah*, 119. In addition to these diversionary attacks, some of the tribesmen were assigned to defend the Nuzhah base after it was seized. The account of the coup plan given in *Kudita-yi Nuzhah*, 148–58, is broadly similar to the one given here, although many of its details differ.

²⁷Bani-Amiri, interview. Bani-Amiri said that each of the targets except Khomeini's house was to be attacked by pilots from both Tehran and the Nuzhah base to ensure that these targets would be hit even if the Tehran pilots failed to arrive at Nuzhah. Khomeini's house was to be attacked only by pilots from Tehran, because only they could easily reconnoiter the heavily guarded area to prepare for the attack. Bani-

Amiri also said that Iran's leaders previously had decided to keep all air force planes disarmed so they could not be used easily in conjunction with a coup attempt. Therefore, in March or April 1980, the two military-intelligence officers involved in the plot began to feed false information to their superiors that exaggerated the Iraqi threat, persuading them that some planes should be kept armed at all times to defend against an Iraqi attack. Because the Nuzhah base was ideally located to defend against Iraq, Iran's military leaders decided to arm the planes based there. The planes at all other air force bases were kept disarmed, although ammunition was stored nearby and could be loaded quickly at the command of top officials. This is why the leaders of Niqab chose Nuzhah as their main base of operations. The Nuzhah base had previously been named Shahrakhi, then Hur. It was renamed Nuzhah in 1979 to honor an air force officer killed in Kurdistan.

²⁸Bani-Amiri, interview. Bani-Amiri said that some twenty commissioned and non-commissioned officers in the 1st Division—including Colonel Izadi, its deputy commander—were directly involved in the plot, and that others had agreed to support it once it was under way. He was confident these men could carry out the tasks assigned to them. However, because the commander of the division and the *kumitih* attached to it were presumed to be loyal to the Islamic regime, these men could not easily take tanks, armored personnel carriers, and other equipment from the base. They were therefore told to wait until the commando units had begun their activities, enabling them to act under the pretext of stopping a coup attempt. Similar considerations affected the units from base J.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Taymuri, Shaybani, and Qaddisi, interviews.

³¹Bani-Amiri, interview. In the months after the plot collapsed, Bani-Amiri determined that one or more of these men had revealed other participants' names by examining which participants were arrested at what times and identifying who among those initially arrested would have known the identities of the others. In the same way, he determined that Rukni revealed some information.

³²Ibid. Rukni had recruited most of the pilots involved in the plot. According to Bani-Amiri, some of the pilots assembled at Lalih Park saw air force technicians there who they knew were loyal to the Islamic regime. Fearing that their plans had been discovered, they fled into the surrounding neighborhood. The bus then arrived and managed to pick most of them up, and they drove uneventfully to the teahouse near the Nuzhah base.

³³Ibid.; Taymuri, and Shaybani, interviews. *Reuters*, 13 July 1980. Bani-Sadr states that 270 commissioned and non-commissioned officers were arrested in Ahvaz, but only twenty to thirty were actually involved in the plot: see Bani-Sadr, *My Turn to Speak*, 14.

³⁴See *Tehran Domestic Service*, 10, 12, and 13 July 1980, in *FBIS-SA*, 11 and 14 July 1980; *Nuzhah Coup d'État*, 189–96; and the accounts given by Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, *Tehran Domestic Service*, 13 July 1980, in *FBIS-SA*, 14 July 1980; Army General Qasim Ali Zahir-Nizhad, *Kayhan*, 14 July 1980/23 Tir 1359; and Bani-Sadr, *Bamdad*, 15 July 1980/24 Tir, 1359. Rafsanjani's account describes the coup attempt of late June. Bani-Sadr's account states that the goal of the Nuzhah plot was to neutralize Iran's armed forces in preparation for some sort of broader plot. He later explained that this broader plot called for a full-scale Iraqi invasion, which the Niqab plotters would join, together with uprisings in Kurdistan and other parts of the country. According to Bani-Sadr, this plot was designed by the United States, Israel, and Iranian exiles, with the goal of restoring the Shah's regime: see Bani-Sadr, *My Turn to Speak*, 13–15. Strangely, none of these sources name either the pilot or the non-commissioned officer, making it impossible to verify these accounts and raising doubts about their veracity. For accounts of the Tudih Party's role in exposing Nuzhah, see *Kitabchi Haqiqat (Booklet of Truth)* (n.p., June–July 1998/Tir 1377), 9–11; and *Rah-i Tudih (Path of Tudih)* no. 105, March–April 2001/Farvardin 1380, 21.

³⁵Bani-Amiri, Taymuri, Shaybani, Qaddisi, and confidential sources, interviews. Bani-Amiri told me that the Nuzhah leaders were confident that their phone calls to Paris were not being intercepted because they knew that the Iranian government could intercept only calls that were longer than a certain period, and they were careful to keep their conversations shorter than this period. *Nuzhah Coup d'État*, 196, gives the names of six pilots it says were arrested at Lalih Park. In his subsequent trial, General Muhaqiqi testified that at least one pilot was arrested there. See *Sartip Ata Muhaqiqi Qahriman Paymardi, Ustuvvari, Shuhamat va Buzurgi (General Ata Muhaqiqi: A Helpful, Firm, Brave, and Great Hero)*, unpublished trial transcript provided by Parviz Qaddisi, 3. My sources deny that any pilots were arrested at Lalih. This is an important detail, because no arrests could have occurred there if the plot was revealed on the evening of 9 July, as these sources claim. My two confidential sources believe that the member of Bakhtiar's team who betrayed

the plot was an Israeli agent who had been instructed to penetrate Niqab. Bani-Amiri, Taymuri, Shaybani, Qaddisi, and Amuzigar all agree that Manouchehr Qurbanifar did not reveal the plot, as suggested in Amir Taheri, *Nest of Spies* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 137–38; Samuel Segev, *The Iranian Triangle* (New York: Free Press, 1988), 20–21; and Gary Sick, *October Surprise* (New York: Times Books, 1991), 92.

³⁶Bani-Amiri and Taymuri, interviews.

³⁷Bani-Amiri, interview. *Kudita-yi Nuzhah*, 193, acknowledges that the security forces knew little about the Nuzhah plot before 9 July. It seems likely that the information the security forces had obtained about the plot before 9 July confused it with the parallel activities Oveissi and Iraq were undertaking at the same time. For one thing, both *Kudita-yi Nuzhah* and the accounts given by Iran's leaders state incorrectly that Oveissi was involved in the plot. Moreover, these sources claim that many of Nuzhah's participants were based in Iraq or other neighboring countries and then infiltrated Iran, but it was Oveissi's men who were based in Iraq, as discussed earlier. Similarly, *Kudita-yi Nuzhah*, 108–109, states that Bakhtiar's plan was to seize Khuzestan province and use it as a base to take over the rest of the country, but this was Oveissi's plan, as we have seen. Iran's leaders stated that the coup plan called for several bombings, but it was Iraqi agents who were planting bombs in Iran, and Bani-Amiri had refused to do so. Finally, the ten to twenty participants Iran's leaders claimed to have arrested in June may actually have been the Oveissi people who were arrested at this time.

³⁸Many Iranians have told me that they or others knew about the plot before it was broken up and that it was, in fact, an open secret. Similarly, Schahgaldian, *Iranian Military*, 23, says the plot was discussed openly in Paris cafes before 9 July. There is no reason to doubt these statements. It would have been almost impossible to keep a plot involving some 1,100 people entirely secret, and indeed, the Bakhtiar and Oveissi radio stations were regularly broadcasting obvious references to coup plots in this period. The leaders of Niqab assumed that information about the plot would leak and took precautionary measures to limit the impact of such leaks. However, much of the information about a plot that was circulating at this time probably related to Oveissi's activities (see n. 37), and the essential details of the Nuzhah plot almost certainly did not emerge until 9 July.

³⁹Taymuri and Shaybani, interviews; *Agence France-Presse*, 18 July 1980; *New York Times*, 5 January 1981. The names of 140 participants who were killed are given in *Namih-yi Niqab (Niqab Letter)* (Paris), 9 July 1982/18 Tir 1361. Rukni was interrogated brutally for a year and then executed. Much of the material presented in *Kudita-yi Nuzhah* is attributed to him. Hujjat ul-Islam Muhammad Rayshahri, who supervised the investigation of Nuzhah and was Iran's leading counterintelligence official at this time, later said that fifty-one participants were released after the Iraqi invasion and permitted to fight, although some were eventually rearrested: see *Tehran Domestic Service*, 11 August 1981, in *FBIS-SA*, 12 August 1981.

⁴⁰Bakhash, *Reign of the Ayatollahs*, 119–20, 255–56. Muinzadhih (personal interview) told me that these purges seriously weakened Oveissi's network of supporters inside Iran.

⁴¹Bani-Amiri, interview. Madani, Amuzigar, and some other opposition figures who were not directly involved in the plot were also smuggled out of Iran by this network. A few days after the plot collapsed, two participants commandeered a helicopter and escaped to Turkey: see *Le Monde*, 16 July 1980.

⁴²Bani-Amiri, Taymuri, and Shaybani, interviews.

⁴³Ibid.; and Amuzigar, interview.

⁴⁴Khonsari, *National Movement*, chaps. 3–6; Bani-Amiri, Taymuri, Shaybani, and Amuzigar, interviews.

⁴⁵Bani-Amiri, Taymuri, and Shaybani, interviews.

⁴⁶Muhammad Rayshahri later said that the Nuzhah plot, together with the Iraqi invasion and the mujahedin uprising of 1981–82, were the biggest threats to Iran's security in this period: see *Tehran Domestic Service*, 19 February 1982, in *FBIS-SA*, 22 February 1982. The CIA officer said that, after Nuzhah, he concluded that the various opposition factions were no longer capable of overthrowing the Islamic regime, even with U.S. assistance.

⁴⁷See Hickman, *Ravaged and Reborn*, 18–21.

⁴⁸This argument is made in Andrew T. Parasiliti, *Iraq's War Decisions* (unpublished Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1998), chap. 2; and *Washington Post*, 9 November 1980. For an analysis that stresses Iraq's fears of radical Islam, see Pelletiere, *Iran–Iraq War*, chap. 2.

⁴⁹Anthony Cordesman, a leading analyst of Persian Gulf military affairs, believes Iraq needed three or four months to make the physical preparations necessary to invade Iran (telephone interview, 7 October 1999). Edgar O'Ballance, *The Gulf War* (London: Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1988), 48, and Parasiliti,

Iraq's War Decisions, 115, believe that Iraq began preparing to invade Iran in April or May 1980, implying that it needed four or five months to prepare. If Iraq actually began its preparations in September or October 1979, these figures suggest that these preparations would have been completed between December 1979 and March 1980, which is when both Bakhtiar and Oveissi approached Iraq for support. This suggests that Iraq's leaders may have delayed their invasion at least partly in the hope that the Nuzhah and Oveissi plots would weaken Iran. When the Nuzhah plot collapsed, they may have waited until the full effects of the subsequent arrests, executions, and purge of military personnel had played out.

⁵⁰Muinzadiah, personal interview, said that Oveissi was very concerned at this time that Iraq would use him in this way to facilitate an invasion of Iran. According to Muinzadiah, Oveissi broke his ties with Iraq when the invasion occurred, forcing him to abandon his effort to overthrow the Islamic regime. Bani-Amiri, interview, said that he assumed that the financial support and other outside assistance Bakhtiar had obtained for the plot came from the United States, not Iraq. Although Bakhtiar continued to maintain close relations with Iraq after the invasion, Bani-Amiri, Taymuri, Shaybani, and Qaddisi all refused to work with Iraq.