



Director of  
Central  
Intelligence

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## Soviet Military Options in Iran

Special National Intelligence Estimate

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## SOVIET MILITARY OPTIONS IN IRAN

Information available as of 21 August 1980 was  
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*The following intelligence organizations participated in the preparation of the Estimate:*

The Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the Department of State, and the National Security Agency.

*Also Participating:*

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## SUMMARY AND KEY JUDGMENTS

The USSR is taking steps to strengthen the ability of its forces to invade Iran, should Soviet leaders so decide.

On balance, we believe the Soviets have not made a decision to invade Iran. We believe they are likely to pursue their goals in Iran without direct use of military force at least during the next several months.<sup>1</sup>

Crucial in the Soviets' calculations about undertaking major military action are their perceptions of US political will and military capabilities in the region.

Although there is little direct intelligence on Soviet intentions, the Soviets might intervene if they believed that:

- There was an emergent low-risk opportunity to gain the enormous economic and geopolitical advantages that control of Iran would bring.<sup>2</sup>
- The United States was bent on re-creating a position of strength in Iran through military means.

Other circumstances that could trigger Soviet intervention are:

- Serious instability in Iran near the Soviet border.

<sup>1</sup> The Director, Defense Intelligence Agency, and the Service Intelligence Chiefs believe that these judgments are overstated. There is no evidence to determine whether the Soviets have, in fact, made a decision to invade or not to invade Iran. Moreover, the time frame "at least during the next several months" is also beyond our evidence. To properly reflect the SNIE, they believe the judgment should be:

On balance we believe the Soviets are likely to pursue their goals in Iran without direct use of military force at least over the next month or so. Nonetheless, the USSR is taking steps to strengthen the ability of its forces to invade Iran and may do so particularly if the Soviets believed Iranian developments posed a threat to their security or if the US intervened in Iran.

<sup>2</sup> The Director, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, does not believe the USSR would see "an emergent low-risk opportunity" for a power-grab military takeover of Iran under current circumstances. He believes that Moscow's cost benefit analysts will lead the Soviet leadership to pursue goals with respect to Iran through other than direct military intervention, at least for the near term.

In his view the most likely motive for a Soviet intervention in Iran would be a conclusion on Moscow's part that a Soviet intervention was needed to preempt an American move to create a position of strength in Iran by military means.

The Soviets would, of course, find the emergence of a potentially viable leftist regime a tempting reason for intervention, but there appears to be little chance that such a political situation will arise. A Soviet move to occupy only the northern areas of Iran would not give Moscow control of the oil resources, it would leave the USSR in a significantly less advantageous position to influence events in the rest of Iran, and the Soviets would probably see such action as likely to elicit a Western counterintervention.

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—A call for assistance from a pro-Soviet faction in Iran that had acquired national or regional power.

[

]

If the Soviets made a calculated decision to invade Iran under conditions in which they believed they could choose the time, such an operation probably would include 16 to 20 divisions and would be preceded by at least one month of activity to improve the preparedness of the forces. We would be able to see much of this activity within a week of its beginning, and probably would interpret it as preparations for hostilities, but determining whether the Soviets had actually decided to attack would be more difficult.

A Soviet decision to seize northwestern Iran probably could be implemented with three to five divisions within two weeks. If the mobilization were limited to only those units that would take part, we might be able to provide only a few days or at most a week of warning.

If the Soviets perceived a situation threatening their security interests—such as an intervention in Iran by US forces—they probably could hastily assemble a force of some 10 to 12 ill-prepared divisions and launch an attack directed at seizing major objectives in Iran, including some on the Persian Gulf littoral, within about two weeks of a decision to do so. We probably could provide at least a week, and perhaps 10 days, of warning of such an attack.

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## DISCUSSION

### Status of Military Preparations

1. [

[ In the first four months of 1980, there were activities in the Soviet forces opposite northwestern Iran that suggested that the Soviets were paying more attention to the posture and readiness of those forces. [

[ 2. On the basis of activities in the past month, it is evident that the Soviets are indeed developing plans for military contingencies in Iran. [

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divisions (including one airborne) of the Transcaucasus Military District, at least three of the four divisions in Turkestan, and at least part of the 40th Army in Afghanistan. Altogether the forces from the Turkestan and Transcaucasus Military Districts and in Afghanistan would total some 16 to 20 divisions.

15. The six divisions in the North Caucasus Military District also probably would be mobilized in any preparation for an invasion of Iran. In selecting other reinforcements for an invasion of Iran the Soviets would be constrained by the need to maintain large forces opposite NATO and China.

16. The tactical air forces in the Transcaucasus and Turkestan Military Districts have some 450 combat aircraft, including 285 in the Transcaucasus and 165 in Turkestan Military Districts. The Turkestan tactical air forces are presently supporting Soviet operations in Afghanistan. About 75 Soviet fighters, most of them from Turkestan, are based in Afghanistan. There are also some 100 combat aircraft assigned to two training regiments in the Transcaucasus that could be used for operations in Iran. [

] In addition to the tactical air forces opposite Iran, the Soviets also have some 300 air defense interceptors in the Transcaucasus and Turkestan.

17. Combat helicopters would provide support for Soviet forces moving into Iran. The Soviets have some 175 helicopters in the Transcaucasus Military District, which could be augmented by helicopters from other military districts. There are 180 combat helicopters inside Afghanistan and another 40 in Turkestan.

18. Since the beginning of 1980, the Soviet Indian Ocean Squadron has averaged 30 to 32 units—four to six attack/cruise missile submarines, eight surface combatants, two amphibious ships, one minewarfare ship, and 15 auxiliaries. In support of Soviet operations in Iran, these forces could be used to deter and counter Western naval operations in the region. Without substantial augmentation from either the Pacific or Black Sea Fleets, naval forces currently in the Indian Ocean have only a limited amphibious assault capability.

#### Preparedness of the Forces

19. [

] the overall preparedness of the units comprising the forces has undergone relatively modest upgrading. Although small changes

#### Forces for Use Against Iran

14. The evidence indicates that the Soviet planning for military operations in Iran includes the 12 ground

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Soviet Ground Force Divisions Opposite Iran

	Tank			Motorized Rifle			Airborne (All Cat. I)	Total
	I	II	III	I	II	III		
Forces Immediately Adjacent to Iran								
Transcaucasus MD	0	0	0	0	4	7	1	12
Turkestan MD	0	0	0	2	1	1	0	4
40th Army, Afghanistan	0	0	0	3	0	0	2	5
Potential Reinforcements								
North Caucasus MD	0	0	1	0	0	5	0	6
Kiev MD	0	1	5	0	0	4	0	10
Central Asian MD	0	1	0	0	2	4	0	7
Odessa MD	0	0	0	0	0	7	1	8
Moscow MD	0	1	1	0	1	3	1	7
Ural MD	0	0	1	0	0	2	0	3
Volga	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	3

Category descriptions:

- I - 75-100% manning; ready to move at M+1.
- II - 50-75% manning; ready to move at M+1-2.
- III - 10-40% manning; ready to move at M+3.

would be difficult to detect except over long periods of time, most of the divisions in the Transcaucasus Military District appear to remain at low manning levels. [

21. The tactical air forces in the Transcaucasus and Turkestan Military Districts, unlike the ground forces, have been and continue to be equipped about on a par with those in any of the other military districts.

22. There have been a few indications of increased preparedness of rear services and logistics support forces in the Transcaucasus Military District. [

20. Some new ground forces equipment has been delivered to Soviet units in the Transcaucasus Military District, but other than communications equipment the deliveries have been consistent with the generally low priority at which new equipment has been introduced into the forces of this district. In general, the equipment of the ground forces in the Transcaucasus Military District lags behind that found in most other ground forces units in border regions but recently has been upgraded and is better than that found in most interior military districts.

Warning Implications

23. The Soviets could mobilize ground force divisions of the kind located opposite Iran, complete with authorized wartime levels of manpower and equipment, in about three days. [

[ They would have low combat effectiveness, however, especially in the case of a large-scale invasion of Iran—where the distances and terrain

difficulties are substantial, and organized<sup>a</sup> resistance would be virtually assured.

24. These considerations lead us to estimate that if the Soviets make a calculated decision to invade Iran under conditions in which they believe they can afford to choose the time, such an operation is likely to be preceded by at least one and probably several months of activity to improve the preparedness of their forces. We would be able to see much of this activity within a week of its beginning and probably would interpret it as preparation for hostilities, but determining whether the Soviets had actually decided to attack would be more difficult.

25. The Soviets could launch a more limited attack to seize northwestern Iran with a force of about three to five divisions. This force probably could be readied within two weeks. If the mobilization were limited to only those units that would take part in the attack, we might be able to provide a few days or at most a week of warning.

26. If the Soviets perceived a situation threatening their security interests—such as an intervention in Iran by US forces—they probably would forego most of the longer term force improvements discussed above and mount an invasion as quickly as possible. We judge that the Soviets could hastily assemble an invasion force of some 10 to 12 ill-prepared divisions and launch an attack directed at seizing major objectives in Iran, including some on the Persian Gulf littoral, within about two weeks of a decision to do so. We probably could provide at least a week and perhaps 10 days of warning of such an attack.

#### A New Situation on Moscow's Southern Border

27. Although the Soviets' recent military activities opposite Iran probably do not reflect a decision to launch a large-scale intervention in the immediate future, they do show that Moscow is enhancing its ability to conduct substantial military operations against Iran on relatively short notice. At a minimum, they indicate heightened Soviet interest in containing or reversing potentially adverse trends.

28. The Soviets and their Czarist predecessors have long viewed Iran as a lucrative potential addition to

<sup>a</sup> The Director, Defense Intelligence Agency, and the Service Intelligence Chiefs do not believe that Iranian forces are capable of opposing the Soviets with "organized" resistance. However, Iranian forces could put up "some" resistance.

their sphere of influence, and the currently critical global importance of the Persian Gulf and its oil undoubtedly has made it seem an even more tempting target. Control of Iran would bring the USSR major—even decisive—gains. It would shift the power relationships in the Persian Gulf and hence the world a considerable way in Moscow's favor. Control of even part of the region's oil would give Moscow new leverage on Western Europe and Japan, and a successful invasion of Iran would enhance Moscow's ability to intimidate other vulnerable countries in the Third World. Even if the Kremlin does not now think Iranian oil critical to its own economic well being, it would help ensure that Eastern Europe remained dependent on Soviet-controlled oil, alleviate economic problems in the Bloc, and give Moscow new sources of hard currency earnings. Moscow thus welcomed the overthrow of the Shah as a decisive setback for the United States and as another indication of waning US influence in the entire Persian Gulf. It created the possibility of a pro-Soviet Iranian regime, if not one entirely dependent on Soviet support.

29. In order to capitalize on this situation, Moscow has sought to cultivate the Khomeini regime and pose as its protector. But the Iranian Revolution has not evolved as the Soviets might have liked. Iranian-Soviet relations have deteriorated recently and are now at their lowest point since the Iranian Revolution. Not only has the opportunity for the pro-Soviet elements in Iran that Moscow may have anticipated failed to materialize, but militantly anti-Communist clerics have become increasingly powerful and have shown signs of successfully institutionalizing their power.

30. Along with their disappointment with developments in Iran, the Soviets almost certainly have been concerned about recent signs that the United States is prepared to play a more direct and active military role in the Persian Gulf area now that Washington can no longer rely on Iranian forces. The Soviets undoubtedly view the military measures that the United States has taken and is planning as inimical to their interests and aimed at depriving them of legitimate opportunities to influence regional developments. Moscow recognizes that US capabilities in the region are limited, but it may believe that they are adequate for an intervention on behalf of internal Iranian opponents of the Khomeini regime, and it fears that they could grow.

31. In short, the Soviets see two adverse trends at work in Iran: their relations with Iran are deteriorating

and US military capabilities in the area are improving. Their concerns over these developments are likely to continue, and the situation is volatile; there are a number of contingencies that could intensify their anxieties and conceivably could precipitate a decision to intervene militarily.

#### Factors That Could Precipitate Soviet Military Intervention in Iran

32. The Soviets would be willing to intervene militarily in Iran if Moscow's leaders came to believe that they could do so with relative impunity. That is, if some combination of circumstances had brought them to the view that:

- The Iranians would not be able or willing to offer much military resistance.
- Soviet strength in the area had become sufficient to gain a quick military decision before effective US or other military counteraction could be brought to bear.
- US resolve was insufficient to produce a serious risk of US-Soviet military confrontation.\*

33. Alternatively, Moscow could decide to intervene militarily in Iran if Soviet leaders believed that the United States was preparing to send military forces there. The scope and nature of Soviet reaction would depend very much on what Moscow thought US motives were. If the Soviets concluded that a small, quick US military move was designed strictly to obtain release of the American hostages, they probably would not intervene. If, however, the Soviets concluded that

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the United States intended to use force to create a pro-US regime in Tehran or take control of the oilfields, they might invade and occupy all or part of Iran to preempt the US move.

34. The Soviets could be tempted to intervene if the pro-Soviet Iranian left had seized power but needed Soviet military assistance to hold it. In the event a pro-Moscow government called for Soviet support, it would legitimize Soviet involvement. This would require a real growth in leftist power, however, before such a situation developed on its own.

35. Another precipitant of Soviet intervention could be the fragmentation of Iran into a number of regional and ethnically based entities. The Soviets might in fact be tempted to promote such a breakdown of order in the northwestern provinces to provide justification for intervening. Soviet efforts in 1921 and 1946 to establish a Soviet-oriented entity in Azerbaijan demonstrate that Moscow has long had an interest in expanding its control into northern Iran. The Soviets would have even more incentive to act if they feared that anti-Soviet, pro-Western governments could emerge in the provinces bordering the USSR. In a situation in which the authority of the Iranian central government had broken down and local authorities were taking control, the Soviets no doubt would provide substantial assistance to leftist elements making a bid for power in areas such as Azerbaijan, Baluchistan, and Kordestan. They would hope that leftists could get enough control for enough time to legitimize a public bid for Soviet military help. Even without such a bid, however, they probably would move into the northern provinces if the only alternative seemed to be governments that were actively hostile to the USSR.

36. Although the Soviets would be deeply disturbed by what looked like movement by any Iranian central government toward resumption of close relations with the United States, Moscow is unlikely to see direct Soviet military intervention as an effective counter. If a legitimate government were moving gradually in such a direction, the Soviets would be more likely to try to halt the trend by a combination of economic inducements and covert subversion than to use military threats or actions, which would be likely to speed an improvement of Iranian-US relations and even result in an Iranian plea for US protection. The Soviets, however, would be more likely to intervene to preempt or overturn a pro-Western coup, particularly if they thought it had active US backing.



#### Factors Constraining a Soviet Decision To Intervene

37. The most important constraint on Soviet intervention in Iran is the possibility of direct and potentially escalating military confrontation with the United States. The continuing Soviet preoccupation with US military intentions and actions in the region argues that Moscow has not discounted the US factor, and both public and private Soviet statements indicate that Moscow clearly recognizes the significance Washington would attach to a Soviet military move in Iran. Brezhnev himself has publicly acknowledged the importance to the West of continued access to Persian Gulf oil, and [ ] said that Moscow recognizes that both the United States and the USSR have vital interests in Iran. Nevertheless, in view of the limited US forces in the region and of our uncertainty about Soviet evaluations of US resolve to confront the USSR, we cannot completely rule out the possibility that Moscow believes it has the military capability to deter or overpower a local US military response and to intimidate Washington from undertaking a broader military response.

38. Even if Moscow discounted the likelihood of effective American military resistance to a Soviet invasion of Iran, it would be mindful of the danger that a new demonstration of Soviet aggressiveness could lead to vastly increased US defense spending, accelerated US-Chinese military cooperation, and a reinvigoration of the NATO alliance. Moscow undoubtedly recognizes that the West Europeans would see a Soviet move into Iran as far more detrimental to their interests than was the invasion of Afghanistan. Moreover, Moscow could anticipate similar adverse reactions from a number of Iran's Middle East neighbors, who, though tempted to accommodate to the Soviet force majeure, might begin to cooperate with the

West in a serious long-term effort to contain the further spread of Soviet influence and power.

39. A further constraint on Soviet aggression would be the major efforts needed to seize and control Iran. The Soviets probably recognize that they have much less support in Iran than they thought they had in Afghanistan at the time of their intervention. Moscow must take account of the xenophobic nationalism and religious fervor the revolution has aroused in Iran, even if it is also aware of a concomitant decline in Iranian military and administrative effectiveness.

#### Prospects

40. We believe Moscow's calculations of risk and gain will most likely lead the Soviets to pursue their goals in Iran without direct use of military force, at least over the next few months.<sup>5</sup> Moscow is likely to continue to follow a less risky course in its quest for "secure borders," regional hegemony, and global influence. It does not follow, however, that Soviet-Iranian relations will remain militarily quiescent. At a minimum we expect the Soviets to continue preparing for military contingencies and to create and take advantage of any opportunities that present themselves.

<sup>5</sup> The Director, Defense Intelligence Agency, and the Service Intelligence Chiefs believe that these judgments are overrated. There is no evidence to determine whether the Soviets have, in fact, made a decision to invade or not to invade Iran. Moreover, the time frame "at least over the next few months" is also beyond our evidence. To properly reflect the SNIE, they believe the judgment should be:

*On balance we believe the Soviets are likely to pursue their goals in Iran without direct use of military force at least over the next month or so. Nonetheless, the USSR is taking steps to strengthen the ability of its forces to invade Iran and may do so particularly if the Soviets believed Iranian developments posed a threat to their security or if the US intervened in Iran.*

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