

I S S U E P A P E R

IRANIAN REFUGEES

THE MANY FACES OF PERSECUTION



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This paper was written by Allen K. Jones, consultant to USCR. It was edited by Rosemary E. Tripp and produced by Koula Hadjipanicolaou of the USCR staff. Cover design by Unicorn Graphics.

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A few short years ago, Iran stood poised as an emergent, regional power in the Middle East: rich in oil, strategically located, closely allied to the West, and ruled by an energetic monarch who wanted a westernized, industrialized life for his historic people. Within the space of a year, however, the Shah's grip on his country was loosened by sweeping revolutionary forces portending great political and social change. These forces coalesced to oust the Shah and, in his place, establish a new social, political, and religious order embodied in the person of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The wave of revolution that swept Iran in 1979 and its continuation today, abetted by a war with Iraq, have served to keep Iranian national life in a state of uncertainty and upheaval up to the present time.

In the wake of the revolution, the attitudes and actions of the new regime's leadership created conditions intolerable to significant numbers of Iranians. As a result, many felt compelled to flee or remain outside their homeland. Today there are hundreds of thousands of Iranians—as many as 1-2 million, by some estimates—in countries around the world who do not wish to return to their homeland. Some have been recognized as refugees; some are awaiting decisions on their applications for asylum; many are without legal status as they seek a country which will allow them to enter and stay.

Post-revolution events in Iran, including the taking of American hostages and, more recently, terrorist incidents in which Iranian elements are thought to have had a hand, have earned for Iran and Iranians a strong dislike in the eyes of the world, particularly in the West. As a consequence, the international community is not inclined to confront the fact that many Iranians are forced to live away from their homeland in trying and uncertain circumstances. Thus the situation of exiled Iranians is little known and little understood, and yet constitutes a significant humanitarian problem.

Some authorities suggest that the problems of the Iranian refugees are the most difficult, complex, and demanding in the world today. The refugee population cuts across the full spectrum of socio-economic classes; it displays enormous

variety of ethnicity, religion, and political sentiment. The refugees are scattered throughout the world—in neighboring countries, Western Europe, and North America. They often do not fit recent popular stereotypes: not quiet, cooperative, and pliable, they are often assertive, demanding, and contentious, a behavior pattern that frequently has marked political overtones. The characteristics and circumstances of the Iranian refugee raise the possibility that new challenges are emerging for the refugee support community.

Background to a Revolution

The Shah's fall from power in January 1979 marked the end of a 37-year reign. Second in the Pahlavi line, Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi had ruled continuously since 1941, except for a brief interlude in 1953 when a republican government forced him into exile.

The Shah wished to make of present-day Iran a state that recalled the ancient glories of the great Persian monarchs—Cyrus the Great, Darius, and Xerxes (559-465 B.C.)—but which largely ignored the contributions of Islam to Persian civilization. At the same time, he wanted to use oil revenues to make Iran a modern nation in a Western sense—progressive, industrialized, and militarily strong. He nevertheless failed to adopt more democratic policies consistent with modernization, a contradiction sorely felt by the better (and often foreign) educated among the population. The Shah's personal brand of authoritarianism meant that there would be no meaningful avenues for popular decision-making or participation in the schemes of national development; this set the stage for revolutionary unrest. The situation was exacerbated by social and economic reforms threatening the power and prestige of the clergy, who traditionally wielded considerable authority in Iranian politics and society.

By the late 1970s, various groups in Iranian society, such as urban workers, merchants, intellectuals, students, and clergy, opposed the Shah. In the months leading up to the revolution, these groups coalesced into a unified force, a development facilitated by the charismatic role of a banished Iranian cleric, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

The Ayatollah attracted to his cause young Iranians living abroad who shared his anti-Shah sentiments. With his loyal supporters, Khomeini began a campaign to bring down the Shah and replace his regime with a government based on the tenets of Shia Islam. He used the network of religious institutions in Iran to spread his message. One method he used was ingenious and effective: sermons were recorded on cassettes and then smuggled into Iran to be copied and played in mosques and homes.

Khomeini's strongest supporters were students, young workers, and many in the lower-middle classes, such as small merchants and shopkeepers—groups for

whom revivalist Islam was a compelling movement. The exiled cleric, with his promise of greater popular political participation than was evident under the Shah, also found support among many Iranians of different social classes and varying (often conflicting) political views.

When, in early 1979, it became clear that the Shah could no longer hold on to power, he left Tehran and went into exile. In his place came the Ayatollah in triumph from France. With his return, Iran experienced several weeks of revolutionary ferment as its people celebrated their new-found freedom. Soon, however, the Ayatollah and his supporters turned their attention to the task of fashioning and establishing the Islamic state they envisioned.

Consolidation and Reconstruction

Before the new regime could begin reconstruction of a government along Islamic lines, it had to come to terms with the remnants of government left behind by the Shah. The regime began to arrest and imprison key members of the Shah's government and military. A number were put on trial during the early days and weeks of the revolution and were either executed or returned to prison to serve indefinite terms. Among those executed were former high government officials, senior military officers, and high ranking members of SAVAK, the Shah's secret police. The new regime carried out its brand of harsh justice with a vengeance; most vulnerable were clearly those who had had close ties with the Shah.

In addition to ridding the government of the Shah's associates, Khomeini and his supporters directed their energies to creating a new Islamic state in Iran. Old institutions such as the *Majlis* (Assembly) were reordered along more avowedly Islamic lines (candidates for office had to be known as devout Muslims, for example), and new institutions of state, such as the Council of Guardians, were created in keeping with a model of government based on Khomeini's interpretation of Shia Islam. A new constitution embodying and legitimizing these changes was drafted and passed in a popular referendum. In letter and spirit, this constitution conformed largely to democratic principles, including respect for fundamental human rights and protection of minorities. In practice, however, the regime soon demonstrated its scant regard for constitutional guarantees of human rights.

The ruling group of Khomeini and his supporters had a difficult time consolidating its position and establishing its authority. Perhaps the most important reason for this was that the new regime created a vacuum in the government by dismissing virtually all high technocrats and putting in their place people who had little or no experience in governmental affairs. The revolution also unleashed an enormous reservoir of popular feeling which perpetuated fluid and unstable conditions in Iran. In addition, the new leadership was not without its detractors,

including members of the revolutionary alliance who felt betrayed by the course the revolution was taking.

One of the revolutionary groups that had emerged in 1981 to mount a serious challenge to the new regime was the *Mujahedin-e-Khalq* (People's Combatants). They showed their opposition to the new rulers through street rallies, demonstrations, and physical attacks on persons closely associated with the new regime. They, too, favored an Islamic government, but one which also incorporated certain Marxist or socialist principles. They opposed the concentration of power in the hands of Khomeini, whom they likened to a dictator.

Members of the *Mujahedin* and their supporters soon found themselves the principal targets of the new regime, particularly after August 1981; thousands were arrested, tried, and executed. The *Mujahedin* responded in kind with vicious attacks on Revolutionary Guards and leading figures of the regime. In the summer of 1981, two bomb blasts allegedly planted by *Mujahedin* activists killed a number of important figures, including the new president, prime minister, and several leading politicians.

In addition to internal causes that kept the revolution alive, there was an external reason as well—Iraq's invasion of Iran's western border. The regime used the issue to divert attention from internal divisions and to mobilize the Iranian public in the war cause. Four years later, the war continues, keeping Iran in a state of alert and readiness, precluding a return to a state where settled conditions might prevail.

The Creation of Refugee Groups

In the early, heady days of revolution, most Iranians were filled with hope for greater freedom and justice than they had known under the Shah. As the revolution progressed, however, that hope faded as it became clear that only certain Iranians—those close to the Ayatollah or believers in his vision for Iran—were to benefit from the revolution.

The groups disaffected by the revolution cut across the full spectrum of Iranian society. Not only associates of the Shah, but also high level civil servants, technocrats, and members of the professions, (especially university teachers) became prime targets for the new regime. Some of this broad group had managed to flee Iran before Khomeini returned, but most remained in Iran. Soon after Khomeini's triumph, the regime began to arrest members of this group, try them, and either imprison or execute them. For instance, most of the teaching staff at the University of Tehran were purged, fired, or retired. Many fled the country.

Religious minorities also became targets. The Baha'i community, persecuted in Iran from its very inception, has been the target of the most severe treatment.



The House of Bab in Shiraz, the holiest Baha'i shrine in Iran, was demolished in 1981. The case of the Baha'i may be the clearest example of religious persecution today.

Baha'i National Center

Theirs probably represents the clearest case of religious persecution in the world today.

The Baha'is are adherents of an independent world religion founded in Iran in the nineteenth century by a Persian nobleman who claimed to be a divinely inspired prophet. This claim challenges the fundamental Islamic doctrine of the finality of divine revelation, which ended with the prophet Muhammad, and thus the Shias view the Baha'is as apostates from Islam. There is no mention of the civil rights of Baha'is in the constitution of the Islamic republic, though such rights are recognized for Christians and Jews. Accusations against the Baha'is include promulgation of prostitution, stemming from the fact that Baha'i marriages are not recognized in Iran. Baha'i couples are, therefore, technically considered to be living in sin and their children to be illegitimate. Baha'is are also accused of having collaborated with the Shah's regime, although, according to the tenets of their faith, they must not participate in partisan politics. In fact, the Baha'is were persecuted during the Shah's rule as well.

The present number of Baha'is in Iran is estimated to be 350,000. According to the U.S. Baha'i community, more than 170 members of the Baha'i faith have

been executed in Iran since the revolution (including women and teenage girls) for refusing to recant their faith, and more than 700 others have been arrested or have vanished. Thousands have been forced from their jobs and denied their pensions, and entire villages have been depopulated. Baha'i holy places and cemeteries have been desecrated. Baha'i homes and properties have been destroyed and Baha'i children prevented from attending school. Baha'is have also been denied passports, depriving them of legal means to emigrate. On August 29, 1983, an edict of the prosecutor general of Iran made participation in any Baha'i institutional activity a criminal act. In keeping with the community's belief in civil obedience to the law of the land, the elected National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Iran disbanded itself and all other Baha'i institutions in the country. The persecution of the Baha'is has nonetheless continued.

The Baha'i National Center in the U.S. estimates that 2,000 Iranian Baha'is were already living in the U.S. before the revolution took place. They have since been joined by about 5,000 others. Most have relatives who have been able to help and support them, so that relatively few have had to resort to the services made available to refugees through resettlement agencies. Some Iranian Baha'is have also gone to Canada, which has adopted a favorable admission policy toward Baha'i refugees. A number are stranded, like other Iranian refugees, in several European countries; still others are in Turkey and Pakistan.

A second religious minority that has experienced insecurity under the present regime is the Iranian Jewish community. This community has deep roots in the country; there is evidence that Jews have lived in Iran for 25 centuries. Estimates indicate a 1978 population of 70,000 to 80,000. Jews are recognized by the Koran as "people of the Book" and, in the constitution passed by the regime in 1979, Judaism is one of the four legally recognized religions.

Even before the return of Khomeini, Iranian Jews felt nervous at the prospect of a new Islamic government. In early December 1978, a group chartered a flight to take Jewish families out of Iran to Israel. Perhaps to dispel the fears of Iranian Jews, the Ayatollah stated in late December that religious minorities, including Jews and Christians, would be protected under an Islamic republic.

Jews have been among those executed by the regime in the months since the revolution, however. They have been singled out and charged with being spies for Israel or clandestinely promoting Zionist interests. The regime's dislike of Israel stems in large part from its identification with the Palestinian cause. In some cases, Jewish businesses have been damaged or destroyed, but more for the material wealth they represented and the suggestion of association with the Shah than for any anti-Jewish sentiment, per se.

All of this has had the effect of heightening fear in the Iranian Jewish community. Many Jews left following the establishment of Khomeini's regime. In March 1980,

a spokesman for the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society stated that approximately half of the Iranian Jewish community had left to go to Israel or the U.S.

In the early days of the revolution, the Anglicans in particular were a target of the regime because of the church's ties with Britain, a former colonial power. Some in the Anglican community were accused of spying, and for a time, four Britons were imprisoned under this charge. Assassination attacks were also made on church leaders, including the vicar in Isfahan, who was killed, and the bishop of Tehran, who survived and is now in exile in Britain.

An estimated 230,000 Armenians make up most of the Christian community in Iran. They suffered the desecration of their Tehran church in early 1979, and later the same year, suffered the loss of a number of their businesses—150 liquor stores and three cinema houses—through arson attacks. As with the Jews, these actions are thought to have been motivated more by moral than religious reasons. Nonetheless, these developments produced fear and anxiety in the Armenian community, compelling a number to leave. More recently, the government has prohibited the use of the Armenian language in religion classes. As a result, Armenian schools remained closed for most of 1984.

Since the early days of the revolution, emotions that ran high against Christian groups have abated somewhat. Nevertheless, whereas Christians can perhaps find some reassurance in a constitutional provision recognizing Christianity, some at least must find irksome the regime's prescriptions to conform to Islamic codes of clothing and conduct.

Zoroastrians, too, have been persecuted and are uncomfortable about the regime's avowedly Islamic social prescriptions, but generally they have not suffered as greatly as some of the other religious minorities.

Although the regime remains distrustful of religious minorities, there have been no reports since mid-1982 of arrests attributable solely to the religious affiliation of members of "recognized" religious minorities.

Ethnic Minorities

Of Iran's current population of approximately 40 million, a majority are Persians. Their language is Farsi, and their religion is Shia Islam. In addition, there are a number of significant ethnic minorities including Arabs, Azerbaijanis, Kurds, Turkomans, Bakhtiaris, Baluch, and Qashqa'is (see map). All of these groups have a distinctive identity shaped by such features as language and religion, and all of them, at one time or another, have had their differences with the revolutionary regime in Tehran. These differences, some of which pre-date the current regime, have usually centered on demands for greater respect for ethnic identity and a larger measure of autonomy.



Distribution of Ethnic Minority Groups in Iran

The Kurds (estimated population, one and a half to three million) and Arabs (estimated population, one million) have been the most troublesome communities for the Tehran regime. The Iranian Kurds (other Kurds live in Iraq and Turkey), who live in western Iran, demand cultural autonomy and control of the local government. The Shah had his own problems with the Kurds. When he was forced to leave and a new regime came in his place, the Kurds saw an opportunity to try to win concessions before the new government became firmly entrenched. The conditions of civil war which commenced in Iranian Kurdistan before the Shah's departure continue today.

Like the Kurds, the Arabs are linguistically distinct from the majority Persians. They also sought greater autonomy from the central government even before the current regime took power. Because most of Iran's oil is produced in the region where they live, the central government is particularly sensitive about disruptions in their area. Relations between the Arab community and the central government, most strained in 1979 when clashes took place between the two parties, remain uneasy, complicated by sectarian differences and the war with Iraq.

Other ethnic groups have had conflicts with the ruling regime in Tehran. Azerbaijani support for the religious/political faction led by the senior Ayatollah Shariat Madari accounts for their differences with the regime; in the case of the

Baluch, sectarianism and a desire for autonomy are the root of their differences with the regime. Ethnicity and aspirations for autonomy distance the Turkomans from the Tehran government.

In August 1981, the government issued a statement offering legal recognition to opposition ethnic groups, provided they renounced their campaigns for recognition and laid down their arms. Since that time, there have been few incidents of conflict between any of these groups and the government, with the exception of the Kurds. Nevertheless, relations remain strained. There are, for instance, Baluch leaders living in exile in Pakistan because of differences with the present regime, and Ayatollah Shariat-Madari remains under house arrest in Qom.

Ideological Groups

There are many Iranian groups that have ideological differences with the ruling regime. Principal among them are the *Mujahedin-e-Khalq* and the Tudeh Party. The former is led by Massoud Rajavi, who lives in Paris. The Tudeh (Communist) Party was initially supportive of the revolution, but later fell out with the regime. In mid-1983, the arrest of 1,500 party members and the execution of the party leadership eliminated the party as a potential threat. Other opposition groups include monarchists who wish to see the Pahlavi dynasty restored; the *Fedayeen*, like the *Mujahedin* but more Islam-oriented; and the National Front, a secular party with a liberal democratic program. More than once, reports have issued from Iran saying military-supported conspiracies—plots that presumably had the goal of placing the Shah's son on the throne—had been nipped in the bud.

Finally, there are those who do not form a discrete group per se, but who are typically progressive, westernized Iranians who welcomed the revolution for its promise of greater political participation and freedom. They, however, quickly became disillusioned with the intolerance and vengefulness of the new leadership manifested by summary trials and executions and by a narrow prescription for proper Islamic behavior in all areas of life. For many, this disillusionment has turned to bitterness which, combined with other considerations, has compelled a significant number to leave the country.

Certain actions of the regime, such as passing of new laws or promoting the war against Iraq, have had a direct bearing on the status and well-being of two broad social groups—women and children. The women who feel the effect of the regime's actions most keenly are almost exclusively those who have received a Western education, have lived abroad, or hold secular values. They have rebelled at regulations prescribing the wearing of the *chador*, a full-length, sheet-like garment, and have taken exception to government pronouncements that women can work only part-time and that the weight of the legal evidence a woman provides is only half that of a man's. Such measures indicate the regime's

clear intent to relegate women to a subordinate role in society. For some women, living under these conditions is intolerable, and they have felt compelled to flee Iran.

The principal concern for children is the war with Iraq. The regime has formally encouraged the recruitment of children into brigades called *basij*, and boys as young as nine years of age are in their ranks. While some families are proud to have their children serve in the army, many are not happy to see their young boys conscripted. Among refugees who have arrived recently in Pakistan, concern for children because of the war, as well as the transformation of Iranian society, are primary reasons motivating flight.

Flight and Places of Refuge

Like the Iranian refugees themselves, the means by which they remove themselves from their home country, the places where they have found refuge—at least temporarily—and the circumstances they encounter there vary.

Two factors have played a predominant part in determining the ability of refugees to depart Iran: their group identity or affiliation and the relative strength of the regime. Early in the revolution, when the power of the Khomeinites was still rather diffuse, the Shah's associates were watched more closely than others. As the regime began to consolidate its power, however, other groups became targets, and it became more difficult for those wishing to leave to do so; airports, for instance, became closely watched. As a result, many would-be refugees had to resort to travel over land to one of the frontiers with Pakistan or Turkey or across the water to one of the Gulf countries.

The situation eased somewhat for those wishing to leave Iran in December 1982. The Ayatollah Khomeini issued an eight-point decree, demonstrating his belief that the revolution had taken hold and his desire that all of those who were not supporters should leave Iran. This decree, however, came at a time when it was becoming more difficult for Iranians to enter other countries as refugees or asylum seekers. Spain, for instance, which had not previously required a visa of entering Iranians, made it mandatory for them to have a visa after December 1982.

Many Iranian refugees use an "underground railroad" to leave Iran. This entails considerable expense—a chain of agents is involved, and each takes his cut—and some risk. Normally, there are at least three links in the chain: one to get the refugees from the point of origin to the border region, another to get them over the border, and a third to receive the refugees in the new country. The rate for one refugee to cross over into Pakistan is \$2,000 - 4,000, depending on age, ability to pay (the agents make their own judgments), and group identity (Baha'is pay more).

The risks are the possibility of being found out and turned over to the authorities or the dishonesty of agents who abandon the refugees in a desolate place. These risks can be minimized by using known, dependable agents, but can never be eliminated altogether. Some agents seek a higher fee in return for a guaranteed escape.

As asylum countries for Iranian refugees, Pakistan and Turkey are similar in a number of respects: both countries share land borders with Iran, have close economic ties with Iran, and have predominantly Muslim populations. The latter point makes them sensitive to the revolution in Iran and its political implications for their own countries. These circumstances have played a role in how the countries have come to view and deal with Iranian refugees.

The true number of Iranian refugees in Pakistan is unknown, but some informed sources put the figure at about 25,000; others say that 45,000 to 50,000 Iranian refugees have passed through Karachi since the flow began. The majority are Baluch tribesmen; one estimate puts the number at 17,000. Most of these are living in Pakistani Baluchistan, though some of their leaders live in Karachi.

Others—perhaps 7,000 - 10,000—are mostly middle-class, westernized Iranians who have fled from the cities. Among these refugees, the largest group, about 30-40 percent, are Baha'is. Another 30 percent is made up of young people, particularly young men who fled to escape conscription, but also young people in general, often sent out by parents who are disillusioned with the revolution. The remainder is amorphous, although a number no doubt belong to one of the leftist parties.

Since January-February 1984, the flow of these refugees into Pakistan has increased. In September-October of the previous year, it averaged 50 a month. As of June 1984, the monthly flow was over 100; some estimates put it as high as 150. The refugees enter Pakistan via two routes, both of which link the provinces of Iranian and Pakistani Baluchistan.

When they arrive in Pakistan, they invariably go to one of the major cities. Karachi has the most (approximately 65 percent), largely because of the city's commercial character and the presence of Iranian businesses and families. The remainder are located in the cities of Islamabad, Lahore, Peshawar, and Quetta.

Only a minority of this group register with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees—between one-in-three and one-in-five, according to different sources. Once it has been determined they are bona fide refugees, UNHCR provides assistance, including a monthly cash stipend of 800 rupees (approximately \$60.00), medical assistance, and English language instruction if the refugees wish. They are also provided with a certificate which verifies their refugee status.

Refugees who do not register with UNHCR apparently receive support from the compatriots with whom they stay.



Revolutionary guards execute Kurdish rebels. The regime acknowledges 5,000 executions since coming to power. Most of the victims, from various ethnic and ideological backgrounds, have been tortured and denied fair trials.

Amnesty International

In addition to assistance, UNHCR—consistent with its mandate—provides protection for refugees, primarily to torture victims. Such protection is crucial because the Khomeini regime does not wish such victims to get to the West where they might tell their story. Thus they strive through agents to locate and capture such victims and return them to Iran.

The third service UNHCR performs is to screen refugees for resettlement in third countries. Some 220 Iranians were resettled by UNHCR from Pakistan in 1983—199 to Canada, 15 to Australia, and 3 to the U.S. This number represented about 8 percent of the Iranians who had been granted refugee status by UNHCR in Pakistan since its program of assistance began in mid-1981. In the latter part of 1984, processing for resettlement increased, and the number of registered refugees departing Pakistan reportedly was only slightly lower than levels of new inflow. As of October 1984, UNHCR had registered 4,000 Iranian refugees.

The U.S. government chooses not to process applications for resettlement from Iranians in Pakistan. The official reason is that such processing could serve

to draw refugees out of Iran. U.S. officials are also concerned about security; their office might be attacked or besieged by Iranian refugees much as the UNHCR office in Karachi was for two weeks in May 1983. The U.S. is also reluctant to begin processing Iranians in Pakistan because of the strains it might cause on Pakistan-Iran relations.

Turkey's accession to the 1951 *Convention relating to the Status of Refugees* carries a geographical limitation according to which it recognizes only those from Eastern European countries as refugees. Thus Iranians who are refugees in Turkey are treated as people in transit and are expected to move on.

The number reported in Turkey varies according to the source. The UN estimates that there are 3,000 to 5,000, but only a minority of them—500 to 1000—are registered with the UNHCR office in Ankara. According to the State Department, as of February 1984, there were 4,000 Iranians who had documents (including some who were not refugees, such as businessmen whose presence outside Iran is only temporary) and 2,000 without documents. The Turkish government uses a figure of 4,000 Iranian asylum seekers. In any case, as with other situations, precise numbers are difficult to establish for such reasons as the movement of refugees, the withdrawal of cases, and the general fluidity that characterizes the situation.

Like those fleeing to Pakistan, Iranians fleeing by land to Turkey are dependent on agents. These are most often Kurds, who, like the Baluch, charge high fees for transporting refugees. Most of the refugees that come across by land manage to get to Istanbul, where the large resident Iranian community can provide clandestine support for the refugees and aid them in their onward travel.

The Turks have generally been tolerant of the Iranians, though there was one case of refoulement in late 1983 and another known case in October 1984 in which three people were returned to Iran when they were unable to procure visas to a third country. According to U.S. State Department officials, this incident was an isolated one and did not represent a change in Turkey's policy.

Nevertheless, because of the refoulements and also out of fear that they might be victimized by Turkey's friendly relations with Iran, Iranian refugees in Turkey live in considerable anxiety, and a number take steps to leave the country. Those with valid passports seek to obtain visas to the few countries that will still issue visas to Iranians. Those without documents may be stopped at the border by the police, made to register, and then referred to the International Catholic Migration Commission. ICMC, in turn, requests UNHCR to see what resettlement opportunities exist.

Some countries are resettling Iranians from Turkey, but the process is slow. In order for Iranians to be admitted into most European countries as refugees, they should have a very close relative (parents qualify, siblings do not) resident

in the country. In the case of the U.S., consideration for resettlement is complicated by the fact that the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) has no processing post in Turkey. The U.S. maintains that the Turkish government is not in favor of a post in Turkey and that such a post could serve to draw refugees from Iran and would place strains on Turkish-Iranian ties. An applicant for resettlement in the U.S., then, will be pre-screened and issued a Turkish travel document and a visa to travel to Rome or Vienna for interviews with INS. The process may take five to eight months. In general, the prospects are bleak for Iranians to be resettled to third countries from Turkey, and many, desperate and fearful of staying in Turkey, leave illegally.

Orbit Cases

A number of Iranians have left their countries of first asylum, often using false identification, and have been refused admittance by the country where they would seek refuge. Forced to return to the first country, they are once again refused admission.

No one knows exactly how many such cases—referred to as orbit cases—there are; Iranians are only one group of refugees who have found themselves in such trying circumstances. Governments do not keep figures of such cases, as no government wants to be known as having created orbit cases. Most of them are in Europe, but there have also been cases involving the U.S. Cases are usually settled—after days or even weeks—by the intervention of such agencies as UNHCR or interested private voluntary organizations.

Iranian Refugees in Other Countries

Iranian refugees can also be found in numerous countries of Western Europe—Italy, Spain, France, West Germany, and the U.K.—the U.S., and Canada. Their treatment may be no better or worse than that of other refugee groups, but they have encountered recently tightened procedures in West Germany and perhaps a less than cordial welcome in the U.S.

The number of asylum seekers from Iran in West Germany has been approximately 1,000 for each of the past three years. The precise number is not known, though it probably is fewer than in other European countries; there are 6,000 registered Iranian students in West Germany, and some of these are likely seekers of asylum or refugee status.

In 1982, the West German government altered its asylum law to allow anyone who can stand on German soil and request asylum to be considered for it. While the letter of the law indicates magnanimity, the spirit in which it is enforced is

strict. If immigration authorities, for instance, are aware or suspect that there are asylum seekers on an incoming plane, they may board the plane or instruct the airline staff to disallow disembarkation.

In some West German states, depending on how they have implemented the new federal law, an alien may be taken to a reception center once he has been accepted for processing as an asylum seeker. He will stay in this center for approximately three months and then move to a smaller center to stay until the asylum process is completed, a period that normally lasts from one-and-a-half to two years.

In the centers, asylum seekers are provided with food, lodging, medical care, and an allowance for incidentals. They are allowed to visit nearby towns to shop, but they must check in and out; violations may be punished by a fine or imprisonment.

The Iranians are critical of the conditions in the centers, especially the absence of any constructive activity. The Germans, in turn, tend to view the asylum seekers negatively, as they do foreigners in general because of the recession and current domestic tensions. They are sensitive about having fenced camps on German soil, but tend not to understand complaints about conditions there.

Canadian government officials indicate that there are fewer than 2,000 Iranians who are presently applying for refugee status; others estimate that there are approximately 5,000 cases, including those who have been granted refugee status as well as those in process. In March 1983, the Canadian government liberalized its policy to allow Iranian visa holders to apply for permanent residence without leaving the country. The change was instigated by concerns over the human rights situation in Iran and the Iran-Iraq war. The government estimated that about 2,000 Iranians would benefit from this liberalization, half of them students whose funding had been cancelled and whose passport renewals had been denied by the Iranian government.

Most of the Iranian refugees in Canada are upper-middle class individuals or families who were in business or the professions. The Canadian government has been especially sensitive to the plight of the Baha'is (as have some other governments), with the result that Baha'is comprise a sizable portion of the Iranian refugees in Canada. Jews and Armenian Christians also have received particular attention by the Canadians; taken together, these groups account for about one-third of the Iranian refugees in Canada.

The Iranian Ferdowsi Association of Canada, comprised of well-to-do professionals and businessmen of Iranian extraction, plays a helpful role for Iranians who arrive on Canadian soil. When an individual arrives, the association is contacted to help establish new arrivals' bona fides as refugees. It also screens out possible agents of the Khomeini regime. If an individual's claim is deemed

Applications by Iranians for Asylum in the U.S.

	Pending at End of Period	Applications Approved	Applications Denied	Otherwise Closed
July–Sept '80	8,428	14	69	—*
Oct '80–Sept '81	14,746	120	181	—*
Oct '81–May '82	14,683	1,212	1,122	—*
Jun '82–Sept '82**	21,033	1,325	491	48
Oct '82–May '83**	11,266	3,320	1,453	475
Jun '83–Sept '83	9,661	1,760 (2,432)***	561	111
Oct '83–Sept '84	3,214	5,016 (7,441)***	3,216	1,359

*Included in "denied" column

**For these two time periods, figures represent number of individuals applying as opposed to "case" applications which may include more than one person (i.e. family).

***Number of individuals included in the cases is shown in parentheses.

Source: Immigration and Naturalization Service.

genuine, the association will often post bond, which enables him to be released and to become gainfully employed while an application for refugee status is processed. This bond varies according to the judge at the hearing; it can be as much as \$5,000 or, if the individual is known to the association, as little as \$2,000. The association then uses its network of contacts to help find a job and provide a support system for him in his new circumstances.

The Situation of Iranian Refugees in the U.S.

During the period of the Shah's rule, when ties were close between the U.S. and Iran, many Iranians came to the U.S. to carry on business, to study, and in some cases, to live. At the time of the fall of the Shah, there were, for instance, over 50,000 Iranians studying in U.S. colleges and universities—the largest group of foreign students in the U.S. at that time.

A number of Iranians in the U.S. were sympathetic to the revolution; many returned to Iran to further its cause after Khomeini's return from exile in February 1979. There were some among these, however, who became disillusioned with the revolution and who sought ways to leave again. There were also some

Iranians who, sympathetic or not to the revolution, stayed on in the U.S. Among these, a number have sought asylum status.

U.S. policy overall has been even-handed toward Iranian refugees. Since the revolution, the U.S. has provided for the admission of Iranian refugees in essentially two phases: prior to January 1983, when Iranians were to be admitted along with others from the Near East and South Asia (none were admitted in FY 1982, however), and after January 1983, when the U.S. established a refugee program for Iranian refugees. According to State Department officials, the policy was changed in response to pressures within the department over how to handle Iranians rather than from any outside pressures. In fact, given the strained relations between the U.S. and Iran, political pressures for a refugee program for the Iranians have been absent. The year-and-a-half delay is likely attributable to the lingering bitterness and frustration over the hostage crisis (1979-81) during which U.S. diplomats and others were held by Iranian militants.

When the U.S. began processing Iranians for resettlement in January 1983, the decision was made to consider cases in four of the six established priority categories. These included individuals of compelling concern to the U.S., those who either had close family in the country, or those who had had some prior relation—employment or education experience—with the U.S. In July, the policy was changed to consider Iranians in all six priorities, allowing those with more distant family in the country or otherwise of national interest be considered for resettlement. The reasons for this modification were twofold: not as many Iranians had come forward as expected and, on humanitarian grounds, extenuating circumstances existed for such groups as the Baha'is. In FY 1983, the U.S. admitted 1,017 Iranian refugees; 2,770 were admitted in FY 1984.

The U.S. government recently established the ceiling for FY 1985 for the Near East and South Asia at 5,000; Iranians in the two lowest priority categories will not be processed. This action has prompted protest from the United Nations as well as private voluntary agencies in the U.S. and Europe that are assisting Iranian refugees. They fear the policy will deny refugee status to compelling and worthy cases, and stress that it comes at a time when the caseload of Iranian refugees is rising significantly in Europe.

Some Iranians have tried to enter the U.S. with false documentation and have been detained, like some other groups, while their cases are processed for asylum. According to INS, Iranians comprise the fourth largest group seeking asylum in the U.S.; they also have one of the highest acceptance rates. In October 1982, there were 20,951 cases pending; in late 1984, the number had declined to 5,500, a result of stepped-up processing efforts by INS, as well as fewer initial applications.

In FY 1982, the U.S. deported 88 Iranians and 32 in the second quarter of FY 1983. According to a State Department official, most of these cases were petty criminals, dope peddlers, or undesirable characters, as well as some whose

claims to asylum could be considered frivolous. In both years, the majority were deported back to Iran. This practice may be in conflict with the UNHCR position that Iranians, like any nationality group who have a bona fide claim to refugee status, should be extended protection from refoulement. Some in the State Department maintain that the UNHCR position is not strictly relevant to the policy of deportation, as those who have been deported were in the U.S. for some time and were judged not to have a legitimate claim to asylum.

A few years ago when the first post-revolution Iranian asylum cases began to be processed, government officials tended to follow a strict interpretation of the law with the result that some applicants with *Mujahedin* or leftist affiliations did not receive favorable consideration. Now such officials, according to lawyers familiar with such asylum cases, have been persuaded that the return of *Mujahedin* members or supporters to Iran would almost certainly endanger their lives, and the rate of approval of their claims parallels that for Iranians in general.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Iranian refugees represent a genuine humanitarian problem which is not widely known and is poorly understood. It is also different in several important respects from the problems presented by other refugee groups.

Most significantly, it is perhaps the clearest and most compelling example of religious persecution in the world today. There is ample evidence to document the Tehran regime's efforts to destroy the Baha'i faith. Other religious groups have suffered, too.

But many refugees are at least nominally Muslim. They have fled Iran for a variety of reasons other than religious—persecution has been based on social, ethnic, and political characteristics as well. The refugees come from across the broad spectrum of Iranian society, including tribal folk as well as many who are educated, middle class, and modern or westernized in their outlook.

Iranian refugees are to be found in many different countries of the world, in continents or nearby countries that are striving to maintain friendly relations with Iran and in numerous Western countries whose relations with Iran are severely strained. The variety and diffuseness of the refugee population has contributed to the lack of understanding and sympathy for their plight.

Relatively few Iranian refugees receive any international assistance; within the broad group, some such as the Baha'is and the Jews are better looked after than others, as they join established communities in their countries of refuge.

Protection for Iranian refugees has come to be a pressing concern, as the regime in Tehran has made efforts to get some, such as the Baha'is, returned to Iran so that they can be punished and prevented from reaching the West to tell their story. Refugees in many countries of asylum need legal advice, so that they can know their rights and be protected from racketeers, false document mills, and the improper practices of some lawyers.

The Iranian refugees, perhaps more than other recent groups of refugees, suffer from a negative public image, particularly in the West. This may reflect a residue of bitterness about recent actions stemming from the revolution. It may be exacerbated by a minority who evoke a new image of refugees—assertive, demanding, and often contentious—in sharp contrast to the recent stereotype of refugees as quiet, cooperative, even helpless people. Although the description does not fit all Iranian refugees, numerous among them have done much to foster this new image.

It must be recalled that actions of the Khomeini regime have produced many victims and that a sharp distinction needs to be drawn between those who are the victims and in need of assistance and those, on the other hand, who are responsible for creating those victims.

Protection of Iranian refugees needs to be ensured. First asylum countries need to undertake measures to ensure the security and well-being of Iranian refugees until their cases can be resolved in a just and reasonable manner. The situation of refugees who are denied admission into any country at all needs to be resolved and measures undertaken to insure that subsequent cases are not created. That the world community cannot accommodate in a humane fashion the small number of cases forced into “orbit” represents an embarrassing breakdown in refugee protection and international burden-sharing.

The U.S. should reassess the reduction of the FY 1985 admissions ceiling for refugees from the Near East and South Asia to 5,000 and the elimination of the lowest processing priorities—categories for less immediate relatives and others of national interest—for Iranian refugees. The establishment of processing posts in Pakistan and Turkey for Iranian refugees should also be considered.

The U.S. should also abandon its policy of denying release on parole to asylum seekers now held in detention. Some of these individuals have been held for long periods, and the practice is not in keeping with humanitarian considerations.

Lastly, the deportation to Iran of Iranians whose applications for asylum have been denied should be stopped, unless there is clear evidence that they will not come to harm. This practice does not take into account current conditions in Iran and the jeopardy into which individuals deported may be placed.

Refugee law and protection standards have been adopted by the international community not only to benefit individuals and groups whose circumstances are well-known or who fit popular images of refugees. The peculiar nature of this refugee population, marked by diversity and dispersed so widely, should not be allowed to undercut attention to its circumstances and needs. Any individual who is outside his home country and has a well-founded fear of persecution on an appropriate basis has the right to be protected. Iranian refugees, like others, deserve our attention and concern.

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For further information, please write or call:

U.S. Committee for Refugees
815 Fifteenth Street NW, Suite 610
Washington, D.C. 20005
(202) 667-0782
