

ARTICLE

Resistance/Rise: Iranian Student Activism in the Late 1970s US

Will Teague 

Department of History, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR, USA
Email: twteague@uark.edu

Abstract

In the late 1970s Iranian student activists in the United States worked to educate the American public on the history of the US-Iranian relationship and the long-term consequences in Iran of the 1953 CIA-sponsored coup that placed Mohammad Reza Pahlavi on the Iranian throne. The students directly challenged local and state governments to respect freedoms of speech, press, and assembly, and pushed President Jimmy Carter to keep his promise of injecting human rights into American foreign policy. Iranians studying in the US were not monolithic in thought, but they shared the common goal of liberating Iran from Pahlavi's despotic rule and creating an Iran free of American intervention and Cold War geopolitics.

Keywords: Iranian students; Iranian Revolution; student activism; Cold War; human rights

Since the early Cold War, college and university campuses in the United States have served as sites of protest, and those protests have sometimes extended into America's streets. As a result, student activists have been targeted by public or government efforts to silence them. It was during the civil rights movement that college students began to utilize sit-ins, teach-ins, and mass demonstrations to fight injustice. Their efforts were often met with official resistance or violence, such as when members of Berkeley's Free Speech Movement were subject to mass arrests or anti-Vietnam War protesters at Kent State were murdered by the National Guard. In the late 1960s Lyndon Johnson made it clear that student activists were a concern when he ordered the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to monitor them both nationally and internationally, eventually creating the "Restless Youth" report.¹ In the following decade his successor, Richard Nixon, orchestrated Operation Boulder to use the Federal Bureau of Investigation

¹ CIA, "Restless Youth," Sept. 1968, Box 3, Intelligence Files, National Security Files, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Texas.

(FBI) and Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) to investigate Arab and Arab American students in the US to determine whether they were politically active and pro-Palestinian.² Concurrently, many of the thousands of Iranians studying on American campuses also embraced activism and endured its backlash.

By the late 1970s, Americans were well acquainted with student activism, but they did not always understand it. In 1978, the *Los Angeles Times* opined that Iranian “demonstrations on the streets and sidewalks of American cities and towns have become almost commonplace, but their cause and their aims often seem distant and confusing to many Americans.”³ This analysis remains a mostly accurate assessment. With few exceptions, historians have given little space or thought to those Iranian voices and experiences.⁴

In contrast to the numerous studies on US-Iranian relations, there are only three in-depth studies of Iranian student activism.⁵ Afshin Matin-Asgari’s *Iranian Student Opposition to the Shah* (2002) provides the first attempt in generating a cohesive narrative of anti-shah student activism in the 1960s and 1970s. His work primarily focuses on US-based activism, as most Iranians studying abroad were located there, but he also demonstrates the internationality of the movement by highlighting the presence and

²Elaine Hagopian, “Minority Rights in a Nation-State: The Nixon Administration’s Campaign against Arab-Americans,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 5, nos. 1/ 2 (Autumn 1975-Winter 1976), 97–114; Pamela E. Pennock, “From 1967 to Operation Boulder: The Erosion of Arab Americans’ Civil Liberties in the 1970s,” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (Winter 2018), 41–52; Molly Wancewicz, “Operation Boulder and Its Effects on Arab-American Communities of the 1970s,” *Gettysburg Social Sciences Review* 2, no. 5 (2018), 154–68.

³Nicholas Chriss, “Iranian Students Fight for Distant, Confusing Cause,” *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 4, 1978, 1.

⁴Only a handful of studies produced since the early 1990s have incorporated the students into the broader discussions of activism or American higher education. Teresa Brawner-Bevis and Christopher J. Lucas’s *International Students in American Colleges and Universities* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), for example, discusses their presence in the US mostly by providing relevant statistics as the nation welcomed international students during the Cold War because of the Fulbright program and other cultural exchange initiatives. David Menashri’s *Education and the Making of Modern Iran* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1992), explains that over fifty thousand Iranians were studying on American campuses by the late 1970s because of failed planning in higher education and anti-government sentiment in Iran, but this is mostly a sidebar in a work dedicated almost exclusively to the geographical boundaries of Iran itself. Other works that discuss the Iranian student experience in the late 1970s are John Ghazvinian’s *America and Iran: A History 1720 to the Present* (New York: Vintage, 2021), Neda Maghbouleh, *The Limits of Whiteness: Iranian Americans and the Everyday Politics of Race* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017); and Mohsen M. Mobasher, *Iranians in Texas: Migration, Politics and Ethnic Identity* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012). The discussions provided by each, however, are brief and focus on the Iranian student experience after the seizure of the US embassy in Tehran in November 1979, which was notably different than the period examined here.

⁵There is a significant historiography of US-Iranian relations, especially since the early 1980s, but the students do not appear in those studies. Instead, they examine the Cold War relationship, arms sales, or the hostage crisis. The following is not an exhaustive list, certainly, but some classic or notable monographs on the subject are Barry M. Rubin, *Paved with Good Intentions: The American Experience and Iran* (New York: Penguin, 1981); James A. Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988); Richard W. Cottam, *Iran and the United States: A Cold War Case Study* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1988); David Harris, *The Crisis: The President, the Prophet, and the Shah - 1979 and the Coming of Militant Islam* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2004); Stephen McGlinchey, *U.S. Arms Policies towards the Shah’s Iran* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Ben Ofliter, *US Foreign Policy and the Modernization of Iran: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Shah* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); and Ofira Seliktar, *Navigating Iran: From Carter to Obama* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

political engagement of Iranians studying elsewhere, primarily in Europe, and how the opposition to the shah had tremendous impact in his loss of some Western support and eventual abdication of the throne. The second study is Matthew Shannon's *Losing Hearts and Minds* (2017). According to him, Iranian students' use of rights-based language beginning in the early 1960s, particularly during the John F. Kennedy administration, was partly a product of Iranian exposure to the American civil rights movement. The students and the regime of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, according to Shannon, became locked in a struggle to define human rights. Unlike Matin-Asgari, however, Shannon's approach is much more focused on US-Iranian geopolitics and the impending Iranian Revolution than it is on student activism at the micro level. The most recent monograph on the subject is Manijeh Moradian's *This Flame Within* (2022). Moradian's work can largely be viewed as a maturation of Matin-Asgari's first attempt at a narrative, as well as an expansion of both his and Shannon's discussion of Iranian student activism's impact on American domestic and foreign politics. Additionally, Moradian best exemplifies how the students sought to build solidarity with other revolutionary student movements and causes.⁶

Each of the above studies is critically important in understanding the role and potential power of student activism. Through a close perusal of Iranian student protests, publications, and public engagement between the election of Jimmy Carter and the summer of 1979, this article seeks to build and expand upon the studies of the Iranian student experiences and to further place them within the historical narrative of student activism during the Cold War.⁷ Upon examining the organizational publications, op-eds, public statements, and protests of the Iranian Student Association (ISA) and the Organization of Iranian Muslim Students (OIMS), one finds that the students were impressively informed, perceptive, and determined. Iranian students in the US were relentless (and fearless) in their pursuit of exposing the human rights abuses and corruption within their own nation enabled by the relationship between the US and Iranian governments, and in their efforts to draft the American public to their cause.⁸

⁶Afshin Matin-Asgari, *Iranian Student Opposition to the Shah* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers Inc., 2002); Matthew K. Shannon, *Losing Hearts and Minds: American-Iranian Relations and International Education during the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017); Manijeh Moradian, *This Flame Within: Iranian Revolutionaries in the United States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022).

⁷For studies focused on student activism during the Cold War in the 1960s and 1970s, see Belinda Davis et al., *Changing the World, Changing Oneself: Political Protest and Collective Identities in West Germany and the U.S. in the 1960s and the 1970s* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010); Gerd-Rainer Horn, *The Spirit of '68: Rebellion in Western Europe and North America, 1956-1976* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Martin Klimke, *The Other Alliance: Student Protest in West Germany and the United States in the Global Sixties* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Daryl J. Maeda, *Chains of Babylon: The Rise of Asian America* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis, 2009); Timothy Scott Brown, *West Germany and the Global Sixties: The Anti-authoritarian Revolt, 1962-1978* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015); and Jaime M. Pensado, *Rebel Mexico: Student Unrest and Authoritarian Political Culture during the Long Sixties* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).

⁸The issues of *Resistance* consulted for this article can be found in *Resistance: A Publication of ISAUS, Member of Confederation of Iranian Students (National Union)*, on microfilm at the Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI (cited hereafter as *Resistance*). This article draws from issues published between 1977 and 1979. No issue of *Resistance* or the individual articles found within attribute authorship to a specific individual.

Neither the ISA nor the OIMS commented on or engaged with every issue, but taken together, their activity and output provide a more comprehensive picture of the work of Iranian students.

Student activism is often associated with the political left, and the historiography of Iranian student activism reflects this by mostly focusing on leftist Iranian student groups at the expense of the smaller, rightist OIMS, even though by the late 1970s it was, according to Shannon, the “ascendant” group in the US.⁹ This article attempts to expand the OIMS’s presence in the historiography by demonstrating its efforts to protest perceived injustice through local activism and national commentary, and to make it apparent that, like the leftist revolutionaries, they too demanded human rights in their pursuit of a post-Pahlavi Iran. Also relevant to this discussion is the way that modernization theory, initially dominant in US thinking during the early Cold War, was undermined. To borrow from Zachary Lockman, the theory posited that modernization is a “universal and unilinear” process, and societies that successfully modernize do so following the Western model. The United States’ loss in Vietnam significantly diminished the theory’s credibility, and scholars recognize that the Iranian Revolution destroyed whatever was left of the theory at the end of the 1970s.¹⁰ The presence of the OIMS and its advocacy for both human rights and an Islamic Republic, then, should not be ignored, as they serve as a potent example that student activists could simultaneously advocate for a government that both adopted and rejected components of Western models, and the government eventually formed in post-revolutionary Iran was the one the OIMS desired, even though it would quickly become as repressive as the Pahlavi regime it replaced.

In the late 1970s, there were two primary English-language Iranian student publications in the US: *Resistance* and *The Rise*. Starting in 1972, *Resistance* was the official publication of the US chapter of the ISA, which was a member of the Confederation of Iranian Students - National Union (CISNU). The latter organization collapsed in 1975 because of ideological differences among members who subscribed to various forms of Marxism, Maoism, or other communist philosophical strands.¹¹ The ISA described itself as “an open, democratic, and anti-imperialist organization” that sought to expose the “reactionary nature of the shah’s regime among the people of the world,” and used its publication to act as “the voice of the Iranian people who are struggling against tyranny and oppression and by echoing the cry of the mutilated political prisoners who courageously withstand the torture of the shah’s executioners.”¹² *The Rise* emerged in 1976 in the wake of CISNU’s collapse. The OIMS sought to meet the “urgent necessity for a politically active, dynamic, and militant Islamic student organization” and to offer

⁹Shannon, *Losing Hearts and Minds*, 144.

¹⁰For a comprehensive discussion on modernization theory and its application to the Middle East, see Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 134–41, quote on 135.

¹¹For a detailed discussion of the CISNU split, see Matin-Asgari, *Iranian Student Opposition to the Shah*, 138–47.

¹²This description of the ISA and of *Resistance* is found at the end of nearly every monthly publication. This specific example is from *Resistance* 4, Supplement 3, May 1977, 4.

a religious path toward liberation from Pahlavi and Western intervention.¹³ Though the groups ultimately disagreed on the path Iran would take after the revolution, the students were effectively all nationalists seeking autonomy for Iran, and they relied on similar themes—human rights, anti-imperialism, historical memory, and the Cold War—to make their case.

It is difficult to understand the rhetoric and motivations of the students without having at least a minor understanding of the US-Iranian relationship as it existed in the late 1970s, how it came to be, and why the students thought they had cause to protest it.

Historical Context: US and Iran

After World War II, Iran was the first non-European nation to face a potential Cold War crisis when the Soviet Union delayed withdrawing its forces from the nation's northwestern province of Azerbaijan and threatened to back a communist separatist movement there. Although a military confrontation was avoided through the work of the young United Nations and the Iranian government, the threat of confrontation demonstrated to the US government that it needed to remain in the region to contain Soviet influence.¹⁴

In 1951 the nationalist Mohammad Mosaddeq became prime minister of Iran. His election was the result of a broad coalition of political factions—nationalists, communists, traditional merchants, clergy—that shared little in common other than a dislike of Pahlavi and his continued adherence to the early twentieth-century oil concessions that the former ruling dynasty made to the British. With Mosaddeq in power, Pahlavi left Tehran for Rome and allowed him to lead the country. Mosaddeq decided to nationalize the oil industry when it became apparent that the Iranians were being denied much of their potential oil revenue. His decision enraged the British, so they turned to the US for assistance in toppling him. Dwight Eisenhower agreed to help. In August 1953 Mosaddeq was removed by a CIA-orchestrated coup, the first in which the agency overthrew a democratically elected leader. It was conducted from the basement of the US Embassy in Tehran and placed the shah back on the Peacock Throne for two and a half decades.¹⁵

After the coup, a long tradition of American support for Pahlavi began. Stretching from Eisenhower to Jimmy Carter, every president welcomed the shah to the White House during their tenure and contributed to solidifying the relationship by making concessions on human rights demands and allowing Pahlavi to purchase all but the most sophisticated American weaponry.¹⁶ Over the decades, as the two countries

¹³“Introduction,” *Compiled Documents of the OIMS: The Rise* 5, April 1979, 7–8; Shannon, *Losing Hearts and Minds*, 143–44; Like *Resistance*, there was no specific authorship attributed to any issue of or article in *The Rise*.

¹⁴Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion*, 34–38.

¹⁵For a narrative of the coup and the events surrounding it, see Ervand Abrahamian, *The Coup: 1953, the CIA, and the Roots of Modern US-Iranian Relations* (New York: The New Press, 2013) and Stephen Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2008).

¹⁶For discussions on these developments, see Roham Alvandi, *Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah: The United States and Iran in the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Douglas Little, *American*

were building their relationship, the Iranian public increasingly turned against the shah.

Throughout his reign, Pahlavi, enabled by the US, embraced systemic oppression to protect his rule and modernize Iran. He, like most authoritarians, was paranoid. His power had already been usurped once by the supporters of Mosaddeq, and he refused to allow that to happen again. In 1957, the Iranian secret police force, known by its acronym SAVAK, was created and trained with the aid of the CIA, the British MI6, and the Israeli Mossad. It acted as chief enforcer throughout Pahlavi's rule, working both inside and outside Iran to defend the regime's interest. It had the authority to arrest, imprison, torture, and execute dissenters, real or imagined, to fulfill its mission, often targeting university students and professors.¹⁷

In the early 1960s, Pahlavi began implementing an economic and social reform program known as the White Revolution. He was pressed lightly by President Kennedy to include political reforms in the program, but the shah resisted and, ultimately, Kennedy lacked conviction to force the issue.¹⁸ This was a common theme for the duration of the U.S.-Pahlavi relationship, as each president privileged Cold War concerns over the rights of the Iranian public.

The shah's reform efforts lasted nearly until the end of his rule. Pahlavi's policies had some successes: land reform, a growing industrial economy, increased educational access, and even women's suffrage. But these policies did not benefit everyone or endear them toward the shah. Land reform undercut the power of the traditional elite, and urban economic reform widened the wealth gap. Additionally, rural peasant villages did not benefit from modernization efforts, such as electrification or plumbing, and price controls on agricultural crops benefited urban dwellers at the expense of rural farmers. To the chagrin of the clergy, some of Pahlavi's policies loosened veil mandates for Iranian women and eased restrictions on divorce. Disillusionment with these policies elevated dissenters, particularly Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who was already well known owing to having been exiled by the shah in 1963 for criticizing his relationship with the US, and the French-educated Ali Shariati, who wrote articles for the Confederation of Iranian Students while studying sociology in the early to mid-1960s. Extending into the 1970s, the work of both men helped to manifest the Iranian Revolution and create common cause among different social classes and ideologies.¹⁹

Anti-shah sentiment grew tremendously during the middle to late 1970s. In 1975 the Pahlavi-mandated and controlled two-party system was reduced to a single-party system. The new Resurgence Party controlled all politics in Iran, and citizens were

Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East Since 1945 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); McGlinchey, *U.S. Arms Policies towards the Shah's Iran*; and Offiler, *US Foreign Policy and the Modernization of Iran*.

¹⁷For a thorough study of the use of torture by multiple Iranian leaders in the last century, see Ervand Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions: Prisons and Public Recantations in Modern Iran* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999).

¹⁸April R. Summitt, "For a White Revolution: John F Kennedy and the Shah of Iran," *Middle East Journal* 58, no. 4 (Autumn 2004), 560–77.

¹⁹Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 134–52; Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 146–48.

expected to join. The party attacked and destroyed the autonomy of the traditional merchant middle class, the *bazaari*, by using SAVAK to set up kangaroo courts to fine, ban, or imprison anyone it judged to be the cause of the country's economic distress. Additionally, the party declared the clerical establishment, the *ulama*, to be reactionary. The shah enraged the clergy when he replaced the nation's calendar with one that reflected Iran's 2,500-year Persian history instead of its more recent Islamic past. Pahlavi also sent agents to investigate the use of religious endowments and declared that religious books could be published only by state-sanctioned institutions. SAVAK rounded up members of the clergy who opposed the shah's decrees.²⁰

The Iranian Revolution officially began in 1977, when resentment from two and a half decades of authoritarian rule exploded. Pressure placed on Pahlavi by international human rights organizations and Carter's rhetoric led him to ease up on repression, and this allowed his opposition room to maneuver. Middle-class organizations, intellectuals, legal professionals, the media, theology students, ousted politicians, and the merchant class began to openly publish criticisms of the regime. By October, protesters began clashing with the police in the streets of Tehran. In early 1978, the Pahlavi regime poured gasoline onto the revolutionary fire with a hit piece in a state-controlled newspaper accusing Khomeini of being immoral during his youth and not even Iranian, but Indian. This led to a clash between police and seminary students in the holy city of Qom, where the police fired into the crowd and killed protesters (estimates vary from two to seventy). This led to further demonstrations in Qom, as well as in Tabriz, Isfahan, and Yazd. In August, on the anniversary of the 1953 coup, a cinema in Abadan caught fire. More than four hundred women and children were burned alive, and locals blamed SAVAK for setting the fire, though it remains unclear how it began. Pahlavi declared martial law in response to the nationwide unrest, which led to what is known as Black Friday. On Friday, September 8, protesters at Jaleh Square in Tehran were gunned down by the shah's forces, who killed an estimated eighty-four.²¹ Pahlavi could not overcome the movement against him. He left Iran for the final time on January 16, 1979, and Khomeini returned from exile on February 1.

Iranian Student Experience during the Carter Administration

Iranian students began enrolling in American universities during the 1950s because population growth was outpacing the capacity of Iranian universities. Other key factors were the prestige associated with attending a Western university for technical knowledge, and the greater international accessibility of that knowledge as a result of US efforts like Harry Truman's Point Four program.²² By the time Jimmy Carter entered the Oval Office two decades later, Iran had more students studying abroad than any other nation. There were sixty-seven thousand international Iranian students by 1978,

²⁰ Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, 153-57; Keddie, *Roots and Results of Revolution*, 155-57. In the summer of 1977, OIMS argued that the calendar swap was an intentional tactic to undermine the clergy's authority. See "Instruments of Repression," *Compiled Documents of the OIMS: The Rise*, July 1977, 15-16.

²¹ Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, 159-64.

²² Shannon, *Losing Hearts and Minds*, 9. For an in-depth study of Point Four in Iran, see Richard Garlitz, *A Mission for Development: Utah Universities and the Point Four Program in Iran* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2018).

which was over 8 percent of the world's total international student body. Over fifty-four thousand of these students were studying in the US, with the rest mostly in western Europe.²³ There were large contingents in California and Texas, but Iranian students were represented in nearly every state and studied a multitude of subjects, including engineering, medicine, and the humanities. For the most part, the students were privately funded by their families and typically came from the elite and upper-middle classes in Iran. However, a small percentage were funded by the Iranian government or came from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. There were two significant reasons for going abroad by the mid-1970s. The Iranian economy was rapidly industrializing, but the nation's university system could not satisfy the educational requirements the young population needed to participate in that economy, and the country's oil boom allowed many lower-class workers to invest in their family's future by sending their children abroad for an education.²⁴ As a result, the students could be found at a variety of institutions, ranging from the Ivy League to community colleges.²⁵

The students listened closely as Carter invoked human rights in his inaugural address. He told the nation, "Our commitment to human rights must be absolute, our laws fair ... the powerful must not persecute the weak, and human dignity must be enhanced.... The world itself is now dominated by a new spirit. Peoples more numerous and more politically aware are craving and now demanding their place in their sun—not just for the benefit of their own physical condition, but for basic human rights," and perhaps most importantly, "because we are free we can never be indifferent to the fate of freedom elsewhere. Our moral sense dictates a clearcut preference for these societies which share with us an abiding respect for individual human rights."²⁶ Although these statements by the new president may have given the Iranians hope, they were quickly dispelled of any illusion that Washington was changing course regarding the shah's dictatorship when Carter chose to embrace the Pahlavis.

An assessment of the US-Iranian relationship appeared in *Resistance* less than four months into the Carter administration. Centered on political prisoners being held and tortured in Iran by the shah's secret police force, SAVAK, the article charged that the "Carter admin. [*sic*] brags about protecting 'human rights' on a world-wide scale," while it also ignored the "most barbaric forms of torture ever known to mankind."²⁷ *Resistance* relied heavily on Amnesty International's 1976 report on Iran to support its argument. That report listed the organization's four significant concerns in that nation: arbitrary arrests of political opponents, torture, lack of fair trials, and executions or unofficial deaths. The word *torture* appeared thirty-two times in its brief nine pages.

²³Matin-Asgari, *Iranian Student Opposition to the Shah*, 131.

²⁴Moradian, *The Flame Within*, 82-83; Mehdi Bozorgmehr, Georges Sabagh, and Georges Sabbagh, "High Status Immigrants: A Statistical Profile of Iranians in the United States," *Iranian Studies* 21, no. 3/4 (1988), 5-36.

²⁵It should be noted that although there were tens of thousands of Iranian students, not all were protesters or activists, and those that were active are difficult to identify. Owing to the risk of being persecuted by the shah's security forces, Iranians often wrote political content anonymously and covered their faces while demonstrating publicly.

²⁶Selected Speeches of Jimmy Carter, "Inaugural Address of President Jimmy Carter," Jan. 20, 1977, <https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/assets/documents/speeches/inaugadd.phtml>.

²⁷"The Relationship between the U.S. and Iran," *Resistance*, May 1977, 5.

The organization also noted that there was “little respect demonstrated for human rights in many other areas of Iranian life,” including freedom of speech, the press, association, or movement. Amnesty asserted that the regime severely punished labor protests and that the only political participation available was through the one-party system created and controlled by the shah. *Resistance* insisted that academic freedom was also nonexistent in Iran, and that both professors and students were routinely monitored and sometimes tortured for not conforming. Perhaps most importantly to the students, who were aware that SAVAK was monitoring them in the US, the article alleged that sometimes students returning from abroad were immediately arrested for political participation while away.²⁸

In the same issue of *Resistance*, the ISA accused Carter of shedding “crocodile tears over the ‘human rights’ issue.”²⁹ In late 1976, an anti-shah demonstration in Houston, Texas, had led to the arrests of ninety-two Iranian students. By the following May, it seemed possible that those students would be deported to Iran, and the ISA was convinced they faced imprisonment, torture, and possible execution if that happened. The president had no immediate role to play in this except that he had the authority to control INS and halt any possible deportation. Still, as head of state, Carter was the US government, at least in the eyes of the Iranian students, and was therefore responsible for any action taken against the demonstrators in Houston. Both the ISA and OIMS interpreted the arrests of the ninety-two as proof that US police, the FBI, institutions of higher education, and SAVAK were working together to silence student movements.³⁰

In the summer and fall of 1977, the concerns and criticisms of Iranian students regarding human rights came increasingly to the fore when the Pahlavis visited the US on two separate occasions. The wife of Reza Pahlavi and the empress of Iran, Farah, traveled to the country in July to receive an honorary doctorate and participate in a conference at the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies. The ISA was livid over her visit (Figure 1).³¹ Labeling Farah “the public relations figure for the shah’s corrupt family and regime and agent for U.S. interests in Iran,” the ISA argued that her trip to the US was solely to soften public perceptions of the Iranian monarchy before the shah visited the White House.³² The ISA pointed out that her visit was greeted with shouts of “Down with the Shah—Down with Farah” by thousands of demonstrators across the nation, mainly in New York, Los Angeles, and Washington, DC. Sharing the ISA’s ire,

²⁸ Amnesty International, “Amnesty International Briefing, Iran,” Nov. 1, 1976, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/001/1976/en/>.

²⁹ “The Relationship between the U.S. and Iran,” *Resistance*, May 1977, 7.

³⁰ “Condemn the Plot against Iranian Students,” *Compiled Documents of the OIMS: The Rise*, Nov. 10, 1976, 79; “What All This Means,” *Resistance*, May 1977, 3. In 1976, the *Washington Post* reported on leaked SAVAK documents that confirmed long-held suspicions that their agents were present in the US, and on October 24 the shah admitted the report was accurate during an interview with Mike Wallace on *60 Minutes*. For additional information, see Matin-Asgari, *Iranian Student Opposition to the Shah*, 154–55; For a media preview of the interview, see “The Shah on Israel, Corruption, Torture, and ...,” *New York Times*, Oct. 22, 1976, 22; For an investigation into the impact of SAVAK’s student surveillance following the shah’s interview, see Richard T. Sale, “SAVAK Said at Work in Washington,” *Washington Post*, May 9, 1977, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1977/05/10/savak-said-at-work-in-washington/5ea92a0a-6d3c-46f5-bf9e-7e4c3c1926f9/>.

³¹ “Queen Farah’s U.S. Visit: Can the Rule of Torture Be Prettified?,” *Resistance*, August 1977, 1.

³² “Guess Who Is Coming to the States,” *Resistance*, June 1977, 1.



Figure 1. A photo of an anti-regime protest sign held by Iranian demonstrators. The sign, a photo of Empress Farah Pahlavi decorated with swastikas and a Star of David, expresses the protesters' discontent with the empress. The swastikas signify their accusations that the Pahlavi dynasty was fascist, while the Star of David alludes to their discontent with the shah's friendly relationship with Israel. (Photographer unknown; photo titled "Farah Pahlavi's doodled picture by anti-Pahlavi protesters hands," in *Kayhan* [newspaper], Iran, n.d. Source: Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Farah_pahlavi-125462.jpg.)

the OIMS said Farah's visit was a "demagogical public relations visit" that was planned to "lie about the real situation in Iran, cheat the American people, and buy influence," and held hunger strikes in Chicago and Washington, DC, in protest.³³

Farah's visit and the planned shah follow-up drew direct criticism for the president. "Carter's 'human rights' campaign," proclaimed *Resistance*, "which was launched with a bang ... is going out with a whimper as large and small tyrants and dictators with fresh blood still clinging to their hands stream into the White House ... pledging eternal service." The students argued the shah would visit "smelling of blood." The ISA directly accused Carter of using human rights as Cold War propaganda in its quest to defeat the Soviet Union and argued that his administration, like its predecessors, had to rely on

³³"Expose the Shah's Puppet Dictatorial Regime," *Compiled Documents of the OIMS: The Rise*, July 1977, 23.

dictators to secure America's global interests. According to the ISA, because Iran was a key ally, Carter only spoke of human rights but did not act on them. The organization pointed out that the Carter administration continued to sell the shah nearly unlimited, highly sophisticated weapons for enormous sums of money, enabling him to maintain internal order for himself and regional control for the US.³⁴

Pahlavi's first and only visit to the Carter White House was not without incident. The OIMS organized demonstrations and held a press conference at a Washington, DC, mosque "to expose the shah's US visit and unmask the treacherous murder of the innocent people killed ... in Iran."³⁵ Many demonstrators, both pro-and anti-shah, gathered near the White House and ultimately had what the president recalled as a "serious clash" that injured several people, including police officers. The skirmish eventually led the police to fire tear gas canisters to disperse the crowd—the chemical agent also chased the Pahlavis and the Carters as the wind dragged the gas cloud across the South Lawn.³⁶ The ISA claimed the pro-shah group was "SAVAK's rented crowds" and charged that the demonstrations became violent because that group, aided by the US Park Police, tried to intimidate and isolate anti-shah protesters.³⁷ Students in Iran simultaneously held protests of the shah's DC visit.³⁸

Part of the ISA's account is corroborated in John Ghazvinian's *America and Iran*. He finds that the anti-shah demonstrators numbered around four thousand and that the smaller pro-shah crowd was "hired by the Iranian embassy." According to him, while the two heads of state met, the president went "out of his way, quietly, behind closed doors, to let [Pahlavi] know he had America's unconditional support," and that during the visit, "the subject of human rights" was barely mentioned.³⁹ In addition, at no point in the meeting did Carter follow the advice of National Security Council staffers William Quandt and Gary Sick. In April, they recommended to National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski that the president "should not [during the shah's visit] lend support to the idea that Iran is the chosen instrument of American policy in the region."⁴⁰

The federal government was not the only target of criticism for rights violations. State and local agencies were often the site of Iranian student mobilization. In May of 1977, Navarro College in Corsicana, Texas, an institution with approximately three hundred Iranian students, suddenly decided to make it more difficult for international students to enroll by instituting a new language-proficiency exam and increasing their tuition. The college had already accepted several Iranians for the upcoming fall semester, but they were not exempt from these new policies. Iranians who failed the new language exam or who could not afford increased tuition would not be allowed to enroll in classes, which meant they might be deported. When asked for an explanation,

³⁴"Guess Who Is Coming to the States," *Resistance*, June 1977, 1.

³⁵"Expose Shah's U.S. Visit," *Compiled Documents of the OIMS: The Rise*, Oct. 30, 1977, 103–5.

³⁶Jimmy Carter, *White House Diary* (New York: Picador, 2010), 135.

³⁷"Mr. 'Human Rights' Meets King Torture," *Resistance*, Dec. 1977, 13.

³⁸Menashri, *Education and the Making of Modern Iran*, 296–99.

³⁹Ghazvinian, *America and Iran*, 282–83.

⁴⁰Memorandum for Zbigniew Brzezinski from William B. Quandt and Gary Sick, April 13, 1977, folder 4, box 23, Subject Files, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Library, Atlanta, GA (hereafter JCL).

the college president, Kenneth Walker, explained that the state legislature of Texas had approved the foreign student enrollment limitation based on state funding.⁴¹ According to *Resistance*, he also justified these moves by saying that there were simply too many foreign students on campus.⁴²

Nearly three dozen Iranians protested the policies on May 27. Those who participated, wrote the local *Daily Sun*, were not all Navarro students. It is not clear how many were or were not. Still, the paper reported that they peacefully protested on campus for about an hour until they were arrested by a police force of about fifty that charged them with unlawful assembly and informed the FBI and INS of the event.⁴³

On the last day of May 1977, there was another demonstration at Navarro against the school's new enrollment policies. This protest was different. "Freed from prison all the students set out to organize for still a tougher fight!" the ISA reported in *Resistance*. The publication stressed that the demonstrators intended to march that Tuesday morning peacefully, but after an hour, it became violent due to police actions.⁴⁴ The ISA publication cited the *Daily Sun* extensively in its recount of the day's event. According to that paper, "deputies wielding nightsticks moved into a crowd of about 80 Iranians ... who were beginning to sit down on the college's front lawn, after they ignored an order by [the college's security officer] to disperse within three minutes." Anger flared when one Iranian refused to stand, and an arresting officer responded by hitting him in the head with a nightstick. The Iranian's attorney told the press the police did "not understand the First Amendment right to free assembly" and said they had been waiting to use "excessive brutality" on Iranians. The nearby *Pampa News* announced there were approximately fifty-five arrests.⁴⁵

Arrests following the second demonstration led to more frustrations for both the detainees and the police. Purportedly, Iranians caused significant damage to the prison bus and the holding areas by breaking windows and damaging facilities.⁴⁶ Officers told local media that they were also spat on and physically assaulted by some, with at least two police visiting the hospital with injuries. Seven women and one man were charged with criminal mischief and assault, respectively, as a result. The ISA's recounting of the time spent in jail differed significantly. They claimed that the police used "tear gas against the prisoners in order to break their will, but to no avail."⁴⁷ The local sheriff demanded each Iranian produce identification upon booking, explicitly looking for passports and visas, and refused to allow them to post bond. The Iranians were to be held as "illegal aliens" for inspection by immigration officials. The sheriff was eventually persuaded by an attorney for INS to release any Iranian who provided any form of identification. Those who could not produce the requested documents were held, according to the sheriff, "under the same premise [as] suspected illegal aliens from

⁴¹"Foreign Students Limited," *Corsicana (TX) Daily Sun*, May 27, 1977, 1–2.

⁴²"Navarro College and Mr. Walker's Hospitality," *Resistance*, May 1977, 1.

⁴³"Iranian Demonstrators Arrested," *Corsicana (TX) Daily Sun*, May 27, 1977, 1.

⁴⁴"Intimidation of Shah's Opposition: Not Easy," *Resistance*, May 1977, 2.

⁴⁵Gary Edmondson, "Demonstrators Arrested Again," *Corsicana (TX) Daily Sun*, May 31, 1977, 1; "Protest in Corsicana," *Pampa News (TX)*, June 2, 1977, 4.

⁴⁶"Damage to Jail Estimated at \$5,000," *Corsicana (TX) Daily Sun*, June 9, 1977, 1.

⁴⁷"Who Dunit," *Resistance*, May 1977, 3.

Mexico.”⁴⁸ The chief of police, Don Massey, took a different tone. He said that the demonstrators did not appear to be local and that “the city has never had any trouble with Iranian students,” recalling civil rights era “outside agitator” arguments.⁴⁹

Resistance portrayed the Navarro administration’s decisions as violations of the students’ rights. In the subsection of a lengthy recounting titled “Mr. Walker’s Version of Human Rights!,” the ISA relied on statements given by Navarro’s Walker to the *Daily Sun* to make their case. He told the paper that “they just don’t have any right to come here and create a disturbance of this educational process,” and “this college belongs to the people of Navarro County.”⁵⁰ The article’s headline explicitly referred to the demonstrators as “outside agitators” and attributed that sentiment to Walker, though the article never quoted him as having used that term. Walker was only quoted as having referred to the protesters as “political activists”; regardless, the ISA wrote that “this sort of thinking [of protestors as agitators] was constantly peddled in the early stages of the Civil Rights Movement ... when racists and reactionaries tried to hide their crimes against Blacks and other minorities” by claiming that “it is not people’s sufferings [*sic*] that moves them to fight injustice” but “some ‘outsider’ harbouring [*sic*] ‘fiendish’ thought and ‘stirring’ up problems.”⁵¹

Iranians in the US consistently tried to separate official actions of government agencies from the actions of the general population. But the separation was not always possible. On the Saturday morning following the May 27 demonstrations, two Iranians who attended Navarro found a burning cross in the front yard of their rented home. According to them, neither had participated in protests of Navarro’s new enrollment policies.⁵² In a separate incident, a man drove up to an Iranian’s home, pointed a gun at a group of students, and acted as if he were about to ram them with his vehicle. Someone called the police, and the man alleged that the group had thrown bricks at him, but no one was charged with any crime.⁵³ The ISA reprinted the incidents from local reports in *Resistance* nearly verbatim and took a rare opportunity not to editorialize.

Editorials and letters to the editor, however, suggest that these behaviors were not the norm for all Texans. An op-ed written by unspecified members of the *Corsicana* staff asserted that “we didn’t appreciate one bit the Iranians protests against Navarro College, but we would hate to see those protests spark a wave of local anti-foreigner feeling.” In defense of the students, the authors noted their contributions to the community, arguing the town’s three hundred Iranians were to be celebrated as “a heck of an industry” for their economic impact. More importantly, they “add a cosmopolitan air” by introducing locals to different cultures, religions, political philosophies, and

⁴⁸Gary Edmondson, “Iranians Trickle Out of the Jail,” *Corsicana (TX) Daily Sun*, June 1, 1977, 1, 4.

⁴⁹Gary Edmondson, “Lack of Communications during Arrests Cited,” *Corsicana (TX) Daily Sun*, June 1, 1977, 4.

⁵⁰“Mr. Walker’s Version of Human Rights!,” *Resistance*, May 1977, 1; Gary Edmondson, “Walker Says College Faultless: NC President Blames Outside Agitators and New Legislation,” *Corsicana (TX) Daily Sun*, May 29, 1977, 8A.

⁵¹“Navarro College and Mr. Walker’s Hospitality,” *Resistance*, May 1977, 1.

⁵²Gary Edmondson, “Iranian Students Find Burnt Cross in Yard,” *Corsicana (TX) Daily Sun*, May 29, 1977, 1.

⁵³“Form at Center of Controversy,” *Corsicana (TX) Daily Sun*, May 31, 1977, 1.

languages they otherwise would never experience. The article finished with an appeal to all readers to resist anti-foreign actions and demonstrated why it was so important to resist xenophobia and embrace understanding. Making a case for respecting foreign students, they wrote, “We admire them for having the courage to come halfway around the world and take courses not in their native tongue,” because “we wouldn’t think of going to Iran and taking college courses in Arabic.”⁵⁴ The well-meaning authors did not realize the official language of Iran is Persian, otherwise known as Farsi.

Further demonstrating that not all Texans harbored harsh feelings, many community members presented arguments in defense of the Iranian students. A local reverend called the arrests at Navarro “disgraceful,” charged that the Iranians had been treated as “common criminals,” and asked if any efforts were being made by the college to relocate the students to a more hospitable institution. The reverend also took a moment to address the previously mentioned burning cross, stating, “It simply shows that we still have our Southern ‘Sickies.’”⁵⁵ A married couple echoed similar sentiments and expressed a hope “that the Iranian students don’t regard the hostile actions against them as indicative of all Corsicanans.” They viewed the incident at Navarro through a global lens, arguing that the chaotic arrests of the demonstrators “could have taken on international implications,” with many possibly returning to Iran with “a hostile attitude towards America because of the way they were treated here.”⁵⁶

Iranians also understood and interpreted events within the context of the global Cold War. Many understood how important their nation and its leader were to American foreign policy and were concerned that Iran would become another Third World theater for the superpower conflict to play out. They warned that “by supporting the shah ... militarily and politically, the U.S. government ... is doing what they did with their other puppets around the world,” and in their consistent effort to separate the government from the populace, said, “it will be a long time before the American people can forget how the U.S. government got involved in creating the blood baths in Chile, South Africa, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, etc.”⁵⁷

A letter published by one Iranian, A. Jahan Fardan, presumably at Navarro, further demonstrated the students’ sense of their history and their nation’s place in the Cold War. Fardan briefly noted the 1953 CIA-backed coup that had placed Pahlavi back in power and argued that “since then, the U.S. government has actively backed, supported, and thereby, kept the shah in power,” citing the thousands of American military advisers in his country as proof. He added that Pahlavi’s goal was to misdirect the American public’s attention away from atrocities committed in Iran and the efforts of Iranians in the US to advocate for their rights by making the public believe that it was of no interest to them. “But the fact of the matter is that the American people have never benefited from the plonder [*sic*] and oppression of other peoples,” Fardan continued. “A good example of this is Vietnam.” Instead of supporting the government in repeating past mistakes with respect to Iran, the American public “[is] organizing committees all

⁵⁴“Foreign Students a Plus for College, Community,” *Corsicana (TX) Daily Sun*, June 6, 1977, 2B.

⁵⁵Reverend John Fowler, “Treatment of Iranians Unfair,” *Corsicana (TX) Daily Sun*, June 3, 1977, 12.

⁵⁶Mark and Barbara Jones, “All Corsicanans Not Hostile,” *Corsicana (TX) Daily Sun*, June 8, 1977, 19.

⁵⁷“The Relationship between the U.S. and Iran,” *Resistance*, May 1977, 4.

over the United States, they are growing consciousness of what the U.S. government is doing in Iran, and they fully support the Iranian students also.”⁵⁸

The ninety-one total Iranians arrested between the two separate demonstrations in Corsicana eventually went to trial. In the lead-up to the September trials, colleges and universities from New Jersey, California, and Washington, DC, sent telegrams to the court demanding that all charges be dropped. The results of the proceedings were numerous, ranging from charges dropped or reduced to guilty verdicts with \$200 fines. It is not clear which decisions, if any, were appealed, but it appears the process moved quickly and resolved itself by October. There was at least one more Iranian arrest in Corsicana before the end of 1977. The city decided to crack down on the placing of flyers on utility poles or on cars by someone other than the owner. The flyering was mostly the work of local Iranians, who began placing anti-shah posters and leaflets to prepare for his November visit with President Carter. One Iranian, Espundia Karimi, was arrested and fined \$50 for placing copies of *Resistance* on vehicles.⁵⁹

The ISA and OIMS did not provide reporting exclusively within their respective publications. A platform in which both organizations proliferated was university newspapers, an excellent example of which was *The Kernel*, the newspaper of the University of Kentucky, in Lexington. In March of 1978, the OIMS branch on campus reported the January murders of several anti-shah protesters in Qom by the shah’s security forces.⁶⁰ The organization called for a seven-day hunger strike in response. It also hammered Carter for his trip to Tehran on New Year’s Eve and his comments while there, such as the president’s claim that the shah was “deeply concerned about human rights.”⁶¹ Similarly, the ISA also attacked Carter for his New Year’s trip to Tehran and argued that it “made it crystal clear, that far from being a ‘human rights administration,’ the Carter administration is unwavering in its support of one of the world’s most brutal fascist regimes.”⁶²

The *Kernel* was not unique. It is difficult to find a single student newspaper from the period that did not discuss the social upheaval in Iran. But the paper became particularly active after an incident on campus in April 1978. During the second week of that month, CIA Director Stansfield Turner spoke at the university. In light of the CIA’s direct involvement in the 1953 coup, politically active Iranian students were hyper-focused on that organization and fearful that the CIA would intervene if the shah was successfully toppled. As many as four dozen protesters greeted Turner with posters that read “Support your CIA, Support American Fascism” and “Down with the Shah, Down with the CIA.”⁶³ Twelve were arrested, three of whom were Americans and another a minor of unspecified nationality whose name did not appear again after the initial reporting. Protesters claimed arrests were made before Turner arrived. In contrast, an

⁵⁸ A. Jahan Fardan, “Shah Put In by CIA,” *Corsicana (TX) Daily Sun*, June 19, 1977, 26.

⁵⁹ “Iranian First One Arrested in War on Illegal Posters,” *Corsicana (TX) Daily Sun*, Nov. 11, 1977, 1.

⁶⁰ The number of those killed remains unclear. See Charles Kurzman, “The Qum Protests and the Coming of the Iranian Revolution, 1975 and 1978,” *Social Science History* 27, no. 3 (Fall 2003), 287-325.

⁶¹ “Protest the Massacre of Moslem Citizens in Iran,” *Kentucky Kernel*, March 1, 1978, 2.

⁶² “Revolutionary Situation Indicated in Shah’s Iran,” *Kentucky Kernel*, March 3, 1978, 2.

⁶³ “Arrests Made as Marchers Disrupt CIA’s Chief’s Speech,” *Kentucky Kernel*, April 13, 1979, 1.

article written by a *Kernel* staff member claimed that the “outside agitators” were not arrested until they began to drown out Turner with their shouting.⁶⁴

Members of the OIMS and others protested the arrests while university students argued about the event in the campus paper leading up to the trials in late September of 1978. On the 29th of that month, after three days of questioning, all were found guilty of violating local laws that forbade protesting with signs. Two of the Americans were released to await sentencing, which came a week later in the form of \$250 fines each and forty-five to ninety days in jail, but the Iranians and the other American, an English professor at the university, were held on bond. At this point, the events of the case become challenging to discern owing to conflicting accounts published by *The Rise*, the *Kernel*, and the *Lexington Herald-Leader*. But the agreed upon facts appear to be that after the guilty verdicts were handed down, the prosecuting attorney requested that the Iranians be held on a \$2,000 bond, with the stipulation that 10 percent be paid to grant a presentence release. The presiding judge, Paul Gudgel, agreed in principle but raised the price to \$4,000 and mandated that it be paid in full. After initial sentencing on October 7, but before the later appeal, Gudgel raised it to \$15,000 for each Iranian and required that it be paid in full and in cash.⁶⁵

Gudgel’s decisions and behavior fueled speculation by the Iranian student organizations. According to *The Rise*, Gudgel presided over the court while wearing a bulletproof vest and accompanied by bodyguards.⁶⁶ To the students, this was proof that the entire affair was a CIA-orchestrated conspiracy to make an example of the Iranian protesters and to discredit their cause through intimidation. “The Lexington Court’s reactionary fascistic measures against the 11, specially the 8 Iranian students, are obviously serving the interests of the U.S. government and the shah’s regime,” declared the OIMS, and the “court is now acting as a local agency of the CIA and the [sic] U.S. imperialism.” The organization also argued that the “repressive measures” in Lexington were proof that their revolutionary struggle was succeeding and causing “deep embarrassment” for American foreign policy.⁶⁷

Like the ISA in Corsicana, the OIMS in Lexington conjured realities of the Cold War and relied on memories of the Vietnam era to make its point: “The CIA’s plot at liquidating student movements in the U.S ... is the same age-old notorious plot against the anti-war activists in the 1960s,” but “now it is well clear to everybody that those harassed and imprisoned progressive elements were quite right in their opposition to the U.S. policy in Vietnam and the CIA’s dirty tricks against the oppressed Vietnamese.”⁶⁸

⁶⁴“Outside Agitators Drew the Attention They Desired,” *Kentucky Kernel*, April 14, 1978, 2.

⁶⁵Andy Mead, “Iranians Protestors Fined, 10 Get Jail Terms,” *Lexington (KY) Herald-Leader*, Oct. 7, 1978, 1, A14; Debbie McDaniel, “After Three Days Jury Reaches Verdict; Protestors Are Guilty,” *Kentucky Kernel*, Sept. 29, 1978, 1.

⁶⁶The bulletproof vest accusation stemmed from local media reports. The *Lexington (KY) Herald-Leader* questioned Judge Gudgel on this and reported on October 7 that his response was only, “I don’t want to get into matters of security.” Mead, “Iranian Protestors Fined, 10 Get Jail Terms,” A14.

⁶⁷“The Course, CIA and the Shah’s Regime,” *Compiled Documents of the OIMS: The Rise*, Oct. 12, 1978, 26.

⁶⁸“The 11: Political Prisoners, Not Criminals,” *Compiled Documents of the OIMS: The Rise*, Oct. 12, 1978, 27–28.

By the time of the judge's decision to increase bail to \$15,000, the detained Iranians had already begun a hunger strike to protest what they believed was an unfair trial. On October 16, the eleventh day of the hunger strike, a couple from nearby Mount Sterling took action. Mr. and Mrs. John and Louise Smiley believed the treatment of the jailed Iranians was unjust and decided to bail them out at the price of \$120,000. The couple purchased a lengthy newspaper advertisement to explain their actions. They focused on the issue of the cost of the bond specifically and wrote that it was "terribly wrong... [We] knew we had to get into this case to keep these young men from being crucified by this judge." They asserted that had the students been left in jail, they would have been deported for missing classes and then potentially killed by the shah's regime for their political activities. The couple hoped that their actions had "done something to redeem the American reputation for fair play."⁶⁹ The OIMS praised the Smileys and their "progressive and humanitarian act." The organization argued the couple's actions had "important political repercussions" because "such a move by [Americans] clearly showed that our just struggle against the CIA ... had the public's support" and proved "that, contrary to what some people would tend to believe, American people are not even apathetic, let alone antagonistic, to our activities."⁷⁰

At nearly the same time the events in Kentucky were occurring, the Congressional Committee on Foreign Relations was organizing a subcommittee to investigate the presence of SAVAK in the US. Chaired by Democratic Senator George McGovern, the subcommittee attempted to question CIA personnel as to whether the agency was training SAVAK in the late 1970s. Agents dodged the questions and claimed they must confer with Langley before answering. McGovern did not take this refusal well and wrote a forceful letter to Stansfield Turner. The chairman reminded Turner that as early as the spring of 1977, Carter had promised the full cooperation of the executive branch; in December of that year, McGovern and Turner had signed a memorandum of understanding in which the latter had promised to "cooperate fully in the investigation" in exchange for the promise that the subcommittee would protect classified information shared by the CIA. McGovern ended his letter to Turner with the warning that if he did not respond promptly with answers to the committee's questions, "I will have no alternative but to ... issue a subpoena."⁷¹ By that point, in late 1978, Iranian students and some members of Congress, such as McGovern, Frank Church, and Joseph Biden, were nearly synchronized in their concerns over the relationship between SAVAK and the CIA and how American power enabled and maintained that of Pahlavi's regime.

On December 10 and 11, many Iranians took to American streets to celebrate International Human Rights Day and the thirtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Twelve hundred Iranians congregated in Washington, DC to demand that the Carter administration reconsider its backing of their nation's repressive regime.⁷² To exemplify respect for the UDHR, the OIMS

⁶⁹John T. and Louise P. Smiley, "A Public Statement," *Lexington Herald-Leader*, Oct. 30, 1978, 13.

⁷⁰"Lexington 11: A Clear Victory for the Iranian Students," *Compiled Documents of the OIMS: The Rise*, Nov. 15, 1978, 26.

⁷¹George McGovern to Stansfield Turner, Oct. 3, 1978, folder 11, box 224, Bob Beckel's Subject Files, Records of the Congressional Liaison, JCL.

⁷²Shannon, *Losing Hearts and Minds*, 97–99, 140, 145.

published a resolution adopted in Tehran that recognized the importance of both the Shia Muslim holy day of Ashura and International Human Rights Day. "We take the opportune coincidence of this great holy day with the International Human Rights Day to declare that ... the provision of natural rights of man is one of the basic objectives of the movements," the resolution stated. "Exploitation and foreign colonialism and dependence on imperialism ... must be eliminated."⁷³ The revolutionary students declared, "We will have relations based on mutual respect for each other's rights and concerns, with all countries that do not commit treason to or aggression against ... the interests of the Iranian people."⁷⁴ Protests in California less than a month later, however, showed how quickly any notion of mutual respect might deteriorate under the weight of anger and opportunity.

On January 2, 1979, one year and one day after president and Mrs. Carter spent New Year's Day with the Pahlavis in Tehran, where the president infamously praised the shah for creating "an island of stability" in the region, demonstrators, protesters, and rioters took to the streets of Beverly Hills.⁷⁵ Feeling emboldened by the revolution's momentum back home and sensing the imminent collapse of the Pahlavi regime, an estimated two thousand Iranians, many of whom were students, attacked a home owned by the shah's family where the sister and mother of the shah were staying.⁷⁶ Neither of them was injured, but the house's windows were shattered by thrown rocks and bottles while police blocked riotous demonstrators from entering the home. Screaming "Death to the shah!" they were eventually dispersed by police in riot gear and with tear gas after protesters set fire to at least one law enforcement vehicle.⁷⁷ Once the scene was cleared and the chaos subsided, a spokeswoman for the Iranians told local media that more demonstrations would follow because "we're not going to let them steal from the Iranian people and then come here and live in peace."⁷⁸

In the newspaper coverage of the events in Beverly Hills, the inspiration for lashing out against the shah's family so forcefully was on full display next to the account of the riot itself. Directly under a report on the aftermath of the demonstration, a Sacramento area paper explained that the shah was preparing to leave Iran "for vacation" and that he had appointed a political opponent, Shapour Bakhtiar, as prime minister. Bakhtiar was expected to end martial law and restore civilian rule. That paper also provided an example of what the various Iranian student organizations had been trying to communicate

⁷³ Ashura commemorates the Battle of Karbala and the martyrdom of the Islamic prophet Mohammad's grandson and third Shia Imam Hussein ibn Ali in 680 C.E.; Andrew J Newman, "Ashura, Islamic Holy Day," *Britannica*, April 1, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ashura-Islamic-holy-day>. Accessed May 13, 2024.

⁷⁴"17-Point Resolution Unanimously Adopted in Tehran, on Ashura, December 11, 1978." *Compiled Documents of the OIMS: The Rise*, Dec. 20, 1978, 42.

⁷⁵Carter, *White House Diary*, 156.

⁷⁶It is a safe assumption that most demonstrators were or had been students. California housed several thousand Iranian students. According to the police, the ISA was holding its international conference nearby at the time, so potentially, thousands of others were visiting that otherwise would not have been there.

⁷⁷Stephen Fox, "35 Hurt as Shah Foes Riot in LA," *Register* (Santa Ana, CA), Jan. 3, 1979, A1; "Demonstrators Besiege Shah's Mother's Mansion," *Times-Standard* (Eureka, CA), Jan. 3, 1979, 1; the quote is also on page 1.

⁷⁸"Demonstrators Besiege Shah's Mother's Mansion," 1.



Figure 2. Iranian protestor in Beverly Hills struck by a police car. Two weeks before the Pahlavis left Iran for the final time, the family home in Beverly Hills, California, where the Shah's mother and sister were staying, became a site of confrontation and violence between anti-regime protesters and the police. Here, an unnamed protestor is bounced off the hood of a moving patrol car. Michael Hearing, "Photo of a protestor being struck by sheriff's patrol car at a demonstration turned violent in front of Shams Pahlavi's home in Beverly Hills," *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, January 3, 1979. Source: Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Beverly_Hills,_California?uselang=zh-my#/media/File:Iran_protestor_struck_by_car_in_Beverly_Hills.jpg.)

to the American public for several years. An uncensored photo, taken when an Iranian woman was hit by a police car and bounced off its hood, adorned the front page (Figure 2).⁷⁹ It demonstrated how the power of the American state had used violence against Iranians to secure the interests of the Pahlavis.

Following the Beverly Hills demonstrations, Iranian students continued to protest, though peacefully. Members of the Confederation of Iranian Students marched the day after with anti-shah posters but were kept from getting too close to the shah's family home by police in riot gear. The Los Angeles City Council decided unanimously

⁷⁹Referenced here are two articles and one photo from the front page of the *Appeal-Democrat* of Marysville-Yuba City, California, on January 3, 1979: "Beverly Hills Home Under Guard" and "Shah Due to Leave Iran." The photo (reprinted here) is captioned "PROTEST TURNS VIOLENT - An unidentified Iranian demonstrator bounced off the hood of a Los Angeles County Sheriff's Office car during a demonstration in Beverly Hills. Hundreds of demonstrators stormed the home of the Shah of Iran's sister, starting brush fires and overturning cars." For further discussion on the use of police violence against Iranian protesters and rioters in Beverly Hills, see Manijeh Moradian, *This Flame Within*, 120–22.

to request that the federal government revoke the visas of any Iranian found guilty of rioting.⁸⁰ The mayor of Beverly Hills sent a telegram to the Carter administration, urging “the deportation of the Iranian students and other people on visitors visa [*sic*] who participated in the riot.” He continued, “These individuals were responsible for widespread property damage ... and their actions seriously threatened the public safety of our citizens... . It is critical that prompt action be taken to initiate deportation... . It is necessary to help prevent the reoccurrence of criminal activity.”⁸¹

A few days after the riot, Attorney General Griffin Bell publicly commented that deportation would be considered in the case of any Iranian found guilty of having participated. A California state senator, Newton Russell, sent a letter to Carter applauding “the Attorney General’s statements about deporting such students” and urged the president “to do whatever is necessary to see that it is done.”⁸² National political figures made similar requests. Lloyd Bentsen, a Democratic senator from Texas, and Robin Beard and Barry Goldwater, Republican congressmen from Tennessee and Arizona, respectively, wrote to Bell to advocate for the deportation of any Iranian student that broke the law.⁸³

Bell also received letters from some members of the public who called for deportation and engaged in Orientalist stereotypes of Iranians as “barbarians” unfit for democracy. Some simply advocated for violence. One man from Michigan wrote to Assistant Attorney General Benjamin Civiletti that “the riot ... is a disgrace to Americans. This kind of violence should be handled by military response with shooting on sight. People like you [Civiletti] are a disgrace to the human race—you don’t have the courage to deport these bastards [emphasis in original].”⁸⁴ The man received a form letter response promising the matter was being handled, to which he replied with a handwritten note: “Nothing has been (or will be) done by the U.S. Government... . As a native-born American citizen I have lost ALL [original emphasis] confidence in the ability of Washington officialdom to accomplish anything!”⁸⁵

⁸⁰“Deportation of Iranians Urged; 70 March in LA,” *Register* (Santa Ana, CA), Jan. 4, 1979, 1-2.

⁸¹Telegram to Jimmy Carter from Joseph N. Tilem, Jan. 4, 1979, folder 11, box 36, Jack Watson’s Subject Files, Office of the Chief of Staff Files, JCL.

⁸²Newton Russell to Jimmy Carter, Jan. 11, 1979, folder 11, box 36, Jack Watson’s Subject Files, Office of the Chief of Staff Files, JCL.

⁸³“Deportation of Iranians Urged; 70 March in LA,” 1-2; Senator Lloyd Bentsen to Attorney General Griffin Bell, Jan. 3, 1979, Folder “INS-Iranian Students,” box 4, Subject Files of Special Assistant Lovida H. Coleman (P 15), General Records of the Department of Justice, Record Group 60, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD (hereafter NARA); Attorney General Griffin Bell to Senator Lloyd Bentsen, Jan. 8, 1979, Folder “INS-Iranian Students,” box 4, Subject Files of Special Assistant Lovida H. Coleman (P 15), General Records of the Department of Justice, Record Group 60, NARA; Attorney General Griffin Bell to Congressman Barry Goldwater, Jan. 9, 1979, Folder “INS-Iranian Students,” box 4, Subject Files of Special Assistant Lovida H. Coleman (P 15), General Records of the Department of Justice, Record Group 60, NARA.

⁸⁴Bernard F. Forster handwritten letter to Deputy AG Benjamin Civiletti, Jan. 7, 1979, Folder “INS-Iranian Students,” box 4, Subject Files of Special Assistant Lovida H. Coleman (P 15), General Records of the Department of Justice, Record Group 60, NARA.

⁸⁵Bernard F. Forster handwritten response on Deputy AG office’s form letter addressed to “Sir!,” undetermined date, Bernard F. Forster handwritten letter to Deputy AG Benjamin Civiletti, Jan. 7, 1979.

The ISA also had much to say. *Resistance* published an analysis of the events in California under the headline “Battle of Beverly Hills.” In that article, the ISA wrote that the shah’s sister and mother had been given refuge from “the storms of popular revolution against their [family’s] 50-year reign of terror” and explained:

The purpose of this demonstration was not only to expose the fact of continuing U.S. government and corporate support to these brutal rulers—who have brought destruction and misery and despotic tortures to the Iranian people; it was also intended to arouse the outrage of the American people at the harboring of these vile rulers in their midst.

Going further, the ISA reframed the argument that the Iranian students were responsible for anti-Pahlavi demonstrations on American streets by proclaiming that it was the American government’s fault for allowing “hated champions of corruption, decadence, and mass murder into the U.S.” The Carter administration had launched “a direct attack on the American people, not only on us.”⁸⁶

The ISA accused the Carter administration of using the riot as a pretext for targeting all Iranian students. INS officials visited fourteen colleges and universities in the LA area, where agents were supplied files on every international student in attendance, totaling 6,254, thirty-two percent of whom were Iranian. INS then randomly selected 500 files that included “a considerable number of Iranian students” for review. The following week, immigration officials visited the universities to check the status of those 500 students.⁸⁷ By January 15, the assessment was complete and found that 356 of the students were legally residing in the nation and maintaining student status. Still, INS had not yet determined the nationality of each one and decided to investigate further the 144 who appeared to have overstayed their visas or failed to maintain student status.⁸⁸

It is not clear how the investigation progressed beyond that point, but before it could have reasonably been concluded, *Resistance* had already told its readers what it believed the investigation’s goal to be: the deportation of Iranians. In nearly four pages, the ISA verbally assaulted Bell, Carter, and their perceived use of the media as a way to misdirect the American public away from the shah’s abuses. It also provided a history of actions taken against Iranian students since the 1960s, explaining that assaults and surveillance on Iranian property, persons, and organizations by local police, the CIA, the FBI, and SAVAK were common occurrences meant to weed out anti-shah Iranians and make it easier to present any given Iranian student as a subversive. But they also noted that the president was new to the deportation scheme and asked, “Why didn’t Carter yell and scream about Iranian students and demand our deportation ... when he received humiliation along with the shah in front of millions of Americans” during

⁸⁶“Battle of Beverly Hills,” *Resistance*, Jan. 1979, 1.

⁸⁷Deputy Associate AG Doris M. Meissner to Griffin Bell, “Status Report on Iranian Student Demonstration Follow Up,” Jan. 6, 1979, Folder “INS-Iranian Students,” box 4, Subject Files of Special Assistant Lovida H. Coleman (P 15), General Records of the Department of Justice, Record Group 60, NARA.

⁸⁸Memorandum for the AG from Phil Jordan, “RE: Iranian Students,” Jan. 15, 1979, Folder “INS-Iranian Students,” box 4, Subject Files of Special Assistant Lovida H. Coleman (P 15), General Records of the Department of Justice, Record Group 60, NARA.

the November 1977 White House visit? Answering their own question, the ISA argued: “The reason is that providing ‘security, safety, peace, and comfort’ for a ruling family ... that has been exposed for its torture chambers, drug dealing, massive corruption, and its 37 years reign of terror is a tough act for ‘human rights’ Carter to sell to the American people.”⁸⁹

Like their ISA compatriots, OIMS members never shied away from explicitly linking the shah’s despotism to the US. As the revolution unfolded in Iran, they increased their condemnation of Carter both in print and in verbal remarks. In a leaflet, the OIMS declared that “Carter’s Human Rights Supports Massacre in Iran” after the Pahlavi regime massacred at least a hundred anti-shah protesters at Jaleh Square in Tehran on September 8, 1978 (in the OIMS account, the number of those killed was five thousand). The organization sarcastically pointed out that Carter was the “champion” of human rights, and yet just two days after the massacre, the president called Pahlavi to express the nation’s support for his regime, and two weeks after that authorized shipments of tear gas to Iran.⁹⁰ “This is the real meaning of Jimmy Carter’s ‘human rights’ policy; arming and supporting the shah’s dictatorial regime,” the OIMS wrote, before requesting that all “freedom-loving and democratic-minded Americans” raise their voices against US support of the shah.⁹¹

Although the OIMS knew about Carter’s call to Pahlavi, it did not know that the president also sent a handwritten note to the shah on September 28, 1978, that read, “Let me extend my best wishes to you as you continue your successful effort for the beneficial social and political reforms in Iran. All of us recognize the great benefits to our own nation and to the world of a strong and progressive Iran.”⁹² Carter wrote specifically to thank Pahlavi for his public support of the Camp David Accords that were signed that month, which the OIMS detested and saw as abandonment of the Palestinian cause by Egypt’s Anwar Sadat.

On January 16, 1979, as the Justice Department was investigating the attack of the Pahlavi home in California, the shah left Iran for the final time. “Criminal Shah Flees Iran in Tears” headlined the January issue of *The Rise*. “His dictatorial authority and absolute powers, thought to be unquestionable under the [*sic*] U.S. patronage even a year ago, had been hammered and shrunk to almost nil,” the paper celebrated. It continued, “Washington, his beloved source of inspiration and power, could no longer keep him at the helm.”⁹³ Both organizations then transitioned to condemning the new government of Prime Minister Shapour Bakhtiar, seeing it as a continuation of the US-Iran alliance. The OIMS argued that Bakhtiar was the last chance the US had at influencing Iran and that he was nothing more than a phony “liberal-democratic” figurehead

⁸⁹“Battle of Beverly Hills,” *Resistance*, Jan. 1979, 2.

⁹⁰The OIMS consistently provided its readers with citations. For the phone call, it cited the *Los Angeles Times* from Sept. 11, 1978, and for the tear gas, it cited *Newsweek* from Sept. 25, 1978.

⁹¹“Carter’s Human Rights Supports Massacre in Iran,” *Compiled Documents of the OIMS: The Rise*, Sept. 1978, 145-46.

⁹²Handwritten note to the Shah of Iran from Jimmy Carter, Sept. 28, 1978, folder 9, box 23, Subject Files, Plains Files, JCL.

⁹³“Criminal Shah Flees Iran in Tears,” *Compiled Documents of the OIMS: The Rise*, Jan. 1979, 49.

because he had been appointed by Pahlavi. In the words of the OIMS, “their ‘stick’ policy had failed, now was the time to try a ‘carrot.’”⁹⁴

Regardless of this perceived disingenuous attempt by the American government to support the Iranian people, however, both the ISA and OIMS continued to believe that most of the American people were on their side and even explained that deportation attempts often failed because some in the American public rose to their defense. They fully believed themselves to be on the right side of both morality and history and thought most Americans stood with them. The ISA also believed a more serious commitment to deportation was going to be made after the Beverly Hills demonstrations and explained to their readers that “in order for Carter to bring these Imperial Majesties to the United States, he has to try to eliminate the Iranian students and their influence.”⁹⁵ However, the student organization misread the administration. In the summer of 1979, Carter extended voluntary departure to all Iranian students, which meant those who were afraid to return to revolutionary Iran could stay in the US.⁹⁶ The order was not rescinded until the seizure of the US Embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979.

Before that crisis though, minor events at Indiana University (IU) demonstrated the continued tension between Iranian students and the US government in the spring of 1979. On March 14, John Stempel, the deputy chief of the political section of the US Embassy in Tehran, arrived at IU to deliver a lecture on the Iranian Revolution. Nearly two hundred Iranian students protested outside IU’s Memorial Union while Stempel spoke to an audience of five hundred inside. His talk was not without interruption, however. Local press reported that between twenty-five and thirty audience members inside the auditorium occasionally shouted things like “Sit down! Sit down!” and “He’s a fascist!” often enough that the scheduled twenty-minute event stretched to about an hour.⁹⁷ There were no arrests or potentially dangerous physical confrontations.

The absence of arrests and violence against Stempel was not expected. In early March, the FBI began monitoring IU’s campus for potential volatility. In an internal document distributed before the lecture, an FBI agent reported that on March 8 a confidential source had advised Stempel of a “threatened demonstration” after observing that the ISA had twice requested for the speech to be canceled and was rejected each time. After the second rejection, the university felt it necessary to alert its own Department of Safety, the US Secret Service, and the local US attorney because the ISA made it clear there would be a protest. But it should be noted that the Iranian students representing the ISA tried to compromise with the university. They requested an additional speaker who could give an alternative perspective. Their proposal was rejected because, according to the lecture series director, “we can not [*sic*] present every side of every issue facing the nation or the world.”⁹⁸

⁹⁴“Bakhtiar Government: The U.S. Last Desperate Resort,” *Compiled Documents of the OIMS: The Rise*, Jan. 1979, 50.

⁹⁵“Battle of Beverly Hills,” *Resistance*, Jan. 1979, 2–4.

⁹⁶Stephen J. Solarz to President Jimmy Carter, Nov. 20, 1979, folder 11, box 224, Bob Beckel’s Subject Files, Records of the Congressional Liaison, JCL.

⁹⁷“Stempel Talks about Iran,” *Rushville Republican* (Rushville, IN), March 15, 1979, 2; John Fancher, “Agitators Disrupt Stempel Address,” *Indiana Daily Student*, March 15, 1979, 1.

⁹⁸Lilsa Huber, “Iranian Students Protest,” *Indiana Daily Student*, March 7, 1979, 3.

The IU student paper was more engaged with the controversy than was local media, and there was concern that its coverage increased tension by providing a preview of Stempel's speech a week in advance.⁹⁹ On the day of the lecture, the *Indiana Daily Student* printed a statement from the campus's director of international services that may have also helped set the tone for that evening when he predicted a protest. However, the director also tried to diffuse any potential animosity between the general student body and the Iranians. As seen in other instances when protests occurred on campus, officials often took an opportunity to separate the behavior and activity of their Iranian students from outside activists. The director told the paper, "The students on this campus from Iran are very responsible, hard-working, and on those few occasions where there have been demonstrations, they have been very orderly and peaceful." But because Iranians had competing views on their nation's revolution, the university was "concerned and uneasy about disturbances by troublemakers from the outside."¹⁰⁰ There was probably at least some truth to the "outsider" argument. The FBI report noted that its informant speculated IU had around 150 Iranian students, which was lower than the number estimated to have demonstrated against Stempel.¹⁰¹

Cause for alarm was likely also increased when the ISA began distributing flyers that demanded Stempel's cancelation because his views were "significantly biased and reactionary."¹⁰² The organization initially argued that student fees were used to fund the lecture series, so "an effort should be made to supply objective facts whenever presenting a sensitive, highly controversial, and important issue in an attempt to give the best educational and unbiased lecture possible." But the two-page flyer became increasingly vitriolic as it continued. It directly condemned Stempel and explicitly tied the US government to SAVAK and the shah's torture regime. Recalling the events at Jaleh Square the previous September, the ISA flyer asserted that President Carter "openly commended the shah on his ... 'appropriate action'" after his troops "burned people, attacked middle-school children, raped revolutionary girls ... and committed the Bloody Friday Massacre." Because the university was allowing a US diplomat to speak on the Iranian Revolution, the ISA proposed that the next logical step for the lecture series was to invite the infamous serial killer and rapist John Wayne Gacy. The bottom of the flyer was stamped with a raised, clenched fist (Figure 3).¹⁰³

⁹⁹Internal report from Indianapolis Field Office, March 1979, Indianapolis (Indiana) Field Division, Series: Classification 157 (Civil Unrest) Case Files, 1957-1978, Record Group 65: Records of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1896-2008, Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, NARA.

¹⁰⁰John Fancher, "IU Official Says Stempel Address Protest Likely," *Indiana Daily Student*, March 14, 1979, 1.

¹⁰¹It is, of course, true that different Iranians had different views on the revolution and various levels of commitment to protesting. In two oral history interviews I have conducted as part of this project, former Iranian students at the University of Tulsa and the University of Arkansas both claimed to have never participated in anti-shah or any other demonstrations.

¹⁰²John Fancher, "Agitators Disrupt Stempel Address," *Indiana Daily Student*, March 15, 1979, 1.

¹⁰³The flyer is found in the Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Indianapolis (Indiana) Field Division, Series: Classification 157 (Civil Unrest) Case Files, 1957-1978, Record Group 65: Records of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1896-2008, Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, NARA. John Wayne Gacy had come to the public's attention three months before the events at Indiana University and the printing of the ISA flyer when he confessed to a series of brutal rapes and murders. It is not clear if the students were aware of the now infamous photo of First Lady Rosalynn Carter and Gacy



Figure 3. First Lady Rosalynn Carter and serial killer John Wayne Gacy at a private event in Chicago. (White House Photographer, “White House photograph of First Lady Rosalynn Carter and Democratic Party activist and serial killer John Wayne Gacy,” May 6, 1978. Source: Wikimedia Commons, <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Johnwaynegacyrosalynncarter.jpg>.)

The *Daily Student* published an interview with Stempel the day after the demonstration. He told the student reporter that the protesters “were harming themselves more than their target” and that they represented “the kinds of problems caused by people who are out to poison relations between the U.S. and Iran.”¹⁰⁴ From the perspective of the ISA, OIMS, and other Iranian student groups, this likely seemed incredibly tone-deaf. But Stempel’s experiences were different from theirs. The previous month, while he was still stationed in Tehran, the US Embassy had been attacked on Valentine’s Day. Hostages were taken that day—Stempel was the only senior-level diplomat who was not—and kept for several hours until the regime of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini intervened and forced their release.¹⁰⁵

taken in Chicago at a private event for the Democratic Party in May of 1978, although they most likely were, given the media attention the photo received after Gacy’s confession. The photo was an embarrassment to the Secret Service and the White House, so the students likely referenced Gacy to insult the Carter administration; “Photograph Shows Mrs. Carter With Suspect in Mass Slayings,” *New York Times*, Jan. 22, 1979, A18; “Timeline of Serial Killer John Wayne Gacy’s Life, Case,” Associated Press, Oct. 25, 2021.

¹⁰⁴Lilsa Huber, “Stempel Says Protestors Were Harming Themselves,” *Indiana Daily Student*, March 16, 1979, 2.

¹⁰⁵Stempel’s complete account of the February 14, 1979, attack on the US Embassy in Tehran can be found in his book *Inside the Iranian Revolution* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1981), 183–88.

The events of Bloomington quickly faded in university and local press coverage. Unlike in Corsicana or Lexington, there were no arrests or trials to chronicle. For the FBI, though, the events were more enduring. Until at least the summer of 1979, the Bloomington office kept track of Iranian student activities in the area. It continued to monitor the student newspaper and retain copies of issues it released. After a late June campus protest, an unnamed informant filed a report immediately after the event and then provided a follow-up in early July. The demonstration was held by the ISA in conjunction with the Organization of Arab Students, the Black Political Caucus, and the International Socialist Organization to show solidarity with the people of Nicaragua. Photos depicting demonstrators with signs that read “Support the Sandinistas” were printed by the *Indiana Daily Student*. Those issues were collected and filed away by the FBI. The demonstrations were reported as peaceful and uneventful and were largely ignored by those on campus.¹⁰⁶

Conclusion

The events discussed here are only a fragment of the Iranian student experience. But in the late 1970s, these were the events that earned their attention. Though the emphasis has been on the students’ domestic commentary, the global lens applied by the students should not be discounted or ignored. Both they and the Carter administration understood their actions and reactions within a global framework. Each group constantly balanced and imbued its respective rhetoric with the realities of the Cold War. Carter and his advisers understood that geopolitical exigencies subordinated human rights and that the shah’s Iran was a crucial part of the extended US national security state that had been constructed by Carter’s predecessors. Likewise, the Iranians understood that their struggle for a nation free to guide its own destiny was not unique. While trying to build solidarity with American citizens, they sought unity with the Third World. That is not to suggest that the students were of one mind or a monolith waiting to claim victory; on the contrary, the ideological schism that had led to separate publications when the revolution was still a dream would play itself out in Iran once the revolution became a reality.

Following Pahlavi’s final departure from Iran in January 1979, many activists decided to return to their nation to help shape post-shah society. This action led to the discontinuation of both *Resistance* and *The Rise*. In March of 1979, the ISA sent a letter to its subscribers notifying them that the publication had come to an end, stating,

¹⁰⁶Front page of *Indiana Daily Student* with photo of pro-Sandinista demonstration on Indiana University’s Campus from June 29, 1979, that was retained by FBI field office, Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Indianapolis (Indiana) Field Division, Series: Classification 157 (Civil Unrest) Case Files, 1957-1978, Record Group 65: Records of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1896-2008, NARA; Internal report on Indiana University protests citing information provided by unnamed source, July 10, 1979, Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Indianapolis (Indiana) Field Division, Series: Classification 157 (Civil Unrest) Case Files, 1957-1978, Record Group 65: Records of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1896-2008, NARA; Internal report on Indiana University protests citing information provided by unnamed source, July 17, 1979, Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Indianapolis (Indiana) Field Division, Series: Classification 157 (Civil Unrest) Case Files, 1957-1978, Record Group 65: Records of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1896-2008, NARA.

“As you know, the situation in Iran today is one of great celebration and also continuing struggle,” but “we do not consider our revolution finished.” The letter appealed to the American public as well as to the Iranians who chose to remain in the US while continuing to support the ISA. It emphasized that the organization still believed there was a chance the US would intervene, as it had in 1953 with the coup that toppled Mosaddeq, to reverse the revolution, and asked its readers to ensure that that would not happen. It closed with one final expression of solidarity: “The bonds that have been forged between the Iranian and American peoples can never be broken.”¹⁰⁷

A month later, the OIMS dissolved as an organization and discontinued *The Rise*. The organization encouraged Iranians who had gone back to Iran and those who would follow to continue fighting for ideological supremacy. Like the ISA, it knew the revolution had just begun. The OIMS declared that “victory of the revolutionary Islamic movement under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini ... does not by any means imply an end to the struggle,” and that the movement “will move forward toward a monotheistic system; until the liberation of all peoples of the world; and until the establishment of the sovereignty” of those who follow the Quran.¹⁰⁸

Both organizations had worked ceaselessly to educate the American public and recruit them to their cause. The dissolution of each publication caused those voices to fade but not to vanish. Their echoes still demand to be heard, and the students’ experiences still serve as a warning that international students can easily become entangled with domestic politics, foreign policy, and crises for which they are not to blame.

While the Iranians were not the first group of students to thrust themselves upon an ideological campus battleground, to engage in activism that sought an expansion of rights, to protest against what they viewed as imperial practices, or to find themselves as the focal point of US politics or the Cold War conflict, they are a group that must continue to be included in the expanding literature on US-Iranian relations and student activism. They refused to let Jimmy Carter talk about human rights but not honor his pledge; they protested discriminatory admission policies in Texas; they were determined on campuses in Kentucky and Indiana to prevent US government officials from controlling the narrative of American intervention in Iran that had saddled the nation with a dictator, or the narrative of the Iranian Revolution that sought to topple him; and in California, some violently lashed out against the shah’s family when presented with the opportunity. Iranians worked to appeal to the sentiments of the American public through protests, organization, and a willingness to be jailed. They consistently used the rights-based language of their host country to protest how its hypocrisy enabled the loss of rights within their own nation. Examining their efforts further extends our understanding of Cold War-era student activism. Further, it demonstrates the agency that foreign students have within the United States, and that even when they may be misunderstood, government policy may be against them, and their own actions may

¹⁰⁷Iranian Student Association Letter to subscribers, March 1979; Document is a single page and possesses no page number. It appears to have been sent as a single item to *Resistance* subscribers. A copy of the letter is found in *Resistance: A Publication of ISAUS, Member of Confederation of Iranian Students (National Union)* on microfilm at the Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

¹⁰⁸“Introduction,” *Compiled Documents of the OIMS: The Rise*, April 1979, 7.

result in failure, there are allies to be made within American civil society and the nation's institutions of higher education.

Will Teague is an instructor in the Department of History at the University of Arkansas. He would like to thank Randall Woods, Joel Gordon, and Patrick Williams for their constructive comments on earlier drafts of this essay, and Matthew Shannon for direction toward important sources during the early research stages.

Disclosure Statement. The author has reported no competing interests.