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The pattern of American influence in Iran after the Islamic Revolution based on documents from the former US embassy in Iran

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Extended Abstract

Diplomatic missions in contemporary international relations serve functions far beyond formal ceremonial duties, consular assistance, and official state-to-state communication. Historically, embassies have frequently operated as pivotal nodes for clandestine intelligence gathering, covert political operations, network building among political and societal elites, and structural influence operations designed to advance the strategic national interests of the sending state. Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the bilateral relationship between Tehran and Washington underwent an unprecedented paradigm shift. Iran transitioned almost overnight from a principal strategic partner and sub-regional pillar of American foreign policy in the Persian Gulf under the Pahlavi monarchy into an ideological, discursive, and

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geopolitical challenger opposing U.S. hegemony.

Losing a crucial geopolitical asset prompted Washington to deploy a multifaceted array of diplomatic, economic, military, and covert instruments to manage, destabilize, or re-orient the trajectory of the nascent Islamic Republic. Central to these clandestine efforts was the U.S. Embassy in Tehran. Following the November 4, 1979, takeover of the embassy by Iranian university students (“Muslim Student Followers of the Imam’s Line”)—an event later termed the “Second Revolution”—thousands of classified, secret, and top-secret intelligence cables, diplomatic correspondence, personality profiles, and operational memoranda were uncovered and meticulously reconstructed. Despite the historical, empirical, and theoretical significance of these primary source documents (commonly referred to as the “Documents from the U.S. Espionage Den”), existing academic literature has predominantly treated them in fragmented ways, focusing selectively on isolated dimensions such as cultural diplomacy, educational initiatives, or specific political events. Consequently, there remains a prominent theoretical and empirical gap regarding a comprehensive, systematic model that synthesizes the overarching structural pattern of post-revolutionary American infiltration in Iran. To address this gap, this study formulates and addresses the core research question: What was the structural pattern of U.S. infiltration in post-revolutionary Iran based on the primary documents retrieved from the former U.S. Embassy in Tehran?

Methodology: This research adopts a qualitative methodological framework utilizing inductive qualitative content analysis. In contrast to quantitative content analysis, which focuses primarily on word frequencies and statistical metrics, qualitative content analysis emphasizes extracting overt and latent thematic structures, contextual meanings, and operational patterns embedded within textual data. The inductive approach was deliberately selected because it allows conceptual categories and analytical models to emerge directly from the raw primary data without imposing a pre-determined, rigid theoretical matrix that might constrain or distort empirical findings.

The empirical data source comprises the complete corpus of diplomatic cables, intelligence reports, inter-agency communications, and operational records published across multiple volumes by the Center for Publication of the

Islamic Revolution Documents, the Institute for Political Studies and Research, and the comprehensive digital repository of the Espionage Den documents (us-doc.ir). The analytical procedure followed a rigorous three-phase protocol:

Preparation Phase: Formulating research objectives, defining analytical units (paragraphs, operational directives, and thematic entries), and selecting all relevant post-revolutionary documents.

Organization Phase: Executing open coding, extracting key textual units, assigning conceptual tags/labels, and iteratively grouping lower-order concepts into coherent sub-categories and main categories.

Reporting Phase: Synthesizing the emerging thematic categories into an integrated structural model and deriving qualitative inferences.

To ensure analytical rigor and validity, the coding process underwent peer debriefing and cross-coder verification, ensuring that extracted concepts directly corresponded to the primary archival materials.

Results and Findings: The inductive content analysis reveals that the pattern of U.S. infiltration in post-revolutionary Iran operates as a multi-layered, interconnected structural matrix structured around three primary pillars: Goals of Infiltration, Targets (Audience) of Infiltration, and Dimensions (Mechanisms) of Infiltration.

A. Goals of Infiltration

The primary documents indicate that U.S. strategic objectives evolved dynamically in response to on-the-ground political realities in post-revolutionary Iran:

Regime Overthrow: In the immediate aftermath of the revolution, intelligence documents reveal active attempts to establish communication channels with elements of the former Pahlavi regime and exile figures (such as Shapour Bakhtiar, the last Prime Minister of the monarchy) to finance, guide, or facilitate counter-revolutionary movements aimed at overthrowing the new political order.

Behavioral Modification and Normalization: As U.S. analysts acknowledged the resilience of the revolutionary state and the impossibility of immediate regime change, the objective shifted toward behavioral modification. Washington sought to infiltrate and cultivate moderate religious, political, and military factions to influence decision-making processes, neutralize

radical anti-American orientations, and promote a pragmatic, pro-Western administration before the new constitution and state structures could fully consolidate.

Geopolitical Power Balance against the Soviet Union: Driven by Cold War imperatives, U.S. policy aimed to prevent Soviet encroachment into Iran. U.S. strategists calculated that even if post-revolutionary Iran ceased to be an active American ally, preventing Soviet strategic insertion into Iran's political and economic space remained a vital national security objective.

B. Targets (Audience) of Infiltration

The empirical findings classify the targets of U.S. infiltration into four distinct categories:

State Actors and Political Elites: U.S. intelligence targeted key figures within the provisional government and emerging state apparatus. Documents detail deliberate, step-by-step recruitment operations—such as contacting Abolhasan Banisadr in Paris under the guise of an economic consultancy firm with a monthly retainer fee, as well as maintaining direct channels with figures like Abbas Amir-Entezam. Intelligence assets were also embedded among remaining Western-leaning administrative managers. Furthermore, documents highlight clandestine contacts with prominent opposition clerical figures, notably Grand Ayatollah Kazem Shariatmadari.

Formal Political Structures and State Institutions: Interventions focused on gaining structural access to critical state organs through the Provisional Government and targeting strategic media facilities, such as acquiring granular technical data on Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) transmitters, power generators, and broadcast infrastructure.

Political Parties and Factions: U.S. operatives maintained dual-track communications, engaging both official ruling factions and opposition political organizations—including monarchist elements and leftist groups—to create leverage and destabilize the government.

General Public and Mass Consciousness: Efforts focused on shaping public perception through psychological operations and international broadcasting networks, particularly the Voice of America (VOA), which was strategically leveraged as an authoritative news source and morale booster for opposition groups.

C. Dimensions of Infiltration

The operational mechanisms of infiltration were deployed across two main domains:

Soft (Software) Infiltration: Emphasized cultural, educational, and linguistic instruments. Priority was given to expanding English language instruction—characterized in intelligence documents as a key soft-power weapon—fostering academic exchanges through the Ministry of Science to recruit Iranian youths, arranging international exchange programs for Muslim students and clerics to reframe religious narratives, and conducting targeted psychological warfare via VOA broadcasts.

Hard (Hardware) Infiltration: Leveraged military, intelligence, and economic pressure points. On the military front, U.S. strategy focused on maintaining intelligence exchanges, cultivating relationships with senior military officers reliant on American technical expertise and spare parts, and offering selective arms sales. Economically, U.S. officials exploited Iran's post-revolutionary economic disruptions, banking instabilities, and trade vulnerabilities, while encouraging American businessmen to maintain financial dependencies with pro-Western Iranian capitalists for political leverage.

Conclusion: The systematic analysis of the former U.S. Embassy documents demonstrates that post-revolutionary American infiltration in Iran was neither an ad-hoc set of isolated diplomatic encounters nor merely standard intelligence gathering. Rather, it constituted a highly organized, institutionalized, and multi-dimensional operational framework designed to preserve American hegemony in the strategically vital Persian Gulf. By operating across hard and soft dimensions and targeting elite actors, formal institutions, opposition parties, and public perception, the U.S. sought either to dismantle the revolutionary state or forcibly adjust its strategic orientation to align with Western interests.

These empirical findings provide critical historical insights into the mechanics of foreign intervention during political transitions. Furthermore, the framework developed in this study offers valuable policy and analytical lessons for sovereign nations hosting foreign diplomatic missions, highlighting how legitimate diplomatic infrastructure can be weaponized for strategic infiltration and political engineering.

Key words: Infiltration, United States of America, Iran after the Islamic Revolution, Former US Embassy in Iran.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in conducting this research study.