

# **MISSING**

The Human Element

**ANALYSIS BY CHAS HENRY**

In 1998, Chas asked if America’s reticence to employ spies in Iran led U. S. officials to be surprised by the 1979 Islamic revolution there.

Was a lack of “human intelligence” – real, flesh and blood spies – America’s weak link in late 1970s Iran?

Read Chas’ analysis. Then ask yourself, “Have ‘human intelligence’ efforts improved?”

## Preface

This is an age in which ever-more-sophisticated technology can be, and *is*, applied toward international intelligence gathering. Policy makers are frequently in awe of scientific promise – and sincerely desirous of acquiring intelligence without putting human *gatherers* in harm's way. Such an ethos leads them to prefer collection means that stand off at some distance. It also argues for greater use of unmanned instruments.

Modern policy makers tend to prefer Technical Intelligence (TECHINT) means over Human Intelligence (HUMINT) endeavors for other reasons as well. They are sometimes averse to the human foible and inefficiency associated with espionage conducted by shadowy agents. Further, many believe it is easier to quantify the costs and benefits associated with TECHINT methodologies. Those who create national security budgets are often more comfortable discussing:

throw weights, missile velocities, fuel range, and the specifications of spy satellites – things measurable. Unlike the traditional human spy (whose identity is a tightly held secret – no pictures allowed), the spy satellite has a tangible presence. Not only can the DCI show it off with slides during closed-door hearings, he can also pass around the photographs it has produced... Satellite cameras neither lie nor defect to the enemy, while their human counterparts...have been guilty on both counts.<sup>1</sup>

TECHINT advocates often criticize the *time* and *ambiguity* associated with HUMINT operations. Developing effective human sources often requires many years and great patience. Moreover, as noted by another intelligence community observer, HUMINT operations require significant quality assurance evaluation by counterintelligence (CI) specialists.

Always subject to manipulation and penetration, HUMINT operations necessitate large-scale efforts to ensure their validity while at the same time identifying and neutralizing the HUMINT efforts of the other side. And, in the final analysis, an element of ambiguity always remains – is it 100 percent certain that the intelligence being provided by a source is correct? Is it guaranteed that the source has not been turned and is now feeding false information? Is it a certainty that the source has not applied his or her own biases to the information being reported?<sup>2</sup>

Advances in all manner of scientific discipline have facilitated exponential growth in the sorts of intelligence potentially gathered by TECHINT means. Yet, these tools often fall short when it comes to providing policy makers with a singularly crucial element of information. In the end, decision makers seek to understand a surveilled party's *intentions*; they desire an analytical comprehension allowing them to draw clear, *predictive* inferences.

Even scholars clearly favoring technical forms of collection acknowledge that

human sources are viewed as uniquely capable of finding out what kinds of people make up a country's leadership, what they care about as individuals and as a group, and what they are planning to do. The human espionage rationale also emphasizes its utility in monitoring indicia of strength, such as political cohesion, for which technical means of collection, in their focus on observable data and objects, are unsuited.<sup>3</sup>

Intelligence agencies are often criticized for failing to provide compelling *intentional* analysis of the sort described. In fairness, intelligence agencies can not be expected to know all things at all times – irrespective of realities imposed by finite resources. Problems can accrue, however, when strategic attention is misplaced, or when – for whatever reasons – a service neglects to at least consider on-site, manned exploitation of HUMINT sources and networks. The case examined in this paper presents one potential outcome of such negligence.

## Introduction

Without doubt, complex issues of trust obtain when considering collection of intelligence regarding an ally. Aggression is implicit in the very semantics of such projects: collection is conducted *against a target*. In situations of strategic alliance, however, ignorance is hardly bliss. While actors in such architectures may legitimately conceal from each other certain proprietary information – participants retain an essential obligation to seek the greatest possible understanding of environmental dynamics impacting such relationships. They owe the constituencies they represent no less.

Eschewing such a responsibility led to US incredulity when religiously inspired militants removed Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi from Iran's "Peacock Throne," seized control of the state, and later occupied the US Embassy in Tehran.

The US intelligence community's failure to predict the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran can be blamed on a set of circumstances unique to the time. First, US strategic policy focused intently on a threat perceived to be emanating from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). US officials considered all proposed policy actions through the lens of this superpower struggle. Little time, and few resources, remained to examine such issues as religious discontent in a state such as Iran – if the situation was viewed as existing outside the context of the US-USSR struggle. Second, the period was marked by significant changes in the US intelligence community. Reform efforts were undertaken to preclude what was believed by many to have been the community's previous pattern of extralegal behavior. Additionally, intelligence

planners began during this period to favor TECHINT collection means over HUMINT methodologies.

This paper does not seek to address in detail the issues of misplaced strategic focus or the relative efficacy of TECHINT and HUMINT collection. Instead, it puts forward the view that – even in the aforementioned context – maintenance of a more robust HUMINT capability in Iran during the late 1970s would likely have provided greater warning of the state’s impending political upheaval. An exploration of the depth and nature of US HUMINT operations in Iran serves to defend this thesis.

To place those operations in context, it is useful to briefly recount America’s involvement with the Persian state during the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

### **The US – Iran Experience**

As a Cold War grew from the smoldering ashes of World War II, US policy makers kept close watch on an important former ally. They were extremely concerned by actions of the USSR, a nation they believed intent on directly challenging democracy by aggressively exporting its Communist ideology. Likely targets of such polemical stabs were those countries contiguous to the USSR – nations such as Iran, which shared a 2,500-kilometer border with the Soviet state.

As early as July 1949, American intelligence officials had expressed concern that wartime and post-war politics in Iran had left a socialist organization, the *Tudeh* (Masses) Party, “as the only political group which has achieved any degree of genuine popular support...”<sup>4</sup> One year later, US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) analysts opined that while they did not anticipate a direct

Soviet invasion of Iran, they believed the USSR would “intensify its efforts to build up subversive forces within Iran and to weaken the country by means of propaganda, border activities, and diplomatic pressure.” The analysts warned against any US action that might cause Iran’s government to doubt the resolve of US support. Any misgivings of this sort, they warned, could compel the Iranians to seek *rapprochement* with the Soviets. Such a turn of events would place the USSR “in a greatly improved position for taking over the country without the use of force.”<sup>5</sup>

US officials were alarmed when an April 1951 power play elevated Dr. Mohammed Mossadegh to the post of Iranian prime minister. Within days of his ascendance, Mossadegh put forward a nationalization law – seizing control of the nation’s vast oil fields from international, primarily British interests.<sup>6</sup> Aggressively stripping away the Shah of Iran’s power to rule, Mossadegh incurred the wrath of military forces loyal to the monarchy. When the armed forces failed in an attempt to unseat Mossadegh, the shah fled into exile. Nine months after their exceptionally profitable oilfield operations had been appropriated, officials of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) approached representatives of the United Kingdom government with a plan to overthrow the Mossadegh government. British diplomats and intelligence operatives carried the scheme to meetings with US officials during late 1952 and early 1953. In the end, though some British agents may have been involved, a CIA officer, Kermit Roosevelt, was assigned to orchestrate the toppling of Prime Minister Mossadegh, return the shah to power – and, not incidentally, reestablish AIOC control of oil production.<sup>7</sup>

The aforementioned fears of potential Soviet intervention in Iran spurred this US initiative. Because the shah retained significant support among merchants in Iran's bazaars, and within the ranks of the state's military forces, Mossadegh – though not a Communist – relied on the support of other population groups best mobilized by the *Tudeh*. In Roosevelt's account of his activities in Iran, he claims he briefed US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles on June 25, 1953 that the Soviet threat to Iran was "genuine, dangerous and imminent." Dulles, wrote Roosevelt, agreed that if the Russians could control Iran "they would control the Persian Gulf. That has been their dream, their chief ambition, ever since the days of Peter the Great."<sup>8</sup>

In accomplishing his mission of destabilizing, then removing, Prime Minister Mossadegh, Kermit Roosevelt was able to make use of a highly efficient HUMINT network put in place over the years by the AIOC. Many politicians were on the firm's payroll, and some tribal chiefs in Southwestern Iran received, directly from the company, portions of oil royalties due to the Treasury. In Roosevelt's estimation, *Operation Ajax* – as Western operatives dubbed their "countercoup" – succeeded because "if the people and the armed forces were shown that...Mossadegh was forcing them to choose...between their monarch and a revolutionary figure backed by the Soviet Union, they could, and would, make only one choice."<sup>9</sup> Roosevelt's operational efficacy was such that when his covert actions did bring about the shah's return to the throne, the royal leader pointed to the CIA officer and said: "I owe my throne to God, my people, my army – and to you!"<sup>10</sup>

Once it had helped reestablish the primacy of Iran's Peacock Throne, the US began developing plans to use the state's strategic proximity to conduct intelligence operations against the USSR.

US listening posts were constructed in northeastern Iran – facilities that would allow American operatives to electronically surveil Soviet military tests and intercept Soviet telecommunications.<sup>11</sup> Seven CIA signals intelligence stations were maintained in Iran until 1979.<sup>12</sup> Additional sites were likely operated under the auspices of the US National Security Agency.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to facilitating collection of TECHINT on Soviet activities, the US-Iran alliance provided American officials the means to establish escape routes for defectors fleeing the USSR. In reverse, such clandestine thoroughfares allowed intelligence operatives to penetrate the Soviet Union for reconnaissance purposes, or to conduct other covert operations. The partnership also facilitated joint efforts to counter Arab terrorists pursuing a destabilization agenda in the region – and benefited both nations through the sharing of intelligence estimates on states and groups of mutual concern.<sup>14</sup>

The US-Iran partnership was highly valued by officials in Washington. When William H. Sullivan prepared to assume the post of US ambassador to Tehran in June 1977, he queried then-President Jimmy Carter regarding reports that the Iranian government – particularly its intelligence arm – was routinely violating the human rights of Iranian citizens. Given the Carter Administration’s strongly heralded vow to fight such abuses, Sullivan asked the president whether the US should consider pulling back from its close association with Iranian intelligence operatives. “The president...answered promptly,” Sullivan recalled, “indicating that the intelligence we received, particularly from our listening stations focused on the Soviet Union, was of such importance that we should continue the collaboration between our two intelligence

agencies. He qualified this general endorsement only by indicating that he expected me to try to persuade the shah to improve the human-rights performance of his government in all aspects.<sup>15</sup>

The cordiality of relations between the two governments was mirrored in the two nations' business communities. Significant numbers of US citizens came to work in Iran – particularly for corporations seeking to tap, process, and export Iran's extraordinary petroleum reserves. These workers, combined with military force members assigned to TECHINT collection sites targeting the USSR, created a sizeable expatriate community. By the late 1970s, there were 45,000 Americans in Iran.<sup>16</sup>

There was *also* a growing, violent political challenge to the shah – an eventually successful Islamic revolution which surprised many in the US, not least the US intelligence community.

### **Failure to Anticipate**

On November 6, 1978 – as riots ripped the very seams of the shah's government – Navy Commander Gary Sick, a National Security Council staff member, assessed US intelligence gathering in Iran for President Carter's National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski. The effort, he wrote, was “an intelligence disaster of the first order... Our information has been extremely meager, our resources were not positioned to report accurately on the activities of the opposition forces, on external penetration, the strike demands, the political organization of the strikers or the basic objective and political orientation of the demonstrators.” Just five days later, President Carter jotted a now-famous handwritten note to the Secretary of State, the National Security Advisor and the Director of Central Intelligence – informing “Cy, Zbig, Stan” that he

was “dissatisfied with the quality of political intelligence” in Iran and directing them to rectify the situation.<sup>17</sup>

After-the-fact analysis from Capitol Hill tended to support Sick’s preliminary appraisal, and offered a political rationale for the inadequacy of intelligence products. Congressional staff members suggested that as US “policy in the Persian Gulf became more dependent on the Shah, risk of offending the Shah by speaking with the opposition became less acceptable.” They noted that “no CIA intelligence reporting based on sources within the religious opposition occurred during the two-year period ending in November 1977, and Embassy political reporting based on contacts with the opposition was rare and sometimes contemptuous.”<sup>18</sup> Specifically:

Until mid to late 1977 reporting on the Iranian political situation received very low priority compared to clandestine reporting on other targets in Iran, and open and clandestine reporting on certain policies of the Iranian government. More aggressive Department of State and CIA reporting occurred after mid-1977, reflecting urgings to the Embassy by intelligence analysts in Washington, as well as the increasing pace of events in Iran. Significant insights derived from contacts between the Embassy political section and opposition elements did not appear in the State Department’s Morning Summary until September 1978. CIA intelligence reporting on the Iranian internal situation was minimal before late 1977. No reports based on contacts with the religious opposition had appeared during the previous two years, and there was absolutely no reporting on the internal situation based on sources within the opposition during the first quarter of 1978.<sup>19</sup>

While some lauded the US Embassy staff’s diplomatic reporting of basic facts regarding demonstrations, work stoppages and the like,<sup>20</sup> others found such elementary reportage to be of little use to policy makers. Even at the height of anti-shah activity, they suggested, such reporting underestimated

the capabilities of the religious opposition, the breadth of popular opposition, and the extent to which even middle class Iranians and moderate opposition

leaders distrusted the Shah. Intelligence collection – political reporting by the U. S. Embassy in Tehran as well as clandestine collection – provided an inadequate base from which to gauge these capabilities and attitudes.<sup>21</sup>

Others in government added that Embassy staffers and intelligence officers offered virtually no “reporting on conversations or contacts with unconventional sources or outsiders, including visiting journalists or others who might have views contrary to the conventional wisdom.”<sup>22</sup>

Congressional investigators, in sum, termed intelligence field reporting from Iran “a narrow and cloudy window” through which to observe Iran’s sweeping social and political changes.<sup>23</sup> “What was missing – and is still weak” in their view, “was insight into the goals and expectations of opposition elements, and popular attitudes toward them.”<sup>24</sup>

Expert testimony before other legislative panels supported the idea that intelligence collection failings were self-induced. One committee reported former Deputy Director of Central Intelligence Ray S. Cline as having testified that “the problem was one of inadequate collection on groups opposed to the Shah because of internally imposed restrictions that had been placed on intelligence.”<sup>25</sup>

Assistant Secretary of State for Near East and South Asian Affairs Harold Saunders made a case that, while apparently too late to have been helpful in predicting the fall of the shah, “...when Ambassador Sullivan went there, he did gradually expand the range of contacts that the Foreign Service Officers in the Embassy had...” Testifying as Islamic revolutionaries were consolidating their power in Iran, prior to their seizure of US hostages, Saunders observed that “when the

Revolutionary Council was formed after (Ayatollah) Khomeini came to power, it turned out that we had a relationship with by far the majority of that council.”<sup>26</sup>

### **The Human Dimension**

In the years immediately following his return to the throne, the shah met with the CIA’s Tehran station chief for two hours every Saturday morning. But as the shah grew more confident, his relations with the US embassy staff began to change. He came to feel America needed *him* more than *he* needed US support. What US officials perceived as the shah’s spirit of “self-glorification” disturbed many, including Secretary of the Treasury William Simon, who, in testimony before the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee, characterized the shah as “nuts and a megalomaniac.”<sup>27</sup> The assumption that US and Iranian goals did not completely parallel led to the bizarre, but probably inevitable consequence that each began to spy on the other. The shah tried to recruit agents within the US embassy, and American officials undertook efforts to recruit agents in the palace. In a confession made before he was killed by Islamic revolutionaries in 1979, a former director of the Iranian intelligence service named an individual on the US embassy staff as having been one of his agency’s spies in the US camp.<sup>28</sup>

Throughout the 1950s, the US embassy and the CIA station in Tehran maintained regular contact with personalities who had been associated with Mohammed Mossadegh. Some old contacts provided the embassy with regular and valuable information and analyses on various developments within opposition groups.<sup>29</sup> At points when US-Iran relations cooled somewhat, CIA officers *did* make efforts to expand their pool of HUMINT resources. Such collection projects frequently provided valuable information for analysis, but occasionally elicited

unintended consequences. In 1959, the director of Iran's intelligence agency became aware that CIA officers were actively recruiting HUMINT sources. The intelligence chief, Lieutenant General Teymour Bakhtiar, believed the effort indicated the US had lost faith in the shah. In conversation with CIA Director Allen Dulles, Bakhtiar boldly nominated *himself* as a potential national ruler. Dulles promptly informed the shah of Bakhtiar's odd offer.<sup>30</sup> On learning of another, similar CIA project, Iranian intelligence officials countered by forcing some of the newly acquired US agents into playing a double role.<sup>31</sup> As time went on, though, such contacts lost importance in the US view. The embassy and the CIA began to rely less on information and analyses offered by their own tested sources, and more on that made available by Iran's newly-created intelligence service.<sup>32</sup>

### **The SAVAK**

Founded in 1956, the *Sazman-e Etela'at Va Amniyat-e Keshvar* – Iran's National Security and Information Organization – came to be known commonly by its Farsi acronym: SAVAK. The US had encouraged Iran to create such an agency, toward the end of confronting Soviet destabilization efforts – and, in its earliest formation, it placed great emphasis on conduct of counterintelligence operations.<sup>33</sup> “Recruits who were designated for this new service were given training in intelligence and counterintelligence methods in the United States” noted a US ambassador to Tehran, “and, later, in Israel. They were trained not only in fundamental police work but also in the analysis of Soviet techniques and, above all, in the detection of sophisticated Soviet electronic espionage.”<sup>34</sup> While the Iranian agency valued US training, its senior officers felt the CIA was not sufficiently forthcoming with even such rudimentary aid as textbooks.<sup>35</sup>

Further, the Iranians correctly perceived that “the CIA’s view of intelligence matters centered around its competition with the KGB and were framed in the context of the Cold War. What SAVAK trainees needed, and the Shah agreed, was a regional perspective to intelligence gathering and counterespionage...”<sup>36</sup> Intent on developing wider competencies within the SAVAK, the Iranians sought help from Israeli security services and from Britain’s MI6. Both, acting out of a variety of vested interests, were very receptive to Iran’s assistance requests.<sup>37</sup>

During the 1960s and 1970s, human rights campaigners would claim these training regimens included a darker side. SAVAK officers – as part of a campaign initially designed to fight campaigns of terror – began torturing certain prisoners. Activists alleged the Iranians had learned these practices from CIA officers, and from agents of Israel’s Mossad and Shin Bet.<sup>38</sup>

Estimates of SAVAK’s personnel strength varied widely over the years. Though precise determination is difficult – given that Iran never disclosed the agency’s budget – serious scholars at various points guessed the number of full-time operatives to be 6,000<sup>39</sup>, 20,000<sup>40</sup>, 30,000 and 60,000.<sup>41</sup> All agreed that, when including the network of informants contributing information solely for patriotic reasons – or in exchange for a stipend – the reach of Iran’s intelligence service was significantly multiplied.

The SAVAK operated with both police powers and the authority of an examining magistrate. In some cases, this allowed its operatives to make arrests without court warrant, and to detain uncharged suspects incommunicado for long periods of time.<sup>42</sup> While SAVAK employed these powers first to counter Soviet threats, then terrorist challenges, it was eventually assigned a

mandate to identify and intimidate political enemies of the shah.<sup>43</sup> The resulting repression hit hardest among professional sectors of Iran's urban population, who – because of the shah's modernization agenda – might have been expected to support the monarch. The ripple effect of such detentions: each victim had dozens of relatives who were turned against the regime.<sup>44</sup> Though its external reputation was of tough efficiency, one critic claims SAVAK was more accurately characterized as “clumsy...riddled with administrative and personal pettiness, frequently blinded by a bully-boy mentality. For fear of one individual escaping, they cast their net very wide,” he wrote. “Arguably, the large number of political prisoners in Iranian jails resulted from precisely this fear that it might not arrest the right person.”<sup>45</sup>

### **Intelligence Cooperation**

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, however, US attention focused not on events internal to Iran, but rather on the slow wrestling of US-USSR relations. America's growing reliance on SAVAK as its primary source of HUMINT within Iran was in part the result of growing confidence in the shah's regime. It also may have reflected American impatience with those in the anti-shah opposition who, while describing themselves as “nationalists” opposed to foreign intervention in Iran, insisted that Washington dictate the policies of the Iranian government as a means of achieving social and political reform.<sup>46</sup>

Intelligence collaboration reached the point during the 1970s where SAVAK agents were permitted to conduct operations in the US. They collected information on expatriate Iranians believed to be plotting the shah's overthrow. Beyond collection, though, SAVAK operatives also conducted covert actions against Iranian students involved in demonstrations against the

shah. The CIA assisted SAVAK in these efforts – even working to neutralize the US Federal Bureau of Investigation’s challenge to what it regarded as Iran’s violation of American sovereignty.<sup>47</sup> The oddity of the US-Iran intelligence relationship of the late 1970s was evidenced in a strange interplay involving human rights concerns. In early 1977, SAVAK, concerned about exiled extremist groups it suspected were creating links with foreign terrorist organizations, promised to provide US officials with greater information on political prisoners in Iran – in return for greater cooperation with Western intelligence services on activities of exiled Iranians.<sup>48</sup>

Certain political scientists have noted their belief that the repression attributed to SAVAK operations of the 1960s and 1970s were unintended consequences of the shah’s fight against destabilization agendas of the USSR and such internal groups as the *Mujahideen*. For all the notorious excesses of SAVAK, they point out, the shah did *not* permit the full force of the security organization to be brought to bear on his enemies. He consistently denied permission to those who suggested he dispatch operatives to eliminate Ayatollah Khomeini – even when the exiled spiritual leader was gaining strength in his challenge to the shah.<sup>49</sup> And, noted one commentator: “Compared with most of its neighbors, the shah’s Iran was freer than either the socialist military dictatorships or the conservative religious monarchies.”<sup>50</sup>

While the long-gestating seeds of revolution began to root in Iran, US intelligence officials continued to enjoy the geographic advantages Iran provided its Cold War surveillance efforts. And it relied increasingly on SAVAK for an understanding of domestic events in Iran. For a time, the situation seemed to work well. There was, noted two scholars, “very little that SAVAK

knew that the CIA did not also know; years of close relations had guaranteed that the Americans got very complete briefings from Iranian officials in such matters.” While admitting SAVAK might have had cause to withhold certain analyses relative to the gravity of opposition challenges, they surmised “it is unlikely that there was a great gulf between the shah’s information and that available to American officials.”<sup>51</sup> One long-time SAVAK official recalled an illustrating incident: when on one occasion *Mujahideen* fighters attacked an American citizen in Iran, his department quickly assembled an incident report and presented the information to the shah. The monarch chastised the SAVAK officers, saying “the next time something like this happens, you go to the Americans first, *then* bring it to me.”<sup>52</sup>

The ability of SAVAK to gather information for its own use – much less for sharing with CIA counterparts began to diminish in the late 1970s – partly as a result of the shah’s own actions to retain power. The monarch knew that a perception of SAVAK oppression was eroding portions of his educated, urban support base; he was only *too* aware, also, that international human rights organizations had long rallied against SAVAK. In June 1978, conceding to opposition demands, he dismissed the long time head of SAVAK, General Nematollah Nassiri. Nassiri had presided over the agency during its moments of greatest repression. The shah believed that installing a new director, General Nasser Moghadem, would slow the momentum of opposition movements.<sup>53</sup> During and after the shah’s action, certain members of his government began making statements designed to distance the shah from sordid aspects of SAVAK’s reputation. While perhaps deflecting certain criticisms away from the throne, a practical aspect of the political tack was increasing public ire – not just toward those individuals who may have abused investigative privilege, but regarding the whole of the organization. In such circumstances, SAVAK officers found, HUMINT sources began to “dry up.”<sup>54</sup>

Reliant on SAVAK's diminishing collection capabilities, and lacking an active HUMINT project of its own, US intelligence agencies were left with few means by which to credibly assess Iran's domestic situation. How did such a situation come to be? Two senior diplomats suggested that reforms designed to protect against intelligence community excesses had made it very difficult for CIA and Defense Intelligence Agency officials abroad to conduct covert intelligence-gathering operations.<sup>55</sup> The head of the CIA's National Foreign Assessment Center echoed this sentiment in testimony before a Senate committee. Prior to the Carter administration, he avowed, it had been common practice for the CIA to penetrate dissident groups in countries such as Iran. Such practice had been cut back, he claimed, because of the administration's sensitivity to secret operations of any sort. Additionally important in the decision, he affirmed, was US State Department opposition to such penetrations – shared by the shah – on the ground that contact between the American government and the opposition might encourage the shah's opponents and, if revealed to the public, weaken his image at home.<sup>56</sup>

Had SAVAK been able to maintain a strong domestic intelligence gathering apparatus, perhaps this would not have been problematic for US officials. Yet,

SAVAK failed in its mission to appraise the strength and nature of the opposition to the Shah, and thus failed to head off his fall. In its zeal to ferret out the "Communists" that the Shah thought were his enemies, SAVAK did not hear the bubbling discontent in the mosques. Worse from the U. S. government's point of view, SAVAK, relied upon to exchange intelligence with the CIA, couldn't warn the Americans any more than it could the Shah.<sup>57</sup>

Indeed, when Arthur Callahan, a former CIA station chief in Tehran, was sent by Zbigniew Brzezinski to meet with the Iranian ruler November 14, 1978, he observed that the Shah found

the disruptive political situation in Iran “baffling, incomprehensible and almost overwhelming.”<sup>58</sup>

One scholar of Iran’s Islamic revolution has suggested that CIA officers posted in the country “didn’t try very hard to uncover the truth themselves because SAVAK was spying on *them*.”<sup>59</sup> A former SAVAK officer, however, disputed the extent of such “friendly observation.” He recalled an exemplary anecdote: Approximately one year before the shah was overthrown, the SAVAK counterintelligence bureau came upon information that several CIA officers would soon be entering Iran under cover of employment with the International Telephone and Telegraph Company (ITT). Awareness of the agency’s use of ITT cover during US efforts to oust the democratically-elected president of Chile in 1973, counterespionage specialist Morteza Moussavi was suspicious of the CIA group’s intent. He requested permission to surveil the individuals after their arrival. The report went to the director of SAVAK, then to the shah. Some ten days later, Moussavi’s proposal was returned to him without written comment. “Why are you writing this?,” a senior SAVAK official asked. On personal direction of the shah, Moussavi was told, the organization would not interfere with the CIA team’s covert activities.<sup>60</sup>

So, as a current of unrest and dissatisfaction grew stronger in Iran, US officials were not in contact with the mullahs, the communists and – from 1965 onwards – the urban guerillas posing serious threat to the shah. And though in receipt of varying levels of intelligence provided by SAVAK, such information was not free of the Iranian regime’s subjective viewpoint.<sup>61</sup> Because it had lost most of its sources within formal opposition groups, the CIA station in Tehran was rarely in a position to verify analyses offered by SAVAK and other governmental organs. US

representatives were not completely out of touch with those who could provide evidence of diminishing support for the shah. Certain dissidents had taken the initiative of contacting the embassy and the CIA as early as the summer of 1976. And the head of the Israeli mission in Tehran, David Turgman, had also begun to introduce some opponents of the shah to US diplomats in 1977. Such contacts, however, remained sporadic and essentially aimless.<sup>62</sup>

Similarly untapped for the purpose of gathering HUMINT was the sizeable US presence in Iran – and the degree to which these Americans avoided “cantonment” by mingling with Iranian citizens<sup>63</sup> – would seem to have presented the US with a ready-made, if rudimentary, HUMINT network.

While US HUMINT operations seemed to languish in Iran, the intelligence community *was* able to use the collection means to some effect in gathering information on the man who eventually became the shah’s chief rival. Prior to his return from exile, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini lived for a time in Paris. CIA officers conducted surveillance on the religious leader from a rented a villa near Khomeini’s home. Some American Embassy political officers met occasionally with one of the Ayatollah’s advisors. Other US foreign service officers worked late into the night during this period, translating for their counterparts in Tehran the dozens of speeches and interviews given by Khomeini and his entourage each day.<sup>64</sup> Summed one senior US official: “...I think our intelligence was pretty good. We knew what the Ayatollah was doing. They knew he was [security deletion] that were extensively printed. We knew there was a very well organized opposition on the part of the religious figures.”<sup>65</sup> French intelligence operatives, were of course, best positioned to conduct the full range of intelligence collection on Khomeini during

this time. They compiled significant dossiers on Khomeini and his associates,<sup>66</sup> sharing certain elements of the information with US counterparts.

### **Failure to Understand**

Success in collecting and analyzing *any* sort of intelligence – but particularly HUMINT – is based in a comprehensive understanding of peoples and regions. Even if the US had aspired to conduct more aggressive HUMINT operations in Iran, it might not have – in the near term – been able to field the necessary resources. In testimony before the US Congress, one senior government official bemoaned “the shortage throughout the community of people who are experts on a society and country such as Iran.”<sup>67</sup> Exemplary of this deficiency: during the course of the Islamic revolution, the US State Department had no “Iran analyst” in its Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR).<sup>68</sup>

Several factors created this circumstance. Some impediments arose from the culture of the US intelligence community. Congressional investigators suggested that US intelligence officers of the period were not attracted to study of social groups and trends. Such inquiries, they opined, were

considered overly academic by field personnel, since it is usually not fast-changing, and its relationship to policy issues and users’ requirements is not readily apparent. Another is that collection on these intangible subjects is difficult and unrewarding to any but an ‘Iranophile,’ and in too many cases field personnel lack the background, language fluency, or inclination to pursue them effectively.<sup>69</sup>

The agenda pursued within the US Intelligence Community at the time of Iran’s Islamic revolution also played a role. Admiral Stansfield Turner, US Director of Central Intelligence from 1977-1981 has affirmed the importance of paying attention to such “second tier” states as

Iran. “For each of these,” he prescribed, “the CIA should have a group of analysts, ranging from new to seasoned, who have lived in the country, speak the language, and possess solid academic expertise. People of similar backgrounds are also needed for regional groupings of other third world countries.”<sup>70</sup> His support of such sophisticated *analysis*, however, did not seem to inform his actions related to intelligence *collection*. Within two years of assuming his position as DCI, Admiral Turner had authorized the transfer of many CIA station chiefs possessing extensive understandings of language, history and culture in the countries to which they were posted. Replacements assigned during this timeframe often lacked even basic competencies in the language of the area in which they were to serve.<sup>71</sup>

In the course of his tenure as DCI, Turner eliminated 820 positions in the CIA’s Directorate of Operations (DO) – the portion of the agency whose mission includes conduct of HUMINT initiatives.<sup>72</sup> Critics noted that Turner’s management programs downplayed HUMINT collection, placed increased emphasis on TECHINT methodologies, and encouraged greater incorporation of open-source materials in analytical products. “Uncovering intentions is the strong point of human espionage,” agreed Turner,

but it is an exaggeration to say that only espionage can do that. Reading another country’s messages through electronic intercepts or listening to its leaders talk to each other through a concealed microphone can reveal intentions, often with greater accuracy than an agent’s reporting... (With regard to HUMINT) two key limitations are frequently overlooked. One is the difficulty in placing an agent in just the right place at just the right time. The other is the question of whether there are *any* reliable sources who can divulge a country’s intentions.<sup>73</sup>

The Director of Central Intelligence admitted to spending much more time on TECHINT issues, though claimed – using arguably disingenuous reasoning – this was because “human intelligence does not need the same detailed supervision as technical. In fact, the smaller amount of

supervision is a demonstration of confidence in human espionage and the way it is run.”<sup>74</sup> Criticizing what he deemed the intelligence community’s preoccupation with clandestinity, Turner alleged: “Just plain scholarly research on Iran from about 1970 onward should have forecast the problems the Shah would encounter, if not their exact timing. But secret reports with their aura of mystery, often tend to crowd out just that kind of scholarly, unclassified work as well as respect for the scholars, businessmen, and others who do it.”<sup>75</sup>

For the most part, the CIA analysts who dealt with Iranian material during this period were not Persian specialists, but rather Arabists. Those few analysts with regional expertise were deluged with assignments when policy makers belatedly grew concerned with events in the region. In the resulting confusion, certain potentially valuable sources were ignored. To wit: on only one occasion was Richard Helms, former DCI and former Ambassador to Tehran, asked for his assessment and recommendation. The conversation took place at the White House and lasted just over an hour. Kermit Roosevelt also received summary treatment during this period.<sup>76</sup>

A short sighted Iran policy, deference toward the shah and a lack of political imagination impacted the sort of information US operatives were asked to collect. Policymakers did not ask the Intelligence Community to estimate whether the shah’s autocracy would survive indefinitely; policy was *premised* on that assumption.<sup>77</sup> And US officials could not fathom the potential that a modern people might allow a religious philosopher-king – the *velayat-e faqih* proposed by Khomeini – to lead their nation.<sup>78</sup> Failing to consider alternative policies hampered the search for deeper understanding of Iran’s internal situation, and the receptiveness of intelligence users to such analysis.

## The Last Days

Six months before the shah's removal, a senior CIA analyst made a plea for greater collection on "less tangible influences" of the sort almost by definition requiring HUMINT methodologies.

What the US needed to know, he avowed, was

whether Iranians were loyal to the concept of a monarchy as distinguished from a particular dynasty, to what extent the Tehran urban masses provided an exploitable tool to support or oppose a new government, etc. He complained that "we knew much more about the views [of key Iranians toward the monarch] 15 or 20 years ago when many of these Iranians discussed with American officials...[concerning] even doubts about the viability of the monarchy."<sup>79</sup>

During this "eleventh hour" of Iran's monarchy – after long months of violent anti-shah protests – the CIA attempted to do in weeks what it had neglected to do for decades. The agency's mobilization effort poured dozens of officers into Iran. By August 1978, one author notes,

the CIA presence in Iran overflowed the embassy compound into subsidiary buildings, supposedly devoted to such purposes as aid, communications and so forth. Many CIA officers had been brought into the country in various cover positions, as diplomats, advisers and businessmen. As the crisis deepened, they began to spend less time on cover occupations and more on their real tasks.<sup>80</sup>

Among these tasks: development of a credible HUMINT project. The daunting challenge was undertaken in whirlwind fashion just prior to – and for a period *after* – the Islamic revolution. US intelligence officers found that many "tested" sources had fled the country. Other agents had lost their positions and contacts. George Cave, who had worked at the CIA station in Tehran until the revolution, was sent back in April 1979 – tasked with attempting to recruit new informers and contacts. He established close personal relations with several senior ministers of the revolutionary government, and approved recruitment of several officers formerly associated with SAVAK and the Army's G-2 directorate. Not all the CIA's emissaries were as successful

as Cave. Another CIA officer fruitlessly attempted to recruit Abol-Hassan Bani-Sadr, offering the future Iranian president one thousand dollars a month for “economic consulting” services.<sup>81</sup>

The flurry of HUMINT activity was viewed by congressional investigators as too little, too late.

They observed that

Whereas one or two more clandestine penetrations of student, religious, and other opposition elements could have provided samplings of attitudes and plans, their value would have been limited. Reliable assessments of the volatility of the situation, the degree of polarization, and relationships among groups and between individuals would have required broad contact with the Iranian people.<sup>82</sup>

Finally, even as some US intelligence officers tried to “make up for lost time,” many senior leaders held on to old dogmas. When reports contradicted these individual’s predisposed beliefs, the tendency was to explain them away as “exaggerations” and “distortions.”<sup>83</sup>

### **Who Else Knew What?**

During the middle months of 1978, few, if any, Americans believed the shah of Iran to be in danger of ouster. Neither US nor Iranian intelligence agencies appreciated the strength of the shah’s enemies, or sensed any weakness of the shah’s resolve.<sup>84</sup> Though DCI Turner swore he “knew of no other intelligence service that predicted trouble in Iran” and that “even Ayatollah Khomeini didn’t realize how well his force was moving along,”<sup>85</sup> representatives of France and Israel *had* expressed concern about the shah’s prospects. Their concerns, made known in the spring of that year may or may not have resulted from HUMINT efforts. In the case of the head of the Israeli mission in Tehran, it may have been a case of “pattern recognition”: Uri Lubrani had served as Israel’s ambassador to Ethiopia in the last days of the Haile Selassie regime.<sup>86</sup> The French intelligence representative in Tehran filed a report predicting the shah would not be on

the throne by the spring of 1979.<sup>87</sup> This prophecy may have been influenced by understandings related to the shah's health.

French doctors who examined the shah in early 1978 told him that he was fatally ill with cancer and that problems involving irrigation of the brain could slow his reactions and decision-making ability. This prognosis, which never became known to the United States government, made him listless and fatalistic, contributing to his personal collapse in the face of the revolution...<sup>88</sup>

It is not apparent whether access to the shah's French physicians contributed to the operative's prescience.

### **What if...?**

Counterfactual speculation is important in analyzing the degree to which lack of a credible HUMINT program led to the warning failure alleged by legislative critics and others. What, for instance, is the correlation between intelligence *not* collected or analyzed – and that required to best serve US interests? One must imagine benefits potentially obtained through development of more – and better “handled” – intelligence sources and agents of influence. Additionally, what might have happened had US intelligence operatives taken greater pains to routinely debrief the many US citizens who lived and worked throughout Iran? Such endeavors would likely have improved the quality of understanding afforded US policymakers. It is well within the realm of possibility that efficiently coordinated HUMINT agents could have sensed and reported the degree to which merchants in Iran's bazaars had grown to resent certain aspects of the shah's modernization programs. The shah's modern banking system supplanted Bazaar income from money lending at rates much higher than permitted by the banks and his plans for creation of cooperatives also menaced their traditional activities.<sup>89</sup> Such resentments are rarely borne in complete quiet, and could almost certainly be sensed and reported by a well-placed agent.

An agent very highly placed – admittedly the sort usually developed after many years of patience – might have been able to inform US officials as to the state of the shah’s health. The likelihood of recruiting such an agent is certainly questionable. However, one can imagine the analytical value policymakers would accrue from understanding the psychological effects of such a disease, along with prescribed treatments. Speculates one political scientist: it is a

virtual certainty that the worsening of (the shah’s) physical condition heightened his sense of insecurity, magnified his suspicions of hostile forces around him, and drove him deeper into withdrawal. At the same time, it must have concentrated his concern that the dynasty should remain after his death, and the parallel wish that his own image in Iranian history should be as glowing as possible.<sup>90</sup>

The shah’s condition and treatment may also have formed a certain paranoid outlook regarding the causes of activities designed to challenge his rule. Ambassador William Sullivan recounts a 1978 meeting with the Shah in which the leader expressed concern regarding what he saw as “the role of the CIA” in his nation’s slide toward destabilization.

Why was the CIA suddenly turning against him? What had he done to deserve this sort of action from the United States?...or had we and the Soviets reached some grand design in which we had decided to divide up Iran between ourselves as part of an overall division of power throughout the entire world?<sup>91</sup>

Then-senior State Department official Warren Christopher testified before Congress that the situation in late 1970s Iran was one in which HUMINT sources and methods could have provided policymakers with extremely relevant understandings. “When you have a situation,” he testified before Congress, “in which you have both the personal capacity and the health deteriorating, and a revolutionary situation developing in a country, I think it is a challenge to political reporting and intelligence which we ought to try to heighten for the future.”<sup>92</sup>

## Conclusion

In August 1977, a 60-page CIA study predicted “the shah will be an active participant in Iranian life well into the 1980,” and that “there will be no radical change in Iranian political behavior in the near future.” One year later, another of the agency’s analytical papers promised that “Iran is not in a revolutionary or even a ‘prerevolutionary’ situation.”<sup>93</sup> The conduct of a robust, clandestine HUMINT project would almost certainly have precluded presentation of such strong, misplaced affirmations.

A variety of influences, however, mitigated against implementation of widespread contact with Iranians from across spectrums of class and culture. US policy, for instance, seemed to prevent direct contact with opposition elements. It is not completely clear to what degree such contact was directly discouraged by the shah. An element of the prohibition may have been self-imposed by US officials fearful that the monarch might deny US access to its TECHINT collection sites or restrict other forms of intelligence cooperation.<sup>94</sup>

Another obstruction to HUMINT collection: America’s close public association with the monarch limited the likelihood US officials would be approached by – or even come in contact with – members of any opposition faction.<sup>95</sup>

Absolute predictability is clearly beyond the achievement capacity of most intelligence endeavors. Still, a nation cannot hope to achieve understanding of what it does not examine. During the late 1970s, the US – focusing with a singular intensity on its Cold War competition with the USSR – chose *not to examine* the broad political circumstances internal to Iran. It

determined that HUMINT operations – exposed – would impose too great a risk: potential alienation of Iran’s royal ruler. The maintenance of anti-Soviet intelligence operations from bases in Iran was deemed more important than understanding the nature of Iran’s domestic situation. Such abrogation of intelligence collection left US policy makers open to surprise as to the political *intentions* of the shah’s opponents – designs of the sort more distinctly comprehended through well-run HUMINT projects than by any other means.

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- <sup>31</sup> Taheri, p. 49-50.
- <sup>32</sup> Taheri, p. 49.
- <sup>33</sup> From the author's interview with a former Iranian Army general in Washington, D. C. on November 9, 1998. Though retaining his active military commission throughout, the general served for more than 15 years in SAVAK's internal security directorate. His operational activities during these years included surveillance of Iranian citizens in the US – with the cooperation of the CIA – and in other nations. The general – who asked that his name not be included in this paper, and will hereafter be cited as “General X” – noted that shortly before SAVAK's creation, Iran had established an Army “G-2” section designed to root out perceived *Tudeh* infiltration within military ranks.
- <sup>34</sup> Sullivan, p. 96.

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- <sup>35</sup> From the author's interview with Morteza Moussavi in Washington, D. C. on November 9, 1998. Mr. Moussavi worked for many years as chief of the USSR desk within SAVAK's counterintelligence bureau. Other assignments included conducting counterintelligence operations along Iran's northern border with the Soviet Union, and – under diplomatic cover – gathering positive intelligence in a variety of Persian Gulf states. Just prior to the 1979 revolution, he headed counterintelligence operations targeting the community of all non-embassy-related foreign nationals in Iran.
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