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**Soviet and American Intelligence Assessments of the Political Situation
in Iran at the Time of the Iranian Revolution**

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INTRODUCTION

If one can say that intelligence-gathering is a science, intelligence assessment would surely be an art. The transition of political intelligence from the raw data collected by the intelligence officer to the establishment of a policy involves certainly a lot of individuals but also a lot of subjectivity. The assessment of the political situation in Iran during the two-year period preceding the Iranian Revolution is a formidable example of how complex such an assessment can be.

The United States and the USSR were greatly involved in the Middle East and Iran was of strategic importance for both countries. This research is aimed at presenting their respective assessment of the political situation in Iran and then to identify what was similar and what was different in these assessments.

1. AMERICAN ASSESSMENT

In January 1977, Jimmy Carter arrived in the White House as the thirty-ninth President of the country. At that time, Iran was not a problem, and was not expected to be a problem. Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, whom the United States had put back on his throne in 1953, seemed firmly in control and 'the policy differences between Iran and the United States were regarded as relatively minor and manageable'¹. The United States was to go on with its policy of supporting the Shah, a policy formulated by the National Security Council that one could easily qualify as a 'blank check of support to the Shah.'²

¹ Gary Sick, *All Fall Down: America's Fateful Encounter With Iran*, London, I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 1985, p. viii.

² Abul Kasim Mansur, 'The Crisis in Iran: Why the US Ignored A Quarter Century of Warning', *Armed Forces Journal International*, January 1979, p. 29.

For the new Carter Administration, the situation in Iran seemed to be continuity with the past where in fact, as history was to teach us, Iran was already in transformation. However, the warnings did not make it to the White House and somewhere along the line between Teheran and Washington the information either vanished or was filtered. Although – as the President would later state – ‘it is impossible for anyone to anticipate all future political events’³, the information should have reached the Administration and should have been taken into serious consideration in the establishment of American foreign policy for Iran. Moreover at that time Carter was bound – one could say ‘imprisoned’ – by his pledge to base American foreign policy on the protection of human rights.

Basically, the US intelligence assessment of the political situation in Iran before 1979 was flawed. Not because the intelligence organizations did not pick up the signals of the revolution before that date but because these signals have been ignored or underestimated by the American policy-makers. They believed that the situation in Iran was under control, that because the main opponents to the Shah were abroad there was no immediate threat to their Iranian ally, and that the economic development was a guarantee for political stability. To make us understand how the United States wrongly assessed the situation, we will look at what characterized its assessment of the political situation in Iran.

Firstly, Iran was of strategic importance for the United States – and for the entire Western world, said President Carter⁴ – because of its geographic proximity with the USSR. ‘Sharing a 1,600-mile border with the Soviet Union, Iran has long stood as a shield against the spread of communist influence into the Persian Gulf region.’⁵ The maintenance of a balance of power in

³ Yonah Alexander and Allan Nanes (eds.), *The United States and Iran: A Documentary History*, Frederick, University Publications of America, 1980, p. 476.

⁴ *Id.*, p. 460.

⁵ James A. Bill, ‘Iran and the Crisis of ‘78’, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 57, no. 2, 1978-79, p. 336.

that strategic area of the world was of crucial importance in the context of the Cold War⁶. Washington therefore 'bought' the friendship of the Shah first with a successful coup to put him back on the throne in 1953 and, after, with a copious flow of economic and military aid.

Secondly, the interest of the United States in Iran's oil production has always been obvious and has played an important role in the relations between the two countries. But probably more important was the strategic situation of Iran in the Persian Gulf, since 'it sits beside the principal artery for most of the world's trade in oil'⁷. By adopting a friendly and cooperating relationship with the Shah, the United States could, as a result, count on a regime disinclined to challenge Western oil interests.⁸ Also, the rapid economic development that the American industry, mainly the oil and military sectors, promoted and benefited from brought the Administration to turn a blind eye on the political situation in order to maintain as much as possible of their economic interests in Iran.

Thirdly, the quality of the intelligence assessment of the political situation in Iran has been greatly undermined by a simple yet very important factor, namely the US fear of getting bad news about Iran. All authors seem to agree on the fact that the strong US interest in making the Shah its friend and maintaining the best relations with him led intelligence analysts to filter the information gathered to fit the US Administration hopes and preconceptions⁹. Basically, as sad as it is to say, the Americans 'were unprepared for the collapse of the

⁶ Read the President Carter's speeches in Yonah Alexander and Allan Nanes (eds.), *supra* note 3, p. 460 and p. 479. See also Adda B. Bozeman, 'Iran: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Tradition of Persian Statecraft', *Orbis*, vol. 23, Summer 1979, p. 400.

⁷ Yonah Alexander and Allan Nanes (eds.), *supra* note 3, p. 479. See also Adda B. Bozeman, *supra* note 6, p. 400.

⁸ Andrew Cockburn and Leslie Cockburn, *Dangerous Liaison: The Inside Story of the U.S.-Israeli Covert Relationship*, London, The Bodley Head, 1992, p. 103.

⁹ *Id.*, p. 316; see also James A. Bill, *supra* note 5, p. 339; Shahram Chubin, 'Repercussions of the Crisis in Iran', *Survival*, vol. 21, no. 3, May-June 1979, p. 101; Abul Kasim Mansur, *supra* note 2, p. 31; Harold P. Ford, *Estimative Intelligence: The Purposes and Problems of National Intelligence Estimating*, Lanham, University Press of America, 1993, p. 282.

Pahlavi Regime because [they] did not want to know the truth.’¹⁰ For example, ‘[n]o one really wished to report on the constant problems in the supply and performance of the Iranian troops sent to help suppress the PFLO [Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman] rebellion in the Dhofar province of Oman.’¹¹ And at the other end of the intelligence assessment process, ‘[n]o one at the highest level of the Carter Administration wanted to hear ‘bad thoughts’. As a result, the Carter bureaucracy continued to act as a filter that reported what the Administration wanted to hear.’¹² Clearly, the relation between the Shah and the United States, based on American national interests, had blinded the Americans to any bad news about their protégé. Ambassadors, analysts and intelligence officers were more concerned about confirming Washington’s stereotypes than about reporting the disturbing but realistic truth about the situation in Iran. In fact, ‘the Department denied itself information which might have enabled the United States to be better prepared for [the 1978-79] Iranian developments.’¹³

Fourthly, in order not to offend the Shah, the United States had to be very careful in its relations with other Iranians than the Shah himself. ‘As U.S. policy in the Persian Gulf became more dependent in the Shah, risk of offending the Shah by speaking with the opposition became less acceptable. No CIA intelligence reporting based on sources within the religious opposition occurred during a two-year period ending in November 1977, and Embassy political reporting based on contacts with the opposition was rare and sometimes contemptuous.’¹⁴ Although there were some contacts between US representatives in Iran and citizens or leaders of religious opposition, they were too rare and not given enough importance. By trying not to offend the Shah and not wanting to hear any bad news about

¹⁰ Stanley T. Escudero, ‘What Went Wrong in Iran?’, in a confidential memorandum from the United States of America Department of State, p. 32.

¹¹ Abul Kasim Mansur, *supra* note 2, p. 30.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Stanley T. Escudero, *supra* note 10, p. 32.

¹⁴ Harold P. Ford, *supra* note 9, p. 282.

Iran, the United States blinded itself by ignoring those who were going to play a major role in the Revolution, namely the Iranian middle class and the religious opposition. Because one state cannot completely understand the situation of an ally state without understanding the motives of that ally's opponents as well as the grievances of that ally's middle class, the view of the United States toward Iran was flawed from the beginning. The United States simply ignored an entire although crucial group of people, the dissidents, and an entire aspect of the global picture, the very special and specific Iranian society¹⁵. Americans even ignored warnings from the deputy of the most important leader of the religious opposition, namely Ruhollah Khomeini. 'While Ayatollah Khomeini prepared in Paris to take over Iran, his deputy, Sadegh Ghotbzadeh, twice attempted to establish private communications with the CIA. Twice the CIA witlessly ignored the pleas from this future Iranian Foreign Minister, who with Western help might have spared Iran the tragedy that has befallen it. When the CIA finally did recognize the desperate American need for intelligence about Iran, it found that its foremost authority on the country, an officer capable of comprehending every nuance of Iranian life, was gone.'¹⁶

Fifthly, demonstrations and uprisings did take place in the two years preceding the fall of the Shah and these 'turbulences' were warnings that the United States greatly underestimated¹⁷. It failed to appreciate the gravity of the situation as events unfolded in 1978 and at that time, 'Washington's assessments were behind those of virtually every other government and independent observer'.¹⁸ And a consequence of such a misinterpretation could be seen as the United States decided – in the name of 'national security' – to proceed with a substantial arms

¹⁵ Adda B. Bozeman, *supra* note 6, p. 387.

¹⁶ John Barron, *KGB Today: The Hidden Hand*, Sevenoaks, Hodder & Soughton Ltd., 1983, p. 424.

¹⁷ Although the United States was aware of the continuing violence and the strikes in Iran and qualifying them as a 'serious problem for the government': see the statement by Secretary of State Cyrus Vance on 3 November 1978 in Yonah Alexander and Allan Nanes (eds.), *supra* note 3, p. 461.

¹⁸ Shahram Chubin, *supra* note 9, p. 101.

sale to the Shah. That clearly showed that the United States miscalculated the importance of the troubles in Iran, troubles that such an arms sale could only aggravate and whose meaning was not accurately assessed by U.S. intelligence agencies.¹⁹ This failure is closely linked to other factors presented here, since intelligence analysts, by observing the demonstrations complacently, 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.’²⁰ The Americans would have needed a more global interpretation of the situation, a broader view but, most important, a more open mind.

Sixthly, an open mind is essential to be able to examine the multiple dimensions of a situation. President Carter even acknowledged – one could say somehow too late – that the Revolution was ‘a product of deep social, political, religious, and economic factors growing out of the history of Iran itself.’²¹ But at the same time, Henry Kissinger admitted that the United States ‘paid insufficient attention in Iran to the proposition that political construction should go side by side with economic construction. The failure was less of intelligence agencies than of conceptual apparatus. The fashionable ‘progressive’ view for decades had been that economic development would more or less automatically produce political stability, that a rising standard of living would reduce discontent.’²² Understanding the Iranian society as a whole was a vital key to an accurate intelligence assessment of the political situation in Iran²³. One crucial element of such understanding is the fact that in Iran, ‘religion cannot be separated either from law or government. [...] ‘Islam is at once religion and state, spirit and

¹⁹ Yonah Alexander and Allan Nanes (eds.), *supra* note 3, p. 435.

²⁰ Harold P. Ford, *supra* note 9, p. 282.

²¹ Yonah Alexander and Allan Nanes (eds.), *supra* note 3, p. 479.

²² Henry Kissinger, *For the Record: Selected Statements, 1977-1980*, Boston, Little Brown, 1981, p. 176. See also p. 179 and 180.

²³ Adda B. Bozeman, *supra* note 6, p. 402.

work, Holy Book and sword.’²⁴ Moreover, ‘the [Iranian] Constitution explicitly invests religious leaders with the authority to declare legislation null and void if they find it to conflict with the principles of Islam.’²⁵ These facts clearly did not receive enough attention by the American analysts of the 1970s. The reason for that is probably a mix of ignorance and of ‘voluntary blindness’. The United States also greatly underestimated the influence of Iranian nationalism on the political situation in the late 1970s. The analysis of the situation at a micro- rather than at a macro-level prevented the Americans from adequately assess the breadth and depth of Iranian nationalism.²⁶

Seventhly, ‘America knows astonishingly little about Iran.’²⁷ Part of that ignorance could be said to be a consequence of the very complex culture patterns but there is also a part of voluntary ignorance, motivated by some of the factors mentioned above and also by the somehow closed mind of the American policy-makers and analysts. It would be simplistic to conclude that the United States egocentrism is omnipresent and could affect such an important task as the intelligence assessment of a country but it would not be totally false to come to that conclusion²⁸. An accurate assessment of Iran would have implied at least some understanding of 2,500 years of history and such an understanding would have required the Americans to be more open minded.

Overall, US assessment of the political situation in Iran at the time of the Revolution was characterized by lethal flaws which made the Americans react too late. The overthrow of the Shah was, for the Americans, a serious failure but their management of the crisis afterward

²⁴ *Id.*, p. 389.

²⁵ *Id.*, p. 391.

²⁶ Lawrence L. Whetten, ‘The Lessons of Iran’, *The World Today*, October 1979, p. 393. See also Abul Kasim Mansur, *supra* note 2, p. 26.

²⁷ James A. Bill, *supra* note 5, p. 323.

²⁸ See Stanley T. Escudero, *supra* note 10, p. 33 and Adda B. Bozeman, *supra* note 6, p. 387-388.

can be seen as a success, mainly because Iran did not fall into Soviet hands following the 1979 Revolution.

2. SOVIET ASSESSMENT

Less has been written in the English language literature about the Soviet intelligence assessment of the situation in Iran at the time of the Revolution. But that literature tells us that the Soviet Union's approach to Iran was aimed at consolidating the political and economic ties between the two countries, establishing correct, if not cordial, relations with the Shah.²⁹ Iran's oil reserves and access to the Persian Gulf were certainly reasons for that approach.³⁰

But the Soviet intelligence assessment of the situation in Iran was not flawless and it appears today that the USSR overestimated the stability of the political situation in Iran³¹. There was also a problem of human resource on the field, since the SAVAK was undermining the KGB's recruitment and cultivation activities in Iran. That led to a lack of accurate and relevant intelligence about Iran in a crucial time and therefore caused the Soviets to be caught by surprise in 1979.³² But one could conclude that in the early 1970s, the Soviets were making valuable efforts to get a better understanding of the situation in Iran, such as appointing KGB officers in Iran who were, almost without exception, fluent speakers of Farsi.³³

²⁹ Kail Ellis, 'Superpower Relations with Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan', in Hafeez Malik (ed.), *Soviet-American Relations with Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan*, London, Macmillan, 1987, p. 408 and Shahram Chubin, *supra* note 9, p. 103.

³⁰ George C. McGhee, 'The Strategic Importance of Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan to the United States', in Hafeez Malik (ed.), *Soviet-American Relations with Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan*, London, Macmillan, 1987, p. 31.

³¹ As shown in the somehow funny story of Vladimir Kuzichkin's briefing on the political problems in Iran by the KGB: Vladimir Kuzichkin, *Inside the KGB: Myth and Reality*, London, André Deutsch, 1990, p. 115.

³² Sharam M. Taromsari, 'Inside the KGB: Myth and Reality [Book Review]', *Intelligence and National Security*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1993, p. 253.

³³ Harry Rositzke, *The KGB: The Eyes of Russia*, London, Sidgwick & Jackson, 1981, p. 230.

Overall, the Soviet assessment of the Iranian political situation concluded that Iran was ‘an ‘anomaly’ – fundamentally weak but strong in some components of power, inherently fragile yet nevertheless run by the most long-lived régime in the Middle East – which did not fit any formula or pattern.’³⁴ That made the USSR act somehow ambivalently towards Iran and despite its usually powerful imperialistic foreign policy the USSR was ‘curiously impotent with respect to influencing the Iranian scene.’³⁵

First of all, concerns about security have always been at the top of Soviet political agenda. In the view of the USSR, ‘[s]ecurity comes first, and to it must be sacrificed all other ambitions.’³⁶ In fact, ‘[t]he Soviet Union’s interest in her neighbours [was] rooted in her desire for stable borders as a means of enhancing her own security.’³⁷ And in the context of the Cold War, Soviet security rhymed with anti-Western policies. Therefore, in its relations with Iran, the USSR was always suspecting American pressure to increase the pro-Western Iranian government.³⁸ The Soviets wanted to see the American influence on their close neighbour to decrease and therefore, their interests coincided with the aims of the Mujahidin and Fedayin underground organizations, actively fighting for the overthrow of the Shah’s regime. ‘Their slogans were anti-imperialistic, anti-American, and anti-Israeli, their main objectives to overthrow the Shah’s regime and remove Iran from the influence of the United States.’³⁹ But the USSR perceived the Iranian political situation as being so stable and its support from the United States so strong that it did not believe that the Mujahidin and Fedayin organizations could ever mount a serious threat against the regime.⁴⁰ So the USSR tried its

³⁴ Shahram Chubin, ‘Soviet Policy Towards Iran and the Gulf’, *Adelphi Papers*, no. 157, 1980, p. 33.

³⁵ James A. Bill, *supra* note 5, p. 334.

³⁶ Morris McCain, ‘Thinking South: Soviet Strategic Interests in Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan’, in Hafeez Malik (ed.), *Soviet-American Relations with Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan*, London, Macmillan, 1987, p. 40.

³⁷ Shahram Chubin, *supra* note 34, p. 10.

³⁸ Shireen T. Hunter, ‘The Soviet Union and the Islamic Republic of Iran’, in Hafeez Malik (ed.), *Soviet-American Relations with Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan*, London, Macmillan, 1987, p. 253.

³⁹ Vladimir Kuzichkin, *supra* note 31, p. 203.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

best to have Iran maintain its policy of balance between the United States and the USSR.⁴¹ But when the Revolution – and the fall of the Shah – became inevitable, it was mainly seen as a direct set-back for his Western allies and therefore a gain for the Soviet Union.⁴² Also, among the security concerns of the Soviet Union in respect with Iran was the one related to the American sales of arms to Iran. The strategic geographic situation of Iran and the fact that the weaponry was of a technology virtually unknown to the Iranians – but clearly not to the American soldiers – made the USSR feel the threat of an eventual American aggression launched from Iran.⁴³

Secondly, as stated earlier, the USSR had common anti-Western interests with the Mujahidin and Fedayin. Given the situation at that time, one could argue that the best course of action for the USSR would have been to support these groups in order to fight indirectly the American influence in Iran. But that would be without considering Iran's sensitivity to other nations' contacts with opposition groups. A clear example of such sensitivity happened when, in February 1976, a meeting between Cuba's leader Fidel Castro and the tiny opposition party that was the Tudeh People's Party of Iran led to complete break off of diplomatic relations between Cuba and Iran.⁴⁴ It was clear that the USSR could not afford such a break off. The risk was too great to see the United States take advantage of the disappearance of the USSR from the chessboard in Iran.

The fragile balance of power in that area required the presence of both superpowers and the break off of diplomatic relations between Iran and the USSR would have undermined that equilibrium and posed a serious threat to Soviet national security. 'The strictest instruction

⁴¹ *Id.*, p. 205.

⁴² Shahram Chubin, *supra* note 9, p. 103.

⁴³ See Vladimir Kuzichkin, *supra* note 31, p. 205 and Shahram Chubin, *supra* note 34, p. 12.

⁴⁴ Vladimir Kuzichkin, *supra* note 31, p. 203 and 204.

from the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party was therefore issued to all Soviet missions abroad, that there should be no contacts of any kind with members of these organizations. This instruction was observed by everybody, including the KGB.⁴⁵

3. SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

Defining the American then the Soviet assessments of the political situation in Iran was an initial step essential to comparing and contrasting them. We can therefore try to determine what were the similarities as well as the differences between these two assessments of the pre-Revolution period.

In the case of the United States, the interests were related to oil trade and to the maintenance, in the Middle East, of a balance between the Cold War opposing forces. The USSR, on the other hand, was mainly and almost exclusively preoccupied with questions of security and Western influence in the belt of states at its Western border. Both presented some flaws in their analysis of the situation and both were, to a certain extent, caught by surprise when the Iranian Revolution started. Although the assessment made by the United States and its flaws were better documented than that made by the USSR, it can be argued that in both cases a broader and more objective approach to the Iranian political situation would have allowed the United States and the USSR to be more prepared and more effective when came the time to react to the troubles in Iran.

Our analysis of both US and Soviet assessments can lead us to conclude that the American intelligence organizations had more information about the situation in Iran and that such

⁴⁵ *Id.*, p. 204.

information probably was of better quality than that of the USSR. Overall, the KGB was very unsuccessful in Iran and despite some efforts to get a better picture of the situation it could barely send to Moscow more information than what Soviet agents could collect from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Also, at that time, the emphasis was mainly put on the European continent and the Middle Eastern area was of lesser importance for Moscow.

But the Americans, with that intelligence of better quality, have been as surprised as the Soviets by the uprisings and ultimately the overthrow of the Shah. The United States did have the means of getting prepared and maybe preventing the fall of the regime while the Soviets did not, but they both ended up taken by surprise. However, once the events became irreversible, the United States succeeded in preventing the new regime to get too close to the USSR. Whether the Americans had a considerable role to play in that 'success' is in itself another question. But in conclusion, and following our analysis, it can be said that the pre-Revolution period in Iran is a good example of how an intelligence assessment of the political situation of a country can clearly be influenced by the interests of the client of such intelligence.

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