

AGENTS OF RELIGION – RELIGION OF AGENTS (Vol. II): THE POST-SAVAK INFLUENCE OF IRAN'S REVOLUTIONARY THEOCRACY

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The perfect example of fusion between religion and politics can be found in the Islamic Republic of Iran. As opposed to a democracy, the theocracy ruling Iran offers serious scholars a clearer understanding of how ideology drives national strategy. As with any motivated country seeking to exert influence beyond its borders, intelligence continues to play a prominent role in bringing these aims to fruition.

That is why any allusion to the Arab Spring's 'uniqueness' can be misleading as well as inaccurate. What was unique was the precedent of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. This was the catalyst that demonstrated to the Arab street what was possible.¹ Although Iran is Shia and non-Arab, the rest of the Muslim world could only watch in admiration as one of the biggest and richest strongmen was toppled. It is after all these same accusations of corruption and westernization of Arab leaders that the Arab Spring appears to be more déjà vu than a random wave of uprisings.

What the 1979 Iranian Revolution shares with the Arab Spring uprisings was their manipulation by the foreign intelligence services over the years. As the entire Middle East struggled for independence against tyrannical, colonial regimes, these same external intelligence services and paramilitary forces aided the coups of military 'Free Officers' ² who in turn could assure the 'business as usual' continuation of market access to raw materials (mainly oil), weapons purchases and geopolitical interests.

What these intelligence services also foresaw was the incompatibility of monarchic Arab rulers maintaining ties with the recently created Jewish state (1948) at the expense of fellow, disenfranchised Muslims.³ Thus the success of military coups and revolutions in the Middle East during the 1950s-1960s hinged on an anti-Israel policy that did not accept any notion of compromise or the lack of willingness to avenge the loss of the territories. The threads shared between Revolutionary Iran and Egypt, Iraq, Yemen and Libya is the clique of elite military officers ⁴ becoming strongmen although for Iran it happened much earlier in the century. Another similarity is that these military leaders consolidated power by eliciting popular support, mainly by vocalizing antipathy towards the State of Israel.

Despite these similarities, Iran was different on two points. First they had a democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq (1952-1954). While both the United States and Great Britain were engaged in a fight against communism neither could they tolerate the nationalization of their assets either.⁵ In this case it was the Anglo-Iranian Petroleum Company – the forerunner of British Petroleum. In an archived U.S. document classified "Top Secret," it was clear that the intent was to replace Mosaddeq. This was the only known case of the CIA and MI-6 deposing a democratic regime.⁶

Once Shah Pahlavi's monarchy was reaffirmed, he enlisted the help of the CIA to establish SAVAK.⁷ Given his father's ascension to the throne from the military ranks; Pahlavi was sensitive to anyone trying to repeat the same feat at his expense. What he did not foresee was that a religious leader sent into exile 20 years earlier would be the one to win popular support and force him to abdicate.

The second point was that religion was the forefront of the revolution instead of playing a supporting, mobilizing role. This could only have been possible based on the ideological legacy of Khomeini. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini will remain one of the most studied religious leaders of modern academia. According to most scholars, Khomeini was a man of extraordinary intellect who kept the depth of his ideology very vague. He was one of the first Muslim clerics that understood the medium of mass communications and knew how to use it to address his followers.⁸

During his exile in France, he was in communication with the CIA and MI-6 amongst others. One of his assistants, Sadegh Gotbzadeh (who later became Khomeini's Minister of Foreign Affairs) acted in this role. Ghotbzadeh promoted the grand agenda of the Ayatollah while also actively working with the Muslim Brotherhood and Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PLFP). By doing so, Khomeini was seeking to transcend the two positions that had historically denied Iran a leading role in Middle Eastern affairs: Persian ethnicity and the Sunni-Shia divide. Arab suspicions of Persians and their dogmatic religious cleavages had prevented successive Iranian leaders from extending their influence to the Arabian Peninsula.⁹

Khomeini was the first Persian, Shiite cleric to lend his support to the aims of the Muslim Brotherhood for example. With branches throughout the Middle East, the connectivity between Sunnis and Shia thus became complete. What they shared in common was a dislike for the Saudi Royal Family. For the Muslim Brotherhood, the House of Saud was a corrupt, tainted, 'Westernized' regime not worthy of keeping watch over the holy sites of Mecca and Medina. For Khomeini, denunciations by the House of Saud and Iraq's Saddam Hussein likewise denied it the legitimacy it so desperately sought.¹⁰

MI-6 was also interested in disrupting the House of Saud. For Britain the currency situation was very harsh given the fact that OPEC pegged its rates based on U.S. Dollars. By changing OPEC's policy away from U.S. Dollars towards a "basket of currencies," massive purchases of British Pounds Sterling would favorably raise the exchange rate. With the raise of the exchange rate, spot prices for oil would benefit British oil interests as well as the speculative market in London.¹¹

On a number of levels, Khomeini's grasp of the situation was clearly misjudged by the other intelligence agencies. Once returned, key military heads and the upper echelon of SAVAK were executed. As if lifted directly from Machiavelli's 'The Prince,'¹² Gotbzadeh himself was executed within a year. This accomplished two things. By executing the Jesuit-trained Gotbzadeh,¹³ Ayatollah Khomeini made it clear that he was the one to set the course of actions not external agencies. The second is that any ruler after assuming power has to assure that power by eliminating those who helped him get there.¹⁴

Until today, key positions such as Iran's Head of Intelligence are occupied by the religious clerics as Khomeini ordered. The mainstream of actions involving the Iranian Intelligence community has not shifted far away from this main ideology of 'Pan-Islamism.' It is believed that there are two directions which Iranian intelligence is working towards. Along the west and south, they must assure Iran's leading role in the Middle East by securing a chain of Islamic states loyal to Iran. As a result, Iranian

intelligence remains active in Syria, Iraq, Bahrain and Yemen. Bahrain for example has a Shia majority ruled by Sunnis. Tehran is likely interested in organizing the pro-Iranian revolution in Bahrain by using religious schism to as a tool to divide the two. In Syria, the opposite is true where a Shia Alawite minority rules over a predominately Sunni population. Iraq counts Shia as one-third of its population. In Yemen, people in the north are Shia ruled by Sunnis in the south. Despite support for Pan-Islamic causes, the fault line between Sunni and Shia extends to the three islands within the strategic Strait of Hormuz.¹⁵

In the north they are constantly seeking allies in the CIS countries such as Tajikistan and Afghanistan due to their ethnic and linguistic ties. In 1995, Russian mass media mentioned that Middle Eastern Intelligence Services, Iran included, are fighting for the influence in the Northern Caucasus region. These areas include the Volga Region, Bashkiria and North Caucasus. What makes them attractive is the fact that they are ethnically compact with Middle Eastern ties that are ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious. Particularly Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia believe that the Northern Caucasus can create a "cordon sanitaire" of small Muslim states. To implement this plan, they use both public and religious organizations not to mention their respective intelligence agencies.¹⁶

Despite sanctions, Central Asian countries offer an attractive option to launder money. With the limited resources available to the regulatory bodies, it is fairly easy to conceal major financial transactions. The most recent scandal happened in Kyrgyzstan where the investigation is still ongoing. What we do know from the media is that four Iranian businessmen bought out the shares of one of Kyrgyzstan's leading banks. They in turn are allegedly linked to one of the subcontractors to Iran's Ministry of Defense. Further these same businessmen were affiliated with such banks as Sepah and Mellat, both of which were sanctioned by the UN Security Council in 2007. The indictment alleges they used the Kyrgyz Bank to complete the international transactions that paid for purchases of technology critical to Iran's missile and nuclear programs. One of the businessmen, Muhammad Gaffari is under the custody of the State's Committee of National Security, facing accusations of espionage.¹⁷

While the key traits of the Iranian national strategy are based on religion and its legitimacy, the ruling theocracy can implement decisions that are equally ruthless as well as pragmatic. Similar to how the western intelligence services and SAVAK itself miscalculated Ayatollah Khomeini, the blur of confusion between irrationality and realist calculation suits the regime very well. For the last 30 years, Iran has used its intelligence service for a variety of functions central to its interests however the ultimate aim is the fall of the corrupt, 'westernized' House of Saud. By breaking the monopolization over the holy sites, any notion of establishing the Great Caliphate uniting Dar al-Islam (the House of Islam) could equally be established with Tehran at its head once Riyadh is out of the way.

Endnotes:

¹ Rafizadeh, M. (2012). "The clerics and the Islamic Republic of Iran: Unique Narrative of the Arab Citizens' revolt." Huffington Post, 30 Apr 2012, [accessed on 1 May 2012] <http://www.huffingtonpost.com>.

² Primakov, Y. (2009) "Russia and the Arabs: Behind the Scenes in the Middle East from the Cold War to the Present." Perseus Books: New York.

³ Gaddis, J.L. (1997) "Rethinking Cold War History." Oxford University Press: New York.

⁴ Primakov, Y. (2009).

⁵ Takeyh, R. (2009). "Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the world in the age of

Ayatollahs" Oxford University Press: Oxford.

⁶ Gasiorowski, M. and Byrne, M. (2004). "Mohammad Mossadeg and the 1953 Coup in Iran." The National Security Archive [online], George Washington University, [Accessed 1 May 2012]

<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB126/index.htm>

⁷ Library of Congress. (1987). "Iran: SAVAK." Library of Congress Country Study, Dec 1987, [Accessed 14 May 2012]

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field%28DOCID+ir0187%29>

⁸ Takeyh. R. (2009).

⁹ Dreyfuss .R.(1979). "The Muslim Brotherhood Plot Against Saudi Arabia." Executive Intelligence Review, Vol. 6, No. 48, December 11, 1979.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² Sahakian, W. and Sahakian, M. (2005). "Ideas of the Great Philosophers." Barnes and Noble: New York.

¹³ Dreyfuss .R.(1979).

¹⁴ Sahakian, W. and Sahakian, M. (2005).

¹⁵ Sparaunyus. A "Турция – хрупкий кандидат в лидеры хрупкого региона" Published at GeoPolitika, available [online] at URL: <http://www.geopolitika.lt/index.php?artc=5207> [accessed on May 1st, 2012].

¹⁶ Interfax –Eurasia, Bashkortostan, issue 1995

¹⁷ Vechernij Bishkek Published May 12th, 2012, available [online],

at URL: <http://www.vb.kg/paper/2011/11/25/>

170368_ssha_groziat_kyrgyzstany_sankciiami.html, [accessed May 14, 2012]