

London plans Iranian civil war

Middle East Editor Robert Dreyfuss reports on the strategy and the probable response from the Soviet Union.

The British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS)—the organization that plotted the downfall of Iran's Shah in 1979 and installed the Ayatollah Khomeini and the Muslim Brotherhood secret society—has launched a plan to provoke a civil war in Iran. At best, the current British-directed effort will lead to a very bloody Ten Years' War between army and guerrillas, and, at worst, a nuclear confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union.

The British SIS is operating in Iran and amid certain Iranian exile circles through both the U.S. administration of President Ronald Reagan and the French government of President François Mitterrand, along with the participation of Israel's Mossad intelligence specialists. At the Ottawa summit meeting last month, the British brought about a marriage between the CIA and SDECE, the French intelligence service, on the issue of Iran.

The first project of that alliance was to bring ex-President Abolhassan Bani-Sadr out of Iran to his current exile in Paris, France. Now with the regime of Ayatollah Khomeini and the mullahs fast crumbling, the British, American, and French secret services are working with diverse Iranian political forces to put together a replacement government.

Various scenarios are currently being considered. At the top levels of the British elite, options ranging from the restoration of the Pahlavi dynasty to a military strongman regime to a Muslim Brotherhood socialist regime under Bani-Sadr are now under review.

But, no matter what option the British finally decide to pursue in earnest, the end result will not be a stable and prosperous Iran. The Soviet Union, which has gained enormous influence in Iran, especially in the northern part of the country, and which has tens of divisions stationed near the Iran border and in Afghanistan, is determined to prevent the emergence in Iran of any government that could present a threat to the national security interests of the U.S.S.R.

In 1978-79, when the British SIS and the Carter administration began the destabilization of the Shah's government, the Soviet Union was taken by surprise. Moscow, which enjoyed relatively good trade relations

with Iran and which hardly sought to create a severe point of instability on its southern border, was then content to allow the Shah to remain in power—as long as the Shah maintained a healthy respect for the power of the Soviet Union. But the Anglo-American effort to topple the Shah did, in fact, create that instability; and the Soviets responded by taking advantage of the lack of central authority in Teheran to increase dramatically their relative political and military influence throughout Iran.

Now, according to a former Iranian official, "Moscow has veto power over the next government in Iran."

Bani-Sadr or Shah?

In the first half of August, two focal points have developed concerning the Iranian opposition to Khomeini and the mullahs. The first is the furor created by the flight of Bani-Sadr to France, pledging to overthrow the mullah regime and restore "democracy," and the second is the public call to revolt by Shah Reza II, the heir of the late deposed Shah, from Cairo.

In an Aug. 5 statement marking the anniversary of the 1906 constitution of Iran, Reza II declared that he would support a "national uprising" by the people of Iran against the Khomeini dictatorship. In a message to the Iranian people, he said that "national organizations inside and outside of Iran are ready to join patriots fighting inside Iran at the necessary time," and that many clandestine military groups are already carrying out anti-Khomeini operations. More than 50,000 cassette tapes of the young Shah's remarks were produced for secret circulation in Iran.

One week earlier, a moustacheless Bani-Sadr arrived in Paris, France, alongside Massoud Rajavi of the "Islamic Marxist" Mujaheddin guerrilla group.

Meanwhile, inside Iran, a reign of terror was launched by opposing sides. In the past several weeks, scores of prominent Iranian mullahs have been killed by anti-Khomeini underground groups, including some important leaders of the regime, such as Hassan Ayat, the alleged "theoretician" of the ruling Islamic Republican Party. Bombs have wrecked IRP offices and the

Teheran headquarters of the fascist Pasdaran, or Revolutionary Guard. Leading judges of the bloody courts in Iran were killed in Gorgan, Kermanshah, and other cities.

From the government side, Prime Minister Bahonar declared the formation of a "war cabinet" amid crisis conditions. According to Iranian sources, as many as 100 Iranians have been executed every day of the past two weeks, and even according to official figures the number of executions is more than 200. In Tabriz, an important northern city, hundreds of military men and other officials were purged, and many executed, on the suspicion of cooperation with the anti-Khomeini forces, and several brigades of Revolutionary Guard gestapo members were dispatched to Tabriz on an emergency basis. Some observers called the recent crisis "the start of Iran's civil war."

According to U.S. intelligence sources, the center of Anglo-American operations concerning Iran has been recently established in Paris with the support of the socialist Mitterrand government, and all operations by London and Washington will go through France. Soon after Bani-Sadr's arrival in Paris, Iran's mullahs acted to prevent 116 French citizens from leaving the country, and a major crisis threatened for Mitterrand. However, on Aug. 11-12, in two groups, the Frenchmen, including Ambassador Guy Georgy, were allowed to leave the country, indicating that Iran's mullahs did not feel capable of confronting the French. According to Iranian observers, Mitterrand will step up French intelligence's support for the Iranian opposition now that the French citizens have been evacuated.

The Mitterrand government has two options: to use its Socialist International connections to aid a socialist coup in Iran in support of Bani-Sadr, or—with the CIA and the British—to give a green light to the pro-monarchist forces in the army, navy, and air force of Iran. In either case, the resulting government in Iran's capital of Teheran is likely to find itself besieged by an increasingly powerful Soviet-backed guerrilla force, led by the communist Tudeh party, extending down from Iran's northern provinces.

Inside Iran

On the surface, it would appear that the single most powerful anti-Khomeini force inside Iran is the so-called Mujaheddin. Years before the revolution, the Mujaheddin was a tiny terrorist band of Islamic Marxist ideologues, generally kept in check by Iran's secret police. But with the fall of the Shah, that organization swelled its ranks and absorbed several thousands of young, heavily armed anarchists and gang members. In recent months, the Mujaheddin has received most of the credit for the hundreds of assassinated mullahs and other acts of sabotage against Khomeini's government.

According to Iranian military sources, the reality is somewhat different. "Most of the actions against Khomeini and the mullahs are currently being carried out by small but organized groups of former Iranian military officers," said one source. "There are about 40,000 ex-officers in Iran, and many of them are organized into about 30 or 40 organizations, each loyal to the monarchy."

He added, "But the military resistance does not want the credit for these actions, because it would only make them vulnerable to the repression and executions by Khomeini. So they are content to allow the Mujaheddin to get the credit."

Other sources report that the Mujaheddin itself is infiltrated, and in some cases controlled, by former Iranian military officers. "There are really two distinct Mujaheddins. One is the obvious one, the young teenagers carrying the guns in the streets—but it is clear that they are not capable of sophisticated political assassinations. The 'other' Mujaheddin is the hit squads run by ex-military intelligence people and the police, who are responsible for such actions as the murder of Hassan Ayat."

Ayat, according to French intelligence sources, was heavily guarded and had been warned by Khomeini's secret police that he was to be assassinated—thus marking his murder as the work of a professional agency, probably the same one that exploded the bomb that killed Ayatollah Beheshti and 100 other mullahs in June.

The Iranian Air Force pilot who escorted Bani-Sadr and Mujaheddin leader Rajavi out of Iran was a former personal pilot of the late Shah, reportedly with strong CIA connections. In an interview in France, the pilot, who has asked for asylum in France, declared that he is a member of the Mujaheddin. That, and other evidence, indicates that there exists a strong overlap among the Iranian armed forces against Khomeini, the radical Mujaheddin, and the CIA-SDECE command currently backing the anti-Khomeini opposition.

In this context, according to all observers, the pathetic Bani-Sadr seems to be nothing more than a front man, a sort of "Wizard of Oz" puffed up by the forces behind the scenes. In fact, according to highly placed French government sources, Bani-Sadr has not been welcomed by top French officials, even including foreign policy adviser Régis Debray, an old friend, and has gotten the cold shoulder from Mitterrand. That indicates that the French government is merely using Bani-Sadr as a convenient public figure to attract the attention of the mullahs, while preparing for a larger operation. Moreover, among the vast majority of the Iranian exiles, Bani-Sadr is viewed as a murderer and ally of Khomeini's Revolutionary Council since the early days.