
Book Review

Bani-Sadr looks back with insight

by Jeffrey Steinberg

My Turn To Speak: Iran, the Revolution and Secret Deals with the U.S.

by Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr
Brassey's (U.S.), Inc., McLean, Va., 1991
224 pages, hardbound, \$19.95

Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr was the foreign minister and then the first popularly elected President of the Islamic Republic of Iran throughout the entire ordeal of the U.S. hostages in Teheran. As President of Iran, he was also the commander in chief of the Iranian Armed Forces at the time of the Iraqi invasion on Sept. 22, 1980. He was driven from office on June 10, 1981 in one of the first moves by the mullahs to tighten their total grip on power. Needless to say, his autobiographical account of those dramatic events makes a fascinating piece of historiography.

Bani-Sadr offers some startling insights into one of the most important chapters in late 20th century history. And much to George Bush's dismay, the Bani-Sadr book, a 1991 translation of the French *Le Complot des Ayatollahs* of 1989, provides evidence that there was, indeed, an October Surprise, in which representatives of the 1980 Reagan-Bush campaign negotiated a "separate peace" with the ayatollahs that prolonged the ordeal of the American hostages for months and planted the seeds for what would follow in the Irangate arms-for-hostages deals.

The Bani-Sadr documentation of the October Surprise is devastating for two reasons. First, he presents the story of the secret deal between the mullahs and the Reagan-Bush team from the vantage point of a top Iranian official seeing the deal transpire from the Iranian side. The book provides a nearly hour-by-hour chronology of the intrigues of top mullahs like Mohammad Husseini Beheshti and Ali Akbar Rafsanjani—as well as some long-forgotten figures like Ali-reza Rajai and Behzad Nabavi—and provides an in-depth explanation of what motivated them to cut their deal with the Reagan-Bush campaign.

Second, the Bani-Sadr chronology corresponds precisely

to the account of the arms-for-hostages dealings of both the Carter and Reagan-Bush camps published in *EIR* dating back to the fall of 1980. As such, it escapes the trap of the idea that the whole October Surprise scandal boils down to the almost irrelevant question of whether George Bush personally sneaked off to a secret Paris rendezvous with the ayatollahs' men in mid-October 1980.

After reading *My Turn To Speak*, no sane person can come away uncertain that there was an October Surprise and that it represented treason on the part of some of the most important players in the Reagan and Bush regimes.

The view from Teheran

According to Bani-Sadr, the taking of American hostages in November 1979 and the 444-day ordeal was inextricably tied to three key events: the internal Iranian power struggle between himself and the mullahs seeking to impose a fundamentalist dictatorship upon Iran; the war with Iraq; and the 1980 U.S. presidential elections.

Well over a month before the Iraqis invaded, Bani-Sadr had received critical intelligence—including details of a July 1980 meeting in Jordan between Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and Carter National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski—at which the U.S. official urged Iraq to invade. (Curiously, this meeting would have occurred just weeks before Cyrus Hashemi sued *EIR* among other publications, for exposing his involvement in financing terrorism, in a case that ended up implicating high levels of the Carter State Department, the CIA, Justice, and other government agencies—as well as Henry Kissinger; see Edward Spannaus interview in *EIR* of May 3, 1991.)

By August, Sadegh Ghotbzadeh had obtained a document exposing "Operation Nojet," a purported royalist restoration plot formulated at a Paris hotel meeting between American officials, several Israeli generals, and Iranian exiles. The plot centered upon an Iraqi invasion of Iran and a simultaneous Kurdish uprising. For the ayatollahs—especially Beheshti and Rafsanjani—the Iraqi invasion, like the taking of American hostages, offered a chance to exploit an external threat to strengthen their internal power. So long as the hostage crisis and the war with Iraq dragged on, they could wield an authoritarian club against their domestic rivals, and build up the Revolutionary Guard as an alternative to the Iranian Army. For the mullahs, a quick and favorable resolution of the hostage crisis and the war would have meant their political defeat.

Bani-Sadr was convinced in the month leading up to the Iraqi invasion that a quick settlement of the hostage crisis was urgent. Without the unfreezing of millions of dollars in American spare parts purchased during the final days of the Shah, Iran could potentially be overrun and defeated by Iraq in short order. By mid-August 1980, two French lawyers, François Chéron and Christian Bourget, had drafted an agreement between Iran and the Carter administration that would

have freed the hostages and thawed the Iranian assets a month before the Iraqi assault. But, before the agreement could be sealed, Ayatollah Khomeini issued one of his famous decrees putting sole authority for negotiating the hostage release in the hands of the mullah-dominated Parliament. At a meeting on Aug. 20, 1980, Ayatollah Beheshti forced Bani-Sadr to sign a document swearing that he would not attack the mullahs for their handling of the hostage negotiations. Bani-Sadr was unaware that the clerics were already engaged in secret talks with the Reagan-Bush camp.

On Sept. 3, the West German ambassador to Iran delivered a letter from Jimmy Carter to Bani-Sadr proposing a hostage deal that conformed precisely to the earlier Iranian plan. One week later, Sadegh Tabatabai, Khomeini's son-in-law, was dispatched by Rafsanjani and Khomeini's son Ahmed to Bonn with a message that Khomeini was dying (a total lie), and that the hostage release deal had to be negotiated right away—with Khomeini directly. Another opportunity for the hostage resolution was wrecked by an eleventh-hour intervention from the mullahs.

On Oct. 15, Iran's Prime Minister Alireza Rajai, a member of the Beheshti-Rafsanjani-Ahmed Khomeini group, was secretly sent to New York City, where he apparently met with intermediaries to the Reagan-Bush campaign. One week later, in Teheran, he announced that Iran had no interest in obtaining U.S. weapons or spare parts. On Oct. 24, in an interview with *Le Monde's* Eric Rouleau, Rafsanjani repeated the assertion. These statements sealed the fate of the American hostages until after the election.

Meantime, the first arrangements for future delivery of American military equipment to Iran by the Reagan-Bush group were made on Oct. 22, 1980, according to Bani-Sadr. The first contracts were signed in March 1981, and the first deliveries arrived in July—shortly after Bani-Sadr's removal (which was key in the deal between the mullahs and Reagan-Bush intermediaries).

Bani-Sadr also discusses another key player on the Beheshti-Rafsanjani side, Behzad Nabavi, whom the Iranian Parliament appointed as the "official negotiator with the Carter administration" in the weeks leading up to the U.S. elections. While the first part of the deal between the ayatollahs and the GOP had been completed on Election Day (the hostages were still in Teheran), the second phase of the deal involved the resolution of the crisis—on the very day of the Reagan-Bush inauguration.

For fairly obvious reasons, the lame-duck Carter-Mondale administration was still anxious to settle the hostage affair. Warren Christopher, working through the Algerian government, entered into a whirlwind of negotiations with Nabavi—all to no avail. Finally on Dec. 17, Nabavi made the incredible demand that the U.S. give Iran \$24 billion, an arbitrary figure supposedly combining the frozen Iranian assets in the U.S. plus a grossly exaggerated estimate of the Shah's personal wealth. Carter accepted the extortion, but

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the Iranian Parliament still stalled for nearly a month.

Finally, on Jan. 15, 1981, with the inauguration just six days away, Nabavi announced that Iran would drop the \$24 billion payoff demand altogether. In fact, Iran would agree to pay \$500 million in cash—the entire debt to the United States—as part of the hostage release package. Two days later, U.S. and Iranian representatives signed the deal in Algiers. On Jan. 21, 1981 the planes took off from Teheran bringing the American hostages back home.

Bani-Sadr met with the Algerian ambassador on Jan. 29, and complained bitterly about the rotten deal struck between Nabavi and the Americans, and the role of Algeria in brokering that traitorous arrangement. The ambassador replied: “On the contrary, we explained to Nabavi that this agreement was not good for Iran, but he told us he would sign it anyway. We were intermediaries in the agreement with Carter, but not the other one, the one Beheshti and Rafsanjani concluded with Reagan.”

Insights and flaws

His account contains many other important insights into the complex events that played out in the Persian Gulf during the 1979-81 period. His account of the transformation of the Iranian Army, from an appendage of the NATO war plan for defending the Gulf oil fields against a Soviet invasion, into a functioning national military force is full of useful observations and lessons. His account of a March 1981 visit by the late Olof Palme (who warned Bani-Sadr that the mullahs had struck a deal with the GOP and that his life was in danger unless he could rapidly end the war with Iraq) provides some suggestive clues about Palme’s own murder five years later.

However, this reviewer was continuously left with the impression that Bani-Sadr never quite figured out the bigger picture. Not once in his account did Bani-Sadr demonstrate any understanding of the role of British intelligence in sponsoring the Muslim Brotherhood. For Bani-Sadr, Khomeini was as much a victim of the mullahs’ power plays as he was a witting player. And as an ideological fellow-traveler of the European Socialist International, Bani-Sadr’s view of the Reagan phenomenon inside the United States was one-dimensional. Ironically, that flaw made his account of the Iranian October Surprise all the more credible, because he did understand the motives and machinations of all the Teheran players so well. Inside the fishbowl called the Iranian Revolution, Bani-Sadr was at home.

It should also be noted that *My Turn To Speak* was not written as a detailed, annotated account of the Revolution and the hostage crisis. In September and October 1988—immediately after the cease-fire in the Iran-Iraq war—Bani-Sadr gave a series of lengthy interviews to French journalist Jean-Charles Deniau. Those interviews were the basis for the book. As such, it jumps back and forth between events, omits many important dates, and leaves the reader with more of an impressionistic picture than a clear, concise chronology. Even with these flaws, the book is important reading.

An unusual eyewitness account of the Queen’s visit to Mount Vernon

The brief manuscript below was mysteriously delivered to our offices over the signature of Washington Irving, the illustrious American author who, of course, departed this life many generations ago. While its authenticity may thus be doubted, it should be recalled that Mr. Irving conclusively demonstrated in many of his writings, that simply burying a man does not mean that you have heard the end of him. In tribute to that worthy principle, we hereby share with our readers this intriguing account of the visit of Her Most Britannic Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, to Mount Vernon, on the 16th of May of this year.

I was astounded to hear the news that the present guardians of our nation had decided to permit a reigning British monarch to tread upon the hallowed grounds of Mount Vernon, the venerable home of George Washington, the valiant leader of our Revolutionary War, who secured our freedom from the clutches of empire, and who sagely established the security of our republic as its first President. Having lain peacefully ignorant of whatever vast changes could have brought about such surprising harmony, where deadly antagonism once prevailed, I determined to move heaven and earth, if need be, to become a witness at the scene. I was especially concerned that our foremost Founding Father, being untutored in the modern way of diplomacy, might rise from his tomb hard by his former home, answering his country’s call to repel yet another British invasion.

It was with great difficulty and no less embarrassment—on account of the foolishness I felt at having to make so many inquiries during my journey—that I made my way to the old general’s home overlooking the stately Potomac. A vague sense of anxiety, even of impending peril, took hold of me as my cab driver tore along the highway like a headless horseman, charging in and out among the competitors for the road, who thundered along the broken pavement in motorized vehicles like galloping herds of undersized buffaloes. Rather admirably, I thought to myself, I fought off an inclination to sheer terror, by the happy device of picturing in my mind the pleasant landscape, the fragrant gardens, and the high-columned piazza, with its magnificent view from the rear of the house, where I had often sat enjoying the shade during my visits to the place, while preparing my *Life of Washington*.