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FROM: AMEMBASSY TEHRAN

DATE: July 25, 1977

E.O. 11652: E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, IGOV, IR
SUBJECT: STRAINS IN THE MIND: INTELLECTUAL AND RELIGIOUS
OPPOSITION IN IRAN

REF: A) TEHRAN'S A-73 of 22 FEB 1977 (NOTAL), B) TEHRAN'S
A-116 of 11 JULY 1977 (NOTAL), C) TEHRAN 5317 AND
5513 (NOTAL), D) TEHRAN 1964 (NOTAL), E) TEHRAN 5223
(NOTAL)

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Stirrings of Dissent

Summary. Criticism of the regime in foreign newspapers and magazines which circulate freely here has long been tolerated although hardly welcome. This has not been true with respect to criticism from internal sources. In the past two years, however, official attitudes appear to have become increasingly relaxed on this score. Indeed much of the impetus has come from the Shah himself and government sponsored groups and commissions have been formed to examine and criticize government policy and performance. Lately criticism has also come from groups not associated with terrorist organizations and outside officially sponsored channels. While fairly carefully phrased they call for the Shah to resign and not rule and for a revival of intellectual freedom of expression. Whether more is to come and what the government will do about it remains to be seen. But the door of liberalization seems to be ajar. While welcome and consonant with our renewed emphasis on human rights, we believe that we should avoid any pronouncements which could be construed as endorsing the substance of the criticism. End Summary.

Attachments:

1. Letter to Shah CONFIDENTIAL
2. Letter to Prime Minister CONFIDENTIAL
3. CONFIDENTIAL

CLASSIFIED BY: JDS/... 7-25-77 CONFIDENTIAL CLASSIFICATION APPROVED BY: DCM/JC.../kios

Contributors: DCM, JC.../kios, PGL, PVL, mady, SK...

Background. Twice in this century attempts to emulate Western forms of representative government, multi-political parties, freedom of speech, and the right to dissent have been tried and failed in Iran. These are concepts that are essentially alien in this ancient monarchy. Loyalties and interests are traditionally in order of priority to family, tribe and only distantly to the monarch and the nation. Cooperation, group efforts, and working within institutions are not part of the Persian heritage and their absence accounts in substantial measure for past failures of Western political values to take root and grow. Dissent and opposition have been seen generally as attempts to overthrow the established regime and to frustrate its objectives. Nevertheless the notion is gaining strength that Iran is not an island unto itself and that it must accommodate to outside ideas and influences. One response has been to invite "constructive criticism" but keep it within manageable boundaries.

Some intellectuals and conservatives had not found this a sufficiently adequate or satisfying outlet however. A kernel of the old fanatical religious groups have continued in being and the Shah's regime has constantly felt itself under challenge from those who still believe that the 17th century Safavid dynasty reached the apogee of social organization and development. Religious opposition to the government has continued and even grown as the pace of modernization has increased since 1963 at the time of White Revolution. Terrorist groups, probably under the aegis of Mujahidin-e-Khalq (People's Strugglers), began recruiting impressionable youths from deeply religious Muslim backgrounds. Most of these younger people began by being aghast at the Shah's reform program, particularly land reform (peasant habits changed slowly) and giving women the vote. The COI has kept a close eye on the leading radical imams, moving to discredit some, simply watching others.

In the same period, 1963-1975, left-leaning members of the National Front, many of whom had been Tudeh (communist) Party members, discarded an active interest in politics. Some became coopted, impressed by the Shah's revolutionary reform efforts. At least two became ministers. Most, however, simply dropped out of politics and became apolitical. Several remained university teachers, some went into business (and became well off as Iran's wealth grew rapidly in the late 60's and 70's). Many remained privately critical of the Shah, cynical about government, and unwilling to participate in regime-sponsored activities such as the Resurgence Party. Not a few came to accept the country's development, but centered their criticism on the lack of

civil liberties--the growth of press and publishing, censorship, detention programs, etc. In addition, there is a growing left-oriented and anti-establishment intellectual and academic community. Representatives of this movement exist not only in student groups but to an increasing degree in other areas of society, particularly those who have had foreign university training.

Opening Up the Political System

Concurrent with Iran's growing interest in its human rights image, which began about the fall of 1976, came the realization that people remained critical of the government's ability to respond to economic and social challenges. Moreover, it was becoming obvious to Iran's leaders that to coordinate and continue Iran's economic growth something more than tacit cooperation of the rising numbers of Iran's new middle class was going to be required. In short, the Shah and the government, by spring 1977 at the latest, began to look for ways to encourage the active support of the new elites. Criticism within the Resurgence Party, provincial and city councils and the Majles was tolerated--to the point where many who participate enthusiastically are now wondering what good it has done. Is anybody listening? To make this process more creditable, the GOI resurrected and spot-lighted the activities of three bodies created to examine the government--the Imperial Commission, the Imperial Inspectorate Organization (IIO) and the Study Group of Iranian Problems. Each group has been given a separate and sometimes overlapping mandate: The Imperial Commission to focus on overseeing economic development, eradicating waste and eliminating corruption; the IIO to monitor the progress of the Administrative Revolution and since June 7 to conduct unannounced spot inspections of all GOI ministries and offices; and the Study Group to debate and evaluate GOI problems and policies and to forward their criticism and reports to the Shah. (Ref. B describes the evolution of these groups.)

To inaugurate the new campaign in June and July, the Imperial Commission meetings were televised nationally. Committee reports and ministerial testimony revealing "deficiencies and shortcomings" in the national economic development plan received extensive comment and coverage. Commission wrath was primarily directed at the power, Lestbook, cement, labor and hospital shortages and caused little short of a sensation--ministers were being attacked and forced to defend their policies or to promise change. At a similar meeting of the Study Group in June, the Prime Minister and other top officials were closely questioned about GOI mismanagement and bungling. According to a summary prepared by a Study

Group number two is also a GOI local employee, many of the members of the group are active or antipathy toward the GOI. The group has been off-the-record question-and-answer sessions with the Prime Minister, the integrity of the government has directly impugned and its performance ridiculed. The group has been re-cast as the GOI's "watchdog" agency to adjudicate citizen complaints, to conduct independent investigations and to prepare reports for the Shah. It is the most powerful and effective of the three groups-and has the full confidence and support of the Shah. The only question remaining is whether the Shah and the Prime Minister will live up to their promises and be able to convince a skeptical public that they mean business.

Sources close to the Prime Minister assert that this carefully orchestrated campaign to open up and permit more criticism of the government was initiated with the Shah's blessing and the Prime Minister's recent actions lend credence to those reports. Speaking to the press on July 5 and to the I.C. on July 12, Hoveyda said every Iranian has the right to criticize and differ in all national affairs except where "the essence of Iran's nationhood is concerned" (i.e., the Shah, the Constitution, and the Shah-People Revolution). He stated what has become the government's position: "There is no reason why a country that has, thanks to the Shah's leadership, reached a position of strength from one of weakness should be afraid of criticism." How this will eventually work out in practice is not yet certain--following a Kayhan editorial of June 7 criticising censorship as bad for Iran, the Prime Minister is reported to have telephoned Kayhan's editors and stormily accused them of going too far too fast when they echoed his own criticism of present censorship arrangements. Nevertheless, it seems clear that the GOI is adopting a more tolerant basic position regarding opposition to government policies than it has in some time. There has even been stray talk of allowing a second political party, but so far it remains just that--stray talk.

Stirring of Opposition

Other signals emanating from the GOI--the Military Court Reform Bill (see Ref C), and counterattacks against international charges of torture in Iran (Ref D) have led some formerly apathetic individuals and groups to return ever so tentatively to the political arena. This has been reinforced by their belief that the danger of repression is less because Iran wants to open up a bit, and the new U.S. human rights policy has pressured countries in general and Iran in particular to exercise police controls with more restraint on dissidence.

The most visible evidence of this "reawakening" are two letters which have been circulating privately, one addressed to the Shah, the other to Prime Minister Hoveyda. The Embassy has obtained copies in Paris and has translated them informally (attachments one and two). The letter to the Shah is probably as articulate a statement of the liberal aspirations of the ex-oppositionists as is available. It was written by twelve individuals, three of whom signed the letter. All three were senior National Fronters, one an ex-minister of justice. Several individuals close to this circle say there are others who are considering ways to break their silence. One prominent ex-Fronter, the grandson of Prime Minister Mossadeq, has indicated privately to friends that many of the "old circle" remain, and if there were a "true" liberalization, there would be more such activity. Most of those involved with the letter to the Shah have been in opposition to the government, either tacitly or openly, since Mossadeq's time. This led Resurgence Party Deputy Secretary General Darius Homayoun to refer publicly to "political fossils" who criticize outside the accepted channels with the same old shopworn ideas.

The second letter, addressed to the Prime Minister, was signed by 40 intellectuals who form the Writer's Guild of Iran. According to F.Y.I., a local political review (see attachment three) it was actually part of a series begun some months ago. According to two sources in Tehran, it represents a line of thought that has been prevalent in oppositionist circles for several years, one that has even been played by the clandestine radio Peike Iran off and on in the past.

According to one of the signers of the letter, all 40 signed "because the government wouldn't dare jail all of us in the present climate on human rights." The list of signers is a reasonable Who's Who of older intellectual dissidents, many of whom have been or are connected with the arts or teaching. Dr. Gholam Hossein Saedi the subject of U.S. human rights inquiries was a prominent author who spent time in jail. Ali Asghar Haj-seyd-Javadi is a prominent anti-communist intellectual who was very annoyed when clandestine radio Peike Iran picked up one of his articles two years ago and rebroadcast it. Several others on the list have backgrounds ranging from near-Tudeh to National Front.

To date, the GOI has not reacted openly except to denigrate such offerings without mentioning names or otherwise giving them publicity. Those who wrote the letters and otherwise identified themselves with the sentiments contained in them are waiting to see what the government will eventually do. Their hope is to stimulate more criticism, perhaps heading even closer to the edge of directly criticising the "untouchables"--Constitution, Shah, and Shah-People Revolution.

Religious Current

Activities of religious groups over the past six months have shown a definite stirring. Although less is known in detail about them, right-wing Muslims have tried to interest foreign human rights groups in the fate of those charged with killing Ayatollah Shamsabadi (Ref E) on the grounds they were religious martyrs. This does not appear to have been successful, except in a modest way in Great Britain, but there are hints that despite their right-wing fanaticism, some of the more pragmatic conservative Islamic imams and ayatollahs are willing to ride the human rights horse into alliance with those on the left where mutual interests can be made to coincide.

Signs of challenge to the regime from this quarter are mainly secondary and low key--increased use of the chador among college-educated women as a sign of opposition to government, resistance to women's rights legislation (almost amounting to pressure group lobbying) and the spread of unflattering jokes about the Shah.

Religious restiveness has been reinforced by the revival of Islamic political fortunes in neighboring political arenas--Pakistan, where the religious opposition to Bhutto led to a military takeover; Turkey, where religious factions appear to hold at least some balance of power in the new, divided parliament; and Saudi Arabia, where the Shah perceives the fanatical Islamic right as one of the serious problems for any reigning Saudi monarch.

The Shah and the government have taken discreet steps to keep this type of potential opposition under control. In addition to normal surveillance of religious factions, the Shah finally paid a visit to Imam Reza's shrine at Mashad in May to meet with religious leaders and urge, in his public speech, that faithful Muslims not be misled into terrorism by subversive groups. In their trips to various provinces, the Prime Minister and Empress Farah have devoted time and public utterance to placating the faithful and trying to draw them (and their religion) into a supportive relationship to the government. A perceptive younger member of the Empress' Special Bureau claims the royal family watches the religious situation very carefully, and that many rural development efforts are geared to drawing more of the religious fundamentalists into the modern sector through greater participation in secular projects.

What Will the Government Do?

Both the GOI and the Resurgence Party are assimilating this upsurge of criticism and limited "opposition" which has been

brought on by a combination of the GGI's own policies and circumstances. Over the short term, it appears to be three options: (1) a continuation of approval of the GGI's actions by the government, (2) the government trying to bring these oppositionist actions under the Resurgence Party umbrella. By calling for critics to become active in the Party or providing their criticisms to Party officials, the GGI could attempt to encompass the nascent opposition entirely within the present political system. This will not be wholly possible, since there are other organizations--the Imperial Commission, the Group for the Study of Iran's Problems, and the Imperial Inspectorate, for example--which play roles in this area. Having identified some critics through letter signatures, these individuals may get the call to play the Party Game. Some may heed, most probably will not--this could eventually bring them into conflict with the system itself as they try to justify their refusal to participate by attacking the system and the Shah personally.

2) Both government and Shah may simply continue to relax and allow more criticism as the price of opening up the political system. This could only be done if it is perceived that this type of opposition is safely manageable in security terms, and that the system is stable enough to afford what the Shah calls the "luxury of dissent". Any hint of foreign support for or even public sympathy with opposition groups from any quarter would probably bring a sharp, if perhaps sophisticated, crackdown.

3) The government may simply repress such criticism or limit it a priori on grounds of state security. This seems an unlikely choice--it would defeat the purpose of opening up the political system. Undoubtedly, however, the Shah would take this course if criticism got out of hand--or exceeded the permissible and attacked on a regular and sustained basis, the Shah as an institution, the Constitution, or the Shah-People Reforms. Hoveyda's current posture suggests that criticism which calls these fundamentals into question will not be allowed, or subject the critics to the force of harassment and limitation.

In practice, the GGI will probably use all three--tolerance to bring criticism out, attempts to direct it toward the Party, and some form of limiting control to keep it from destabilizing the developing Iranian political system. The degree to which repression may be applied will depend upon the content of the critic's message. If oppositionist criticism remains focused rather narrowly, as it has for 7-10 years, on a critique of present facts of life, it may be supportable at a fairly high level of vituperation. If,

... it is... the three "foreigners"... criticism will be important... The Shah himself might not... in criticism of the balance between Monarch and Constitution... if it were done... muckraking over his own personal role... or radical leftist suggestions of a "people's republic" for Iran, a la Turkish times are likely to get as short a shift as one would expect in a modernizing monarchy which is nonetheless still a real monarchy.

U.S. Attitudes

The U.S. is not directly involved in this process of increased criticism, nor should it be. Critics of the COI may use symbols with which many Americans might sympathize. The U.S. may also come under fire from those caustic of our traditionally close ties with Iran under the Pahlavi Dynasty.. In both cases, we should treat the process of criticism as a purely internal Iranian matter. At discreet moments and in the right place privately, it will do no harm and some positive good to express our approval of the opening up process and reinforce the thinking that has led to it. On the other hand, the U.S. should avoid the temptation to make public pronouncements on the subject which might be misinterpreted by either critics or supporters of the present regime, or both. Given the differences in culture and political perception between elites and ordinary individuals in both countries, as well as the long history in Iran of connection between foreign intrigue and dissidence, the lower the U.S. profile, the better.

[Handwritten Signature]
SULLIVAN

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no attachments

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