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## The Ayatollahs

By Kai Bird

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Fuck the Shah. I am not going to welcome him here

when he has other places to go where he'll be safe.

—President Jimmy Carter[1]

On February 1, 1979, just nine days after Ali Hassan Salameh's assassination, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was welcomed home in Tehran by millions of Iranians celebrating the shah's ouster just two weeks earlier. Over the next eleven days Khomeini mobilized his supporters in the streets. By February 11, Khomeini's revolutionaries were in full command of the government. The revolution had begun in October 1977 with a few hundred demonstrators. Protests escalated throughout 1978, and by the late autumn it was clear to everyone that the Pahlavi regime could no longer control the streets.

After the 1979 revolution, George Cave was brought back from Saudi Arabia to Washington, where he worked on the problem of how to deal with a very unstable, fluid revolutionary government in Tehran. As national intelligence officer (NIO) for the Near East, Bob Ames was working on many of the same issues. Ever since Ayatollah Khomeini's return, a fierce power struggle had been taking place in Tehran between moderate members of the revolutionary government and Khomeini's more radical Islamists, who wanted to turn Iran into a fundamentalist theological state. The moderates were led by Mehdi Bazargan, a professor of engineering from Tehran University whom Khomeini had appointed as his interim prime minister. But while Bazargan tried to restore essential government services and get a constitution written, Khomeini inflamed political passions with fiery speeches attacking foreign imperialists and corrupt, irreligious secularists at home. Throughout 1979, the ayatollah was methodically undermining his prime minister.

By the spring of 1979, Tehran was descending into chaos. Bands of radical Islamists loyal to Khomeini roamed the streets. Armed men set up checkpoints throughout the city. On March 18, 1979, the acting chief of station, Howard Hart, was out meeting a source in the middle of the night when he was attacked by a couple of men shouting, "CIA! CIA!" Beaten to the ground, Hart pulled out his gun and shot them dead. On the other hand, it was a period of postrevolutionary exuberance when a "thousand flowers were blooming." Hawkers on Tehran sidewalks were selling newspapers and magazines espousing viewpoints that ran the gamut from communist to Islamist. The Tudeh Communist Party maintained public offices, as did the People's Mujahedin Party, an armed group with a leftist Islamic program. Yet it was clear that Khomeini's Islamist radicals had the political momentum and the street muscle to prevail in any political showdown.

*"It is not easy to sleep next to an elephant that you have wounded."*

In this uncertain atmosphere, US policy makers were under no illusions that the monarchy could ever be restored. Washington's decidedly modest goal was merely to restore some normalcy to American-Iranian relations and hope that Prime Minister Bazargan's cabinet, dominated by men of more or less moderate and modernist temperaments, could survive long enough in power to stabilize the government and write a democratic constitution—and perhaps keep the oil exports flowing to the international markets. Sadly, this goal would prove illusory. As one American official noted, “It is not easy to sleep next to an elephant that you have wounded.” But Bob Ames and George Cave nevertheless made a valiant attempt in 1979 to divert the Iranian revolutionaries' relations with America from messianic nihilism to something approaching normalcy.

The obstacles in their path were truly enormous. Most Iranians were highly suspicious of American intentions. They knew that the CIA had planned the coup that put the shah back in power in 1953. They knew that the CIA had worked closely with the shah's secret police, the hated and feared SAVAK. And most Iranians assumed in 1979 that the Americans were doing everything they could to mount a counterrevolution.

In the spring of 1979, just after the revolution, the Carter administration had pulled its ambassador, William H. Sullivan, out of Tehran because he was so closely identified with the shah. So there was no ambassador, only a chargé d'affaires, in the Tehran embassy. The CIA maintained a small station with only four officers, and over the next few months the number of embassy personnel shrank from hundreds to fewer than eighty. None of the CIA officers had any experience with Iran—and, incredibly, not one spoke Farsi. Ironically, Mossad had better information about the new regime because they'd trained scores of SAVAK agents, some of whom had shed their military uniforms, let their beards grow, and joined the Revolutionary Guards.

That summer the State Department and the CIA tried to pry open a back channel to the regime. Prime Minister Bazargan had appointed his personal aide, Deputy Prime Minister Abbas Amir Entezam, to be the main liaison to the US embassy. Bazargan wanted better relations with the Americans, and so with his express authority Entezam began meeting regularly with US embassy officials. Entezam was a 46-year-old engineer and businessman who'd studied and worked in the United States. As a young man, he'd once delivered a letter of protest to the US embassy in the wake of the 1953 coup. He was an Iranian patriot and dissident, a longtime member of the anti-shah National Resistance Movement, and by 1978 he was an ardent supporter of Khomeini as the figurehead of the revolution. And just coincidentally, Entezam had met Cave when the CIA

officer was stationed in Tehran in the late 1950s. Cave hadn't recruited Entezam; the Iranian was not a paid asset. But Cave had known him and solicited his views about the Pahlavi regime. Cave had empathized. Unbeknownst to Entezam, the CIA had assigned him a cryptonym: SDPLOD/1. This would ruin his life, later turning him into revolutionary Iran's longest incarcerated political prisoner.

But in the spring of 1979, it made perfect sense to put Cave and Entezam back together again. And so it happened that the two men met in Stockholm on August 5th and 6th. Entezam remembered Cave from their casual acquaintanceship years earlier. Cave explained that Washington wished to establish a friendly, working relationship with Tehran—and to that end he proposed that they set up a series of regular meetings in which Iranian officials could be briefed on various intelligence issues of interest to the revolutionary regime. Entezam agreed, and a briefing was scheduled for late August in Tehran.

Bob Ames was selected to give the first briefing. As NIO for the Near East, Ames was thought to have a broad overview. They also knew he was a good briefer. And, of course, he'd had some prior experience in Iran. He flew into Tehran from Paris, arriving on Air France Flight 168 at 10 p.m. on August 21, 1979. He carried with him a "courier letter" to protect his classified briefing papers—which typically would have been placed in a locked pouch chained to Ames's wrist. The courier letter under standard international diplomatic agreements exempted his bags and his person from any searches while passing through immigration control in Tehran. Ames was traveling under his own name on a diplomatic passport. But CIA cable traffic referred to him only by his Agency pseudonym, Orrin W. BIEDENKOPF. The next day he gave the briefing. Bruce Laingen, the US embassy's chargé d'affaires, and Victor Tomseth, the embassy political officer, accompanied him to the meeting. The only Iranians in the room were Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan, Foreign Minister Ibrahim Yazdi, and Entezam. Ames was told that his goal was to entice the Iranians into having regular briefings. In this he clearly succeeded. Scheduled for one hour, the briefing went on for a full two hours.

Ames did not in this initial session convey any hard intelligence, but he gave the Iranians a summary of how Washington saw developments generally in the Middle East. Entezam had earlier requested information about external threats to the new regime. Ames mostly talked about developments in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Soviet Union. Bruce Riedel, the analyst with whom Ames was working in Washington, later explained that Ames was trying to disabuse Iranians of their long-standing suspicions of America's intentions. "Bob was basically trying to convince them that the real Great Satans were their neighbors in the region, the Soviet Union and Iraq." At

the end of the two hours, Entezam said, “We hope your organization will improve its ties with us just as our countries are improving ties through the exports of the chargé [Laingen] and Dr. Yazdi.” Entezam said this sitting next to Prime Minister Bazargan, who clearly understood English. Ames did not “reveal” his “RTACTION connection”—the code word for the CIA—but clearly everyone in the room understood that he was from the CIA. The meeting concluded with Bazargan stating that he “hoped similar briefings could be provided every two months.” Entezam later told Cave that “they had considered” the briefing from the “NIO [Ames] as a good start.”

*Some analysts in the US intelligence community had come to the conclusion the previous summer that neighboring Iraq might be preparing to invade Iran.*

Now that Ames had opened the channel, his job was basically done. But he lingered in Tehran for at least a few more days, trying to gauge the temper of the revolutionary regime. He managed to arrange an interview with Ayatollah Dr. Mohammed Beheshti, age fifty-one, a leading scholar and theologian who was deeply involved in writing the new constitution. This was the same Ayatollah Beheshti whom Ames knew had been involved in the disappearance of Lebanon’s revered Shi’a leader Imam Musa Sadr. Ames had read the intelligence reports on Sadr’s disappearance, reports that implicated Beheshti. So on every level he knew he was seeing a tough, formidable player in the Iranian revolution. Beheshti was a leading advocate of an Islamic republic and an ally of Ayatollah Khomeini’s. “If Khomeini was the revolution’s charismatic chairman of the board,” said one Agency analyst, “Beheshti was the chief executive officer.” But he was also a man who had lived in the West, having led the Islamic Center in Hamburg, Germany, for five years in the 1960s. As such, he was thought to be a little more cosmopolitan and erudite than most mullahs in the new regime. Nevertheless, he had Khomeini’s ear and his respect. Beheshti had no idea that he was meeting with a CIA officer—one who was merely trying to educate himself by meeting an influential ayatollah. They got together in early September, and soon afterward Ames flew back to Washington.[2]

Six weeks later, in October 1979, George Cave, pseudo-named ADLESICK, came back to Tehran to convey to Foreign Minister Yazdi and Entezam some concrete military intelligence. Some analysts in the US intelligence community had come to the conclusion the previous summer that neighboring Iraq might be preparing to invade Iran. Ames hadn’t been authorized to convey this information in August, but now Cave came to Tehran with hard technical evidence that Iraq’s Saddam Hussein was quietly positioning his vastly superior military forces in preparation for a full-scale invasion. The noted American scholar on Iranian history Mark Gasiorowski wrote about this intelligence mission: “Alarmed about the prospect of war between these two strategically important countries, [Undersecretary of State David Newsom] and

presumably other top US officials decided the United States should provide intelligence on Iraq's activities to the Bazargan government so it could take steps to deter an invasion and thus prevent war from breaking out. An obvious way to do this was through the briefing series initiated by Robert Ames."

The Americans had an ulterior reason for conveying this warning to the revolutionary regime. To be sure, they wanted to establish some semblance of normalcy in their relations with the new people in control. But the CIA also wanted to persuade the provisional government in Tehran to reactivate two separate electronic surveillance systems. IBEX was an electronic system with ground-based listening posts that gathered intelligence from three C-130 aircraft flying along the Iran-Iraq border. The system could provide aerial photographs of Iraqi military movements up to seventy miles inside Iraq. In the chaos of the revolution, IBEX was no longer operational. Bazargan, Yazdi, and Entezam had no knowledge of IBEX's existence, let alone its intelligence-gathering capabilities.

The other electronic surveillance system, Tacksman, was of special interest to the Americans because it could monitor Soviet missile tests. The CIA hoped that if it could prove the value of IBEX in providing Iran with hard military intelligence about Iraq, perhaps the new regime could also be enticed into reactivating the Tacksman missile-monitoring facilities. In 1979 the Cold War with the Soviet Union remained the Agency's number-one priority.

*Prime Minister Bazargan, must have been swayed. The Americans were sharing hard intelligence.*

So on October 15, 1979, Cave gave another top-secret briefing. He bluntly told the Iranians that Iraq was preparing to invade. The Iranians were taken aback. "They wouldn't dare," Foreign Minister Yazdi exclaimed. Three days later, in another meeting with Yazdi, Cave patiently explained that if he was incredulous, he could reactivate the IBEX system and see the intelligence for himself. Yazdi and his boss, Prime Minister Bazargan, must have been swayed. The Americans were sharing hard intelligence. "We went to the degree of actually sitting down with them," said Chargé d'Affaires Bruce Laingen, "and giving them highly classified intelligence on Iraq." After Cave got back to Washington, he and Ames briefed CIA director Admiral Stansfield Turner on their Iranian missions.

By then, however, things in Tehran had rapidly deteriorated. On October 20th, President Jimmy Carter very reluctantly decided to permit the exiled shah to come to New York to treat his cancer. Carter had been hounded for months by a lobbying campaign, code-named "Project

Alpha,” personally financed by David Rockefeller. Tens of thousands of dollars were spent on “Project Alpha.” Rockefeller paid Chase Manhattan Bank employees and high-powered lawyers from Milbank, Tweed, Hadley & McCloy to pester Carter administration officials to give the shah political asylum. At one point First Lady Rosalynn Carter noted in her diary, “We can’t get away from Iran. Many people—Kissinger, David Rockefeller, Howard Baker, John McCloy, Gerald Ford—all are after Jimmy to bring the shah to the United States, but Jimmy says it’s been too long, and anti-American and anti-shah sentiments have escalated so that he doesn’t want to. Jimmy said he explained to all of them that the Iranians might kidnap our Americans who are still there.” The president’s fears were all too prescient.

On October 22, 1979, the shah arrived in New York and checked into a hospital to treat his cancer. A few days later, millions of Iranians demonstrated in the streets of Tehran, protesting the shah’s arrival in America. Khomeini incited the crowds with fiery statements, denouncing America and criticizing internal leftists and secularists. When several hundred students stormed the American embassy on November 4, 1979, and seized sixty-one American hostages, Khomeini praised the students. “Khomeini probably sensed that the Americans were trying to lure Iranians like Bazargan, Yazdi, and Entezam into a moderate path,” said Bruce Riedel, the analyst who worked with Ames. “So when the students took over the embassy, this gave him the opportunity he needed to radicalize the situation.” Two days later, Prime Minister Bazargan and his cabinet resigned. Khomeini had used the embassy seizure to purge his government of anyone critical of his vision of Iran as an Islamic theocracy.[3]

The hostage crisis created the pretext for Khomeini to tip political power into the hands of his mullahs. But it also destroyed the back channel created by Ames, Cave, and the CIA to Bazargan, Yazdi, and Entezam. Khomeini had not known about Ames’s intelligence briefing. Neither did Khomeini know of the intelligence evidence conveyed by Cave that the Iraqis were planning an invasion. Ironically, the students who took over the American embassy found a treasure trove of thousands of classified documents—including CIA cables describing the Ames and Cave meetings with Bazargan, Yazdi, and Entezam. The classified documents—many painstakingly reconstructed from the bins of the embassy’s shredding machines—were used to charge Entezam with espionage. He was arrested in mid-December and eventually tried and sentenced to life in prison.[4] A number of CIA assets named in the documents were also arrested: Simon Farzami (SDTRAMP/L), a Jewish Iranian journalist, was executed by firing squad in December 1980. And Khosrow Qashqai (SDROTTER/T), a tribal leader, was publicly hanged in 1982.

In September 1980, as predicted by George Cave, Saddam Hussein's military launched a major invasion of Iran. The Iranians were caught completely unprepared and suffered major defeats and high casualties. The Iraq-Iran War quickly descended into brutal trench warfare and extensive use of chemical weapons. It slogged on until August 1988, by which time an estimated half a million soldiers on both sides had lost their lives. In the end, neither side gained anything.

“The tragic irony,” writes Professor Gasiorowski, “is that the radical Islamists who seized the US embassy in early November [1979] did so in part because they thought US officials were plotting a coup or other nefarious activities there. In fact, US officials were warning Iran's government about Iraqi activities that culminated in the devastating invasion of September 1980.”

In retrospect, there was probably nothing Ames, Cave, and the CIA could have done to change the course of this history. Khomeini was determined to push moderates like Bazargan aside and forge a hard-line Islamic republic. He and his fellow revolutionaries were deeply suspicious of America and the West on both political and religious-cultural grounds. But Ames thought it had been worth the effort to try to keep a channel of communication open to a moderate faction of the revolutionary government.

Seven years later, on May 25, 1986, Cave boarded a chartered jet in Tel Aviv bound for Tehran on a secret mission. Accompanying him were the Reagan administration's national security adviser, Robert “Bud” McFarlane; Lt. Col. Oliver North; and an Israeli intelligence official, Amiran Nir. Their goal was to attempt to revive a back channel to a “moderate” faction of the revolutionary regime. Cave carried with him a chocolate cake made in a kosher bakery in Tel Aviv. The key-shaped cake was meant to symbolize their desire to unlock the door barring a resumption of American-Iranian relations. President Ronald Reagan authorized the trip; it was Cave's idea to bring the key-shaped cake. The mission, of course, was a failure. But it—and the cake—was a signature event of what became known as the Iran-Contra scandal.

## NOTES

1. Kai Bird, *The Chairman: John J. McCloy and The Making of the American Establishment* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), p. 648.
2. Ayatollah Beheshti was killed on June 28, 1981, along with some sixty other members of the Islamic Republic Party, in a bomb attack carried out by unknown opponents of the regime.



3. Iran's former president Mahmoud Ahmedinejad has admitted that he was one of five students who attended the first meeting to plan the embassy seizure. He claims he wanted to take over the Soviet embassy but was outvoted. Mark Bowden, *Guests of the Ayatollah: The First Battle in America's War with Militant Islam* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006), p. 615.

4. Entezam survived in prison until 1997, when he was released and then imprisoned again the following year for another eight years. He remains under virtual house arrest. In another irony, the students did *not* find Cave's memorandum in which he briefed Yazdi and Entezam about Iraq's invasion preparations. Cave had burned the embassy's copy after cabling it to Washington.