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Mubarak's Last Gasps

From Counter-Attack to Departure Day

By ESAM AL-AMIN

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According to the CIA's declassified documents and records, senior CIA operative, Kermit Roosevelt, paid \$100,000 to mobsters in Tehran, in early August 1953, to hire the most feared thugs to stage pro-Shah riots.

Other CIA-paid men were brought weeks later, on August 19, into Tehran in buses and trucks to take over the streets, topple the democratically elected Iranian government, and restore Shah Reza Pahlavi to his thrown. It took the people of Iran 26 years, enormous sacrifices, and a popular revolution to overthrow the imposed, corrupt and repressive rule of the Shah.

This lesson was not lost on the minds of a small clique of officials who were meeting in desperation in the afternoon of Monday, Jan. 31, 2011, in Cairo. According to several sources including former intelligence officer Col. Omar Afifi, one of these officials was the new Interior minister, Police Gen. Mahmoud Wagdy, who as the former head of the prison system, is also a torture expert. He asked Hosni Mubarak, the embattled president to give him a week to take care of the demonstrators who have been occupying major squares around the country for about a week.

Not only he had to rapidly reconstitute his security forces, which were dispersed and dejected in the aftermath of the massive demonstrations engulfing the country, but he also had to come up with a quick plan to prevent the total collapse of the regime.

The meeting included many security officials including Brig. Gen. Ismail Al-Shaer, Cairo's security chief, as well as other security officers. In addition, leaders of the National Democratic Party (NDP)- the ruling party- including its Secretary General and head of the Consultative Assembly (upper house of Parliament), Safwat El-Sherif, as well as Parliament Speaker, Fathi Sorour, were briefed and given their assignments. Similarly, the retained Minister of Information, Anas Al-Feky, was fully apprised of the plan.

By the end of the meeting each was given certain tasks to regain the initiative from the street; to end or neutralize the revolution; and to defuse the most serious crisis the regime has ever faced in an effort to ease the tremendous domestic and international pressures being exerted on their president.

They knew that eyes around the world would be focused on the massive demonstrations called for by the youth leading the popular revolution while promising million-strong marches on Tuesday, Feb. 1. True to their promise the pro-democracy groups drew a remarkable eight million people (ten percent of the population) throughout Egypt on that day.

People from every age, class, and walk of life assembled and marched in every province and city by the hundreds of thousands: two million in Tahrir Square in Cairo, one million in Martyrs Square in Alexandria, 750 thousand in downtown Mansoura, and a quarter million in Suez, just to name a few. It was an impressive show of strength. This time, they demanded not only the immediate removal of Mubarak but also the ouster of the whole regime.

An evil plan devised

As the fierce determination of the Egyptian people to remove their autocratic president became apparent, governments around the world began pressuring Mubarak to step down and be replaced by his newly appointed Vice President, the former head of intelligence, Gen. Omar Suleiman. President Barak Obama, for example, dispatched over the last weekend former U.S. Ambassador, Frank Wisner, a close friend to Mubarak to deliver such warning.

Wisner indeed delivered a firm but subtle message to Mubarak that he ought to announce that neither he nor his son would be presidential candidates later this year. He also urged him to transfer his powers to Suleiman. Western governments have been alarmed by the deterioration of the situation in Egypt and were trying to give their preferred candidate, Gen. Suleiman, the upper hand before events favor another candidate that might be less amenable to Israel and the West, and therefore shift the strategic balance of powers in the region.

On Saturday Jan. 29, The National Security Council advised the president to ask Mubarak in no uncertain terms to immediately step down. However, Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel and King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, whom the president consulted, strenuously objected and pleaded for time to allow Mubarak to stay in power at least until he finishes his term in September.

Openly criticizing Obama, former Israeli Defense minister, Binyamin Ben-Eliezer, a longtime friend of Mubarak, said, "I don't think the Americans understand yet the disaster they have pushed the Middle East into." The Israeli lobby and Saudi Ambassador Adel Al-Jubeir went overdrive and intensified their lobbying efforts in Congress in order to exert immense pressure on the administration. Reluctantly, the U.S. president relented.

Meanwhile, the last touches of a crude plan to abort the protests and attack the demonstrators were being finalized in the Interior Ministry. In the mean time, the leaders of the NPD met with the committee of forty, which is a committee of corrupt oligarchs and tycoons, who have taken over major sections of Egypt's economy in the last decade and are close associates to Jamal Mubarak, the president's son. The committee included Ahmad Ezz, Ibrahim Kamel, Mohamad Abu el-Enein, Magdy Ashour and others.

Each businessman pledged to recruit as many people from their businesses and industries as well as mobsters and hoodlums known as *Baltagies* – people who are paid to fight and cause chaos and terror. Abu el-Enein and Kamel pledged to finance the whole operation. Meanwhile, the Interior Minister reconstituted some of the most notorious officers of his secret police to join the counter-revolutionary demonstrators slated for Wednesday, with a specific plan of attack the pro-democracy protesters.

About a dozen security officers, who were to supervise the plan in the field, also recruited former dangerous ex-prisoners who escaped the prison last Saturday, promising them money and presidential pardons against their convictions. This plan was to be executed in Cairo, Alexandria, Suez, Port Said, Damanshour, Asyout, among other cities across Egypt.

By Tuesday evening, Mubarak gave a speech in response to the massive demonstrations of the day. He pledged not to seek a sixth term, while attacking the demonstrators and accusing them of being infiltrated, in an indirect reference to the Muslim Brotherhood. Nevertheless, he pledged to complete his term and that he would not leave under pressure.

Although he pledged not to run, he was silent about whether or not his son would be a candidate. He ended his 10 minute address by giving his nation a grave warning that the situation was extremely dangerous, and that the country would face either "stability or chaos," presenting himself as the embodiment of the former. Leaders of the pro-democracy demonstrators immediately rejected his characterization and insisted that he leave power.

Although Sen. John Kerry, the Chairman of the Senate Relations Committee, called publicly on President Mubarak two days earlier to disavow any plans for his son to seek

the presidency, the Egyptian president ignored his call. However, a former senior intelligence aide, Mahmoud Ali Sabra, who used to present daily briefs to Mubarak for 18 years (1984-2002), said publicly on Al-Jazeera that Mubarak has indeed been grooming his son to become president since at least 1997. Although Jamal had no official title in the government, Sabra stated that Mubarak asked him to present these daily intelligence reports to no one in the government except to him and his son.

Sabra also described how Mubarak was disturbed after the first stage of the 2000 Parliamentary elections, when the Muslim Brotherhood won a majority of seats. He then ordered his Interior Minister to manipulate the elections in the subsequent stages and forge the results in order to put NDP on top.

Shortly after the besieged president's address to his nation around midnight on Tuesday, the baltagies were unleashed on the pro-democracy demonstrators in Alexandria and Port Said beating and clubbing them in a rehearsal for what was to come the following day at Tahrir Square.

Tahrir or Liberation Square has been the center of action in Cairo throughout the protests. It's the largest square in the country located in downtown Cairo where millions of demonstrators have been gathering since Jan. 25. Eight separate entrances lead to it including the ones from the American Embassy and the famous Egyptian museum.

Around 2 PM on Wednesday Feb. 2, the execution of the plan of attack ensued in earnest. Over three thousand baltagies attacked from two entrances with thousands of rocks and stones thrown at the tens of thousands of peaceful demonstrators gathered in the square, while most attackers had shields to defend themselves against the returning rocks. While a few were armed with guns, all baltagies were armed with clubs, machetes, razors, knives or other sharp objects.

After about an hour of throwing stones, the second stage of the attacks proceeded as dozens of horses and camels came charging at the demonstrators in a scene reminiscent of the battles of the middle ages. The pro-democracy people fought back by their bare hands, knocking them from their rides and throwing their bodies at them. They subsequently apprehended over three hundred and fifty baltagies, turning them over to nearby army units.

They confiscated their IDs which showed that most assailants were either NDP members or from the secret police. Others confessed that they were ex-cons who were paid \$10 to beat up the demonstrators. The camel and horse riders confessed to have been paid \$70 each.

The third stage of the attack came about three hours later when dozens of assailants climbed the roofs in nearby buildings and threw hundreds of Molotov cocktails at the pro-democracy protesters below, who immediately rushed to extinguish the fires. They eventually had to put out two fires at the Egyptian museum as well. By midnight the

thugs started using tear gas and live bullets from a bridge above the protesters killing five people and injuring over three dozens, ten seriously.

Interestingly, one hour before the planned assault the army announced to the demonstrators on national TV that the government “got the message” and then implored the protesters to end the demonstrations and “go home.” But when the protesters begged the army units to interfere during the brutal attacks that persisted for 16 hours, the army declared that it was neutral and partially withdrew from some entrances despite its promise to protect the peaceful and unarmed demonstrators.

By morning, the Tahrir Square resembled a battleground with at least 10 persons killed and over 2,500 injured people, 900 of which required transport to nearby hospitals as admitted by the Health ministry. Most of the injured suffered face and head wounds including concussions, burns and cuts because of the use of rocks, iron bars, shanks, razors, and Molotov cocktails. Al-Jazeera TV and many other TV networks around the world were broadcasting these assaults live to the bewilderment of billions of people worldwide.

Before the attacks started that afternoon, the Minister of Information had also executed his part of the plan. He called on all ministry employees to demonstrate on behalf of Mubarak in an upscale neighborhood in Cairo. He then asked the Egyptian state TV to broadcast live- for the first time in nine days of continuous demonstrations- the ensuing confrontation between the protesters and the government-sponsored thugs, in order to show the Egyptian people what chaos would bring to the country as Mubarak had warned them in his address just the previous night.

The battle plan was for the baltagies to block seven entrances of the Tahrir Square, leaving only the American Embassy entrance open for the thugs to push back the demonstrators in order for them to come so close to the Embassy that its guards surrounding it would have to shoot at them and thus instigate a confrontation with the Americans.

But the heroic steadfastness of the demonstrators lead by the youth was phenomenal as they not only withstood their ground but also chased them away every time they were pushed. By the next morning the assault fizzled and the whole world condemned the Mubarak regime for such wickedness, cruelty, and total disregard of human life.

“The events in Tahrir Square and elsewhere strongly suggest government involvement in violence against peaceful protesters,” said Kenneth Roth, executive director of the Human Rights Watch. “The U.S. and other allies should make clear that further abuse will come at a very high price.”

By that afternoon every major Western country has called for Mubarak to step down including the U.S, the European Union, the U.K, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Norway and many others. In Washington, White House spokesman Robert Gibbs called the

violence by the pro-Mubarak crowd “outrageous and deplorable” and warned that it should stop immediately.

On the other hand, by daybreak, hundreds of thousands of Egyptians joined their fellow pro-democracy activists in order to show support and solidarity. The leaders of the protests have already called for massive demonstrations on Friday across Egypt after congregational prayers, calling the event “Departure Day,” in a reference to the day they hoped to force Mubarak to resign or leave the country.

In an attempt to contain the damage about what happened in Tahrir Square on Wednesday, Prime Minister Ahmad Shafiq offered his apology to the people. He also denied his government’s involvement, calling for a prompt investigation and swift punishment for those who were responsible. Moreover, Vice President Suleiman appeared on state TV offering an olive branch to the opposition, declaring that all of their demands would be accepted by the government, while ignoring the main demand of Mubarak’s ouster. He then pleaded for time to implement political reforms.

He also appealed to the nation to allow President Mubarak to complete his term until the upcoming presidential elections in September. For the first time, the regime then vowed that the president’s son would not be a candidate. He further called for dialogue with all opposition parties.

Ahmad Maher, 29, the national coordinator of the “April 6 Youth” movement, the primary group that called for and organized the uprising, immediately rejected the offer by Suleiman, calling it a trick to abort the revolution. He insisted on the main demand of removing Mubarak from power before any negotiations could take place.

All other opposition groups, including the popular Muslim Brotherhood, followed suit. Friday’s “Departure Day” is promising to be a decisive day where the pro-democracy demonstrators vowed to continue the protests until Mubarak is ousted.

Meanwhile, the regime in a last-ditch effort to limit the effect of the demonstrations have asked all foreign journalists to leave the country before D-Day (Departure Day), and dismantled all cameras from Tahrir Square. There is not a single network in Cairo today that can broadcast the event live. Clearly, this last ploy was designed to intimidate the demonstrators who insisted that they would not cowed.

Likely scenarios: remember Marcos?

The Obama administration is evidently very frustrated with Mubarak because of his stubbornness and obliviousness to reality. President Obama bluntly declared on Tuesday, “It is my belief that an orderly transition must be meaningful, it must be peaceful and it must begin now.”

Since the crisis began ten days ago, the U.S, which has been supporting and subsidizing the Egyptian regime for three decades, expected that its beleaguered ally would listen to

its advice, limit the damage, pack up and leave. But his performance and ruthless behavior have endangered its other allies in the region, and caused long-term damage to its strategic interests, namely, Israel, stability, oil, and military bases.

Egypt was one of the most important countries and allies to the U.S. in the region. It was a cornerstone in its strategic equation. If Egypt were to be lost to a more independent leader, the strategic balance of power in the region would radically shift against America's interest or its allies.

In turn this change might cause a major re-assessment of the long-term American strategy in the region, especially in regard to policies related to Israel and counter-terrorism. Thus, Vice President Suleiman is considered by the U.S. and other Western allies, as the best person who could fulfill this role of maintaining the status quo. Thus, the more Mubarak maneuvered to stay in power, the less likely this prospect would be realized.

Ambassador Wisner, who has been in Egypt since Saturday, was asked to deliver to Mubarak an ultimatum from Obama. It would be similar to the one given to Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines in 1989 by then President George H. W. Bush. Mubarak would be told that he should resign and transfer his presidential powers to his vice president.

If he refuses, the army would then remove him anyway, while Western governments would go after the billions in American and European assets that he and his sons have hoarded over the years. He would also be told that he would face a certain indictment by the International Criminal Court on War Crimes against his people. Surely, Mubarak would be expected to choose the first option and leave either to Germany under a medical pretext, or join his two sons in London.

As Omar Suleiman is promoted to become the new President of Egypt, this appointment will be hailed by Western governments and media as a great victory by the pro-democracy forces and as the expression of the will of the Egyptian people. Political and economic reforms will then be promised to the people, in an effort that allows great leeway in internal reforms but keep foreign policy intact.

However, this move will undoubtedly divide the country. The leaders of the revolution, namely the youth, who have led the demonstrations for the past two weeks and sacrificed blood for it, would continue to press for total and clean break from the previous regime. They will also be supported by popular and grass-roots movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood.

On the other hand, other opposition movements, which have little or no popular support but were largely created by the Mubarak regime as a décor to portray a democratic image, will accept Suleiman and embrace the new arrangements in order to have a seat at the table and get a piece of the pie. The Egyptian public will likely be split as well.

With the monopoly of the government over the state media and other means of government information control, the new regime may bet on getting a slack from the public while it consolidates its power.

Alternatively, the youth movement, which started its march towards freedom and democracy using social media and independent means of communications, while spearheading the most robust and forceful democracy movement in the whole region, may actually have the last word.