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## John Limbert

*The students who occupied the U.S. Embassy provide in their recent work, Revelations from the Nest of Espionage, an unintended window into the obscure politics and ideology of the occupation.*

# Nest of Spies: Pack of Lies

More than two years after the seizure of the American Embassy in Teheran, the identities, organization, and motivation of the Muslim Student Followers of the Imam's Policy remain largely unknown. Published material about the students is fragmentary and speculative. For example, in an interview with a Greek investigator, the students did little except repeat their slogans ("all of our problems are from America") and reveal an ignorance of history, religion, and world affairs.<sup>1</sup>

In December 1980, an Iranian newspaper (*Mojahed*) published a six-part account of the occupation written by one of the participants. This report, by a *Mojahedin-e-Khalq* sympathizer, discussed the mechanics and organization of the occupation and the factional disputes among the students. The writer described the relationships between the student leadership and outside political groups, nota-

bly the Islamic Republican party (IRP), attacking the student leaders and their IRP supporters as "opportunists" and "monopoly-seekers."

In addition to these sources, the students' own published works, the so-called *Revelations from the Nest of Espionage*, provide an unintended window into the obscure politics and ideology of the occupation. These books are collections of purported embassy documents with Persian translations and commentaries by the students.<sup>2</sup>

### A Personal Note

I first saw the *Revelations* in February 1980 while captive in the chancellery basement. Several of the students had already shown me a copy of a letter allegedly from the director of Radio Free Europe to National Security Af-

fairs Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, in which the writer advocated harsh measures against Iran, including clandestine support of Ayatollah Shari'at-Madari's partisans in Tabriz, provocative Persian-language broadcasts on the Voice of America, and assassination of members of the ruling Iranian Revolutionary Council. I pointed out to the students that both the format and the language revealed the letter to be an obvious forgery.

Several days later, Akbar, a serious young man of about 25, brought me two books saying, "Are these forgeries too?" These books, entitled *Exposure of Imperialism* and *The Union of the CIA, Mossad, and Savak* were collections of purported embassy cables, memoranda, and other written material with Persian translations and commentaries by the students.

### **Seek and Ye Shall Find**

The triviality of these "revelations" and the bombast of the accompanying commentaries were both amusing and, under the circumstances, depressing. The students claimed to have found in the embassy evidence of an American plot to destroy the Iranian revolution. They apparently understood neither the meaning nor the purpose of embassy reporting. Their so-called evidence was either trivial (routine trade promotion material), out-of-date (material from the early and mid-70s), or innocuous (notes of routine meetings between American diplomats and Iranian government officials). There were also some analyses of Iranian political conditions and material about the admission of the shah.

Much of this so-called incriminating evidence was absurd. One purported cable asked Washington to inform the embassy of any plans to commemorate the fifteenth Islamic century in the United States so that the Iranian government and cultural organizations could be informed of foreign recognition of this important historical event. It is worth quoting the students' commentary on this message.

Why do they [the Americans] try to mislead public opinion by observing the *hijra* festival?

Is this not evidence of the subtlety of America's hypocritical actions toward its client states?

What favorable conditions does America see in Islamic Iran for concealing its own filthy nature that it dares to observe a *hijra* festival?

Is it not time for our naive people to understand the unclean and devious character of this great Satan and resist it with all of their power?<sup>3</sup>

There was also a purported memorandum to the files dated November 4, 1979 (the day of the attack) noting the visit of an Iranian businessman to the embassy commercial section. He told the embassy officer that he was waiting for Central Bank permission to transfer about \$4 million abroad. The student commentator concludes that "this document shows the embassy's relationships with organizations for smuggling money out of Iran." After the translation of this "evidence," the commentator adds,

The crucial point here is that between the lines of the above letter the following sentence is typed almost invisibly: "Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their country!" [emphasis in the original]. From the date it will be noted that they did not cease their plotting even after the revolution.<sup>4</sup>

Under different circumstances I would have found this material amusing. When Akbar later asked my opinion of these books I told him that any impartial group would laugh at their claims of American plots based on the evidence of trivial and outdated reports and routine diplomatic correspondence. I told him that some of the material could be legitimately criticized for poor judgment or for misreading of Iranian conditions. Such weaknesses, however, were our problem, not his.

According to the students' view of the world, as recorded in these collections, the entire U.S. government did nothing except plot against the Iranian revolution. Their

self-centered mentality converted everything at the embassy into evidence of counter-revolutionary conspiracies. The embassy cashier's funds became "presorted payments for their spies," and the embassy liquor storeroom became "evidence [of what?] at a future trial." Embassy reports of the existence of an international counterfeiting ring printing dollars and marks in Istanbul and smuggling them into Teheran somehow became:

... a document incriminating that world-devouring monster America, the ghoulish whose vertebrae are villainy, treachery, crime, theft, forgery, deceit, massacres, plots, coups, etc.<sup>5</sup>

The students claimed that their evidence proved America continued to support the shah after the revolution, even to the extent of providing him a luxurious villa in the United States. This American treachery is exposed in the following letter:

December 7, 1978

The Honorable William H. Sullivan  
Ambassador  
U.S. Embassy  
Teheran, Iran

Dear Mr. Sullivan:

In light of recent events in your area, it occurred to us that His Royal Highness might be interested in purchasing a *large* parcel of land (with home) in this country which is both centrally located, yet remote in its situation on our California Coast.

The enclosed brochure fully describes the property. If appropriate, please do inform His Royal Highness of its availability for purchase.

Most cordially,

Lynn Grabhorn  
Associate  
Fountain Realty  
Morro Bay, California

All these diatribes against the United States appeared to be a childish effort by the students to retroactively justify their seizing the embassy and holding hostages by producing evidence of American plots against the revolution. My first judgment was that we were in

the hands of mental nine-year-olds who, in the absence of adult authority, had taken over the school with the approval of their senile, indulgent, 80-year-old grandfather. My conversations with the students confirmed this judgment. Most were the children of unsophisticated, lower-middle-class, provincial families. They had come to Teheran from such places as Gonabad, Nishapur, Miyaneh, and Kazeroun. Their politics were a mixture of paranoia and mindlessly repeated slogans. Their gullibility and simplicity made them ideal followers of a fascist demagogue.<sup>7</sup>

### Reconsideration

A second reading of the *Revelations* and events of the past year in Iran—the fall of President Bani-Sadr, the battles between the revolutionary guards and the *Mojahedin-E-Khalq*, and the occupation of government posts by some of the student leaders—suggest that the embassy occupation, despite its apparent irrationality and its publicly stated anti-American goals, also had a well-defined political purpose unrelated to the United States. The publication of these books required more than the ability to compose semiliterate anti-American invectives. The selectivity and the consistency of purpose of the authors of the *Revelations* indicates the existence among our captors of a politically astute, elite group of leaders for whom taking the embassy and holding hostages were part of a sophisticated political strategy.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the apparent absurdity of many statements in the *Revelations*, the students who produced these volumes treated the material with a subtlety far beyond the limited mental capacities of most of our captors, whose duties were limited to taking us to the bathroom. These leaders probably never intended that these purported documents prove anything against the United States by common standards of evidence. Even the most ridiculous accusations had a more subtle purpose: to manipulate a politically unsophisticated, Iranian audience inside and outside the embassy walls. This audience, which in-

cluded Ayatollah Khomeini himself, was ignorant of the customary functions of an embassy. In the emotional atmosphere of revolutionary Iran, the sensational revelation of the existence of a paper shredding machine in the U.S. embassy, combined with vague references to "Satanic plots," could convince this gullible audience to mobilize in defense of their revolution against Central Intelligence Agency conspiracies. The street mobs of Teheran and the young students at the embassy were an ideal audience for the student leaders' wild accusations against the "nest of espionage."

Those who wrote the commentaries cited above understood how to exploit an ignorant, volatile public opinion. The absurd charges against the embassy and the United States were not (as I first imagined) the product of stupidity. They were instead part of a cynical manipulation of an emotional audience for the purpose of building support for the embassy occupation and for the subsequent political offensive of the students and their allies.

The *Revelations* were not all crude misrepresentations. When necessary the students could treat complex material with both subtlety and sophistication. For example, in the case of Abbas Amir-Entezam, the students claimed to have collected, translated, and arranged chronologically all material related to his contacts with the American Embassy.<sup>9</sup> This analysis and organization was obviously not the work of naive 20-year-olds, some of whom could barely speak or write correct Persian.

### Political Purposes

The content and organization of the *Revelations* suggest that the student leadership was cooperating with individuals and groups outside the embassy in a planned, deliberate political campaign. The targets of this campaign were the Iranian pro-revolution "liberals" who opposed *akhundbazi*—the imposition of an obscurantist brand of Islam on Iranian society. Specifically, they objected to the undermining of women's rights, limitations on freedom of the press, and the abuses of the

revolutionary courts. The students denounced these liberals in the following terms:

[The liberals] desperately sought to impose Western values. Although this group called itself nationalist, intellectual, radical, etc., it was fundamentally allied to America. America, the great Satan and the number-one enemy of our nation, used these alienated, Westernized intellectuals as its secure power base during the 25 years that it ruled Iran.<sup>10</sup>

The students used embassy records to brand the liberals as American agents. They scoured the files to find the names of their rivals in any context. Innocuous meetings or statements became weapons directed against such political figures as R. Moghaddam-Maraghe'i, Ahmad Madani, and Karim Lahiji, and religious leaders such as Ayatollah Tabataba'i Qomi, one of the two senior clerics of Mashhad.<sup>11</sup>

The *Revelations* operated on several levels. While the students were publishing absurd claims about American plots, they selected their Iranian targets with care. In April 1980, Ayatollah Qomi told the Teheran newspaper *Bamdad* that Islam took no position on the issue of taking hostages. In other words, the hostage-taking at the American Embassy could not be justified in Islam. Immediately afterwards, Ayatollah Qomi was criticized for this opinion by the students and by Sheikh Khalkhali, the famous hanging judge. The students also revealed an alleged embassy report of Ayatollah Qomi's dissatisfaction with the abuses of the revolutionary courts and with Ayatollah Khomeini's disregard for the opinions of other senior religious leaders.

During the weeks before the attack on the embassy, the small group of Iranian moderates had been increasingly outspoken in criticizing the growing authoritarianism and intolerance in the revolution. These criticisms appeared in the press, on radio and television, in public meetings, and in the constitutional debates within the Council of Experts. Moghaddam-Maraghe'i was among the most articulate critics of the *velayat-e-faghih* (gov-

ernment by theologians), the establishment of a permanent revolutionary guard corps, and the alienation of the non-Shi'ite and non-Persian-speaking minorities. Thus, it was no accident that the students used an alleged report of Moghaddam-Maraghe'i's meeting with the U.S. State Department Iranian affairs director, Henry Precht, to make their attack.

Mr. Moghadam-Maraghe'i intended, in any way possible, to return the criminal America . . . to rule the nation again.

Mr. Maraghe'i so sympathetically advises the American spies to meet with Imam Khomeini so they may operate in Iran.<sup>12</sup>

### A Marriage of Convenience

The original planning for the embassy seizure probably did not foresee using purported embassy documents to attack the embattled Iranian moderates. A few days after the occupation the spiritual adviser to the students, Musavi-Kho'inha, reportedly said that there was no plan to disclose embassy documents. The disclosure was more likely the result of a *de facto* alliance between the student leaders and a coalition of outside groups who shared their *anti-intellectual, absolutist ideology*. These groups included the Islamic Societies in ministries and universities; the *Hezbollah* (gangs of right-wing thugs); and the opportunistic politicians of the Islamic Republican party. All of these groups recognized the possibilities of using the popular emotions stirred up by the embassy occupation to attack those Iranians who opposed the authoritarian version of the Islamic Republic.

In return for the students' cooperation, the IRP and its allies provided the political support the students needed to keep control of the embassy and hostages. This support took various forms: the party arranged messages of support and organized crowds to demonstrate in front of the embassy; it helped the students defy Qotbzadeh and Bani Sadr on the issue of the United Nations Commission in March 1980; it assisted the students' moving the hostages around the country after the aborted rescue; and it allowed the students to use the

facilities of Evin and Komiteh prisons in Teheran.<sup>13</sup>

One of the students participating in the occupation described his disillusionment when he realized "we were to an extent a tool in the hands of people who were interested only in benefiting from this movement for self-interest and anti-Islamic interests." He noted that the number of expressions of outside support for the occupation varied according to the state of relations between the students and the IRP.<sup>14</sup> This participant believed that Ayatollah Beheshti, secretary-general of the IRP, was the villain who controlled the *Revelations* for his own political purposes. Whatever Beheshti's connection to the students' publications, he was somehow exempt from their attacks. They never published reports of meetings between him and U.S. officials before and after the revolution. The substance of these meetings was no less incriminating than those that produced wild accusations against Beheshti's rivals. By December 1980, when *Mojahed* finally printed an account of Beheshti's meeting with Precht and Laigen on October 29, 1979, there was almost no reaction in Teheran.<sup>15</sup>

This selectivity in choosing political targets suggests that the student leadership, despite its apparent irrationality, had a well-defined strategy that it pursued in coordination with supporters outside the embassy. This strategy, which remained below the surface of events, may explain why the students remained silent about the information they claimed to have about such matters as:

- Meetings between U.S. officials and certain religious leaders such as Montazeri and Beheshti.
- Embassy reporting on disturbances in Kurdistan, Khuzestan, and *Turkman-Sahra*.
- The Iranian military.<sup>16</sup>

Apparently, including these subjects in the *Revelations* would have conflicted with the students' political aims and alienated too many outside forces simultaneously. The students used sound tactics by making the liber-

als the primary target of their attacks. They chose the weakest, most vulnerable adversary. By not antagonizing Beheshti, the IRP, or the Iranian military, the students aimed to keep the support or neutrality of these centers of power. In the case of the Kurds and other ethnic minorities, mentors such as Kho'iniha may have advised the students against making accusations that would exacerbate sensitive and dangerous internal problems. Furthermore, rumors of unspecified evidence in student hands could be a means of pressuring uncooperative government or IRP officials.

Outside mentors not only helped the students select their targets, but also advised them on timing their attacks. Documents purporting to show Bani Sadr's contact with a CIA representative were not published until July 1981—after Bani Sadr's fall from power. According to the students' own account, Musavi-Kho'iniha advised them in late 1979 or early 1980 not to show their evidence to Khomeini. When further evidence became available in late April 1981 the students told Khomeini, who ordered them to withhold its publication. Khomeini withdrew his objections during Parliament's debates on Bani Sadr's impeachment two months later.

### **Personal Impressions**

From a hostage's viewpoint, the management of our captivity appeared disorganized and chaotic. There was much of that special Iranian quality of *sholugh* in which numerous leaders simultaneously give pointless orders to nonexistent followers. Much of this apparent disorganization, however, came from a deliberate policy of layering authority and of putting distance between the hostages and the student leadership. As a result, our contacts were limited to those students who performed the menial jobs of custody. Few of these students possessed a fraction of the knowledge required to produce the *Revelations*.

Those leaders I saw were, as might be expected, older, better educated, and far more sophisticated than the rank and file. Some had studied in the United States and were familiar with foreign writings on modern Iranian poli-

tics. One took my casual reference to Richard Cottam and immediately cited chapter and verse of his *Nationalism in Iran*, a book almost unknown outside a limited circle of Iranians. Sophistication and education—even American education—did not preclude fanaticism. The leaders were usually more fanatic than the followers, many of whom saw the whole episode as a student prank. The main concern of many of the followers was learning English and pleading with us not to speak ill of them after our release.

The leaders' tactics led occasionally to open expressions of dissatisfaction among the students, some of whom realized they were being manipulated for political purposes unrelated to the goals of the original occupation. I overheard one student say that he had been opposed to taking hostages from the beginning and had not joined the group to be a jailer. Another abandoned the cause, telling whoever would listen (including some of the hostages) that the original, Islamic purposes of their action had been perverted.

### **Conclusion**

Published materials suggest that few observers understood either the identity or purposes of the group that occupied the American embassy. One author called them *mujahedin*- and PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization)-trained. Another observer said that communist and PLO elements comprised "as much as 30 percent of the militant forces holding our hostages."<sup>18</sup> Although future evidence may change our views, the little we now know about the identities of the embassy captors does not support any of these theories.

The *Revelations from the Nest of Espionage* are an invaluable source for explaining who was occupying the embassy and why. These works relate the embassy occupation to the continuing struggle for power among groups with competing visions of Iranian society after the revolution. The students' selection, organization, and commentaries on the *Revelations* show them as part of a coalition of so-called Islamic groups and individuals with an authoritarian, anti-intellectual,

and absolutist ideology. This coalition, in addition to attacking the liberals, opposed the *mojahedin*, rarely mentioned the PLO, and showed no evidence of pro-communist sympathies. On the communists, one student commentary read as follows:

Another interesting point is the desire of the Russians to sell arms to the Shah's regime. Two years after the suppression of the revolutionary Muslim people's movement in 1963, we see the Russians more than willing to sell their sophisticated weapons to the Shah . . . [The Russians] sold the Shah some of the arms he wanted in order to preserve neighborly relations and with the approval of the Americans.

This matter should reveal the degree of sincerity of those who claim to be protectors of the liberation movements fighting against imperialism. How naive are those people who intend to fight America and attain independence by relying on Russia!<sup>19</sup>

The full story of the hostage-taking, like a full account of the Iranian revolution, may not be known for years. Based on the narrow window the *Revelations* provide into the motivation of the students, it appears that the leaders of the occupation were very different from the naive and misled 20-year-olds who had most contact with the hostages. Judged by the evidence of these books, the leaders were a dedicated, fanatic, and politically astute elite group able to manipulate a simple-minded public opinion and use support and guidance from allies outside the embassy. The main purpose of these publications was not to discredit the United States, but to destroy those Iranian nationalists, liberals, and intellectuals who did not share the view that the Iranian revolution should create a society based on a narrow, intolerant, and idiosyncratic vision of Islam.

TWO

### Notes

The author appreciates the advice and comments of Sha'ul Bakhsh of the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton University.

1. Christos P. Ioannides, "The Iranian Hostage Tak-

ers." *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 3, no. 3, Summer 1980.

2. In January and February 1982, the *Washington Post* printed some of these purported embassy documents. It is difficult to understand the *Post's* sensational treatment of material publicly available for over two years.
3. *The Exposure of Imperialism*, Teheran, n.d., pp. 65-66. I asked the students if the United States required their permission before it could observe the *hijra* festival.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38, 42.
5. *Revelations No. 5. Teheran, n.d.*, p. 4.
6. *Espionage Documents No. 7: The Relations of America and the Shah*, Teheran, n.d., p. 253.
7. Many reminded me of the students I had taught at Shiraz University 10 years before. Coming from the provincial towns of Fars—Fasa, Jahrom, Kazeroun, and Abadeh—their community and family values clashed (sometimes violently) with the casual and humanist university atmosphere. Earnest, naive, and confused, many of these students joined Islamic study groups and secretly read the works of Dr. Ali Shari'ati.
8. We still know very little about the leadership cadre of our captors. Articles in *Mojahed* give some information. John Stempel (*Inside the Iranian Revolution*, University of Indiana Press, 1981, pp. 226, 330) claims that PLO allies of the students helped plan the takeover. But he provides no supporting evidence for this claim beyond an ethnic slur that implies no purely Iranian operation would have gone so smoothly.
9. Abbas Amir-Entezam was deputy prime minister and ambassador to Sweden in the provisional government. On the basis of purported embassy documents he was sentenced to life imprisonment as an American agent. Cf. "U.S. in Diplomatic Cross Purposes." *Washington Post*, Feb. 6, 1982.
10. *Exposures of Imperialism*, no. 2, p. 26.
11. Rahmatollah Moghaddam-Maraghe'i, leader of the Radical Movement, after the revolution was governor-general of East Azarbaijan and then a deputy in the Council of Experts. He was identified with the moderate policies of Ayatollah Shari'at-Madari. State Department Iranian affairs director Henry Precht visited Maraghe'i in late October 1979 over the objections of embassy officers that such a visit would not help the fragile position of the moderate political forces. Admiral Ahmad Madani was chief of the Iranian navy and governor-general of Khuzestan. In Iran's first presidential election he ran second to A.H. Bani Sadr. Lahiji was chairman of the Iranian Human Rights Committee. Ayatollah Tabataba'i-Qomi was widely known to oppose the arbitrary actions of the revolutionary courts and the extremists in the Council of Experts.
12. *Exposures of Imperialism No. 2*, pp. 26-27.
13. Although the existence of this understanding is speculative, the statements of Moghaddam-

Maraghe'i and the other moderates were clearly resented by the IRP. At an IRP rally at Friday prayers on October 26, 1979, I saw numerous banners with slogans attacking the intellectuals and threatening to break their pens (or their legs, depending on the translation of the Persian *qalam*).

14. *Mojahed*, December 2, 1980.

15. *Mojahed*, December 2, 1980. Several of the students told me of their dislike and distrust of Beheshti. Their leaders, however, apparently understood the dangers of opposing someone of his stature. The lack of reaction to the *Mojahed* article indicates both Beheshti's power and the extent to which the IRP was

able to manipulate the "popular" response to the students' attacks.

16. *Newsweek* (December 28, 1981) suggests that larger quantities of sensitive military documents were lost. Little if any of this material appeared in the *Revelations*.

17. Scott Armstrong, "The Shah's Last Days," *Washington Post*, February 3, 1982.

18. Congressman George Hansen, letter to Alexander Haig, January 30, 1981, *Congressional Record*, vol. 127, no. 23, February 16-17, 1981.

19. *Revelations*, vol. 8. Introduction.



## New Washington Papers from CSIS

### **Saudi Arabian Modernization: The Impact of Change on Stability, by John A. Shaw and David E. Long**

This study is the first comprehensive assessment of the economic and political implications of Saudi Arabian modernization. It analyses in detail the strengths and weaknesses of the Saudi development effort and the interaction between that development and Saudi oil policy. The paper outlines the successes and failures of the First and Second Five Year Plans, the inherent and potential problems in the Third Plan, and gives a detailed breakdown of the Saudi manpower problem. The paper also analyses the various elements that make up Saudi society and the concerns and imperatives that motivate each of them as Saudi Arabia undergoes one of the most accelerated modernization efforts ever undertaken. Finally, the authors provide a guarded look at the prospects for the House of Saud over the next decade. (*Washington Paper #89*. Praeger Publishers \$6.95. Available from CSIS.)

### **Soviet Energy and Western Europe, by Angela Stent**

Western Europe's energy interdependence with the USSR increased significantly in the 1970s. The members of the European Community are committed to greater energy trade with the Soviet Union and believe that it is in the West's interests to participate in the development of Soviet energy sources. The United States does not share this view and has unsuccessfully attempted to dissuade its allies from participating in the construction of a natural gas pipeline from Western Siberia to Europe, which would double Western Europe's dependence on Soviet gas. Professor Stent examines the energy trade between West Germany, France, Italy and the USSR over the past decade and discusses the details of the West Siberian pipeline, the U.S. objections to this project, and the European response to U.S. concerns. The author concludes that East-West energy interdependence is likely to remain a source of contention within the Atlantic Alliance in the coming years. (*Washington Paper #90*. Praeger Publishers \$6.95. Available from CSIS, Spring 1982.)