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What went wrong? One man's view of an Iranian debacle

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Following are excerpts from Manucher Ghorbanifar's message to President Reagan that Barbara Walters forwarded to the White House.

I. Background

When almost two years ago preliminary contacts were started to define a framework within which a dialogue could be started between the United States and the Islamic Republic, two main interrelated goals were outlined:

A. A slow process of normalization of relations between the two countries to counterbalance expansion of Soviet influence in Iran and in the region.

B. As within the ruling political and religious establishment in Iran, three main lines of political and religious thinking were competing for power; the aim was to strengthen those who would support such a normalization and opening to the West and in this context would give up the policy of export of revolution, subversion and any terrorist activity and seek at the same time an honorable solution to the Gulf War.

The problem of hostages and the arms deal was only a by-product of the process.

When both sides, the United States and the Islamic Republic, had come to the conclusion that a political dialogue was in the interest of both parties, the way to proceed to open the dialogue was as important as the decision itself. It was essential to act in such a way to keep this dialogue outside the power struggle which was taking place in Tehran and prevent the contacts with the United States from upsetting the power balance in Tehran and endangering the whole policy.

Naturally, attention had to be given to the particular characteristics of the Iranian regime and the different powers within it. At that time, there existed three main lines in Iran:

1. The radical line under Ayatollah Ali Meshkini and the prime minister, Mir Hossein Moussavi, who, despite his enmity with Western countries but because of Iran's ever increasing needs, wished to make contact with the West. He believed that such relations would lead to the delivery of arms in sufficient amounts to give Iran the upper hand in the Iran-Iraq war and himself a stronger position in the power struggle.

2. The balancing line under Hojatolislam Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, speaker of the Majlis [parliament], who basically believed that Iran . . . needed to create relations with the West. He therefore supervised all movements in this direction. But at the same time, he was enough involved to be able to move at a later stage to get for himself all the benefits.

3. [Ayatollah Hossein Ali] Montazeri and the conservative members of his line, who were strongly in favor of normalization of relations with the United States, [and who] were fully informed of the undertaking. Furthermore, it had been agreed that any profit from the arms deal would be made available to them to strengthen them in their fight to take power.

Several secret meetings were arranged between U.S. officials and leading members of the line with knowledge of Montazeri. As the power struggle developed in Tehran, substantial payments financed by loans were made to this group in Iran, with the hope the funds would be recovered at a later stage from arms sales. Consequently, the contacts were under way for more than 18 months without any leak. The whole thing was blown up when it suddenly became an issue in the power struggle in Tehran.

The undertaking progressed and reached some success: Three American hostages were freed. The necessity of opening a dialogue with the West was accepted in principle at the peak of the Iranian pyramid of power.

Most importantly, the two moderate wings, under Montazari and Rafsanjani, strengthened their positions within the Iranian regime. It became almost certain that following the death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, this wing, the symbol of extreme radicalism and anti-Americanism, would all but disappear from the political scene. Hojatolislam Ali Khamenei, president of the Islamic Republic, lost his power and Prime Minister Moussavi, one of the radical leaders, prepared himself to cooperate with the West and accept its points of view.

Unfortunately, at this point a certain amount of carelessness was introduced into the process. Without regard for the principle that a system can only function completely with the full cooperation of its members, and that members which work independently will bring about the collapse of the system, certain tendencies emerged to create a direct link between Iran and the United States. The following events spurred the materialization of this link:

The previous contacts were not making any progress . . . because among the spare parts [provided by] the Americans, some had been deficient and some important ones had not been delivered. Furthermore, the Iranians found out that the American prices were 500 percent [too high] and they submitted related documents to prove their claim.

Instead of trying to solve the problem, the Americans made the mistake of bypassing the previous channels of the prime minister. The CIA contacted Rafsanjani through his son and the ambassador of the Islamic Republic at the United Nations and tried to make a completely new deal.

The CIA did not act itself but put the new channel at the disposal of [National Security Adviser John] Poindexter. In this deal, the price of TOW missiles was much cheaper . . . and with the delivery of 500 TOW missiles, [American hostage David P.] Jacobson was freed.

Montazari and [his line] were informed of the new American approach . . . and became very suspicious of the American behavior, thinking that despite the previous American involvement with them, they may have changed their minds and were trying to eliminate Montazeri's line and finalize everything with Rafsanjani and his followers. To safeguard their position in the

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power struggle, they felt obliged to blow up the whole process.

The radicals under the prime minister, who had also taken the risk of getting involved, had the same feeling of being brushed aside by the Americans and almost panicked. As a result, the power struggle worsened and the whole policy collapsed.

This incident totally destroyed the undertakings and networks of communication which had been developed over 18 months. . . .

II. The current situation

All signs indicate that the regime is weakened and to a certain extent paralyzed. On one hand, the opening of a dialogue with the United States has not succeeded and therefore the regime is unable to tap the military resources of the West and get Western political support. On the other hand, the regime is suffering internal attacks because it has supposedly created [the relationship].

Extremist leaders and radical lines are taking the opportunity to direct constant attacks at the heads of the regime because of its contacts with the United States, a country still referred to in Iran as the "Great Satan. . . ."

Guardians of this revolution are asking many questions about the regime's policies and the regime is at loss to give any acceptable explanation.

For the first time, the legitimacy and credibility of the regime has been shaken even among its own followers. The power struggle continues and is becoming even worse, and for that reason the regime is unable to define a common policy to handle the crisis.

Rafsanjani has weakened the position of Montazeri. He even gained the support of Khomeini in the imprisonment of several of Montazeri's supporters. But his situation is not ideal. . . .

Moussavi, under the burden of executive difficulties, had laid aside his extremist thoughts. He often turns to weak and illogical solutions in the governing of the country's affairs. . . .

The other Iranian leaders are not in better positions. Within Iran, there is presently no religious or political leader who could conceivably take power after Khomeini's death. For this reason, his son, Hojatolislam Ahmad Khomeini, who preferred to remain in the background, is beginning to take a prominent role. . . . He has not only taken over the supervision of his father's office, but also that of Iran's two largest newspapers, Ettelaat and Kayhan.

The potential effects and dangers of this power vacuum cannot be estimated. If a solution is not found immediately, the death of Khomeini, Iran's old and ailing ruler, could plunge Iran into a civil war.

Another important issue must be considered: The rulers of the Soviet Union have never hidden their interest in expanding their sphere of influence to Iran, and the recent steps taken in this direction are clear to any observer.

However, the presence of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan has always pushed the Iranian government and its people to react strongly against the Soviet Union out of solidarity with the Afghan Moslems. But recent developments in this field — [Soviet leader Mikhail] Gorbachev's search for a solution to leave Afghanistan, . . . [Afghan Communist Party leader] Najibullah's visit to the Soviet Union, the Soviet foreign affairs minister's visit to Afghanistan, preparations for an amnesty in Afghanistan [and] murmurs of a possible date for the withdrawal of Soviet troops — have improved the Soviet Union's position in Iran.

Positive Soviet reaction to some economic proposals by President Khamenei may be an indication that the Russians — in order to prevent a religious, conservative, anti-Marxist, pro-Western regime in Iran — may be more ready to support the Islamic extremists. Although [it is] religious, this group would at least continue to destabilize Western and conservative Arab interests in the region.

In the present situation in Iran, the radical groups will try to overcome their difficulties and unify. They have already begun to attack the moderates for their attempts to create a dialogue with the United States. They are trying to use the situation as a tool to distance the moderates from the center of power.

In this respect, these groups are hoping . . . for the support of the Soviet Union. And since the present circumstances in the United States prevent the American government from intervening in any way, the Soviet Union has the possibility to take any steps it deems necessary. This is a very dangerous situation for Iran and the region, and immediate and serious action must be taken.

Nevertheless, as [former CIA Director] Richard Helms has said recently: "The United States may have lost a battle, but they now have a chance of winning the war." Especially since, in the words of another American observer, the present position of the Iranian leaders can be summarized in the following way:

"Powerful religious and political figures in Iran have been awakened to the possibility of a mutually profitable relationship with the United States, [and] also to the dangers of not having such a relationship.

"Even the Ayatollah Khomeini, while not moderating his view of the United States as the 'Great Satan,' is admitting that there might be some advantages to 'limited cooperation' with American intelligence agencies in monitoring the Soviet-Iranian border.

"Both the Iraqis and the Iranians have been shocked into the realization that prolonging their war, whatever its eventual outcome, is sure to have disastrous consequences for both."

III. Possible solutions

With respect to the present situation, the following solutions can be proposed for the Iranian problem:

1. The most immediate step is to support the moderate groups. As Rafsanjani has weakened himself and is a constant target for attacks from all sides, it is best to direct support toward Montazeri — especially since his moderate views and the consequent strikes against him from the governing body have made him an unpopular and oppressed figure. He has always been in favor of relations with the West, and the United States in particular. Furthermore, his belief in liberalism has led the Bazaris, a considerable force in Iranian internal affairs, to support him.

2. Other groups must be prevented from uniting and gaining power to solve the crisis in this way; this will aggravate the Iranian internal crisis. The fighting between them will sap their energy and strengthen the moderates.

3. Indirect contacts must be made with the radicals to involve them in the recent policy of creating relations with the West. In this way, they will be unable to distance themselves from the problem and will cease attacks on the moderates.

4. Constant and continuous assistance must be made to the moderates to encourage them to continue their relations with the West.

5. These policies shall lead to the total removal of extremist radical groups and in supporting Montazeri; this group would take complete control of the Iranian regime.

To summarize the situation, we have been at the center of the process and today our position is so strong that we are both in a key position for the expected developments in the future.

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It is well understood by all parties that your initiative was your own and you have not involved in any way Saudi Arabia. Your aim has been to make a contribution to counterbalance Soviet influence . . . and bring peace to the region. The same applies also to me.

The credibility and contacts we have established in the United States and in Iran are fully accepted by all parties involved. In order to [maintain] the momentum of the process, . . . Saudi Arabia has here an opportunity to take an important role through you without getting directly involved. This role is essential, as for some time American policy — although supporting the opening to Iran — may be paralyzed, and Saudi Arabia may fill through you the vacuum.

As we have already shown in the past, we will do everything in our power to realize the new policy.

With hope that this report gains your attention, I remain

Yours faithfully,
M. Ghorbanifar

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