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Political Prospects for Iran

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POLITICAL PROSPECTS FOR IRAN

THE PROBLEM

To examine the political prospects for Iran, particularly in the short term.

SUMMARY

With the resignation of Prime Minister Amini, the Shah is once more the focal point of the Iranian political scene. Before long he will almost certainly again become the direct target of political pressures and general discontent. While none of the Shah's opponents are likely for some time to summon up the will or develop the capability to overthrow him, they will be alert to exploit any fortuitous crisis which may occur, e.g., a popular outburst in Tehran or a Kurdish insurrection. As long as the Shah retains control of the army and the security forces, the chances are that he will be able to ride out such crises, but each time a serious crisis occurs, the possibility of his overthrow or even his voluntary abdication will be present.

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THE ESTIMATE

1. For some years our estimates have been pessimistic about the prospects for political stability in Iran. In SNIE 34-61, "Prospects for Iran," dated 23 February 1961, we pointed out that the growing political unrest of the urban middle class was being manifested increasingly openly, and we estimated that profound political and social change was virtually inevitable. We added that such change would most likely be revolutionary in nature. In SNIE 34-2-61, "Short-Term Outlook for Iran," dated 23 May 1961, soon after the advent of Prime Minister Ali Amini, we said that the chances of an evolutionary change would be enhanced should Amini be able to develop a position independent of the Shah and implement a major reform program. However, we also said that, if the Shah forced Amini into a puppet's role or replaced him with a politician subservient to the throne, unrest would be likely to break out again.

2. Ali Amini resigned as Prime Minister on 17 July 1962. As his successor, the Shah appointed Asadollah Alam, a long time retainer and personal friend, indicating that he himself intended to resume direct responsibility for governing Iran. Hence, though the implications of the change cannot yet be fully assessed, a new look should be taken at Iran's political prospects.

3. While Amini was in office, the Shah gave him a free hand except in military matters and in some aspects of foreign affairs. However, his Imperial Majesty was never sanguine that this experiment with an independent Prime Minister would be successful. In reasserting his own exclusive dominance, the Shah has acted in accordance with his long-standing belief that Iran is far from ready for a true parliamentary government and that the country can be ruled effectively only

by a strong man like himself who understands Iran's problems. The Shah's conviction is not without some foundation. The wealthy conservative elements, who for generations have constituted the established elite, have proven themselves virtually incapable of modernization and reform. The nationalist opposition is disunited and weak. The military has shown little talent for leadership. Apart from Amini, there are no political "independents" of any stature. Amini himself was never able to develop a political base of his own; such progress as he made in land reform and anticorruption could not have been accomplished without the Shah's backing.

4. As a result of Amini's departure from the government, the Shah is again the focal point of Iranian politics. He must not only cope with the budgetary problems which defeated Amini but must try to raise the substantial foreign aid needed for Iran's new development plan which begins this year. He must also deal with what most Iranians (including himself) feel is the less than satisfactory state of their country's relations with both the USSR and the West. Above all, he must once again bear directly the burden of unrest in the country: the disgruntlement of the upper classes who would un- in Amini's modest reforms, the disillusionment of many urban intellectuals whose hopes for modernization and reform have been set back, the almost certain increase in National Front agitation.

The Outlook

5. In these circumstances, the Shah is likely to press ahead by himself, sincerely trying to implement the anticorruption and land reform programs begun by Amini, but with-

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out either the will or the ability to deny special treatment to those whom he trusts or to whom he is bound by personal ties. He will attempt to avoid calling elections, since this would face him with the unhappy choice between rigging them, which would deepen popular discontent and could touch off disturbances, or, on the other hand, permitting free elections, which would give the nationalists an opportunity to carry their opposition into Parliament. He will be reluctant to share power with anyone; although he might recall Amiri to the Prime Ministership if popular pressure grows acute again, he will not consent to any such permanent impairment of his authority as would be implied in a meaningful compromise with the nationalists. His pre-occupation with military matters and his relative indifference to administrative and fiscal improvement will almost certainly persist. He will continue twisting and turning to relieve or deflect Soviet pressure, without however weakening his alliance with the West. He will press for greater military and political support from the U.S.

6. What all this means in terms of future political stability in Iran is less easy to estimate. The nationalists' distrust of the Shah is as implacable as is his of them. However, the number of militant nationalists is small and their organization weak. Hence, at least for some time to come, they will probably be incapable of posing a serious challenge to the Shah's authority. Eventually, the Tudeh, the Iranian Communist Party, may succeed in infiltrating the nationalist movement and welding it into a more formidable opposition. At the moment, however, the Tudeh is also small and weak and more severely repressed than the nationalists.

7. While the wealthy conservatives will continue their efforts to frustrate almost any kind of reform, they are likely to move directly against the Shah only if they feel that such a move is the sure way of preventing a

nationalist takeover. Most of the top military officers share the same inhibitions as their counterparts in the civilian "establishments," although there will probably continue to be a few of them, like the currently exiled General Timur Bakhtiar, former head of the Iranian Intelligence and Security Organization (SAVAK), who have a desire for personal power on their own and may fancy themselves destined for the role of the "man on a white horse." A move against the Shah by nationalist-minded junior or middle level military officers along the lines of the Nasser and Qassim coups in Egypt and Iraq is another possibility. If it did come to pass, its chances of success might be considerable, and its implications for the West might be unpleasant.

8. The large and fairly effective security apparatus which the Shah has developed—SAVAK, the national police, the gendarmerie, and the military intelligence service—has in the past enabled him to detect and deal with potential challenges by both military and civilian elements. He probably can continue to count on the loyalty of the security forces and the support of the bulk of the military to counter most clandestine plotting and organization. The military and security forces will also probably remain capable of dealing with more direct challenges to central authority. Much of the top leadership of these forces, however, is clique-ridden, and few officers appear to have any outstanding devotion to the Shah. The possibility will remain that some of these officers might fail the Shah in the face of a critical challenge or might even themselves become involved in plotting.

9. For some months, Soviet political elements will probably be busy assessing the new situation and determining their own attitude toward it. This will give the Shah a breath-

* Annex A contains a more detailed account of the Iranian security forces.

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ing spell. Before very long, however, the political pressure will almost certainly begin to build up once more. The nationalists will not be satisfied with anything the Shah does and will agitate for early elections—always likely times for crisis in Iran. If the Shah continues to press Amiri's land reform and anticorruption measures, many conservatives will seek to undermine his authority; and in a more fluid situation, the ambitions of individual military officers are likely to be sharpened again.

10 For some time to come, none of these groups is likely on its own to develop both the will and the capability to overthrow the Shah. However, the nationalists in particular will be alert to challenge his control given a favorable occasion, e.g. a popular outburst in Tehran, a Kurdish insurrection, or a particu-

larly juicy scandal in the royal court. In extreme circumstances, nationalist and conservative elements might enter into a brief opportunistic alliance against the Shah, but it is unlikely that any lasting or effective coalition will be worked out among various opposition groups. As long as the Shah retains control of the army, the chances are that he will be able to ride out such crises. Nevertheless, each time a serious crisis occurs, the possibility of his overthrow or his voluntary abdication will be present. (He has several times indicated that should he find it impossible to direct affairs in the manner he believes necessary, he would leave Iran.) Under these circumstances, Iran's political structure will continue to be extremely fragile. Over the longer term, profound political and social change appears virtually inevitable.

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ANNEX

INTERNAL SECURITY IN IRAN

1. Internal security in Iran is the responsibility of the following organizations:

a. The *National Security and Intelligence Organization (SAVAK)* has between 2,000-2,400 personnel in all categories. It is directly responsible to the Office of the Prime Minister and is the Shah's main instrument for detecting and countering political and subversive activity against the regime. Its Chief, Major General Hassan Pakravan, is a regular army officer who is also involved in governmental affairs on a day-to-day basis as a Deputy Prime Minister. SAVAK's apparatus extends over much of the country and it has penetrated most known opposition groups. While SAVAK is generally loyal to the Shah, some of its officials are involved in the cliques and personal jealousies which are common among senior Iranian military officers, and their objectivity and reliability is uncertain.

b. The *National Police*, numbering about 24,000, is responsible to the Ministry of the Interior for control of urban areas. It is probably able to provide normal security in Tehran in all situations short of a mass popular uprising. It is considerably less effective in the provincial cities. The intelligence collection unit has recently been reorganized, and its capability to detect potential disorder is probably growing.

c. The *Gendarmerie* is also responsible to the Ministry of the Interior. It numbers about 26,000 and is organized into military

type units. Most of its posts are small and widely scattered. It has a reputation for corruption and oppression which alienates it from the local people. While generally capable of maintaining normal security in rural areas, it would probably be of very limited effectiveness in the face of determined insurgency.

d. The *Counterintelligence Corps*, consisting of about 500 officers and men, is a unit of J-2, Supreme Commander's Staff. It has a number of trained specialists and is capably directed. Its main responsibility is the countering of threats to the military establishment, but it has also provided information in support of SAVAK's activities.

e. The *Frontier Guard* is another comparatively small unit of J-2, Supreme Commander's Staff. It is reasonably effective in its very limited field of detecting and turning over subversive elements entering the country.

2. Elements of the regular Iranian Armed Forces are available to cooperate with the security organizations in suppressing disorder. The army has in the past had considerable experience in dealing with tribal uprisings, and we believe it is probably capable of dealing with any indigenous insurgency likely to take place in Iran in the next few years. Its reliability and effectiveness in urban mob control is less certain, although some army units, notably the airborne battalions now stationed in Tehran have had some training and experience in this field.

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3 In general, we estimate that the security agencies, with appropriate support from the regular Armed Forces, are capable of maintaining internal security in Iran. However, they would be hard put to cope with a large-

scale Kurdish uprising which received considerable material support from the Soviet Union or with disorders on a national scale which might ensue from such a cause as the sudden death of the Shah.

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