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# A Decade of Appeasement

On July 24, 1985, Richard Murphy, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs in the Reagan administration, appeared before a hearing of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee of Europe and the Middle East. At the session's close, he proceeded to read unsolicited remarks about the People's Mojahedin of Iran into the record. Ambassador Murphy's statement read in part: "They are militantly Islamic, anti-democratic, anti-American, and continue to employ terrorism and violence as standard instruments of their policies."<sup>1</sup> This rather abrupt burst of accusations startled the committee members and reporters present. It was without precedent for a superpower to so attack a resistance movement to a religious, terrorist regime.

If, at the time, it was unclear why the United States would so strongly lash out at a movement which had already seen nearly 40,000 of its members and sympathizers executed by the ruling regime, the later release of the *Tower Commission Report* clarified the motives. In a letter to his contact, Manouchehr Ghorbanifar (an Iranian middleman) noted that the State Department had met one of the mullahs' nine demands for the release of the Americans taken hostage by pro-regime terrorists: "[Issuance] of an official announcement terming the Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization terrorist and Marxist..."<sup>2</sup>

A review of events preceding Richard Murphy's remarks sheds light on the subject. In 1984, senators Gary Hart, Edward Kennedy, and a number of representatives had written to Massoud Rajavi, to declare their support for the Iranian people's just Resistance. The regime's internal situation at the time was critical. These statements

of support, accompanied by thousands more from other countries, alarmed the mullahs, who subsequently made any normalization of relations with Western countries, including the United States, contingent upon curbing the activities of the Mojahedin and National Council of Resistance. Hence, missiles were not the only issue being negotiated by Oliver North and the mullahs; the Mojahedin's presence in the United States and congressional support were also on the agenda. As in other instances, those involved in the Irangate affair misinformed Congress about the Mojahedin, distorting facts to undermine their support.

In December 1984, the State Department had written to Rep. Lee Hamilton, then Chairman of the Subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East, to clarify its official views on the Mojahedin: "The Iranian Mujahedin remains a highly nationalistic, Islamic, left-wing and anti-western organization. . ."<sup>3</sup> The letter was followed by a more detailed, 11-page report. Even though it had been prepared in line with the overall Irangate policy - and therefore distorted the facts and raised false allegations against the Mojahedin - the report is in some respects enlightening, since it appeared in the early stages of Irangate, before the mullahs had formulated all of their demands, and contains several points later denied or questioned by the State Department.

In reference to the Mojahedin's extensive social base, for example, the report notes:

- An estimated 100,000 well-organized sympathizers marched through Tehran. The demonstration had been organized without access to any of the major media outlets and announced only in Mujahedin publications and by word of mouth. Simultaneous Mujahedin demonstrations took place throughout Iran.
- The Mujahedin unsuccessfully sought a freely elected constituent assembly to draft a constitution.
- [Masud] Rajavi was forced to withdraw when Ayatollah Khomeini ruled that only candidates who had supported the constitution in the December referendum- which the Mujahedin had boycotted - were eligible.
- Rajavi's withdrawal statement emphasized the group's efforts to conform to election regulations and reiterated the Mujahedin's intention to advance its political aims within the new legal system.
- The Mujahedin was the only leftist group with enough first-

round votes [in the parliamentary elections] to qualify candidates for the run-off. Rajavi and Khiabani seemed assured of winning... The group's allegation that vote tallies had been altered to deny Rajavi and Khiabani's victories, were ignored.

- On June 25 [1980], Khomeini responded by a major statement against the Mujahedin, claiming their activities would derail the revolution and bring back "U.S. dominance."

- [In mid-1971,] all the founding Mujahedin leaders were either imprisoned or executed.

- In 1973, a dedicated Marxist faction... murdered several Mujahedin leaders who preferred the Islamic content, as opposed to the Marxist orientation.

- [Masud] Rajavi—then imprisoned for anti-shah activities—was accepted as the Mujahedin's leader and chief ideologue.

- Several thousands of [the Mojahedin's] followers or alleged followers probably have been executed.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Khomeini Sets the Terms**

Apparently, the mullahs did not like this version. Six months later, on June 14, 1985, the State Department issued another statement against the Mojahedin which contrasted sharply with the facts contained in its previous report. In this statement, the "highly nationalistic, Islamic" Mojahedin, became "a militantly Islamic, anti-democratic, anti-American, anti-Western collectivist organization." The Mojahedin who, according to the December 1984 report, had "sought a freely elected constituent assembly to draft a constitution," and maintained specific political demarcations with the mullahs, now "served as initial security forces for the new regime."

In June 1985, tens of thousands of Iranians, including 2,500 in Washington, D.C., declared their support for the Iranian Resistance in worldwide demonstrations.<sup>5</sup> A significant number of U.S. congressmen sent messages of support or addressed the gathering. Shortly thereafter, on July 24, 1985, the Department issued its unsolicited statement during the congressional hearing. The Secretariat of the National Council of Resistance of Iran prepared a detailed response to the allegations, which it submitted to pertinent officials, to clarify the facts. Irangate masterminds and their operatives in the State Department, however, had bought the tailor-made scheme by Iranian "moderates" wholesale.

The U.S. media found "the duping of U.S. congressmen" by an "anti-American terrorist group" interesting news. Offered reasonable replies by the Resistance's representatives, however, they could not come to grips with the Department's contradictory positions. A correspondent for a major television network told Dr. Ali Safavi, then U.S. press spokesman for the Mojahedin in Washington, that he was dumbfounded by the State Department's ready willingness to provide "documents" on the Mojahedin's "terrorism," coupled with foot-dragging about documents pertaining to the mullahs' terrorist activities. Little did he or anyone else know that the masterminds of Irangate had made a deal with criminals who had executed Iranians *en masse*, including pregnant women, raped young girl supporters of the Mojahedin before executing them, gouged out the eyes of Mojahedin prisoners, and poured acid down their victims' throats. Meanwhile, the mullahs had also murdered 241 American marines in a single explosion in Beirut.<sup>6</sup> Judge Lawrence Walsh, Irangate's independent counsel, published a report in 1993, singling out Assistant Secretary of State Richard Murphy as one of the State Department's nine players in the Irangate scandal.<sup>7</sup>

#### **Irangate Aftermath**

Following the exposure of Irangate, the State Department contacted the Mojahedin's Washington office in November 1986, to formally request a dialogue. In several meetings between one State Department official and Mojahedin representatives in Washington, the official described the Department's previous position as "stupid and unrealistic." He reiterated that American policy-makers viewed the Mojahedin as the "only serious and sincere force with a decisive role in the future developments in Iran." (Minutes to these meetings are available.) He stressed that the June 14, 1985, statement by the Department had been discarded and a new one was being prepared. The press also criticized the appeasement policy and consequent position on the Resistance.<sup>8</sup>

In spring 1987, Representative Mervyn M. Dymally, referring to the Tower Commission report, questioned Assistant Secretary of State Richard Murphy about the Department's efforts to discredit those House members who had endorsed the Mojahedin.<sup>9</sup> In a subsequent "Dear Colleague" letter, Mr. Dymally explained how the Iranian Resistance had been victimized by the Irangate deals.<sup>10</sup>

Mr. Murphy was again questioned about the Irangate scandal at a hearing on April 21, 1987, by the Subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East. In line with the change in policy, Mr. Murphy did an about-face when asked about the Department's anti-Mojahedin statements. He said: "I will very freely admit that there were gaps in our knowledge about the organization," adding, "We meet, have met with the Mojahedin Organization here in Washington. They are a player in Iran... We are not boycotting them."<sup>11</sup> *The Washington Post* carried his remarks the next day.<sup>12</sup> The same month, the Khomeini regime, concerned about a policy change in favor of the Mojahedin, once again reacted, this time publicly. United Press International quoted Hashemi-Rafsanjani, then *Majlis* speaker, as saying that if the U.S. government were to curtail the activities of the anti-Khomeini Mojahedin Khalq opposition movement, the Iranian government would end its support of terrorist groups in Lebanon.<sup>13</sup>

Washington apparently swallowed the bait. Soon thereafter, the Department official informed the Mojahedin's representatives that the Department's policy had changed and that he was no longer permitted to meet and talk with the organization. It became clear that the catastrophic failure of the Irangate policy had only temporarily forced the proponents of appeasement into retreat. A year later, they were back, making another attempt to negotiate a compromise with the mullahs.

The appeasement policy continued to hold sway during the administration of George Bush, who addressed a message to Tehran's rulers in his inauguration speech: "Goodwill begets goodwill." The goal, according to U.S. government officials, was constructive engagement of Iran, to which end, apparently, the State Department persisted in the absurd allegations lingering from the Irangate era. The American people's elected representatives in Congress, however, knew better. Members of Congress from both parties, affronted by the regime's terrorist, medieval nature, increasingly supported the Iranian Resistance and condemned the Khomeini regime, ignoring the Department's allegations against the Resistance.

### **Here We Go Again**

In September 1989, the State Department replied to a letter to Secretary of State James Baker from Congressman Mervyn Dymally.<sup>14</sup> Repeating the Irangate allegations, the Department rejected Mr.

Dymally's request to resume dialogue with the Mojahedin. In conclusion, the letter enunciated the real reason for the hostile attitude towards the Iranian Resistance: "We believe a more normal relationship between Iran and the United States is desirable."<sup>15</sup>

Four days later, John Kelly, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs addressed a House subcommittee hearing. Responding to a question from Chairman Hamilton about a letter from 186 members of Congress urging Secretary Baker to support the Iranian Resistance, Kelly repeated the same old accusations against the Mojahedin.<sup>16</sup>

Two weeks later, Representative Dymally submitted another letter to Secretary Baker. After first clarifying the facts concerning the allegations in the State Department's September 15 letter, Mr. Dymally proposed an explanatory briefing between the Department and the Mojahedin's representatives.<sup>17</sup> On October 6, the State Department sent Mr. Dymally a note. Without referring to his reply, the Department again cited the Mojahedin's plan for "the violent overthrow of the Government of Iran" as the reason for its refusal to engage in a dialogue.<sup>18</sup>

The policy's pursuit also led to the arrest, on bogus charges, of Dr. Aladdin Touran, then representative of the National Council of Resistance in Washington, as he entered the United States in August 1989. As later proved in court, Dr. Touran had committed no offense. To inform the regime of the gesture, American sources leaked word of the arrest to media sources in the Persian Gulf states. Khomeini's death in June and Rafsanjani's presidency had again tempted Western countries, including some special interest groups in the United States, to take another stab at the "moderates" in Iran.

The Bush administration's policy on Iran, the Mojahedin and the Khomeini regime remained more or less unchanged. The gradual surfacing of Rafsanjani's domestic failures, the insistence on export of terrorism, and the bid to take advantage of the Persian Gulf War to establish an "Islamic Government" in Iraq (for which reason President Bush halted the war), however, left little room for further deals or compromises with Tehran.

One of the State Department's last pronouncements was issued when a House majority of 219 members of Congress signed a statement in support of the National Council of Resistance. The statement, made public on July 8, 1992, said in part:

...The time has come for the free world to form a common front against fundamentalism with those fighting for peace and democracy against the Iranian regime. In announcing a specific program and determining responsible policies vis-a-vis recent international developments, the National Council of Resistance, led by Mr. Massoud Rajavi, has demonstrated that it is determined and able to contribute to peace and stability in this sensitive region...

Experience has shown that this resistance's profound popular and religious roots within Iran's people are the best impediment to the Iranian regime's abuse of popular religious sentiments. Hence this resistance is the solution to the phenomenon of fanatic fundamentalism.

We are convinced that support for the National Council of Resistance will contribute to the achievement of peace and stability for all the countries of the region.<sup>19</sup>

In response to a request from a correspondent of the Khomeini regime's news agency, IRNA, State Department spokesman Joseph Snyder gathered a group of reporters at the Department, where he repeated the same old allegations against the People's Mojahedin.<sup>20</sup> The message was clear: Although a majority in the House of Representatives endorsed the Iranian Resistance, you can count on us.

### **The New Administration**

Initially, it appeared that a policy debate was being conducted in the new administration. Such a debate probably continues, to some extent. While the President and Secretary of State concurred that Tehran was the worst supporter of terrorism, described the regime as an "international outlaw," and spoke of a containment policy, the officials at State did not budge. The same people who had formulated the policy of appeasement continued to insist on their line. They never referred to the containment policy in any official statement. Pushed for a straight answer by a House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing, the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs did his best to avoid the term "containment," never once stating that it was official U.S. policy on Iran.<sup>21</sup> Hence, the new administration's policy has, for all practical purposes, been a continuation of the past policy.

Geoffrey Kemp, an expert on Middle East affairs at the Carnegie Endowment, writes,

At first glance the Clinton administration seems clearly to support the former

view [that the Iranian regime is the most serious threat to U.S. and Western interests in the Middle East.] Secretary of State Warren Christopher has asserted that the Clinton team has a "stronger policy of isolating Iran than the prior administration did. We think Iran is an international outlaw... and we're trying to persuade the other nations of the world to feel as we do, to treat Iran as an outlaw." In reality, however, there is less to this new American toughness than meets the eye. The administration has openly called for a dialogue with the Teheran regime and (though scarcely mentioned by administration officials) U.S. exports to Iran have increased dramatically over the past two years and include major sales of oil drilling and engineering equipment. Exports may reach \$1 billion in 1993 compared to \$747 million in 1992, \$527 million in 1991 and \$161 million in 1990. Iran is also selling huge amounts of oil to U.S. oil companies - between \$3.5 billion and \$4 billion a year - who sell it on the world market. For this privilege the oil companies pay Iran in hard currency, which not only helps Iran's struggling economy but its rearmament program as well.<sup>22</sup>

In its last days, the previous administration gave more leeway to American companies to buy Iranian oil. The amount of trade between the U.S. and Iran continued to mount in 1994. Presently they lead all the other oil companies.<sup>23</sup> The United States is reportedly Iran's third largest trading partner, after Germany and Japan.<sup>24</sup> In a critical commentary, "Double standard in dealing with Iran?" *The Washington Times* wrote:

In 1994, American oil companies were Iran's biggest customers, purchasing about \$4 billion worth during the year. The sales marked an astonishing 19.5 percent increase over the previous 12 months. Lamentably, American dollars are helping to finance the very same Iranian activities the administration has deplored.

American oil companies are providing Iran with more than enough money to fund its purchases of arms and military technology. The oil deals also have assisted Iran in paying for terrorism and other international mischief-making.

The companies involved are Exxon, Bay Oil, Coastal, Texaco, Mobil and Caltex, the latter a joint venture of Texaco and Chevron. But they are not the only American firms contributing to the Iranian economy.

Some U.S. corporations have obtained lucrative contracts to sell high technology and other products to Iran. The firms include Apple Computers, Motorola U.D.F. and ATT Global Information.

Rockwell international sold helicopter gear and electronics, Bell Helicopter supplied five helicopters, Hewlett Packard sells advanced computers and Chrysler plans a jointly operated Jeep assembly plant. Furthermore, a Reston, Va., firm, known as Octagon, has signed a contract



to sell portable satellite telephones for use by the Iranian military.

The administration is correct in trying to isolate Iran. Tehran's pursuit of nuclear weapons, its support for terrorism and Islamic extremism as well as its efforts to undermine the Middle East peace process must be stopped. But, in view of the web of commercial activity that increasingly binds the United States and Tehran, the administration's efforts to stop other countries from trading seem hypocritical.

Under American pressure, Japan has delayed a \$450 million loan package to Tehran. But the administration can't credibly ask that the loan be canceled as long as American companies profit from trading with Iran. For the same reason, the administration's protests against Russia selling nuclear reactors to Iran sound hollow.<sup>25</sup>

### **A Policy Misguided**

In response to repeated calls by members of Congress for dialogue with the Iranian Resistance, officials at State have more or less stuck to the 1985 trashing of the Mojahedin. In a show of how inconsistent a policy can be, in the period provided by Congress for a comprehensive and objective report on the Mojahedin, these same officials spared no opportunity to display their animosity toward the Iranian Resistance, while continually pleading with Tehran for a dialogue, describing the Khomeini regime as a "permanent feature."

Without doubt, the primary victims of the policy of appeasement have been and remain the Iranian people and Resistance. The people and government of the United States, however, are running a close second as big losers in this disgraceful deal. The regime's two fundamental demands from the U.S. government are to loosen restrictions on sales of oil, technology and other goods—currently underway—and to maintain a hostile attitude toward the Iranian Resistance.

Clearly, the mullahs have never sought diplomatic relations or public, face-to-face talks with American officials, because normalizing international relations runs contrary to the medieval nature of the velayat-e faqih. The regime needs to tout America as its enemy. Ironically, it is always the United States which is appealing to the regime for diplomatic relations and open, direct talks. One U.S. official or another sporadically, and unilaterally, issues an invitation to negotiate with this "international outlaw." Khamenei and Rafsanjani routinely reject these proposals. In other words, purely from the standpoint of the political and diplomatic balance of power, the policy

espoused for so many years by the State Department is unprofessional, encouraging the mullahs' terrorism and rogue conduct.

A policy so far off the mark obviously stems from what is essentially a misperception of the Khomeini regime, as well as from a lack of sufficient information about Iran's internal situation. The latter is nothing new, and has been behind American policy blunders in Iran at different junctures, particularly during the 1979 revolution, when the U.S. relied on the information provided by SAVAK for its analysis of the Iranian situation.

During Khomeini's era, the State Department's assessments reflected a worse deficiency of information than during the shah's time. The diplomatic, military and economic ties, and elaborate embassies of the shah's era no longer existed. After the State Department had characterized the Iranian people and their Resistance as "violent terrorists, without any popular backing," and "not worth listening to," what remained but the regime, its lobby and its operatives in and out of the U.S.?

Western foreign policy in general, and that of the U.S. in particular, however, suffers from a more basic problem: Non-comprehension of the religious dictatorship and the velayat-e faqih system. Drawing parallels between this regime and 20th century dictatorships, such as the shah's or those of various Latin American countries, gives the false impression that the mullahs are inclined to appeasement and change. Sixteen years of experience, however, has shown that policies seeking to placate and appease the mullahs have only one message, weakness, which emboldens the regime to export more terrorism and fundamentalism, i.e., Khomeinism. The only effective policy with Tehran is firmness.