

A military coup threatened

Britain urges generals' revolt to foster Lewis plan

Less than one week after taking power, Iranian Premier Shapur Bakhtiar is involved in a crucial bid to solidify his government and avoid a right-wing military coup. Bakhtiar stated that should his efforts fail his country must choose between two alternatives. "At this time, the country is facing, on the one hand, the continued corrupt government of the past 25 years; on the other, a military coup . . . I am trying my best to prevent a coup," declared Dr. Bakhtiar.

Throughout Iran there is talk of a replay of 1953, when under similar circumstances, the Shah temporarily left Iran under strong political pressure led by Prime Minister Mossadegh, only to return and reclaim the throne after the military led a countercoup against Dr. Mossadegh.

Then General Zahedi led the countercoup which returned the Shah to the throne. Now it is Zahedi's son, U.S. Ambassador Ardeshir Zahedi, who is conspiring along with hard-line anti-Soviet generals to unseat Bakhtiar, himself a former member of Mossadegh's government in the early 1950s. Zahedi is leading a conspiratorial hard-line grouping named the Hesperok Faction which includes a number of prominent generals who are openly threatening a bloody and repressive right-wing putsch. Such a development, informed Defense Department sources concur, would throw Iran into an attenuated and brutal civil war which would make the last year of political turmoil look mild.

A military coup in Iran has grave strategic import as it would install an anti-Soviet regime on Soviet borders.

According to UPI, Moscow has officially warned of "certain circles" in Washington working to overthrow the present regime and to set up a military dictatorship. The Soviet warning refers to the actions of National Security Council director Zbigniew Brzezinski who is orchestrating a coup. For months, Brzezinski has been closely collaborating with Zahedi, who up until recently has been working with the former commander of ground forces, General Oviessi. Following the appointment of Bakhtiar to the premiership, Oviessi resigned from his post and flew to

Washington for talks with Brzezinski.

Bakhtiar is now attempting to reach an agreement between the opposition which includes the leftwing National Front and the allied conservative Islamic Shi'ite clergy on the one side and the powerful military establishment and Zahedi on the other. Without such an agreement, it is likely that Bakhtiar will not be able to form a government. The central issues in these negotiations involve whether the Shah should leave Iran, giving Bakhtiar greater credibility with the population, and the sensitive issue of who will control the military, assuming that the Shah becomes simply a figurehead monarch.

The opposition, specifically the exiled Ayatollah Khomeini and the National Front leader Karim Sanjabi, are demanding that the Shah leave for good, and that if he does not they will call for further street violence and block Bakhtiar from forming a government. Bakhtiar has announced that he has a firm commitment from the Shah that the monarch will leave soon. The right-wing generals who owe much of their power to the Shah are adamant that the Shah not leave Iran and are openly threatening a coup d'etat should the Shah go.

The military threat

According to the *Baltimore Sun* Jan. 9, there are six generals who are leading the coup plot. General Khosrowdad, a vocal member of this hawkish generals' clique, told the press that if Bakhtiar allows the Shah to leave "he will be digging his own grave." He told *Le Figaro*, Dec. 9, "the Shah will not leave, because the communists will take over the country. The Army will never accept a regime led by Bakhtiar or by anyone of the National Front. We want the regime led by the Shah."

On the same day, *Le Monde* reported that an alternative "general staff" had been created, comprised of General Bahredi, the chief of the Imperial Guard, and Generals Rahemi, Nechat and Afshar. According to *Il Giorno*, this faction has drawn up a list of 100,000 religious and political opponents to be "eliminated."

in Iran

It is this clique of generals who have been working closely with Zahedi that represent the traditional corrupt court royalists. This grouping has insisted that the Bakhtiar government not assume the total command of the armed forces, a privilege traditionally reserved for the Shah.

According to Iranian diplomatic sources, when Bakhtiar presented his cabinet to the Shah last week, despite the fanfare in the press, he was still short eight nominees to fill all the cabinet positions. Bakhtiar took the premature step of announcing his cabinet based on the acceptance of the Defense Ministry portfolio by General Djam, a highly respected figure in military circles who has been at odds with the hard-liners commanding the Armed Forces, and the SAVAK secret police. Djam left Iran in 1972 to become the Ambassador to Spain, and more recently has been a private citizen in England. Djam was considered the central figure around whom the Bakhtiar government could be built and the one figure who could command the solidarity of the armed forces.

Shortly after the cabinet presentation to the Shah, Djam suddenly pulled out of the government. The reason? The Shah, under strong pressure from Zahedi and company, refused to give the Bakhtiar government full command over the 400,000 strong armed forces. The withdrawal of Djam was a major setback for Bakhtiar.

The U.S. role

In the last week, at the behest of the State and Defense Departments, the Carter Administration for the first time has taken a more definitive stand on Iran stating that the Shah should leave the country to aid Bakhtiar's efforts toward stabilization. State Department sources have confirmed that the deployment of U.S. Air Force General Huyser from NATO headquarters to Iran was done to build support for Bakhtiar among the restive generals. Huyser's stay has been extended because of the fear of a generals' coup.

At the same time, the *New York Times* reports that

Shah tells Britain they're the troublemakers

The following excerpts are from an interview the Shah gave to reporter Andrew Duncan of the London Observer on Jan. 9.

Asked by Duncan if he was expecting to stay in the country in two months time, the Shah answered "no" and said:

"Some people say, 'ask the British and Americans because they are making all the trouble.' That's what people say. That you are behind the scenes. I am repeating to you what people say. I'm not expressing my own opinion."

Duncan: Surely you don't agree?

Shah: Do you listen to the Persian version of the BBC? It's very provocative.

Duncan: Are you embarrassed to be supported publicly by President Carter or Dr. David Owen?

Shah: It's how you say it, what words you use.

Duncan: So it is an embarrassment to you?

Shah: I'd better keep quiet.

Cyrus Vance has taken a more aggressive role in the Iranian crisis since the four-power Guadeloupe summit last week. Vance has established daily communication with U.S. Ambassador in Teheran, William Sullivan, overriding communications between Brzezinski and Zahedi.

According to a number of well informed Defense Department officials, the U.S. is well aware of the prospects of the generals' coup and is working over time to halt this development. But what the officials are not saying publicly is that there is a well-planned conspiracy working through the U.S. from London to undo Bakhtiar. Mr. Brzezinski is the ring leader.

According to French press sources, the Shah, who is being constantly consulted by Zahedi, could easily be convinced that he could replay the 1953 comeback scenario, hence making a deal with the hawks. But unlike 1953, the army is bigger, more sophisticated, and, on the lower officers level, not allied with the top brass.

Hence, any effort to relaunch a 1953 scenario, according to a number of Washington analysts, will split the military, launch a civil war and most likely see a countercoup with strong religious backing occur. This, notes a Washington source, could be the beginning of a number of coups and dangerous regional instability in the oil-rich Persian Gulf.

—Judith Wyer