

Hostage release part of U.S.-Iran-Syria arms deal

by Thierry Lalevée

Whatever the White House may be saying nowadays, money and weapons have been thrown into the balance of the latest round of the secret negotiations between the United States and Iran, in order to obtain the release of Robert Polhill, former professor at the American University of Beirut, who was kidnaped on Jan. 24, 1987. But seven Americans, three British, two West Germans, four Belgians, two Swiss, one Irishman, and one Italian are still being held hostage, not to mention the countless Lebanese and others who have also been kidnaped and whose fate is clearly of no interest to the White House and most other Western governments.

Polhill is the first American hostage to be released since November 1986. The last hostage was released as part of Oliver North's infamous "Arms for Iran" operation. Polhill, his colleagues, and others were subsequently kidnaped as the result of the exposure of what became known as the the Irangate scandal. In order to politically survive the consequences of the scandal within Iran and prove his "revolutionary" good faith, Iranian President Hashemi-Rafsanjani personally had become involved in hostage-taking and, for example, ordered the kidnaping of Anglican Church mediator Terry Waite in January 1987.

More U.S. arms for Iran

Polhill's release was part of the most recent stages of American-Iranian negotiations which have been going on with numerous interruptions ever since 1986. Last year's expectations of an impending breakthrough were quashed by the international crisis around the author Salman Rushdie, whose book *Satanic Verses* moved the Iranians to put out an international death warrant for him; and then by the death

of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, which led to months of political instability within Iran. A new round in the fall of 1989 led to George Bush's decision in late November to release \$567 million worth of Iranian assets which had been frozen by U.S. banks when the Shah was toppled in 1979.

An expected breakthrough for Christmas came to nothing. Local parliamentary elections in Teheran saw the victory of radicals led by former Interior Minister Ali Akbar Mohtashemi, who immediately used the Dec. 22 U.S. invasion of Panama as an ideal pretext for further anti-U.S. agitation. Once more, the secret negotiations had to be halted. The release of any of the hostages had to be postponed, even though Washington had already paid a hefty price: half a billion dollars' worth of assets unfrozen, and deliveries to Iran of the latest model of Silkworm missiles from China, at Washington's request.

It was not until late January that the contacts could be resumed. Intensive sessions were held in Geneva or Vienna, and then in Pakistan. (A not insignificant consequence of the negotiations has been that the Iranian leadership has entirely taken the side of Pakistan against India in the Kashmir crisis.)

The governments of Pakistan and Algeria were the go-between the United States and Iran. In Iran itself, the Swiss and Japanese embassies were called on to deliver messages. By late February, a deal was struck. On the military front, it involved delivery of large shipments of cluster bombs from Pakistan, originally coming from the stores of the U.S.-based International Signal and Control corporation of James Guerin, a maverick businessman whose companies have been used for the last decade by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency in the Middle East and South Africa. Teheran, on its

side, sent additional financial support and military deliveries to the Hezbollah in Lebanon.

The phone call to Bush

None of these negotiations was smooth. In mid-March, the deals almost went sour when the story of a direct phone call between the White House and Teheran became known. Intelligence sources report that the White House had decided to make it public in order to preempt a scandal, floating the line that the President had talked to an "impostor." In reality, such a phone call had been reportedly agreed at the last meeting in Pakistan. The plan was that Bush and Rafsanjani would get on the phone as the final confirmation that the deal was on.

The White House initiated the call, and Bush spoke with Mahmoud Rafsanjani, the Iranian President's brother, and Foreign Ministry official Sheikholislamzadeh. The choice of Mahmoud Rafsanjani was no coincidence. He had been chosen by his brother to negotiate with the Lebanese Hezbollah. The phone call meant that he could additionally carry a verbal commitment from the U.S. President.

Fearing that the contents of the call, which was obviously monitored, would be made public by the radicals around Mohtashemi, the White House decided to go public with its own perverted version that Iran had initiated the call and that nothing had come out of it.

Meanwhile, to cover their own involvement in the affair too, the Iranian leadership sponsored a wave of articles depicting the ridiculous efforts of Bush to get in touch with Iran at all cost. "Is another Irangate in the making?" the Iranian media trumpeted.

At the same time, yet another game of manipulation of public opinion was going on concerning Iraq. Timed with the latest round of negotiations in Pakistan, and the reaching of some kind of agreement, the U.S. news media discovered a great Iraqi military and political threat to the entire region. The game was easy enough: The arrest of a few Iraqis at London's Heathrow Airport and widely publicized reports that Iraq was about to deploy a nuclear weapon, were sufficient to convince the Iraqi leadership that their country was coming under severe attack.

There was actually more to it: American intelligence had provided Baghdad with precise information about an Israeli attack in the making. The information was provided by Washington in full knowledge of the effect it would have on the Iraqi leadership. A few days later, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein fell into the trap and went into a lengthy diatribe against Israel, threatening to annihilate it with chemical weapons—just the kind of threat that worldwide media could use to further corner the Iraqis.

That Iraq, equipped with chemical weapons, represents a regional danger, is true enough. Iraq's neighbors along the Persian Gulf are nervous enough about that prospect. Yet no one raised the real issues of the whys and hows of such a

campaign.

How is it that 90% of all of the companies supplying Iraq with deadly weapons are American? Why was it that, while this had gone on for more than four years, it was exposed just now? Why was it that, at the same time that Baghdad was involved in developing such dangerous weapons with American technology, Washington had taken the political decision to become increasingly dependent on Iraqi oil, whose supplies to the United States have more than tripled since 1986?

And was it a coincidence that just a few days after Polhill's release, Bush sent a personal message to Saddam Hussein, underlining his commitment to maintaining good relations between the two countries, just as the day before the U.S. State Department had sent a memorandum to the Iraqi authorities assuring them that Washington was pressuring Israel to the utmost not to attack Iraq?

Denouncing Iraq was therefore just part of a broader game. It had several purposes: First, it could create a general environment in which, compared to Iraq's potential madness, both the Syrian and Iranian leadership would appear moderate. (Israeli reports about Syria's ability to deploy chemically equipped Scud-B missiles were conveniently ignored.) After all, even if both Syria and Iran possess exactly the same kind of weapon, neither Syrian President Hafez al Assad nor Hashemi-Rafsanjani were indulging in the kind of diatribe used by Saddam Hussein.

No less important, it paved the way for the next major U.S. offensive in the Middle East, together with the Soviet Union: the imposition of an Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces-type treaty over the entire region, effective over both Arab and Israeli missiles.

The Washington-Damascus-Teheran axis

A direct result of this campaign has been Washington's ability to throw all caution to the wind in underlining the need for good relations with the terrorist states of Iran and Syria. The environment had been created, and a gesture was just what was needed; the release of Polhill was that gesture. Prior to it, Bush had sent a personal message to Hafez al Assad on the 44th anniversary of Syrian independence, in which Bush praised Assad's "personal efforts to eliminate the danger of international terrorism."

Following Polhill's release, Bush's tone became even warmer. This was no surprise to Syria: Since the beginning of the year, it had hosted former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, former President Jimmy Carter, and U.S. Senate minority leader Robert Dole, keeping them informed of Damascus's role in the secret negotiations. Vance's visit had been used to test the possibility of direct negotiations between Syria and Israel, on Syria's terms. This could only be welcomed in Washington, which is all too eager to establish a good working relationship with Damascus, if only as an efficient means of control over Israel.