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June 12, 1972

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IRAN: INTERNAL DISSIDENCE - A NOTE OF WARNING

The bombings in Tehran during President Nixon's visit highlight the existence of internal dissidence in Iran. In itself, such dissidence is nothing new. For many years it did not pose a serious problem for SAVAK, the Iranian National Security and Intelligence organization. However, dissident activities over the past two years show that a violence-inclined "youth underground" has taken root in Iran with possibly serious consequences for the country's long-term stability.

In public, the Government of Iran prefers to blame outside instigation for domestic dissidence. The available intelligence indicates that SAVAK, however, knows there is more to the problem than that. While many Iranian dissidents are linked clearly to the radical regime in Iraq or to other organizations and movements outside Iran, even the intelligence information received directly from official Iranian sources indicates that Iran now has its own indigenous "alienated youth" movement. The activities of persons in this movement, including bombings, attacks on police, assassinations, bank robberies, kidnappings (so far unsuccessful), and shootouts with security forces, are part of a pattern that has become familiar elsewhere in the world.

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Intelligence reports on arrests and interrogations, with public and private statements by SAVAK and the Iranian police, indicate that, at a minimum, several hundred, mainly middle-class, Iranian young people, educated overseas or at home, are sufficiently alienated from their government and society to accept the hardships of longterm clandestinity and personal danger in pursuit of radical change, frequently no more than "revolution for the sake of the revolution." Few of them seem to have a clear concept of what is to replace the present social order in Iran, though most are more or less leftist and claim some title to being Marxist, Marxist-Leninist, or Maoist. The dissidents have no single overall organization. Though identifiable small groups sometimes appear to overlap or maintain occasional liaison with one another, uncovering, penetrating, and rolling up their networks is a constantly renewed task for SAVAK since new groups are always springing up among the students and recent university graduates in Iran.

Though rightly deemed no immediate threat to the general security of the Iranian state, these groups still pose a threat greatly in excess of their numbers. The current political stability and orderly economic development of Iran depend overwhelmingly for their continuation on one man, the Shah. The Shah's sudden death by any means would be a setback to the continued implementation of the basically evolutionary political, social, and economic reforms of his "White Revolution." It would remove the ruler's will, dynamism, sense of direction, and authority which have

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spurred Iran's rapid emergence as a strong pro-Western regional power. The Shah's death at the hands of an assassin would create an atmosphere of suspicion and insecurity exploitable by Iran's dissidents even if an individual not connected with the movement did the act. In the short run, popular revulsion at the killing of the ruler could facilitate the immediate task of the Shah's successors and help to legitimize firm security measures. The law of succession in Iran calls for the Empress to act as Regent for the Crown Prince Reza during his minority (he is now 11 years old). The Empress Farah is genuinely popular in Iran, and in the immediate aftermath of her husband's assassination could be expected to carry through a relatively smooth transfer of power, while SAVAK and the armed forces guaranteed public order. In the longer run, however, the lack of broadly-based political institutions, the absence of the Shah's firm hand, a likely atmosphere of doubt and fear fuelled by increased dissident activities and perhaps also by excessive security measures, could undermine public confidence and impair the country's reputation as a stable and modernizing nation.

There is no reliable evidence that Iranian dissident groups or individuals as yet have focussed on the Shah as a target. It must be expected, however, to occur to them as the toll of arrests and executions demonstrates the futility of "armed propaganda" against a regime with the Shah's resources. The Shah is a difficult target to hit, but no man is invulnerable.

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Iran's home-grown dissidents are concerned almost exclusively with domestic issues in their anti-regime activity. To a young dissident with the anarchistic outlook of the "New Left," the level of disruption and uncertainty that the killing of the Shah would generate represents a positive gain. He would expect to see a weaker, probably clumsier successor regime, one sufficiently frightened to inaugurate its rule with a crackdown on internal disorder but unable in the long run to maintain concentrated pressure on internal dissidents. He might even see opportunities in such a situation for gaining a measure of popular support for a genuine revolution in Iran, a support he has been prepared to do without since it has been largely unobtainable from a population convinced that the Shah holds all the cards.

The apparently self-renewing proliferation of dissident "cells" and reported attempts to re-establish guerrilla outposts in the mountains of rural northern Iran indicate the potential for something more than hit-or-miss urban terrorism in the future. A question of some relevance now is when Iran's dissidents will raise their sights high enough to pass from "guerrilla theater" to attempt a decisive act which could have repercussions far beyond Iran's borders.

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