# The Paranoid Style in Iranian Politics

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The Paranoid Style in Iranian Politics

Ervand Abrahamian
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1. Excerpts from 1993 book Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic

[page 21]

... Khomeini retained traditional attitudes toward the state throughout the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Even in 1963 when he emerged as the most vocal antiregime cleric, he did not call for a revolution or for the overthrow of the monarchy. Rather he castigated the shah for secular and antinational transgressions: becoming an unwitting tool of the "imperialist-Jewish conspiracy"; permitting women to vote in local elections; allowing citizens to take oaths on sacred books other than the Koran; smearing clerics as "black reactionaries"; trampling over the constitutional laws; giving high offices to the Bahais; siding with Israel against the Arabs, thus causing "our Sunni brothers to think that we Shiis are really Jews"; and "capitulating" to the almighty dollar by exempting American military personnel from Iranian laws. "An American cook," he declared, "can now assassinate our religious leaders or run over the shah without having to worry about our laws." ...

[page 48]

... Khomeini added that the clergy would lead the oppressed masses to their liberation. He also implied that the lower class respected private property, whereas the upper class had no regard for other people's belongings. In Ossowski's terminology, Khomeini's picture of society was now one of "antagonistic dichotomy."

In this stage, Khomeini and his disciples often placed the religious minorities, especially the Jews and the Bahais, on the side of the oppressors. They referred to them as "traitors," "Zionists," "economic plunderers," and the "enemies of Islam, the clergy, and Muslim intellectuals." However, they made no

attempt to transform their concept of najes into actual discriminatory laws. Their distrust was expressed more in political than in religious-theological terms. ...

[page 92]

... The Constitutional Revolution began in 1905 as a broad-based urban movement led by the three most important senior clerics in Tehran: Sayyid Abdallah Behbehani, Sayyid Mohammad Tabatabai, and Shaykh Fazlollah Nuri. But the movement eventually broke apart. First, Shaykh Nuri defected to the royalists in 1908, enabling the shah to bomb Parliament and execute some of the revolutionaries. This triggered off the civil war of 1908-9. In changing sides, Shaykh Nuri accused his former colleagues of imitating foreigners, subverting the sacred law, being secret Babis (forerunners of Bahais) and Freemasons, and introducing heretical notions such as liberty, equality, anarchism, nihilism, socialism, and "naturalism" (the supremacy of natural law over divine law). ...

2. Complete chapter "The Paranoid Style in Iranian Politics" (pages 111-130 in original book)

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Political polemics in Iran are replete with such terms as tuteah (plot), jasouz (spy), khianat (treason), vabasteh (dependent), khatar-e kharejeh (foreign danger), cummal-e kharejeh (foreign hands), nafouz-e biganeh (alien influence), asrar (secrets), naqsheh (designs), arosak (marionette), sotun-e panjom (fifth column), nokaran-e estecmar (servants of imperialism), posht-e pardeh (behind the curtain), and posht-e sahneh (behind the scene).

This vocabulary treats Iranian politics as a puppet show in which foreign powers control the marionettes -- the local politicians -- by invisible strings. The message is that the intelligent observer should ignore appearances and focus instead on the hidden links; only then can one follow the plot, understand the hidden agendas, and identify the true villains. Needless to say, the picture assumes the puppets are devoid of all initiative; the puppeteers are not only omnipresent but also omniscient and omnipotent; and the playwright, whoever he may be, works to a grand scheme, knowing beforehand exactly where to start the story, how to develop it, and when to end it. Moreover, the plot, like any children's pantomime, is entertaining but contains no ambiguities, portraying the characters in absolute, good or evil terms.

The conspiratorial interpretation of politics is not, of course, unique to Iran. In fact, the title of this essay is borrowed from Richard Hofstadter's classic "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." Published nearly thirty years ago, that article described how throughout American history nativistic groups have claimed that Washington was being subverted by foreign conspirators -- at times by Freemasons, at other times by Roman Catholics, at yet other

times by Jews, and, in more recent times, by International Communists, such as General Eisenhower and Chief Justice Earl Warren. Similarly, fearful politicians in Britain have been known to conjure up a variety of fantastic conspiracies -- all the way from the Luddite-Jacobin plot during the Napoleonic Wars, to the Zionist "manipulation" of the 1908 revolution in the Ottoman Empire, and, more recently, to the KGB's "control" of Prime Minister Harold Wilson. Such paranoia not only sees plots everywhere but views them as the main force of history. "According to this style history is a conspiracy," writes Hofstadter, "set in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendent power."

Although the paranoid style can be found in many parts of the world, it is much more prevalent in modern Iran than in most Western societies. In the West, fears of plots, both real and imaginary, emerge in times of acute insecurity -- during wars, revolutions, or economic crises. In Iran, they have been pervasive throughout the last half century. In the West, they tend to be confined to fringe groups, causing more ridicule than concern in the mainstream. In Iran, however, the paranoid style permeates society, the mainstream as much as the fringe, and cuts through all sectors of the political spectrum -- royalists, nationalists, Communists, and, of course, Khomeinists. What stirs ridicule in Iran is not the style itself but the rival reading of the grand "conspiracy." One man's particular interpretation becomes for others not ridiculous but a deliberately misleading misinterpretation.

This chapter has three interrelated aims: first, to trace the root causes of the paranoid style in Iran; second, to compare the forms the style takes among the main political streams -- among royalists, nationalists, and, most important of all, Khomeinists; and third, to weigh its consequences for contemporary Iran, especially its costs in retarding the development of political pluralism.

## Causes

Observers -- from Victorian travelers to American social scientists -- have argued that Iranian politics is marked by a high degree of paranoia as well as mistrust, insecurity, and factionalism. Lord Curzon concluded his encyclopedic Persia and the Persian Question with the comment that the "natives are a suspicious people" who tend to "see a cloven hoof beneath the skirt of every robe." Professor Ann Lambton, in a much quoted work from the 1950s, remarked that "factionalism, in one form or another, has remained a feature of Persian life down to modern times." Herbert Vreeland, in his introduction to the famous Human Relations Area Files, asserted that "insecurity and distrust permeate Persian attitudes toward each other . . . the individual has a psychological wall out of which he reaches to play his game of life." Andrew Westwood, in explaining why the monarchy survived the turbulent 1950s, claimed that the "culture of distrust" not only fragmented the opposition but also predisposed the public to view politicians as "corrupt," "mendacious," and "foreign-connected." Similarly, Hooshang Amirahmadi, in discussing the Islamic Republic's economic failures, places responsibility on the country's "obsolete political culture," which is characterized by ideological dogmatism, political

extremism, chauvinistic heroism, vulnerability to personality cult, subservience and fear of authority, cynicism, distrust, disunity, and individualism. . . . The paranoia associated with this conspiratorial view of politics is largely cross-class and cross-ideological. It is, however, widespread among Iranian political elites and intelligentsia who continue to use it as a weapon against political enemies or for manipulation of the followers.

Most observers trace these "maladies" to "national culture" in general and to child-rearing practices in particular. In Vreeland's view, for instance, the "Persian learns his basic attitude towards authority in the family." The shah, in arguing in favor of strong government, continually harped on the presumed "weak moral fiber of the Iranians." Marvin Zonis, the author of the main quantitative study on the Pahlavi elite, appears to conclude that their peculiar child-raising customs result in adults who, in his own words, are paranoid, insecure, cynical, distrustful, disdainful, dishonest, pessimistic, subservient, manipulative, xenophobic, opportunistic, timid, individualistic, egoistical, and megalomanic.

Western diplomats, especially when frustrated by Iranian politics, readily resorted to such "national character" explanations. For example, the British consul in Isfahan, upon failing to create an anti-Communist labor movement during World War II, complained that "no two Persians can ever work together for any length of time, even if it is jointly to extract money from a third party." Similarly, one British ambassador, fearful of Soviet influence in the aftermath of the battle of Stalingrad, wrote of a "volatile race" without "principles.""Only the prospect of making an illicit fortune seems to give the Persian, including the young, courage and energy." He also warned: "It is regrettable, but a fact, that the Persians are ideal Stalin-fodder. They are untruthful, backbiters, undisciplined, incapable of unity, without a plan. The Soviet system is equipped with a complete theoretical scheme for everything from God to galoshes." Another British ambassador declared that these "failings" were not passing phases but the "permanent weaknesses" of the "Oriental character." Similarly, the U.S. ambassador, showing off his classical education, warned Washington: "In our dealings with the Medes and Persians we must always recall that we have to do with a people for whom advantages of the day suffice. They are not without talent and ability, but they disdain the past and ignore the future."

These imperial, even racist, attitudes are encapsulated in a 1951 Foreign Office memorandum drafted to explain why Iranians were so "emotional" as to reject the "reasonable" argument that their oil industry should continue to remain under British control for an indefinite period of time. Entitled "Paper on the Persian Social and Political Scene," the memorandum explained:

Most Persians are introverts. Their imagination is strong and they naturally turn to the agreeable side of things. They love poetry and discussion, particularly of abstract ideas. . . . Their emotions are strong and easily aroused. But they continually fail to subordinate their emotions to reason.

They lack commonsense and the ability to examine and reason from facts. Their well-known mendacity is rather a carelessness of the truth than a deliberate choice of falsehood. This excess of imagination and distaste for facts leads to an inability to go conscientiously into detail. Often, after finding the world does not answer their dreams, they relapse into indolence and do not persevere in any attempt to bring their ideas into focus with reality. This tendency is exaggerated by the fatalism of their religion. They are intensely individualistic, more in the sense of pursuing their personal interests than in the nobler one of wishing to do things on their own without help. Nearly all classes have a passion for personal gain. . . . They lack social conscience and are unready to submit to communal interests. They are vain, conceited, and unwilling to admit themselves in any wrong.

These explanations have obvious flaws. They reduce complex phenomena to one residual category -- to that ever-elusive category known as "national character." They are highly ahistorical, often based on Jungian assumptions, accepting national character as an unchanging entity rooted in some unstated source -- maybe in "race," "ethnicity," or "folk mythology." They jump from impressionistic observations of a few people, invariably members of the elite, to blanket generalizations about the whole population, one that is in reality extremely diverse. They provide little information about child-rearing but, again because of their psychological assumptions, presume that the "maladies" can be traced to child-parent relationships. What is more, they lump together a variety of maladies, assuming them to be present in equal proportions among most Iranians.

Nevertheless, most observers would agree that political paranoia exists in modern Iran, as long as one keeps in mind Hofstadter's important caveat that the term means merely a political style and mode of expression, not a clinical and deep-seated psychological disorder. What is more, this style can be explained by history, especially Iran's experience of imperial domination: foreign powers -- first Russia and Britain, later the United States -- have, in fact, determined the principal formations in the country's political landscape over the last two hundred years.

These key formations include three disastrous wars in the first half of the nineteenth century; the subsequent capitulations in the treaties of Golestan, Turkmanchai, and Paris; the creation of the Tsarist-led Cossack Brigade in 1879; the sale of the tobacco monopoly to a British entrepreneur in 1890; the 1901 D'Arcy concession, which soon led to the establishment of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company; the 1907 Anglo-Russian Agreement, dividing Iran into zones of influence; the 1911 Russian Ultimatum and the consequent Anglo-Russian occupation; and the 1919 Anglo-Persian Agreement, designed to make the whole country into a British protectorate.

In the eyes of not only Iranians but also other Europeans, Russia and Britain had in effect incorporated Iran into their empires. It was their diplomats who ruled the country; the shah served as a "mere viceroy." By the second half of the century, the Qajar shahs could not even designate their successors without

the explicit approval of the two imperial representatives.

Imperial influence was also present in Iran's three military coups: in 1908, 1921, and 1953. In the first, the Cossack Brigade led by its Tsarist officers bombarded the newly established Parliament in an attempt to shore up the faltering Qajar monarchy.

In the second, British officers helped Colonel Reza Khan of the same Cossack Brigade to overthrow the government, paving the way for the demise of the Qajar dynasty and the birth of the Pahlavi state.

In the third, the CIA, together with Britain's MI6, financed army officers to overthrow a popular prime minister and salvage the Pahlavi throne. These traumatic events naturally led Iranians to conclude that whatever took place in their country was decided by the imperial powers.

This feeling of alienation was further intensified by the wide gap existing between state and civil society -- in Persian terms, between the dawlat (government) and mellat (nation); the mamlekat (realm) and ummat (community); the darbar (court) and vatan (country); the hokumat (regime) and mardom (people).

The imperial powers sought local clients, and the elite in turn sought foreign patrons, even foreign citizenship. Ordinary citizens, thus, understandably came to the conclusion that public figures harbored alien "ties" and "connections." In the words of a typical Iranian historian: "The imperial powers interfered in everything, even the personal affairs of leading statesmen. Absolutely nothing could be done without their permission."

The link between the imperial powers and local elites was most glaring from 1941 to 1953 -- from Reza Shah's abdication brought about by the Anglo-Soviet invasion to Mohammad Reza Shah's triumphant return engineered by the CIA. For one thing, this period saw the birth of Iran's main political movements, especially the Tudeh and the National Front, and a host of gadfly newspapers which were able to openly air such themes as class conflict, national sovereignty, and foreign intervention. For another, the Great Powers immersed themselves in Iranian politics while Iranian politicians actively sought their help.

The shah, convinced that the army and the monarchy would stand or fall together, sought U.S. military aid. Southern politicians -- led by Sayyid Ziya, a leading figure in the 1921 coup -- obtained British assistance to counter both the shah and their other competitors. The United States considered Sayyid Ziya to be so pro-British as to be "unsuitable" for the premiership. Americans, no less than Iranians, were highly skeptical when British officials, such as Lambton, categorically denied having ties with Sayyid Ziya. Northern aristocrats tried to contain the shah and their southern rivals first by seeking Soviet help, but when they found the Soviets encouraging social revolution in Iran, they turned to the United States, seeking economic, rather than military, assistance.

The Tudeh party, on the other hand, as a radical movement, looked to the Soviet Union as the "champion of the international working class." Meanwhile, Mosaddeq, leading the middle-class National Front, sought U.S. support against the pro-British aristocrats associated with the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, against the shah and the armed forces, against the pro-Soviet Tudeh, and against the northern aristocrats as well as conservative pro-American politicians.

Riding a wave of popularity based on his promise to nationalize oil, Mosaddeq was elected premier in 1951 and promptly took over the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. The British, refusing to accept nationalization, did their best to discredit Mosaddeq, categorizing him as a "wily Oriental" who was not only "crazy," "eccentric," "abnormal," "unbalanced," and "unreasonable" but also "demagogic," "slippery," "cunning," "unscrupulous," "single-mindedly obstinate," and "opium-addicted."

"Mosaddeq's megalomania," declared the British Embassy in 1952, "is now verging on mental instability. He has to be humoured like a fractious child." As evidence of Mosaddeq's "mental instability," the British ambassador cited his refusal to use the ministerial motorcar and the title "His Excellency." He concluded that Iran, unlike the rest of Asia, was not yet ready for independence but rather, like Haiti, needed some twenty more years of foreign occupation: "Persia is indeed rather like a man who knows very well that he ought to go to the dentist but is afraid of doing so and is annoyed with anybody who says there is anything wrong with his teeth."

The British government planted articles with similar themes in the newspapers. For example, the London Times carried a biography of Mosaddeq describing him as "nervously unstable," "martyr-like," and "timid" unless "emotionally" aroused. The Observer depicted him as an "incorruptible fanatic," a xenophobic Robespierre, a "tragic" Frankenstein "impervious to common sense," and with only "one political idea in his gigantic head."

To encourage similar views across the Atlantic, the British fed the American press with a steady diet of -- to use their own words -- "poison too venomous for the BBC." Typical of such character assassinations was an article in the Washington Post written by the venerable Drew Pearson falsely accusing Hosayn Fatemi, Mosaddeq's right-hand man, of a host of criminal offenses, including embezzlement and gangsterism. "This man," Pearson warned, "will eventually decide whether the US has gas rationing, or possibly, whether the American people go into World War III."

The British, determined to undermine Mosaddeq from the day he was elected premier, refused to negotiate seriously with him. For instance, Professor Lambton, serving as a Foreign Office consultant, advised as early as November 1951 that the British government should persevere in "undermining" Mosaddeq, refuse to reach agreement with him, and reject American attempts to find a compromise solution. "The Americans," she insisted, "do not have the experience or the psychological insight to understand Persia."

The central figure in the British strategy to overthrow Mosaddeq was another academic, Robin Zaehner, who soon became professor of Eastern religions and ethics at Oxford. As press attache in Tehran during 1943-47, Zaehner had befriended numerous politicians, especially through opium-smoking parties. Dispatched back to Iran by MI6, Zaehner actively searched for a suitable general to carry out the planned coup. He also used diverse channels to undermine Mosaddeq: Sayyid Ziya and the pro-British politicians; newspaper editors up for sale; conservative aristocrats who in the past had sided with Russia and America; tribal chiefs, notably the Bakhtiyaris; army officers, shady businessmen, courtiers, and members of the royal family, many of whom outstripped the shah in their fear of Mosaddeq. Helped in due course by the CIA, Zaehner also wooed away a number of Mosaddeq's associates, including Ayatollah Kashani, General Zahedi, Hosayn Makki, and Mozaffar Baqai.

Baqai, a professor of ethics at Tehran University, soon became notorious as the man who abducted Mosaddeq's chief of police and tortured him to death. MI6, together with the CIA, also resorted to dirty tricks to undermine the government, one of the more harmless ones being the rumor that "the communists are plotting against Mosaddeq's life and placing the responsibility on the British."

It is therefore not surprising that the 1953 coup gave rise to conspiracy theories, including cloak and dagger stories of Orientalist professors moonlighting as spies, forgers, and even assassins. Reality -- in this case -- was stranger than fiction. These conspiracy theories were compounded by the fact that some Western academics did their best to expurgate from their publications any mention of the CIA and MI6 in the 1953 coup. In fact, recent autobiographies reveal that the shah often subsidized British and American academics whose publications tended to reinforce the court view of modern Iranian history, especially of the 1953 events.

Expressions

The paranoid style permeates Iranian politics, but the various political groups vary the plot and cast of characters. For Khomeinists, estecmar (colonialism-imperialism), helped by the sotun-e panjom (fifth column), formed of diverse minorities, is a constant threat to the Muslim people of Iran. For the Left, imperialists are plotting with the upper class against the country's workers and peasants. For the National Front, imperialism, but this time more as a political phenomenon, has gained a stranglehold over Iran by overthrowing Mosaddeq, the nation's only genuine spokesman. For the royalists, the foreign powers, particularly Britain and Russia, have consistently conspired to destroy the Pahlavi dynasty in general and Mohammad Reza Shah in particular.

In Khomeini's works "colonial conspiracies" lurked everywhere. He blamed them for the age-old problems of the Middle East: the decline of Muslim civilization, the conservative "distortions" of Islam, and the divisions between nation-states, between Sunnis and Shiis, and between oppressors and oppressed. He argued that the colonial powers had for years sent Orientalists

into the East to misinterpret Islam and the Koran and that the colonial powers had conspired to undermine Islam both with religious quietism and with secular ideologies, especially socialism, liberalism, monarchism, and nationalism (mellitgarayi).

He claimed that Britain had instigated the 1905 Constitutional Revolution to subvert Islam: "The Iranians who drafted the constitutional laws were receiving instructions directly from their British masters."

Khomeini also held the West responsible for a host of contemporary problems. He charged that colonial conspiracies kept the country poor and backward, exploited its resources, inflamed class antagonisms, divided the clergy and alienated them from the masses, caused mischief among the tribes, infiltrated the universities, cultivated consumer instincts, and encouraged moral corruption, especially gambling, prostitution, drug addiction, and alcohol consumption.

He claimed that the West spread cultural imperialism and false notions of Islam through its control of schools, universities, publishing houses, journals, newspapers, and radio and television. "Colonialism," he declared, "has poisoned the minds of our youth. It is determined to keep them weak." At times he argued that the West harnessed the Eastern Bloc against Islam.

During the Islamic Revolution, Khomeini found "plots," here, there, and everywhere. "The world," he proclaimed, "is against us." He even used the terms Left and Right to describe how the newly established republic was supposedly besieged by royalists as well as Marxists. "Satanic plots" lurked behind liberal Muslims favoring a lay, rather than a clerical, constitution; behind conservative Muslims opposed to his interpretation of velayat-e faqih; behind apolitical Muslims who preferred the seminaries to the hustle-and-bustle of politics; behind radical Muslims advocating root-and-branch social changes; behind lawyers critical of the harsh retribution laws; behind Kurds, Arabs, Baluchis, and Turkomans seeking regional autonomy; behind leftists organizing strikes and trade unions; and, of course, behind military officers sympathetic to the Pahlavis, the National Front, and even President Banisadr. He labeled the pro-Soviet Left as "Russian spies," the anti-Soviet Left as "American Marxists," and the conservative Muslims as "American Muslims."

He considered the Mojahedin the most dangerous of these fifth columnists. Playing on words, he likened the Mojahedin to the notorious monafeqin (hypocrites), who in the Koran had pretended to support the Prophet while secretly conspiring against him with Jews and pagans. "In the name of Islam," he warned, "the monafeqin want to destroy Islam."

He also likened the Mojahedin to a recently converted Jew at the time of Imam Ali who incessantly cited the Koran without understanding its true meaning. "The country," he stressed, "is threatened by a conspiracy involving the monafeqin, the Left, the liberals, and the nationalists."

Khomeini also warned that the West, in its desire to dominate the world, had an

insatiable desire to collect information on Iran:

The Big Powers, and among them especially the United States, have since long ago been busy scheming. And preceding them was Britain. For a long time now they have been putting together the sporadic bits of information and intelligence which they have gathered about the various countries of the world and specifically those upon which they have preyed. What we have in terms of natural resources, they know better than we do. Even before the advent of motorcars they would dispatch their experts here to make a survey of our resources on horseback or camel and along with caravans in order to survey our mineral resources, including our oil as well as our valuable stones. I recall I mentioned in an earlier speech my meeting with a member of the Qom Theological School during my trip to Hamedan many years ago. He was the son of a well-reputed personality in the city of Hamedan and he brought me this map which was strewn with small dots. I asked him what the dots represented, and he told me the map had been drawn by agents of a foreign power and the dots represented the presence of mineral resources in that region of the country. It was a fully detailed map showing even the smallest villages. Therefore, as you can see, even at a time when automobiles were not in vogue, they had surveyed the whole of our country including our deserts on camels and had at the same time studied the ethnic life of the people here, as well as their social life, their habits, their religion, their tastes, their inclinations, and also learned about the clerics here, as well as about the relations between the ulama and the masses and so on and so forth.

Khomeini assigned a particularly sinister role to the religious minorities, especially the Jews, to whom he often referred with the derogatory term yahodi rather than the more neutral kalimi. He accused them of distorting Islam, mistranslating the Koran, persecuting and imprisoning the clergy, advocating historical materialism, instigating the so-called White Revolution, applauding the 1963 bloodshed, controlling the mass media, and, of course, taking over the economy. The Jews were depicted as imperialist spies, agents, and fifth columnists. They were seen as the real power behind the imperialists plotting to take over the whole world: "Their true aim is to establish a world Jewish government."

Khomeini added that there was a danger they would achieve this aim since Jews were "energetic and very shrewd [zalum]." Khomeini also denounced the Bahais as a "subversive conspiracy" and a "secret political organization" that had originally been created by Britain but now was controlled by Israel and the United States. "Reagan supports the Bahais," he argued, "in the same way the Soviets control the Tudeh. The Bahais are not a religion but a secretive organization plotting to subvert the Islamic Republic."

Khomeini's supporters were equally paranoid. A prominent cleric issued a proclamation reminding the faithful that chapter 5, verse 56, of the Koran warned them not to befriend Jews and Christians. Ruhani, Khomeini's main hagiographer, asserted that SAVAK (the secret police) had instructions to kill those who dared to criticize Jewish capitalists "such as Nelson Rockefeller."

Hojjat al-Islam Sa'edi, a cleric tortured to death in 1970 in prison, preached that Jews "like Lyndon Johnson" controlled America. He also preached that the Bahais had taken over the Iranian economy, and the shah was working hand-in-glove with Bahais and Communists against true Muslims.

Khamenei claimed, in the same breath, that East and West conspired together against Iran and that at the same time they competed with each other for Tehran's favor. Kayhan-e Hava'i argued that the Bahais had always worked as foreign slaves (ghulam), first for the Tsarists, then for the British and Ottomans, and now for the Israelis and Americans.

Ettelaat linked Kasravi, the secular historian, to Reza Shah, and the latter to the international imperialist plot. The same paper argued that secular nationalism was a bourgeois ideology created by imperialism to sow dissension in the Muslim world and divide the people from the clergy. Similarly, history textbooks describe Bahaism as a "political conspiracy" hatched by nineteenth-century European imperialists to break the unity of Islam.

Khomeinists did not confine their search for conspiracies to Iranian politics. A public meeting organized by the regime in 1990 claimed that Marxism was a Jewish plot and that Salman Rushdie's Satanic Verses was part of the Israeli conspiracy to destroy Islam.

In a long series of articles on imperialism, Kayhan-e Hava'i argued that some historians felt the past was shaped by "great men," others by the "common man," but in reality the true force behind events had been conspirators -- especially Freemasons, Jews, or the two combined. Such conspiracies had brought about the Stuart Restoration in England, the partitioning of Poland and the Ottoman Empire, and, of course, the American, French, and Russian revolutions. The Bolshevik Revolution, the articles asserted, was an integral element in the Jewish conspiracy to take over the whole world. As evidence, the articles referred to the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion," the flow of "Jewish gold" into the Russian underground, and the ethnic origins of Marx, Trotsky, Kamenev, and Zinoviev. Even Stalin was named part of this conspiracy on the grounds that his wife was Jewish. These Jews were responsible for the persecution of the Muslim peoples of central Asia. These conspiracy theories would have won the approval of Louis XIV, not to mention Tsar Nicholas II. These paranoid fantasies should not be dismissed as the ranting and raving of the lunatic fringe; Kayhan-e Hava'i is a "highbrow paper" written for graduates studying in Western universities, that is, the creme de la creme of the Islamic Republic.

The paranoid style of the National Front comes out clearly in a book entitled Nabard-e Pruzheh-ha-ye Siyasi dar Sahneh-e Iran (The struggles of political projects in the Iranian scene). Its author, Hosayn Malek, was a veteran Mosaddeqist, who, together with his elder brother Khalel Maleki, had created the "social democratic" wing of the National Front. The two had joined the Tudeh in the early 1940s but had left it in 1946 to form an independent Marxist organization. Active in the 1979 revolution, Hosayn Malek was forced to flee Iran in 1981 when Khomeini cracked down on the opposition, including the

National Front. He wrote this book in Europe a few years before his death (from natural causes).

The book, which is replete with charts and diagrams, argues that the imperialists have incessantly schemed to subvert Iran. Every political organization -- of course, with the notable exception of the National Front -- is categorized as part of this or that foreign scheme.

The Russians worked not only through the Tudeh, the Fedayin, and the Mojahedin but also through -- believe it or not -- Khomeini's inner circle. "Behind these clerics," Malek claims, "lurk the Soviets." The British conspired through the Bahais, Freemasons, Fedayan-e Islam, and most especially senior clerics. The British could work with the clergy because Islam was an "Arab ideology" and everyone knew that the English historically controlled the Arab world. Even Jamal al-Din Afghani, the famous nineteenth-century pan-Islamist, was seen as part of this British plot.

Malek went on to argue that the Americans channeled their activities through the Pahlavis, the military, the large corporations, the Freemasons, the liberal parties (notably Bazargan's Liberation Movement), and defectors from the National Front. In fact, according to Malek, Mosaddeq had been the victim of a highly complicated plot involving not only the CIA, MI6, the royalist generals, the clerical leaders, and the Fedayan-e Islam but also the Tudeh, which he linked to Britain as well as Russia. The Tudeh, in turn, took the position that the oil nationalization crisis was a struggle between America and Britain and that the National Front was merely a "U.S. instrument" forged to supplant one imperialism with another.

The notion that the Tudeh worked for the British, however far fetched, has a long pedigree within the National Front. Mosaddeq himself had dubbed the Tudeh as "oil communists." These charges were based on the following "facts." During World War II, the Tudeh had joined a group of pro-British editors in creating a newspaper alliance known as the Anti-Fascist Society. Lambton, as the wartime British press attache, had had frequent dealings with prominent intellectuals, many of whom happened to be left-leaning. The Tudeh had initially been ambivalent about Mosaddeq's nationalization campaign, instead calling for concessions to the Soviets in the north and the prompt expropriation without compensation of the British company in the south. The final clincher was the "discovery" in the Abadan offices of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company of "secret documents" proving that the British were supporting the Tudeh. In actual fact, these documents were forgeries planted by Baqai supporters. The forgeries were so crude that they did not even bother to use the company's paper, numbering codes, and transliteration system.

British officials not only lacked links with the Tudeh but, together with their American counterparts, complained that they found it impossible to penetrate the wall of secrecy surrounding that party's leadership. The U.S. State Department was so ignorant of the inner workings of the Tudeh that its main handbook on communism in Iran, written in 1950, argued the party's real leaders

were not the acknowledged ones but veteran Bolsheviks hiding in Russia. In fact, the veteran Bolsheviks named here had been killed by Stalin some twenty years earlier -- so much for the notion that the imperial powers were all-knowing.

The reader may be tempted to dismiss these conspiratorial notions as leftist, nationalist, and Khomeinist paranoia. The style, however, was no less prevalent among royalists, whom the American media generally referred to as "moderate," "realistic," and "down-to-earth." The shah's last memoir, Answer to History, reads like a long nightmare full of shadowy figures out to knife him. According to him, the British, because they liked to "meddle in everything," had "a hand" in the creation of the Tudeh party.

The attempt on his life in 1949 had been plotted jointly by the Tudeh, the "ultraconservative" clergy, and the British, who liked to have "their fingers in strange pies" and whose embassy gardener was the father of the mistress of the would-be assassin. Mosaddeq, despite his "public posturing," was really a British agent who had agreed to take the premiership during World War II on condition he received his "master's explicit approval." Shahpour Bakhtiyar, premier on the eve of the revolution, was also an agent of British Petroleum. The Tudeh had infiltrated the National Front, elevated Khomeini to the rank of ayatollah, and created "an unholy" alliance with the Right to instigate both the 1963 bloodshed and the 1979 revolution. The oil companies had also played an important role in the revolution for they had never forgiven him for making a highly favorable deal with an Italian entrepreneur, whom they had murdered. The CIA, for unstated reasons, had for years financed the clergy.

The shah's paranoia reaches its peak when discussing the 1979 revolution. He claims that his overthrow was brought about by a "strange amalgam" of not only the clergy, the Tudeh, and the oil companies but also the Western media and, of course, the Carter and Thatcher administrations. The joke going around royalist circles after the revolution was if you lifted Khomeini's beard you would find inscribed "Made in Britain."

The religious minorities are conspicuous in their absence from the shah's memoirs. This, however, does not mean that they did not figure in royalist paranoia. In 1957 the regime, probably with CIA help, published with much fanfare a propaganda book against the Tudeh implying that the Soviets found the Christian community in Iran fertile ground for recruiting spies and subversives. The shah himself, in a private conversation with an American human rights lawyer on the eve of the revolution, argued that the Western press was Jewish controlled and that was why it had taken him to task over SAVAK as soon as he had begun to side with the Palestinians. This would have been news to the Israelis, not to mention the Palestinians. Similarly, a royalist pamphlet published in 1979 argued that Khomeini, "who cannot even speak Persian properly," had been installed in power by a formidable international conspiracy. This conspiracy included not only the oil companies, the Communists, and the superpowers but also Freemasons, Western companies who did not want Iran to industrialize, and Zionists, who "control 70 percent of the

world's investments in giant industries."

The shah's private conversations with his adviser and longtime friend Asadollah Alam are also highly revealing. He was convinced that Britain worked through the Tudeh, the senior clergy, including Khomeini, and the Baathist regime in Iraq. He was equally convinced that the Soviets were behind student disturbances in Iran, and the oil companies were instigating the Marxist as well as the Muslim guerrilla organizations against his regime. He even suspected that a "hidden force" controlled the United States, assassinating Kennedy and anyone else who got wind of its existence. If he had lived long enough, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi could have found employment in Hollywood as a consultant to the film JFK.

Royalist paranoia appears clearly in the 1988 television "confession" of General Hosayn Fardoust, the shah's childhood friend who for years headed the Imperial Inspectorate, a security agency second only to SAVAK. Even though this confession, like all television confessions, should be taken with a grain of salt, it does reflect the royalist mentality -- at least, features of that mentality which the new regime considered plausible for the general public. Besides dwelling on Mohammad Reza Shah's amorous adventures, Fardoust "revealed" the inner affairs of the royal palace. He claimed that Reza Shah had been a secret Bahai; Foroughi, the wartime premier, was a Freemason and therefore a British agent; and the royal palace was so full of British spies that even the shah could not speak freely there. Fardoust also claimed that over 30 percent of the leaders of the National Front were secret Tudehis; the British secretly favored Mosaddeq and his campaign to nationalize the oil company; the National Front was "linked" to the United States; the British arranged the young shah's marriage to and divorce from Princess Fawzieh of Egypt; Queen Elizabeth had personally ordered the shah to set up the Imperial Inspectorate; and Ernest Perron, another of the shah's childhood friends, had been placed by the British in Le Rosey School in Switzerland to establish ties with the future shah. Fardoust also claimed that MI6 rather than the CIA had saved the throne in 1953 and that the latter, left on its own, would have installed a military dictatorship.

Fardoust died a few weeks after the publication of these confessions. Three years later, Kayhan-e Hava'i serialized, in both Persian and English, what were purported to be Fardoust's more detailed memoirs. These claimed that Perron had been planted by the British in Le Rosey to seduce the young shah; that Perron headed a homosexual clique among the courtiers and the Freemasons; and that he continued to work for MI6 until his death in 1961, when his espionage role was taken over by Dr. Ayadi, a Bahai veterinary surgeon who had cured the shah of a psychosomatic ailment. Ayadi was described as the Rasputin of Iran. These memoirs also elaborated on the theme that Mosaddeq was a British agent. They argued that Mosaddeq could not have attained high positions in the 1920s without London's support and that his close friend Alam was a "well-known" British agent. To top it all, the memoirs claimed that Mosaddeq, because of these foreign ties, had consciously helped the MI6 and CIA carry out the coup

against himself.

Consequences

Given the imperial experience, some of the suspicions of foreign conspiracies were quite plausible. The British did want Mosaddeq's removal, did have contacts with senior clerics, did seek information about the Tudeh, and at times did have policy differences with the shah. Similarly, the Russians and the Americans actively sought contacts, influence, information, and, thereby, operatives. After all, the KGB, CIA, and MI6 are not mere figments of a fertile imagination. Even paranoids can have enemies. But accepting this does not mean that the main actors on the Iranian scene, whether politicians or political parties, were mere marionettes controlled by the Great Powers. The paranoid style distorted the overall picture, not just the details.

The paranoid style had far-reaching consequences. The premise that grand plots existed naturally led to the belief there were plotters everywhere -- some obvious, others more devious. And if one were surrounded by plotters, one could conclude that those with views different from one's own were members of this or that foreign conspiracy. Thus political activists tended to equate competition with treason, liberalism with weak-mindedness, honest differences of opinion with divisive alien conspiracies, and political toleration with permissiveness toward the enemy within.

The result was detrimental for the development of political pluralism in Iran. Political coalitions were difficult to launch, and when in the rare cases they were launched, they could quickly be shipwrecked on the treacherous rocks of mutual distrust and widespread suspicion. Differences of opinion within organizations could not be accommodated; it was all too easy for leaders to expel dissidents as "foreign agents." Moreover, the rulers -- Khomeini as much as the shah -- could readily exploit public paranoia, associating the opposition with this or that foreign conspiracy. Furthermore, the regimes, in eliminating the opposition, could easily charge them with the ultimate political crime: that of treason, espionage, and foreign subversion. One does not compromise and negotiate with spies and traitors; one locks them up or else shoots them.

The paranoid style, thus, paved the way for the mass executions of 1981-82. When in June 1981 the Mojahedin tried to overthrow the Islamic Republic, Khomeini proclaimed that the CIA was planning a repeat performance of 1953 and that the whole opposition, not just the Mojahedin, was implicated in this grand "international plot." In six short weeks, the Islamic Republic shot over one thousand prisoners. The victims included not only members of the Mojahedin but also royalists, Bahais, Jews, Kurds, Baluchis, Arabs, Qashqayis, Turkomans, National Frontists, Maoists, anti-Stalinist Marxists, and even apolitical teenage girls who happened to be in the wrong street at the wrong time. Never before in Iran had firing squads executed so many in so short a time over so flimsy an accusation. Real fears had merged with unreal ones. The paranoid style had produced tragedy as well as comedy.

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3. Image scans of excerpts from 1993 book (click image for full-size version)

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