

# Global Affairs

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## *Dr. Assad Homayoun*<sup>1</sup> IRAN: INTO HARM'S WAY

*Mission To Tehran.* By General Robert E. Huyser. Harper & Row, New York, 19H6; 3(06, \$20.95

Some of the soldiers opposed Clearchus, saying that all the captains and generals ought not to go, and that they ought not to trust Tissaphernes; but Clearchus insisted strongly, until in the end he succeeded in getting five generals and twenty captains to go. About two hundred of the other soldiers went with them, too, as though to buy provisions.

When they arrived at the entrance of Tissaphernes' tent, the generals were invited inside ... the captains waited at the entrance. Not long afterwards, at one and the same signal, those who were inside were seized and those who were outside were massacred. After that contingents of native cavalry rode over the plain and killed all Greeks they could find slaves and freemen alike.

From *The Persian Expedition* by Xenophon (430-354 B.C.)

Evidently my arrival had not been a secret as I had believed. There was another message from Washington, it was from Secretary Vance, and said that I was to proceed as previously instructed. I should establish contact with five top Iranian military leaders, and pass on them the assurances sent by President Carter.

From (*Mission To Tehran*) by Gen. Robert. E. Huyser

When I finished reading Huyser's book *Mission To Tehran*, it reminded me of *The Persian Expedition* by the Athenian general and historian Xenophon, which was narrated around 370 B.C. Study of book **II**, which consists of twenty-seven pages, was instructive.

I believe history often repeats itself in different ways, different places; and

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<sup>1</sup> - Dr. Assad Homayoun is a professorial lecturer of international affairs at George Washington University.

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with different actors, and study of history sometimes might help us avoid fatal mistakes.

During the Iranian crisis, when the situation was getting out of hand, the U.S. government decided to support the civilian government of Dr. Shapour Bakhtiar. In early January 1979, President Carter dispatched Air Force Gen. Robert E. Huyser, then deputy commander of U.S. forces in Stuttgart, to Tehran.

He arrived on January 4, 1979, and stayed for one month. He was sent to contact top military officers of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi to unite them in support of the government of Bakhtiar and indeed to encourage the military to transfer its loyalty from the Shah to Bakhtiar. Huyser's mission proved to be a disaster, and U.S. intervention in the Iranian crisis was a great failure.

The Iranian armed forces were misled, kept busy, and confused in those decisive days, and after the departure of Huyser, highranking military officers reluctantly declared neutrality. Following that, the armed forces disintegrated and many military leaders were arrested and killed.

Now after eight years we can read Huyser's story. He discusses his contacts, negotiations, and activities during his one-month stay in Tehran in those momentous days. Senior Iranian officers who are alive disagree with most of Huyser's analysis, but his day-to-day reports are very interesting to read. Huyser writes, "The President directed me to convey his concern and assurances to senior military leaders at this most critical time. It was of vital importance to both the Iranian people and the U.S. government that Iran have a strong, stable government which would remain friendly to the United States. The Iranian military was the key to the situation."

Huyser's mission emanated from a discussion between James Schlesinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski. It was suggested to the president that the United States send a high-powered emissary to boost the morale of the Shah for restoration of order. But the result was Huyser's mission to the Iranian military leaders. How and why did the president choose to send Huyser? Why he accepted, though reluctantly, is a different subject that space does not permit us to discuss. Huyser had made many trips to Iran and met several times with the Shah and his senior officers to set up a command and control system. He knew some military leaders fairly well. He did not know anything about lower ranking officers or non-commissioned officers and was not familiar with the political leaders

and the political, socio-economic, and religious reality of life in Iran. He understood that the role of the armed forces was vital to any government, but he failed to appreciate that the armed forces could not transfer their loyalty from the Shah to a civilian government so fast in that critical time. Huyser knew that:

- **In** the absence of a supreme commander, the Shah, there could be a great problem of command and authority. The command structure of the Iranian armed forces lacked cohesion due to divisions that were imposed by the Shah to exercise control. Without the Shah, the military could neither move independently nor switch its loyalty.
- **The** armed forces of Iran were integrated and commanded not horizontally but vertically, with the Shah as supreme commander and sole decision-maker. The three services were not separated but were under the overall command of the Shah. Thus, the army, navy, and air force could not coordinate with each other unless it was through the supreme command, and infantry, artillery, and the armored corps also were organized separately. This system worked brilliantly in the 1950s and 1960s, but in the 1970s and a time of crisis it was a great hindrance to the national security of the country.
- **Even** in those crucial days, military leaders could not freely talk to each other, and the chief of staff was usually a figurehead, dealing mostly with personnel affairs, budgets, and planning. He was not the charismatic leader to take a risk in a turning point in Persian history. Also the Shah, as his chief of staff later said, was still supreme commander after his departure and did not delegate responsibilities and authority to the chief of staff to deal effectively with pressing issues.
- **Iran** had no liberal tradition and political parties in a real sense.
- **The** geographic position of Iran is such that it is always feeling the geopolitical weight of the USSR. Given the fact that the Communist Party of Iran has always been active, with the overt and covert support of the all-powerful Soviet espionage organization, Iranian leaders must always be mindful of this reality.

**In** this situation, the United States wanted the Iranian military to support Bakhtiar. Bakhtiar was concerned about the possibility of a military coup against himself, and the Shah was suspicious of U.S. support of

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Bakhtiar. As Huyser says, "The Shah, to my surprise, told me I was getting a little too strong in my support for Mr. Bakhtiar." And Ayatollah Khomeini thought that Huyser's mission was to repeat the history of 1953, which led to the downfall of Dr. Mohammed Mossadegh.

There was confusion within the U.S. government, too, with no consensus of views on what policy to pursue. There was no coordination among the National Security Council, the State Department, the Pentagon and the CIA. Lack of such a grand strategy was a source of concern to many. Gen. Alexander Haig says, "I opposed the Huyser mission because it was not a military task." While Huyser was insisting on support for Bakhtiar, Ambassador William Sullivan was in favor of the armed forces transferring their loyalty from the Shah to the religious leaders. Neither was there any unity of views and coordination within different sections of the U.S. mission in Iran. The CIA station chief and Air Force, Army, and Navy representatives each had separate views and followed different policies. To understand the situation better, the reader can refer to the proceedings of the "crisis committee," which have been recorded in *Facts about the Iranian Crisis* by Gen. A. Gharabaghi:

General Badrei (commander of the army): This morning the CIA station chief came to see me and suggested we get in touch and meet with Mr. Khomeini. I did not answer him and wanted to bring this to your attention.

Lt. General Moghadam (the chief of SAVAK): It is true that the CIA chief believes we should.

Lt. General Rabii (commander of the air force): On the contrary, when I met the U.S. Air Force representative today he was telling me it would be necessary for the army to support the Bakhtiar government.

Lt. General Badrei: On the contrary, the U.S. Army representative believes, like the CIA chief, that it would be better for us to meet with Mr. Khomeini.

Vice Adm. Habibollahi (commander of the navy): The U.S. Navy representative believes it would be better for the army to give its support to the Bakhtiar government.

Gen. Toufanian (vice minister of war): General Huyser also recently is talking of both, Bakhtiar and Khomeini."

The lack of unity, coordination, and purpose evident here reminds me of a remark made years ago by a Turkish general to a friend of mine: "The great difficulty with having Americans as allies is that you can never be sure when they will turn around and stab themselves in the back." The author in his day-to-day record often contradicts himself.

On the one hand, he says that Generals Gharabaghi and Rabii, after meeting the Shah, told him, "Yes general. The Shah told us to trust you, to listen to you, and obey you." On the other hand, when he wants to convince the Iranian air force of the need to transfer sensitive weaponry that had been provided by the United States he meets with resistance:

"General Rabii objected to the pressure applied by the U.S. to protect the sensitive weaponry. He understood our concern, but he said his people were doing the job adequately." If the Shah had issued an order that generals should obey Huyser and this order was relayed to Huyser by Rabii and Gharabaghi, then Rabii must have listened to Huyser on the transfer of sensitive arms. Of course, it is possible that the Shah's views were misinterpreted. After all, it would be difficult to believe that the Shah, who was so proud of the Iranian armed forces, would instruct his top commanders to obey a foreign general. However, Gharabaghi has categorically denied that such a thing was said by the Shah.

Huyser talks about the need for the establishment of a national security council in Iran to deal with the crisis and then says that a national security council had now been established. He was not aware that such a council had existed for years, but unlike the American NSC, it only met once in a while.

The writer talks about the desertion rate of the Iranian armed forces during the crisis and mentions, "a more realistic figure was probably 100 to 200 out of 450,000 each day." However, Gary Sick, who had access to Huyser's report to the Whitehouse, in his book *All Fall Down* says, "Huyser reported that the desertion rate within the military was as high as 500 to 1,000 per day."

Huyser twice mentions the name of Mohammad Beheshti as Ayatollah Beheshti. As far as I know, Mr. Beheshti never reached the rank of ayatollah. At that time, there were six grand ayatollahs and close to a hundred *hojat-al-Islarn* and Beheshti was not among them.

Huyser talks about the "board" and the "plan" of the military and wanting to know what the board was up to and what the military's plan was. As far as I understood, there was no board but a loose "crisis

committee" consisting of around ten high-ranking generals. As far as their plan was concerned, they could neither trust Huyser, because they really did not understand him, nor each other because of the Shah's intelligence.

Although Huyser had a direct order to encourage the Iranian military to support Bakhtiar, he gradually tilted toward the position of Ambassador Sullivan. After the opposition attack on SAVAK and the escalation of street fighting, he wrote, "There was an urgent need for a meeting with the opposition. Sullivan said the religious leaders were still willing, and the military should be ready to meet on religious territory. I told him I would sound them out." In another meeting, Huyser suggests that the military leaders meet with the religious leaders, and in that meeting he passes the telephone numbers of opposition leaders to the military leaders to initiate contact.

Huyser refers to the postponement of Khomeini's departure from Paris, but he fails to explain the real reason behind this postponement. Khomeini and his followers knew quite well that the army was loyal to the Shah and would not let the opposition succeed. They were afraid of possible military moves and wanted first to neutralize the army then follow their objectives. Their concern decreased when several meetings took place between Ibrahim Yazdi and Warren Zimmerman, political counselor of the U.S. Embassy in Paris. The reason for the meeting was to get assurances from the United States that the army would not take action against the opposition. As Sick puts it, "Yazdi was interested in learning about U.S. contacts with the Iranian military.

He was very concerned about reports that the military was preparing a coup ... speaking for Khomeini, he urged the United States to do everything possible to prevent such action."

Khomeini knew the army was not 'just a paper tiger," as Sullivan believed. Even after getting some assurances, religious leaders were still scared of a sudden strike by the army. This is described in *Iran: The Untold Story* by Mohamed Heikal. The book says that when Khomeini boarded the Air France jet on the evening of February 1, 1979, he was still worried. As Heikal says, "He went straight to the upper section, where he performed his ritual ablution (wudu), said prayers for those facing death, ... there was a good deal of nervousness . .. he again performed the (wudu)." Also, one important actor in the Iranian revolution has said that fear and panic were so great that nobody, including Khomeini, was hopeful in the religious camp until 11 a.m..

February 11, 1979, when they heard the news about the declaration of neutrality by the armed forces, which led to the victory of the revolution. Huyser contends that Iranian military leaders were exaggerating the influence and power of communists in Iran and he is wrong. I would like to refer him to Mehdi Bazargan's book, *Revolution In Two Steps*, in which he says, "The victory of the Iranian revolution was obtained with the cooperation of three groups: clergymen, communists, and youths." Huyser's mission failed, and his book is a story of failure-not his, but a failure of U.S. policy and of lack of coordination and direction from Washington and of mistakes on the part of Iran in relying on others for shaping its destiny. Huyser's book is well written. It is an important document that will contribute to better understanding of the Iranian crisis and U.S. policy toward Iran.

It is a story of an honorable and outstanding general who was sent by Carter on a mission of the most sensitive political nature, and the general, against his wishes, contributed to the destruction of the Persian armed forces. This led in turn to the revolution that catapulted Iran into the dark ages and triggered the occupation of Afghanistan, followed by the bloody war in the Persian Gulf that has been going on for more than six and a half years and exhausting the energy, treasury, and blood of Iran and Iraq while threatening the security of the entire area.