

Bungles, Bobbles and Spies; The Tehran Papers: Portrait of the CIA in a Maze of Its Own Design

[FINAL Edition]

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N THE SHELVES of a few libraries around the country - and undoubtedly also in the archives of the KGB - is a remarkable collection of books entitled "Documents from the U.S. Espionage Den."

These flimsy paperback volumes, now 68 in all, contain the raw CIA and State Department cables seized by Iranian militants when they overran the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in 1979. The most sensitive CIA cables had been shredded into confetti by the embassy staff, only to be reconstructed, strip by strip, by the industrious Iranians.

The Tehran documents triggered some news stories when they began to surface in the early 1980s. But few people nowadays even seem aware that the collection exists. Which, in a way, is unfortunate. For they are, quite simply, sensational reading - as close as most of us will ever get to sitting in the office of a CIA station chief and perusing his files.

Open these volumes and out tumble real-life spy stories: how the CIA recruited Kurdish agents in 1979 to work against Ayatollah Khomeini; how it sent a deep-cover agent to contact Abolhassan Bani-Sadr in Tehran; how CIA operatives charted the growing Red Army presence in Afghanistan on the eve of the Soviet invasion. And it's all told in cable traffic - almost in the style of an epistolary novel!

You learn the most unlikely bits of tradecraft. Say, for example, that you find yourself standing watch at the U.S. consulate in Tabriz and an Iraqi intelligence officer walks in the door and says he wants to spy for the United States. Quick! What do you do?

Answer: You call a CIA officer in Tehran and say: "Mr. Mayday, an American businessman from Indiana, needs some assistance with an export contract involving iron. He is particularly interested in information on work permits in the United States."

Then there is the fun of puzzling out cryptonyms. SGSWIRL is obviously the polygraph, RTACTION is clearly one of the CIA's code names for itself, and ZRWAHOO seems to involve procedures for distributing sensitive information. But can NVBLAZON really be code for the United States of America?

And most important of all, you learn about the bureaucratic imperatives that drive the CIA. Consider the following cable sent from CIA headquarters to Tehran, offering advice to the station chief who wants to send an informal letter to the director of Central Intelligence (DCI):

"1. REGRET DELAY RESPONDING.

"2. LWSURF IS INDICATOR USED FOR INFORMAL CHANNEL DIRECTLY BETWEEN CHIEFS OF STATION AND THE DCI. LETTERS ARE TO BE POUCHED ADDRESSED . . . IN PSEUDO IDEN SIGNED IN PSEUDONYM AND SHOULD CARRY LWSURF INDICATOR BOTH ON OUTSIDE OF ENVELOPE AND ON LETTER ITSELF.

"3. LWSURF LETTERS SHOULD NOT BE MORE THAN TWO TYPEWRITTEN PAGES IN LENGTH, AND SHOULD NOT CONTAIN ACTION RECOMMENDATIONS OR REQUESTS

(THESE SHOULD BE COVERED IN NORMAL STAFF CORRESPONDENCE.)

"4. GENERALLY LWSURF LETTERS CONTAIN A PARAGRAPH COVERING THE BIG PICTURE (POLITICAL ATMOSPHERICS) FOLLOWED BY OPERATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS, PERSONNEL PROBLEMS, ETC.

"5. LWSURF LETTERS MAY BE SENT AT ANY TIME, BUT THE CURRENT SCHEDULE CALLS FOR SUBMISSIONS EVERY SIX MONTHS. LETTERS FOR NE {Near East} STATION CHIEFS ARE TO BE SUBMITTED IN NOVEMBER AND MAY."

Got it? Informal communications in November and May, please, and no more than two pages! That brief cable says more about the bureaucratic pressures at work in the modern CIA than a drawerful of learned papers. I first began reading the Tehran documents three years ago, when I was beginning research on a new spy novel. I was amazed at what they contained - the raw cables seemed like a Rosetta Stone for anyone interested in how an intelligence agency worked overseas. When I found selected volumes on sale at the National Intelligence Book Center on K Street, I snapped them up.

The real secrets in these volumes - and there are many - have long since been blown. The documents have been on sale for years in Tehran - not to mention Washington, where I'm told "hundreds" of copies have been sold - and the details I will discuss in this piece already have been pawed over by the intelligence agencies of several dozen countries. Still, I am going to leave out agents' true names and some other operational details. If you want those, you'll have to buy your own set.

What is priceless in these volumes aren't the nominal secrets but the small details. They convey the feel of a case officer's job, and the mundane and sometimes inane details that command much of his attention. One always suspected this - the essential silliness of some of what passes for intelligence work - but it's interesting to see it confirmed in these documents.

Take my favorite spy saga in the Iranian collection, the "Larry Giel" case. Who could invent a plot as goofy as this:

It's 1976 in pre-revolutionary Iran. Air Force intelligence, egged on by the CIA, has recruited an American doctor at the U.S. Army Hospital in Tehran to provide information on a hypochondriacal Soviet diplomat named Sazanov, who thinks he is suffering from radiation poisoning.

They give the doctor a code-name, "Larry Giel," and also a pseudonym, "Paul Windsor." Surely he doesn't need both a code-name and a pseudonym, you might think, but that's the way they do things. Back at the Pentagon, the Air Force brass exchange some frantic memos about whether using a doctor for intelligence purposes will violate the Geneva Convention and eventually decide to go ahead.

"Larry Giel" asks Sazanov to a cocktail party. The Soviet is mystified and says, according to the cable traffic, that he isn't sure why he was invited. The doctor then asks him to dinner, but this time Sazanov doesn't show. The local CIA station, meanwhile, sends an operative to chat with Sazanov and tell him that he is "different from the other Soviets in Tehran . . . sensitive, a private man, but more approachable."

The Sazanov case, alas, turns out to be a bust. But the next year, "Larry Giel" is targeted on a Soviet doctor named Ramkov. Ramkov accepts a gift of a used black-and-white TV and then begins asking the American for drugs, medical information and other favors. He looks like a prime candidate for "IPD" (in-place defection).

The pot is boiling along nicely when "Larry Giel" blurts out to a Swiss diplomat at a cocktail party

that - funny coincidence - they both seem to know the same Soviet doctor. The Swiss is "visibly upset." And no wonder. It turns out the nominally neutral Swiss diplomat is also passing information to the CIA about Ramkov.

Now it's the CIA's turn to get upset. Or so we infer from a CIA cable dated 040023Z JUL 79 (July 4, 1979) in which headquarters discloses the combination for an Air Force safe in Tehran! The problem, explains the memo, is that one of the Air Force documents on the otherwise sleepy Larry Giel case "DESCRIBES INSET/1 {the Swiss diplomat} AS AN RTACTION {CIA} SOURCE SECURE RETRIEVAL AND DESTRUCTION OF THIS MEMO IS OUR PRINCIPAL REASON FOR WANTING TO GAIN ACCESS TO THE . . . SAFE"

Got that? The CIA decided in July 1979 to break into an Air Force safe in Tehran to protect the identity of a Swiss diplomat who had helped try to recruit a Russian? Evidently the break-in effort failed, for several months later when the U.S. Embassy was seized, the entire file landed in the hands of the Iranians.

Few of the operations described in the Iranian documents are quite as clumsy as the "Larry Giel" fiasco. There is a deadly serious attempt to develop a relationship with an Iranian codenamed SDLURE/1, who has since been identified by the Iranians as none other than Khomeini intimate (and later Iranian president) Bani-Sadr. For this sensitive task, the agency sends in a very experienced case officer posing as a businessman named Guy W. Rutherford (also known by the alias William Foster), who is selling agricultural equipment for a Pennsylvania company.

"Rutherford's" instructions, if he needs to contact the U.S. Embassy during this dangerous mission, are to dial one of four embassy numbers, ask for extension 1106 or 1135 and identify himself as George Johnson. That gives him, on this mission alone, three code names!

"Rutherford" did indeed visit several times with Bani-Sadr and apparently offered him a stipend of at least \$1,000 a month - just four months before he became president of Iran! "Rutherford" lays out in one memo an elaborate scenario for developing Bani-Sadr as a CIA asset, noting on the negative side that "disclosure of a clandestine relationship with us would probably end subject's political career."

Well, yes. Even though Bani-Sadr was never recruited, the mere fact of unwitting CIA contact apparently did him in. His political career came to a rather sudden stop when the Iranian militants pieced the shredded documents back together and realized that the person code-named SDLURE was their president! In fact, reading these cables you can't help but think that the Iranians may have a point in their paranoia about the CIA.

A reader of the Iranian documents is also reminded what a dreadful time 1979 was for the CIA, and for the United States as a whole. It wasn't simply the collapse of American influence in Iran. The Soviets were on their way into Afghanistan that year. One volume of the Iranian collection is devoted to Afghanistan, and it's eerie to read an October 1979 CIA cable outlining their newest technique for assessing the growing Soviet military presence in the suburbs of Kabul: "A ROUGH COUNT WAS MADE OF YOUNG SOVIETS PLAYING VOLLEYBALL ON THREE COURTS IN THE BLOCK 5 AREA. ABOUT 300 SOVIETS WERE COUNTED."

Of more current topical interest are the CIA's frantic attempts in 1979 to recruit Iranian Kurds to work against Khomeini. This might seem a tricky task, given the widespread anger among the Kurds at what many felt was their seduction and abandonment a few years before, in a 1974-75 covert campaign by the shah and the CIA against Iraq. But memories at the agency were apparently short. A secret 1979 CIA study, "The Kurdish Problem in Perspective," doesn't include any serious discussion of the 1975 flap. Perhaps it was too sensitive. In any event, the agency presses forward in 1979.

CIA bases in San Francisco and Los Angeles pursue local emigres. The CIA contacts one former asset code-named SDTHROB/1, but after polygraphing him concludes tartly that he is "A MAN WHO HAS RATHER CONSISTENTLY ADVANCED HIS OWN INTERESTS" and would not "GO OUT OF HIS WAY TO ADVANCE THOSE OF NVBLAZON."

In the case of one young Kurd, code-named CATOMIC/19 (known familiarly as "T/19"), the agency uses a paternal approach, with the case officer admonishing his target "THAT HE WAS GOING TO TALK TO T/19 LIKE A FATHER WHEN NECESSARY AND THAT IT WOULD BE FOR T/19's OWN GOOD."

A cable from the director dated Sept. 28, 1979 offers this stark discussion of how to play the Kurdish card against Iran, apparently by rousing Iranian fears about Soviet support for Kurdish independence:

"HQS CURRENTLY LOOKING FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON POSSIBLE SUPPORT OF KURDISH AND OTHER MINORITIES IN IRAN WHO SEEK AUTONOMY OR INDEPENDENCE. WE CONTEMPLATING POSSIBLE ACTION TO EXPLOIT SUCH SUPPORT. HOWEVER, AS THIS IS DEFINITELY TWO-EDGED SWORD SITUATION, WE INVITE STATIONS' COMMENTS/OPINION. FYI: POLICY AUTHORITY IS CONTAINED IN "PERSPECTIVES IN SOVIET INTERFERENCE IN OTHER COUNTRIES' AFFAIRS," AND NO NEW PRESIDENTIAL FINDING WOULD BE REQUIRED."

Definitely a two-edged sword situation.

To their credit, CIA station chiefs come across in these documents as level-headed chaps who are willing to shoot down dumb proposals from headquarters. Consider this response from the Ankara station to the above cable:

"STATION FEELS THAT ANY COVERT ACTION EFFORT TO LINK SOVIETS WITH KURDISH MINORITIES IN IRAN OR, BY EXTENSION, IN TURKEY, IN ORDER TO BE CREDIBLE WOULD HAVE TO BE BASED ON HARD SUPPORTABLE EVIDENCE. OTHERWISE OUR EFFORT MIGHT ONLY SERVE TO HEIGHTEN SUSPICIONS OF USG INVOLVEMENT IN THIS AREA. WE COULD COME OUT THE LOSER IN THIS DEBATE. TO DATE STATION HAS OBTAINED NO INFORMATION THAT WOULD BE USABLE IN COVERT ACTION CONTEXT."

CIA officers also appear in these cables to have a discriminating eye for the half-baked nonsense that is peddled around the fringes of the spy world. And on occasion they have some tart words for their counterparts in other intelligence agencies.

Consider this response from headquarters to a report from Israeli intelligence that the Iranians were transferring U.S. weapons to Syria and the PLO: "WE ARE DISTURBED THAT THE ISRAELIS FIND {this} REPORT `PLAUSIBLE.' INTRIGUING, MAYBE, BUT NOT `PLAUSIBLE.' "

Or this blunt reponse to a report from the G-2 intelligence unit of the Phalange Party in Lebanon, which claimed to have evidence that Iranians were training Palestinians in Southern Lebanon: "FRANKLY, WE DOUBT THAT PARA 1 INFORMATION IS TRUE."

The Iranian documents reveal, too, the hubris of a secret organization, the fatal tendency to give oneself and one's colleagues a covert pat on the back. Reading some of the cables, you can almost hear the martini glasses clinking. My favorite is this summary of an interview with an Iranian agent code-named SDSTAY:

"SDSTAY ASKED WITH CONCERN IF PRESS REPORTS OF VIRTUAL DESTRUCTION OF RTACTION {the CIA!} WERE TRUE AND WAS REASSURED TO HEAR A CONTRARY VIEW. HE FEELS THAT ONLY RTACTION PERSONNEL UNDERSTAND IRAN AND THAT IT IS THE

ONLY GOVERNMENT ORGANIZATION WORTH CONTACTING. SDSTAY WAS GREATLY IMPRESSED WITH RTACTION OMNISCIENCE AS DEMONSTRATED BY FACT WE HAD LOCATED HIM."