

Iran Fears Velvet Revolution: Can Azeris Do It?

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According to the report:

'Following the arrest of four Iranian nationals on charges of plotting to overthrow the government with Washington's support, head of the counterespionage department in the Intelligence Ministry said Monday that the group intended to build social and political tension in the country.'

The official, whose name was not revealed, added "organizing anti-government public rallies and creating ethnic division in the country" were among the tactics to be employed by the network. [The report may be read here.]

In our ongoing conversations with Dr. Walid Phares — director of the Future of Terrorism Project at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies who now also serves as secretary general of the Trans Atlantic Legislative Group on Counter Terrorism -- we asked for his interpretation of any underlying message within the report.

We know what the report says. What are the Iranians not saying?

DR. WALID PHARES: First, the Iranian regime has always conducted arrests among its opposition. It has done so since coming to power in 1980. The regime has — for all intent and purposes — physically eliminated Iranian citizens — thousands of them — by labeling them as being "U.S.-backed" and/or "Zionist" elements inside the country.

If you look at the archives of the various international human rights organizations, or country reports in various foreign ministries; and of course, if you review the information collected from the many Iranian opposition groups, you'll easily discover a continuous and systematic suppression of freedoms in Iran for the last 30 years. The arrest campaigns have covered nearly every sector of Iranian society: students, women, labor, artists, but also ethnic minorities such as Arabs, Kurds, Baluch, Azeri and others. Also, religious minorities such as Christians, Jews and Bahais have also been persecuted.

The news regarding arrests of Azeri ethnics in Iran is not unusual. We've been reading open sources reports about Bahais arrests in recent weeks, as well as arrests of Ahwaz Arabs over the past several months, and women over the last year. So, the reports by the Iranian regime about a "U.S. conspiracy" is neither strange nor exceptional.

W. THOMAS SMITH JR.: The Iranian press reported the unnamed intelligence official as saying 'the group' had been successful in fomenting dissent among Azeri people in the Azerbaijan Province. Why the regime's focus on this province?

PHARES: This is very telling in that anti-Khomeinist sentiment is spreading in the northwestern part of the country and among the single largest ethnic minority in Iran. Azeris are the second group after the Persians, and they form a contiguous group settling the entire northwestern part of Iran in what is known as southern Azarbaijjan. It is historically a part of the Azeri nation and they speak a Turkic language. Traditionally the Iranian Azeris have been loyal to the Iranian

nation, and many among them have served in Iran's military. But with the radicalization of the regime and the economic crisis now underway in Iran, many ethnic minorities are protesting bad socio-economic conditions in their areas. They mainly accuse the Mullahs in Tehran of concentrating wealth among their own elite in the center while letting the provinces decay. The Azeris aren't happy with the state of affairs in the so-called 'Islamic republic'. Hence we're witnessing the rise of local opposition movements in their areas. The regime responds with preemptive arrests, and of course labels any protest as a 'pro-American' conspiracy: Classical Khomeinist narrative.

SMITH: Why would the Iranian press quote 'Intelligence officials' and not the justice ministry?

PHARES: Because most likely when the opposition is widening, the regime unleashes its strongest arm, the intelligence services. If anything this is an indicator that the Azeri movement, and all other movements are getting stronger with time.

SMITH: The report states:

'Tehran's Islamic Revolution Court sentenced the four suspects without announcing the length of their sentence. 'They have confessed to trying to distance the people of Iran from the government and introduce the United States as their sole savior,' the court said in a statement. 'Two of the detainees are internationally renowned doctors Arash and Kamyar Alaei, who specialize in HIV/AIDS. In the Monday press conference, the top Iranian counterespionage official said that the US intelligence agencies had resorted to 'soft overthrow projects' over the past decade, as there is no international statute law against such measures.'

What are we to deduce from such arrests?

PHARES: It means the middle class in Iranian Azarbaijians is fed up with the Mullah regime. When the Khomeinists begin striking out at citizens — doctors as in this case, or professors and bloggers as in other cases — we're talking about a serious development. When educated people are accused of political 'incitement' against the regime — which translates to political opposition — it means that many more activists are mobilizing civil society, and that of course is a red line to the regime.

SMITH: The report also mentions the U.S. having spent \$32 million on 'soft overthrow projects'; a means by which the U.S. could 'infiltrate elite and expert circles' and therein gain access to information regarding national 'infrastructure, microbiological achievements, and defensive capacity.' They also named names of Americans. Why?

PHARES: It is an act of desperation. It shows the regime is angry and wants to send a message to the U.S. government, which by the way is preparing to open dialogue with Tehran. By naming names and agencies, the Iranian Pasdaran [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps] and intelligence services are sending a message to the Obama administration telling them that if they want to open dialogue, they will have to shut all these 'democracy operations'. What is ironic is that the Bush administration was criticized for doing so little to help the Iranian democracy movement. If indeed the Iranian regime is complaining about \$32 million spent allegedly by the U.S. on democracy activities, this is peanuts compared to the billions of dollars spent on the war on terror and the hundreds of millions of dollars spent on the war of ideas. This amount is ridiculous: Yet the Iranian regime wants Washington not to spend a penny on any program that would help democracy groups in Iran. This pressure is aimed at preempting the Obama administration.

SMITH: The report said 'Iranian intelligence operatives had been able to infiltrate the network and 'launch an intelligence war with the CIA by leaking false information.' It also said the UK and Israel were involved.

PHARES: Typical of the regime to try to frame all three governments of the U.S., UK, and Israel in one giant conspiracy. For by linking alleged Israeli activities to alleged U.S. and British activities against the regime, they would create a 'radioactive' environment in the region. Again, Tehran is trying to build a big bargaining chip for the day of dialogue. Thus the Iranian negotiators hope to be in a position of strength: Hold the high ground and lead with other subjects before the discussion of the most relevant ones, i.e. the nuclear issues.

SMITH: The report mentions the claim by Mohammad-Javad Zarif, the former Iranian ambassador to the United Nations, that 'the White House is taking essential measures to orchestrate a 'Velvet Revolution' in Iran.'

PHARES: It is a reminder of the last decade of the Soviet Union when Soviet citizens invited to the West were eager to learn about open and free societies. They were often punished by Moscow for concocting revolutions against the Communist regime. The Iranian establishment lives in the paranoia of a similar situation. They spy on their own citizens when they travel and accuse them of being recruited by the West. When the Khomeinists start talking about a so-called 'American support' of a so-called 'Velvet Revolution' inside Iran, it means they are indeed afraid that seeds have already been sown for such a revolution. In fact, what worries the regime are not these scientific conferences but the narrative on many Iranian web sites talking about 'democratic revolution.' Ali Khamenei's Pasdaran can feel the sentiment inside Iran's civil society. Thus they want to suppress these sentiments by connecting them to an alleged American and Western activity.

[Dr. Phares, who has provided similar analysis to U.S. government and who regularly conducts Congressional and State Department as well as European Parliament and UN Security Council briefings; has been providing exclusive analysis to us for nearly five years.]

[The Iranian Press TV report also states: 'Investigative journalist Seymour Hersh revealed in July that U.S. Congressional leaders had secretly agreed to President George W. Bush's \$400-million funding request for a major escalation in covert operations inside Iran.' Our sources coordinating with the Iranian opposition groups, have informed us that members of those opposition groups 'are wondering why Hersh is leaking such information, which is in turn used by the regime against them.' (International Analyst Network).