

VA

Interviewee: Archie Bolster

Session #2

Interviewer: William Burr

Arlington, Virginia

March 24, 1988

Q: The second part of the interview with Archie Bolster took place in Arlington, Virginia on March 24, 1988.

Mr. Bolster, when we broke off last time, you were talking about some of the officials who worked at the Embassy in Tehran during the mid-sixties. Who was the DCM around this time, 1965 or 1966?

Bolster: Well, when I first came there the DCM was Stuart Rockwell, who had made a remarkable effort to learn Farsi, and he was really quite good. He was able to converse in Farsi with various politicians and other figures that he met. Perhaps not in great detail, but at least enough to impress them with the fact that he had really studied and was able to use Farsi. Which was unusual, because I think he was probably the only DCM we had, until much later, who spoke Farsi, and that was entirely through his own efforts at the post, taking lessons every day.

And he was there for quite a period of time. I don't exactly recall when he left. I'd have to refresh my memory as to who was there at what period, because I tend to run things together. But I think Stuart Rockwell was there for quite a long

period, maybe four years or something like that.

Q: Into the period when [Armin] Meyer was Ambassador?

Bolster: Yes. Then Nicholas Thatcher came along as the next DCM. He was a very nice fellow. Very energetic and very easy to work with. And he was, in fact, there as DCM when I left in '66.

Q: Who was the Military Attache that was at the Embassy around this time? I mean, there were several military attaches from the services, is that right?

Bolster: There were attaches from each service, and then there was one who was designated the Defense Attache. I can't frankly even recall at this point who the Defense Attache was.

Q: Was there a Labor Section at the Embassy?

Bolster: Yes.

Q: Do you recall anything about who ran that shop?

Bolster: Well, we had a person in AID who followed labor relations. His name was David Levintow. And he was quite good. He was not a Farsi speaker, but he had been in labor related

activities for some years and had served in other countries and was well checked out on labor issues, and he got into a great deal of information in Iran. You know, actually went out and talked to labor leaders and was really quite well aware of all the trends and tendencies in the labor movement, despite his lack of the language. So I think he really did quite a good job in reporting on labor relations.

Q: But he was with the AID staff?

Bolster: Yes.

Q: Did the Embassy have labor people?

Bolster: We did not have a full-time labor person, as I recall. I mean, we followed that within the Economic Section, but Levintow was the only person I know who really spent pretty much full time on labor relations.

Q: I guess in the early sixties [Colonel] Yatsevitch was a CIA Station Chief.

Bolster: Yes.

Q: Was Alan Conway his successor?

Bolster: Yes.

Q: That's what I thought. And he was there, I guess, until the late sixties? I'm not quite sure about that.

Bolster: I really don't know the timing myself. Because he was there when I left again in '66.

Q: Okay. Did you get much of a sense of what the CIA's main activities were? Was it like mostly counter-intelligence against-- I guess they were concerned about the Soviet Union, from an Iranian vantage point. That's my impression from-- did you get any indirect sense of what their main focus was at this time?

Bolster: Well, not really, because I interacted mainly with people who were doing activities similar to mine. That is, finding out what was happening on the internal side in Iran. We shared a lot of information back and forth as to what our contacts were saying about what was going on. It was a fairly cooperative relationship. That is, they did continue to do their own reporting, but they also shared some information with us, and we occasionally debated points and would show in our reporting that there were maybe several points of view on some development.

If we couldn't resolve which was really correct, we would send them both in, with an indication that one was a view from down the hall or whatever, a euphemism we would use. And I think that was probably useful to show that there was sometimes a divergence of opinion on issues.

Q: So in this period the CIA had its own contacts in the community? They had their own source of information?

Bolster: Yes. I think there was even, you could say, a sort of a friendly rivalry. That is, you know, as to who could find out the most information, using its own methods. Obviously we, on the Political Section side, would be able to talk to people very openly. We could go and have lunch with them or meet them somewhere downtown or whatever and just have a chat and come back and report what we were learning about various developments. The agency people were more circumscribed on how they would make their contacts and obviously had ways of getting to sources that we didn't have, various resources at their disposal that we didn't have available, but still we always felt that there was a little bit of a rivalry as to who got the best information. Sometimes we would find out that we were even going after the same person. We tried to avoid that, obviously, so that we would not be wasting our efforts to both contact the same person. So as much as possible we tried to avoid any duplication.

Q: Now at our last meeting you mentioned some of the people you'd been in touch with in various opposition movements. You mentioned the Ayatollah Qotsi, as well as figures like Bakhtiar and Matin-Daftari. What other opposition people were you in touch with? Can you remember any of the names, some of the figures of this period?

Bolster: I really don't remember any other major names, because what I tried to do in general was to keep track of all the various people who in any way could be considered to be part of the opposition, and that included some people who sort of were legends in Iran for their own positions of opposition to the government. People like Muzaffa Bagai. Bagai had been a long-time oppositionist. Founded the Toilers' Party. And there were all kinds of people like him, who had roles in the past, but whose influence had, for one or another reason, waned by the time I was there.

And so in reporting on the opposition in Iran, I tried to cover the entire range, but I didn't feel it was necessary to go to all the people and meet them personally, because some of them were inaccessible and some of them were pretty much has-beens. Also you have the problem of any kind of a signal that you're going to give by getting in touch with people. You have to weigh the benefits of getting information with the disadvantage of

people talking about "Why is the American Embassy sending someone to talk to Mr. X?"

So even though we were in touch with the opposition in those days, we had pretty much an unwritten rule that as long as it was with a junior officer, we could contact the opposition, and that was considered to be normal political reporting. The only thing that made the Shah nervous was when political counselors or high- ranking Embassy officers would go and meet anybody who was considered to be even remotely anti-regime. That gave the Shah problems, but it worked out that at the lower levels of the Embassy-- and I was a junior officer at the time, so I could do it without any particular problem arising for the Shah or the regime.

But still, even as I say, given that ground rule, you still had to sort of weigh the advantages and disadvantages of going to talk to certain people, and I felt with some of the contacts I had, I was able to get information, enough to gauge the importance of some of these very splinter groups, you say, or unimportant groups, who were worthy of mention in a long airgram about the opposition, but not worth a great deal of effort to cultivate or look into in great detail.

Certainly Rahmatollah Mogadam-Mareghei is someone I should mention here, because he's been a long-time contact of mine and other people in the Embassy. He was a National Fronter, but not a radical one, not one who was out in the forefront leading the

National Front. He tried to somewhat stay in the background, but nevertheless made no secret of his National Front leanings. He admired Amini very much and admired Mossadeq very much for Mossadeq's nationalistic credentials. He very much opposed our actions in restoring the Shah to power in '53. He used to talk about it all the time. You know, every time we met him-- anyone in the Embassy met him, he would give us his views on that. So we knew where he was coming from. But he also was married to someone related to Alam, who was the Court Minister, so he had the ability to be a sort of known oppositionist, but he didn't go too far as to get in real trouble, and he had this sort of anchor to windward through his wife's family that could protect him if he perhaps went a little too far.

Now he eventually, after I left Iran the second time, he eventually was more active politically-- and, in fact, he was doing it just as I left. He formed a new party, called the Radical Party, which was in opposition to the Shah and in favor of more rational development policies. He was an agricultural expert and he made a lot of his analyses of Iran's problems based on agricultural problems as he saw it, the way the development in the provinces was being improperly pushed. Too much emphasis on technology brought in from the West and not enough development with Iranian people doing it in an Iranian way. So this was sort of basic approach that he took.

But because of his National Front contacts, he was quite



well aware of the opposition and he was a valuable source for information on just background and who's important and who's not and so on. He, of course, eventually became quite a celebrity in Iran, because after the revolution he was named Governor-General of Azerbaijan by Khomeini, and then he was named to the Constitutional Convention, when Khomeini dictated that a new Constitution was to be written for Iran. And Mogadam was one of the main leaders in that movement and was brought into it, but as the days wore on, he took a position that there should be a separation of church and state essentially, that the Khomeini leadership should be on the religious side and there should be a secular government that more or less ran things on a day-to-day side, with contact and influence between the two, but still a degree of separation.

And that was anathema to Khomeini. So eventually Khomeini's contacts and closest supporters began to attack Mogadam and he eventually was put on a list for interrogation, and when they came to get him, he was forewarned, he escaped. Hid out in the country and eventually got out and now lives in California. Like thousands of other Iranians.

Q: Yes. That's very interesting. Now when we met last time, you were mentioning that some of the opposition people told you that the U.S. should try to put pressure on the Shah to get him to relax his hold over things, or I guess to let the opposition

alone in some way, if I remember correctly. What other points did they make in discussions with you? If you can generalize about some of the things that they said or told you.

Bolster: Well, I think everything really boiled down to that same point, because they kept saying it in so many different ways. They kept saying, "If you're supporting the Shah, then you should have a say over how he behaves, and when he does things that are wrong or too repressive or whatever, then you should have a way to correct that." And when you said, "Well, this is a sovereign country and so on," they said, "Well, you know, as long as everyone knows you're so deeply involved in Iran, you should use your influence to improve the government."

Of course these were the same people who probably would tell their friends that the problem with Iran was that foreigners were trying to control everything. And I would occasionally bring that up. I would say, "Well, look, you have also told me that you're upset by the degree of foreign involvement in Iran. You're asking me to have the United States take a policy of doing more in the country, to try to get the Shah to do certain things." I said, "Isn't that buying the opposition's point, that the West is too much involved in what goes on here? Well-- but the idea is the goal, you see. The goal would be to improve the country and if you could make the Shah relax some of his policies of wasting money on arms and so on and start funneling

the money to help the people, then that would be appreciated.

Q: What was the condition of the opposition at this time? What was the condition of groups like the National Front? I mean, how open could they afford to be in their opposition? Or how open was the opposition generally?

Bolster: It really was a situation where people could say just about as much as they wanted, but they couldn't do anything. That's how I would characterize it. I mean, they were able to demonstrate their independence of view and their opposition to the government by meeting with people and telling people what they thought in private groups and so on, which went on constantly. I think people have overestimated the power of SAVAK to find out what was going on in every household, in every mosque, in every store all over the country. They were not physically able to be on top of everything that was going on. So they figured as long as there was just a murmur of opposition among people venting their anger against the government with comments to each other-- even a satirical magazine, TOFIQ, was allowed to be published, which had cartoons that made fun of political developments. You know, there was a certain amount of unrest and opposition ferment that was allowed to go on, but if it ever then coalesced into demonstrations or strikes or anything like that, then the government came into its own and repressed

these and picked up people and imprisoned them and so on.

So that was more or less the unwritten rule, that you could talk about things as long as you didn't go too far. You could get in trouble by talking too much, if you really made it very personal against the Shah and his family, or if you made any kind of a public statement, but as long as you did it with friends and so on, you usually were not in that much trouble. Although there were some occasional cases of people being picked up for rumors that got to some SAVAK source. I don't want to minimize the danger that people had, but the Iranians are very good at dissembling and telling stories. They don't like to say things very directly, but they like to use allegories and quote poetry that has a subtle point, that you don't get to until you go down through layer after layer of symbolism and so on, and then you get the story that basically makes a point. But if you're picked up, then you can just say, well, I was just quoting or I was just using a beautiful line from Sa'adi, or Hefez, or Ferdowsi or whoever.

So I think there was a lot more opposition in a talking sense, but there was not much opposition in the way of action.

Q: Because, do you think, of the fear of the consequences?

Bolster: Yes.

Q: We can talk more about this when we get to the seventies, because it was much more a visible problem. Much more striking perhaps, I'm not sure.

Did the information that you'd pick up from your contacts during this period in the sixties lead you to make any suggestions or recommendations to the Ambassador or the Political Counselor on the U.S. plan of approach to Iran? Did you draw any conclusions from it that led to suggestions on your part?

Bolster: Yes, but that's a very difficult point, because what I came up with was probably, in my own thinking, a version really of what the Iranians that I was in touch with were telling me. I was not quarreling with the basic thought that we still had to deal with the Shah as the de facto power, because he was, and I couldn't see the argument that we should just abandon the Shah totally as an autocrat that we'd put in power in '53 and who was now not worth backing any more and we should just toss him out and throw our support behind some National Front group of "New Men," as one of the observers in our Embassy called them.

I didn't think that these so-called "New Men," were really all that new. I thought that if they were in power, they would not necessarily do things all that much better than the Shah. They might just do it in their own way and it would be different people who would be put in jail or whatever. I didn't have the feeling that there was a clear alternative to the Shah, and, of

course, his policy with the opposition was to keep everyone down, so that there would be no one group that would rise up to prominence and get support and be a threat to him.

But I did feel that we began to support the Shah to an extent that was not necessary. That is, it became Embassy policy, it seemed to me before I left in '66, that whatever the Shah wanted, he was going to get. If he wanted more arms, we found a way to figure that he could afford more. Although in that time we still had these debates with the Shah. We had these formal discussions.

Q: Oh, the annual review?

Bolster: The annual review, where we tried to tone down the Iranian desire for more arms, or particularly the Shah's desire for more arms, and tried to say that you couldn't afford more than X amount. He always found a way to put in a request for more and we always seemed to manage to push it up to the upper limits or even go over it.

But again I had no real quarrel with that at the time. That is, his desire for weapons had not gone into the stratosphere like it did later on. And I think he had a legitimate reason for improving the country's defenses. Don't forget that it was very much on his mind that his father was overthrown by the British Navy coming into Khorramshahr [port]

and firing on Iranian gunboats. You know, when your father's thrown out of power by the British at the beginning of World War II, you feel that one of your goals in life is to improve your country's defenses, so that that kind of thing can't ever happen again.

But I felt that it was going too far, for example, to respond immediately to every request the Shah had, even for such things as PL 480 wheat. I remember when I came back from Iran in '66, '67, this was one of the things that came up occasionally. He wanted some of this wheat that was for emergency uses. There were various Titles within the law to permit-- there were emergency provisions, there were other provisions for when there was actual famine in the country, and there were provisions for when supplies were short. There were various bases on which you could request wheat. But I didn't feel that the Shah had any claim to any of this low-priced wheat, subsidized by the American producers, because his country needed to get organized and they could have fed themselves well was my impression, if they had simply organized their agriculture properly.

But it was easier to come to the United States for help, and I think there were a number of situations where the Shah expected us to do things more or less automatically, because he asked for them. I felt we had to be less fulsome in our help, less automatic in our help. We should evaluate things. Some things we should do if they were important to the Shah and important to



us, but other things that were only of importance to the Shah, we should say no. And we got into a position where we practically said yes on everything, and as I mentioned last time, the Shah sort of used our string of Ambassadors there as his transmission belt to just put all of his demands on the United States and get us to do whatever he wanted.

Q: How would you explain that? How did that relationship come about? Was it the Shah's sense of his own growing strength, in terms of oil resources and stuff, or was something else involved?

Bolster: It was even more than that. It was his feeling of strength from the continuity that he had, because he had been in power-- although you could say at the beginning that his power base was very shaky, but at least he had been in power, in a position as a leader, since Roosevelt. When you think that he went through Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, Nixon, Carter-- I mean, you know, he just saw Presidents come and go, and he maintained his power and got more and more used to running things and more adept at talking with-- not just Ambassadors, but with Congressional delegations that came. Tehran was on the circuit, where there were people almost every week coming through there in the sixties and seventies, of various backgrounds. But the Shah was very clever at how he talked to people, and he always talked



about the pincers movements that were coming around Iran, you know. Through Iraq, where Soviet influence was growing, and through Afghanistan. He always pictured Iran as being about ready to be taken by the Soviets if we didn't support him in every way, because he was tying himself to the Free World and it was our duty to support him. And many people took that as sort of an act of faith, this great bastion of stability in that whole area of the world.

And I wrote at the time, as much as I could, that I thought the Shah's power was elusive. That is, the degree of control he had over the country was predicated on his levers of power. The Army, the police, SAVAK, the Gendarmarie. And that the way in which he always kept the opposition down and never let anybody have any other ideas had limited any institution building in the country, so that he was really the only institution. Everything else was pretty much just a set piece, a Potemkin village, and he was really the one who was running everything behind the scene.

I wrote that in my report. I think we mentioned that last time, the report on--

Q: Oh, the political dynamics.

Bolster: The political dynamics of Iran. And I've never forgotten that the Embassy was highly critical of this paper when it came out, and I think that it was felt that I had kept some of

my opinions that I tried to voice in Tehran when I was there-- kept those to myself and then had put them into this report when I got back to Washington and was looked upon as a sort of almost a traitor, who'd gone back and undermined the true message from Iran by working on this paper. Because the paper had been, as I mentioned to you before-- had been started by Bill Miller, who was very much a pro-National Front, anti-Shah voice within the Embassy when I first went to Iran. And then it was worked on further by Larry Semakis, who I think had a much more balanced view. And then I finished it up and went through all the agonies of getting it published, making whatever changes were needed to satisfy the people in INR.

Then another case stands out in my mind just after that. We had felt that we should be the supplier of arms to the Shah, because this at least gave us this annual review to try and only give him what he really needed, and we felt it was better for us to be the supplier than somebody else. And we obviously wanted him to be able to project a certain amount of power, as long as it was used in a reasonable fashion and was appropriate to our thoughts for the area.

But the Shah began to make these vague threats, that if we didn't supply as much as he wanted and the kinds of things he wanted, he was going to have to go to the Soviets. And the Embassy--

Q: Wasn't the F-4 fighter that was at issue maybe?

Bolster: These were the-- well, eventually what they bought from the Soviets were cannons and trucks and things like this. I think this is before the F-4 issue, but I'd have to check that.

Anyway, the Shah kept asking for better terms on the military assistance we were giving him, and the Embassy felt that if we met his demands that he would stay with us as a supplier. And I wrote a paper in INR, which I got approval to publish, saying that the Shah was concerned about his image in the Third World. He did not want to appear to be a creature of the Americans and that no matter what terms he got from us, he was going to go to the Soviets to show that he was independent, that he could operate between East and West and be a sort of a-- if you will, a Third World country that could have ties in both camps.

And the Embassy was very upset that I published this kind of an analysis, because they felt it undercut their efforts to persuade the Shah to buy American. But I figured I was right, and, indeed, subsequent events bore me out, because the Iranians did go to the Soviets and bought a lot of equipment, and I think it was purely for that reason, that the Shah did not want to let people feel that he was dependent only on the Americans.

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Q: Did you publish this open in a newspaper or something or a

magazine?

Bolster: No, no, no.

Q: It was published internally.

Bolster: Yes, I misled you. No, I mean within the INR structure. In other words, producing a report that analyzed all these factors and then made a conclusion that it's likely the Shah will buy this material anyway. And it was Classified, but of course it's sent around all over the Department of State, both in Washington and overseas, as an information type of thing.

So that was looked upon unfavorably by the Embassy, because again I was taking an issue with the party line.

Q: I see the wisdom. I want to go back to this question of the contacts with the opposition a little bit, and then I have some more questions about some of the arms sales stuff in a few minutes. Now you mentioned that there are unwritten rules that junior officers could talk with opposition figures, whereas senior people were supposed to stay away from them pretty much. Was that rule ever broken in practice? Were there instances where the Ambassador or the Political Counselor met with opposition people and that led to problems with the Shah?