

INTERVIEWEE: EARNEST R. ONEY

INTERVIEWER: SEYYED VALI REZA NASR

BETHESDA, MARYLAND: MAY 22 AND 29, 1991

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PREFACE

This manuscript is the product of a series of tape-recorded interviews conducted for the Oral History Program of Foundation for Iranian Studies by Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr with Earnest Oney in Bethesda, Maryland in May 22 and 29, 1991.

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I hereby give and grant to the Foundation for Iranian Studies as a donation for such scholarly and educational purposes as the Foundation shall determine, the tape recordings and their contents as listed below.

Earnest H. Grey
Interviewee

Sydney
Interviewer

Date of Agreement

Subject of Tapes

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Earnest Oney received his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in linguistics in 1950. Soon then after he joined the CIA, where he became the Chief of the Greece, Turkey and Iran (GTI) Section of the Office of Current Intelligence of CIA. For almost four decades Oney served as CIA's chief Iran expert. Oney was also involved in training SAVAK junior officers and analysts in the 1950s in Iran. Oney's recollections shed much light on the CIA's method of intelligence gathering and analysis, the organization's thinking on Iran, and policies on the vents of 1953, 1963-64 and 1979. Oney furthermore, provides detailed sketches of important events in contemporary Iranian history.

CORRECTIONS LIST

PP.8ff. Bakhtiar should be Bakhtiyar
PP.21ff. Savak should be SAVAK
P.21 Hussain Sabzalizadeh should be Hosein Sabz'alizadeh
P.24 Mohammad, Reza Shah should be Mohammad Reza Shah
PP.31ff. imam jumah should be Emam Jom'eh
PP.31-32 mehdi Haeri should be Mehdi Ha'eri
P.33 Cotton should be Cottam
P.33 proNationalist should be pro-nationalist
P.40 Alavi-moqaddam should be Alavi Moqaddam
P.40 Qarani should be Qarane'i
P.41 alinaqi should be 'Alinaqi
P.54 Colonial Pashai should be Colonel Pasha'i
PP.60ff. Alavi-kia should be Alavi Kiya
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P.90 vizheh should be vijeh
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P.91 Awardi should be Avardi
PP.122ff. Rain should be Ra'in
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Interviewee: Ernest Oney

Session 1

Interviewer:

Place: Washington, DC

Date: May 22, 1991

Q: Mr. Oney, thank you very much for accepting our invitation and participating in the Oral History Program of Foundation for Iranian Studies. Let us begin by a brief account of your own background, where you were born, your education. Go ahead, please.

Oney: Okay. Well, I was born in Wellington, Ohio, on May 31st, 1920 and educated in the high school there. Graduated from high school in 1938 and went directly to a small college south of Wellington, Ashland College--now Ashland University--where I spent the next four years. I did general academic, but I specialized in Greek, in Latin, and in French. I graduated in late May of 1942, just in time to be drafted into the United States Army. I spent the next 42 months with the army as, mostly as a medical technician, a brief period in the signal corps. But I was also chosen in the ASTP program--that's the Army Specialized Training Program--to go to Indiana University and

study Turkish. So I spent about four or five months at Indiana studying Turkish and Turkish history and Balkan politics in general. This, as it turned out, was just before D-Day. So the program was closed up, and since I was a medic, I was put in the stream of replacements to be sent to Europe. I spent 18 months in Europe as a medic with the 26th Infantry Division, Patton's Third Army. Had a total of 210 combat days. After the war in Europe ended, I got a chance to go to Paris for three months to continue studying French at the University of Paris, and finally, in December of 1945 I came back to the States and was discharged in January. I was married one week later and the week after that I started back again to Ashland College and picked up my second Bachelor's Degree, a Bachelor of Science in Education. The GI Bill was in effect then. That was a government program which gave to anybody who wanted to go back to college an equivalent of their service time, plus, I believe it was one year. So I had four and a half years of qualification for this and I was accepted in the graduate program at the University of Chicago in the Department of Linguistics. So the next--let's see, I got my Ph.D. in December of 1950 in linguistics. My specialty at that point, the subject on which I wrote my dissertation, was Hieroglyphic Hittite. Obviously, I needed a job and academic jobs were in short supply right at that point, but Professor Gelb, who was a Hittite specialist at the Oriental Institute, and the man with whom I had done my dissertation and much of my graduate work, was a former military intelligence officer in World War II, and he had a friend in Washington who had gone to

work for CIA. It just happened that at that point CIA was also looking for people who had some kind of an interest--well, as it turned out, an interest in something besides making money, since it was not a profession in which you made much money. But I had done some work on the Middle East, enough to indicate that I was interested in the area, although it didn't have a great deal of relevance to what was going on currently. After all, Hieroglyphic Hittite is a long way -- But I had studied Turkish and in graduate school I had studied Old Persian and Avestan and Pahlavi, so at least I had demonstrated an interest in the area. So after the usual amount of filling out forms and correspondence back and forth, I went to work for CIA in the last part of July, 1951. I came to Washington from Chicago, together with my wife, in late July, 1951, and after the usual entrance testing and so on, I immediately went to work. I was assigned to the Office of Current Intelligence and the job at Current Intelligence was just as the name suggests, to follow current political developments and report on them in an Agency publication every day, if there was anything worth reporting. I was assigned to the GTI, the Greece-Turkey-Iran, branch of OCI, at which point there were only two people. I was the second one and there was a woman who had come on board a few months earlier. The Agency, although it had been in existence for a couple of years, was still in a state of development and transition. I immediately began reading the material that came in, the State Department reports, dispatches and telegrams, reports from the CIA station in the areas, because at this point we were both responsible for all three countries,

Greece, Turkey and Iran. We wrote--well, you can say copiously, although not extensively. Each one of us at that point was writing three or four news type articles every day on one or the other of those three countries.

Q: The material you said would come from field officers, that you would write on.

Oney: Yes, in theory we got all of the material that came in through US government dealing with our country, from the State Department, from CIA sources, from agriculture. If the Foreign Agricultural Service happened to have something, there were agricultural attaches in the embassies that reported through their channels. There were commercial attaches. There were reports on Point Four activities.

Q: Everything would be included.

Oney: Yes, and it was our job to read all this, pick out what appeared on that day that we thought would be of interest to the readers of our publications. Our readers were, generally speaking, seen as policy makers. People who made policy, but did not have the specialized knowledge in any particular area. Obviously, a great deal of it was political reporting, although we did on occasion do some economic reporting. Particularly during the period of '51 to '53 when there was the dispute between the Iranian government and the Anglo Iranian Oil Company

over the nationalization of oil. During that period oil was probably the main topic that we followed.

Q: Was the thinking on this issue uniform from the beginning, since you followed it from '51?

Oney: No, I don't think it was uniform from the beginning. It took some time before we were able to sort out the various strands of what was going on, to understand what the British position was, understand what the Iranian position was.

Q: To what extent, say, did the British have, or the British intelligence, or the British opinion or ambassador, public relations in the US, have an impact on the analysis of this? Or was the analysis solely based on what came out of Iran?

Oney: Well, the analysis was based primarily on the material that was coming out of Iran, plus the news reports that we read, the various studies that were prepared by--oh, I think maybe the IBRD did a study. Everyone was doing something, analyzing the oil situation. But from the analytical point of view there was -- What you're asking, "Was there any outside influences?"

Q: I don't mean necessarily political, directly in the form of orders, but in the sense that as the material was coming in, the British, obviously being a party to the whole dispute, had a particular view of it.

Oney: Oh, yes, sure. But we also had the Iranian view, since the ambassador there was talking with Mosaddeq and his advisors all the time. Of course, there was the Harriman Mission that went over to try to bring the two sides together to an understanding. I think the whole thrust of the American effort at that point was to try to get the two sides to agree on a position that would solve a dispute, and to give each one a little bit, but neither one everything. There was considerable sympathy for Mosaddeq and Mosaddeq's position, but I think he was

--

Q: Within the Agency.

Oney: Yes, within the Agency. I think generally in the State Department. But in a sense, he was his own worst enemy, because he never--as the ambassador reported at one time in considerable frustration, he said, "I have seen Mosaddeq." I'm paraphrasing because, obviously, I don't remember the precise wording after all this time. But he said something to the effect that, "I saw Mosaddeq again today and found out that he had not only retreated from the position that he held yesterday, but was back to the position that he had held day before yesterday." I think that was a fairly good explanation of the problems in dealing with Mosaddeq. He could not or did not develop--let me back up. He couldn't see any kind of compromise and, of course, this was what the ambassador and the United States generally was trying to

find; a compromise between the two sides.

Q: Before we progress any further, before this era began, say, when Razmara was Prime Minister, did at that time the US or the Agency, the CIA, have specific opinions in the way that you might see they might have about the word "leader" today. As to, "Maybe he's a strong man. We should back him up. Something should be done." Or was the involvement not yet as detailed?

Oney: You mean with Razmara?

Q: For instance, Razmara is a good case in point, since he was a paramount figure, in a way.

Oney: Yes, he was. I've seen since allegations of perhaps a closer relationship with Razmara than I thought really existed. I know trying to recollect days from the reporting that came in, there was reporting on Razmara, speculation that Razmara had dreams of being a strong man, or maybe even shoving the Shah aside. I suspect the Shah may have felt the same way.

Q: But this awareness existed at the time? This awareness of his possible ambitions existed at that time with the CIA?

Oney: Yes, and with State Department, simply because that seemed to be a very common pattern. You get a strong figure like Razmara or Mosaddeq or sometimes Qavam, they seem to develop to

the point of challenging the Shah, rather than using the Shah to achieve national goals. Do you understand what I'm suggesting? Whatever the goal was of Razmara or Mosaddeq, or maybe Qavam, or maybe even much later of Bakhtiar, whatever their original goals may have been, it seems that ultimately it boiled down to a challenge to the Shah. I think that Iranian politicians missed a number of good opportunities to advance the interests of Iran and of reform and so on, by aiming at the Shah instead of co-opting him. In the early days I think it would have been possible, maybe even as late as 1960.

Q: By aiming at him you mean?

Oney: Aiming to supplant or supercede him or shove him into a purely ceremonial position. In the early days, the Shah was quite an uncertain figure. I think in his own mind he had his father as a figure that he admired and would like to emulate, but personally he was uncertain of what he could do, of how to do it. During this period I think Iranian politicians in general, if they'd played their cards right, could have made a genuine contribution. Instead of sniping and trying to undercut the Shah, they could have shoved him aside, but again, like Mosaddeq, too many Iranian politicians were their own worst enemy. They spent a lot of time fighting each other and this was one reason I think that the embassy slowly--and I say slowly--came to the viewpoint that the Shah was about the only stable figure with whom they could deal because governments and Prime Ministers came

and went so fast that there was no one to talk to constructively.

Q: There was no sense that, as usually was done elsewhere in the Third World, that the military is the better, stable --

Oney: The military?

Q: The military.

Oney: No. I don't have the feeling that the military or any member of the military was ever looked on as the solution to Iran's problems.

Q: Not even Razmara or Zahedi?

Oney: No. No, not even Razmara. No, not Zahedi.

Q: How come, because lesser generals in other Third World Countries were looked upon favorably to bring stability or perform that function, why not in the case of Iran at that time? If you look with hindsight in the framework of that period of thinking, why not in Iran? [tape turned off] We're discussing this issue of why wasn't the military option, do you think, looked upon at that time?

Oney: That's a good question. I don't know whether I have a

good answer or not. Perhaps for a couple of reasons. Now, if I had a chance to reread all the material again from, say, the 1950's and refresh my memory, I might come up with a little different slant, but it seems to me in most of the Third World Countries where the military came to dominate a military leaders or a coup leader achieved his position of dominance in his country and then was recognized by the United States. Iran, of course, had a long history of vigorous politics, if often destructive, and there was a political system. There was a sophisticated and generally educated group of politicians. I think the whole political scene in Iran was considered as something viable without the military participation directly. I would not be surprised, for example, if somebody digging in the archives would dig up a piece of paper where somebody in the embassy reported admiringly on Razmara and his potential for being the strong man, and pick up the piece of paper and say, "Ah-ha, see. That shows that the United States was looking for military dictatorship." What that would really show was that people in the embassy were looking at Razmara, looking at all the other politicians, for their potential to see where they stood on the various problems and not that the embassy was supporting Razmara or later supporting Bakhtiar or even Zahedi, except in a limited sense. Zahedi was not supported so much as a military man, I think as kind of reluctantly, as somebody who was available.

Q: I detect in your rendition of these generals that you look

upon Zahedi with a reluctance yourself. Why was that, do you think? Why was he sort of reluctantly accepted?

Oney: Well, of course, Zahedi--and I don't know how he was picked out or who made the choice--the British were not happy initially with the idea of having Zahedi move in as Prime Minister.

Q: Even though he acted as a prime mover in that operation that [unclear] the government?

Oney: Before the operation, when somebody in the Agency--now, understand, I was not in Operations at that time. So this is --

Q: You were working in analysis.

Oney: I was working in analysis. As a matter of fact, at the time of the operation in 1953, Ajax, the analytical side was not aware of what was going on. Analytically we had reported rumors of a coup attempt against Mosaddeq. But there had been rumors of a coup against Mosaddeq for most of his career. You know, from '51, '52 and into '53 we were always picking rumors of this group plotting against Mosaddeq or that group plotting against Mosaddeq. So when we heard a few reports of a group around Zahedi, analytically, we dismissed it as not having much of a chance of success because Mosaddeq had not only become aware of what was going on previously, he had moved very shrewdly to block

those attempts. So analytically our position was that Zahedi presented no threat and Mosaddeq would probably be able to block his move. At that point, it seems that our reporting upset somebody in the State Department who was aware of what was going on, and raised the question, "Well, if your analysts don't think Zahedi has a chance of --"

Q: Pulling it off.

Oney: "Of doing the job, why should we give him any support?" Of course, that was the key thing. If we had known at that point of American-British participation, that would have changed our whole analysis because that threw into the equation a very important point.

Q: A very important source of support for Zahedi.

Oney: Yes, but we reported initially without any knowledge of that. But that forced the people in Operations to come and say, "Hey, you didn't know this," and of course, we didn't know it. But putting that into the balance made a significant difference in our approach. At this point it might be well to point out something you may already know and that's, there was long and maybe to this day a deep division, almost a compartmentation between Operations and the analytical side. In those earliest days, the analysts barely knew who was working in Operations. The idea was, I suppose, based on security. Analysts were

generally overt employees of the Agency. They identified themselves as employees of the Agency and the Operations side did not. They operated under the State Department, or Military, or whatever. So this division, which persisted for many years, and as I say, may still persist, I felt was always something of a barrier toward complete understanding of what was going on. I should say that after I managed to move into Operations for a couple of tours, I had a much better idea of the problems that they faced, and conversely, becoming personally acquainted with the people, I was able for the rest of my career to talk freely to them about what was going on. Very useful. This was not, to a great extent, the official Agency position. Okay, I wandered off a bit, but I wanted to --

Q: No, no, that was very useful. Yes, go on.

Oney: I wanted to make that clear. I had said that the British were unhappy initially about supporting Zahedi, based mostly on his reputation in World War II, when he was military governor in Isfahan and headed involvement with Franz Mayer and the German intelligence network there. You may know Fitzroy Maclean's book. He led a British commando team into Isfahan and kidnapped Zahedi--oh, what was it?--'43, maybe something of the sort. So he was not exactly one of their favorites. But anyhow, they did come to support him. I suppose--I never really heard this discussed as to how it came about or who ultimately made the decision, but I expect he was somebody who had--well, he was a

Senator. He was a Senator. He had good contacts among the military, probably in the retired military, particularly, I believe. Of course, there was a lot of resentment among the retired officers because Mosaddeq had purged so many of them from the ranks. There was what seemed to be a solid basis for military operation. I think the main thing was to be assured that the military would not move to support Mosaddeq. Of course, he had alienated so many of the military by his actions that, except for his personal guard, the military either threw in on the side of the Shah, and the others simply stood aside and let it happen.

Q: Did at that time the United States or the Agency have direct contacts with the military, either through the ambassador or otherwise, to engage their sentiment?

Oney: I can't say this with a great confidence, but I think there was certainly some contact with the military and, of course, the army attache, the army attache's office, had the job of reporting on the military [unclear] and so on. They were not directly involved in the operation. The military and military attache's office and most of the embassies are usually not aware of things like this that go on. There is no particular reason for them to know. It's not their job. Military attaches from any country, it's their job to keep track of and report on the military activities of the country to which they're assigned. This is not a clandestine operation because it's understood by

all parties that that's the job of the military.

Q: Let me ask you this. At that time in Iran, by this time the CIA had direct sources of information gathering, or were you relying on the consulates and the embassy staff to send material?

Oney: No. Of course, the Agency had developed their own sources. A lot of the resources were--a lot of the attention was--directed at the Tudeh party, and that was probably the major target at that point. Now, we're talking about the period at the beginning of the Cold War. We're talking of a time when United Nations are fighting the communists in Korea. The Soviet Union has shown its postwar hand in taking over places like Czechoslovakia and Hungary and Poland. The guerilla war in Greece, which was communist party war against the Greek government. Soviet threats to Turkey over places like Kars and Ardahan and Soviet demands for joint control of the straits, Bosphorous, the Black Sea. So I think it's things like this that led to a concentration on the communist parties in these countries because they were seen as political weapons that Moscow could use in Iran, or in Greece, or in Turkey.

Q: What was your assessment of the Tudeh at that time?

Oney: Assessment of the Tudeh at that time; we had pretty good coverage. There were several sources that reported to us from the Tudeh party. Our assessment was that they had the

capability, which they indeed did demonstrate, of considerable disruption, political disruption because they could drag out the crowds. They had infiltrated several government ministries. This had gone back to the period when Qavam had put three Tudeh party Cabinet Ministers in and the first thing they did--let's see. Who were they? Eskandari was one of them, I think. I've forgotten the other two right now. But the first thing they did was to move a lot of Tudeh party members into their ministries. This was not unusual because this was exactly the technique that the communist parties followed in other countries when they took a position in the government. Much later, when the French communist party, for a while had a couple of ministries in the French Cabinet, first thing they did was to move their supporters into the key positions.

Q: But did you assess --

Oney: But over all -- I'm sorry. Over all our assessment was, while they had the capability of creating a lot of trouble, they had the capability to affect the political positions of noncommunist politicians because of what seemed to be their strength. That without a great deal of Soviet support, they were not in a position to actually take control of the government. At least, say, around '53, after the coup, for example, I remember there was a report that the central committee of the Tudeh party was talking about the possibility of staging a counter revolution and our assessment of that was simply that they couldn't do this

without massive Soviet support, and there was no indication that the USSR was ready to give them this support.

Q: So you basically saw them more as a creeping nuisance, but you didn't assess that they possibly were in a position to take over power in Iran?

Oney: No, I don't think we ever came to the conclusion that the party by itself was in a position to take over power.

Q: And there was no awareness at this time of their infiltration to the armed forces? So these didn't play into your --

Oney: There were a few scattered reports, I think in 1952, maybe early in 1953, of Tudeh party activity in the armed forces. Mostly it was in the ranks, and the noncommissioned officers and the [unclear], which are kind of warrant officers, I guess. But, except for sabotage of some air force planes--I've forgotten exactly what point that was when eight or ten of the Iranian Air Force planes were sabotaged, destroyed, which was attributed, and as a matter of fact was done by a Tudeh party noncomm, who then fled the country to Bulgaria. I don't recall, and maybe except for a mention that there was a similar organization among the officers.

Q: Mark Gasiorowski elsewhere has suggested that the British were doing a lot of, staging a lot of Tudeh demonstrations in

order to force CIA's hand, in other words. Was there any awareness of this?

Oney: I guess that's kind of a yes and no question. As you probably know, the Iranians often talk about the British Tudeh as opposed to the Soviet Tudeh or conjunction with them. I think part of this is based on kind of a folk memory or a popular belief that the British and the Russians were always cooperating against Iran. Therefore, if there was a Soviet Tudeh Party, there had to be a British Tudeh Party. Plus the fact that the British had infiltrated the Tudeh Party, also, as we had.

Q: And you collaborated on information at this time?

Oney: Information was exchanged.

Q: Even between the analysis sections? Not only Operations, but also analysis.

Oney: Yes. Not all of it. See, in a liaison relationship, no matter how friendly it is, you're still having liaison with another intelligence organization that's working for its own interests. So there's always a bit of woriness as to what information you exchange and what you withhold. So exchange is usually done on a high level with all the material being cleared several levels inside before it's passed at the highest level. So, yes, some analytical reports--I don't know which

ones--occasionally we'd get a request saying, "We want to pass this to the British. Do you see any objections?" And then conversely from time to time we would see British reports identified as such coming across our desks. This was part of the normal liaison exchange, which dated clear back to the World War II days and actually was based on an agreement between the United States and the Commonwealth countries as to relatively free exchange of information, as well as an agreement not to carry on operational activities in each other's countries. For example, CIA would not carry on any clandestine activities in England or in Australia or New Zealand, and those countries would not carry on clandestine activities in the United States. It was a gentleman's agreement. Maybe a little more than a gentleman's agreement. I think it was formalized. But that was the basis for the cooperation.

Q: Well, let's go back to the Shah. What was the impression of him? You mentioned that he was seen as the only source of stability, but what was the impression of him as a person, as a leader at that time? Despite his reluctance, why he became so prominent in Operation Ajax? I mean once the British accepted Zahedi, why did still the Shah come into the picture, although he left the country and abandoned everything?

[end of side 1, tape 1]

Q: You were saying?

Oney: I think the Shah didn't come prominently into the picture because he was afraid to get too closely involved. I think he was too uncertain of his position and of the support that he really had to involve himself too closely. I don't know whether how often this observation has been made, but in those days he was very unsure of himself. I think he wanted to be like his father, but he didn't have the drive, perhaps. I think perhaps he had also been spoiled by his education in Switzerland. I don't know how good a student he was, but he inevitably would have picked up some feelings and some ideas about the European idea of relationship between the governor and the governed, certainly. Although I couldn't document it, I've sometimes suspected that his Swiss education made him unfit to be the kind of ruler that Iran had always had. But it was the fact that Ajax succeeded that gave him a considerable amount of courage. He always insisted afterwards that that was a demonstration of the loyalty of the people to him. Maybe it was, in a sense, but there were other factors. I think Dick Cottam, in his Nationalism in Iran, has made the point or made the statement, and of course, Cottam was very close to the Nationalists when he was in the embassy there. He made the point that an operation like Ajax could not have succeeded if there had not been a great deal of popular support for what was being attempted. Maybe I can give you a couple of anecdotes that sort of illustrate that. When I was finally stationed in Iran, I knew an Admiral Rasai. I don't know whether you know the name or not.

Q: He became commander of the Navy. He's here in Washington.

Oney: He's in Washington? [tape turned off]

Q: You were saying that Rasai was head of Department Seven of Savak. That's where you met him. Go ahead.

Oney: Yes. He told me at one time, we got talking about what had happened in 1953 and he said, well, he was surprised at the stories later about the American participation. He said, "I was out there in the crowds, in the pro Shah crowds,"--I think he said, "hiding under a truck and shooting my pistol when I had to," and he said, "And I didn't even know any Americans." Just an anecdote, but another sort of similar thing. We had kind of a cook and a general handyman, Hussain Sabzalizadeh.

Q: What was his last name?

Oney: Sabzalizadeh. He was Azarbayejani. We were talking once, the same thing came up, and he said almost the same thing. He said, "I was for the Shah and I was for the crowds shouting for the Shah." He said, "I didn't know any Americans. It didn't make any difference to me. I was for the Shah." Hussain, incidently, had once worked as a cook in the Royal Palace under Reza Shah, I think. A couple of anecdotes, but I think it serves to illustrate Cottam's point that there was a reservoir of pro

Shah or at least pro monarchy feelings at the time, which operation Ajax merely channeled and was able to direct.

Q: Had the Shah not been part of -- Would the Iranian military been able to pull off the coup on its own?

Oney: You say could the Iranian military have done it?

Q: On its own without the Shah? Or let's put it this way, the question always comes into mind when one looks back, as to General Zahedi played an important role in galvanizing the ministry coup, and it's not characteristic that somebody would do that and then step aside for someone else. I was wondering, when you were mentioning earlier that the British had a distrust of him, that were the British instrumental in bringing the Shah into the picture, just not to have Zahedi running the whole show?

Oney: I don't know that that's the case. I suppose it's a possibility, but then the Shah had sufficient confidence after he came back. It may have been misplaced, but he had enough confidence that he was willing to take a stronger stand on many things. I think one of the things that perhaps he decided in his own mind is that he could no longer tolerate somebody who, like Mosaddeq, was a threat to his position as Shah. I think perhaps the Shah at some point thought Zahedi was getting too much popularity and took measures to move him out. Zahedi, I believe, was something of a disappointment in that he didn't get the

Iranian political economic system back on an even keel and make some progress as well as, perhaps, everybody thought that he should have been able to. So I don't recall that there was a whole lot of pressure on the Shah to keep Zahedi after the Shah had made it clear that he wanted Zahedi to go. I once made the criticism that I thought that a major problem with Ajax, with the operation, was that, after having successfully moved Mosaddeq out, that then the United States and Britain both drew back so far and let the Iranian politicians take over, that things tended to move back into the pre-Mosaddeq form. Whereas, if we had been willing or able to take a more active role in advising Zahedi, or pressuring Zahedi, or perhaps being more aggressive to try to get him to do things that we thought should be done, it would have been more successful. But we actually, having done that, then we sat back and said, "Okay, straighten things out again now," and, of course, it took a long time to do that.

Q: What did the success of this operation do to the thinking within CIA on Iran or the Middle East?

Oney: Do to?

Q: The general attitude towards Iran and the Middle East in the CIA. Did they change the way they operated? I mean someone suggested it might have been complacency.

Oney: No, I don't think it changed the way it operated. It was

seen as something of a blueprint because it was really the first such thing that had been tried, and it was a very small operation, actually. There were probably not more than a handful of Americans involved. Not much money. Very little money compared to the very big figures that you see. I think it was studied as a model of the way things should be done. If you had to do something like this, this was sort of a blueprint, but I think the blueprint was forgotten later because it depended on one key thing. That is the operation channeled a support for the monarchy that was already there, but was foremost in another direction. I think there was also something else, perhaps. There was support for the monarch here as an institution, I expect. As opposed to Mohammed, Reza Shah specifically. But I think there was probably also considerable public disturbance, public unease over what had been going on for the previous three years. You know, rioting, demonstrations. After a while people get tired of things like that.

Q: What extent did Tudeh play a role? The fear of the Tudeh Party, to what extent did that play a role?

Oney: Well, I think it played a role in bringing the clergy in on the Shah's side, which seems kind of a strange thing to say now, but the clergy generally supported the Shah because of a distrust of Communism. On the other hand, I don't think the clergy knew a whole lot about communism or about the Tudeh party. I think what they knew was the fact that the USSR had

rejected religion of any kind. Even Kashani came in ultimately on the Shah's side, but he had had a dispute with Mosaddeq before that. As I understand, what money did go out to the crowds went from Aramesh, to Kashani and then out to the crowds.

Q: From Aramesh?

Oney: Yes.

Q: Who was that?

Oney: Oh, gosh.

Q: He was a National Frontist?

Oney: He was an opportunist, for one thing. He was a political opportunist. He was quite prominent in those days. I'm trying to remember his first name. He was quite prominent in those days in political infighting, in political influencing, this sort of thing.

Q: I'll find out.

Oney: Ahmad Aramesh. As I recall, he was killed in a shoot out with the police some 15 or 20 years afterwards. I'm very vague on this. He got caught in a plot against the Shah and was killed in a shoot out when police raided a meeting he was having.

Something of the sort.

Q: At this period when he was paying Kashani, who was he working with?

Oney: Who was that?

Q: Aramesh.

Oney: God knows. Probably for either us or the British.

Q: Oh, I see.

Oney: He acted as a conduit for money.

Q: So Kashani was receiving money from Operation Ajax?

Oney: My understanding is that he was, although he may not have known, or he may have suspected. Somebody like Aramesh comes out with a few thousand dollars to give to Kashani, Kashani was shrewd enough to know probably that Aramesh didn't pull it out of his own pocket and he was getting it from some place else.

Q: Did you travel to Iran yourself during this period?

Oney: Did I?

Q: Did you go to Iran during this period?

Oney: No, the first time I went to Iran was 1954, right afterwards.

Q: Right afterwards.

Oney: Right after the big demonstrations against the Bahai where the High Temple was destroyed. I went there the next summer.

Q: Do you recollect anything about that incident, anything particular? Why and how is your assessment of it?

Oney: Well, of course, it was Falsafi's speech on the radio that apparently set it off. There had been a few anti-Bahai incidents earlier. We usually took note of them, but it wasn't the kind of thing that we spent much time on. Let's see if I can recollect. I think the feeling of the embassy at the time was Falsafi--was this a Moharram speech or something? I'm sorry. I've kind of forgotten.

Q: Well, that we can find out.

Oney: I think the story was that Falsafi had said something to the Shah that he wanted to make a speech against the "apostates," unbelievers and so on, and the Shah probably said, "Well, ya, that's okay. This is what a clergyman is supposed to do," not

realizing that what Falsafi had in mind was an attack on the Bahai. The story or the feeling got around that the Shah had approved the attack on the Bahai and General Teymur Bakhtiar was prominent in tearing down the dome over the temple there.

Q: Yes, I know he was.

Oney: I think the Shah was appalled at what had happened when he found out that there was this misunderstanding. It was interesting for a couple of reasons. It didn't loom large in political thinking, obviously, but it did show that it was possible to whip up a mob against the Bahai, even after considerable number of years of tolerance. Secondly, that even the most prominent officials, if they thought the Shah approved it, were willing to join in, like Bakhtiar.

Q: Did they make the CIA aware of the potential of political power of the clergy?

Oney: Yes. The activities of Kashani, of course, who was a political mullah. In those days it did lead to a couple of studies on the clergy, on the structure, on the personalities, but once that was over and Kashani dropped from view, everybody pretty much forgot about that. I think from the American point of view, we were victims of our own philosophy. The idea that in modern world the clergy could, not only want to, but be capable of wielding such political power came as a shock because, as you

well know, one of the major arguments in American politics, one of the major impulses, is to keep government and religion separated. Every day in the paper you read some damn thing about somebody suing somebody for praying in school or sitting under a tree reading a Bible, all kinds of things like that. We have so ingrained in our own philosophy of politics the idea that there is this wall of separation, the Supreme Court called it, between religion and politics that intellectually we could not see the clergy any place playing that kind of a political role. Obviously, it was a mistake.

Q: But something like the anti-Bahai, Falsafi's role in the anti-Bahai agitations, how were these interpreted then at the CIA, for instance?

Oney: Well, of course, every one who had some interest or had done some work on Iran knew the history of the Bahai, or at least something about the fact that by the clergy they were considered apostates and apostasy was a death sentence. So it did not seem--I don't think it struck anybody as unusual that a prominent clergyman should attack the Bahai. Or that a prominent clergyman would want to attack the Bahai. What was unusual about it was the fact that in the face of a couple decades of tolerance, if not acceptance of the Bahai, that a clergyman would do this openly and with the support of the Shah. As I just said, I think there was a misunderstanding on the Shah's part as to what Falsafi had intended. For years afterwards, although there may

have been isolated incidents, there was no overt anti-Bahai demonstrations. So I don't think this showed so much the power of the clergy to exert a political influence, as it did the power of the clergy to whip up popular emotion on a very specific subject.

Q: So you saw this as a limited nuisance factor.

Oney: Yes, yes. It was not something that had any political impact at the time, nor was it assessed as having any political implication, indeed. Although it's been years since I read the speech, I don't think it was specifically political. Of course, again, as I said, from Kashani's activities as a political mullah, it was obvious that some of the clergy could exert a political influence, but mostly it was on the side of the monarchy. The Behbehani and who else?

Q: The Borujerdi.

Oney: The Borujerdi, yes. They were generally supportive of the monarchy. I say generally because on certain specific things they had disagreements. When they got into things like land reform, you had disagreements, and particularly the attitude that the Shah took toward women. There were disagreements with the clergy and I suspect that even on the normally pro-monarchy, if not pro-Mohammed Reza clergy. These were things that were so basic to the clergy that they had to come out against them. I

think even the imam jumah.

Q: Hasan Emami.

Oney: Hasan Emami. I think he came out, for all his position with the royal court and so on, he came out in opposition to land reform as being basically against the tenets of religion.

Q: During this period, after Operation Ajax, you became more fully concentrated on Iran.

Oney: Yes.

Q: And what happened? You went back to school or you learned Persian? How was this done at CIA, to educate a country specialist, in other words?

Oney: In those days that was left pretty much up to the individual. I already had a Ph.D., which was considered as at least an indication that a person had the interest and the ability to learn what he needed to know on his own, without any formal education. I did, over the next few years, drop in on some courses at American, Georgetown, simply to round out some of what I thought I knew and systematize some of it. I studied a course one semester with mehdi Haeri, who I think was himself an ayatollah, but a quite a different kind.

Q: He comes here occasionally.

Oney: He does?

Q: He has Parkinson's Disease, so he comes to Washington for treatment once in a while.

Oney: Oh, is that right? I enjoyed him very much because, although he was perhaps not typical of the kind of clergy that took over, he nevertheless, because of his own intellectual powers and obvious ability to look beyond the narrowest tenets of Islam to a little broader fields of philosophy and religion, he made a very impressive presentation. Where does he usually live now? I thought I saw something suggesting he was in Mashad, or at least maybe his brother. [tape turned off] -- always interested me a great deal. [tape turned off]

Q: So you were a student of Haeri. You said you were catching up on courses at Georgetown and here and there.

Oney: Yes. I did that just to keep in touch academically a little bit, from time to time and because, as I say, I wanted to round out, maybe systematize some of the things that I knew or thought I knew. Except for what I did with Haeri, I didn't do any academic stuff specifically on Iran, although I talked to a lot of academics.

Q: This was, again, up to you, or this was routine at CIA, that analysts would be in touch with relative academicians in their own field?

Oney: Yes. Yes, they were free to do it if the academician would talk to them. Of course, I had known Dick Cottam for a long time and --

Q: He had been at the Agency himself, no?

Oney: Yes, he had been. He has been very close to National Frontists and Nationalists. Had a great deal of sympathy toward them. I had sympathy toward the Nationalists, too, mostly because they missed so many chances. They missed so many chances to, if you like --

Q: Was it possible to stay in CIA for someone like Cottam, especially after Operation Ajax?

Oney: Was it what in CIA?

Q: Was it possible for someone like Cotton with such strong proNationalist and anti-Shah sentiment to stay in the CIA after 1953?

Oney: He could have, but he chose not to.

Q: But he was conducive to that view of Iran?

Oney: Oh, yes. On almost all problems, across the board you could find people arguing on every side of the problem. Not only Iran, but every place else. There was no party lines. The only limitation that there was sometimes, was there were so few people interested and knowledgeable, for example, about Iran, so few people working on the country, that the views you could exchange profitably were limited by the limited number of people you had available to talk to. [tape turned off]

Q: We got to the 1950's at this point and we spoke a little bit about your education on Iran after these events. You said you went to Iran after the Bahai riots in the '50s.

Oney: Yes, that was the first time that I went to Iran. I stayed, I think, about a month. That was the first time I had been there.

Q: This was just to acquaint you with the country?

Oney: Yes. I also went to Turkey and Greece in the same trip. I was gone for three months and I spent about a month in each of the three countries. This was kind of an orientation trip.

Q: And in the '50s, as we progressed between '54 and '60, which is another watershed period, how did CIA and yourself analyze