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CIA's Chummy Ties And the Iran Snafu

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The Central Intelligence Agency's long and close ties to the Shah of Iran and his intelligence service effectively prevented the agency from giving the White House a clear warning that public unrest posed a major threat for the shah and for U.S. policy.

That conclusion emerges from a series of interviews with officials and analysts of the U.S. intelligence community, which has been shaken severely by White House criticism of its performance in Iran. Some of these officials also have been interviewed by House and Senate staff investigators who are preparing reports on this intelligence failure.

Warnings originating in the State Department that the shah faced rising and dangerous popular opposition last summer were kept out of a draft National Intelligence Estimate because CIA and Defense Department analysts strongly disagreed with that view, congressional investigators have been told.

A CIA official said Saturday that CIA Director Stansfield Turner had returned the draft estimate on Iran to its agency authors twice "because he didn't think it was good enough." But the official was unable to say if Turner's objections involved the report's highly optimistic view of the shah's hold on power.

Other knowledgeable sources said Turner had sent the now controversial estimate back for more information on military and other matters, but there were no clear indications at the time that he was unhappy with the political reporting.

The bureaucratic wrangling over the estimate — which was overtaken by the explosion of unrest in the streets in Tehran in September — is only part of a much broader problem that the CIA faces in trying to work in a country where it has an enormous investment in maintaining an autocratic ruler that it helped put in power.

"If we wanted information on the opposition leaders and on the military in Iran, we should have turned it into an unfriendly country," said one exasperated analyst. "Then we would have targeted them and developed sources. But we can't do much with opaque regimes headed by friendly authoritarian figures."

The political opposition and military officer corps have been off-limits for years to the 50 to 75 agents the CIA maintains in Iran. The agency's professional intelligence on domestic Iranian developments has had to come largely from the shah's own secret police, SAVAK, which hardly could be expected to report that the shah was in trouble.

"If we had tried to penetrate the opposition, we would have been caught immediately by SAVAK," a CIA official said. "Iran is an ally. In England, we would not try to penetrate the opposition."

Hovering in the corners of the sharpening disputes over the Iran failure and U.S. choices for the future are ghosts from an era when the CIA quickly could mount covert operations to shore up — or move aside — agency allies who suddenly had become liabilities in their own countries.

Ngo Dinh Diem, the South Vietnamese dictator assassinated by his own troops in 1963 after President Kennedy let his lack of confidence in Diem be known, is conjured up by U.S. policymakers who argue that the United States would touch off disastrous turmoil by doing or saying anything to undercut Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi in a moment of crisis.

In any case, Iran is already a multilevel failure that is likely to haunt the agency for years.

The agency has been deeply implanted in Iran since 1953, when Kermit Roosevelt and fewer than 30 American and Iranian agents were able to mount an operation that brought down the leftist government of Mohammed Mossadegh and put the shah back on the throne.

The entire operation cost less than $1 million, which the shah insisted on paying back, according to agency folklore.

While honoring the shah's wishes that they totally ignore Iranian developments, CIA personnel have been given free rein in gathering intelligence about the Soviet Union from Iran. The shah permits the United States to operate some of the world's most sophisticated listening and radar equipment on the Soviet border.

The fate of that equipment — should the shah fall suddenly, before it could be relocated — is a major worry for Carter administration planners.