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Perspective

Powder Keg in Iran – Part I

By Arthur M. Sussman

In the midst of the power plays between the East and the West, little attention is being given to a potentially dangerous situation. It may not explode into the headlines for several years, but when it does, it will be most serious. This little known tension spot is the nation of Iran. Most Americans hear only of Iran when the Shah takes another beautiful wife or when a former wife of the Shah dates T.V.'s Wyatt Earp.

Yet this situation is vital to western security. Within its borders are to be found 24 per cent of the world's oil supply. Iran also shares a 2400-mile border with the Soviet Union. These two factors make Iran the happy recipient annually of several hundred million dollars in American aid. This is in addition to the 300 million dollars of oil revenue received from foreign companies.

The Government of Iran is headed by a king or Shah, as he is known. Under the Constitution of 1905, he is granted powers similar to that of the Queen of England. The people are granted a full bill of rights and a parliamentary government. The present royal family came to power only thirty years ago; when the Shah's father, a private in the Army staged a successful coup. It is said that the came to power with only a whip and a gun. When he was forced off his throne by the British in the early forties, he owned over 1,000 villages. (Quite a capital gain!)

The present Shah was given his throne by the British and he has behaved very well. He did have some difficulty in 1953 when a nationalistic group forced him into exile. This group was headed by Mohammed Mossadeq, an elderly nationalist, who had the support of the masses.

Dr. Mossadeq had opposed a Russian takeover of the oil reserves in the north and had fought to keep Iran for the Iranians. He was pictured by the American press as a tool of the Reds, and there was a great sigh of relief when his regime was overthrown and the Shah restored. Of Dr. Mossadeq, Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas has said, "He was a great friend of mine. They (Americans and British) destroyed him."

Today in Iran the image of Mossadeq is still alive. As one Iranian student recently expressed to me, "He gave Iran a sense of dignity...We were forced to ride the back of British-owned buses in our own country. Mossadeq changed this."

After the removal of the Mossadeq government, the Shah was restored to power and a series of Prime Ministers appointed to grapple with the many problems. None have succeeded. There is rampant corruption. It has been estimated that out of every dollar given to Iran in aid, 80 cents goes for corruption.

With the political and economic pressure mounting, the Shah was forced in May to appoint a reform government headed by Dr. Ali Amini, one of Iran's largest landholders, and to announce that he was going to distribute the royal lands to the poor farmers. Along with this new look, the Shah hired an advertising firm in the United States to do a little image-building. The reform was on.

As of November the huge anti-corruption campaign has only exposed graft in the caviar industry. Meanwhile the opposition party has been muzzled and last July over 1,000 students at Tehran University were arrested for demonstrating against the regime. The land reform program has moved very slowly. The large land owners have refused to cooperate, and even the Shah has not been overly anxious to part with Dad's hard won spoils.

That very briefly is the story of Iran—a nation rich in resources, but yet with high illiteracy rates and poverty. What happens to the vast oil revenues and the American aid?

Iran has a 200,000-man army with 60,000 officers and another 120,000 men to care for these officers. This leaves them with 20,000 fighting men who are so demoralized that they would probably balk at a real battle.

Thus the vast American expenditures have served to prop up a tired authoritarian government. A government that practices repressive and harsh measures, a government that fails to acknowledge the bill of rights of the Constitution of 1905.

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