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A Soviet View on the Assassination of the Iranian Prime Minister, Haj ‘Ali Razmara, in the Context of the Early Years of the Cold War

Soli Shahvar 

Department of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, the University of Haifa, Israel
Email: sshahvar@univ.haifa.ac.il

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Abstract

Using Soviet foreign ministry documents found in the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, this article seeks to shed a new light on the identity of those behind the assassination of Haj ‘Ali Razmara in 1951, and the reasons for it. In seeking a power to back his aspirations to become the ruler of Iran, Razmara hopped between the USSR and the United States, finally gambling on USSR. In spite of this, the United States was not in a hurry to get rid of him; instead, they preferred to use the Shah’s fear of Razmara to secure the former’s cooperation and to extract from him what they wanted, especially oil concessions in Iran. However, by then Iran was already marching rapidly toward oil nationalization, which Razmara opposed on the grounds that the USSR should be the power that produced the oil for the Iranians. This was unacceptable to the Americans, who, according to Soviet sources, decided to get rid of Razmara during the early stages of the Cold War.

Keywords: Cold War; Haj ‘Ali Razmara; Iran; oil; United States; USSR

On March 7, 1951, the Iranian Prime Minister, Haj ‘Ali Razmara, was assassinated.¹ Information about the time and the place where the assassination was committed, the identity of the person who shot Razmara, and the organization to which that person belonged are well known, but do we really know who was behind it?² The historical background of the early stages of the Cold War between the USSR and the United States gives us cause to wonder who was behind Razmara’s assassination and what the motives were, and to find this missing piece to the puzzle. The main contribution of this article is its presentation of the Soviet perspective on the circumstances surrounding Razmara’s assassination, based on documents from the Soviet foreign ministry that until now have been missing from the existing literature on the case. The circumstances of the case are inseparable from the context of the Cold War, which Muhammad Riza Shah Pahlavi, along with many others, believed to have started in Iran.³ Therefore, the historical framework of this article is the Cold War,

¹ Soviet sources provide the following information on Razmara: Born in 1902 in Tehran, Razmara graduated from the military school in Tehran in 1920. From 1923 to 1927 he completed his military studies at the Saint-Cyr military academy in France. Razmara joined the Supreme Military Council of Iran in 1939, and was appointed chief of staff (1943, 1944, and 1946). See: Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (hereafter RGASPI), Zakharov to Molotov, 110 and also Ghods, “Rise and Fall,” 22–35.

² See Turkaman, *Asrar-i Qatl-i Razmara*, for the mystery around the assassination.

³ Pahlavi, *Mission for My Country*, 118.

and its theoretical framework is the Soviet-American struggle and each side's respective attempts to sway Iran to their side. In this context, and based on the Soviet documents, a few questions arise: what interest did the Soviets have in Razmara, if any? And if they did, how did Razmara draw their interest? Furthermore, who, in the eyes of the Soviets, was behind Razmara's assassination, and how should the assassination be seen in the light of the Soviet-American Cold War struggle in Iran?

When exactly the Cold War took root in Iran is a disputed question, and it is not my intention to discuss it here. I present here, in detail, the Soviet point of view. Also described is the struggle in Iran which formed, in Soviet eyes, a sort of prelude to the opening shot of the Cold War. Before addressing this historical background, it should be noted that Iran had been the scene of an ongoing struggle between Great Britain and Tsarist Russia during most of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, a struggle called the "Great Game."⁴ When the Soviet Union was established at the end of 1922, it inherited and continued this struggle against the British. The vested interests of these two powers, as well as the United States, in Iran were a factor in the invasion of Iran on August 25, 1941. This incursion officially sought to open an Iranian corridor for supplying weapons and necessary equipment to the USSR and to prevent Iran from falling into the hands of Nazi Germany.⁵ Then, in 1943, when the German army was checked on the outskirts of Stalingrad, each of the three Allies began, in secret, to plan for the postwar period.⁶ All three wished to promote their own interests in Iran, with Iranian oil being the main focus.

Historical Background

The competition for Iranian oil between the three invading Allies, which had already started in 1943, was a significant result of the described postwar planning. With the outbreak of the Cold War, this competition would become part of it, as will be addressed. The Soviet documents detail how this competition was driven by the Americans, a claim that also is supported in Western sources. Arthur Millspaugh, the American financial adviser to the Iranian government, drove the renewed competition for Iranian oil. Millspaugh was assisted by 'Ali Suhayli (1895–1958), the pro-American reigning Iranian prime minister, in gaining the Americans a foothold in the development of oil fields in southern Iran, an area and an industry that was traditionally controlled by the British.⁷ To help achieve this foothold for the Americans, Suhayli criticized British dealings with and management of the Iranian national resource (oil) and called for the Iranian government to make changes, all to discredit the British in the eyes of the Iranian public. Meanwhile the Americans entered into secret negotiations with the Iranian government over an oil concession in southeastern Iran.⁸ In Soviet eyes the coordinated moves of Millspaugh and Suhayli were carried out in exemplary fashion; in that same year representatives of Standard Oil of New York and of Sonol-Vacuum arrived in Iran to sign oil agreements with the Iranians. The British, however, discovered this plot and were able to react in time.⁹ Soon, this Anglo-American competition

⁴ On the "Great Game" in general and with regard to Iran in particular, see the following: Ingram, *Beginning of the Great Game*; Kazemzadeh, *Russia and Britain*; Hopkirk, *The Great Game*.

⁵ Majd, *August 1941*.

⁶ Abdul Razak, "Convenient Comrades," 283.

⁷ Suhayli served as Iranian prime minister twice: from March 9 to August 9, 1942, and February 15 to April 6, 1944. According to Abrahamian, Suhayli even "offered to visit Washington to negotiate a commercial treaty; [and] secretly proposed a concession covering much of southwest Iran to the Standard-Vacuum Oil Company"; Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 184. US Department of State, Dreyfus to Hull, April 14, 1943; May 5, 1943. RGASPI, subtitle 2 of "Negotiations on Oil Concessions."

⁸ RGASPI, "Negotiations on Oil Concessions." The specific locations are not mentioned.

⁹ The British hurried to send representatives of Royal Dutch-Shell (a British international oil company) to negotiate a new oil concession in southern Iran before the arrival of the American companies. Royal Dutch-Shell offered

became public, turning into a bitter rivalry.¹⁰ The Soviets drew their own conclusions, namely that this was an American move against the British, and that the USSR should join the struggle over Iranian oil.¹¹

A few years later, the Soviets saw the struggle that Millspaugh had initiated in 1943 in a different light. With hindsight, they were able to see a wider picture of the American actions in Iran, regarding these actions as the opening shot of the Cold War.¹²

According to Soviet sources, the Americans began to openly act against the USSR in Iran soon after the evacuation of the Red Army forces, in May 1946. At that time, an oilfield workers' strike broke out in Agha-Jari. This served Soviet interests because it carried the potential of eroding the power and status of the British in Iran, and especially in the southern (and oil rich) part of the country.¹³ In extensive coverage of the strike, the May 14, 1946, issue of the *Ettela'at* national newspaper included a Russian translation of an announcement that had a brief, vague reference to the Americans. The announcement read as follows: "This morning the US ambassador to Iran . . . held an official meeting for the first time with the prime minister."¹⁴ This short and relatively vague announcement from mid-May 1946 attracted the attention of the Soviets. The documents that were sent from Iran to Moscow during the years 1948 to 1950 and circulated among senior officials of the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs retrospectively refer to the beginning of the summer of 1946 as the beginning of open American activity against Soviet interests in Iran.¹⁵

Razmara: In Search of the Backing of a Power

Documents from the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs include a lot of information about Haj 'Ali Razmara's past, and they make clear that as early as 1944 he began to be seen by the Soviets not only as a senior military commander, but also as a person who had the potential for state leadership. The relevant Soviet sources emphasized that Razmara was endowed with great political flexibility, for better or worse as far as the Soviets were concerned. This flexibility, according to Soviet belief, meant that Razmara could fluctuate between positive and negative attitudes toward any of the former Allied powers, all according to his personal ambitions, the main one being his desire to replace his general's uniform with a politician's clothes through the support of any of those Allies, and without hesitation. In 1944 Razmara began to prepare the ground for garnering Soviet support. In conversations with Red Army personnel, Razmara frequently stated that Iran-USSR relations must be tightened. After the Soviet Union's request for an oil concession in northern Iran was rejected by the Majlis's Oil Committee, Razmara made sure to let the Soviets know that, if they would guarantee him their support, he would take off his uniform and enter politics, and then would remove the obstacles to their desired concession. In 1946, after being appointed to the position of chief of staff for the third time, he also began to give practical expression to this position by allowing freedom of movement for the Soviets, a freedom that gave them a closer look at what was going on in the Iranian army, and also other areas.¹⁶

its services on much better terms than those previously offered by the British Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. See also *Ibid.*

¹⁰ UK National Archives, Bullard to Foreign Office, October 22, November 10, 13, 15, 1943.

¹¹ RGASPI, "Negotiations on Oil Concessions."

¹² The Soviets saw that along with the competition for Iranian oil that was advocated by Millspaugh, the Americans actually took over financial management in Iran (through Millspaugh's appointment as the Iranian government's financial advisor) and the Iranian police (through the appointment of Norman Schwarzkopf), and they increased pro-American propaganda in Iran while creating more proxies, all steps that the Soviets interpreted as American preparation for the post-World War II period and the beginning of the Cold War against them. This Soviet appraisal with a view to the 1940s was written in early 1950; see RGASPI, Lomakin to Grigorian, 19.

¹³ See RGASPI, "The Parties and the Trade Unions."

¹⁴ See RGASPI, "America and Iran," 11.

¹⁵ RGASPI, Sichiov to Baranov.

¹⁶ RGASPI, Zakharov to Molotov, 106.

However, in spite of these gestures toward the Soviets, in late 1946 Razmara did not refrain from violent repression of pro-Soviet and Communist elements in Iranian Azerbaijan or from making public statements condemning the Soviet Union. Suppression of the pro-Soviet Azerbaijan People's Government in Iranian Azerbaijan (which had been set up in November 1945 under Soviet military protection) contributed to Razmara's rise in the eyes of the Shah, who happily praised him.¹⁷ At the same time, the Soviets came to understand the breadth of maneuvering that characterized Razmara.¹⁸ The fact that he came out publicly against the USSR did not prevent him from, later, at the end of 1948, seeking the USSR's support on the basis of their mutual interests, namely Soviet assistance of his ambitions in the Iranian political system in exchange for his acting against pro-Western elements in Iran. Razmara returned to a pro-Soviet position with the following declaration: "I understand very well that the strategy of Iran and [its] army should be steered [toward] getting closer to the USSR alone. But the current ruling circles [in Iran] will not do this."¹⁹

The Soviet sources emphasize that Razmara showed fluctuations not only in his dealings with them, but also with the Americans. In their opinion, control over the Iranian army was entrusted to the Americans by virtue of the agreement between them beginning on October 6, 1947.²⁰ Razmara had been one of the supporters of this move, and actively worked to recruit American military advisers as part of that agreement's implementation. However, Soviet documents imply that toward 1949 Razmara changed his approach toward the Americans, treating them in a negative manner.²¹ Although the reason for this is not known definitively, it is possible, as he sought the "backing of a power" to realize his personal ambitions, that his attitude toward the US cooled once he perceived that he would not manage to gain US backing.

An example of Razmara's change in attitude to the Americans is reflected in his attempts to persuade the Shah not to proceed with his US visit, planned for late 1949.²² Soviet sources indicate that, according to information received, the Shah decided to go ahead with his planned trip, much to Razmara's disappointment. This disappointment was expressed to a small and close circle of his "friends," one of whom was a Soviet informer who passed this on to his Soviet recruiters, who operated in Iran under the guise of diplomats at the Soviet embassy in Tehran. According to this report, Razmara stated that "he [the Shah] was blinded by the grand welcome [given to him] by the US and he does not understand that the Americans are courting him to finally enslave Iran." That same year, Razmara pressed for changing the role of the Americans to advisers to the Iranian military. This would be a partial withdrawal from the 1947 agreement giving the US control over the Iranian army, which had been signed with Razmara's support. Razmara also ordered secret surveillance of American personnel movements in Iran.²³

In March 1950 Razmara issued an order that Americans were not to be allowed free movement in areas close to the borders without special permission from the general staff of the Iranian army. In the light of the Cold War it can be assumed that he was particularly referring to the Iran-USSR border. Yet another order was issued not to allow any further intervention by Americans in the decisions of the Iranian general staff.²⁴ He also "went so far as to end the US military aid program and reconnaissance flights over the Soviet border."²⁵ The Americans regarded these two latter orders of Razmara as contemptuous. They provoked the

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 111–12.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 108.

²⁰ RGASPI, Vyshinsky to Stalin, 58.

²¹ RGASPI, Zakharov to Molotov, 109–10.

²² The visit took place between November 16 and 20, 1949. The Shah's purpose was to assure Truman that he would take control of the situation in Iran, and to secure the American president's support.

²³ RGASPI, Zakharov to Molotov, 110.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Amanat, *Iran*, 525.

anger of General Vernon Evans, the head of the American military mission in Iran, who saw Razmara as a “father of the Reds,” namely a leading pro-Soviet. After this, the Soviets learned that the Americans began frequent appeals to the Shah to remove Razmara from his position as chief of staff of the Iranian army.²⁶

Removing Razmara from the command of the Iranian army did not mean that the Americans did not want him as prime minister. According to Manuchehr Farmanfarmaian, Jerry (Gerald) Dooher, First Secretary at the US embassy in Tehran, was the driving force behind the appointment of General Ali Razmara to the premiership in May 1950, as Dooher “openly advocated bringing in a strong prime minister to whip the country into shape.”²⁷ Farmanfarmaian did not clarify exactly what this phrase meant, but it is clear that the United States preferred that Razmara be appointed Iranian premier rather than remain in position as chief of staff of the army. In British eyes, Iran once again needed a strong man, and according to Ernest Bevin, the British Minister for Foreign Affairs, Razmara was the only man suitable for the position, a view which the Americans accepted, either because they still deferred to British views or because they believed that Razmara could succeed in his promise to solve the Anglo-Persian oil conflict.²⁸

As Iran’s director general of petroleum at the time, Farmanfarmaian was working closely with Razmara, whom he described as “a master at making promises he couldn’t keep.”²⁹ Razmara had already, in the summer of 1950, when he was appointed prime minister, held a meeting with the British regarding the oil conflict, and upon leaving it answered journalists’ questions, as will be described.³⁰

Based on Soviet sources, Razmara did not stop his anti-American measures and statements, telling a senior Soviet military representative in Iran, “I have no secrets from you.” To this he added another statement that made clear to the Soviets that the support and backing he expected from them should be not only political, but also military, if and when he needed it. In his own words, “Our army is weak and is used only to maintain order in the country. But we have a strong [Soviet] neighbor and we hope that in time of an external threat [to us], you will help us.”³¹

At this time, in closed conversations, Razmara was heard saying that he would never turn to the United States to ask for the backing that he needed.³² He would not have turned to Great Britain either, whose influence in Iran was constantly declining and who certainly could not provide him with military support.

The steps taken by Razmara against the Americans in Iran were clearly contrary to those of the Shah vis-à-vis the Americans. It seems that the Shah’s decision to go ahead with his planned visit to the United States despite Razmara’s pleas not to do so, marked—as far as Razmara was concerned—a parting of his way with the Shah. In this context, sensitive messages began to flow from the circle of Razmara’s associates. Two examples are from February and March 1950. In a harsh statement against the Shah, made in February 1950, Razmara is reported to have said “I would single-handedly eliminate the Shah and declare that Iran is a republic if [already] I had the support of [the superpower].” In March of the same year, in discourse among Razmara’s circle of associates after his harsh statement against the Shah, one of them told him, in the presence of the others, that the USSR and her supporters in Iran “would definitely support you,” to which Razmara replied, “Let’s wait and see.”³³

²⁶ RGASPI, Zakharov to Molotov, 111.

²⁷ Farmanfarmaian and Farmanfarmaian, *Blood and Oil*, 236. See also Nijati, *Se Guzarish*, 38; and Bill, *Eagle*, 52.

²⁸ See Fayzi, *Chalish-i Mashru’iyat*, 81–7, 104–5, for a detailed account of the global, regional, and local circumstances, as well as the involved interests.

²⁹ Farmanfarmaian and Farmanfarmaian, *Blood and Oil*, 238–89.

³⁰ RGASPI, TASS, July 27, 1950, 116.

³¹ RGASPI, Zakharov to Molotov, 107.

³² *Ibid.*, 113.

³³ *Ibid.*

The Soviets saw that Razmara aspired to political power and believed he would go to great lengths for the power that extended its patronage to him. The Soviet documents state that in the presence of his associates Razmara did not hide his intention to become the Shah or the president of a republic. Given Razmara's previously described statement that he was ready to eliminate the Shah and declare the establishment of a republic, and now the indication that he also was ready to become the Shah, the Soviets would have reached the conclusion that it was not the nature of Iran's regime that interested Razmara, but rather becoming her ruler.³⁴ Razmara was important to the Soviets, and such statements, obtained by Soviet intelligence agents, were in favor of a significant improvement in Iran-USSR relations, statements to which the Soviets attached great importance.³⁵ The Shah, for his part, proposed that Razmara take off his military uniform and be appointed as Iran's prime minister. Soviet sources do not clearly or with certainty indicate whether the Shah's proposal was the result of American pressure exerted on the Shah beginning in March 1950 to remove Razmara from the position of chief of staff. Farmanfarmaian, however, described the pressure exerted on the sovereign by outside powers, and especially the United States, as intense.³⁶

It is no coincidence that news about the Shah's proposal to Razmara began reaching the Soviets in March. Razmara refused to accept the Shah's offer, and he told his close friends General 'Abdullah Hidayat and another general (whose name is not readable) about it, probably believing that it would be leaked to the Soviets. At any rate, Razmara made his decision to refuse the Shah's proposal because at the time it meant heading a political system that was greatly colored by anti-Soviet feelings. In such circumstances if the prime minister had taken even a neutral side toward the USSR it would have resulted in his quick removal from office. Razmara added a last sentence that sounded like a condition, or a statement for the sake of bargaining; namely that it would be best for him to stay in his uniform until the superpower (namely, the Soviet Union) "wises up," that is, until it granted him the patronage he desired, with which he would feel safe to take control of Iran. Razmara said that it would be better for him to remain in the stable position of chief of staff for the time being.³⁷ The fact that of the two generals before whom Razmara made the statement, one is identified in the Soviet documents (i.e., Hidayat) whereas the other is not, may indicate that the nonidentified general was the Soviet informer whom the Soviets, as a matter of precaution, did not want to name in writing.

In May 1950, when the Shah once again proposed the premiership to him, Razmara refused a second time.³⁸ He explained his reason to his close associates, telling them that to accept the premiership and to succeed in promoting reforms in Iran he needed the backing of a power.³⁹ This time Razmara refused even after the Shah showed him special respect by putting him in charge of the ceremony for the reburial of the Shah's father's remains in 1950. Riza Shah had previously been exiled to South Africa (in 1941), where he died and was first buried in 1944. The Soviets emphasized that commanding such a ceremony in Iran was considered a great privilege and honor on the part of the Shah.⁴⁰

On June 26, 1950, following the two refusals, Razmara decided to accept the Shah's proposal and formed a government the very same day. It is possible that he had managed to bring himself closer to the long-desired "backing of a power," the Soviet Union. However,

³⁴ Ibid, 105.

³⁵ Ibid., 105–6.

³⁶ Farmanfarmaian and Farmanfarmaian, *Blood and Oil*, 238–9.

³⁷ RGASPI, Zakharov to Molotov, 108.

³⁸ According to Farmanfarmaian, the Shah regarded Razmara with suspicion and only reluctantly acquiesced to his premiership; Farmanfarmaian and Farmanfarmaian, *Blood and Oil*, 238.

³⁹ RGASPI, Zakharov to Molotov, 105.

⁴⁰ RGASPI, Vyshinsky to Stalin, 55; RGASPI, Zakharov to Molotov, 113.

it also is possible he thought that this was the time to accept the Shah's offer, because the cabinet of ministers of the Iranian government, led by Prime Minister Hasan 'Ali Mansur, had resigned, and another refusal would be worse for him than agreeing to be appointed to the position.⁴¹ He did not intend to lose time and formed the new government according to his own vision, since, except for Taqi Nasr, all the ministers were appointed for the first time in their lives as heads of government ministries.⁴² Razmara made sure above all else to appoint his own men to the institutions of the armed forces, namely General 'Abdullah Hidayat as Minister of War and General Muhammad Daftari as chief of police. In this, the Soviets saw Razmara's far-reaching ambitions.⁴³ However, quite soon, rumors surfaced that Razmara might be planning to wrest power from the Shah, something that could not have escaped the latter's ears. Razmara had no choice but to refute these rumors in public.⁴⁴

According to Soviet sources, after forming his government, Razmara began to issue a new newspaper, titled *Safir-i Vatan* (Motherland's Envoy) with the aim of diverting Iranian foreign policy toward the USSR in a more positive direction. An article published on July 31, 1950, criticized the policies of Iranian governments toward the USSR during the five years (after World War II, 1945–50), being especially critical of Ahmad Qavam and his government, "whose [pro-Western, American policies] caused the Russians to count us among their enemies," and going on to say that meanwhile "England and the USA did nothing for Iran and only intervened [frequently] in the Iranian government's affairs."⁴⁵

On November 4, 1950, Razmara made a meaningful move toward the Soviets, that is, the signing of a trade agreement with the USSR, a move the Soviets welcomed. This was the result of long discussions between Razmara's government and the Soviet embassy in Tehran, while concurrently Razmara openly expressed his dissatisfaction with former Iranian premiers who had strived for closer relations between Iran and the United States, even though the latter was in no hurry to implement the promises of aid to Iran. In Razmara's own words, "much has been written about [the US] providing aid to Iran, but this is not reflected in reality."⁴⁶

The Soviets saw with great satisfaction that there was a prime minister in Iran who was working to tilt Iran toward the USSR, and to some extent change the balance in the geopolitical struggle against the West in the USSR's favor. But the Soviets also saw Razmara's great political error, manifested when he "opened a front against the USA" prematurely, back in 1949, instead of doing so when he had gathered enough power to take control of Iran. The Soviets believed that instead of Razmara's aforementioned defiant behavior toward the United States he should have kept his cards close to his chest for as long as possible. In their eyes, it was this error of Razmara's that made the Americans immediately begin to scrutinize every move of Razmara as a step toward the Soviets. As mentioned, they had even pressured the Shah to fire him from his post as chief of staff.⁴⁷ It is also not impossible that the Americans emphasized the threat posed by Razmara to the Shah to bring the Shah

⁴¹ Mansur's period of premiership was very short (April 4 to June 25, 1950). See RGASPI, "New Government Composition," 101.

⁴² Taghi Nasr was the "most American" in Razmara's cabinet, and this choice could be considered a pro-American move. Razmara also wished to keep the peace with the British. According to Farmanfarmaian, "in seeking a man to keep the peace with the British, Razmara had chosen well, for Mohsen Khan [Râis, the Minister of Foreign Affairs] was the ultimate diplomat who believed in compromise [in the Anglo-Iranian oil conflict] to the bitter end." By "compromise," Farmanfarmaian was referring to 50-50 profit sharing. Razmara also was on good terms with the Soviets, as Soviet sources quoted here show clearly. See also Farmanfarmaian and Farmanfarmaian, *Blood and Oil*, 240. On the Anglo-Iranian negotiations over the oil conflict and profit sharing, see Bamberg, *History of the British Petroleum Company*, vol. 2, 401–5, 408–9, 414–6.

⁴³ RGASPI, "New Government Composition," 101; RGASPI, Zakharov to Molotov, 105.

⁴⁴ RGASPI, TASS, July 10, 1950, 114.

⁴⁵ RGASPI, TASS, August 1, 1950, 117.

⁴⁶ RGASPI, TASS, July 27, 1950, 115.

⁴⁷ RGASPI, Zakharov to V. Molotov, 111.

even closer to themselves in exchange for guaranteeing his safety. The Soviets soon realized that the Shah was aware of this threat and feared Razmara's growing power. Already, on the day of his appointment as Iranian premier, Razmara had demonstrated his power by appointing his own choices to head the various ministries and the armed forces. All this was designed to strengthen his own position. The Soviet document dated June 30, 1950, in which these insights were presented, reveals that the Shah feared Razmara's malice toward him, and so decided to offer him the premiership to obscure Razmara's vigilance by busying him with running the government and the state.⁴⁸

It is quite clear that the Americans—whose popularity, position, and influence in Iran was steadily on the rise during the 1940s and early 1950s, and who supported the Shah—had many ways to make it difficult for Razmara to fulfill his duties as Iranian premier, or to harm him, even to the point of assassination.⁴⁹ However, it can be assumed that assassination was a last resort, because, once carried out, it would drastically reduce the ability of the Americans to manipulate the Shah's fears. Already, at the beginning of 1951, Razmara began to face difficulties implementing even relatively simple decisions. For example, Soviet sources point out that despite the signing of the November 4, 1950, Irano-Soviet trade agreement, and despite Razmara's strong desire to implement it, the Iranian bureaucracy managed to delay its implementation. Razmara had to intervene, and as the Soviets themselves noted (on January 11, 1951), even then it was not fully implemented.⁵⁰

As noted earlier, the Allied struggle over Iranian oil began in 1943 during the World War II occupation of Iran. The importance of Iranian oil was so significant to the Americans that they were willing to harm the interests of their closest ally, Britain, just to gain a foothold in southern Iran and develop new oil fields there. In this context, it is not unreasonable to believe that the more Razmara dared to move and engage in the areas that were especially important to the Americans, the more the latter would be willing to take harsher measures to neutralize Razmara and his unwanted actions.

One of the most significant steps Razmara took before he was assassinated was his approach to the issue of Iranian oil production. A few days before his assassination, Razmara insisted that Iranian oil production should be entrusted to an oil powerhouse, and given his previous pro-Soviet stance it was quite clear that he was referring to the Soviet Union. This had continued for about eight-and-a-half months, beginning with an idle meeting that Razmara held with the British at the end of July 1950. Razmara then managed to gain some time because the Majlis, most of whose members were in favor of oil nationalization, was going on recess. Razmara expressed relief and said that his government would be able to vigorously advance its plans. He did not specify in public the plans involved and or exactly what reform he envisaged; he said only that, based on his assessment, "this reform" would be successful very soon. It is clear that Razmara was referring, among other reforms, to Iranian oil, especially as his remarks came immediately after a government meeting dedicated to that very issue.⁵¹

Razmara had, for some time, turned his back on the West and was moving toward the USSR. Indeed, it was only few days after the July 1950 meeting with the British about Iranian oil that Razmara's paper, *Safir-i Vatan*, published an article in which Razmara claimed, in an attempt to sway Iran toward the USSR, that the British and the Americans had done nothing for Iran.⁵² As Razmara saw it, there was no point arguing over which power was worthy of operating the oilfields in Iran.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 113.

⁴⁹ RGASPI, Lomakin to Grigorian, 19. As the Cold War struggle progressed during these years, the Americans were required to develop more proxies in the Iranian sociopolitical sphere to increase their channels of influence in Iran. Suhayli was not the only pro-American leading political figure; there were many others, such as Hussein 'Ala, Murtiza-Quli Bayat, and Riza Hikmat. Also, there were the American gendarmerie and military missions (GENMIS and ARMISH, respectively).

⁵⁰ RGASPI, Menshikov to Molotov, 1.

⁵¹ RGASPI, TASS, July 27, 1950, 116.

⁵² RGASPI, TASS, August 1, 1950, 117.

Less than two weeks after Razmara's assassination, George Crews McGhee, the US Assistant Secretary of State for the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa, arrived in Iran, and proceeded from there to Iraq. He summarized his Iran visit at a press conference held upon his arrival in Baghdad. According to Soviet sources, McGhee, in reference to the Cold War context, solemnly stated that Iran no longer wanted to be "in a neutral position." He stated that the time had come to close this possibility because it gave an opening for aggressive elements to realize their ambitions in Iran. It was clear to the Soviets that they themselves were the "aggressive elements" to whom McGhee was referring. Since it was clear to them even before that that the Shah regarded Razmara as a threat (pushing the Shah further into the Americans' arms), the Soviet interpretation of McGhee's words was that Razmara had needed to be eliminated, since he endangered and threatened the Shah and American interests in Iran. Indeed, by then Razmara was seen as a pro-Soviet Iranian prime minister, who had the support of the Iranian army (as former chief of staff) and wanted Iran (and with it Iranian oil) to join with the USSR. Logically, the Soviets regarded Razmara's assassination as a plan to remove that threat and replace Razmara with the pro-American Hussein 'Ala, facilitating the navigation of Iran into the arms of the Americans for good.⁵³

Whether the Shah himself, or elements in the royal court, with or without American cooperation, played a role in Razmara's assassination is not clear from the Soviet sources, who blame the Americans. However, rumors about the Shah's involvement in the assassination did exist. For example, according to Farmanfarmaian:

Prime Minister Razmara had been shot and killed as he was entering a mosque with one of the Shah's closest friends. No one else had been hurt. His assassin was a religious fanatic. Already it was being rumored that the Shah's friend had brought Razmara to the slaughterhouse.⁵⁴

Elsewhere Farmanfarmaian makes an important addition, also indicating foul play behind Razmara's assassination: "His alleged killer had claimed to have been sitting in a friend's office, and he had an alibi to prove it."⁵⁵

Although the majority of the current historiography sides with the view that the assassin was a religious fanatic, named Khalil Tahmasebi, some indicate that the assassin might have been from Razmara's bodyguards or the royal court.⁵⁶ There also seems to be a third view, claiming both to be true, namely that Razmara was shot by people from both parties, since the three bullets found in his body were not identical. Given the ballistic analysis, it is believed that the shots by the member of Fadā'ayan-i Islam were not the fatal ones, but rather that Razmara was killed by the bullet shot by one of the royal court soldiers, named Allahverdi.⁵⁷

Based on available sources, religious and national circles, as well as the Shah and the royal court, had reasons to get rid of Razmara, and it could well be that this third view regarding Razmara's assassination was indeed the right one. Nevertheless, the official version accuses the member of Fadā'ayan-i Islam. The Soviet sources presented here point in an altogether

⁵³ RGASPI, Bazarov to Molotov, 133.

⁵⁴ Farmanfarmaian and Farmanfarmaian, *Blood and Oil*, 255. According to Musavvar Rahmani, the "Shah's closest friend" who accompanied Razmara to the mosque was none other than Assadullah 'Alam, then Minister of Labor; Musavvar Rahmani, *Khatirat-i Siyasi*, 270-3.

⁵⁵ Farmanfarmaian and Farmanfarmaian, *Blood and Oil*, 376. According to Sirus Fayzi, "Razmara's killing is known to be among the most mysterious killings in Iran's political history." Fayzi adds that there are two main views about it: one that relates Razmara's assassination to the radical religious group Fadā'ayan-i Islam, and the other that relates it to Iran's royal court. Fayzi, *Chalish-i Mashru'iyat*, 145-6.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Kazemi, "Fedā'īān-e Eslām" (for the view of the assassin being a religious fanatic), Turkaman, *Asrar-i Qatl-i Razmara*, 32 (for the view that the assassin was from Razmara's bodyguards), and Mahdi-nia, *Zindigi-yi Siyasi-yi Razmara*, 339-41 (for the view that the royal court might have been behind Razmara's assassination).

⁵⁷ Fatimi, "Kudita-yi 28 Mordad," 43.

different direction, namely that the Americans were (or could have been) behind it. This is a novel view, also expressed by TASS (Televizionnoye Agentstvo Sovetskogo Soyuz, the Soviet Television Agency) on March 8, 1951.⁵⁸

Conclusion

The picture of Razmara drawn by the Soviet sources is of a resolute and capable man who aspired for and succeeded in reaching the highest possible positions of leadership, in both the military (as chief of staff) and the political sphere (as prime minister). In principle, he was looking to advance himself, and he was not concerned with the identity of the power whose backing he sought, as long as its support for him furthered his personal interests. In return for the backing of the three powers (Britain, the USSR, and the United States), he promised to assist each the Allied power with what it considered most important. He promised to help the Soviets secure their long-desired oil concession in the north and to free the Tudeh prisoners who languished in jail after the assassination attempt on the Shah's life in February 1949. To the British he promised to oppose oil nationalization and support 50-50 profit sharing (the Supplemental Agreement), resolving the oil conflict. Finally he pledged to the Americans that he would stand firm against communism and involve their proxies in his government.⁵⁹

Parts of those promises Razmara indeed kept; but after cold consideration of the situation and the powers involved in Iran, he came to the conclusion that his best chance to realize his personal aspirations lay with the Soviets. Britain after World War II had been drastically weakened and was broadly hated in Iran. Between Razmara and the Shah, the Americans appeared to favor the latter: the inexperienced, young, and staunchly pro-American (especially after the failed attempt on his life) Shah. Razmara's gestures toward the Soviets were well noted by the Americans. The Soviets and their proxies in Iran had experienced severe blows in previous years: attacks against Tudeh's branches and activists; the short-lived term of Tudeh in Qavam's coalition government (mainly due to American and British pressure on Qavam); the accusation of Tudeh for the assassination attempt on the Shah's life; and Soviet failure to secure an oil concession in northern Iran. It was easy for Razmara to promise the Soviets that he would secure them that concession (and so win their support), although it was a difficult promise to realize given the prevailing atmosphere of oil nationalization.

Moreover, in 1950, once Razmara began to express his desire to overthrow the Shah and sought Soviet support in realizing this, the Soviet price was no longer limited to their long-desired concession in northern Iran; the price probably would have been much higher. It was not for nothing that Razmara opposed the nationalization of oil and insisted that a proper power should produce the oil in Iran. Razmara's personal interests dictated that that power should be the Soviet Union, and he came to state that he would never ask for American backing.

Although on March 7, 1951, it was not the Americans who actually shot Razmara, a review of the Soviet documents discussed here shows that, at least as the Soviets saw it, the United States was behind his murder. From these sources it is clear that Razmara's assassination must be considered in the context of the Cold War struggle between the two superpowers. American interest in depriving the USSR of Iran and keeping Iran under American influence (and promoting American interest in Iranian oil) was clearly and publicly expressed by McGhee in a press conference in Baghdad after his visit to Iran. McGhee's visit to Iran took place only two weeks after Razmara's assassination, and the issue of Iranian oil was one of the main topics on the agenda. McGhee said the time had finally arrived to end

⁵⁸ The TASS article read as follows: "The assassination of Razmara was carried out by the imperialists of American and England to block the right of the Iranian nation to the southern oil"; Mahdi-nia, *Zindigi-yi Siyasi-yi Razmara*, 347.

⁵⁹ Fayzi, *Chalish-i Mashru'iyat*, 75–9; Farmanfarmaian and Farmanfarmaian, *Blood and Oil*, 238–9.

Iran's neutrality because neutrality encouraged the aggressor (the USSR). This statement was made only few days after the new and pro-American premier, Hussein 'Ala, had replaced his assassinated pro-Soviet predecessor. Whether the Soviets were right or wrong in identifying the Americans as responsible for Razmara's assassination, the fact remains that afterward the image of both the British and the Soviets in Iran was declining, whereas that of the Americans was on the rise. However, the 1953 coup and the American role in it changed the latter as well.

The Soviet documents used in this article provide an innovative approach to the question of who stood behind Razmara's assassination. The vast majority of the existing literature on this question puts the blame on the Fadāiyan-i Islam organization, but there also are some insinuations pointing to the Shah and the royal court. The Soviet documents, however, clearly point a finger at the Americans. The Soviets reached this conclusion as result of their analysis of the events, actions, and interests of the parties involved, as expressed in secret and top-secret correspondence between senior Soviet officials.

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