

RELEASE IN FULL

From: Abedin, Huma <AbedinH@state.gov>
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Subject: Fw: State Department cables reveal U.S. thirst for all things Iranian (McClatchy)

From: OpsNewsTicker@state.gov [mailto:OpsNewsTicker@state.gov]
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Subject: State Department cables reveal U.S. thirst for all things Iranian (McClatchy)

WASHINGTON — At a November 2009 meeting, top Iranian security officials allegedly discussed staging a student takeover of the Saudi Arabian embassy in Tehran, much as students had seized the U.S. Embassy there three decades earlier, according to a State Department cable.

But Ali Larijani, a powerful politician and speaker of Iran's parliament, urged caution as Iranian-Saudi tensions rose. Referring to the 1979-81 U.S. hostage crisis, Larijani told his colleagues that "one experience occupying a foreign embassy is enough — in fact we have not yet extricated ourselves from the last experience." The second-hand anecdote, related to a U.S. diplomat by an unidentified Iranian in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, is one of hundreds about Iran contained in classified U.S. cables obtained by WikiLeaks and recently passed to McClatchy.

Taken together, the cables portray a U.S. government ravenous for any scrap of information about Iran, no matter how incomplete or contradictory — and admittedly blind to much of what is taking place in a country where the U.S. has not had an official presence in more than a generation.

Filed by a special corps of U.S. diplomats known as "Iran watchers," the cables are a mix of surprising insights into life inside Iran and large blind spots about a country key to U.S. foreign policy. Most are classified confidential, a fairly low security classification, though about a third are labeled "secret" or "secret/no form," meaning they should be read only by U.S. diplomats.

They are based on phone calls to and emails from sources inside Iran, interviews with members of Iranian rock bands on tour in neighboring countries, foreign journalists who've recently been to Iran, and conversations with Iranian businessmen, academics, and former officials traveling outside their homeland. One cable even recounts an Iran watcher's chats with truck drivers crossing the border into Turkmenistan.

How critical the work of the Iran watchers is to U.S. intelligence assessments of what is taking place in Iran is unknowable. The U.S. government refused to comment on the cables.

"The United States strongly condemns any illegal disclosure of classified information," Mike Hammer, the acting assistant secretary of state for public affairs, said in an email. "In addition to damaging our diplomatic efforts, it puts individuals' security at risk, threatens our national security, and undermines our efforts to work with countries to solve shared problems. We do not comment on the authenticity of the documents released by Wikileaks."

But the work of the "Iran watchers" brings attention to one of the realities that American decision-makers face — without an embassy and consulates inside Iran, most of what they know about that country is second and even third hand. In a world where such information helped mislead the Bush administration into asserting erroneously that Saddam Hussein still had active weapons of mass destruction programs in Iraq, the prospect that U.S. intelligence may be guided, even in a small way, by such reports unnerves some.

Anyone who will talk to an Iran watcher "is someone who wants a (U.S.) visa, who wants money, is an expatriate, or someone with an explicitly anti-Islamic Republic agenda," said Flynt Leverett, a former White House and CIA official who's now a professor of international affairs at Penn State University.

"The whole concept is really flawed," said Leverett, a long-time critic of U.S. Iran policy. "It's almost structurally designed to make sure we get skewed information."

The Iran watchers' observations generally appear above the signature of other embassy officials, though their identities do not seem to be a secret; Assistant Secretary of State Jeffrey Feltman named several, offering specific praise for their work, in a cable that was labeled unclassified. Nevertheless, at the State Department's request, McClatchy deleted their names on the version of the cable that it posted on its website.

As for the people the Iran watchers talked to, McClatchy also withheld the names of many — as well as other information that might help identify them — to protect them from possible retribution.

Of course, the Iran watchers are not the only source of information for the U.S. government, which trades information with its allies, most of whom do maintain a diplomatic presence in Tehran, and presumably spies on the country through more covert means.

Even so, the cables show, the U.S. often has a difficult time knowing what is going on there.

The largest mass protests in the Islamic republic's history "were unanticipated by most of us," Feltman acknowledged to the Iran watchers on June 26, 2009, two weeks after disputed presidential elections sparked massive demonstrations and rioting in a challenge to Iran's theocracy.

"Without a post in Iran and given the Iranian government crackdown on its citizens, journalists, foreign diplomats and most modes of communication, our ability to get reliable news and make sense of the situation here in Washington has proved most difficult," Feltman wrote.

The Iran watchers themselves are aware of the vulnerabilities of their information.

In the conclusion of the cable that recounted the alleged plot to seize Saudi Arabia's embassy in Iran, the cable's author notes that the source of the anecdote is citing someone with access to Iran's Supreme National Security Council. But the cable writer offers no assessment of the story's accuracy.

"What can be said in this cable is that the purported original source of most of the above information is credibly in a position to have access to the information provided," the cable said. "However, while our strong impression is that the Baku contact genuinely believes his information is accurate, we cannot yet assess the credibility of the information itself."

Other cables show more direct knowledge.

In one, an American diplomat recounts how former Iranian president Mohammad Khatami, who was planning to seek his old office in 2009, asked for U.S. government help in arranging a meeting with the Swiss

ambassador to Tehran. The Feb. 24, 2009, cable said the reformist Khatami hoped the meeting would "highlight his international appeal" and circumvent regime curbs on his campaign websites.

In another 2009 cable, a diplomat tells how the Iraqi government had shared the passport information of Iranian diplomats in Baghdad and those applying for duty there with the United States so the U.S. government could determine which were Iranian intelligence officers or members of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guard Corps.

"The namechecks are still pending, but we believe a significant percentage are intelligence officers," the cable noted.

Iran, with its suspected nuclear weapons program, ties to terrorist groups, and attempts to spread influence throughout the Middle East, has been a prime foreign policy headache for both the George W. Bush and Obama administrations.

But the 295 "Iran watcher" reports reviewed by McClatchy, out of 251,287 cables obtained by WikiLeaks, also show what seem to be missed chances at reconciliation between the adversaries.

In November 2008 and again in April 2009, U.N. officials and a former Iranian official told U.S. diplomats in Istanbul, Turkey, that the Tehran regime would welcome an American offer of counter-narcotics cooperation. Iran is plagued with rampant drug addiction and opium trafficked from neighboring Afghanistan.

But Washington apparently never picked up on the proposal.

In a more humorous encounter, a U.S. official found herself staying in the same hotel, on the same floor, as Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad during the latter's August 2008 visit to Istanbul.

A cable relates what happened next: "She was approached in the lobby by an Iranian official mistaking the (U.S.) official for a Western reporter and asking her if she had any question to ask him."

The Iran watcher program is relatively small, current and former U.S. officials say, comprising about 15 diplomats stationed in Azerbaijan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Great Britain, Germany and Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates. Its unofficial headquarters is the State Department's Iran Regional Presence Office in Dubai, where an estimated 700,000 Iranians live.

A State Department official in Washington said the program was established in 2006 for three reasons: to improve U.S. knowledge about Iran; to prepare a cadre of diplomats should the United States ever re-establish a diplomatic presence in Tehran; and to build up a corps of Farsi-language speakers.

Before the program, the number of State Department Farsi-speakers with knowledge of Iran "was three, maybe four," said the official, who was not authorized to speak for the record.

While many of the contacts outlined in the cables come from Iranians seeking visas or even pro-democracy assistance from U.S. contacts, they also portray American diplomats making creative efforts to engage with a broader slice of Iranians.

In early 2010, a U.S. diplomat based in Turkmenistan's capital of Ashgabat, traveled to the nearby border with Iran to talk to Iranian truck drivers crossing the border.

Some of those truckers predicted, erroneously, that Ahmadinejad would be forced out within a year. Others complained that President Barack Obama had not kept his promise to close the Guantanamo Bay detention facility.

Whatever their reliability, such efforts provide "a real reality check" to talking only to elite, educated Iranians who travel abroad, said a U.S. official, who asked not to be identified because he wasn't authorized to talk for the record.

Iran seems well aware of the U.S. effort, which the regime no doubt considers little short of espionage.

In a bit of spy vs. spy, the U.S. consulate in Istanbul reported in September 2009 that several of its contacts "have separately cautioned us in the past week that they have been asked (or warned) by Iranian officials to cease contact 'with American diplomats asking questions about Iran'."

This "reconfirms that the regime pays attention to our outreach efforts outside Iran," the cable continued. "In response, we will take additional steps to protect local contacts and stay vigilant against regime efforts to track our interactions with them."

The Iran watchers' reporting provided no hint that the country would erupt into crises after the June 2009 election, which opposition leaders claim Ahmadinejad stole. In the aftermath, the cables convey a wide range of prevailing theories about who was behind the apparent electoral fraud, and which Iranian leaders would come out on top.

One constant theme is pleas to U.S. officials from Iranians unhappy with their system to focus more on human rights abuses and less on Iran's nuclear program — a shift that critics say Obama undertook belatedly.

But mostly the cables are an avalanche of information: on why Iran scotched the visit of the U.S. badminton team; on Iran's planned car exports to Turkey; on how a single Iranian company controls the market for Iranian pilgrimages to the Shiite Muslim shrine in Karbala, Iraq.

In a cable sent to U.S. diplomatic posts in Latin America on Jan. 23, 2009, two days after she took office, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton peppered diplomats with at least 75 specific questions comprising nearly 1,400 words on Iran's attempts to expand its role in that region.

"What does Tehran see as the ultimate goal of Iran's outreach to Latin America? How high a priority is Latin America for Iranian foreign policy?" Clinton asked. "Who in Tehran is pushing Iran's outreach to Latin America?"

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