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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Memorandum of Conversation

DATE: October 15, 1969

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SUBJECT: How To Buy A Revolution: Talk With an Iraqi Plotter

PARTICIPANTS: Mr. Loutfi Obeidi, Iraqi Emigre and Businessman  
Mr. Talcott W. Seelye, Country Director, NEA/ARN

22 Oct 1969

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(In response to a telephonic request from Mr. Robert Anderson, I agreed to meet with Mr. Obeidi for lunch to hear what he had to say about his recent trip to the Middle East.)

Obeidi stated that the overthrow of the current Bathist regime in Iraq by Iraqi emigres working with the Kurds and the Iranians, which had been scheduled for the last week in August, had foundered on Iranian stupidity and obstinacy. He claimed that the Iranians had put all their money on one horse, a Colonel Mohamad Ali Sa'id, Commander of the Tenth Armored Brigade, which defends Baghdad. The Iranians had offered Sa'id £ 30, 000 for his participation in the coup effort and had lapsed into the complacent belief that he was the key to the whole operation. Fortunately, according to Obeidi, the Deputy Commander of Sa'id's Division got word to the Iraqi emigres plotting from London that Sa'id was really playing a double game. He had informed the Iraqi regime of the Iranian offer and, in return for a higher Bathist stipend, had agreed to play the role of double agent. What Sa'id was supposed to do was to entice the Iranian negotiators to Baghdad (presumably incognito) for their next session, instead of meeting them at the border. Presumably, once in Baghdad they would have been nabbed red-handed. Obeidi said that the information concerning Sa'id's duplicity had forced the Iraqi plotters to suspend the operation immediately. In this way

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they had succeeded in protecting their contacts in Iraq--whose identities would have been surfaced to Sa'id in time. Obeidi claimed that the Iranians still are not convinced that Sa'id is a double agent.

Obeidi listed other grievances which the Iraqi plotters had against Iran, including Iran's failure to give Barzani enough arms or money. He said that when Barzani was in Tehran recently the Iranians had given him £ 50,000, an amount which Obeidi said was hardly enough to spark a successful campaign from Kurdistan. Also, he claimed, the Iranians were dragging their feet with regard to providing adequate arms. Barzani needs, for example, anti-tank guns if he is to be effective against the Iraqi military forces.

Obeidi expressed the view that even without the support of the Baghdad garrison a successful revolt could be launched. When queried as to what the revolvers could do against the Iraqi Air Force, Obeidi said that the plan had been to seize Kirkuk, Mosul and Habbiyeh simultaneously and thus neutralize the Iraqi Air Force. Obeidi claimed that the Commander of the Iraqi troops in Kurdistan is not a Ba'thist and is prepared to join in the revolt once assured that the chances of success are excellent. General Sa'id, on the other hand, is a Ba'thist with good Ba'thist contacts. Nevertheless, Obeidi thought that if Sa'id could be offered enough money (maybe £200,000) his mercenary propensities would override his ideological affinities.

Obeidi said that al-Rawi, one of the key Iraqi emigres involved in the plot, is now very discouraged and is being wooed by the Iraqi Ba'thists. According to Obeidi, the Ba'thists are offering him money and an ambassadorial position. He said that others in the plot, including the Iraqi Ambassadors in Tripoli and Madrid, have endeavored to submit their resignations to the Iraqi Government but these resignations have been refused. Obeidi said that the reason for this was that the Iraqi Government knows of their anti-regime activities and feels that it can keep better tab on them, as well as inhibit their dissident activities, by keeping them on as ambassadors. He alleged that some of the plotters are now considering cooperating with the Syrian Ba'thists in the latter's current efforts to overthrow the Baghdad Government.

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Obeidi expressed the understanding that Saudi Arabia had put some money into the pot through Iran but he had some doubts as to whether this money had ever gotten to Barzani. He said he feared the Iranian officials are pocketing money destined for the Iraqi Kurdish rebellion. He characterized the Iranians operating in the coup endeavor as being of very low caliber. He wondered whether the Shah was aware of how poorly the Iranians had handled the operation, since the Shah had once told an Iraqi emigre-plotter that the group could rely on Iran's full support. Obeidi said he was casting around for an effective way of bringing directly to the Shah's attention the concern of the Iraqi emigres regarding the botched Iranian effort.

Obeidi said that there are five different Iraqi emigre groups plotting together and that each group claims to have well-placed contacts in Iraq. The key problem is orchestrating the operation. He deplored the fact that Salah Jabr, who had recently left the United States for London and Tehran to help in the coup effort, had claimed that he had been in contact with U.S. Government officials and had implied that he had USG support. Obeidi said that he had called Jabr aside at one point and reprimanded him for making such claims, whether true or not. He emphasized that making known any identification with the USG would not be helpful. (I told Obeidi that we also had been concerned at reports that had filtered back to us of Jabr's claims to having USG support. Obeidi evidently had not believed them.)

Obeidi said that one immediate problem facing some of the Iraqi emigres is a home base. One result of the recent patching-up of Lebanese-Iraqi differences had been a Lebanese undertaking to expel from Beirut certain leading Iraqi emigre politicians. These included several of his friends, who would have increasing difficulty in obtaining passports. He wondered what we could do to help out. I indicated that they could apply for immigration to the U.S., perhaps on the basis that they might be able to qualify as bona fide political refugees. However, they would then have to serve out their residence requirements and become American citizens. When I wondered why the emigres could not obtain Iranian passports, Obeidi said that the Iranians used the passports as a club. They validated them for only six months and sought quid pro quos in return for renewing the passports.

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Obeidi expressed concern that the momentum which had been generated last summer for the coup effort was gradually slowing down and he thought that after two or three months it would be difficult to sustain the cooperation of the different groups. He expressed the view that unless the Shah and perhaps King Faisal throw their full support behind the coup effort and reverse the trend, they too would eventually go the way of the other conservative regimes. Obeidi said that he thought that Kuwait would be next on the list. He said that because the Kuwaiti regime is afraid of Iraq, however, no support could be expected from that quarter.

Obeidi asked if the United States Government could be of any assistance. I replied emphatically in the negative. I said that I would be happy to listen to what he had to say but obviously the United States Government could not become involved. He wondered whether I could give him any advice at all. He noted that the Shah was coming to the United States and wondered whether this might not present an opportunity for a USG official to talk to the Shah about the plight of the plotters. I said that it would not be appropriate for us to do so but that Obeidi through his American business or other contacts was free to try to establish communication with the Shah.

Obeidi claimed that he was on the periphery of the plotting efforts since "he is a businessman and not a politician" and that his job is essentially as a go-between.

Obeidi also had some other comments to make. He said he had learned from his colleague, the Iraqi Ambassador in Libya--who he said, is not in sympathy with the regime, that the Iraqi Ba'thists have the inside track in Libya. Nasser has been frozen out. As for internal politics in Iraq, he expressed the view that Saddam Takriti is the strong man. He cast aspersions at the British, alleging that they support the Baghdad regime. I sought to disabuse him of this notion.

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