Back to Article Click to Print

TIME IN PARTNERSHIP WITH CNN

Monday, Mar. 21, 1994

The Tehran Connection

By THOMAS SANCTON;Nomi Morris/Berlin, Elaine Shannon/Washington and Kenneth R. Timmerman/Geneva, Istanbul, Paris and Vienna

On a sweltering August afternoon in 1991, three dark-haired men approached an ivy-covered villa in the Paris suburb of Suresnes. It was the home of Shahpour Bakhtiar, 76, exiled former Prime Minister of Iran and a leader of the anti- Khomeini opposition. Since fleeing Tehran in 1979, Bakhtiar had been one of the most closely guarded men in France, watched over by paramilitary police 24 hours a day.

The arrival of the three men raised no alarm, since one was Farydoun Boyerahmadi, 38, a Bakhtiar aide and confidant. He was bringing two friends, Ali Vakili Rad, 32, and Mohammed Azadi, 31, to meet the famous exile. The guards at the door collected the visitors' passports, frisked the men, then waved them inside.

Bakhtiar and his personal secretary, Fouroush Katibeh, greeted the guests in a ground-floor salon. As soon as Katibeh went to the kitchen to make tea, one of the visitors leaped at Bakhtiar and, according to the autopsy report, struck a "mortal blow" to the throat. The secretary was similarly dispatched. With two knives grabbed from the kitchen, the assailants hacked at their victims' throats, chests and arms so savagely that a knife blade was broken. An hour after arriving, Boyerahmadi calmly collected the trio's passports, and the men drove off in an orange BMW. The guards failed to notice that Vakili's and Azadi's shirts were drenched in blood.

The vicious attack touched off one of the most intensive murder investigations in French history. Conducted by Judge Jean-Louis Bruguiere, 50, a dogged investigator of terrorist activities, the probe followed a winding trail that led through Switzerland and Turkey to the highest levels of the Tehran government. The judge completed his work last month by turning over 18 volumes of documents to

the Paris Appeals Court. This week judges will hear arguments from the prosecutor and defense attorneys, and must decide by April 7 whether to charge three key suspects in the case with "criminal conspiracy" and "complicity." If convicted, they risk a maximum sentence of life in prison.

Like another trial of accused Iran-backed assassins now under way in Berlin, the Bakhtiar case will in effect put the Tehran government in the dock. Bruguiere's investigation appears to have assembled an unprecedented body of evidence linking Iranian officials to the murder of a political opponent abroad. "This case," says a French official familiar with the investigation, "marks the first time that we have so many proofs of the implication of the state in an operation of this importance." Defense lawyers contend that the evidence against their clients is flimsy, and Iranian officials vehemently deny any involvement in this or other foreign assassinations.

Nonetheless, the secret 177-page prosecutor's report, a copy of which TIME has obtained, lays out a credible chain of accusations. It declares flatly that "Iranian intelligence services effectively took part in carrying out this criminal conspiracy." The head of the intelligence and security ministry, Ali Fallahian, is believed to be in charge of Tehran's worldwide assassination networks. Investigators also claim to have uncovered links to Iran's foreign ministry, telecommunications ministry, Islamic orientation ministry and state television network, IRIB. One key charge in the prosecutor's report is that an important member of the alleged assassins' support network entered Switzerland with an order of mission typed under the letterhead of the foreign ministry and initialed by a ranking official above the typed words "for the Foreign Minister," referring to Ali Akbar Velayati, one of the most senior members of the government. "The whole Iranian state apparatus is at the service of these operations," says a French official. "The government assumes the legitimacy of killing opponents anywhere in the world."

Since 1979, more than 60 Iranian dissidents have been murdered abroad. "No one is immune to this threat," says Manouchehr Ganji, leader of a Paris-based opposition group, who lives with 24-hour police protection. Nor are non- Iranians safe. Salman Rushdie, the Indian-born author of The Satanic Verses, remains under a Tehran death sentence pronounced five years ago and reconfirmed last month. Iranian operatives are suspected in the killings of Saudi and Jordanian intelligence agents as well as the murders of five Turkish intellectuals since 1990. "Turkey is a prime target," says Istanbul police chief Necdet Menzir, "because we are a Muslim country with a secular democratic system."

On the basis of extensive reporting in France, Switzerland, Germany, Austria and Turkey, much of it involving privileged access to investigators as well as to police and court files, TIME has compiled this report on four major murder cases. Complete with mysterious blue baseball caps, safe houses and none-too- bright hit men, these cases, Western authorities believe, point to Tehran's role in

hunting down its opponents abroad.

Bakhtiar: Follow the Numbers

The trail that led French investigators to uncover the Tehran connection began with the killers' flight from the Bakhtiar murder scene on Aug. 6, 1991. The bodies of the former Prime Minister and his secretary were not discovered until the morning of Aug. 8, giving the fugitives a substantial head start. But Vakili and Azadi, who shaved off their mustaches and ditched their bloody shirts in the Bois de Boulogne, were beset by a series of mishaps after parting company with Boyerahmadi. Traveling on false Turkish passports and speaking little French, the pair hopped a train to Lyons but got off at the wrong station and missed a connection to Geneva, where their contacts were waiting to sneak them back to Tehran. The morning after the murder, as police reconstructed their flight, they arrived at the Swiss border by taxi. An official suspected that their visas were forged and refused to admit them. Five days later, they arrived in Annecy, where they left a wallet full of incriminating information in a phone booth.

Meanwhile, the French police had finally found Bakhtiar's body and put out international arrest warrants. Boyerahmadi had disappeared without a trace. Eventually Azadi and Vakili made their way to Geneva, where Azadi met his contact and was whisked out of the country. Vakili, however, was picked up by Swiss police on Aug. 21, while wandering lost and abandoned along the banks of Lake Leman. He was extradited to France the next month.

Interrogated by Bruguiere, Vakili admitted he was present at the murder scene but denied any connection to the Iranian government. Yet the judge was already tracing the link through France's computerized national telephone system, which automatically stores a record of every call. By running a computer analysis on 20,000 calls made from public phones along the escape route -- particularly the booth where the wallet was found -- investigators were able to zero in on a few key numbers called by the fleeing suspects.

Two of these numbers led to apartments in Istanbul linked to a certain Mesut Edipsoy. An Iranian-born Turk, Edipsoy had rented one of the flats for two Iranians suspected of involvement in the plot and allowed them to use his own apartment as well. According to the prosecutor's report, the Iranians requested that Edipsoy procure the falsified Turkish passports that the killers used.

Although Turkish police let Edipsoy slip away, the authorities were more helpful when it came to letting the French analyze phone calls from his apartments. A Paris number dialed from Istanbul led investigators to a woman who admitted working for Iran's intelligence agency, VEVAK. She said the

call had come from her case officer, who was seeking confirmation of Bakhtiar's death on Aug. 7, one day before the crime was discovered.

Before and just after the killing, calls were made from the same Istanbul apartment to the telecommunications ministry and to another Tehran number used by the Iranian secret service. Other calls were made to the headquarters of Iran's IRIB network, which is believed to provide cover for intelligence operations. Still more were made to Geneva hotels, where, according to Bruguiere's findings, members of the killers' alleged support team were staying. French investigators say these calls connected the Istanbul apartments, which served as logistical bases for the assassination, to the killers, Iranian intelligence and the Iranian government.

The paper trail provided other links. Combing through thousands of visa applications, French authorities found forms submitted by Vakili and Azadi. Their applications had been endorsed by a French electronics company called Syfax. Officials of the company said they had intervened at the request of Iranian businessman Massoud Hendi, a nephew of the Ayatullah Khomeini and a former Paris bureau chief for Iranian television.

Arrested while vacationing with his family in Paris in September 1991, Hendi admitted seeking the visas but said he had done so innocently: Hossein Sheikhattar, a senior aide to the telecommunications minister, had asked him to help two friends enter France by inviting them as guests of Syfax. Hendi's lawyer, Jerome Herce, insists that his client's efforts to obtain visas "prove nothing," since the two alleged killers actually entered France on a different set of visas. But the prosecutor claims this fact has "no effect on the charges of complicity" in the murder.

Another alleged co-conspirator is Zeinolabedine Sarhadi. According to Swiss border police, Sarhadi arrived in their country on Aug. 13, 1991, ostensibly to work as an archivist in the Iranian embassy. His real mission, Bruguiere claims, was to help whisk Bakhtiar's murderers out of the country. Phone data, backed up by questioning of hotel personnel and inspection of guest registers, indicate that Sarhadi was in touch with both the Istanbul base and the Geneva hotel where hit-man Azadi stayed just before his escape from the country. Sarhadi's lawyer, Nuri Albala, admits that his client's "passport arrived in Switzerland on Aug. 13, 1991" but insists that someone else was using it. The travel document was "stolen," says Albala, after being handed over to the Iranian airport police.

Arrested in Switzerland in December 1991 and extradited to France five months later, Sarhadi has not taken his imprisonment gracefully. He has written repeatedly to his ambassador, Ali Ahani, demanding that Tehran intervene on his behalf; Ahani has visited Bruguiere several times seeking to get the charges dropped.

The diplomatic interest is understandable: one of the most direct links between the plot and the Iranian government is the order of mission dispatching Sarhadi to Switzerland. The one-page typed document was issued on the authority of Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati. The original of this letter, dated July 16, 1991, will be a key piece of evidence at the trial.

Bruguiere believes that he has established a final link between the killing and Tehran in the person of Gholam Hossein Shoorideh Chirazi Nejad. A well- traveled Iranian businessman with high-level government connections, Shoorideh prevailed upon a visiting Swiss businessman to help two friends get visas by having his company invite them as guests. One of the "friends" was Nasser Ghasmi Nejad, whose real purpose was apparently to rendezvous with Azadi and shepherd him back to Tehran. Shoorideh and Nejad thus joined the list of six alleged co-conspirators, including Azadi, Boyerahmadi, Sheikhattar and Edipsoy, who are to be tried in absentia at the same time as Vakili, Hendi and Sarhadi.

Rajavi: Riding the Tiger

Kassem Rajavi was a tempting target. Not only was he the brother of Massoud Rajavi, leader of the largest and best-armed Iranian opposition force, the % People's Mujahedin, but he was the group's spokesman before the Geneva-based U.N. Commission on Human Rights, where he was known for his vehement denunciations of the Tehran regime. "For years he tickled the tiger," says Swiss investigating judge Roland Chatelain. "In the end the tiger bit him."

On April 24, 1990, Rajavi, 56, was heading for his home in the Geneva suburb of Coppet. Shortly before noon, a Volkswagen Golf swerved in front of his car and sprayed the windshield with bullets. Two gunmen jumped out of a second car and methodically pumped five bullets into Rajavi's head. One of the killers leaned over and tucked a navy blue baseball cap into the door pocket. It was the third time police had found a blue baseball cap at the scene of an Iranian assassination.

Shortly after the murder, police discovered the Volkswagen at Geneva's Cointrin Airport. Authorities held up the 5:45 p.m. Iran Air flight to Tehran for two hours, while they noted the identity of every passenger. Investigators are now convinced that several members of the hit team were aboard, as well as two Iranian diplomats suspected of involvement in the killing.

By checking the passenger list against hotel registries and police records, investigators eventually identified 13 individuals believed to have taken part in the plot. All of them came to Switzerland on brand-new government-service passports, many issued in Tehran on the same date. Most listed the

same personal address, Karim-Khan 40, which turns out to be an intelligence- ministry building. All 13 arrived on Iran Air flights, using tickets issued on the same date and numbered sequentially. Switzerland issued international arrest warrants for them on June 15, 1990.

On Nov. 15, 1992, French police arrested two of the suspects in Paris. France informed Switzerland last August that an extradition request would soon be granted. But on Dec. 29, French Prime Minister Edouard Balladur abruptly announced that "for reasons linked to the national interest," the two men, Moshen Sharif Esfahani and Ahmad Taheri, had been "expelled" to Tehran.

France has provided no further explanation. "The Prime Minister judged the situation, based on certain concrete facts, and decided on the appropriate action," says an adviser to Interior Minister Charles Pasqua. Denying there was any "specific threat" from Tehran, this official adds, "Of course, what we did was contrary to the extradition convention. But sometimes you just have to take exceptional measures." !

Qassemlou: In the Lion's Den

Abdelrahman Qassemlou, 59, leader of the independence-minded Iranian Kurds, arrived in Vienna on July 11, 1989, to negotiate an autonomy agreement with emissaries of President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. After 10 years of fighting, the government seemed eager to reach a settlement. For two days, Qassemlou, his deputy Abdullah Ghaderi-Azar, 37, and Fadhil Rasoul, 38, a Vienna-based Iraqi Kurd serving as a mediator, talked in a borrowed apartment with interior-ministry official Mohammed Jaafari Sahraroudi and Hadji Moustafavi, a.k.a. Ladjeverdi, an intelligence operative. A third Iranian, Amir Mansour Bozorgian, stood guard at the door.

On the second day of the talks, at about 7:15 p.m., police found Sahraroudi standing in the street, clutching his bleeding arm and shouting "Help! Help!" He told police someone had broken into the apartment upstairs and shot him. While Sahraroudi was packed off to the hospital in an ambulance, the police entered the apartment. They found Qassemlou's bullet-riddled body seated in an armchair. His two associates were sprawled dead on the floor. The killers had tossed a blue baseball cap into Qassemlou's lap.

The wounded Sahraroudi, who was apparently hit by a stray bullet, was not as dazed as he seemed. Just before the police arrived, a witness later recounted, he was talking on the sidewalk to a man who fit Moustafavi's description. The man drove off on a red Suzuki motorbike. Apparently, he was carrying the murder weapons; the next day two silencer-equipped pistols were found in a garbage dump along with a bloodstained windbreaker and the bill of sale for the Suzuki Sahraroudi had

purchased six months earlier.

Nothing about the murder scene made sense. There was no sign of forcible entry. The furniture seemed to have been rearranged after the crime. "Bozorgian and Sahraroudi told us someone had forced their way into the room and opened fire," says a senior Austrian-government official. "They lied. By all appearances, the murderers were inside the room at the time of the crime."

Within hours, police had recovered the murder weapons, had one suspect in custody (Bozorgian) and a second in the hospital, and knew the identity of the third. They had a cassette recording of the conversations before the murder and of the gunshots. By the morning of July 14, they had interrogated Bozorgian and Sahraroudi and had found enough "important discrepancies" to detain them both.

Nonetheless, they reported there was "no reason" to hold Bozorgian, who was released the day after the crime and went straight to the Iranian embassy. Sahraroudi was taken to the embassy on July 21, after recovering from his bullet wound. Police dutifully returned to him an envelope containing $9,000 and his diplomatic passport, which he was seen handing to Bozorgian shortly after the murder. Next day Sahraroudi was escorted by police to the airport and flew to Tehran. There he was reportedly given a hero's welcome. He has since been promoted to the rank of brigadier general in the Revolutionary Guards and heads the intelligence directorate of its covert-action branch.

Four months after the crime, the Austrian state prosecutor issued arrest warrants for Sahraroudi, Bozorgian and Moustafavi. Police made a show of cordoning off the Iranian embassy in Vienna on the theory that Bozorgian might still be holed up there, but the cordon was quietly withdrawn a few weeks later. In January 1992, Austrian authorities sent a 16-page inquiry to Tehran, seeking information on the case. The Iranians have never replied, but that has not stopped Austria from maintaining cordial diplomatic relations and signing commercial contracts with the mullahs.

Wolfgang Schallenberg, secretary-general of the Austrian foreign ministry, denies there was any pressure from Tehran to release the suspects. Says he: "The police made their determination according to the information available to them at the time." But another top-level Vienna bureaucrat privately points out what may be a more compelling reason for Austria's laxity: "No country wants to prosecute a terrorist case. It's a threat to your government, to your stability, to your penal system. A convicted terrorist faces a life sentence, which means in Austria at least 15 years. That means 15 years you are at risk."

Sharafkandi: Last Supper

In the back room of Berlin's Mykonos Restaurant on Sept. 17, 1992, eight men were feasting on lamb and stuffed grape leaves. The diners, members of various Iranian opposition movements, were in town for a convention of the Socialist International. The senior member of the group was Sadegh Sharafkandi, 54, who had succeeded the murdered Qassemlou as head of the Kurdish opposition.

At 11 p.m., Iranian dissident Parviz Dastmalchi glanced up at what he assumed was a late arrival coming to join the gathering. Suddenly someone shouted in Farsi, "You sons of whores!" and two gunmen opened fire. Dastmalchi threw himself backward under a table and played dead. The shooting lasted no more than a minute, then the gunmen fled in a dark blue BMW. Sharafkandi and two associates were killed instantly, and a third man died shortly afterward in the hospital.

German authorities quickly rounded up five of the eight suspected perpetrators and have had them on trial in Berlin since last October. Three others are still at large. The alleged leader, Kazem Darabi, a 34-year-old importer-exporter, worked for years as the German-based link between Tehran and the Lebanese Hizballah, according to the German prosecutors. The indictment identifies him as "an agent of the Iranian intelligence service VEVAK" and a Revolutionary Guards member. His assignment, assert German prosecutors, was to "liquidate" the Kurd leader as part of a "persecution strategy of the Iranian minister for intelligence and security against the Iranian opposition." The other four defendants, all Lebanese, are veterans of the Hizballah and Amal militia.

The evidence against the five is overwhelming. The getaway car contained the fingerprints of a defendant. One of the weapons recovered from a sports bag left in a parking lot was flecked with blood from a victim. It also bore fingerprints of another defendant, whose prints were found in an apartment Darabi kept in Berlin.

Whether prosecutors will succeed in proving links to Tehran officials is less certain, however. A police officer has testified that a top aide of Chancellor Helmut Kohl ordered a key report to be removed from the evidence file. The exact contents of the report are unclear, but the testimony has deepened suspicions that Iran has been pressuring the German government to limit the Mykonos case to keep intelligence matters out. However, German intelligence chief Bernd Schmidbauer, the country's main liaison with Iran, has repeatedly denied that Tehran has exerted any undue influence or that the missing report contains crucial information. Iran's ambassador to Germany, Seyed Hossein Mousavian, "categorically ((denies)) any connection between Darabi and the Iranian state" and blames the killings on "assassins from the outside, who want to sabotage Iran."

The case has hardly ruffled Tehran's relations with Bonn. Last October Intelligence Minister

Fallahian visited Bonn for private meetings with Schmidbauer. The government tried to keep the meeting a secret, but Fallahian brazenly called a press conference to "demonstrate that contrary to the public statements of the German government, we maintain good relations with Bonn." Shortly afterward, Schmidbauer testified to the close ties between the two countries by telling a parliamentary committee that German intelligence had recently delivered a $60,000 computer-training project to its Iranian counterpart.

The cooperation may reflect Bonn's efforts to win the freedom of two German nationals being held on espionage charges in Tehran. But it may also be related to the fact that Bonn is Tehran's No. 1 trading partner: apart from oil, 50% of Iran's exports end up in Germany, and last year Iran imported $2.4 billion worth of German goods. Last month the German government guaranteed a refinancing package on about $2.35 billion worth of loans to Iran.

The Men Behind the Veil

The official believed to be most directly responsible for the assassination squads is Intelligence Minister Fallahian, 45, a black-bearded mullah who was born into a religious family and educated in the holy city of Qum. An ardent follower of Ayatullah Khomeini, Fallahian spent time in the Shah's jails for spreading antigovernment propaganda. His political rise began after the 1979 revolution, when he became a religious magistrate. He quickly won a reputation, say dissidents, as a "hanging judge," because of his penchant for handing down death sentences. He became the government's acting chief prosecutor in 1982.

Head of intelligence since 1988, Fallahian is believed to play a key role in organizing covert operations abroad. According to an Oct. 6, 1993, report by Germany's federal criminal department, two dozen foreign-based opposition figures have been assassinated since he took over the ministry. In an August 1992 interview on Iranian TV, Fallahian openly boasted of his organization's success in stalking Tehran's opponents. "We track them abroad too," he said. "Last year ((1991, the year of Bakhtiar's assassination)) we succeeded in striking fundamental blows to their top members."

According to Western intelligence and Iranian dissident sources, decisions to assassinate opponents at home or abroad are made at the highest level of the Iranian government: the Supreme National Security Council. The top political decision-making body is chaired by Rafsanjani and includes, among others, Fallahian, Velayati and Ali Khamenei, who succeeded Khomeini as the revolution's spiritual guide in 1989. The council's secretary, parliamentary ; vice president Hassan Rouhani, was recently quoted in the Iranian newspaper Ettela'at, vowing that Iran "will not hesitate to destroy the activities of counterrevolutionary groups abroad."

One man high on Tehran's current hit list is Manouchehr Ganji. A former education minister under the Shah, Ganji, 63, heads a Paris-based opposition group known as the Flag of Freedom, which has monarchist origins but seeks "democratic" change in Iran. Guarded at all times by a six-man French antiterrorist squad, Ganji moves about Paris in a bulletproof car and works behind heavy metal doors with coded locks. "I live the life of a rat, going from one hole to another," he says. As head of a Western-backed organization that broadcasts anti-regime propaganda into Iran, where he claims to have substantial underground networks, Ganji is considered a "prime target."

He shares with Salman Rushdie the distinction of having a price on his head. TIME has obtained a copy of a document, dated March 16, 1993, that promises a "considerable financial reward" for Ganji's "assassination." Written on government letterhead and signed by state prosecutor Moussawi Tabrizi, it is addressed to Fallahian's intelligence ministry. The document accuses Ganji of "plotting against Islam" and quotes Khamenei as decreeing that "this man is an apostate and a corrupt man, who must be eliminated." The document adds that "the President of the Republic ((Rafsanjani)) has been informed of this obligatory decree." French intelligence experts, operating from a photocopy, are cautious about pronouncing on the document's authenticity but say it contains "no glaring errors."

Western intelligence sources say foreign assassinations are carried out by a special branch of the Revolutionary Guards known as the Quds (Jerusalem) Force, headed by Brigadier General Ahmad Vahidi. The foreign ministry typically provides diplomatic cover, material support and logistical assistance. The Quds Force, which has its headquarters in Tehran, is said to use bases like the Imam Ali department in northern Tehran to train Iranian and foreign recruits.

In a videotaped 1994 confession that TIME was able to view in Istanbul, Mehmet Ali Bilici, a militant Turkish fundamentalist, described his terrorist training at an Iranian camp near Qum. He said he and other trainees received basic military instruction, followed by courses in intelligence-trade craft, coded communications, explosives and covert operations, and acknowledged that he received "direct orders" from the Iranians to conduct "military operations on Turkish soil." Bilici has admitted to kidnapping two Iranian opposition figures who were turned over to VEVAK agents and later killed.

"The Iranians are extraordinarily determined in their efforts to assassinate members of their opposition abroad," says Paris assistant district attorney Patrick Lalande. "They will tell you that they treat their opponents abroad just as they treat them at home and that this is a purely domestic affair." Western governments do not agree but find it hard to stand up to Iran's state-backed terror. The Bakhtiar case, with a trail of evidence that leads right into Tehran's ministries, is a major test of France's resolve. The trial, which could start as soon as next June, is more likely to open in the fall

and could possibly be delayed until early 1995. Given France's recent "expulsion" of Rajavi's suspected killers, some skeptics wonder if the case will ever get to court.

French prosecutors insist that nothing can derail the judicial process at this point. Yet they admit that a conviction could set off diplomatic reverberations -- and, perhaps, even a replay of the September 1986 bombing wave that left 12 dead and at least 250 injured in Paris.

Such worries do not deter Bruguiere. The antiterrorist crusader, who survived an abortive 1987 grenade attack and packs a .357 Magnum for his own protection, is hard at work on a new investigation. On Dec. 20, he arrested two alleged VEVAK agents for plotting to kill an opposition figure in Paris. One of the men is also implicated in the 1990 murder of Ganji's aide Cyrus Elahi. Judge Bruguiere is giving the mullahs no rest.