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'A Darker Horizon': The Assassination of Shapour Bakhtiar

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by DAN GEIST

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[25 Comments](#)*On the 20th anniversary of the opposition leader's murder, a comprehensive look at the details and the bigger picture.*

[feature] Late on a Tuesday afternoon 20 years ago, Shapour Bakhtiar, 77, longtime advocate for Iranian democracy and the last prime minister before the Revolution, was assassinated in his home along the banks of the Seine in the west Paris suburb of Suresnes. His murder is a defining moment in the relationship between the Islamic Republic established by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1979 and those Iranians, both at home and abroad, who have opposed it over the past 32 years.

Bakhtiar was born in 1914 to the leading family of the Bakhtiari tribe of southwestern Iran. His maternal grandfather, Najaf Gholi Khan Samsam ol-Sataneh, twice served as prime minister during the Constitutional Revolution, in 1912 and again in 1918. In 1934, after receiving his diploma from a French high school in Beirut, Bakhtiar had just arrived in Marseille to pursue his studies when he learned that his father, the Bakhtiari chieftain, had been executed on the order of Reza Shah. He returned to Iran for two years before heading to Paris, where he studied law, philosophy, political science, and economics. In 1940, he volunteered for the regular French army, rather than the Foreign Legion. After the Nazi takeover, he reportedly fought with the Résistance and came to idolize General Charles de Gaulle, leader of the Free French Forces.

Following the end of World War II, he attained his Ph.D. in political science from the Sorbonne and returned to Iran. He was appointed to head the Labor Departments in the provinces of Isfahan and then Khuzestan, center of the Iranian oil industry. In 1949 he joined the social-democratic, middle-class-oriented Iran Party, and was soon chosen to lead its youth organization. After Mohammad Mosaddegh was elected prime minister in 1951, Bakhtiar relocated to Tehran to serve as deputy labor minister in the new democratic government. He held the post until the CIA-sponsored coup in 1953 that overthrew the popular Mosaddegh (seen here in the photograph next to Bakhtiar) and restored Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, Reza Shah's son, to the Peacock Throne. Invited to join the government of the Shah's handpicked prime minister, General Fazlollah Zahedi -- Bakhtiar's cousin Soraya Esfandiari was then married to the Shah -- by one account he sent a message saying, "Go tell your boss that I worked in Mosaddegh's government. I am not a piece of clothing to be dragged everywhere. I will not work for a coup d'état government."



By the early 1960s, Bakhtiar was a force in both the Iran Party and the opposition National Front coalition of which it was the largest constituent. Abbas Milani describes his distinctive character as a politician: "Of all the leaders of the National Front, he was particularly prominent for his uncanny combination of feisty, sometimes reckless militancy, and a Machiavellian pragmatism that preferred tactical flexibility to ideological purity.... Of all the leaders of the National Front, [he] was the most vocal and unabashed in defense of secular democracy and in his willingness to criticize the clergy openly. From the cracking of clergy's sandals, he famously said, he heard the sounds of fascism."

On June 12, 1977, with fellow veteran National Front leaders Karim Sanjabi and Dariush Forouhar, Bakhtiar released an open letter to the Shah demanding an end to "despotism in the guise of monarchy" and the restoration of Iranians' rights as mandated by both the nation's Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. While this was one of the sparks that ignited the Revolution, Bakhtiar maintained a relatively moderate position as popular opposition to the

monarch grew increasingly fervent: he advocated permitting the Shah to remain nominal head of state until a plebiscite was held on what form the country's government should take. He opposed the decision of other pro-democracy figures during 1978 to publicly align with Khomeini, the paramount religious figure in the opposition, at that point in exile just west of Paris.

In late December 1978, in a last, desperate attempt to forestall the establishment of an Islamic regime, the Shah asked Bakhtiar to form a government, though the latter had made his acceptance conditional on the king's agreement to leave the country. Despite the many steps the new premier swiftly took to restore political and civil rights to Iran's citizens and the Shah's departure for Egypt, the effort failed. Bakhtiar was forced out of office a week and a half after Khomeini's return to Iran. Having served as prime minister-designate and prime minister for a total of just 38 days, Bakhtiar went into hiding; by midyear, he too had left the country.

Upon his arrival in the West, he became a leader in the exile opposition to Iran's new Islamic government. After a failed attempt on his life in 1980, Bakhtiar moved from the apartment building where he had been living in another Parisian suburb to the large Suresnes residence. There he was constantly surrounded by a sizable detachment of French state police, with guards stationed around the hillside grounds, manning a metal detector at the front door, and positioned in the foyer of the three-story house. Nevertheless, on August 6, 1991, three Iranian men -- one well known to Bakhtiar -- were able to enter his home, kill him and his secretary, and depart without raising any suspicion. French investigators would later allege that two of those men were tied directly to the Islamic Republic's Ministry of Intelligence and National Security, known as VEVAK; they would also implicate a range of other Iranian government institutions in the assassination conspiracy.

The main sources for the following narrative of the killing of Shapour Bakhtiar and its investigation are "[The Tehran Connection](#)," by Thomas Sanction, Nomi Morris, Elaine Shannon, and Kenneth R. Timmerman (*Time*, March 21, 1994); "[Tale of Deadly Iranian Network Woven in Paris](#)," by William C. Rempel with Ronald J. Ostrow and Sarah White (*Los Angeles Times*, November 3, 1994); and "[No Safe Haven: Iran's Global Assassination Campaign](#)" (Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, May 2008). Details concerning the first assassination attempt on Bakhtiar come primarily from *No Safe Haven* and various articles at "[Omid: A Memorial in Defense of Human Rights in Iran](#)". Among the many sources for the significantly related events also included in the timeline, especially the fall of the Bakhtiar government and the assassinations of other opponents of the Islamic Republic's regime outside Iranian borders, most important are "[The Ten Days That Changed Iran](#)" (Tehran Bureau, February 3, 2010) and "[The Chain Murders: Killing Dissidents and Intellectuals, 1988-1998](#)" (Tehran Bureau, December 14, 2009; updated and expanded, January 5, 2011), both by Muhammad Sahimi. The accounting of those foreign assassinations below is partial; according to *Time's* 1994 tally, more than 60 opponents of the regime were murdered around the globe during the first decade and a half of the Islamic Republic's rule.

1979

January 3 With strikes and street protests paralyzing the country, the Majles, Iran's parliament, provisionally approves Shapour Bakhtiar as the new prime minister. During his five-and-a-half weeks in office he will oust the martial law governor of Tehran, General Gholam Ali Oveisi; lay the groundwork for the prosecution of other high officials close to the Shah; start to dismantle the secret police force SAVAK; order the release of all political prisoners; end press censorship; reopen the universities; cancel \$7 billion in purchase orders for U.S. arms; and announce plans to hold elections for a constituent assembly to determine the monarchy's fate. The Revolution continues. Shouts of "*Bakhtiar nokar-e beekhtiar*" (Bakhtiar the powerless servant) ring through the Tehran streets.

January 6 Bakhtiar presents his cabinet to the Shah and is sworn into office. From the French village of Neauphle-le-Château, Khomeini rejects the new government, declaring it illegal. In a letter read out in Iranian mosques, he equates acceptance of Bakhtiar's premiership with "obedience to false gods." Bakhtiar is expelled from the Iran Party and the National Front.

January 16 The Majles, Iran's parliament, gives Bakhtiar the constitutionally prescribed vote of confidence that officially makes him prime minister. He heads from the parliamentary building to Tehran's international airport to bid a formal farewell to the Shah, who is about to depart for a supposedly "temporary" exile that will comprise the remaining 17 months of his life. (The two men are seen here facing each other immediately before the monarch boards his plane.) The Shah tells him, "I hope you will succeed. I give Iran into your care, yours and God's."



Late January Bakhtiar sends several cables to Neauphle-le-Château, saying he is ready to visit France to meet with Khomeini. The response to each request for an audience is the same: "First you must resign and then only shall you be received."

February 1 Having previously announced, "We look forward to having the honor of soon welcoming home Ayatollah Khomeini," Bakhtiar allows the charismatic cleric to return to Iran after years in exile. Khomeini immediately denounces Bakhtiar's government, proclaiming, "I shall kick their teeth in. I appoint the government. I appoint the government by support of this nation."

February 4 Responding to Khomeini's threats -- including one the previous day in which the ayatollah warned, "Do not provoke me to invite people to stage a jihad" -- Bakhtiar says,

Iran has one government. More than this is intolerable, either for me or for you or for any other Iranian. As a Muslim, I had not heard that jihad refers to one Muslim against other Muslims. Those fomenting a civil war will be put in front of the firing squad. I will compromise neither with the Shah nor with Khomeini. I will not give permission to Ayatollah Khomeini to form an interim government. In life there comes a time when one must stand firm and say no.... I have never seen a book about an Islamic Republic; neither has anyone else for that matter.... Some of the people surrounding the Ayatollah are like violent vultures.... The clergy should go to Qom and build a wall around themselves and create their own Vatican.

February 5 Khomeini proclaims a provisional revolutionary government and introduces the prime minister he has selected to head it, Mehdi Bazargan. Khomeini declares, "Since I have appointed him, he must be obeyed. The nation must obey him. This is not an ordinary government. It is a government based on the sharia [Islamic law]. Opposing this government means opposing the sharia of Islam."

Bakhtiar addresses the Majles in response:

The Iranian nation and Iranian state are indivisible entities: one country, one government, one constitution, or nothing else. We will tolerate this thing about anybody forming their own government as long as it is a joke and in words only, but if they take action in this regard, we shall reply with our own actions. If blood is spilled and aggression is committed against the people, I will expose the aggressors without regard to their name or position. I shall remain in the position of the legitimate prime minister of this country until free elections are held.... Whoever enjoys a majority, shall then govern.

2 p.m., February 11 With Tehran a virtual war zone, Iran's Supreme Military Council announces itself "neutral in the current political disputes...in order to prevent further disorder and bloodshed." Revolutionary forces take control of government buildings and media centers. The last government established under the monarchy collapses and Bakhtiar goes into [hiding](#).

March 30 and 31 Iranians vote on a referendum asking, "Should the monarchy be abolished in favor of an Islamic government?" No other alternative to monarchy is proposed. The measure passes with 98 percent approving.

May 14 Ayatollah Sadegh Khalkhali, appointed by Khomeini to head the newly established Revolutionary Courts, tells *Kayhan* newspaper that Bakhtiar has been sentenced to death in absentia for "sowing corruption on earth." Declaring that "those who left Iran after the Revolution were considered genuine criminals" and "incurred the death penalty," he states that Bakhtiar is among 12 of the Shah's relatives and officials then in hiding or exile who have been condemned for "making a campaign against Imam Khomeini." He announces that any Iranian who carries out the death sentence on foreign territory will be considered an agent of the court.

May 16 In a public speech, Khomeini charges Bakhtiar with "treason."

July 31 Bakhtiar emerges in Paris. While in hiding, he solicited the French government's aid and was provided with a false passport by the Fourth Republic's ambassador in Tehran. Successfully disguised as a Christian pastor returning home -- former French Prime Minister Félix Gaillard once reportedly said that Bakhtiar spoke French better than a native -- he flies from Iran to Paris-Orly Airport. Upon arrival, he speaks out publicly against the Islamic regime and describes Khomeini as "ignorant, uncultured, narrow-minded, and obstinate."

Mid-September Bakhtiar organizes an anti-Khomeini rally in London and announces that he will continue to resist the new regime until the ayatollah relinquishes power.

December 7 Shahryar Shafiq, the son of Ashraf Pahlavi, the Shah's twin sister, is gunned down on a Paris street. An Iranian suspect will be apprehended in Britain and extradited to France.

In Tehran, Khalkhali excoriates Bakhtiar for "actively opposing Ayatollah Khomeini from his exile in Paris."

1980

Mid-June France's *L'Express* magazine publishes a story featuring Khalkhali. (It is, at present, unclear whether the piece involved an original interview or was largely culled from statements that had already appeared in the Iranian media.) "I have sent a commando unit to get him," the ayatollah is quoted as saying in reference to Bakhtiar. "He can not escape us."

July 7 The Iranian government announces that it has broken up a network of Bakhtiar supporters who have allegedly been plotting the armed overthrow of the Islamic regime. More than 60 military officers -- most of them active -- and civilians purportedly linked to the network are executed around Iran over the following month.

8:45 a.m., July 18 A five-man hit squad led by Anis Naccache, a Lebanese national and self-described former member of the Palestinian resistance group Fatah, carries out an assassination attempt on Bakhtiar at his then residence, an apartment in the Parisian suburb of Neuilly-sur-Seine.

The team members, using forged press credentials, talk their way past the French policemen stationed in front of the apartment building. Inside, they shoot and kill the officer assigned to vet visitors more rigorously. Upstairs, the hit squad heads to the wrong apartment and kills a neighbor of Bakhtiar's when she opens her door; her sister is wounded. They head to the correct door and ring the bell, but Bakhtiar's cousin, suspicious of the unexpected, early-hour visit, attaches the door's security chain before opening it. The assailants' attempts to shoot their way into the apartment fail and they take flight. Intercepted by the police outside, they shoot one, paralyzing him for life, before they are subdued. (For a short French television report on the attack, see [here](#).)

July 22 Ali Tabatabaei, who served under the Shah as press attaché in Iran's embassy in the United States and joined the opposition after the Revolution, is murdered at his home in Bethesda, Maryland. The killer is Dawud Salahuddin, an American convert to Islam, who later says he was paid \$5,000 to commit the assassination. He makes his way via Paris and Geneva to Iran, where he continues to reside.

August Bakhtiar establishes the National Movement of Iranian Resistance (NAMIR; the organization, whose Farsi name is Nehzat-e Moghavemat-e Meli Iran, is also referred to as NRMI and NMIR). While the group officially promotes the establishment of a social-democratic government in Iran, Bakhtiar does not forswear the possibility of a constitutional monarchy, which helps to attract the support of some monarchists even as it repels other opponents of the Islamic regime.



September An Iranian organization identifying itself as Neghab (Mask, or Veil) issues a communiqué claiming responsibility for the attempted "uprising" that was crushed by the regime two months earlier. Referring to former Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh, ousted in the CIA-sponsored 1953 coup that reinstated the Shah, the communiqué declares that "the path of Mosaddegh is that of the people" and that "Bakhtiar is its authentic leader." Decrying the new Islamic dictatorship, it states, "We have risen up to put an end to this curse and to entrust the affairs of our land to the faithful disciple of Mosaddegh -- Shapour Bakhtiar."

1982

March 10 Four members of the hit squad that attempted to kill Bakhtiar two years earlier, including Naccache, are sentenced to life imprisonment; the fifth is sentenced to 20 years. With the exception of one hearing, the accused men refused to attend the trial, announcing, "Only Allah is a judge." During his single appearance, Naccache says the assassination plan was justified by a verdict issued by the Islamic Revolutionary Court in Tehran.

1984

February 7 General Gholam Ali Oveisi, the Tehran military governor who was forced out by Bakhtiar five years earlier, and his brother, Gholam Hossein Oveisi, are assassinated in Paris. The case remains unsolved.

1985-86

Between December 7, 1985, and September 17, 1986, Paris suffers from a bombing campaign in which 11 explosions kill 13 and injure 255 people. An Islamist group calling itself the Committee of Solidarity with Arab and Middle East Political Prisoners -- or CSPPA, the acronym for its French name -- claims responsibility. The group is evidently closely linked with the Lebanese Hezbollah, which receives both ideological guidance and material support from the Islamic Republic. The CSPPA demands the release of three people imprisoned in France, including Anis Naccache "of the jihad."

1987

January 16 Ali Akbar Mohammadi, a former pilot for Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, is assassinated by two men in Hamburg. He had flown a plane to Baghdad and defected the previous year. The case remains unsolved.

May 19 Hamid Reza Chitgar, first secretary of Iran's Hezb-e Kaar (Labor Party), disappears after traveling from his Paris home to Vienna. Killed by a gunshot to the back of the head, his corpse is found two months later in a Vienna apartment. A man identifying himself as Ali Amiztab apparently corresponded with Chitgar from Iran for about two years and lured him to the Austrian capital, supposedly to discuss the establishment of a group for Labor Party supporters. The case remains unsolved.

June Information derived from wiretaps lead French investigators to identify Wahid Gordji, who has a position as a translator at the Iranian Embassy in Paris, of coordinating the CSPPA bombing campaign. He avoids imminent arrest by fleeing to the embassy, where Iran claims he is protected although he is not a registered diplomat. A months-long standoff ensues as French police surround the building, and Iranian police encircle the French Embassy in Tehran in retaliation.

July Iran and France sever diplomatic relations and Hezbollah takes several French citizens hostage in Lebanon.

November Gordji is briefly interviewed by French authorities, then flies to Iran. The hostages in Lebanon are released soon afterward. Iran claims that France expedited the repayment of Iranian loans, paid millions of dollars to the Lebanese kidnappers, and agreed to suppress the activity of French-based opponents of the Islamic Republic. French Prime Minister Jacques Chirac denies that there was any deal.

1988

June Full diplomatic relations are restored between France and Iran.

1989

July 13 Abdulrahman Ghassemlou, leader of the [Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan](#), and his aides Abdollah Ghaderi, Fadal Mala, and Mamoud Rassoul, meet with Iranian representatives Mohammad Jafari Sahraroudi, Amir Bozorgnia, and Kurdistan provincial governor Mostafa Ajoudi in a Vienna apartment. Shots are fired, killing Ghassemlou and his aides. The murders are reported to the police by the Iranian delegation, who deny any responsibility. The Austrian police, after taking statements, release the Iranian representatives. They are expelled from Austria, after which the police conclude that they were probably the culprits.

August 26 Bahman Javadi (aka Gholam Keshavarz), a member of the central committee of the Communist Party of Iran and a top figure in its Kurdish branch, Komaleh, is assassinated in Lanarca, Cyprus. The case remains unsolved.

Autumn According to his later testimony to French investigators, Fariborz Karimi, an Iranian exile in Paris, is solicited by a friend of his, Manouchehr Akasheh, to meet him in Frankfurt to discuss an important matter. Karimi and Akasheh know each other through their membership in NAMIR. Karimi discusses the solicitation with Bakhtiar, with whom he has become quite close, and they agree he should go and find out what Akasheh wants.

In Germany, Karimi is offered "\$600,000, a house in Tehran and anything else" to kill Bakhtiar by poisoning his vodka. According to Karimi, the VEVAK recruiter who makes the offer tells him the poison, half a small vial's worth of white powder, "is colorless. No one will know. They will think he had a stroke." On his third day in Frankfurt he receives a direct call from Hojatolislam Ali Fallahian -- then assistant to the chief of VEVAK -- encouraging him to accept the mission.

Karimi returns to Paris without directly rejecting the proposal. A month later, he receives another call from Fallahian, using the name "Hossein," pressuring him to do the job. Fearing for his life, Karimi publicly denounces Bakhtiar, moves to London, and tries to lie low, but Fallahian tracks him down a third time. Karimi flees to Canada and eventually the United States, where he is granted asylum.

1990

April 24 Dr. Kazem Rajavi, elder brother of Massoud Rajavi, leader of the Mojahedin-e Khalgh Organization (MKO), is assassinated in a village near Geneva. Rajavi, Iran's first ambassador to the United Nations headquarters in Geneva after the Revolution, resigned and became active in the National Council of Resistance, MKO's political arm. The case remains unsolved.

July 15 Ali Kashefpour, a member of the DPIK central committee residing in Turkey, is kidnapped, severely tortured, and killed. The case remains unsolved.

September 6 Effat Ghazi, daughter of Ghazi Mohammad, the Kurdish leader and president of the Mahabad Republic -- a breakaway state formed in 1946 and soon crushed by government forces -- is killed in Sweden by a letter bomb intended for her husband, Kurdish activist Amir Ghazi. The case remains unsolved.

July 28 The five men convicted of participating in the 1980 assassination attempt on Bakhtiar in which two people were murdered are pardoned and released by the French government. Accompanied by two officials from the Iranian Embassy in Paris, Naccache is flown immediately to Tehran. He later asserts that the pardons were part of a 1988 deal between France and Iran to secure the release of three French nationals held hostage by Shia paramilitaries in Lebanon.

October 24 Cyrus Elahi, a member of the opposition monarchist group Derafsh-e Kaviani (Flag of Freedom), is assassinated at his home in Paris. The case remains unsolved.

1991

April 18 Bakhtiar's chief assistant in the National Movement of Iranian Resistance, Abdolrahman Boroumand (pictured here, in the foreground, with Bakhtiar), is stabbed to death in the lobby of his Paris apartment building. The case remains unsolved.

Early summer Iranian secret agents establish an operations center in two Istanbul apartments, one owned and the other newly rented by Mesut Edipsoy, then 31, an Iranian Turk with alleged ties to the Turkish underworld. Edipsoy, also known as Edybnia in the United States, travels frequently to Los Angeles and Orange County.

July Bakhtiar calls a meeting to select a successor to Boroumand. Farydoun Boyerahmadi, a 38-year-old member of the resistance movement -- whose brother happens to be a member of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps -- attends and places flowers on an empty chair reserved for their lost colleague. (Boyerahmadi is referred to in many accounts as a "friend" of Bakhtiar's. A former high-ranking Iranian official who was indisputably close to Bakhtiar challenges that description; he says that Boyerahmadi was able to ingratiate himself and work his way into the opposition leader's circle by defending Bakhtiar in the media and leveraging some old tribal ties. The official concludes, "No. A friend? No.") After the meeting, Boyerahmadi puts a call in to Istanbul.

Mid- to late July Through the Iranian Ministry of Telecommunications and Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, Ali Vakili Rad, then 32, and Mohammad Azadi, then 31 -- later alleged to be intelligence agents -- obtain French visas based on the claim that they are businessmen going on an electronics shopping trip. The Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issues Vakili Rad and Azadi passports with false names. According to French investigators, the ministry subsequently dispatches one of its employees to Geneva to help bring the agents home.

In Istanbul, investigators later say, a master forger is employed to create counterfeit Turkish passports and phony Swiss visas.

Upon their arrival in Paris, Vakili Rad and Azadi learn from Boyerahmadi, who frequently visits the Bakhtiar's home to do odd jobs, that the exile leader's housekeeper and gardener are about to depart on extended vacations. Apart from a private secretary and the French police guards who surround his house, Bakhtiar will be alone.

5 p.m., August 6 Boyerahmadi, accompanied by Vakili Rad and Azadi, drives his BMW to the home of Bakhtiar, who is expecting them. The visitors wear suits and black ties as a gesture of respect for the former prime minister, who is still in mourning over the death of his close friend and assistant Boroumand.

Like any other visitors, the three men turn over their passports to the guards, pass through the metal detector set up in front of the house, and are frisked without incident. The investigators' account of what follows is based largely on forensic evidence.

5:15 p.m., August 6 Vakili Rad and Azadi join Bakhtiar in his living room. They present him with a picture frame that they have brought as a gift. Tea is served by Bakhtiar's private secretary, Soroush Katibeh, who then retires to the terrace off the kitchen.

5:30 p.m., August 6 Police guards notice Boyerahmadi sitting with Katibeh. Bakhtiar is thus alone with Vakili Rad and the large, robust Azadi.

One of the men strikes a massive blow to Bakhtiar's throat, possibly with a forearm, crushing his larynx. A lover of the passionate *ghazals* of Hafez, the piercingly ironic prose of Anatole France, reputed to have memorized 10,000 verses of poetry, he lies on his sofa, able neither to cry out nor even breathe.

With two knives retrieved from the nearby kitchen, Vakili Rad and Azadi stab Bakhtiar multiple times in the chest before suffocating him to death. Afterward, they use the serrated edge of one of the knives to carve at his throat and wrists. His Rolex watch is removed -- a souvenir, a trophy, perhaps evidence of a mission well accomplished.

5:45 p.m., August 6 Katibeh returns from the terrace and is killed in a similar fashion. The assailants return the knives to the kitchen and wash as much blood from their clothing as is practical. They place a wastebasket in front of a window to conceal the secretary's corpse. Bakhtiar's corpse is left on the sofa, draped over with a tablecloth. The phone is removed from its hook.

6 p.m., August 6 The assassins exit the house. The guards notice nothing unusual, despite the remaining bloodstains on the two killers' clothing. The three men drive off in the BMW, passing through the Bois de Boulogne, a large wooded park in western Paris. Vakili Rad and Azadi change into fresh clothes. They dump their bloody suits and shirts in a curbside trash bin at the edge of the park and discard their false Iranian passports after shredding them.

Boyerahmadi drops them at a subway station, then abandons his car with its bloodstained upholstery in a predominantly Iranian neighborhood, known as Tehran on the Seine. It will go unnoticed for days.

Evening, August 6 All is quiet at the Bakhtiar compound. The police guards continue to make their rounds. Every 15 minutes, they enter "RAS" in their logs: *rien à signaler* -- nothing to report.

Night, August 6 Having assumed the identities of Turkish citizens named Musa Kocer and Ali Haydar Kaya, Vakili Rad and Azadi travel without Boyerahmadi for the first time since their arrival in France. They are bound for the small resort town of Annecy, near the Swiss border. The route requires them to switch trains in Lyon, which has two stations. The operatives, neither of whom speaks French, get off at the wrong one. They miss their connection to Annecy.

Midnight, August 7 A call is placed to the Istanbul operations center from Lyon. Days later, a taxi driver will tell police investigators that "the big one," Azadi, used the pay phone outside the rail station. One of the two men leaves his wallet in the phone booth.

Morning to night, August 7 At the Bakhtiar compound, the guards fail to notice when his secretary does not make the customary morning delivery of the day's agenda. In the vestibule of the house, sacks of groceries, dropped off as usual, go unretrieved. The phone is constantly busy, but this is unremarkable given how much time the former prime minister spends talking on it.

While the failure to discover the crime has given the murderers a substantial head start, it is making their handlers in Istanbul very nervous. There are no press reports to confirm the assassination. Despite the fact that Vakili Rad and Azadi have already checked in, a call is placed from the operations center to an Iranian woman in Paris, Fereshteh Jahanbani, who will later admit to investigators that she was employed by VEVAK. The Istanbul caller, her case officer, asks if there is any news of Bakhtiar. There is not, so she agrees to make inquiries.

Late night, August 7 Vakili Rad and Azadi finally arrive at the Swiss border. A border guard examines their fake Turkish passports. In the course of their stop-and-start flight across France, they waited too long to stick in their fake Swiss visa stamps. The stamps are still moist, arousing the guard's suspicion. On closer inspection, he determines that the visas, supposedly issued in Tehran, bear serial numbers of Swiss consulates in France. Entry is promptly denied and the Iranians are turned over to French border guards -- who just as promptly release them.

Noon, August 8 Bakhtiar's son Guy, a local police officer, returns from a trip and arrives at the house. Forty-two hours after the killings, long enough for mold to bloom on the unfinished cups of tea in the parlor, the two decomposing bodies are discovered.

August 8-9 News spreads of Bakhtiar's murder, and Iranians in France react. Aides to the NAMIR leader say that the French government, looking to improve its relationship with Iran, had been pressuring Bakhtiar to stop his political activity and had recently reduced his security detail. "France closed its eyes and let Iran kill Shahpour Bakhtiar," says one aide, Iraj Soltani.



August 13 Zeynalabedine (Zia) Sarhadi, a grandnephew of Rafsanjani's, the Iranian president since 1989, enters Switzerland. Assigned to an archivist's position at the Iranian Embassy in Bern, his order of mission from the Foreign Ministry is initialed by a top bureau official above the typed words "for the foreign minister" -- Ali Akbar Velayati, one of the most powerful members of the Rafsanjani administration.

Mid-August Pictures of the last three visitors to the house are soon distributed to news outlets throughout Europe and international arrest warrants are issued. Swiss border police alert anti-terrorism authorities that the Iranian operatives tried to enter Switzerland a day after the killings.

Boyerahmadi, hiding in Paris, tells a confidant (and subsequent prosecution witness) that he is awaiting documents for a trip to the United States. Some time after August 15, he apparently departs France. Investigators later say he has relatives near Washington, D.C., and in Germany and likely changed identities to make his escape.

Meanwhile, Azadi and Vakili Rad finally make it across the border to Geneva. Their difficulties in getting out of France have forced the Istanbul operations center to send out repeated calls to Tehran, Paris, London, Los Angeles, and other cities, each call compromising another intelligence asset and revealing more of the VEVAK network.

Splitting up to make it appear that each has been traveling alone, the operatives check into separate hotels. According to French investigators, phone data -- supported by guest registers and the testimony of hotel staff -- show that "archivist" Sarhadi was in touch with both the Istanbul center and the Geneva hotel where Azadi stayed.

Arrangements are made to get the operatives out of Europe. They are to meet their contacts outside the offices of Iran Air. Azadi makes his appointment and is apparently whisked off to Iran. Vakili Rad gets lost and arrives at his appointment 10 minutes late. His contact has gone.

Early morning, August 21 Vakili Rad, wandering aimlessly alongside the shore of Lake Geneva, is arrested by Swiss police. He has attempted to disguise himself by shaving off his mustache.

Afternoon, August 21 The Istanbul operations center shuts down. The last agent monitoring the phones leaves for Iran.

Late August-early September Aided by the testimony of the Lyon cab driver and the abandoned wallet, French investigators, led by Magistrate Jean-Louis Bruguiere, are tracing the killers' flight path. Using France's computerized national telephone system, which automatically stores a record of every call, an analysis is run on 20,000 calls made from public phones along the escape route. Investigators are able to zero in on a few key numbers called by the fleeing suspects. Two of these numbers lead to the apartments in Istanbul provided by Edipsoy for the operations center. A Bois de Boulogne prostitute informs police that she found the bloody clothes left behind in the Paris park. Though she has cleaned them to give to a boyfriend, lab tests are later able to link the clothes to the Iranian operatives and the murders.

Switzerland extradites Vakili Rad to France. Interrogated by Bruguiere, he admits to being present at the killing of Bakhtiar and his secretary, but denies any connection to the Iranian government.

September 13 The operatives also left a paper trail. Combing through thousands of visa applications, investigators have found forms submitted by the two men and endorsed by Syfax, a French electronics company. Syfax officials say they intervened at the request of Iranian businessman Massoud Hendi, a grandnephew of Khomeini's and former IRIB Paris correspondent. Hendi is arrested while on vacation with his family in the French capital.

September 17 Hendi is indicted. He admits seeking the visas but claims to have done so innocently: Hossein Sheikhattar, a senior aide to the Iranian telecommunications minister, asked him to help two friends enter France by inviting them as guests of Syfax. After his indictment is made public, IRIB issues a statement denouncing Hendi as a French agent and claiming he is "no relation to Imam Khomeini or to his family."

October While Edipsoy slips away, the Turkish police allow the French investigators to analyze phone calls from his apartments. One leads to Jahanbani. A raid on her Paris home turns up encoding devices, a pen with disappearing ink, and other evidence identifying her as an Iranian intelligence agent. Before and just after the assassination, other calls were made from the Istanbul operations center to the Iranian Telecommunications Ministry, to IRIB headquarters, and to a Tehran number which other evidence also indicated was used by the Iranian secret service. Calls were also placed to the Geneva hotels where Vakili Rad and Azadi stayed.

October 27 The *Independent* in Britain publishes an interview with Naccache, the 1980 hit squad commander, in which he says,

I had no personal feelings against Bakhtiar, it was purely political. He had been sentenced to death by the Iranian Revolutionary Tribunal. They sent five of us to execute him.... I came to have contacts with the Iranian opponents of the Shah in Beirut and Tyre. That's how I found myself involved in the Iranian revolution.... I became convinced that a revolution had to be safeguarded and protected ... With Bakhtiar, I felt there was a danger of a coup like the one against Mosadeq [*sic*]. That's why we decided to assassinate him. It was a sentence of death against him, to be carried out as an execution. Bakhtiar was the head of a plot to carry out a coup against the revolution and come back to Iran.

December 23 Sarhadi is detained in Switzerland on an international arrest warrant. Investigators say that documents in his possession show he received support from various Iranian agencies to facilitate the arrangements for the Bakhtiar killers' escape. After five months, he will be extradited to France.

1992

August 8 The corpse of Fereydown Farrokhzad, a popular exiled Iranian singer, is found in his Bonn home. He has been stabbed 40 times and beheaded. The case remains unsolved.

August 30 In an interview aired on Iranian state television, Fallahian boasts of VEVAK's foreign operations prowess. Speaking of the regime's political opposition, he says, "We track them outside the country, too. We have them under surveillance.... Last year, we succeeded in striking fundamental blows to their top members."

September 17 Dr. Sadeq Sharafkandi, Abdulrahman Ghassemlou's successor as head of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan, and three aides, Homayoun Ardalan, Fattah Abdollahi, and Nouri Dehkordi, are assassinated in a Berlin restaurant. The event becomes known as the Mykonos Incident, after the name of the Greek eatery where the killings take place.

1993

January French investigators have followed the trail of the conspiracy to Los Angeles, where Edipsoy frequently traveled and from where logistical support for the killers may have come. Fariborz Karimi tells them how he was solicited to kill Bakhtiar four years earlier. Despite that, Edipsoy's activity, and other evidence, the French team is frustrated when the regional U.S. attorney's office, citing inadequate probable cause, turns down their search and arrest warrant requests. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, one French investigator later says of U.S. officials, "We told them there is a network of terrorists operating in your country. The Americans seemed to resent being told."

1994

March A French judicial panel, having spent a month with the documents turned over by Bruguiere and his investigative team -- 18 volumes worth -- hears arguments from attorneys in the Bakhtiar assassination case. Speaking with *Time* anonymously, a French official says, "This case marks the first time that we have so many proofs of the implication of the state in an operation of this importance." The most significant material evidence for that claim relates to Sarhadi, President Rafsanjani's young relative, who is charged with facilitating the killers' escape (or attempted escape) from Europe. His lawyer concedes that Sarhadi's "passport arrived in Switzerland on Aug. 13, 1991," but not the man himself; the passport was "stolen," claims the lawyer, after it was handed over to Iranian airport police.

April The U.S. State Department issues a report on global terrorism that claims, "Tehran's policy makers view terrorism as a valid tool to accomplish their political objectives, and acts of terrorism are approved at the highest levels of the Iranian government." It continues,

Iranian intelligence continues to stalk members of the Iranian opposition in the United States, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Despite Tehran's attempts to distance itself from direct involvement in terrorist acts, Iran has been linked to several assassinations of dissidents during the past year.... All of the murders were carried out by professional assassins; no arrests have been made.

Late October-early November "Terrorism is trying to destroy our society. It's like a war," says Bruguiere in an interview on the eve of the trial of nine Iranian nationals on charges related to the Bakhtiar assassination. "Organized crime has an understandable goal, to make profits for its members. But terrorism seeks to destroy our values, our democratic systems. We must fight it with the arm of the law."

In the course of their lengthy investigation into the phone calls from the Istanbul center, French authorities have uncovered other apparent Iranian intelligence operatives around Europe. Evidence found in the office safe of an Iran Air official at Paris-Orly Airport indicates that he was involved in the forging of runway access badges. He was also holding the long-lost wallet and passport of a French businessman, suggesting that they might be used to create fake identities for Iranian agents. In England, investigators expose an Iranian interior decorator near Birmingham as what they call a "dormant mole" for VEVAK. He is detained by British authorities for interrogation.

Bracing for possible terrorist attacks similar to those that followed the trial of the unsuccessful 1980 hit squad, police ramp up security around train stations and department stores. Marksmen line the Palais de Justice roof. In an effort to minimize tensions with Iran, one French Justice Ministry spokesman insists, "This is a murder trial, not a trial of Khomeini or Rafsanjani. The issue will be simply this: Who is the murderer and who is the accomplice?"

In contrast, Ali Chakeri, who has replaced Bakhtiar as head of NAMIR, accuses Iran of pursuing an international campaign to extinguish dissent. "We don't care so much if the accused suspects are convicted," he says in an interview. "What is most important to us, the victims of this violence, is that Iran is convicted." Speaking with the *Los Angeles Times*, a senior French justice official reveals a similarly broad view of the stakes: "Iran seems to regard political assassination as its national right, even on foreign soil. Any country that enforces its laws against murder is seen interfering in the sovereign affairs of Iran."

November 2 The trial begins under massive security. Three defendants are in the dock: Vakili Rad, Sarhadi, and Hendi, whose lawyer insists that his client's efforts to obtain visas for Vakili Rad and Azadi "prove nothing," since the two men actually entered the country on a different set of visas. All deny involvement in the alleged conspiracy, including Vakili Rad, notwithstanding his confession that he was at the murder scene.

Six men are being tried in absentia, including Azadi, Boyerahmadi, Edipsoy, and Sheikhattar, the Telecommunications Ministry official. The other two, businessmen Gholam Hossein Shoorideh Shriazinejad and Nasser Ghaseminejad, are accused of conspiring to aid the assassins during their Swiss sojourn. French investigators express confidence that they can show that four Islamic Republic ministries -- Intelligence (VEVAK), Telecommunications, Foreign Affairs, and Interior - played key roles in the murder plot.

December 6 Vakili Rad and Hendi are convicted and sentenced to life in prison and ten years, respectively. Sarhadi is acquitted. In the course of the trial, Vakili Rad has been identified as a senior member of VEVAK who worked under the alias "Kowsari." According to the prosecution's case, he was previously employed in the security office of the Revolutionary Guards and was attached to the Guards' Quds Force, responsible for foreign operations, at the time of the killings.

December 7 The Islamic Republic hails the acquittal of Sarhadi, linchpin for the allegations of Iranian government culpability in the assassination. "We have repeatedly said that the government of Iran has not been involved in this issue," says Foreign Minister Velayati. "Now we can see that your French court has proved that the government of Iran is not involved and has not been involved." (For a brief exit interview with Sarhadi and other interviews that aired in a French television report, see [here](#).)

1995

June 16 The six Iranians tried in absentia are all convicted and given life sentences. Azadi has been identified as a former high-ranking Guard intelligence officer who was assigned with terrorist activities abroad and transferred to the Quds Force, where he was Vakili Rad's superior. Sheikhattar is the first confirmed official in the Islamic Republic government to be convicted by a French court of complicity in terrorism. Responsibility for the assassination lies among "the highest rungs of power in Tehran," Francis Szpiner, the lawyer for Bakhtiar's widow, Shaintaj, tells the court. "Your verdict will not be without an echo tonight in Tehran, in the milieu of officialdom or the opposition."

1996

May 28 Reza Mazlouman (also known as Kourosh Aryamanesh), an opposition member who was deputy minister of education under the Shah and a professor of criminology, entertains a friend in his Paris apartment. The friend opens the door to a visitor who is known to Mazlouman as a self-proclaimed opponent of the Islamic Republic. Mazlouman is shot dead.

In 1997, a court in Europe for the first time named high-ranking Iranian officials as culpable in a foreign assassination plot. The German tribunal that sentenced two of the killers in the Mykonos Incident to life imprisonment also issued an international arrest warrant for Ali Fallahian, who had risen to become Iran's minister of intelligence. The court held that the assassination was ordered by Fallahian with the knowledge of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and then President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. In 2002, another international arrest warrant was issued for Fallahian after the conviction of a conspirator in the Mazlouman murder.

Before the Bakhtiar assassination trial in 1994, Hamid Reza Asefi, Iran's ambassador to France, had denied that his government had any involvement in the killing, adding that Bakhtiar posed no threat to the security of the Islamic Republic. Few would have contested the latter observation, which raises the question of motive. Cyrus Amouzegar, information minister in Bakhtiar's short-lived government and a fellow exile in Paris, later addressed that issue: "When they killed him, it was a mystery why. But there are things happening [in Iran] that those of us abroad don't have much information about.... When they killed Bakhtiar, he was hardly active. But they knew the [political] situation was deteriorating, that people would protest and search for a leader. And the best leader was Bakhtiar. He was head of the opposition here. People came here and gathered around him. Everyone respected him." Speaking with *Time* in 1994, a French official suggested that political circumstances and individual popularity are beside the point: "The whole Iranian state apparatus is at the service of these operations. The government assumes the legitimacy of killing opponents anywhere in the world."

Fifteen and a half years after being sentenced to life for the murder of Shapour Bakhtiar and Soroush Katibeh, Ali Vakili Rad, who had become eligible for parole, was [released](#) on May 18, 2010, and flew home to Iran. He was freed just two days after Tehran released a young French academic who had been imprisoned for ten months on charges of espionage and acting against national security. French authorities vociferously denied any quid pro quo.

An old friend of Bakhtiar's [recounts](#) one evening early in the revolutionary period when cries of "*Allah-o akbar*" (God is great) were heard across the rooftops in Shiraz, as had been happening in Tehran. The friend excitedly called Bakhtiar, expecting to share delight at the news. But Bakhtiar reportedly said, "Listen.... We are after freedom and democracy. We cannot move from the dictatorship of the boot to the dictatorship of *naylaan* [clerics' slippers]. We must advocate freedom. We have no right to be taking the people to a darker horizon."