

# THE LEFT IN CONTEMPORARY IRAN

IDEOLOGY, ORGANISATION AND THE  
SOVIET CONNECTION

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## CONTENTS

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Preface

1. The Iranian Left: A Historical Perspective	1
2. The Soviet Connection	16
3. The Old Left: The Rise and Demise of the Tudeh Party	25
4. The New Left: People's Mojahedin of Iran	69
5. The New Left: The Fedayeen	113
6. The Militant Left: League of Iranian Communists	158
7. Conclusion: Problems and Prospects	190
Appendix I: Fedayeen Fragmentation	208
Appendix II: Minority Fedayeen, First Congress, December 1981	210
Appendix III: Excerpts From N. Kianouri's Confession	214
Select Bibliography	223
Index	233

would make them more aware of political issues in Iran. Armed struggle would also neutralise the influence of the oppressive culture induced by the imperialistic regime.

Both the Mojahedin and the Fedayeen denounced US influence on Iranian politics. They firmly believed that US imperialistic policies were responsible for the poverty, backwardness, dependence, and repression in Iran. They believed that the Shah was essentially a puppet of Western imperialism, restored to power by the CIA to guarantee the interests of international capitalism. His control was stabilised by the power of Iran's military, its police, and its secret police (SAVAK). His regime was dictatorial, anti-democratic, and without significant popularity among the people. The positions of the two organisations differed on the two rival communist poles – the Soviet Union and China. It is ironic that in the early literature of the Fedayeen, there is a critical attitude towards Soviet policies whereas the Mojahedin never addressed that topic in their writings. The Fedayeen, along with many other Marxist-Leninist organisations excepting the Tudeh and its affiliates, was highly critical of past Soviet policy towards Iran. These misgivings led to a strong pro-Chinese inclination in some members.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, the organisation did not view the Soviet Union as an imperialistic power. It exercised cautious independence from both communist poles, but was hesitant to criticise their policies publicly.

The Mojahedin, being a new leftist organisation, never showed hostility towards either communist state. The past policies of the Soviet Union towards Iran and the Chinese doctrine of 'Third World' were simply ignored by the organisation. This convinced many that Mojahedin interests in Iran paralleled those of the Soviet Union. Indeed, the alleged intervention of Soviet authorities to get the Shah to commute Massud Rajavi's death sentence has often been cited as proof of Soviet support for the Mojahedin.<sup>16</sup>

The positions of these organisations *vis-à-vis* the global powers were manifest in the emergence of the 'Independent Left' on the Iranian political scene, at least until the 1979 Revolution. As will be noted later, the Fedayeen suffered a major split, as a result of which its majority faction espoused a pro-Soviet stance that made it almost indistinguishable from the Tudeh Party.

Having refined its political programme at the end of 1969, the Mojahedin began urban guerrilla warfare in early 1970, although prior to that time isolated and sporadic acts of armed resistance had occurred in various parts of the country.

### Urban Guerrilla Warfare, Pre-1979

The Mojahedin targeted several important groups for their guerrilla campaign: (1) members of the military prosecutor's office and judges of the military tribunals that had tried and sentenced the captured members of their organisation as well as other groups engaged in the anti-government armed struggle; (2) members of the US Embassy staff, particularly the US military advisers who were training the Iranian armed forces; and (3) members of the state security organisation (SAVAK), especially those in charge of the anti-terrorism section of the organisation and those who had infiltrated the resistance groups.

The major source of financial support for the Mojahedin was contributions from members and sympathisers, including some of the well-to-do Bazaar merchants who were attracted to the religious aspect of the group's ideology. To bolster their financial resources and create panic in the main urban centres, they would often hold up banks and other financial institutions. It is noteworthy that in doing so they would show an awareness of the religious sensitivity of their supporters in the Bazaar by targeting the branches of the Banke Saderat (Export Bank) which was allegedly owned by a wealthy Bahai businessman.<sup>17</sup>

Some of their operations were well coordinated as urban guerrilla attacks for the purpose of demoralising the security forces and, perhaps more significantly, convincing the public that armed resistance to the regime was on-going. Some members of the group had acquired military training when serving as conscripts in the army while others managed to make their way to Arab countries such as Jordan and Lebanon, where the PLO instructed them in urban guerrilla warfare. Thus Hanifnejad and Rezai, who actually met while in the army, already possessed military training while Badizadegan and Moshkinfam were two of the best-known members of the leadership cadres who received such training in Palestinian camps in Jordan and Lebanon during 1967-9.<sup>18</sup>

Up to summer 1971 the military operation of the Mojahedin was confined to intermittent acts of hijacking armoured trucks, blowing up power transmitters, and ambushing small numbers of gendarmes on remote and isolated highways. The government's preparation for the celebration of the 2,500-year anniversary of the monarchy in autumn 1971 gave all opposition forces, particularly the Mojahedin, the opportunity to coordinate acts of sabotage and armed resistance. They figured that even minor disruption of the national celebration would (1) show the public that apart from the Fedayeen, there was another

contrary. But it is equally clear that some of their recent actions and claims have alienated a number of potential supporters. Indeed, signs of disharmony and ultimate split within the ranks of the Mojahedin and the NRC have already appeared. In April 1984, Banisadr declared his 'amicable' separation from the Mojahedin and its umbrella organisation, the NRC.

## Notes

1. *Elm va Zendegi* [Science and Life] (Tehran, April 1953).
2. *Seyre Komonizm dar Iran* (Tehran, 1956) is a government publication giving an official account of the destruction of the Tudeh and its military network. This account denies the torture-murder of any Tudeh leader, military or civilian. Sepehr Zabih, *The Communist Movement in Iran* contains a factual description of the Tudeh's first demise after 1953. Tudeh publications such as *Mardom*, *Ettehad-e Mardom*, and *Rahe Tudeh* which appeared between the 1979 Revolution and the party's second demise in May 1983 contain many accounts of the scope of its repression in that early period.
3. The three leaders of the movement were Mehdi Bazargan, Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleghani, and Dr Yaddollah Sahabi. They supported Dr Mossadegh to various degrees. The two non-clerics among them represented Western-educated Iranians who believed in the necessity of integrating Shia doctrines with Western progressive thought. Bazargan became Khomeini's first Prime Minister while Sahabi served as Minister for Revolutionary Transition. *Mizan* became the official organ of Bazargan after his resignation from the premiership in 1979 up to mid-1983 when the paper was banned. The movement has boycotted the elections of the 2nd Islamic Majlis held in April 1984 on grounds of the absence of freedom of press and assembly (*Keyhan*, 2 April 1984).
4. On the National Front era, see Richard Cottom, *Nationalism in Iran* (Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1968); also, S. Zabih, *The Mossadegh Era: Roots of the Iranian Revolution*.
5. Allahyar Saleh was a respected, somewhat conservative leader of the Iran Party who had cooperated with Mossadegh in the 1949-53 era. At the height of the 1978-9 Revolution he turned down, because of old age, the invitation of the Nationalist forces to become their leader.
6. The second banning of the Front occurred even though SAVAK admitted their non-involvement in the uprising (*Keyhan*, 9 June 1963).
7. *Khabarnamah* (organ of the Third National Front), no. 7 (West Germany, September 1963).
8. *Mojahed* (Tehran: Clandestine, October 1965).
9. This letter was given wide publicity both at the trials of the Mojahedin leaders in 1971 and during the brief premiership of Dr. Bakhtiar in January-February 1979 when his supporters tried to discredit the Front's leadership for having expelled him because of his acceptance of the Shah's request to form a government (*Ayandegan*, 14 January 1979).
10. See Point 6 of the nine-point programme published clandestinely in Iran in early 1970 and given wide circulation in *Mojahed* issues which began open publication in Iran in autumn 1978.
11. Saeed Mohsen, *Cheshmandazi Porshur* [An Enthusiastic Outlook] (Tehran: Clandestine, November 1965).

12. *Ibid.*
13. *The Nine-point Programme*.
14. Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, pp. 480-95.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Ahmad Mirfendereski, who served as the Iranian ambassador to Moscow in the early 1970s, has testified that in 1971 President Brezhnev asked the Embassy to intercede with the Shah so that Rajavi, who along with five other Mojahedin leaders had been convicted by a military tribunal, would not be executed. Mirfendereski, who served as Minister of Foreign Affairs in the short-lived Bakhtiar Cabinet just prior to the triumph of the Revolution, is presently working for the former Prime Minister as leader of the National Iranian Resistance Movement in Paris where Rajavi is leading the rival opposition group called the National Resistance Council. Personal interview in Paris, August 1983.
- Another leader of the Mojahedin suspected of ties with the Soviets was Mohammadreza Saadati. In March 1979 the Revolutionary Guards detained him while trying to enter the Soviet Embassy reportedly carrying sensitive documents about the Revolutionary Council. After much hue and cry, he was finally tried and sentenced to serve ten years in prison. In June 1981 when the Mojahedin began their armed struggle against Khomeini's government, Saadati was retried and executed for allegedly managing the guerrilla war from inside the prison. An indication of the scope of support for the Mojahedin at the beginning of the Islamic Republic is the public defence of Saadati by Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleghani, the prominent Nationalist clerical leader who died mysteriously in Tehran in September 1979. See *Keyhan* (Tehran: 12 July 1981) for the will of Saadati urging his fellow Mojahedin to repent and accept Khomeini as 'the true Imam of Ummat'.
17. A major bone of contention of the basically conservative and religious Bazaar community against the Shah's regime was that the development of a modern and extensive network of new banks affected adversely the Bazaar's control of the money market. If the new banks were owned by what they considered a religious heretic group like the Bahais, this was even graver. For the alienation of the Bazaar, see Sepehr Zabih, *Iran's Revolutionary Upheaval*.
18. Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, p. 490.
19. Other data compiled from government sources and usually published in official newspapers such as *Keyhan* and *Ettelaat* show that between 1966 and January 1978, a total of 1,153 violent acts were committed by all guerrilla groups, of which the Mojahedin scored about 500. The same data put the number of their deaths at 57.
20. 'Defae Nasser Sadegh' [Defence Statement of Nasser Sadegh], *Mojahedin* (Tehran, 1972), p. 24.
21. 'Pasokh be Etahamate Akhire Regime' [Reply to the Regime's Latest Accusations], *Mojahedin* (Tehran, 1975), pp. 10-13.
22. 'Elame Mavazeye Ideologik' [Manifesto on Ideological Stances], *Mojahedin Organisation* (Tehran, 1975).
23. Data compiled from *Mojahed* (Tehran, 13 December 1978-January 1979); *Ayandegan* (Tehran, December 1978); Sepehr Zabih, *Iran's Revolutionary Upheaval* (San Francisco: Alchemy Books, 1979); Shahram Chubin, 'Leftist Forces in Iran', *Problems of Communism*, no. 4 (July-August 1980); Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982).
24. The English text in *Mojahed*, vol. 1, no. 5 (London: May 1980), pp. 25-9. Also 'The Closing Defence of Martyr Ali Mihandust' (Long Beach: Moslem Student Society in the US March 1981). Mihandust is quoted as saying: 'we and the revolutionary Marxists have a common objective and that is the elimination of