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IN MODERN IRAN

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Stephanie Cronin*

THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION AND THE LEGACY OF THE GUERRILLA MOVEMENT

Maziar Behrooz

40 The report, almost certainly written by some intelligence authority, was published in the newspaper *Kayhan*, 5 August 1965, two weeks after his arrest. See the Appendix for the full text.

41 As a matter of fact, Maleki had been undergoing a heart operation in Austria before the June revolt, and returned to Iran a few months after it. See *Khatrat-e Siyasi*, 2nd edn, Introduction.

During the early 1970s, the National Iranian Radio and Television (NIRT) began broadcasting a new American TV series named "The Guerrillas." The series was a not-too-well-produced story about Allied commando operations behind Nazi lines during the Second World War in Europe. It was dubbed in Persian, but then the name of the series was translated as "*gurrilha*," which in Persian can only mean "gorillas." What possible relation there might be between commando operations and the mighty ape was left to the imagination of poor Iranian viewers. Such was the sensitivity of the imperial regime of Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi to the term "guerrilla" ("*cherik*" in Persian) that the NIRT had to resort to such ridiculous innovation. The sensitivity of the imperial regime was accompanied by a touch of respect for the guerrillas. In 1976, the shah went on record praising the guerrillas by saying: "The determination with which they fight is quite unbelievable."¹ Who were these guerrillas of the 1970s and how did they come to be both feared and respected by the imperial regime?

The years 1970-71 constituted a turning point in the shah's perception of his place in history and in his regime's relationship with the opposition. During the course of this period, Iran's imperial navy occupied three islands in the Persian Gulf, signaling the beginning of the shah's attempt to assert Iran's domination of the region in relation to the Persian Gulf's Arab states on the eve of the British evacuation. The latter year, 1971, was the year in which the imperial regime celebrated 2,500 years of Persian empire in Persepolis-Shiraz. Here, the shah opened the ceremonies by standing in front of Cyrus the Great's tomb at Pasargad (near Shiraz), asking him to rest assured as all was well with the empire under the shah's leadership. The celebrations were a grand and expensive ceremony, before the eyes of world leaders, attesting to the shah's majesty at the peak of his power. A year earlier, in one of the seminaries of the holy city of Najaf in Iraq, not far from Imam Ali's tomb, Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah al-Musavi al-Khomeini

had given a series of lectures arguing for an Islamic state under the guardianship of the ulama, thus making a clear break between his movement and those who still supported a return to a constitutional monarchy in Iran.² A few months before the shah's celebrations, in February 1971, a team of guerrillas had attacked the Siyahkal gendarmerie post in the northern province of Gilan, signaling the opening of an intense eight-year period of armed activity against the imperial regime.

Hence, 1970-71 signals a clear radicalization and the beginning of a violent phase of oppositional struggle against the imperial regime at the height of the shah's power. In this, the guerrillas played a pivotal role. The birth of the guerrilla movement in Iran heralded the opening of a new chapter in the anti-shah oppositional activities. The imperial regime of the shah had closed the 1960s by crushing the secular nationalist, religious, and Marxist political opposition. By allying his regime to the West and establishing a modern dictatorial regime, based on a violent secret police, the shah had declared his intention of implementing his version of modernization with or without popular consent.

By making their existence known, the guerrillas were addressing three audiences. First, they were letting the people, or *khalq*, their preferred term, know that reality was not as the shah presented and that resistance to his rule not only had not ceased but had been reinvigorated. Secondly, they were addressing the regime by letting it know that its seemingly total control was but an illusion. Thirdly, they were addressing the previous generation, nationalist, Islamist, and Marxist, by letting them know that bygone methods of purely political opposition had been a failure and that a new, violent phase had begun, if only because the regime had left no other choice.

This chapter re-examines the historical role of the guerrilla movement of the 1970s. In doing so, a re-evaluation will be presented of the movement's contribution to the anti-shah opposition, to the revolutionary overthrow of the imperial regime, and to the re-emergence of radical leftist politics (both communist and otherwise) in post-revolution Iran. What were the motives and legacy of these mostly young and educated men and women who took up arms against a well-organized repressive state? How much did they accomplish and what were their flaws and failures? The study will argue that while the movement was unsuccessful in its ultimate goal of leading the revolution in the overthrow of the shah, it played an important role in challenging the shah's regime, in keeping the spirit of resistance high, and was a determining factor in popularizing and redefining the politics of the radical Left after the revolution.³

In a discussion of the guerrilla movement, three organizations stand out as dominant, both quantitatively and qualitatively. There were other, smaller groups, but these three played a clear hegemonic role. The three were: The Organization of People's Fada'i Guerrillas (henceforth

Fadaiyan), the Mujahedin Khalq Organization (henceforth MKO), and the MKO (Marxist-Leninist) (MKO(ML)), an offshoot of the latter established in 1975.

Established in 1971, the Fadaiyan was the more important among the three, both qualitatively and quantitatively. Some of its prominent members, and major contributors to the guerrilla movement, were Bizhan Jazani, Mas'ud Ahmadzadeh, Amir Parviz Puyan, and Hamid Ashraf. It was the Fadaiyan which attacked the Siyahkal police post and opened the guerrilla chapter of the anti-shah movement. Between 1971 and 1979, the organization engaged the imperial regime in intense, mostly urban, armed activity. It gave many casualties, including its entire original leadership, and was greatly damaged by the security forces in 1976. Nevertheless, at the point of the 1979 revolution, the Fadaiyan was the most able guerrilla organization then operating. The Fadaiyan was a Marxist-Leninist revolutionary and independent organization with no ties to either the Soviet or Chinese Communist Parties. The dominant line in the organization was Stalinist, and the organization was critical of aspects of Soviet and Chinese foreign and domestic policies.⁴

The MKO was established in 1965, and was a revolutionary Moslem guerrilla group. Some of its prominent members were Muhammad Hanifcezhad, Mohsen Sadeq, Muhammad Bazargani, Sa'id Mohsen, Ali Asghar Badizadegan, and Mas'ud Rajavi. The MKO represented a genuine attempt by young Moslem revolutionaries to reinterpret traditional Shi'i Islam and infuse it with modern political thinking in order to turn it into a viable revolutionary ideology. In doing this, the leadership of the MKO spent the 1960s reinterpreting Shi'i Islam by freely borrowing from Marxism. The final result was a Shi'i Islam which viewed history as a process of class struggle, armed action as the only path to confront the regime, and the revolutionary, modern, educated Moslem intelligentsia (and not the ulama) as the natural leaders of the upcoming movement. Hence, the MKO was intellectually close to Ali Shariati, the pre-eminent Moslem intellectual of this period. The MKO did not take any armed action against the regime until after the Fadaiyan had made their move. In the summer of 1971, the organization was dealt blows by the security forces and most of its leadership was wiped out. It managed to reorganize and continued to engage the regime in an effective manner until 1975.⁵

The MKO(ML) came to life after a substantial portion of the Moslem MKO changed ideology and accepted Marxism in 1975. Some of the main personalities of the organization were Muhammad Taqi Shahram, Bahram Aram, Hosein Ruhani, and Torrab Haqshenas. The beginning of the new organization was bloody, as Marxist members purged the Moslem members and killed a number of its key leaders. This development weakened the Moslem MKO. The Marxist MKO then continued on the path of armed activity against the imperial regime until 1977. At this time, the organization came to reject armed activity in favor of more politically oriented activity.

The MKO(ML) was a Maoist–Stalinist organization from its inception and was hostile to the Soviet Union.⁶

Iran in the 1960s

The imperial regime had closed the 1950s by consolidating its rule following the CIA/MI6-led coup of 1953 and the toppling of the nationalist government of Dr. Muhammad Mosaddeq. Except for severe repression, the establishment of a number of military alliances with the US and the acceptance of American grants and military aid, and the resolution of the Anglo-Iranian oil dispute, little else changed in the country. Iran's agrarian economy remained stagnant, and the country continued to lack infrastructure, and was plagued with maladministration and corruption.

The 1960s opened with a three-year period of turmoil: a partial lifting of political repression and reform, followed by the reinstatement of repression. By 1963, the shah had started a process of reform which helped change Iran from an agrarian-based, pre-industrial, pre-capitalist society to a semi-industrialized, capitalist society ready to be integrated into the world economic system. The centrepiece of the shah's reform program, which he liked to call the "White Revolution" or the "Shah–People Revolution," was land reform.

At the grass-roots level, 1960–63 were years of struggle between the opposition and the imperial regime, which had been forced to relax the repression of the previous decade. The opposition to the shah at the beginning of this period was headed by the Second National Front, founded in July 1960 by some former colleagues of Dr. Mosaddeq. The strategy of the Front was to demand free elections and call for reforms. University students, professional unions such as the teachers' union, and some Islamist and Marxist activists and intellectuals joined the Front to oppose the shah. Revolutionary Marxist activists played a secondary role in this period as their traditional political organization, the Tudeh Party of Iran, was effectively crushed by 1958 and had been unable to reorganize itself by the early 1960s. The shah, once he was confident of US support and armed with his reform program, moved decisively against the National Front and had suppressed it by 1963.

Another opposition front against the shah came from ulama-led circles. Headed by grand ayatollahs who represented the top Shi'i religious leaders, the religious opposition confronted the shah on a number of issues, including land reform and the proposal for women's suffrage. The most vehement opposition came from Grand Ayatollah Khomeini, who opposed the shah on a number of issues centred on the influence of the US in Iran.⁷ The religious opposition to the shah came to a bloody end on 5 June 1963, when the shah ordered the army to suppress any and all opposition. Subsequently, the repression was executed effectively and Ayatollah Khomeini was sent into exile the next year.

For the rest of the 1960s, the shah ruled as a confident authoritarian ruler, depicting himself as a reform-minded king, a close ally of the US and the West, with normalized relations with the Soviet Union. When he confidently crowned himself, and, for the first time, his empress, in 1967, he could see no serious opposition to his rule or his design for Iran. The foreign press seem to have agreed with this when they depicted the shah as a progressive ruler who had made Iran a modern miracle.⁸

The state of the opposition

The opposition to the imperial regime in the 1960s went through a generational change. The older generation had received its political training and experience in the 1940s, starting in the wake of Reza Shah's overthrow by the Allies in 1941 and continuing to the overthrow of Mosaddeq in 1953.

This was a period of the return of relatively constitutional rule and open and free political activity. As such, the generation of the 1940s became well versed in political activity under legal and semi-legal conditions. The political parties of this period, however, proved unable to sustain their activities during the period of intense state repression which followed the 1953 coup.

The political opening of 1960–63 only served to confirm the above observation. All the political groups of this period proved unable to function once repression was reinstated. These included the second and third National Fronts, the Liberation Movement of Iran (which was made up of religious figures associated with the Front, prominent among them Mehdi Bazargan and Ayatollah Mahmud Taleqani), the political group formed around Khalil Maleki known as the Third Force, and finally the opposition religious movement formed around Ayatollah Khomeini.

During the second half of the 1960s, various attempts by underground oppositional groups to establish themselves in Iran were frustrated by the SAVAK. One such group was the Coalition of Islamic Associations (*Hey'atha-ye mo tale/eh-ye Islami*), which functioned in association with the movement ignited by Ayatollah Khomeini's confrontation with the regime.⁹ The group was established in 1963 and was in fact a merger between three smaller groups with close links to the bazaar and to the Ayatollah Khomeini-led ulama. Among its key members, Mahdi Araqi, Asadallah Lajevardi, Habiballah Asgaroladi, and Sadeq Amani may be mentioned.¹⁰ The group's activities after the 1963 events focused on using political violence as a means to confront the regime. Its high point was the January 1965 assassination of Prime Minister Hasan Ali Mansour by Muhammad Bukharai. After this episode, the group was discovered and some of its key members executed. By the group's own admission, its activities had come to a halt by 1971, and its remnant began to cooperate with the guerrilla group MKO between 1971 and 1975.¹¹ After the revolution, the remnant of the group were instrumental in establishing the Islamic Republican Party.

The Tudeh Party of Iran was another group attempting to establish itself in Iran in this period. The party was perhaps the biggest loser of the 1953 coup as its network had been decimated in the 1950s.¹² By the late 1950s, the Tudeh had essentially become an oppositional party in exile. Because of the flows and internal difficulties of the 1950s, the party did not have a significant presence in the country during 1960–63. But, in the middle of the decade, backed by the Soviet Union and its allies, the party made a number of attempts to send in operatives in order to re-establish its network inside Iran. The idea was to attempt to reorganize the party along the line of its former network.

The party viewed itself as the working-class party of Iran. As a vanguard-Leninist party, the Tudeh's main aim was to organize the working class against what it called the coup regime. The party's policy at this point was not to overthrow the monarchy but to end the shah's dictatorship. As such, the use of violent means was not a priority of the Tudeh. However, all these efforts were frustrated as what the party leadership perceived as its reliable network inside Iran was in fact infiltrated by the SAVAK.¹³ A number of Tudeh operatives sent to the country were compromised and were either killed or received long jail sentences. By 1971, the Tudeh's attempts to reorganize inside the country had come to nothing.

Another group attempting to organize for the first time inside the country was the Revolutionary Organization of the Tudeh Party of Iran (ROTPI). The ROTPI was made up of young Tudeh members – mostly in Western Europe – and was a Maoist offshoot of the Tudeh established in February 1964. Some of the key members of the organization were Mohsen Rezvani, Mehdi Khanbaba-tehrani, Iraj Kashkuli, and Kurosh Lashai. Besides differences with the Tudeh leadership along the lines of the Sino-Soviet split, these young members had many grievances against the party leadership on account of its past and present performances.¹⁴ The organization envisioned itself as a nucleus of a future, vanguard working-class party. But as a Maoist party, the ROTPI used violence and propaganda to rally the Iranian peasantry in a classic Maoist encirclement of urban areas through rural uprisings. The organization was unfazed by the shah's land reform program and refused to accept that it was about to change Iran from an agrarian society to a semi-industrial urban one.

The ROTPI was involved in three episodes in the 1960s which point to its attempt to establish a network inside the country. First, in 1964, it sent a few members to join a rebellion in south-central Iran led by Bahman Qashqai. Bahman had been a student in Britain and a ROTPI sympathizer who had returned to his famous nomadic tribe to start an uprising in the province of Fars.¹⁵ The operation had less to do with the ROTPI's organizational strength than with the Qashqai support for Bahman and other ROTPI tribal members sent to help him. The uprising, nevertheless, was small, and was crushed by the end of 1965, with Bahman executed. Secondly, a group

of returning Iranian students affiliated with the organization abroad attempted to assassinate the shah in 1965. The group had entered Iran a few years before and was under the leadership of Parviz Nikkhab. The assassin was killed on the scene and the group was promptly arrested by the SAVAK. Thirdly, the organization sent a number of operatives to join a rebellion in Iranian Kurdistan in 1967. However, by the time the ROTPI members reached the Iran–Iraq border, the rebellion was already crushed and its leaders killed.¹⁶

As with the Tudeh and the Islamic Coalition, all attempts by the ROTPI to establish a network inside the country had been frustrated by the end of the 1960s. Indeed, establishing a durable underground network inside the country became a clear preoccupation of the opposition. In the light of the failure of both non-violent and violent attempts at independent political organization, the key question of how to organize and survive became a pressing problem. One legacy of the guerrilla movement was its ability to provide an answer to this question.

The political climate of the 1960s

An important aspect of the political environment of the country and one which created an imposing problem for the opposition was the seeming invincibility of the imperial regime. Not only had the regime managed to crush all independent political parties, associations, trade unions, and any other independent gatherings, but it had also been very successful in frustrating any attempt at reorganization. The fact that the opposition was not even able to establish a network inside the country, let alone challenge the shah, pointed to the power of the state.

This reality of the post-1963 political environment generated a depressive mood for the opposition, which can perhaps best be described as apathy and despair. There was a feeling of being unable to reason with a violent regime which was confident of its strength and unwilling to listen or tolerate any kind of opposition whatsoever. This meant it was imperative to find suitable ways to re-establish organized opposition in a sustainable manner. Sustainable meant not only survival but growth under the new socio-political circumstances. Establishing a firm and stable connection to the people and leading them to a successful overthrow of the regime became the ultimate goal of the new generation.

The radicalization of the international environment in the 1960s contributed to the radicalization of the new generation of activists in Iran. The success of the Cuban and Algerian revolutions, the flaring up of the Vietnamese and Palestinian struggles, and the radical student movement in Europe and the US all helped to direct the new generation toward a new more militant solution to the problem of confronting the imperial regime. Mehdi Bazargan, a major opposition figure of the time

a future provisional prime minister of the Islamic Republic, prophetically urged the spirit of the coming age in his military trial in the 1960s: "We are last ones who are struggling politically in accordance with the [monarchical] constitution. We expect the head of this court to convey this point to his rulers."¹⁷ Hence, under the new circumstances, the use of violence against violence became the centrepiece of the new generation's activities. Accordingly, an important aspect of the new generation's concerns regarding political activity, and indeed another legacy of the guerrilla movement, was a psychological one. The challenge had become, partially at least, to overcome the state of despair and apathy, as well as how to begin organizing under intense state repression.

Amir Parviz Puyan's *The Necessity of Armed Struggle and a Refutation of the Theory of Survival* best captures the mood of the new generation and is a map for future steps.¹⁸ As a founding member of the Fada'iyan, Puyan reached the problem as a Marxist-Leninist revolutionary who had already come to conclude that armed struggle was the path to overcoming state of apathy and organizing the opposition. Written in the late 1960s, Puyan's short but powerfully written pamphlet argued that the problem of absolute despair on the part of the people was compounded by the perception of the absolute invincibility of the regime. Armed action of the vanguard would challenge this perception and change the two absolutes of the situation, thus paving the way for a victorious revolution.

Iranian politics and the use of violence

guerrilla movement of the 1970s is often associated with the use of violence as the prime means of confronting the imperial regime. This observation is correct with the following clarifications. First, the use of violence in the politics of this period was a development initiated by the imperial regime. The 1953 coup and the events of 1960-63 clearly shows that it was the regime, and not the opposition, which opted for the sustained and severe use of violence to promote its socio-political agenda. Indeed, the state repression of 1963 seems to have had a determining role in the resort to violence by a younger generation of political activists. During his interrogation, Bizhan Jazani, a major thinker of the guerrilla movement, made this point clear. After writing on the opposition and the state repression in 1963, Jazani wrote: "There is no doubt that once the government decided to resort to the opposition (be it university students, or bazaaris and others) and an armed military force, it came to us that what can bring victory to the opposition is resorting to violent means of struggle."¹⁹

Secondly, the use of violence had been part of Iranian politics long before the guerrilla movement was launched in 1971. Many political groups used violent methods in order to further their aims before the 1970s. The Tudeh Party of Iran had an extensive network within the imperial army

before 1953 and used it for violent as well as more peaceful, intelligence-gathering purposes. Islamic activists too used violence to further their political agenda. The activities of the Islamic Fada'iyan and the Coalition of Islamic Associations attest to this fact. To these may be added the activities of political groups during the Constitutional Revolution, the Jangal movement and other similar movements of the first three decades of the twentieth century.

Nevertheless, the use of violent means for political ends in all of the cases mentioned above were either random or unsystematic, and, at any rate, tactical rather than strategic. The goal of the guerrillas was not to conduct a simple, single act of violence followed by the danger of exposure to the SAVAK and possible decimation. Other experiences in the 1960s had shown the futility of such acts. The fact that neither open nor underground political activity seemed possible only added to the urgency of finding a solution. The goal was (and here the movement can be separated from the others) to initiate a violent means of struggle from point zero and sustain the movement under severe repression. This is another legacy of the movement. The guerrilla movement's use of violence was highly influenced by developments among liberation movements internationally as well as by current socio-political developments in Iran. Hence the use of the term "armed struggle" to distinguish the guerrilla movement's use of violence from violence as used before.

"Armed struggle" was used for a number of purposes. It was used as self-defence against the regime's security forces. It was used in an offensive manner in order to establish the vanguard-underground organization. Furthermore, it was used as a propaganda tool to declare the existence of the organization and attract others. It was used as a means of punishing the regime for its harsh dealings with different segments of society, particularly the working people. It was used to render support to acts of civil disobedience. And finally and ideally, it was to be used to create a people's army to overthrow the regime in a successful revolution.

For the guerrilla movement (both Islamic and Marxist), justification of violent means of struggle had several layers.

First, it was argued that the regime had left no other means of activity by shutting down all legitimate political parties, independent trade unions, and free associations, and had made a mockery of Iran's constitutional rule and its parliament. In his memoirs, Mohsen Nejat-hoseini, a member of the MKO, captured the sentiments of the guerrillas by noting: "In a situation where the shah's regime was suppressing the nationalist and freedom-seeking forces by relying on its armed mercenaries, talk of political [manner of] struggle was adventuresome. Combating the shah's regime empty-handedly was a type of suicide."²⁰

The starting point for this line of thinking was the 1953 coup, and its final turning point was the 1963 repression and the shah's reform program. In their polemics against those who rejected armed struggle (e.g. both Tudeh and non-

would be that of the establishment of the vanguard organization. In this phase, the vanguard would attack the dictatorship, declare its existence to the people, and organize the revolutionary elements who were ready to take arms and join the struggle. In the first phase, armed actions would have the form of armed propaganda and would prepare the vanguard in terms of military, organizational, and political experiences for the future revolutionary participation of the people. The second phase would be one of a mass-based revolutionary movement. In this phase, a people's army would be formed.²⁵ Jazani saw armed struggle as both a military and a political process. Although he saw armed action as the axis of all other tactics and strategies, he indirectly criticized Ahmadzadeh and the Fadayan for not paying enough attention to the political side of the movement, and warned them of the dangers of sectarianism and adventurous policies.²⁶

A factor which worked against the guerrillas in Iran, and one which they did not take note of, was Iran's social class formation. In many Third World countries, where a dictatorship leaves no other avenue of open political change short of violent means, it is often the case that class formation provides the necessary conditions for protracted armed resistance in rural areas in support of, or as a part of, an urban resistance movement. Many victorious liberation movements (e.g. Vietnam, Cuba and China) were supported by a revolutionary peasantry which was willing and able to lend support, for a prolonged period of time, to a vanguard, urban, armed movement. The movements which were successful were usually active in societies where the majority of the population was rural, and more importantly, where the population was highly susceptible to political and revolutionary agitation.

Twentieth-century Iranian society has shown two general tendencies. First, urban areas have always been the determining factor in any major political change, violent or otherwise.²⁷ Secondly, the Iranian peasantry lacks significant revolutionary potential and has remained, for the most part, politically passive. According to Nikki Keddie, Iran's inactive peasantry mainly results from arid geography, which produces a poor and scattered peasant population with much control by landlords.²⁸

To the above elements must be added the fact that the guerrillas had almost no experience in underground warfare and organization. This meant that the movement had to start from zero and was able to acquire experience only gradually and in practice. The above factors forced the inexperienced but highly motivated guerrillas to concentrate their struggle in urban centres, where the state was better able to exert political control. Consequently, from the very beginning, the guerrilla movement in Iran had a much more difficult task and less opportunity to organize on a mass basis when compared to other movements around the world. An analysis of the movement's ultimate failure in leading the 1979 revolution needs to take these factors into consideration.

As mentioned, Marxist activists were largely unsuccessful in their attempts to organize the rural population in the 1960s and 1970s. The ROJPF's attempts to organize the peasantry on the Maoist model and the Fadayan's attempts to organize in both urban and rural centers clearly failed. Furthermore, unlike some other Third World countries, Iran had had very little experience in independent trade union activity. By the end of the 1960s, the imperial regime had managed effectively to control all trade unions, thereby closing them to political activity by the opposition. This lack of any meaningful avenue for expressing political dissent, coupled with a total lack of means for organizing the working class or the population as a whole, combined to convince younger Marxists to take up arms themselves and to develop the "armed struggle" theory.

Critiques of the guerrillas

Those who criticized the guerrilla movement did so from various perspectives. The ulama-led Islamists who supported Ayatollah Khomeini were hostile to the Marxist guerrillas but were initially supportive of the Moslem guerrillas (i.e. the MKO). But the relationship between the two deteriorated steadily during the 1970s. The MKO's free borrowing from Marxism, its view of revolutionary Islam as being free of clerical leadership, and its emphasis on armed activity as the only path toward victory were the causes of this deterioration. The Islamist followers of Ayatollah Khomeini were suspicious of the MKO's Marxist leaning and of course were opposed to its anti-clerical perceptions of revolutionary Islam. But the two groups maintained a cordial relationship as long as the MKO remained a unified organization. Nevertheless, by the early 1970s, Ayatollah Khomeini was already developing his views on the role of the ulama as the best form of an Islamic government. This notion ran against what the MKO stood for. When, in 1972, the opportunity presented itself for the MKO to solicit Khomeini's support, the latter refused to endorse the MKO. From this point on, the relationship between the two began to cool down.²⁹ According to a key member of Ayatollah Khomeini's movement, the ulama-led Islamists did not have much faith in the guerrilla movement, although it was viewed as a positive element in the anti-shah struggle.³⁰ In 1975, the MKO began to disintegrate from within, which further damaged the relationship between the two groups. In the same year, a substantial portion of the MKO cadres switched to Marxism and gave birth to the MKO(M). This episode was accompanied by a violent purge of key members of the MKO who refused to switch ideologies.³¹ The change in ideology followed by the killing of Moslem members who refused to join in was a turning point and badly damaged the relationship between Moslem supporters of armed struggle and the ulama-led Islamists who led the 1979 revolution.

eh activists), the proponents of the guerrilla movement argued that not fighting to armed struggle was tantamount to passivity, i.e. not taking any risks and waiting for future developments. There was some justification to this claim. After all, there is no evidence that any purely political movement was able to be active inside Iran during 1963-77 in any meaningful manner.

Secondly, the imperial regime's victory in the wake of the 1963 events resulted in decimation of all political parties. Those who had attempted to establish themselves were unsuccessful throughout the 1960s. Therefore, an important aspect of the justification for armed struggle was the creation of a vanguard organization to fill the vacuum. Armed struggle was to provide military/underground discipline for the vanguard; declare the existence of the vanguard to both the regime and society at large; and begin fighting by engaging the regime and recruiting new members.²¹

Thirdly, it was argued that after the establishment of a well-organized, disciplined, and militant vanguard organization, in due time, the limitless power and resources of the *khaliq* could be tapped, opening a revolutionary process culminating in a final victory.

Finally, it should be noted that reorganization and the use of violent means needed a degree of self-assurance. The new generation was unique in this sense. It was ready to declare war on the imperial system even while it was to start from point zero. With boldness and sheer courage as their only capital, without expecting aid from the outside, with little or no experience in armed action, this generation challenged the imperial regime at the height of its power and simply stunned the older generation, who were mostly exiled outside the country. This was at a time when the older generation's attempts to re-establish its foothold inside the country had been frustrated more than once, and it was forced to remain as opposition parties in exile or inactive inside the country.

Problems of reorganization

In terms of reorganization, the guerrilla movement had a monumental task ahead of it. As noted, all independent political, and even non-political, associations had been smashed by the imperial regime or had come under its control. Furthermore, the prevalent political culture of the opposition was one of legal or semi-legal political activity. There was no clear precedent or blueprint of how to organize under harsh repression. In terms of how to set up an armed vanguard revolutionary organization, there was even less experience. Hence, a major challenge was how to organize the movement from zero and develop a mass base among the working class and the masses under relentless repression.

Other problems were theoretical in nature. The movement needed a clear answer of why and how the defeats of 1953 and 1963 had come about. Another challenge was the clear need for an analysis of an Iranian society

which was going through profound changes. In this context, an analysis of the shah's reform program, the nature of the shah's rule, and the role played by foreign powers in Iran's internal affairs became significant issues.

In providing answers to the above problems, the MKO and the Fada'iyan, independently from each other, developed many similar responses, but also some different ones. They both agreed that the imperial regime was a reactionary dictatorship sustained by foreigners (i.e. imperialism). Both viewed the shah's reform program as inherently reactionary and designed to co-opt Iran in the world capitalist system. Both had concluded that Iranian society was going through a transformation from a pre-capitalist "feudal" society to what was termed dependent capitalism.²²

In terms of armed struggle and how to go about it, the MKO provided fewer writings than the Fada'iyan. Both groups initially agreed that the shah's reforms had not decreased the people's opposition to the regime. Hence, an absence of spontaneous movements on the part of the people was due to repression. In this context, the vanguard organization could use its minimum resources to attack the regime and ignite a general revolutionary movement leading to victory.²³ The MKO's vision of a vanguard organization was similar in structure to an underground communist organization, except that its guiding ideology was its version of revolutionary Islam. The examples of the Palestinian movement of al-Fatah and the Algerian liberation movement were the MKO's models. The Fada'iyan looked to the rich history of the international communist movement and the liberation movements of Latin America, as well as the Palestinian and Vietnamese experiments.

Among the Fada'iyan theorists, there was a clear difference of opinion on how to start and what to expect from armed struggle. The difference was between Masud Ahmadzadeh and Puyan's perception and that of Bizhan Jazani. Both Ahmadzadeh and Puyan believed that the reform program had intensified class contradictions in society. Therefore, in analyzing the causes of an apparent lack of a spontaneous opposition movement, they both pointed to the role of repression as being fundamental. Ahmadzadeh believed that the lack of a spontaneous movement was due to violent and long-term repression and the weakness of the revolutionary forces.²⁴ Hence, in Ahmadzadeh's view, while the objective revolutionary conditions did exist, the only other factor needed to start a successful revolution was a consistent attack on the dictatorship. Such an attack would gradually result in the creation of a People's Army and would bring the spontaneous revolt into the open.

Jazani saw the situation differently. He believed that the land reform programs had eased class conflict in society for a period of time and that objective revolutionary conditions did not exist. On the basis of this analysis, he suggested the "Armed Propaganda Theory". Jazani divided the process of armed struggle into two phases. The first phase, he suggested,

Another angle of criticism of the guerrillas came from the Tudeh party whose main focus was the Fadayian. The main point of the Tudeh's criticism was that the Fadayian's theories on armed struggle were alien to Marxism-Leninism. The Tudeh argued that the only time armed activities could become prominent in any organization's tactics was when an objective revolutionary situation existed. Short of such a condition, armed activity as the Fadayian were planning was, according to the party, wrong. Of course, the Tudeh criticized the Fadayian while itself had only been uprooted by the SAVAK but proved to be utterly unable to establish any meaningful presence in the country.³²

The legacy

Iran's guerrilla movement was first and foremost a generation's response to the shah's repression and arbitrary rule. It clearly had a romantic and heroic aspect, which at points even gave birth to myths. The significance of the movement is not in its professed revolutionary alternative (be it the Marxist or Islamist versions) or in its inability to reach its ultimate goal of securing state power. In both of the above cases, they clearly failed. The guerrillas were not able to organize the *khalq* under the banner of a revolutionary movement, they failed to lead the revolution, and their revolutionary alternative seems irrelevant today. The legacy of the movement and its significance in the modern history of Iran lies elsewhere.

The movement played a pivotal role in overcoming the atmosphere of despair which followed the shah's consolidation of power after 1963. This was a time when all open and semi-open political and even civic associations were either outlawed or taken over by the state. Furthermore, the events of the late 1960s showed that traditional modes of organization had become redundant when faced with the shah's mighty security forces. The guerrillas not only overcame the atmosphere of despair, they also managed to show the path of reorganization and continuation of the struggle. In this the movement was successful. By overcoming the atmosphere of despair, the movement showed that the regime was not as invincible as it claimed. Furthermore, the guerrillas managed to boost the morale of the anti-shah movement, which had some influence on the revolutionary movement that overthrew the shah in 1979. In the final analysis, because of the guerrillas, the shah's imperial regime could never claim total control over the country.

The cadres of the guerrilla movement were representatives of a restless generation. Studies show that while the guerrillas were unable to organize the masses, they were successful in attracting the young, educated middle class to their cause.³³ Universities were a main source of recruitment for the movement. This young, educated generation was a main beneficiary of the shah's reforms and theoretically should have provided the regime with the social support it needed. But, instead, it turned against the regime and

chose to rebel against it. The rebellion began with a few and attracted many others. By the middle of the 1970s, the guerrilla movement had already created a reputation for itself and had managed to break the barriers of state censorship and repression and reach an audience among the university community. A look at the memoirs of those who were associated with the movement or directly involved in it shows a high degree of restlessness among the rebellious young men and women of 1970s Iran.³⁴

Perhaps the most important aspect of the guerrilla movement's legacy is its redefinition of the politics of the radical Left in the post-revolutionary period. After 1979, the organizations associated with the guerrilla movement posed the most significant challenge to the new Islamic Republic. Although they were all defeated eventually, the challenge of these radical groups consumed much energy and time. Indeed, it is difficult to see how radical Left political groups could have posed any serious challenge to the Islamic Republic had there not been the guerrilla movement of the 1970s.

Without the emergence of the guerrilla movement in the 1970s, the politics of the radical Left would have been left to other groups to define. On the Marxist side, the task would have been left to the pro-Soviet Tudeh and its Maoist offshoots, none of which managed to establish their networks inside Iran in any meaningful manner. A look at these groups' networks and the number of their followers after the revolution suggests that their popular appeal was rather insignificant.³⁵ The post-revolution Marxists whose history was rooted in the guerrilla movement of the 1970s, the Fadayian in particular, soon became popular mass organizations and were viewed as a serious threat by the new Islamic leadership.

Among the Islamists, without the MKO and its brand of radical Islam, the ulama-led Islamists would have been the sole interpreters of revolutionary Islam. Furthermore, the MKO's popularity, which soon posed a major challenge to the Islamic Republic, was based on its radical reputation of the 1970s.

Notes

- 1 Amir Asadollah Alam, *The Shah and I: The Confidential Diary of Iran's Royal Court*, ed. Alimzhan Alikhani (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), p. 146.
- 2 Michael M.J. Fischer, "Imam Khomeini: four levels of understanding," in John Esposito (ed.), *Leaves of Resistant Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 150-75.
- 3 The term "radical Left" as used in this paper is meant to mean those Marxist and Islamic groups which sought a revolutionary violent overthrow of the imperial regime and its replacement with a revolutionary regime that would then seek to implement reforms which would benefit the *khalq*.
- 4 For a history of the Fadayian, see Maziar Behrooz, *Rebels with a Cause: The Failure of the Left in Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), and "Iran's Fadayian 1971-1988: a case study in Iranian Marxism," *Asian Survey* 6 (1990): 1-39.
- 5 For more on the MKO and its activities, see Esvand Abrahamian, *Radical Islam: Iranian Mullahs in London* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1989).

- 6 For more on the history of this organization, see Abrahamian, *Radical Islam*, pp. 145–70; Behrooz, *Rebels with a Cause*, pp. 70–4. The terms “Stalinist” and “Maoist” are used throughout this chapter in a loose manner. By Stalinist, it is meant to denote dictatorial, arbitrary, and repressive modes of conduct by left-wing individuals, political organizations, and regimes. The main features of Stalinism were established in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union during the reign of Joseph Stalin in the 1930s and 1940s. It was subsequently emulated by other communist and non-communist political movements. Maoist is meant to refer to any political organization which followed the guidelines of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) under Mao Zedong. Two features of the CCP guidelines are particularly relevant here: first, the belief that the peasantry makes up the principle revolutionary force, and, secondly, that the Soviet Union was a social-imperialist state. Any organization believing in either or both of the above is referred to as Maoist.
- 7 For more on Khomeini's role in this period, see Baqer Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), pp. 92–107.
- 8 See, for example, *US News and World Report*, 27 January 1967, or *Time Magazine*, 25 May 1970.
- 9 Asadollah Badamchian and Mi. Banu'i, *Her'athaye mo'jaddehe-ye Islami* [*Condition of Islamic Associations*] (Tehran: Oway Publications, 1983), pp. 2–74.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- 12 For more on the Tudeh in this period, see Behrooz, *Rebels with a Cause*, pp. 3–26, and “Tudeh factionalism and the 1953 coup in Iran,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 33(3) (August 2001): 363–382.
- 13 Behrooz, *Rebels with a Cause*, pp. 37–43.
- 14 For a history of the ROTPI, see Behrooz, *Rebels with a Cause*, pp. 74–91; Hamid Shokat, *Ve'gati az dami beh joubeshe chap dar Iran, goftogoo ba hai Koshkuli* [*Look at the Left Movement in Iran: Interview with hai Koshkuli*] (Saarbrücken, Germany: Bazar Publishers, 1999), pp. 15–109; Hamid Shokat, *Argathi az dami beh joubeshe chap dar Iran, goftogoo ba Karosh Lashi* [*A look at the Left Movement in Iran: Interview with Karosh Lashi*] (Tehran: Akhavan Publishers, 2002), pp. 49–175.
- 15 Shokat, *Interview with hai Koshkuli*, pp. 41–403.
- 16 For more on ROTPI's involvement in Iranian Kurdistan during this period, see Shokat, *Interview with Karosh Lashi*, pp. 124–138.
- 17 Mehdi Bazargan, *Mudaf'at dar dar'athaye gharib-e sakhe-ye tajdide nazari-nezami* [*Defense in the Illegitimate Revue Military Tribunal*], as quoted in Ghobkam Reza Nejadi, *Tafelhe-bist va panj sakhe-ye Iran* [*The Twenty-Five-Year History of Iran*], Vol. 1 (Tehran: Raza Cultural Institute, 1992), p. 373.
- 18 Amir Parvaz Puyan, *Zar'ath-e-mobarezeh-ye mosalaha-ye va-tabe-ye-ary-ye haqi* [*The Necessary of Armed Struggle and a Refutation of the Theory of Survival*] (n.p.: Iran National Front Publications Abroad, 1976).
- 19 As quoted in Sayyed Hamid Rohani, *Ve-are- binam Khomeini* [*The Movement of binam Khomeini*], Vol. 3 (Tehran: Center for Islamic Revolution Archive, 1993), p. 338.
- 20 Mo'ibsen Nejat-hosseini, *Parvaz bar taraz-e khali* [*I Fly Over the Gulf*] (Tehran: Nai Publishers, 2000), p. 64.
- 21 Mas'ud Ahmadzadeh, *Mobarezeh-ye mosalaha-ye ham esvat-e-ze-hi ham taklik* [*Armed Struggle: Both as Strategy and Tactic*] (n.p.: OIPFG Publications, 1977), pp. 72–80; Bizhen Jazani, *Chegonch mobarezeh-ye mosalaha-ye tadehi mosharaf* [*How Does Armed Struggle Become a Mass Movement*] (n.p.: OIPFG Publications, 1978), pp. 2–10; *Majalah* (publication of MKO) 4 (December 1974): 1–18.
- 22 For the MKO argument, see *Eqtasad beh zabani-eshakh* [*Economics in Simple Language*] (n.p.: Mujahedin Publications, 1972); for the Fadaiyan point of view, see Bizhen Jazani, *Jam'eh-e-mobarezeh-ye sakhe-ye taklik dar Iran* [*A Summation of the Recent Thirty-Year Struggle in Iran*] 2 vols (n.p.: 19th of Bahman Publications, 1975).
- 23 See, for example, Ahmadzadeh, *Armed Struggle*, and Nejat-hosseini, *Parvaz bar taraz-e khali*, p. 340.
- 24 Ahmadzadeh, *Armed Struggle*, p. 73.
- 25 Bizhen Jazani, *Chegonch mobarezeh-ye mosalaha-ye tadehi mosharaf* [*How Armed Struggle Becomes a Mass Movement*] (n.p.: OIPFG Publications, 1978), pp. 16–26, 66–83.
- 26 *Ibid.*, pp. 40–6.
- 27 Nikki Keddie, *Iran and the Muslim World: Resistance and Revolution* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), pp. 73–95.
- 28 Nikki Keddie, “Stratification, social control, and capitalism in Iranian villages,” in Richard Antoun and Haya Hark (eds) *Rural Politics and Social Change in the Middle East* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1972), pp. 365–72.
- 29 Khomeini refused to endorse the MKO after hearing its representatives explain their view of Islam and struggle against the shah. The accounts of the encounter were published after the revolution by the participants in the encounter: see *Liha'at*, 26 June 1980; *Pavkar* 67–9 (11–25 August 1980), 70–84 (1 September–23 November 1980).
- 30 Ali Akbar Hashemi-rasanjani, *Doane- mohabeh-eh* [*The Age of Struggle*] (Tehran: Zareh Publishers, 1997), pp. 249–50.
- 31 See Abrahamian, *Radical Islam*, pp. 145–70; Behrooz, *Rebels with a Cause*, pp. 70–4.
- 32 For Tudeh-Fadaiyan disputes, see Behrooz, *Rebels with a Cause*, pp. 76–9; for Tudeh's views on the armed struggle, see F-M Javani, *Cherik-ye khali beh magranah* [*What Do the People's Guerrillas Say?*] (Stassfurt: Tudeh Publishing Centre, 1972).
- 33 Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 328.
- 34 See, for example, the memoirs of the following two activists who had ample chances of securing good jobs and a stable future for themselves after college graduation but chose to join the guerrilla movement: Lotollah Meisami, *Khatirat: az nehzat-e-azadi to Mujahadin* [*Memoirs: From the Freedom Movement to the Mujahedin*] Vol. 1 (Tehran: Samandeh Publications, n.d.); Abbas Ali Samakari, *Man yek shureshi hastam* [*I am a Rebel*] (Los Angeles: Shekar-e Ketab, 2001).
- 35 Behrooz, *Rebels with a Cause*, pp. 124–30.