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# Iran:
# The Reemergence of the Left

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# Iran:
# The Reemergence of the Left

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**Summary**

The crisis between the United States and Iran has permitted the reemergence of Iran's Marxist left after several months of repression and quiescence. By far the most visible leftist group in the last month has been the pro-Soviet, Communist Tudeh Party. It has enthusiastically supported the takeover of the US Embassy as well as Ayatollah Khomeini's new Islamic constitution.

The Tudeh's support for Khomeini has paid off, in that the party is functioning openly in Iran now and actively recruiting new members. Although still suffering from an image of subservience to Moscow, the party also benefits from outside support from the USSR and its allies. In sum, the Tudeh is probably stronger now than at any time in the past decade. Moreover, Iran's economic problems give the party new opportunities to exploit.

Iran's other leftist groups, including the Fedayeen guerrillas, have been less visible than the Tudeh, but have also increased their level of activity. Only the Tudeh, however, has tried to align itself with Khomeini, while the rest have opposed his new constitution.

The duration of the Tudeh's tactical alliance with Khomeini depends on the Ayatollah's willingness to tolerate the Communists. Khomeini's problem is that he may allow the Tudeh to gain too much strength before he decides to move against it.

Despite recent gains, the left in Iran is split and too weak to challenge Khomeini directly. The independent armed leftist groups will continue to pose a challenge to Khomeini's security forces, but there is no sign that the various leftist groups are prepared to unify enough to overthrow Khomeini's Islamic Republic.

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*This memorandum was prepared by of the Iran Task Force, Office of Political Analysis. It was coordinated with the National Intelligence Officer for Near East and South Asia. Information available as of 5 December 1979 was used in its preparation. Questions and comments are welcome and may be addressed to the Chief of the Task Force, OPA, on*


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# Iran: The Reemergence of the Left

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The crisis between the United States and Iran has permitted the reemergence of Iran's Marxist left after several months of repression and quiescence. The left has been far more visible in the last few weeks than at any time since the chaotic days of last February when Ayatollah Khomeini took power. For a brief period last spring the left was extremely active as the symbol of opposition to Khomeini's theocratic state. By late summer, however, Khomeini had turned on the left and successfully intimidated its leaders, forcing most leftist activists to go underground. 25X1

The seizure of the US Embassy in Tehran on 4 November and the crisis that followed gave the left an opportunity to reappear. The left shares Khomeini's desire to purge Iran of all US influence and to radicalize the revolution further by removing relatively moderate figures like former Prime Minister Bazargan from positions of influence. Khomeini, for his part, has tolerated the reemergence of the left only because it has supported his stand. 25X1

## The Tudeh Party

By far the most visible leftist group in the last month has been the pro-Soviet, Communist Tudeh Party. First Secretary Nureddin Kianuri has enthusiastically supported the Khomeini regime on virtually all issues. In an interview on 26 November, Kianuri defended the taking of the US Embassy, which he called "a center of espionage activities." Kianuri has also lauded the Khomeini regime as an "anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist" movement that is seeking to establish a "real, not a formal, popular democracy." Kianuri claimed that Khomeini was vigorously defending the revolution against threats from the right and thus deserved the support of progressive elements. 25X1

The Tudeh is the only major leftist party in Iran which supports Khomeini's new Islamic constitution. Tudeh Party spokesmen urged Iranians to vote for the constitution in the 2-3 December referendum. Kianuri has frankly admitted that the Tudeh has little choice but to support Khomeini if it wants to function in Iran. Last September Kianuri said "everything depends on Khomeini. He has the people's support." 25X1

Kianuri's support for Khomeini is consistent with the Tudeh's longstanding policy of calling for a national front of all popular forces. The Tudeh has never tried to seize power for itself out of recognition of its weakness, but

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rather has sought to form alliances with other political forces in the country—alliances which the Tudeh hoped, in time, to dominate. 25X1

The Tudeh's support for Khomeini has paid off for the party. After more than 20 years in exile in East Germany, the Tudeh leadership returned to Iran last March, and although the party is still technically illegal, it functions openly in Tehran and other cities. The party has an office in Tehran, and one press report suggests it has a small militia. During Khomeini's crackdown on the left the party's journal *Mardom* and newspaper *Navid* were banned, along with 60 other papers in August, but reappeared on 2 October. Tudeh members sporting red armbands openly distribute party literature now. 25X1

Press sources also report that Tudeh members have visited the US Embassy compound in Tehran to show support for the "students" holding the hostages. Kianuri has hinted publicly that he is in indirect contact with the Ayatollah, and other press reports suggest that Tudeh Party leaders have been received by government officials in Tehran. 25X1

The party has also been actively recruiting and trying to build up its popular support. The Tudeh has long had some strength among oil workers and probably is trying to broaden its support among other labor groups. The Communists have also focused attention on building a clandestine apparatus in the military. 25X1

Despite these efforts and the Tudeh's support for Khomeini, the party still lacks significant popular backing. It suffers from an image of subservience to Moscow that erodes its credentials among Iranian nationalists. 25X1

The Tudeh's support for Khomeini has probably also cost it support among Iran's minorities—especially the Kurds and Azarbayjanis. Iran's other leftist parties have backed the minorities' demands for autonomy but the Tudeh has supported Khomeini's constitutional opposition to autonomy. 25X1

Nonetheless, the Tudeh has several important strengths. The Communists have a tradition of clandestine behavior that has enabled them to survive years of repression by the Shah. Moreover, the party is doubtless benefiting from the widespread unemployment and rampant inflation that is turning some in the lower class away from the mullahs. 25X1

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**Other Leftist Groups**

Iran's numerous other independent Marxist parties have been less active than the Tudeh. The largest Marxist guerrilla group, the Peoples Fedayeen (formerly known as the Chariks), has held several demonstrations in Tehran supporting the seizure of the Embassy. Some evidence suggests that members of the Fedayeen may be among the group occupying the Embassy compound, but there is little to suggest that the Fedayeen elements control the situation in the compound or that the takeover is a repetition of last February's attack on the Embassy, which was carried out by the Fedayeen.

The Fedayeen opposed Khomeini's constitution, and the Ayatollah has sharply criticized the group for failing to support the revolution. Most reports indicate that the group is badly factionalized and that its leadership is still intimidated by Khomeini's mob support. 25X1

Nonetheless, the Fedayeen remain well armed and dedicated and retain the ability to cause trouble for Khomeini. They have been active in support of the Kurds and other minority groups in their efforts to secure autonomy. Like other leftist groups the Fedayeen are recruiting and organizing, waiting for an opportunity to move against Khomeini. 25X1

The leftist Islamic guerrilla group known as the Mujahidin is apparently even more factionalized than the Fedayeen. It is badly split over how much support to give Khomeini. Some reports suggest that Mujahidin members may also be among the students in the Embassy compound. 25X1

**Outlook**

The Tudeh Party is clearly trying to establish itself as the junior partner in an alliance with Khomeini and the Islamic movement. To date, it has been relatively successful in starting to organize and propagandize its message. The Tudeh doubtless hopes that over time it can develop more influence with the Islamic movement and Khomeini. 25X1

For his part, Khomeini has quietly accepted the Tudeh's backing in the struggle against the United States and for the constitution. He remains a staunch anti-Communist, however, and will tolerate the Tudeh only as long

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as the Communists follow his line. The danger for Khomeini is that the Tudeh gain enough influence, if he allows the party to recruit and organize for a long period of time, to pose a threat to his control. 25X1

The left would be far stronger if it were united. The Fedayeen and most other leftist groups, however, continue to be wary of the Tudeh's close ties to Moscow. The left in general is plagued with ideological differences and factionalism that hinder its ability to confront Khomeini. 25X1

In the long run, however, the left is in a good position to gain more influence. The left benefits from Khomeini's efforts to radicalize the revolution because the moderate center has been weakened. Secularists are beginning to see the Communists as an alternative to Khomeini. The left also gains from the country's economic problems, which may over time encourage the lower class to break with Khomeini. 25X1

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## Annex

### Background on the Tudeh Party

Communism in Iran dates from 1917, when Iranian workers returning from the Caucasus oilfields—with encouragement from Soviet agents—formed the Justice Party, which in 1921 became the Communist Party of Iran. In 1920-21, Communist groups supported by Soviet troops tried unsuccessfully to form a separatist republic in northern Iran. Communists in the urban areas in the late 1920s had considerable success in organizing workers. The party was outlawed in 1931 afer the government discovered that the Communists were responsible for the oil workers' strike of 1929. 25X1

During the 1930s, Communist covert activity focused on propaganda and recruiting among intellectuals, including students returning from Europe. The arrest and imprisonment of 53 ringleaders—known as the Erani Circle—ended this phase of activity in 1937. 25X1

The members of the Erani Circle were released in 1941 after the abdication of Reza Shah and the occupation of Iran by Soviet and British troops. They immediately formed another party organization named the Tudeh (Masses) Party. With Soviet troops occupying the northern part of the country and Allied troops elsewhere, the Communists quickly built a nationwide organization.

The Communists skillfully exploited grievances resulting from the modernization program of Reza Shah. The middle and working classes had expanded considerably, but had been given little opportunity to participate in politics. This, coupled with the abrupt removal of restrictions on political activities, allowed the Communists to make rapid progress in the cities. Numerous front organizations were formed to work among the various groups and minorities. In 1944, eight Tudeh members were elected to Parliament, and for three months in 1946 the Cabinet included three Tudeh members.

In 1945-46, Communist Party organizers, with the support of Soviet troops, organized two autonomous republics in Azarbayjan-e-havari. These puppet republics collapsed after the Soviets withdrew in May 1946. An attempt to assassinate the Shah in 1949 led to the proscription of the party throughout Iran, but the government failed to root out the Tudeh organization.

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Although still nominally outlawed, the party reemerged between 1951 and 1953 when Mohammed Mossadeq was Prime Minister and, by using xenophobic slogans, again gained followers. The Tudeh appeal was greatest among university students and civil servants. In addition to indoctrinated members, the Tudeh gained a large number of sympathizers. The party successfully penetrated professional and trade union groups and also much of the civil service and the military. 25X1

In supporting Mossadeq it played a key role in inciting mob violence on the streets of Tehran. The Shah's triumph over Mossadeq in 1953 was followed by another suppression of the Communists. Over 1,000 party members and supporters were arrested, and most party leaders fled to Eastern Europe. The party was dealt a crushing and near fatal blow when Iranian security forces broke up the Communist apparatus within the military. Some 500 pro-Communist army officers were arrested. 25X1

**The Party in Exile**

From 1953 until the fall of the Shah in 1979, the leadership of the Tudeh Party was centered in Leipzig, East Germany, where it attempted to:

- Refine its organizational structure.
- Keep activity alive in Iran through radio, press propaganda, and covert communications.
- Communicate with party members within Iran. 25X1

The expatriate organization consisted of about 400 individuals, including the senior leadership and its families. The Central Committee convened in Moscow; the Executive Committee and Secretariat were based in East Germany. The party apparently had cells in both Eastern and Western Europe.

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In early 1979 most party leaders returned to Iran. A small cadre organization remained in East Germany, however, to provide support for the party.

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For years the party used a transmitter in East Germany to broadcast party statements, commentaries, and summaries. The station, named Radio Iran Courier, was moved to Bulgaria in late 1965 and closed altogether in late 1976 after the Shah had protested to the Soviets. The Iranian Communists may now have access to the National Voice of Iran, which broadcasts from Baku in the Soviet Union.

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**Pragmatic Party Policies**

The Tudeh Party has been notably pragmatic in its policies. Aware of its limited strength and its need to cooperate with other radicals and nationalists, for years the party has espoused a united front policy. Even at the peak of its power in 1953, the party did not seek to compete by itself, but called for a voice in a democratic front. The Communist content of its platform has, therefore, not been emphasized. [redacted] 25X1

As part of its effort to gain broad popular support, the Tudeh Party has consistently been careful not to criticize religion or religious leaders. The party is not known to have recruited heavily among the Shiite hierarchy, although a few opportunistic members of the clergy were active in front organizations during the early 1950s. [redacted] 25X1

A second cornerstone of party policy has been the maintenance of close ties with Moscow. The Tudeh has always depended on Soviet support and has faithfully followed Moscow's line, even to the extent of toning down its opposition to the Shah when the USSR was trying to improve relations with Iran. [redacted]

Soviet allies also support the Tudeh. East Germany has long been host to the exiled Tudeh. The party has a history of cordial relations with the ruling Marxist party in Afghanistan. The Marxist regime in South Yemen has apparently had some contact with the Tudeh Party. [redacted] 25X1

**Leadership**

The increase in Tudeh activities since late 1978 coincided with a change in party leadership. Iraj Eskandari, who had been first secretary since 1971, was replaced on 4 January by Nureddin Kianuri, formerly second secretary. The party statement announcing the shift gave no explanation for the change. It is possible that Kianuri obtained the top post after a split over policy. It is also possible, however, that the 72-year-old Eskandari was simply not able to exercise effective leadership. Kianuri, who at 63 is one of the youngest Tudeh leaders, is said to be the foremost Tudeh theoretician. 25X1C
He is virtually unknown outside party circles. [redacted] 25X1

**Party Size**

There are no good figures available on the size of the Tudeh Party. [redacted] [redacted] in January that there were no more than 10,000 party activists in Tehran. About 5,000 people turned out for one of the Tudeh's demonstrations early this year. [redacted] 25X1

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