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Iran: Growing Leftist Influence Among Minorities

An Intelligence Memorandum

Top Secret

PA 80-10033C
SC 00366/80
January 1980

Approved For Release 2004/07/08 : CIA-RDP81B00401R000500160018-4

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Iran: Growing Leftist Influence Among Minorities (U)

Summary

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The Iranian Government has been unable to establish control in its minority-populated periphery. This has led these important areas to be influenced increasingly by leftist groups or organizations that are allied with or vulnerable to the leftists. There are no competitive, pro-Western groups.

Some minority groups or individuals leading them have had contacts with the USSR. The Soviets have long supported regional autonomy for the Iranian Kurds, and we have some evidence that they have indirectly aided some dissident Kurds. We cannot document as fully Soviet involvement with other minorities. []

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Indirect support of Iranian ethnic minorities complements Moscow's hope that a leftist regime will eventually emerge from the present instability. In working toward that end, Moscow is not likely to endorse the dismemberment of Iran. Rather, it would see more advantages in consolidating its allies' control in the outlying areas, while an ever-weakening government held power in Tehran. []

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This memorandum was prepared by [] Office of Political Analysis. It was coordinated with the National Intelligence Officer for Near East and South Asia. Research was completed on 22 January 1980. Comments and queries are welcome and should be directed to the Chief, Iran Task Force, telephone [] []

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NOFORN-NOCONTRACT-
ORCON**Iran: Growing Leftist
Influence Among Minorities (U)****Northwest**

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Our most complete information on leftist influences among the Iranian ethnic minorities is on the Kurdish and Azarbayjani areas in the northwest; this is based on reports from several sources accumulated over the past year. Much of our best reporting comes [REDACTED]

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This region is an important agricultural and industrial area, through which pass the main road and rail routes to Europe and the USSR. It is coming under the expanding influence of aggressive Kurdish and Azarbayjani "Democratic" parties whose programs have changed little since those same parties headed Soviet puppet regimes after World War II. The Azarbayjani Democratic Party (ADP) is technically the Communist Tudeh Party's wing in the far northwest; Tudeh members made up one wing of the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP). The Kurdish and Azarbayjani parties are allied in a Rejectionist Front with the People's Fedayeen. The Fedayeen are the "independent" Marxist-Leninist guerrillas who are active among the major minorities; they have nominated representatives to the Kurdish team that is negotiating autonomy proposals with Khomeini's representatives. The Front holds firm control over parts of Kordestan and West Azarbayjan Provinces,

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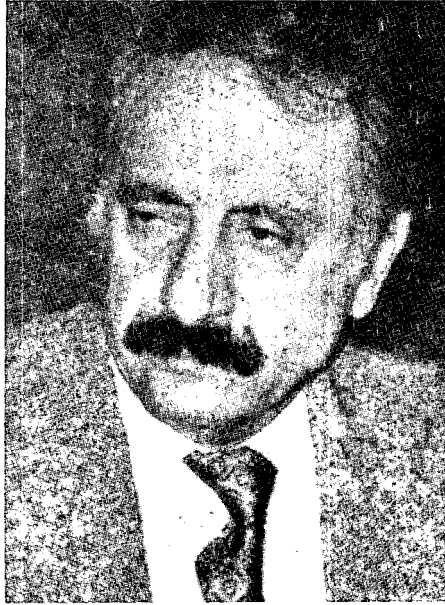
[REDACTED] The area most solidly controlled by the KDP approximates that of the former Kurdish Republic of Mahabad.¹ According to reports from several sources, the area around Marivan is a center of "Communist"—probably Fedayeen—activity [REDACTED]

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Leftist groups of several persuasions are infiltrating Islamic Movement organizations in the northwest. One branch of the Muslim People's Republic Party, associated with Ayatollah Shariat-Madari, recently disbanded after discovering it had been penetrated. The recent decision of the party to go underground because of both pressure from Khomeini's supporters and Shariat-Madari's alleged instruction to Azarbayjanis to arm and organize will open more opportunities for leftist exploitation of organizations backing Shariat-Madari against Khomeini. Pro-Soviet groups, in particular, want to penetrate Shariat-Madari's camp because Moscow suspects that an 25X1A autonomous Azarbayjan run by supporters of the popular, moderate, and anti-Communist Ayatollah would not serve Soviet interests [REDACTED]

¹ The Kurdish Republic of Mahabad, like the Azarbayjan Democratic Republic, was backed by the USSR from late 1945 through 1946. Both collapsed after the withdrawal of Soviet troops from northern Iran [REDACTED]

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*KDP leader Abdulrahman Qassemli,
who has longstanding contacts with the USSR
and Middle Eastern Communist Parties*

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[redacted]
however, that both the ADP and Tudeh have difficulty reaching the Azarbayjani masses because each has a pro-Soviet image. Party members and sympathizers, therefore, tend to come from the intelligentsia. The [redacted] also noted that the Fedayeen, who are ostensibly anti-Soviet, have been successfully operating among the Azarbayjani people and that leftist views predominate in Tabriz. Other reports suggest that the Fedayeen are staging incidents designed to intensify resentments between the followers of the two Ayatollahs. Far more than other ethnic minorities, the Azarbayjanis have been integrated into Iranian society, including the highest civilian and military levels [redacted]

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North Central

Leftist influence is strong in the fertile north-central coastal plain, according to several sources. During clashes with the government early last year, Turkoman tribesmen, who have won substantial autonomy, are said to have received safe haven in the USSR and aid from Soviet Turkomans. The Soviet border, according to persistent rumors, was opened to dissident Turkomans during the early 1979 clashes; at that time some of the dissidents told newsmen that they were Fedayeen members. One pro-Khomeini group in the area charged that the Fedayeen had initiated the clashes; as a result some Fedayeen were arrested by the Khomeini forces. If that was the case, the Turkomans were certainly quick to seize the opportunity—Khomeini's representatives reportedly are now almost completely absent from the Turkomans' homelands [redacted]

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The Turkomans reportedly are working closely with the Fedayeen and are arming for another uprising. In September political activity reportedly was intense in Turkoman areas. The Azarbayjani and Turkoman homelands have been the targets of Soviet intelligence operations. Such activities have also been directed against Khorasan Province, an isolated region in northeast Iran about which we have little current information. In 1944, a brief tribal revolt backed by the Soviets established the People's Republic of Khorasan [] 25X1A

Southeast

Iranian authorities have consistently perceived a greater threat to their territorial integrity in the isolated southeastern province of Baluchestan va Sistan than has been borne out by our information on dissident activity there. This may be the reason that martial law was applied in the province in early December in what seemed an overreaction to clashes that had broken out in the provincial capital, Zahedan. Iranian concerns have been intensified by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. On 20 June, a senior Interior Ministry official publicly accused the USSR of encouraging leftist activities in Baluchestan. Iranian officials under the Shah and the Khomeini regime have been particularly concerned that Afghanistan is acting as a Soviet surrogate in aiding dissident Baluchis. Last fall for the first time the regime in Kabul invited Iranian Baluchi representatives to participate in activities during a holiday celebrating ethnic separatism. Iranian intelligence officials met recently in Islamabad with their Pakistani counterparts to discuss joint efforts to counter Soviet activities among Baluchis in both countries. [] reported recently that the Soviets are using Afghan citizens to provide support to the Tudeh Communist Party from Afghanistan. [] 25X1C 25X1A 25X1C

Baluchi dissident groups include the Baluchestan Liberation Front and the Baluchi Student Organization, both recently reactivated separatist groups allegedly trained by the USSR; the Democratic Party of the Baluchi People and the House of the Baluchi, newly formed leftist organizations; and the Islamic Unity Party (IUP), a cleric-led organization that appears to be working with the Fedayeen. The last two groups reportedly cooperated in preventing voting on the Islamic Constitution at some polling places in early December and a few days later sent a joint ultimatum to Khomeini demanding that Baluchi autonomy be written into the constitution. []

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[] the older Baluchis—some of whom may be leading their own dissident bands—tend to be anti-Soviet, but that younger tribesmen hope the USSR will aid their quest for autonomy. The IUP head reportedly warned the Khomeini regime in October that “Communists” in Baluchestan would profit if the government does not act soon to resolve local political and economic problems. [] 25X1C 25X1A

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Baluchestan va Sistan has strategic importance, and this rouses Iranian suspicions of Soviet intentions, despite the limited capacity of both roads and ports in the southeast. Roads in Iran and Afghanistan provide a relatively direct route over the several hundred miles between the Iranian Gulf port at Char Bahar and the Soviet rail line at Ashkhabad or its terminus at Kushka. Moreover, road and rail links that could be vital to Iran if its Gulf ports are blocked also pass through the province to Pakistan []

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Southwest

Leftist strength in the oil-rich southwest is less visible. Iranian leftists, including the Tudeh Communist Party, have reportedly tried to build assets among the oil workers. The Fedayeen, the Arabestan Liberation Front, which is a newly revitalized radical leftist Arab separatist group, and agents of radical Arab states and Palestinian groups are all reportedly active in Khuzestan. The Front apparently changed its name to the Arab Islamic Revolutionary Front after Khomeini's revolution, presumably to improve its image with the Khomeini forces. It is well armed and has sought contacts with the KDP and other Iranian leftists. Most recently, radical leftist groups have been trying to discredit the moderate leadership of the Qashqai tribe, which inhabits the area around Shiraz. The Fedayeen are reportedly very active in the Qashqai's homeland, where they may control several villages. The southwest has remained relatively quiet since midsummer, although incidents of sabotage against oil industry and public facilities occur regularly []

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Soviet Position

At present, the USSR and the Tudeh Party publicly support the Khomeini regime and favor peaceful resolution of ethnic disagreements. Secular and clerical officials of the Khomeini regime, however, have consistently indicated that they suspect the Soviets are deeply involved in ethnic dissidence []

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As of 1978 the USSR was running intelligence operations into Iran and []
[]
[] from residences of the Committee of State Security (KGB) in Baku and Ashkhabad, [] conversation with a Soviet official.
25X1C These residences were independent of KGB components at the Soviet Embassy in Tehran and the Consulate General in Tabriz, and they usually used officers of Soviet Azarbayjani extraction. Those Iranian recruits who had the capacity to advance themselves were trained and financed by the KGB to infiltrate the Iranian civil and security services or military. Some were sent to live in other Iranian areas of interest to the USSR or in Iranian communities elsewhere in the Middle East. Less promising recruits reported on local Iranian military dispositions []

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Moscow was then ready to provide—through pro-Soviet Middle Eastern Communist parties—“material and personnel” support to Iranian minorities to prolong Iranian instability. The [redacted] thought Kurdish and Azarbayjani representatives and others would attend a meeting in Moscow on 1 April to discuss details. In early September Tudeh spokesmen publicly denied that two party members executed in western Iran by the Khomeini regime were involved in “events in Kordestan Province”; the Revolutionary Court thought otherwise. [redacted]

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Recent reporting indicates that the Soviets may be providing indirect aid—such as East European arms sent by Bulgaria—to some Kurdish dissident groups. As part of a long-term effort to promote leftist prospects, the USSR has supported Tudeh and pro-Soviet groups’ efforts to infiltrate Islamic Movement organizations and the military. [redacted]

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The spottiness of evidence of Soviet involvement with dissident minorities in Iran does not mean that the USSR is not backing them. Collection of such evidence is inhibited by the isolation of the areas involved, their contiguity to the USSR, Moscow’s ability to provide indirect aid, and its operatives’ ability to exploit ethnic similarities and old contacts. By keeping their support well hidden, the USSR can pursue a dual policy—denying involvement with Khomeini’s opposition while maintaining its options in the event that such groups succeed in gaining power. Moscow’s goal is the eventual emergence of a more pro-Soviet government in Tehran. [redacted]

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People’s Fedayeen and the Minorities

Fragmentary reporting suggests the Fedayeen may be trying to develop a capacity to initiate incidents in several minority areas. The Fedayeen’s aim is to exploit ethnic unrest in order to increase their own national influence. The Marxist-Leninist Fedayeen do not now seem likely to develop sufficient strength to come to power independently. They can, however, help perpetuate the instability that prevents the formation of a stable central government. To further their goals, the Fedayeen have formed temporary alliances with several other, often competing, groups. Fedayeen members have been repeatedly accused of posing as Revolutionary Guards or minority dissidents to promote disturbances for their own purposes. They are said to operate under their own name in larger towns but to obscure their identity in smaller, more conservative villages. [redacted]

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A Fedayeen rally in Tehran



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According to a report received earlier this month, a senior Tudeh official had recently made critical remarks about the Fedayeen—partly because of their leaders' professed anti-Soviet, anti-Tudeh stance, but also because the group seems to be successfully rivaling the Tudeh in the provinces and among the youth. The Fedayeen are deeply factionalized; they have six factions at their Tehran headquarters, which reportedly has little control over provincial branches. At least one of the Fedayeen's factions is probably at least tacitly pro-Soviet, despite their public posture. Fedayeen leaders have chosen to remain anonymous. The group has long received aid from radical Arab states and Palestinian groups. [REDACTED]

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Outlook

Whatever the details of the autonomy granted by the Khomeini regime to the ethnic minorities—or simply taken by them—the local administrations on the Iranian periphery will be left-leaning, allied with aggressive leftist groups, or vulnerable to them. Such a situation, however, would not necessarily lead to the dismemberment of Iran. The best organized groups are those with contacts with the USSR. These groups and the Soviets might consider a policy of consolidating dissident control in the outlying areas to be more advantageous while an ever-weakening government holds power in Tehran; this course could facilitate the eventual emergence of a leftist regime in Tehran without precipitating US intervention. The groups that look to the USSR for assistance are not likely to see the invasion of Afghanistan as a threat. The Fedayeen find advantages in attacking the Soviet invasion in order to win additional ethnic support at the expense of more openly pro-Soviet organizations. [REDACTED]

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