



# The origins of Communist Unity: anti-colonialism and revolution in Iran's tri-continental moment

Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi

To cite this article: Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi (2018) The origins of Communist Unity: anti-colonialism and revolution in Iran's tri-continental moment, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 45:5, 796-822, DOI: [10.1080/13530194.2017.1354967](https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2017.1354967)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2017.1354967>



Published online: 01 Aug 2017.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 497



[View Crossmark data](#)



Citing articles: 1 [View citing articles](#)



## The origins of Communist Unity: anti-colonialism and revolution in Iran's tri-continental moment

Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi

Faculty of Oriental Studies, Oriental Institute, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

### ABSTRACT

This article analyses the historical emergence of the Organization of Communist Unity, which coalesced out of the National Front of Iran and its Organizations abroad. In the aftermath of the MI6/CIA-orchestrated 1953 *coup d'état*, a new generation of political activists left Iran for Europe and the United States to pursue their higher education. While politically active in the Organizations of the National Front Abroad, they gradually turned to revolutionary Marxism against the backdrop of the torrential waves of decolonization and resistance to imperial military interventions undulating across the Global South. This same constellation of activists was not only fiercely anti-imperialist, but also opposed any form of dependence on the U.S.S.R. or the People's Republic of China. They would move from Europe and the United States to establish themselves in several locations across the Arab world, and pursue political activism and their advocacy of guerrilla warfare, as part of their ambition to launch a national liberation struggle against the Pahlavi regime. By examining Communist Unity's predecessors and their manifold transnational ideological, political and logistical networks with like-minded revolutionary movements inside the Middle East, this article brings to the fore hitherto under-explored South–South connections, and situates Iran's revolutionary opposition within the global moment of '1968'.

### Introduction

Despite the lingering vestiges of several intermittent traumas of modern Iranian history, few have rivalled the profound impact of the MI6/CIA-orchestrated *coup d'état* which ousted the nationalist premier, Muhammad Musaddiq, on 19 August 1953. In this article, I examine how during the 1960s and 1970s in the aftermath of the coup, the discursive and practical framing of resistance to the late Pahlavi regime began to shift and transform in decisive ways. This is achieved through an exploration of the history of the transnational Organizations of the National Front of Iran Abroad (Middle East Branch) (henceforth, ONFME) and the Organization of Communist Unity (*Sazman-i vahdat-i kumunisti*, henceforth OCU), which evolved out of the former, as well as the domestic and international contexts in which they both emerged.

The trajectory of these two intricately related groups illustrates how the language of armed resistance and revolutionary insurrection challenged and sought to dislodge

prevailing ideological and political practices centred on civil protest and electoral contestation and how liberal nationalism gave way to revolutionary Marxism amongst active and vocal elements of the dissenting opposition. The latter shift was a theoretical and practical transformation that would be enacted by a new generation, many of whom had experienced the coup in their teenage years and for whom the memory of both the nationalist-popular government's euphoric ascendancy and its tragic demise continued to live on.<sup>1</sup>

Like the Cuban, Fidel Castro, or the Palestinian, George Habash,<sup>2</sup> these men's formative political experiences began as nationalists and anti-imperialists.<sup>3</sup> However, unlike the aforementioned, several leading members of ONFME and OCU came to embrace revolutionary socialism in the imperial metropolises of Europe and the United States. It was thus largely in the metropole where they first came to conclude that American imperialism, the world capitalist system and the oppression and exploitation they were held to perpetuate, were inextricably intertwined. ONFME and OCU's partisans were born of a foundational trauma for which they contended foreign imperialists and home-grown reactionaries were responsible, giving rise to the search for a radical explanation and political praxis in the face of what they took to be Iran's authoritarian political impasse.

I will first provide a detailed account of the OCU's origins in the Organizations of the National Front of Iran Abroad and the formation of the ONFME—a series of political constellations that cannot be understood apart from the numerous problems and antagonisms which afflicted the Second and Third National Fronts and their supporters, both inside and outside of Iran during the 1960s: in short, the domestic and organizational factors contributing to ONFME and OCU's emergence and development.

However, a further contention of this article is that the transformation of the activists comprising ONFME and OCU, who during the late 1950s and first half of the 1960s moved from the politics of liberal nationalism to fierce advocacy of democratic socialism, anti-imperialism and proletarian internationalism, must also be framed within the wider context of the politics of tri-continentalism and South–South solidarity. This was a solidarity that harboured important logistical, political and imaginative dimensions. Though one could cite myriad events and political struggles both before and after 1953,<sup>4</sup> such solidarity saw its chief programmatic expression first in the Afro-Asian Conference convened in Bandung,

<sup>1</sup>Bihruz Mu'azzami, 'Az tajrubah-yi Musaddiq va tashkil-i hukumat-i milli chih natayiji ra mitavan barayi ayandah itikhaz kard?', in *Tajrubah-yi Musaddiq dar chishm andaz-i ayandah-yi Iran*, ed. Hushang Kishavarz Sadr and Hamid Akbari (Bethesda: Ibex, 2005), 357–365. Bizhan Iftikhari and Hamid Ahmadi, Interview with Bizhan Iftikhari, *Research Association for Iranian Oral History (RAIOA)*, Vienna, 2013, Part 1. Kambiz Rusta and Hamid Ahmadi, Interview with Kambiz Rusta, *RAIOA*, Berlin, 1995, Parts 1 and 2.

<sup>2</sup>Walid W. Kazziha, *Revolutionary Transformation in the Arab World: Habash and His Comrades from Nationalism to Marxism* (London: Charles Knight & Company, 1975), chapters 3 and 4.

<sup>3</sup>Iran's experience of colonialism was distinct, insofar as unlike either India, Egypt or Algeria, it was never formally colonized or subject to direct rule from the imperial centre. It was, however, divided de facto into mutual spheres of influence by Russia and Britain in 1907, and once more by the Soviet Union and Britain following the Allies' invasion in 1941. Moreover, the Anglo-Persian (later Iranian) Oil Company during the first half of the twentieth century often behaved as a colonial enclave within south-western Iran, possessing its own police force, as well as effectively introducing various disciplinary mechanisms and spatial processes of class segmentation and racial segregation. See, Touraj Atabaki, 'Far from Home, But at Home: Indian Migrant Workers in the Iranian Oil Industry', *Studies in History* 31, no. 1 (2015): 104; Kaveh Ehsani, 'Oil, State and Society in Iran in the Aftermath of the First World War', in *The First World War and Its Aftermath: The Shaping of the Middle East*, ed. T.G. Fraser (London: Gingko Library, 2015), 203.

<sup>4</sup>For a history of the 'Third World' as a political identity and agency, see Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (London and New York: The New Press, 2007).

Indonesia in April 1955,<sup>5</sup> followed by the inaugural conference of the Non-Aligned Movement in Belgrade, Yugoslavia in September 1961, and the founding of the Organization of Solidarity with the People of Asia, Africa and Latin America at the Tricontinental Conference in Havana, Cuba in January 1966.<sup>6</sup> A new generation of Iranian activists coming of age in the 1960s consciously embraced these historic events of tri-continental solidarity, while also introjecting them into the meaning and significance of the Musaddiq era and the coup simply referred to as '28 Mordad' (19 August 1953), to construct a popular revolutionary politics in Iran which unmistakably located itself *within* the fold of the Global South. In the words of Kambiz Rusta, a leading student activist in the National Front Abroad, 'we believed that the evolution of the political line (*khatt*) of Musaddiq was that of Ben Bella, then Castro, the path of revolution.'<sup>7</sup>

Even if it would be somewhat crude to identify the birth of the 'post-colonial subject' with a specific date,<sup>8</sup> the articulation of tri-continentalism undoubtedly nurtured the emergence of new political subjectivities, agencies and identifications, including in Pahlavi Iran and the Iranian diaspora. Thus, whilst the domestic context and organizational travails of the National Front of Iran (henceforth, NFI) are indispensable to understanding the ONFME and OCU's emergence, they are far from sufficient. An examination of Iran's revolutionary opposition through the wider lens of the global 'Tri-continental moment' and its transnational networks inside the Arab world is pivotal to an adequate understanding of its political and ideological development preceding the Iranian Revolution of 1979. However, this Iranian case study also contributes to the ever-growing literature on the historic period of decolonization following WWII and the 'Tri-continental moment', further complicating the picture vis-à-vis the latter's global reception and resonance as well as its disparate and uneven repercussions.

In the words of Arif Dirlik, the 'global sixties' and their denouement in 1968:

were directly inspired by the crisis of colonialism, and the implications for capitalism of de-colonization, but also by the seeming crisis of 'actually existing socialism', until then the only challenger to capitalism. The crisis gave renewed hope to Third World struggles for liberation, autonomy, and new modes of development that would avoid the pitfalls of capitalism as well as of Stalinist Communism.<sup>9</sup>

The ONFME and OCU are an aperture through which we might view this global moment and thereby eschew the prevailing 'methodological nationalism' defining many accounts of Iran's revolutionary opposition, understood solely through the perspective of domestic causes and events.<sup>10</sup>

By examining the ideational and logistical networks of the ONFME and OCU, which crisscrossed the metropole and West Asia and North Africa, while also being imaginatively

<sup>5</sup>Christopher J. Lee, *Making a World After Empire: The Bandung Moment and its Political Afterlives* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), Introduction; Jeffrey James Byrne, *Mecca of Revolution: Algeria, Decolonization, and the Third World Order* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), Introduction.

<sup>6</sup>Thea Pitman and Andy Stafford, 'Introduction: Transatlanticism and Tricontinentalism', *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 7, no. 3 (2009): 197.

<sup>7</sup>Rusta and Ahmadi, Interview with Kambiz Rusta, *RAIOA*, Part 4.

<sup>8</sup>Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism: A Historical Introduction* (London and New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), Loc 6187.

<sup>9</sup>Arif Dirlik, 'The Third World in 1968', in *The Third World in the Global 1960s*, ed. Samantha Christiansen and Zachary A. Scarlett (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2015), Loc 200.

<sup>10</sup>For a pertinent critique of such 'internalism', see Alexander Anievas and Kerem Nisancioglu, *How the West Came to Rule: The Geopolitical Origins of Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2015); Kamran Matin, *Recasting Iranian Modernity: International Relations and Social Change* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), Introduction and Conclusion.

connected to anti-colonial and national liberation struggles in Egypt,<sup>11</sup> Algeria, the Congo, Vietnam and Palestine, we are able to ascertain a more global vantage point on Iran's revolutionary opposition during this period.<sup>12</sup> In this way, we might begin to understand Iran's revolutionary and transnational dissidents as participating in what Alex Lubin has called 'geographies of liberation', namely, those 'dialectical spaces produced in the collision between nationalism and colonialism, on the one hand, and subaltern decolonial and liberation politics, on the other'.<sup>13</sup>

I have sought to avoid a teleological reading of OCU, *as if* its final form was already nascent in the Organizations of the National Front of Iran Abroad. To do so would be a patent misrepresentation, not to mention bad history. Rather, what we observe are fluid political engagements by a relatively small constellation of activists in the metropole, predominantly Continental Europe and the United States, subsequently followed by a period focussed in Beirut, but also Baghdad, Syria, Libya and Turkey. Upon entry into the Middle East, this network of activists took different names commensurate with distinct phases and purposes, including the Organizations of the National Front of Iran Abroad (Middle East Branch), the Star Group (*Guruh-i sitarah*), the Communist Alliance Group (*Guruh-i ittihad-i kumunisti*, henceforth CAG) and lastly the OCU following the 1979 revolution (see Figure 1). Despite appearances to the contrary, these transformations were more of a gradual slow-burn than a series of epiphanic metamorphoses. 'Shift', in the course of the narrative presented herein, acts more as a heuristic and clarificatory device than a determinate temporal marker in the flow of historical time. I have tried to give a basic account of such ideological and political shifts and their relationship to domestic, regional and international developments.

Despite some continuity of personnel, it is also crucial to acknowledge that the organizations which make up the historical genealogy of OCU significantly changed over time and its final form was far from determined at the outset. What we see is a complex transnational network of activists undergoing a series of discernible transformations, first in relation to questions of internal organization in the Organizations of the National Front of Iran Abroad, but more importantly, in relation to a global moment, namely, that of decolonization and the proliferation of national liberation movements. Not as a passive and orderly process, but framed as part and parcel of formerly colonized nations' struggle for collective liberation, and the emergence of the 'Third World' as a substantive geopolitical category striking an independent path in the face of great power bi-polarity.

This article avails itself of relevant Persian-language newspapers, primarily two different series of *Bakhtar-i imruz*, inspired by the memory, example and famed newspaper of the same name published by Dr Husayn Fatimi, Musaddiq's outspoken Foreign Minister who was executed by the Pahlavi regime in 1954. They were published by the Organizations of the National Front Abroad during the 1960s and 1970s in New York and Beirut/Iraq, respectively. This has been complemented by the political and ideological literature of the CAG, encompassing various pamphlets published during the 1970s, as well as subsequently

---

<sup>11</sup>Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser's triumph in the face of the British, French and Israeli invasion during the Suez Crisis also made its mark on the evolving political consciousness of this generation of Iranians, including Ali Khansari, a leading activist of the National Front Abroad and the OCU. 'Dar guzast-i 'Ali Khansari; buzurg zist va buzurg raft', *Inqilab-i islami*, 18 Farvadin 1393, <https://www.enghelabe-eslami.com/component/content/article/36-didgagha/khane-ahzab/8135-2014-04-07-09-21-08.html> (accessed 6 June 2017).

<sup>12</sup>Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), Introduction.

<sup>13</sup>Alex Lubin, *Geographies of Liberation: The Making of an Afro-Arab Political Imaginary* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 7.

published memoirs, oral history accounts and correspondence of members of the Star Group and OCU. Because of the well-known secretiveness of the organization and the unwillingness of erstwhile members, with a few exceptions, to go on the record, alternative histories of its inner workings and personnel are extremely limited. There were charged and partisan exchanges between the OCU's forebears, namely, the Star Group, and the Organization of the Iranian People's Fada'i Guerrillas (OIPFG), when the two groups' planned merger unravelled, particularly on the question of who was to blame for the process's failure. These exchanges have continued to colour extant historiography of the so-called 'homogenization process' (described later), even if it is not the chief focus of this article. Nonetheless, I have tried to draw upon other accounts where tenable, including those by former members of the OIPFG.

### The NFI: historical bloc or haphazard coalition?

The lineages of ONFME and OCU are to be found in the history of the NFI, first and foremost the National Front Abroad and the chapters established by its activists and sympathizers in Europe and the United States. The Organizations of the National Front of Iran Abroad (*Sazman-ha-yi jibbah-yi milli-yi Iran kharij az kishvar*, ONFA), out of which the OCU emerged in 1979, sought to continue the legacy of the original NFI. The latter was an essentially tenuous umbrella of political personalities and disparate groupings, which had first been established in 1949, and had pioneered the nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in 1951 and the Musaddiq government's defence of the principle of oil nationalization.<sup>14</sup> Many years later Musaddiq would contend that the Organizations were bound by the NFI's charter approved at the first and only congress of the Second National Front in January 1963. But since no explicit mention was made of them in the new charter of the Third National Front of 1965, they were thereafter free to pursue political activism and agitation consonant with their own needs and local conditions, bestowing these diaspora-based organizations with a significant degree of autonomy.<sup>15</sup>

While the majority of the individuals who would go on to form ONFME and later OCU were initially liberal nationalist and anti-imperialist in orientation, a number of them, like other prominent Marxists of subsequent decades<sup>16</sup> and student activists in the Second National Front of Iran, had begun their political lives in the Youth Organization of the Tudah Party before the 1953 *coup d'état*.<sup>17</sup> They were profoundly invested in the moral and political authority of Musaddiq who remained under house arrest until his death in March 1967,<sup>18</sup> and had become antagonistic to the Tudah Party, whose highest echelons had shown

<sup>14</sup>Homa Katouzian, *Musaddiq and the Struggle for Power in Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1990), 71–3.

<sup>15</sup>This was affirmed in Musaddiq's letter to the European Organizations of the National Front of Iran, 3 February 1965 [14 Bahman 1343]. Sayyid 'Ali Shayigan and Ahmad Shayigan, *Sayyid 'Ali Shayigan: zindigi namah-yi siyasi, nivishtahha va sukhanraniha*, vol. 2 (Tihran: Agah, 1385), 168.

<sup>16</sup>Hasan Ziya-Zarifi and Bizhan Jazani of the Jazani-Zarifi Group are one such example. Peyman Vahabzadeh, *A Guerrilla Odyssey: Modernization, Secularism, Democracy, and the Fada'i Period of National Liberation in Iran, 1971–1979* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2010), Loc 346.

<sup>17</sup>This included activists such as Muhammad Ali Khansari, Khusraw Parsa, Kambiz Rusta and Bizhan Mussahibnia, all of whom became disillusioned as high school students with the Tudah Party over the leadership's intractable hostility towards the Musaddiq government. Also see 'Yad-i rafiq shahid Manuchihr Hamidi garami bad', *Raha'i*, no. 80 (28 Khرداد 1360), 21.

<sup>18</sup>Jazani's assessment of Musaddiq by contrast is sober, measured and at times critical. Bizhan Jazani, *Tarh-i jami'ih shinasi va mabani-yi istaratizhi-yi junbish-i inqilabi-yi khalq-i Iran, bakhsh-i duvvum* (tarikh-e si salih-yi siyasi-yi Iran) (Tehran: Mazyar, 1357 [1978]), 51–2.

considerable disagreement and/or antipathy towards the nationalist premier in the period preceding the coup.<sup>19</sup> It should be emphasized that there was a significant degree of political fluidity prevailing among students at the time insofar as several individuals who went on to advocate for armed struggle as members of either the OIPFG, Organization of the People's Mujahidin or Organizations of the National Front in the Middle East (ONFME), had been active in the Second National Front founded in the summer of 1960. By the mid-1960s, a great many of these young activists had become disillusioned with the conduct of the leaders of the Second National Front, as well as their general political outlook during the Amini government (1961–1962) and the aftermath of its fall. The key difference was that despite their overlapping experiences surrounding the demise of the Amini government and the authoritarian consolidation of the Shah's regime, which entered a new phase with the inception of the 'White Revolution' in 1963,<sup>20</sup> the founders of OCU had been radicalized outside of the country, in Europe and the United States, and predominantly active in the Organizations of the National Front of Iran Abroad and the Confederation of Iranian Students (National Union).<sup>21</sup> The latter purported to be the political and corporate representative of Iranian students abroad, as well as inside Iran during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>22</sup>

The formation of the National Front Abroad began in 1961, and according to CAG/OCU's retrospective analysis,<sup>23</sup> was beset by contradictions from the outset. These issues could be traced back to the NFI, which never became nor was even intended to become a unified party with a single coherent ideology and political programme. The forces comprising the National Front coalesced around the issue of the nationalization of Iran's most important natural resource, namely oil, which in turn became a symbol of Iran's national sovereignty and independence against the threat posed by British imperialism.<sup>24</sup> The capaciousness and galvanizing thrust of the demand for unalloyed national self-determination and the power to fully control the nation's most vital natural resource cut across a wide cross-section of socio-political classes, cleavages and groupings. This was the very reason it had been conceived as a *front* in contradistinction to a tightly knit and hierarchical party organization. Between 1951 and 1952 it could even be considered akin to what Antonio Gramsci famously referred to as a 'historical bloc', entailing the mediation of a variety of different class interests

<sup>19</sup>Kambiz Rusta, a member of the Star Group (and who saw himself as intimately associated with the ONFME), explicitly mentions the formative role of the coup and his stern criticisms of the Tudah Party leadership (despite his well-known familial links to the party), and how it shaped his activism in the student diaspora during the early 1960s. Rusta and Ahmadi, Interview with Kambiz Rusta, *RAIOA*, Berlin, 1995, Part 2.

The Tudah leadership was also criticized by Bizhan Jazani, who contends the party's policy was based on a flawed analysis and underestimation of the still perfidious role of British neo-colonialism inside Iran. Jazani, *Tarh-i jami'ih shinasī*, 54.

Also see, Maziar Behrooz, 'The 1953 Coup in Iran and the Legacy of the Tudeh', in *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran*, ed. Mark J. Gasiorowski and Malcolm Byrne (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2004), Loc 2472.

<sup>20</sup>Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), chapter 9.

<sup>21</sup>Hasan Masali, *Nigarishi bih gūzashtah va ayandah: panjah sal-i mubarizah dar rah-i azadi*, vol. 1 (Wiesbaden, 1392 [2013]), 135.

<sup>22</sup>Afshin Matin-asgari, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. 'Confederation of Iranian Students, National Union', vol. VI, Fasc. 2, 122–125, <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/confederation-of-iranian-students> (accessed 7 June 2017).

<sup>23</sup>In this instance, I will be using the CAG and OCU interchangeably. But for the sake of historical accuracy it should be noted that the pamphlet *Chih nabayad kard?* was in fact authored by Khusraw Parsa as a CAG position paper during the final assembly of a sizable number of activists of the Organizations of the National Front of Iran Abroad in Giessen, West Germany in January 1978. It would be published after some revisions in the same year by the CAG and following the publication of several other pamphlets such as *Dar barah-yi purusah-yi tajanus*, *Istalinism*, etc. also drawn upon in the course of this article. The OCU would later republish several of these pamphlets under their name.

<sup>24</sup>For an account of British neo-colonialism and American imperialism in Iran, see Ervand Abrahamian, *The Coup: 1953, the CIA, and the Roots of Modern U.S.-Iranian Relations* (New York: The New Press, 2013), Introduction.

propagated throughout society, 'bringing about not only a unison of economic and political aims, but also intellectual and moral unity... on a "universal" plane.'<sup>25</sup>

This is not to say that the leaders of the National Front conceived of it in such terms, but rather that the principles of national sovereignty, self-determination, democratic constitutionalism and the coalition of social forces which rallied behind them, temporarily engendered a considerable degree of a moral and political unity around Musaddiq and his programme in its stand-off with Great Britain. For a brief time, this platform was able to forge a hegemonic consensus as well as constitute and mobilize a collective nationalist anti-imperialist political subject in the government's defence throughout much of Iran's urban populace.<sup>26</sup> In this vein, the Marxist-Leninist, Bizhan Jazani, argued in a retrospective analysis regarding his own involvement in the movement that:

our collaboration in public activism under the banner of the National Front was to realize an historic issue, namely, that of the collaboration of the progressive forces of society. This collaboration allowed us to have a healthy and sound understanding of the national anti-imperialist struggle, and to become intimately acquainted with the forces of the National Front.<sup>27</sup>

This popular anti-imperialist hegemony was harnessed to great effect by Musaddiq during his time as prime minister, and bestowed an air of moral authority that he and other members of his inner circle would continue to wield among their partisans long after their removal from power. The nationalist PM was, however, both sceptical and hesitant about mobilizing the fervour his persona and platform provoked in his supporters and devotees, and never seriously considered providing it with an organizational form of substance. This decision was arguably to his great detriment and contributed to the movement's ultimate defeat and failure to bring about a lasting social transformation. Moreover, as the example of the Second National Front shows us, despite Musaddiq's great moral standing it did not always translate into political authority or ensure his epigones would abide by his prescriptions for the movement's policies and trajectory.

CAG/OCU's analysis of the Second National Front of Iran helps us understand not only the group's own thinking about the Front's often dysfunctional *modus operandi*, but how the Front's vicissitudes were interpreted by younger activists at home and abroad more generally. The OCU delineated three key groups comprising the Second National Front and its Organizations abroad in the first half of the 1960s.

The *first* group had a historic association with and investment in the original Front, which went back to its initial formation in 1949, the Musaddiq government and the coup. These groups included those affiliated with the Iran Party (*Hizb-i Iran*) led de facto by Allahyar Salih, and populated by other notable figures such as Karim Sanjabi, Ahmad Zirakzadah and Shapur Bakhtiyar. It consisted of salaried professionals and technocrats, including many engineers and lawyers, who sought to participate and achieve piecemeal reforms through the electoral process. Muhammad Nakhshab, a one-time member of the Iran Party, later split to form his

<sup>25</sup>Gramsci quoted in Adam David Morton, *Unravelling Gramsci: Hegemony and Passive Revolution in the Global Political Economy* (London: Pluto, 2007), Loc 2497.

<sup>26</sup>For more on the constitution of collective subjects in contentious politics, see John Chalcraft, *Popular Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), Loc 762.

<sup>27</sup>In this instance, Jazani is apparently referring to his involvement in the Second National Front. Bizhan Jazani, 'Namah bih yak dust', in *Bih zaban-i qanun: Bizhan Jazani va Hassan Ziya Zarifi dar dadgah-i nizami*, ed. Nasir Muhajir and Mihrdad Baba 'Ali (Créteil and Berkeley: Nuqtah, 1394), 333.

own party, the Iranian People's Party (*Hizb-i mardum-i Iran*), with its own unique blend of Islamic pieties and socialism. Next was the Socialist League of Iran (*Jami'ih-yi sawsiyalist-ha-yi Iran*) headed by Khalil Maliki, which enjoyed a strong bond with the National Front and Musaddiq personally. This dated back to the period when Maliki had remained steadfast in his support for the Musaddiq government as leader of the Toiler's Party of the Iranian Nation, Third Force (*Hizb-i zahmatkishan-i millat-i Iran, Niru-yi sivvum*). This was complicated by the secession of two prominent figures from Third Force. Muhammad Ali Khunji and Mas'ud Hijazi broke with Maliki, became highly critical of his stewardship and decried him as a traitor for having met with the Shah.<sup>28</sup> The Party of the Iranian Nation (*Hizb-i millat-i Iran*) led by Dariyush Furuhar were staunch nationalists, anti-British, anti-communist and harboured well-known Pan-Iranist leanings. CAG/OCU gloss over the role of Ghulam Husayn Sadiqi during this period; a widely respected nationalist politician and academician,<sup>29</sup> he had been Musaddiq's Interior Minister during the nationalist government, and played a notable role in supporting the Second National Front's formation.<sup>30</sup> This was most likely because of his advocacy of principled dialogue and the need to reach an accommodation with the ruling regime.<sup>31</sup>

According to CAG/OCU, the *second* grouping which had attached themselves to the Organizations of the Front Abroad were supporters of the Tudah Party, who surreptitiously strove to steer the Front in their own favoured direction. But the *third* and largest group of supporters making up the National Front of Iran Abroad (*Jibhah-yi milli-yi Iran kharij az kishvar*) were new to political activism and were individuals, for the most part students, who had only recently been politicized.<sup>32</sup> This last constituency followed events in Iran from afar, but they were nevertheless crucial to the National Front's political fortunes going forward. Moreover, this collection of individuals cannot be understood in isolation either from events inside Iran or from the waves of anti-imperialist radicalism colouring a huge swathe of protests in cities throughout the metropole during the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>33</sup> In this way, both *geographical* (south–north/south–south) and *generational* (pre- and post-1945) differences within the National Front and its sympathizers made themselves manifest, and converged to reinforce the ideological and political rupture that was in the offing. Such a variegated constituency would have been difficult to maintain under the best of circumstances, let alone those where conditions of severe political repression prevailed inside the country, and the Pahlavi state's security services, namely SAVAK (*Sazman-i ittila'at va amniyat-i kishvar*), sought to infiltrate dissident and student organizations across Europe.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>28</sup>Katouzian, *Musaddiq and the Struggle*, 227–8.

<sup>29</sup>Ahmad Ashraf, 'Sadighi: Ethics, Politics and Social Sciences', *International Institute of Social History* (Amsterdam, 2011), 15.

<sup>30</sup>H.E. Chehabi, *Iranian Politics and Religious Modernism: The Liberation Movement of Iran under the Shah and Khomeini* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1990), 130.

<sup>31</sup>A more charitable reading holds that the scant mention of Sadiqi is because he was above the factional fray of the National Front and thus widely respected.

<sup>32</sup>*Sazman-i vahdat-e kumunisti-yi Iran, Chih nabayad kard? Naqdi bar guzash-tah rahnamudi barayi ayandah* (December 1978), v.

<sup>33</sup>A comparable dynamic whereby the radicalization of Third World intellectuals took shape in the metropole is demonstrated to great effect by Michael Goebel, albeit with a focus on Paris during the 1920s and 1930s: Michael Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

Also see, Quinn Slobodian, *Foreign Front: Third World Politics in Sixties West Germany* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), chapter 4.

<sup>34</sup>Masali, *Nigarishi bih guzash-tah va ayandah*, 1, 290; Afshin Matin-asgari, *Iranian Student Opposition to the Shah* (Cost Mesa, CA: Mazda, 2002), 154.

## The dispute over party (*Hizb*) admission in the Second and Third National Fronts

While it is beyond the remit of this article to explore the genesis of the Second and Third National Fronts and their relationship to the Organizations of the National Front of Iran Abroad, I will now try to address the crux of the disagreements which led up to the formation of the ONFME.

After a prolonged period of political repression following the 1953 coup, it was not until 1960 (1339) that the Front's leading activists, many of whom had been members of the underground Movement for National Resistance (*Nihzat-i muqavimat-i milli*), felt there was a political opening and opportunity in which the Front might resume open political activity with enlivened momentum. As alluded to above, disagreements over ideology and strategy, but above all organization persisted and characterized the internal dynamics of the Second National Front from its inception. The most important bone of contention was how the National Front ought to be ordered and the role and status of political parties in any such formation. While some insisted that all parties should effectively dissolve themselves, and enter the Second National Front on an individual basis, others, including Musaddiq under house arrest at his family compound at Ahmadabad, argued forcefully to the contrary. Khunji had dissolved his small breakaway organization, which some dispute ever in fact existed,<sup>35</sup> the Socialist Party (*Hizb-i sawsiyalist*), and entered the National Front, while essentially assuming control of its ideological and organizational apparatus as well as the role of its pre-eminent theoretician.<sup>36</sup> In the words of Homa Katouzian, Khunji, Hijazi and Bakhtiyar came to form a 'triumvirate', which sought to exclude Maliki on the shaky grounds that he might detract from the organization's cohesion, with Bakhtiyar going as far as to accuse him of being a serial splitter (*inshi 'abchi*)—a not-so-subtle allusion to Maliki's break with the Tudah Party following the Azerbaijan Crisis of 1946.<sup>37</sup>

In any event, this insistence that parties dissolve and in lieu subject themselves to the triumvirate, rather than unite the Front, led Mahdi Bazargan, the cleric Mahmud Taliqani and Yadullah Sahabi to break away and found the Liberation Movement of Iran (*Nihzat-i azadi-yi Iran*) in 1961.<sup>38</sup> The debate over whether parties *qua* political parties would be allowed to join the NFI, however, was far from settled. Musaddiq had consistently held that the National Front should be made up of political parties and that the executive council of the NFI must be composed of these parties' representatives.<sup>39</sup> This principle was spelt out in a message to the first congress of the National Front in January 1963, a document Musaddiq would explicitly reference in subsequent admonitions.<sup>40</sup>

The key point to take away when analysing the National Front of Iran Abroad (*Jibhah-yi milli-yi Iran kharij az kishvar*) was that the fissures afflicting the Second National Front were

<sup>35</sup>Contrary to Katouzian, Jazani does take the formation of the Socialist Party by Khunji and Hijazi to be genuine, though he says it only had tens of members. Jazani, *Tarh-i jami'ih shinasi*, 85–6.

<sup>36</sup>Khunji is reputed to have circulated a paper in which he called for the self-dissolution of all parties in the National Front. Chehabi, *Iranian Politics and Religious Modernism*, 147.

<sup>37</sup>Katouzian, *Musaddiq and the Struggle*, 228.

<sup>38</sup>*Chih nabayad kard?*, 11; Chehabi, *Iranian Politics and Religious Modernism*, 155.

<sup>39</sup>Hamid Shawkat, *Parvaz dar zulmat: zindigani-yi siyasi-yi Shapur Bakhtiar* (Cologne: Baztab, 2014), 299.

<sup>40</sup>Katouzian, *Musaddiq and the Struggle*, 244.

largely reproduced outside of the country as well.<sup>41</sup> As in the case of the Second National Front, the crux of the dispute abroad was over the status of political parties in the Organizations of the National Front of Iran Abroad.<sup>42</sup> In March 1964, in reaction to the news that the Organizations of the National Front in Europe had disbanded its associated parties, Musaddiq wrote a scolding rebuttal emphasizing

The National Front should be regarded as the central organization of all those parties which believe in a common principle, namely the freedom and independence of the country. If parties and groups are not to join the Front, the Front will become exactly what it is now...and [they] are incapable of taking one step in defending [the rights of the people].<sup>43</sup>

The ramifications of this unambiguous salvo were immediately felt. As documented by Katouzian, the NFI's central council in Tehran sought to diffuse matters by disingenuously claiming it had only taken issue with the Tudah Party's accession to the National Front. This claim was quickly brushed aside by Musaddiq as a red herring, insisting that his statement on the necessity of parties had been strictly reserved for those forces which had been committed to the oil nationalization from the outset. He questioned in direct terms why Maliki's Socialist League had not been admitted to the NFI's 1963 congress.<sup>44</sup>

Within the Organizations of the National Front in Europe there is also evidence that grassroots activists were exceedingly displeased with the conduct of tribal leader, Khusraw Qashqa'i, and his Tudah associates who oversaw the publication of *Bakhtar-i imruz* (2nd series) in Munich, Germany.<sup>45</sup> Qashqa'i stood accused not only of misrepresenting the views of National Front activists and sympathizers based in Europe, but of imposing his views by fiat and force of will alone.<sup>46</sup> These conflicts came to a head at the first congress of the Organizations of the National Front in Europe held in Wiesbaden, Germany in early August 1962, where Qashqa'i refused to place the newspaper under the congress's control and subsequently abandoned the meeting.<sup>47</sup> In the place of *Bakhtar-i imruz* (2nd series), a new publication called *Iran-i azad* would be published as the official organ of the Organizations of the National Front in Europe. Its first issue appeared in November 1962 with Ali Shari'ati as editor, the man who would in the following decade rise to fame as one of the chief ideologues of the Iranian Revolution of 1979.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup>Shayigan and Shayigan, *Sayyid 'Ali Shayigan*, 2, 127.

<sup>42</sup>Because of Musaddiq's forceful and clear position on the issue, Shayigan in the United States also supported the necessity of a Front composed of political parties. Shayigan and Shayigan, *Sayyid 'Ali Shayigan*, 2, 128.

<sup>43</sup>Katouzian, *Musaddiq and the Struggle*, 245.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>45</sup>Qashqa'i's commitment to the National Front during the Musaddiq government appeared to derive more from animosity towards the Shah than any veritable commitment to constitutional government. Moreover, according to Abbas Milani, following the intervention of Ardashir Zahidi during the late 1960s in a bid to improve relations between the exiled brothers and the Shah, the Shah provided the Qashqa'is and their mother with a monthly stipend of 6000 West German marks. Abbas Milani, *Eminent Persians: The Men and Women Who Made Modern Iran, 1941–1979* (New York: Syracuse University Press and Persian World Press, 2008), 262–3.

<sup>46</sup>See letter of 15 June 1962 from Parviz Amin, a student activist of the National Front in Europe, to Shayigan, and the 7 August 1962 letter of the Organizations of the National Front of Iran in Austria and France to the Executive Committee of the National Front in America, in Shayigan and Shayigan, *Sayyid 'Ali Shayigan*, 2, 129–30.

<sup>47</sup>Matin-asgari, *Iranian Student Opposition to the Shah*, 54.

A letter from the Organizations of the National Front in Austria and France appears to confirm this incident. Letter from the Organizations of the National Front of Iran in Austria and France to the Executive Committee of the National Front in America, 7 August 1962, in Shayigan and Shayigan, *Sayyid 'Ali Shayigan*, 2, 129–30.

<sup>48</sup>Matin-asgari, *Iranian Student Opposition to the Shah*, 54.

Back in Iran, the conduct of Bakhtiyar and Khunji was criticized in several quarters. It was claimed that Bakhtiyar feared being overshadowed by Maliki, if he and his Socialist League took up a prominent role within the National Front, while Khunji's deeply antagonistic relationship with Maliki detracted from the Front's very *raison d'être*.<sup>49</sup> Musaddiq's dressing down of the Second National Front's executive committee eventually left them with little choice but to resign, paving the way for the establishment of the Third National Front, whose draft constitution was approved by Musaddiq in early 1965, and which codified the central role of political parties and civil society organizations such as unions, religious and student societies, and local associations.<sup>50</sup> Though the Socialist League were now permitted entry into the Third National Front, the Iran Party refused to cooperate due to a spate of arrests, several on the personal orders of the Shah himself. This latest initiative was thus deprived of any serious prospect of becoming a viable movement beyond the release of two public statements,<sup>51</sup> and was dissolved within a month of its founding.

### The National Front Abroad: fragmentation and the embrace of revolutionary politics

Such disarray could not but affect the Organizations of the National Front of Iran Abroad. In a bid to resolve ongoing disagreements, the Organizations of the National Front Abroad in Europe called for an extraordinary congress which was convened in Kiel, West Germany in 1966. A more moderate faction including figures such as the post-revolutionary president, Abulhasan Bani Sadr, and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sadiq Qutbzadah, continued to express support for the defunct Third National Front. Meanwhile the leftist faction within the Organizations, which included individuals such as Hasan Masali, Manuchihr Hamidi, and Kambiz Rusta, defended membership of the Front on an individual basis. This most likely was because they held that the condition of party membership would prove advantageous to the established parties and their leaderships, and effectively bring about their marginalization within the Organizations of the National Front Abroad. This factional grouping had, however, been radicalized beyond recognition, and forcefully supported armed struggle against the Pahlavi regime and sought to bring about a revolution through the formation of professional cadres predicated on Marxist ideology.<sup>52</sup> In contrast to those in the National Front who had dithered over the question of party organization, this faction called amongst themselves for the strict observation of party discipline.

Clusters of activists had taken to studying Marxist texts and considering the prospects of armed struggle in light of Iran's own socio-historical development and this gradually came to be reflected in the content of the NFI's newspaper in Europe, *Iran-i azad*.<sup>53</sup> This marked

<sup>49</sup>Hijazi's response to Katouzian and explanation of the events which led to the rift with Maliki was later published in the former's memoirs; see Mas'ud Hijazi, *Ruyidatha va davari: 1329–1339* (Tehran: Intisharat-i nilufar, 1375), 683.

<sup>50</sup>Katouzian, *Musaddiq and the Struggle*, 250.

<sup>51</sup>*Chih nabayad kard?*, 14.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, 16. Rusta and Ahmadi, Interview with Kambiz Rusta, *RA/OA*, Part 4.

Bizhan Iftikhari, a student activist in the Organizations of the National Front Abroad and one of the representatives of the Star Group in Europe, also recounts the gradual transition towards advocacy of socialism in the Organizations of the National Front while he was a student in Graz, Austria. Iftikhari and Ahmadi, Interview with Bizhan Iftikhari, *RA/OA*, Part 2.

<sup>53</sup>Issues of *Iran-i azad* were flush with pictures and articles of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara and Ho Chi Minh by the late 1960s. See, *Iran-i azad*, no. 64 (September/October 1969). They also published statements by Guevara in booklet form, e.g. Payam-i Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, *Iran-i Azad* (October 1967).

political and cognitive shift was experienced by a fairly loose group of younger activists, and in such a way that those who were the key proponents of this position remained unidentified and below the proverbial parapet. During the congress, the so-called 'conservative' or moderate faction found themselves in the minority and a series of new measures and regulations were approved resulting in many members abandoning the meeting, where nonetheless a new executive committee (*hay'at-i ijra'iyah*) was elected. Those who accepted the new stricter organizational regulations were welcome to remain in the National Front Abroad, while those who refused were exhorted to withdraw from its committees. According to one account, as a direct result of this drastic change of positions at the executive level, the membership of the National Front in Europe decreased from 700 to 400, amounting to what some decried as a 'legal' purge.<sup>54</sup>

The National Front's presence in the United States was distinct insofar as the role of Dr Ali Shayigan, a senior member of the National Front, esteemed law professor, parliamentarian and confidant of Musaddiq, remained a constant and enduring source of gravity for younger activists based stateside.<sup>55</sup> Following the coup, he had been imprisoned, but soon after his release was exiled to Europe and then the United States.<sup>56</sup> The Organizations of the National Front in America included a slew of politically engaged university students who would go on to play important roles on the revolutionary road to 1978–1979 and in its aftermath. These included Ali Muhammad Fatimi, Mustafa Chamran, Ibrahim Yazdi, Khusraw Parsa and Yusif Tavassuli.<sup>57</sup> In 1962 there were an estimated 7000 Iranian citizens in the United States, rising to 21,000 in 1964 and 40,000 by 1969.<sup>58</sup> Shayigan stewarded the body for the first two years of its existence, i.e. 1961–1963,<sup>59</sup> but continued to have an influential role thereafter delivering rousing speeches to Iranian students across the United States.<sup>60</sup> His presence allowed the committees of the National Front in America to dissent from the line set down by the executive committee, which continued to be dominated by those of a more conservative orientation.

While CAG/OCU alleged that many of these individuals were largely unresponsive to the demands of grassroots activists, they also acknowledged that not all of those who disagreed with the institutionalization of political parties were motivated by the desire to retain their personal prerogatives and control of the organizations and their capacities. Some of those individuals who were sceptical apropos the admission of political parties argued that those parties eligible to join the Organizations of the National Front were themselves unstable, disorganized coalitions, and insisted they would only further exacerbate the Front's organizational shambles.<sup>61</sup>

Nevertheless, the Organizations of the National Front in America were invariably more critical and radical in tone than had been the leadership of the Second National Front.<sup>62</sup> It was believed that preponderating differences were reconciled during the National Front in

<sup>54</sup>*Chih nabayad kard?*, 17.

<sup>55</sup>Mu'azzami, 'Az tajrubah-yi Musaddiq', 359.

<sup>56</sup>Shayigan and Shayigan, *Sayyid 'Ali Shayigan*, 2, 115.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>58</sup>Hassan Mohammadi-Nejad, 'Elite-Counterelite Conflict and the Development of a Revolution: The Case of the Iranian National Front' (PhD thesis, Southern Illinois University, 1970), 143.

<sup>59</sup>Shayigan's letter to Musaddiq, 5 September 1964, in Shayigan and Shayigan, *Sayyid 'Ali Shayigan*, 2, 165–6.

<sup>60</sup>Duktur Shayigan dar kalifurniya, *Bakhtar-i imruz* 3, 1 Ordibehesht 1344 [21 April 1965].

<sup>61</sup>*Chih nabayad kard?*, 19.

<sup>62</sup>Shayigan and Shayigan, *Sayyid 'Ali Shayigan*, 2, 119; Mohammadi-Nejad, 'Elite-Counterelite Conflict', 225–6.

America's Second Congress in 1963,<sup>63</sup> but within a matter of months a left-wing tendency constituting a segment of the membership and minority in the executive committee seceded and formed a new organization called the National Front of Iran in Exile (*Jibhah-yi milli-yi Iran dar tab'id*). The organization quickly grew and included activists who had been impacted by the Sino-Soviet split and subsequent denunciation of perceived Soviet détente with the Pahlavi regime. It was this group which oversaw the publication of the third series of *Bakhtar-i imruz*, published in New York by the Organizations of the National Front of Iran, America Branch, between 1966 and 1969.<sup>64</sup> The editors added 'exploitation' (*istithmar*) to the old National Front slogan of 'the struggle against despotism and colonialism' (*mubarizah ba istibdad va isti'mar*) and reprinted a quote attributed to Ernesto 'Che' Guevara in bold in several issues: 'it is the inviolable right of the masses to respond to the violence of imperialism with revolutionary violence.'<sup>65</sup> These activists had ceased to believe in the possibility of civil resistance or in the prospects of reforming the Shah's regime. A strong anti-colonial sentiment in solidarity with those individuals,<sup>66</sup> organizations and countries fighting European and American imperialism was already unmistakable. As early as 1963 with the assent of Shayigan in the United States, activists of the National Front Abroad first began to send willing and committed individuals to revolutionary hotspots such as Algeria, Palestine/Jordan and Egypt under the name of the Organization for Students' Revolutionary Preparations (*Sazman-i tadarukat-i inqilabi-yi danishjuyan*).<sup>67</sup>

In April 1966, the National Front in Exile and National Front in America held a joint congress in New York City and decided to unify, though this time the executive committee and council were dominated by the left. Shayigan was the keynote speaker.<sup>68</sup> The new organization was renamed the Organizations of the National Front of Iran Abroad, America Branch (*Sazman-ha-yi jibhah-yi milli-yi Iran kharij az kishvar, bakhsh-i Amrika*), and they suggested that the European Organization take the same name, albeit in the capacity of the European Branch.<sup>69</sup> While there was prima facie organizational unity between the European and American branches it was never realized in substance, underwritten by the fact that an inter-continental Executive Committee was never established.

*Bakhtar-i imruz* (3rd series) continued to be published in New York and became increasingly open in its advocacy of armed struggle against the Pahlavi state. Meanwhile, in 1967 the Israeli state, with whom the Shah's regime had known, albeit low-level diplomatic ties, launched a war against Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Iraq, occupying parts of the first three Arab countries and the entirety of historic Palestine. This watershed event also led Arab nationalist governments to publicly support Palestinian guerrilla activities, where they had formerly sought to curb them and suppress their coverage. This vindicated the position that had long been held by the Palestinian movement Fateh (*harakat al-tahrir al-watani al-filastini*). Since its establishment in the late 1950s, Fateh had argued that Palestinians needed to take the lead role in their collective liberation instead of relying on the benevolence of the Arab

<sup>63</sup>A counterpart convention was held by members of the National Front in Munich, Germany at around the same time. Ibid., 145.

<sup>64</sup>*Chih nabayad kard?*, 18.

<sup>65</sup>Shayigan and Shayigan, *Sayyid 'Ali Shayigan*, 2, 178; *Bakhtar-i imruz* 3, Farvardin/Ordibehesht 1348 [April/May 1969].

<sup>66</sup>'Dar Congo: Lumumba, hanuz mi jangad', *Bakhtar-i imruz* 3, 1 Ordibehesht 1344 [21 April 1965].

<sup>67</sup>Shayigan and Shayigan, *Sayyid 'Ali Shayigan*, 2, 178; Masali, *Nigarishi bih guzashtah va ayandah*, 1, 307.

<sup>68</sup>Mohammadi-Nejad, 'Elite-Counterelite Conflict', 148.

<sup>69</sup>Shayigan and Shayigan, *Sayyid 'Ali Shayigan*, 2, 177.

nationalist regimes in Egypt, Syria and Iraq. Fateh announced its first military operation inside Occupied Palestine on 1 January 1965. Although it initially faced hostility, notably from Nasser's Egypt, it rapidly consolidated its position after the 1967 war, emerging as the largest faction in the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO).<sup>70</sup> Its focus on armed struggle was quickly adopted by other major Palestinian groups after 1967, and the Palestinian *fidayin* (freedom fighters) soon became iconic figures of resistance across the globe.<sup>71</sup>

It was in this context that in April/May 1969 *Bakhtar-i imruz* reproduced and praised in the highest terms a fatwa issued from Najaf by the exiled Ayatullah Ruhollah Khomeini, which was interpreted as the cleric's endorsement of 'armed struggle against Zionism and imperialism' in the Middle East. Khomeini, with special reference to the Palestinian armed struggle, had approved the dispensation of religious alms in support of fellow Muslims engaged in the armed defence of 'Muslim lands' (*bilad-i muslimin*).<sup>72</sup> The publishers of *Bakhtar-i imruz* contended that the fatwa 'will be considered an important step in transforming the approach to the struggle inside Iran...it will open new pathways of struggle'.<sup>73</sup> In the same vein, they serialized a Persian translation of Guevara's *Reminiscences of the Cuban Revolutionary War* as part of their effort to dislodge what they held to be the longstanding ideological hegemony of civil contestation through peaceful marches and the ballot box.<sup>74</sup> Such exercises amounted to a normative and political challenge to the way resistance towards the Pahlavi regime ought to be conceived and practised and thereby sought to initiate something of a paradigmatic shift: a shift that was intimately bound up with the wider international context in the lead up to and aftermath of 1968. While it is questionable they were successful in this endeavour,<sup>75</sup> it remains important to note that it was integral to a deeper transformation experienced within the post-Tudah Iranian left and a slew of like-minded international movements elsewhere in the Global South. As in the case of Khomeini's fatwa, the PLO was never far from these young Iranian activists' minds.<sup>76</sup>

## Founding the National Front in the Middle East

According to the account provided by CAG/OCU, the Organizations of the National Front Abroad continued to drift along, albeit with little success or effect into the next decade. In 1970, due to accumulated frustration with the latter's ongoing lack of theoretical rigour, strategic vision and organizational competency, a group of activists within the Organizations of the National Front Abroad decided to form a new branch of the National Front in the Middle East,<sup>77</sup> its official title being the Organizations of the National Front of Iran Abroad, Middle East Branch (ONFME).<sup>78</sup> The latter essentially acted as the public face of their activism and as cover, first for their clandestine Marxist organization, the Star Group (*Guruh-i sitarah*), which from 1973 to 1976 partook in a process to merge with the Fada'i Guerrillas. With the

<sup>70</sup>Rosemary Sayigh, *The Palestinians: From Peasants to Revolutionaries* (London: Zed Books, 2013), 155.

<sup>71</sup>Charles Tripp, *The Power and the People: Paths of Resistance in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 30.

<sup>72</sup>Fatwa-yi Ayatullah Khomeini, *Bakhtar-i imruz* 3, Farvardin/Ordibehesht 1348 [April/May 1969].

<sup>73</sup>Ibid.

<sup>74</sup>Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, 'Havadith-i jangha-yi inqilabi', *Bakhtar-i imruz* 3 (April/May 1969).

<sup>75</sup>Khomeini's scepticism of armed struggle need not be rehearsed here.

<sup>76</sup>Rusta and Ahmadi, Interview with Kambiz Rusta, *RA/OA*, Part 4.

<sup>77</sup>Guruh-i ittihad-i kumunisti, *Nukati dar barah-yi purusah-yi tajanus*, Bahar 1356 [Spring 1978], 28.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., 7. Shayigan and Shayigan, *Sayyid 'Ali Shayigan*, 2, 179.

merger's failure in 1977, several members of the Star Group founded the Communist Alliance Group (*Guruh-i ittihad-i kumunisti*), which following the revolution became the Organization of Communist Unity (*Sazman-i vahdat-i kumunisti*).<sup>79</sup>

By late 1969 or early 1970, the decision was made unilaterally and without broader consultation to move to the Middle East,<sup>80</sup> as the small band of cadres made their way to the region and took Beirut, Damascus and Baghdad as their main locations of activity.<sup>81</sup> Hasan Masali and K.K. (Ahmad) were the first to go to the Middle East, visiting Baghdad to participate in the Iraqi Students Congress as representatives of the Confederation of Iranian Students, National Union. It was there that they contacted Fateh's Walid Ahmad Nimr al-Nasir, better known as Abu Ali Iyad, who was already familiar with Iranian militants such as Ali Akbar Safa'i Farahani, a founding member of the Fada'i Guerrillas. Safa'i Farahani had left Iran to train and fight alongside the Palestinian resistance and would later be executed by the Shah's regime following his capture in the aftermath of the assault against the Siahkal gendarmerie on 8 February 1971.<sup>82</sup> The ONFME's initial cadres amounted to fewer than 10 dedicated activists, while in subsequent years they were able to attract a couple of hundred student supporters in Europe and the United States.<sup>83</sup> In the early 1970s, Jazani too was able to discern a palpable ideological and political transformation in the new generation of activists still cleaving to the legacy of Musaddiq and the National Front, and its consonance with the revolutionary *zeitgeist*: 'the struggling forces of the National Front have lost their faith in the leadership and parties. They have turned to Marxism, having ceased to regard "nationalism" as responding to the problems of Iran's national liberation movement.'<sup>84</sup>

This process of disillusionment with the leadership and politics of the National Front was spelled out in CAG/OCU's pamphlet *What Should Not Be Done?* (*Chih nabayad kard?*), an allusion to Lenin's own famous pamphlet. This work is important not only because of the information it contains about Communist Unity's 'pre-history', but also because it is one of very few pamphlets coming out of the revolutionary left around this time which can be read as an exercise in self-criticism and as part of an ongoing process of searching introspection, in lieu of the usual accounts chronicling a succession of unparalleled acts of bravery and heroism:

Awareness of the shortcomings of the past, and especially the lack of a clear programme, led to the emergence of new movements. This included the formation of a group, close to the small communist currents which had come into being in Europe and America in 1970, and their initiation of special activities in the Middle East.<sup>85</sup>

The first individuals to leave Europe for the Middle East were Hasan Masali and K.K. (Ahmad). They were later joined from the United States by Khusraw Parsa (a distant relative of Ali Shayigan), Bizhan Mussahibnia, K.F. (Tahir) and B.M. (Mahmud Irani).<sup>86</sup> Manuchihr Hamidi first supported the initiative from Munich and acted as a crucial liaison. He then briefly went

---

<sup>79</sup>Masali, *Nigarishi bih guzashtah va ayandah*, 317.

<sup>80</sup>*Chih nabayad kard?*, 18.

<sup>81</sup>Masali, *Nigarishi bih guzashtah va ayandah*, 318.

<sup>82</sup>Correspondence with Mahmud Irani, 11 June 2017.

<sup>83</sup>Masali claims that ONFME had around 400 supporters in Europe and the United States during the 1970s. Masali, *Nigarishi bih guzashtah va ayandah*, 241.

<sup>84</sup>Jazani, 'Namah bih yak dust', 334.

<sup>85</sup>*Nukati dar barah-yi purusah-yi tajanus*, 22.

<sup>86</sup>Correspondence with Mahmud Irani (*nom de guerre*), 4 June 2017.

to Iraq for training, before surreptitiously crossing the Iraqi border into Iran as part of the 'homogenization process' (*purusah-yi tajanus*), namely, the merger of their small group and the OIPFG.<sup>87</sup> Beginning in 1973, both groups agreed in principle that their ideological differences could be resolved through a period of theoretical discussion, criticism and exchange (see next section).<sup>88</sup> Virtually all of those just mentioned had been active in Iranian diaspora student politics revolving around the work of the Confederation of Iranian Students and the Organizations of the National Front Abroad. Like-minded activists in these diaspora organizations, such as Kambiz Rusta, Muhammad Ali Khansari and Bizhan Iftikhari, also later became members of the 'Star Group', but they were not permanently based in the Middle East. Rusta and others did visit the region for meetings and consultations. He also undertook a short period of guerrilla training.<sup>89</sup> Though these activists acted primarily as the Star Group's representatives and advocates in Europe and the United States, one key objective was to dispatch cadres from the metropole to training camps in the Middle East, and from there to Iran so they could participate in armed struggle.<sup>90</sup> Ahmad Shayigan, son of Ali Shayigan, was based in New York, though he later moved to Europe where he was active in the Confederation of Iranian Students, before leaving for Libya in the mid-1970s.

But at the outset of the 1970s, these activists felt a genuine need to establish contact with like-minded groups inside Iran. In the summer of 1970 they began by broaching relations with Mas'ud Ahmadzadah in the north-eastern city of Mashhad. They achieved this through one of their own number, who happened to be a cousin of Ahmadzadah. The latter was of course the co-founder of one of the clandestine groups that would eventually unite to form the Marxist-Leninist People's Fada'i Guerrillas.<sup>91</sup> They later also established relations with the Organization of the Iranian People's Mujahidin, before the release of its first communique, which, incidentally, would also be issued from Beirut on 9 February 1972.<sup>92</sup>

This assortment of individuals had already broached contact with Fateh's representative in Germany in the final years of the 1960s, but went on to establish more systematic ties with the Palestinian group and its representatives in Beirut, which showed great willingness to support the young Iranian revolutionaries. Individuals comprising the National Front in the Middle East came from Europe, the United States and even Iran to undergo military training, while affiliated activists continued their work in European and American cities:<sup>93</sup> publicizing the fate of political prisoners, exposing further the improprieties and violations of the Shah and his regime, and holding protest rallies besmirching the international reputation and public relations of the latter.

Regular cooperation between the Mujahidin and the National Front in the Middle East continued, even after the Mujahidin's now infamous 'change of ideological positions' (*taghyir-i mavaza*) in 1975, when members who protested its abandonment of Islam and adoption of Marxism-Leninism were brutally killed.<sup>94</sup> Alongside the Mujahidin and Fada'i Guerrillas, ONFME initiated and contributed to the operation and content of three Persian-language

<sup>87</sup>The OIPFG added 'Iran' to their name in 1974–1975.

<sup>88</sup>*Nukati dar barah-yi purusah-yi tajanus*, 10; Hasan Masali, *Sayr-i tahavul-i junbish-i chap-i Iran va 'avamil-i buhran-i mudavim-i an* (Los Angeles, CA: Dihkhuda, 2001), 127.

<sup>89</sup>Rusta and Ahmadi, Interview with Kambiz Rusta, *RA/OA*, Part 4.

<sup>90</sup>*Ibid.*, Part 4.

<sup>91</sup>Masali, *Nigarishi bih guzashtah va ayandah*, 357.

<sup>92</sup>H.E. Chehabi, 'The Anti-Shah Opposition in Lebanon', in *Distant Relations: Iran and Lebanon in the Last 500 Years* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 186.

<sup>93</sup>Iftikhari and Ahmadi, Interview with Bizhan Iftikhari, *RA/OA*, Part 3.

<sup>94</sup>Ervand Abrahamian, *Radical Islam: The Iranian Mojahedin* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1989), chapter 6.

anti-regime radio stations expedited and broadcast from within Iraq with the support of the Ba'thsit regime. These were Sida-yi Inqilabiyun (Revolutionaries' Voice) (1972–1973), Radio Mihan Parastan (Patriots) (1973–1975), which was later broadcast from Libya until the revolution,<sup>95</sup> and Radio Surush (1974–1975), which was shut down following the conclusion of the Algiers Accord between the Iranian and Iraqi governments in 1975.<sup>96</sup> ONFME were also the driving force behind the fourth series of the newspaper, *Bakhtar-i imruz*, as well as a newspaper in Arabic by the name of *Iran al-thawra*,<sup>97</sup> of which there were no more than a couple of issues.<sup>98</sup> According to one former member of OCU only a single issue of *Bakhtar-i imruz* was printed in Beirut, while the rest were printed in Iraq, despite representations to the contrary. Each issue had a circulation of approximately 500.<sup>99</sup> The activists understandably harboured a desire to distance themselves and their activities from the Iraqi Ba'thist regime and not appear beholden to the latter.<sup>100</sup> But the publication of *Bakhtar-i imruz* sought once again to connect their political praxis to the historic legacy of Musaddiq's executed Foreign Minister, Husayn Fatimi, and an anti-imperialist imagination, which had continued to evolve and change.<sup>101</sup> Following the Algiers Accord, a number of ONFME activists moved to Libya where they were provided with cars, houses and other facilities with which to carry on their political activities and anti-regime agitation.<sup>102</sup>

As mentioned previously, the debates within the Organizations of the National Front during this period had closely tracked those within Iran itself and were symptomatic of the NFI's precipitous decline inside Iran and the seismic shift taking place within much of the Global South. Manifold national liberation and anti-colonial struggles found themselves enveloped by the discourse and practice of armed struggle as the leading modality of resistance to American imperialism and the authoritarian regimes the United States was held responsible for arming and providing with political and diplomatic cover. In the eyes of these small clusters of young activists based primarily in Beirut, Baghdad and Damascus, the Soviet and Chinese models too were thoroughly discredited, and to their great chagrin, seen as pursuing détente with the profoundly maligned Shah.<sup>103</sup> Because of the fractiousness plaguing the National Front both inside and outside the country, and the Pahlavi regime's authoritarian consolidation accompanied by successive waves of repression,<sup>104</sup> the veteran opposition of 1953 had been severely demoralized. The young activists who formed the National Front in the Middle East and the Star Group had become convinced of the pertinence of Marxist-Leninist organizational principles, namely the need for a vanguard of professional cadres and its accompanying revolutionary ideology. In a retrospective assessment of their own development CAG/OCU insightfully remarked that:

---

<sup>95</sup>Correspondence with Mahmud Irani, 2 April 2017.

<sup>96</sup>Tabrizi states that a condition of launching the radio stations in Iraq was that the Iraqi government not interfere in the content of the broadcasts, though as he later makes clear, as bilateral negotiations between Iran and Iraq progressed, the Iraqis prohibited anti-Pahlavi regime propaganda on Radio Mihan Parastan. Haydar Tabrizi, *Ravabit-i burun marzi-yi saz-man-i chirik-ha-yi fada'i-yi khalq-i Iran ta Bahman 1357* (Cologne: Baqir Murtazavi, 1395), 28; Mahmud Du'a'i, *Gushah'i az khatirat-i Hujjat al-Islam wa al-muslimin Sayyid Mahmud Du'a'i* (Tihran: 'Aruj, 1387), 90.

<sup>97</sup>*Nukati dar barah-yi purusah-yi tajanus*, 11.

<sup>98</sup>Interview with Jalil (*nom de guerre*), 26 June 2017.

<sup>99</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup>This is confirmed by one of their better-known members, Hasan Masali. Masali, *Sayr-i tahavul-i junbish-i chap-i Iran*, 124.

<sup>102</sup>Interview with Jalil, 26 June 2017.

<sup>103</sup>On the issue of Soviet détente, see Roham Alvandi, 'The Shah's Détente with Khrushchev: Iran's 1962 Missile Base Pledge to the Soviet Union', *Cold War History* 14, no. 3 (2014): 423–44.

<sup>104</sup>Mawj-i nawwin-i mubarizah, *Bakhtar-i imruz* 4, no. 7, Day 1349 [December 1970–January 1971].

The activists of our group (*guruh*) came out of currents that had developed separately from one another and without reciprocal influence, and were not in an organic relationship together. This group's adherence to Marxism-Leninism was not created through an acute class struggle tied to the struggles of the working class. In this respect, our knowledge and understanding of Marxism-Leninism were replete with points of weakness.<sup>105</sup>

These activists, having agreed on the *tactical* necessity of urban guerrilla warfare, began to translate and disseminate seminal texts by Castro, Guevara, Carlos Marighella and the Uruguayan Tupamaros National Liberation Movement, with an even greater sense of urgency.<sup>106</sup> CAG/OCU indeed claim that Mas'ud Ahmadzadah had read their translations of Marighella's famous text on urban guerrilla warfare before the two groups had established formal contacts and the People's Fada'i Guerrillas' armed assault on the gendarmerie at Siahkal.<sup>107</sup> The advocacy of armed struggle had not been a radical break, however, as can be seen in the late issues of the third series of *Bakhtar-i imruz* published in New York. It had very much been on the agenda, and came to occupy tactical primacy over civil modalities of political struggle and organization, regarded as untenable under the present conditions. On this point, at least, the individuals who made up ONFME and the Star Group had reached conclusions comparable to those found in Amir Parviz Puyan's (d. 1971) *The Necessity of Armed Struggle and the Repudiation of the Theory of Survival* (spring 1970), and Ahmadzadah's (d. 1972) *Armed Struggle: Both Strategy and Tactics* (summer 1970).<sup>108</sup> Both pamphlets, influenced by the writings of Guevara and Régis Debray, contended that civil contestation was impossible under the prevalent repressive and stultifying political atmosphere, and armed struggle was necessary not only to demonstrate the vulnerability of the Pahlavi state, but to awaken the people and thus ignite a larger struggle for national liberation.<sup>109</sup>

According to Bizhan Iftikhari, a member of the Star Group, his views and those of his comrades were not only closely aligned with Ahmadzadah and Puyan, but the group also helped disseminate the two aforementioned pamphlets and shared similar exemplars in the anti-colonial struggles of Latin America, Cuba and Vietnam.<sup>110</sup> They also rejected not only the tutelage of the Soviet Union, but, unlike their Maoist compatriots in the Revolutionary Organization of the Tudah Party of Iran, the People's Republic of China as well.<sup>111</sup> Like other fellow Iranian revolutionaries at this time, the members of the National Front in the Middle East held that the tactical pursuit of urban-based armed struggle would provoke mass resistance and the eventual formation of a popular liberation army.<sup>112</sup>

CAG/OCU insist that when they first moved to the Middle East, they were still committed to reviving the National Front Abroad, albeit on a new footing. They hoped to witness the emergence of new political formations with a coherent and rigorous ideological and

<sup>105</sup>By their own acknowledgement their relationship and ties to organized labour inside Iran during this time were negligible to non-existent. *Nukati dar barah-yi purusah-yi tajanus*, 28.

<sup>106</sup>Masali, *Nigarishi bih guzashtah va ayandah*, 308.

<sup>107</sup>Marighella's text was published in Persian as a separate pamphlet and not in *Bakhtar-i imruz*. Correspondence with Mahmud Irani, 2 April 2017. Also see, *Nukati dar barah-yi purusah-yi tajanus*, 12.

<sup>108</sup>The advocacy of armed struggle remained consistent throughout the 1970s as can be seen from the final issue of *Bakhtar-i imruz*: 'Dar defa' az mubarizah-yi musalahanah', *Bakhtar-i imruz* 4, no. 77, Day 1355 [December 1975–January 1976].

<sup>109</sup>Masali, *Nigarishi bih guzashtah va ayandah*, 357; Vahabzadeh, *A Guerrilla Odyssey*, chapter 4; Michael Löwy, *The Marxism of Che Guevara: Philosophy, Economics, Revolutionary Warfare*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1973), chapter 11.

<sup>110</sup>Iftikhari and Ahmadi, Interview with Bizhan Iftikhari, *RAIOA*, Part 3; Rusta and Ahmadi, Interview with Kambiz Rusta, *RAIOA*, Part 3.

<sup>111</sup>*Ibid.*, Part 3.

<sup>112</sup>This position would be publicly articulated in *Bakhtar-i imruz*: 'Jang-i chiriki-yi shahri ta tashkil-i artash-i khalq', *Bakhtar-i imruz* 4, no. 3 (10–21 November 1970). Also see *Nukati dar barah-yi purusah-yi tajanus*, 43.

theoretical approach, which could then be fostered and further expanded. At the beginning of the 1970s the activists of the ONFME continued to cling to the vague possibility that a slew of independent militant organizations would continue to collaborate and work together under the auspices of the NFI, and thereby transform the latter into a genuine popular front as they believed already existed in Vietnam. They were still, in their own words, partaking in organizational 'fetishism', instead of making a clean break with the loose coalition in which they had received their early political education.<sup>113</sup>

Nonetheless, a more vanguardist organizational model quickly emerged as the ONFME began the deployment of small cadres to conflict zones in the Arab world, which saw radical armed movements and status quo powers pitted against one another, and where they could acquire military and strategic training in the conduct of guerrilla warfare.<sup>114</sup> According to Ahmad Shayigan, when the decision was first taken to send members of the Organizations of the National Front in Europe and the United States to the fertile enclaves of the Palestinian revolution,<sup>115</sup> most likely PLO camps in Jordan prior to 'Black September' 1970, for military training, his father and elderly statesman in exile gave his approbation, but 'this kind of struggle was a far cry from what he knew'.<sup>116</sup> At this time, the National Front in the Middle East not only operated under the imprimatur of the Organizations of the National Front Abroad, but was also a powerful voice in the Confederation of Iranian Students, where its representatives and supporters vigorously lobbied in favour of the Fada'i Guerrillas inside Iran, receiving messages of support from them in turn.<sup>117</sup> The extent of their influence was palpable when despite a Maoist majority in the Confederation's Secretariat in 1971, Manuchihr Hamidi, a founding member of the National Front in the Middle East/Star Group, was elected to the secretariat, and held the key position of head of Organization and Defence. During this time, he was especially active in calling for an international boycott of the lavish and highly controversial 2500 year celebrations of the establishment of the 'Imperial State of Iran'.<sup>118</sup>

In what might appear to be a reprise of the stultifying wrangling of past gatherings of the National Front and its Organizations, the 1972 congress of the Organizations of the National Front Abroad and 1973 plenum again ran into divisive arguments over the character of 'Front' versus 'group activity'. Some saw no contradiction between a Front sustained by professional political organizations, while others continued to resist such an eventuality. The deadlock over the nature and modus operandi of the National Front Abroad and the very character of the struggle it ought to conduct, and the division between a core of committed activists who advocated revolutionary insurrection as opposed to more casual activists, proved too much to surmount.

Despite the election of executive committees for the European, American and Middle Eastern branches, these organizations except for the radical cadre in the Middle East fell into dereliction. Thus, they concluded:

---

<sup>113</sup>Ibid., 43.

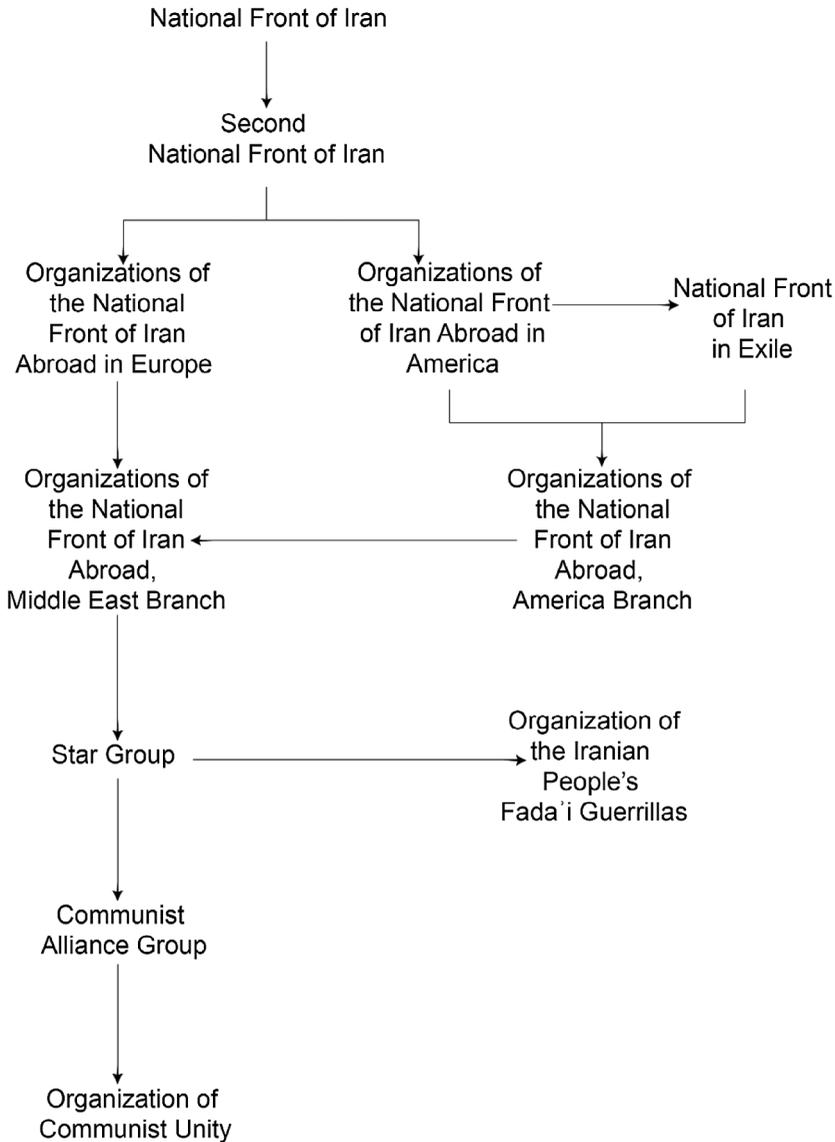
<sup>114</sup>9 sal-i mubarizah 'alayhah impiriyalizm va dast nashandaganish: zindigi namah-yi mukhtasar-i rafiq Murtaza Sayyid Isma'il (Abu Shahin); *Raha'i*, no. 31 (29 April 1980 [9 Urdibihisht 1359]).

<sup>115</sup>See, Karma Nabulsi and Abdel Razzaq Takriti, 'The Palestinian Revolution', 2016. <https://learnpalestine.politics.ox.ac.uk> (accessed 5 June 2017).

<sup>116</sup>Shayigan and Shayigan, *Sayyid 'Ali Shayigan*, 2, 179.

<sup>117</sup>Matin-asgari, *Iranian Student Opposition to the Shah*, 140.

<sup>118</sup>Ibid., 126; Hamid Shawkat, *Junbish-i danishju'i: kunfidarasiyun-i jahani-yi muhassalin va danishjuyan-i Irani (ittihad-i milli)*, vol. 1 (Los Angeles, CA: Shirkat-i kitab, 2010), 237.



**Figure 1.** Mapping the origins of the Organization of Communist Unity.

after 5 years [since the 1972 congress] it will be observed that the only activity under the name of the National Front was from those who belonged to the group [namely, the Star Group, later Communist Alliance Group]. The others did not take a single step for the National Front. During the last five years, the council did not even hold a single meeting.<sup>119</sup>

Those elected to the committees of the Front's foreign-based organizations were overwhelmingly criticized for their general inactivity, lackadaisical attitude and the absence of any sense of genuine accountability within the organization itself. As a direct result, CAG/OCU argued

<sup>119</sup>*Chih nabayad kard?*, 30.

the NFI was susceptible to manipulation as an inherently ‘temporary coalition’,<sup>120</sup> whereas parties, at least the archetypal party they had in mind, were synonymous with ideology, strategy, tactics and a practical programme.<sup>121</sup>

### ‘Homogenization process’, the Star Group and the emergence of Communist Unity

As mentioned briefly earlier, in the spring of 1973 a constellation of independent Marxist activists associated with the ONFME entered into the ‘homogenization process’<sup>122</sup> with the OIPFG under the name of the ‘Star Group’, and thus effectively dissolved their organizational structure into that of the Fada’i Guerrillas.<sup>123</sup> It was Hamidi who was chosen and agreed to covertly return to Iran as the Star Group’s representative in this process and aid its progress.<sup>124</sup> According to a former member of the OIPFG, Haydar Tabrizi, the *nom de guerre* of Muhammad Dabiri Fard, who was involved in the organization’s foreign relations and operations during the latter half of the 1970s, the Star Group, under the cover of the Organizations of the National Front Abroad played a vital part in the distribution of OIPFG propaganda and political literature in Europe and the United States.<sup>125</sup> Within the clandestine Star Group there also appears to have been a dilemma between preserving its hidden identity as an organization, which advocated and partook in armed struggle and facilitated the operations of the OIPFG, while continuing to work under the banner of the Organizations of the National Front.<sup>126</sup> It, nevertheless, acted as an essential intermediary and interlocutor with militant Palestinian organizations inside Lebanon and representatives of the Iraqi state.<sup>127</sup> According to Tabrizi, the members of the National Front in the Middle East acted as the OIPFG’s representatives in the region during this time.<sup>128</sup> Though the OIPFG was undoubtedly the larger, more famous organization, with active professional cadres inside Iran, the Star Group’s extensive logistical and political networks in the Arab world harboured valuable political, military and symbolic capital. This capital was sorely needed by the OIPFG in the face of an unrelenting state campaign against it. ONFME’s relations with revolutionary movements and governments in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Turkey, and their pronounced influence within the Confederation of Iranian Students in Europe and the United States, therefore proved indispensable to the OIPFG’s propaganda and logistical networks abroad.<sup>129</sup>

While we can take CAG/OCU’s account of the Organizations of the National Front of Iran Abroad as a generally accurate appraisal by virtue of the other evidence marshalled here and being confirmed in the few alternative accounts at our disposal, by their own tacit admission, the process of unification they had undertaken with the OIPFG only served to

<sup>120</sup>An identifiably Leninist view. See, V.I. Lenin, *Essential Works of Lenin* (New York: Dover, 1987), Loc 1975, 2185.

<sup>121</sup>*Chih nabayad kard?*, 37.

<sup>122</sup>This article cannot expand at length on the ‘homogenization process’ which has been tackled elsewhere in the extant scholarship: see, Vahabzadeh, *A Guerrilla Odyssey*, Loc 2020; Maziar Behrooz, *Rebels with a Cause: The Failure of the Left in Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 66–7; Afshin Matin-asgari, *Iranian Student Opposition to the Shah*, 139–40.

<sup>123</sup>*Nukati dar barah-yi purusah-yi tajanus*, 10, 18.

<sup>124</sup>Masali, *Nigarishi bih guzashtah va ayandah*, 364.

<sup>125</sup>Tabrizi, *Ravabit-i burun marzi*, 25.

<sup>126</sup>*Nukati dar barah-yi purusah tajanus*, 31.

<sup>127</sup>Tabrizi, *Ravabit-i burun marzi*, 29.

<sup>128</sup>*Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>129</sup>*Nukati dar barah-yi purusah-yi tajanus*, 29.

further aggravate the already serious differences in outlook and approach between and within the respective branches of the Organizations of the National Front Abroad.<sup>130</sup> The very idea of continuing as part of the National Front had in their estimation ceased to be tenable after revising their one-time adherence to the notion of 'national-democratic revolution' (*inqilab-i dimokrat-i milli*), the conditions for which in late 1970 they still believed to obtain, and would be led by none other than a revitalized National Front.<sup>131</sup> But when the core of the Star Group, later Communist Alliance ceased to endorse the thesis of national-democratic revolution, and began instead to advocate fully fledged socialist revolution with the Iranian working class as its basis and chief driver,<sup>132</sup> the notion of a Front cutting across classes appeared misguided and a betrayal of Leninist theory.<sup>133</sup> They came to explicitly reject the 'two stage theory of revolution', and now stated that the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' would effectively commence with the revolution's inception. This circumvented the 'national bourgeoisie', since they argued that the post-revolutionary democratic phase and dictatorship of the proletariat would overlap and entail one another.<sup>134</sup> How exactly socialist revolution would be achieved under the current circumstances and in the absence of powerful, antagonistic workers' unions and organic relationships with the Iranian proletariat was a theoretical and practical question for which they were aware they still had little answer.

Hamid Ashraf's (d. June 1976) dominant role in the leadership of the OIPFG, as well as the ideological shadow cast by Hamid Mu'mini and his Stalinist and Maoist tendencies, led relations between the Star Group and OIPFG to be strained.<sup>135</sup> CAG alleged the OIPFG's nascent theoretical and political Stalinism motivated the internal executions which took place within the OIPFG;<sup>136</sup> subsequently they claimed the latter were decisive in the homogenization process's failure by 1976.<sup>137</sup> Consonantly, it was also in this period that members of the Star Group authored substantial theoretical criticisms of Stalinist and Maoist proclivities within the organizational *modus operandi* and theoretical armoury of the OIPFG.<sup>138</sup> It was in late 1975 that troubling revelations emerged of the OIPFG's involvement in the execution of two of its members deemed to pose a 'security risk', as well as the exaction of corporal punishment at their safe houses as they sought to prepare themselves for the

<sup>130</sup>*Chih nabayad kard?*, 40.

<sup>131</sup>*Nukati dar barah-yi purusah-yi tajanus*, 42.

<sup>132</sup>*Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>133</sup>A position which came to be held by a number of communist organizations during this period. The fortunes of 'Leninism' in the broadest of terms witnessed something of a revival amongst elements within the New Left opposed to established socialist parties, which were regarded as compromised and prone to opportunism and détente vis-à-vis American imperialism. Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao and Che* (London: Verso, 2006), 51.

<sup>134</sup>*Nukati dar barah-yi purusah-yi tajanus*, 34.

<sup>135</sup>A member of OIPFG has also confirmed Mu'mini's decisive role in the disagreement. Tabrizi, *Ravabit-i burun marzi*, 48.

<sup>136</sup>This is implied by CAG/OCU in *Chih nabayad kard?*, 39–40, when it is said that the problem of Stalinism in the OIPFG did not merely exist at a theoretical level.

More contemporary accounts confirm that members of the Star Group were apprised of internal executions within the OIPFG outside of Iran by individual Fada'is such as Muhsin Nurbakhsh. The Star Group held it was due to the ascendancy of Stalinism in the OIPFG, while others in the OIPFG contended it was due to 'security' concerns. Masali, *Sayr-i tahavul-i junbish-i chap-i Iran*, 129–30; Tabrizi, *Ravabit-i burun marzi*, 49.

<sup>137</sup>CAG/OCU also contend that another reason for the failure of the unification process was SAVAK's raids against the OIPFG in May–June 1976, which provoked the demotion of the theoretical opus of Ahmadzadah and Amir Parviz Puyan as the basis of political praxis, and the adoption of Bizhan Jazani's perspective instead. CAG/OCU were later critical of Jazani, contending that his analysis of Iran's political situation was too closely aligned with that of the Tudah Party. Masali, *Nigarishi bih guzashtah va ayandah*, 381.

<sup>138</sup>See, Guruh-i ittihad-i kumunisti, *Istalinism: tabadol-i nazar dar purusah-yi tajanus bayn-i sazman-i chirikha-yi fada'i-yi khalq va guruh-i ittihad-i kumunisti*, Bahar 1356 [Spring 1977].

prospect of torture at the hands of SAVAK. It was news which deeply shocked the Star Group.<sup>139</sup> The death of Hamidi, one of the Star Group's founders and most accomplished partisans, in a flurry of SAVAK raids on safe houses (*khanah-ha-yi timi*) in Rasht, Karaj and Tehran, also had a decisive impact on the process's feasibility as the OIPFG struggled for survival.<sup>140</sup>

Following the homogenization process's final breakdown, the ONFME activists decided to reorganize themselves to form the CAG. It should, however, be made clear that not all of those who were members of the Star Group, for example K.K. (Ahmad), K.F. (Tahir), Iftikhari and Rusta, joined the OCU, despite their initial participation in this new-formation Communist Alliance. Rusta would claim in a 1995 interview that he and 20 of his comrades broke with the latter due to its refusal to abandon 'Leninism', which he claimed was 'dogmatic', 'anti-humanist' and 'anti-communist'.<sup>141</sup> Following the revolution, all the members and close sympathizers of CAG returned to Iran and joined their comrades who were already inside the country. Though we still require more information apropos the process which led to the change of name to OCU, it ostensibly signified the organization's ambition and desire to inaugurate a new level of activities in an Iran which had just overthrown one of the United States' most powerful and trusted allies in the region. While some notable activists such as Rusta and Iftikhari parted ways with the new organization over ideological and political disagreements, the newly named Organization of Communist Unity was intended to indicate the deeper ideological affinity binding its cadres together and a more ambitious political platform on the post-revolutionary political stage. Soon after the fall of the *ancien régime*, OCU began recruiting new members from among its sympathizers and developed a new party structure at the first assembly of the membership in March 1979.<sup>142</sup>

But as already mentioned, during the 1970s and until the revolution of 1978–1979, the ONFME undertook significant collaboration with Palestinian Fateh, and furthermore the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (General Command). According to Masali, it was in this way that they established close relations with these groups' leaders, including Yasir Arafat, Khalil Ibrahim al-Wazir (better known as Abu Jihad) and George Habash.<sup>143</sup> This cooperation continued apace despite the homogenization process's unravelling.<sup>144</sup> Members of the ONFME/Communist Alliance not only received military training in the camps of the Palestinian guerrillas,<sup>145</sup> but a few also participated directly in the conflicts inside Dhufar, Oman during the first half of the 1970s, in which armed revolutionaries attempted to overthrow the British-backed Sultan Qaboos,<sup>146</sup> and the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1991).<sup>147</sup> They also fought the Israeli invasion to drive the Palestine Liberation Organization out of Southern Lebanon in the context of Operation Litani

<sup>139</sup>Masali, *Nigarishi bih guzashtah va ayandah*, 372.

<sup>140</sup>*Ibid.*, 364; Tabrizi, *Ravabit-i burun marzi*, 54.

There has even been speculation that Hamidi may too have been purged, but there is no concrete evidence of this. Mahmud Nadiri, *Chirik-ha-yi fada'i-yi khalq: az nukhustin kunish-ha ta bahman 1357*, vol. 1 (Tehran: Mu'assissah-yi mutala'at va pazhuhish-ha-yi siyasi, 1390), 653.

<sup>141</sup>Rusta and Ahmadi, Interview with Rusta, *RAIOA*, Part 5.

<sup>142</sup>Correspondence with Mahmud Irani, 25 June 2017. I address OCU's post-revolutionary activities in a forthcoming article.

<sup>143</sup>Masali, *Nigarishi bih guzashtah va ayandah*, 318.

<sup>144</sup>9 sal-i mubarizah 'alayhah impiriyalism va dast nashandaganish: zindigi namah-yi mukhtasar-i rafiq Murtaza Sayyid Isma'il (Abu Shahin); *Raha'i*, no. 31 (29 April 1980 [9 Urdibihisht 1359]).

<sup>145</sup>Masali, *Sayr-i tahavul-i junbish-i chap-i Iran*, 128.

<sup>146</sup>See, Abdel Razzaq Takriti, *Monsoon Revolution: Republicans, Sultans, and Empires in Oman, 1965–1975* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>147</sup>*Nukat dar barah-yi purusah-yi tajanus*, 11.

of March 1978.<sup>148</sup> These collaborative efforts emerged not only out of the desire to have a base of operations closer to Iran and acquire training from some of the pre-eminent guerrilla movements within the region, but also from a genuine conviction and belief in the collective liberation of all colonized peoples. Taken together they should be regarded as a form of South–South solidarity in the name of collective emancipation against imperial penetration and neo-colonialism.

By the time of Communist Alliance's (post-1979 Communist Unity) maturation in the second half of the 1970s their stated principles and outlook were enumerated thus:

(1) Scientific communism (*kumunism-i 'ilmi*).<sup>149</sup>

(2) Only under a classless society are the conditions for human liberation capable of realization.

(3) Capitalism is a global system predicated on the exploitation of the dispossessed and is currently in the monopoly imperialist stage; an obvious iteration of Lenin's *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*.<sup>150</sup> It is only by means of a socialist revolution that the yoke of colonial oppression might be overturned, where the dictatorship of the proletariat was synonymous with the masses' re-appropriation of their collective destiny.<sup>151</sup>

(4) Proletarian internationalism. Irrespective of nationality, race, language, religion or culture, the global working class is bound together by its antithetical relation to capital and must therefore support each other's struggle against the predations of global capitalism.

(5) In the numerous debates between Iranian leftists revolving around whether Iran had ceased to be a 'feudal' society, CAG/OCU, like a number of other Marxist organizations, had concluded late Pahlavi Iran had indeed become a capitalist country and that the fundamental contradiction characterizing Iranian society was that of capital against labour.<sup>152</sup>

(6) The violence inherent in the maintenance of empire and the ruling class makes armed resistance key to the liberation of the oppressed. They concurred with Guevara's contention that 'imperialism is a world system, the final stage of capitalism, and that it must be beaten in a great worldwide confrontation.'<sup>153</sup>

(7) Revisionism and parliamentarianism had led the working class astray as had political parties which resort to either ignoring or glossing over class conflict.

(8) Maoism, Trotskyism and Stalinism were all deviations (*inhirafat*) within the communist movement.<sup>154</sup>

(9) Like other New Left trends at the time they did not, in their own words, recognize any *ka 'ba* as the privileged 'homeland' (*mihan*) of socialism and therefore refused to be subject to the dictates or geo-political realpolitik of any external power, explicitly rejecting 'nationalism under the guise of socialism' in a clear swipe at both the U.S.S.R. and People's Republic of China.<sup>155</sup>

<sup>148</sup>Jibbah-yi azadi bakhsh-i filastin va Guruh-i ittihad-i kumunisti, 'Jang-i labnan' (Spring 1357); Tabrizi, *Ravabit-i burun marzi*, 25–7.

<sup>149</sup>Sazman-i vahdat-i kumunisti, *Dar tadaruk-i inqilab-i sawsiyalisti* (Azar 1357 [November/December 1978]), 2–3.

<sup>150</sup>V.I. Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism: A Popular Outline* (London: Penguin Books, 2010 [1916]), chapter 7.

<sup>151</sup>*Chih nabayad kard?*, v.

<sup>152</sup>Jazani, for example, had concluded that Iran's was indeed a dependent capitalist regime: Jazani, *Tarh-i jami 'ih shinasi*, 61.

<sup>153</sup>Che Guevara, *Che Guevara Reader: Writings on Politics & Revolution*, 2nd expanded ed. (North Melbourne, VIC: Ocean Press, 2003), 358.

<sup>154</sup>*Nukati dar barah-yi purusah-yi tajanus*, 40.

<sup>155</sup>The critique of Chinese foreign policy vis-à-vis the Pahlavi regime was publicly evident as early as 1972. 'Dar barah-yi siyasat-i kharijah-yi chin', *Bakhtar-i imruz* 4, no. 33, Day 1351 [January 1972–December 1973].

Apart from the discernible influence of the Tri-continental Moment and its profound emphasis on 'internationalist proletarian solidarity',<sup>156</sup> the importance of CAG/OCU's anti-imperialist lineage in the National Front and Musaddiq's advocacy of 'negative equilibrium' should not be underestimated. Preceding Bandung and Non-Alignment by some years, this distinguished inheritance impacted the group's political trajectory and insistence on the pursuit of an independent revolutionary policy along the lines of comparable movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America.<sup>157</sup> This lineage also arguably shaped their inveterate hostility to Stalinism and the repression of dissenting voices internal to their organization, propelling them instead to partake in vigorous self-criticism, democratic discussion and critical reflection.

Despite holding revolutionary views, many of which would have undoubtedly been wholly foreign to the Qajar aristocrat and statesman, Musaddiq, they continued to operate under the banner of the ONFME, only irrevocably parting ways with the National Front in the autumn of 1977. As this article has tried to demonstrate, this process of disillusionment and eventual break with the National Front Abroad, though not Musaddiq's legacy, was a complex and circuitous one: in organizational terms moving from a plural, amorphous front to Marxist-Leninist vanguardism, and in geographical scope shifting from the national frame to internationalist class struggle, albeit with considerable emphasis upon solidarity with like-minded struggles in the Global South.

## Conclusion

The activists of the Organizations of the National Front Abroad (Middle East Branch) and Communist Alliance/Communist Unity continued to see themselves as perpetuating Musaddiq's legacy, if not radicalizing its logic altogether.<sup>158</sup> They sought not only to establish an independent and democratic government free from imperial meddling, but to overturn capitalist exploitation and class oppression by founding a more humane and equitable socialist society. Just as importantly, they located Iran's liberation in the collective emancipation of the Global South and, to this effect, collaborated and fought alongside national liberation movements throughout the West Asia and North Africa.

It would be facile to blame the National Front in the Middle East/Communist Alliance for the internal divisions and dysfunction of the National Front Abroad, which as we have seen in many respects mirrored the disagreements over organization which had plagued the Second National Front. Indeed, one could even make the case that this challenge which faced the National Front had dogged it from its inception, including during Musaddiq's tenure as premier. In later years, in addition to issues of organization, serious political and ideological cleavages also began to arise. These were to some extent the outcome of a consequential generational gap, as a younger class of dissidents grew frustrated with the Shah's entrenched authoritarian security state and the support it received from the United

---

<sup>156</sup>*Che Guevara Reader*, 360–2.

<sup>157</sup>For an account of the impact of Musaddiq's visit to Egypt in November 1951 and its wider significations for anti-colonial politics in the Arab world, see Lior Sternfeld, 'Iran Days in Egypt: Mosaddeq's Visit to Cairo in 1951', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 43, no. 1 (2016): 1–20.

<sup>158</sup>Mu'azzami, 'Az tajrubah-yi Musaddiq', 361.

States during the 'global Cold War'. As has been recounted, this period also saw the exposure of a sizeable body of Iranian students to radical anti-colonial and leftist thought and activism in Graz, Berlin, Munich, Paris, New York, Berkeley and elsewhere in the United States against the backdrop of the Vietnam War and the worldwide revolt of 1968.<sup>159</sup>

Though recent scholarship has argued that Cold War power politics was experienced by many in the Third World as merely another iteration of European-style colonialism,<sup>160</sup> this insight had already been acutely understood by a generation of dissidents, which had preserved and upheld the anti-imperialism of its forebears, most notably the Musaddiq government of 1951–1953. This was achieved while striking an independent revolutionary path that repudiated the American capitalist imperium and its Soviet and Chinese rivals whose espousal of communist internationalism was given short shrift.

Exceeding the immediacy of Iran's own political and economic conditions, it was also the outcome of a larger struggle and politico-ideological shift on an international scale, where the erstwhile colonized nations of Asia, Africa and Latin America witnessed and participated in the emergence of a plethora of armed liberation movements, many of which had reached the conclusion that the only way to achieve their objectives was by force of arms. The committed were bound to take the lead and help engender the conditions whereby a popular revolutionary process could unfurl.

The National Front in the Middle East and Communist Alliance/Communist Unity, despite their diminutive size, exercised a disproportionate influence on dissident and student activists abroad, as part of the Organizations of the National Front Abroad and the Confederation of Iranian Students. But arguably even more crucial was its transnational network across the Arab world, encompassing Beirut, Tripoli (Lebanon), Libya, Baghdad, Dhufar, Aden<sup>161</sup> and Damascus.<sup>162</sup> The need for a transnational network with like-minded regional movements had also been recognized by leading Fada'i theoretician, Bizhan Jazani, who wrote from his prison cell to Musaddiq's grandson, Hidayatullah Matin-Daftari, that 'The next practical phase is that organizations...gather together in Palestine or Iraq and as councils (*shura'i*)...bring the national liberation movement of Iran into being.'<sup>163</sup> This was in 1972 and Jazani would never again experience freedom, as he would be extra-judicially executed at the hands of SAVAK on the hills behind Evin Prison in April 1975. The letter, however, was written some two years after the activists of ONFME had already begun to make their way and establish themselves in the Middle East. The ONFME was by no means alone in trying to realize this objective, but the fact remains that the invaluable networks it created in the Arab world evinced a spirit and concrete exemplar of South–South internationalism few other Iranian political organizations could match.<sup>164</sup>

<sup>159</sup>The global moment of '1968' is explicitly adduced by Bizhan Iftikhari when retelling the story of his political formation as a student activist along with Kambiz Rusta in Graz, Austria. Iftikhari and Ahmadi, Interview with Bizhan Iftikhari, *RAIOA*, Part 3.

<sup>160</sup>Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 5;

Robert J.C. Young, 'Postcolonialism: From Bandung to the Tricontinental', *Historein* 5 (2005): 15.

<sup>161</sup>Masali, *Nigarishi bih guzashtah va ayandah*, 399.

<sup>162</sup>Correspondence with Mahmud Irani, 2 April 2017.

<sup>163</sup>Jazani, 'Namah bih yak dust', 338.

<sup>164</sup>The Mujahidin-i khalq (M-L) perhaps being the chief exception in this regard.

Finally, because of the CAG and later OCU's critical stances on what it regarded as the lack of internal democracy within the Fada'i Guerrillas as well as its theoretical sophistication and progressive stances on a host of pressing issues following the revolution, it was commended and received plaudits within Iran's left-wing intelligentsia, and was thereby able to further distinguish itself both politically and intellectually from the larger and better-established Iranian Marxist organizations.<sup>165</sup> While it is important not to overstate this group's significance or impact upon Iranian politics and society, the story of its activists' evolution, embrace of a transnational revolutionary politics and preservation of democratic criticism, both recovers and illuminates a neglected vantage point on opposition to Pahlavi authoritarianism during the 1960s and 1970s.

### **Acknowledgements**

The author would like to thank Homa Katouzian, Ervand Abrahamian, Nasser Mohajer, Afshin Matinasgari, Siavush Randjbar-Daemi, Abdel Razzaq Takriti, Mehrdad Vahabi, Behrooz Moazami, Naghmeh Sohrabi, Peyman Vahabzadeh, Khalil Rostamkhani, Roham Alvandi, Touraj Atabaki, Ala Jazayeri and Houchang E. Chehabi, whose comments and suggestions greatly helped improve and strengthen previous drafts of this article.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

---

<sup>165</sup>One example of their post-revolutionary interventions is their pamphlet unambiguously repudiating capital punishment: 'Havadaran-i sazman-i vahdat-i kumunisti dar urupa', *Dar nafy-i i dam* (Autumn 1988).