

ARTICLE

“A Priest does not consider the toppling of the Shah as an option” The KGB and the revolution in Iran

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Abstract

This paper investigates the activities of the KGB residency in Iran during the 1978–79 revolution and early years of the Islamic Republic. While some foreign experts were quick to point to the KGB as behind the revolution, it soon became clear that Soviet leadership and intelligence were no less surprised with the events than their counterparts in the West. However, this does not mean that Moscow did not see the revolution as an opportunity. The KGB served as one of the principal tools of Soviet attempts to influence the domestic situation in Iran and, although it achieved little in pursuing its goals, KGB activities in Iran reveal the extent to which binary Cold War thinking limited Soviet leadership in dealing with the challenge of the Iranian revolution.

Keywords: Intelligence; the Global Cold War; the Soviet Union; the KGB; Iranian revolution; the Tudeh

In September 1981, the U.S. Ambassador to Moscow, Jack Matlock, sent a telegram to the Department of State in which he described Soviet strategy in revolutionary Iran in one brief sentence. According to Matlock, the Soviet Union was “playing the long game in Iran with the hope that, if the Tudeh can keep its head down during the current chaos, it may emerge as the most effective organized force when Khomeini and the mullahs have totally discredited themselves or killed themselves off.”¹ Although the ambassador was quite late in his assessment, and by 1981 few in the Soviet leadership believed the Iranian left were feasible heirs of the supposedly collapsing religious regime, Matlock could have been right in 1979. Soon after the fall of the Shah, the Soviet Union adopted a strategy of supporting the revolution, with expectations to establish a “progressive” (e.g., pro-Soviet) regime in its aftermath as a primary reason for this support, at least for a part of the Soviet leadership. Moreover, the sources critically discussed in this article claim that even before the revolution, and despite mutually beneficial economic relations with the Shah, the Politburo was dissatisfied with the new role of regional policeman assumed by Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in the 1970s. This dissatisfaction resulted in a directive to the KGB to implement “active measures” to discredit the Shah’s regime in the eyes of its neighbors and allies.² However, KGB activities hardly

¹ “Telegram from the Embassy in the Soviet Union to the Department of State,” September 8, 1981, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1981–1988*, Volume III. Soviet Union. January 1981–January 1983, Document 83 (Washington: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2016). <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1981-88v03/d83>.

² In KGB jargon, active measures (*aktivnye meropriiatiia*) were defined as “agent-operational measures aimed at exerting useful influence on aspects of the political life of a target country which are of interest, its foreign policy, the solution of international problems, misleading the adversary, undermining and weakening his positions, the

had any substantial effect on the development of the Iranian revolution. Moreover, they likely became the reason for the massive counterintelligence campaign launched by SAVAK that left the KGB network in Iran virtually destroyed on the eve of the revolution. After the fall of the Iranian monarchy, the KGB followed the directives of the Soviet leadership to help the Tudeh Party of Iran form a united “progressive front” with other leftist groups. However, the developments of the following months proved that KGB attempts to pursue this goal were almost a complete failure. As the rest of the Iranian left was unwilling to join with the Tudeh, the KGB’s functions in the following years were gradually reduced to maintaining secret connections between the CPSU International department and the Tudeh.

One of the main obstacles to studying the KGB and its foreign intelligence activities is the scarcity of available sources. In 2004, Raymond Garthoff wrote in his survey article on the historiography of Cold War intelligence that almost all published accounts of Soviet intelligence activities during the Cold War are based on non-archival sources produced by Soviet defectors, Russian and Western journalists, and retired intelligence officers.³ Unfortunately, little has changed in the availability of KGB archival documents since the publication of Garthoff’s article. While some post-Soviet states declassified their KGB archives, most documents of the KGB First Chief Directorate (*Pervoe Glavnoe Upravlenie*)—the foreign intelligence—remain classified in Moscow. This limitation is, to a certain degree, relieved by the recent declassification of the archives of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). Although most of these new materials do not provide us with detailed descriptions of KGB activities, they do provide much needed context and reveal major Party directives to the KGB. Consequently, this research primarily relies on documents available from the archives of the CPSU, the memoirs of KGB officers, and the archive of the former KGB analyst Vasily Mitrokhin. With memoirs, researchers of Soviet-Iranian relations are in a favorable position, as two of the most well-known KGB memoirists worked in Iran and dedicated significant parts of their books to KGB activities in the country.⁴ Leonid Shebarshin was a KGB resident in Iran from 1979 to 1983, and Vladimir Kuzichkin was his subordinate. More importantly, the aftermath of their service in Iran was very different for the two memoirists. Kuzichkin defected to the United Kingdom, which was partly the reason Shebarshin was called back to Moscow. These circumstances certainly influenced pivotal differences in the memoirists’ two narratives. For Shebarshin, it was important to clear his reputation of the blot of his subordinate’s defection and the failure of his mission in Iran: to form a united front of “progressive” parties in post-revolutionary Iran. Kuzichkin, conversely, sought to present himself as a victim of the KGB and Soviet system and wash away the stigma of betrayal.⁵ The combination of these narratives, which had contradictory purposes when composed, may give us an idea of what was actually happening at the KGB residency in Tehran. Vasily Mitrokhin, on the other hand, unlike the previous two figures, was not personally involved in KGB activities in Iran. Mitrokhin was a KGB archivist that defected to the UK after the fall of the Soviet Union, bringing his personal archive of documents collected over decades—copied from the KGB archive—with him. Most of the documents he smuggled were used in the two volumes he published with historian Christopher Andrew.⁶ Although

disruption of his hostile plans, and the achievement of other aims.” Vasily Mitrokhin, *KGB Lexicon. The Soviet Intelligence Officer’s Handbook* (London; New York: Frank Cass, 2002), 37.

³ Raymond L. Garthoff, “Foreign Intelligence and the Historiography of the Cold War,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 6, no. 2 (Spring 2004), 28.

⁴ Leonid Shebarshin, *Ruka Moskvy. Zapiski nachalnika sovetskoï razvedki* (Moscow: Terra, 1996); Vladimir Kuzichkin, *Inside the KGB: My Life in Soviet Espionage* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990).

⁵ Kuzichkin was also personally responsible for contacts with the Tudeh and other leftist groups during the revolutionary period. Along with archival materials on this matter, his account is an important source on the intercommunication between Moscow and the Tudeh.

⁶ Christopher Andrew and Vasily Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); and Christopher Andrew and Vasily Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive II: the KGB and the World* (London; New York: Allen Lane, 2005).

the chapter dedicated to KGB activities in Iran in the second volume reveals some important materials from the Mitrokhin Archive, the only additional context it provides is from the aforementioned memoirs of Kuzichkin and Shebarshin, lacking the necessary critical analysis of all three sources. Christopher Andrew fairly argued that the publication of the Mitrokhin Archive was crucial to understanding the KGB's importance to Soviet foreign policy that had been largely ignored by previous scholarship.⁷ However, the overall credibility of the Mitrokhin Archive is hardly questioned in Andrew's analysis. Yet, as noted by one of the reviewers, "the book provenance is unfortunate: Mitrokhin did not bring out documents, he hand-copied, summarized, and took notes."⁸ Indeed, the original Mitrokhin Archive available to researchers in the Churchill College Archive at the University of Cambridge is not full of original documents or their copies. Instead, it is filled with chaotically organized texts typewritten by Mitrokhin, which are supposedly based on original documents.⁹ The details of Mitrokhin's files (e.g., reference numbers to the Politburo documents) leave no doubt that his notes are based on the original documents. However, as the examples in this article show, when compared to the recently declassified Politburo files, Mitrokhin's narrative tends to overstate the subversive nature of Soviet policies and KGB activities, as it embellishes the documents' information with speculative and unsupported assumptions. Therefore, although some of Mitrokhin's claims can be presented as almost sensational, they must be approached with necessary caution.

The global Cold War framework was key to limiting the abilities of experts and decision-makers from both the United States and Soviet Union in analyzing the Iranian revolution and new Iranian regime. For the Soviet Union, the revolution appeared as a complete surprise, as its main figures and driving forces were either unfamiliar to the Soviet leaders or poorly analyzed. Until now, the KGB's role in this unpreparedness remained only superficially analyzed by existing historiography. Unable to contextualize the KGB activities revealed by memoirists with official archival documents, researchers were forced to incorporate the memoirs' narratives with only minor analysis.¹⁰ In this article, I integrate these narratives into the picture of the Soviet reaction to the Iranian revolution, which thus becomes much more coherent with the declassification of the CPSU archives. I argue that the KGB's inability to gather and analyze information on the ground, due to a variety of

⁷ Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive II*, 16–17.

⁸ Donald P. Steury, "The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB," *History: Review of New Books* 28, no. 2 (2000): 77.

⁹ I worked primarily with the Mitrokhin Archive's file on Iran, see: GBR/0014/MITN 1/2: Iran, 1988, Typescript volumes compiled by Mitrokhin in Moscow, 1987–1992, The Papers of Vasily Mitrokhin, Churchill College Archives Centre, University of Cambridge (further: MITN 1/2).

¹⁰ Much of the historiography on the Soviet reaction to the Iranian revolution dates back to the 1980s, when this kind of research was limited by a variety of obstacles, primarily the complete unavailability of Soviet archival materials. However, the research of Aryeh Yodfat stands out among these works as despite a limited source base, he managed to guess and analyze many of Soviet motives and reasons that can now be confirmed by the official documents, see: Aryeh Yodfat, *The Soviet Union and Revolutionary Iran* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984). Also see, Muriel Atkin, "The Kremlin and Khomeini," *Washington Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (1981): 50–67; Howard M. Hensel, "Moscow's Perspective on the fall of the Iranian monarchy," *Asian Affairs* 14, no. 3 (1983): 297–311; Yair Hirschfeld, "Moscow and Khomeini. Soviet-Iranian Relations in Historical Perspective," *Orbis* 24, no. 2 (1980): 219–240; Shahram Chubin, "The Soviet Union and Iran," *Foreign Affairs* 61, no. 4 (1983): 921–949; and Richard Herrmann, "The Role of Iran in Soviet Perceptions and Policy," in *Neither East, Nor West: Iran, the Soviet Union, and the United States*, ed. Mark Gasiorowski and Nikki Keddie (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 63–99. All these works mostly ignore the role of the KGB in Soviet policies towards Iran. For more recent accounts that integrate the narrative of KGB memoirists, yet remain focused on the CPSU leadership, see: Dmitry Asinovsky, "The Soviet Union and the Iranian Revolution: How Experts, Intelligence Services and Politicians of the Two Superpowers Missed the Birth of Islamic Fundamentalism," *Russia in Global Affairs*, no. 3 (2018): 190–208; Jeremy Friedman, "The Enemy of My Enemy: The Soviet Union, East Germany, and the Iranian Tudeh Party's Support for Ayatollah Khomeini," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 20, no. 2 (2018): 3–37; and a relevant chapter in Odd Arne Westad, *Global Cold War: Third World interventions and the making of our times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

reasons, and deliver this to decision-makers in a convincing manner, was crucial to the Soviet misreading of the Iranian revolution and the Islamic Republic.

The main functions of KGB residencies included gathering information and getting in contact with influential political actors both in power and in opposition. Consequently, it was their responsibility, along with diplomats, to supply Moscow with this much needed information. However, there were a number of objective and subjective obstacles that prevented the KGB residency in Iran from fulfilling this duty. Firstly, by 1978 it had lost most of its informants in the Shah's court and other Iranian official structures due to the unprecedented counterintelligence campaign launched by SAVAK. Secondly, the analytical notes submitted by the KGB to the center on the eve of the revolution reveal that, although KGB agents were familiar with the importance of the Shi'i clergy in Iranian political life, they were no less limited by ideological constraints than the Soviet leadership in foreseeing the mullahs' rise to power and establishment of a viable rule. Yet, even in bringing the importance of the clergy as a meaningful political force to the attention of the leadership, the KGB reports failed to convince the Politburo. This, however, has more to do with the ideological limitations of the Soviet authorities. When faced with the challenge of religion transformed into a political ideology, the Soviet leadership, scholarship, and intelligence community were limited by their *ideological worldview*—a blend of Marxist-Leninist dogma and Cold War geopolitical considerations.¹¹ Basing their strategy on the complicated grounds of both ideological and geopolitical considerations, the Soviet Union expressed full support for Ayatollah Khomeini as an anti-imperialist (i.e., anti-American) leader. Simultaneously, however, Soviet leadership expected his rule to vanish in the foreseeable future. This is because, from their ideological point of view, religion could only play “an objectively progressive role” temporarily, until substituted by “truly democratic” (e.g., pro-Soviet) forces.¹²

While the leadership remained captivated by a mix of ideological and geopolitical limitations, the KGB suffered failures in its mission to unite the Iranian left around the Tudeh. Following the revolution, the KGB residency became the main mediator between the CPSU and Tudeh, which was legalized in Iran after being banned for 30 years. The KGB was also charged with the task of forming a united progressive front under the leadership of the Tudeh. The objectives set for the KGB reveal that, in 1979, parts of the Soviet leadership saw the strategy in Iran exactly in the terms described by Jack Matlock two years later. Yet, the left-leaning groups with the most popular support, like the guerilla movements of the Mojāhedīn-e Khalq and the Fadā'iyān-e Khalq, had little interest in accepting Soviet proposals. Unwilling to be seen as Soviet proxies and having much wider popular support, they were even less eager to submit to the leading role of the Tudeh in such an alliance. Thus, most Soviet expectations about the unification of the Iranian left were quick to wither away, while this political gamble soon turned into a massacre for the Iranian left. The religious rule proved its viability and ability to consolidate power, which, by 1983, resulted in a crackdown on the Tudeh Party and the expulsion of most KGB agents from Iran.

¹¹ I borrow the concept of “ideological worldview” from Michael David-Fox as a narrower and more precise term than the widely and often vaguely used “ideology.” See Michael David-Fox, *Crossing Borders: Modernity, ideology and culture in Russia and the Soviet Union* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburg Press, 2015). For a debate on ideology and its role in the Cold War, see: Nigel Gould-Davies, “Rethinking the role of ideology in international politics during the Cold War,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 1, no. 1 (1999); and Mark Kramer, “Ideology and the Cold War,” *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 4 (Oct 1999).

¹² These expectations are evident in many Soviet archival documents and personal sources. For example, in one of the most detailed reports prepared for the Soviet leadership in June 1979, the multidisciplinary group of renowned Soviet experts on Islam, contemporary Iran, and the region of the Persian Gulf came to the conclusion that, although Islam would retain some presence in the political life of Iran, “it is doubtful that Shi'i theologians will be capable of maintaining their leading positions and play the leading role in the Iranian politics in the long-term.” See: “Situatsionnyi analiz Instituta Vostokovedeniia AN SSSR ‘Osnovnye vneshnepoliticheskie posledstviia sobytii v Irane’,” June 1979, Russian State Archive of Contemporary History (RGANI) F. 5 Op. 76 D. 1054 L. 10.

The KGB in Iran prior to the revolution

From the early 1960s, the Soviet Union and Iran entered a period of mutually beneficial relations, primarily in the sphere of economic partnership. For the Shah, rapprochement with the Soviet Union was a way to pursue a more independent policy, as he aspired to abandon the image of Iran as a client of the United States and transform it into a regional superpower. For the Soviet Union, the normalization of relations with Iran was a way to secure its state interests on its southern borders in the context of unprecedented ideological challenge—i.e., the Sino-Soviet split and PRC attempts to dominate the anti-imperialist discourse in the Third World.¹³ Initially, the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev had ambitions to push the Shah out of the American camp and move Iran closer to the Third World regimes he dealt with elsewhere, such as Nasser's Egypt, Nehru's India, or Nkrumah's Ghana. However, the aforementioned external circumstances forced him to agree to what he could still achieve.¹⁴ Ideologically, the 1962 Soviet-Iranian agreement put Iran into a unique and very specific position. It was an American ally that did not qualify as a regular Soviet Third World partner that could be described through the Soviet ideological notion of “a state of national democracy” on “the non-capitalist path of development.” In fact, there was no other American ally in the Third World with which the Soviet Union had such decent, even flourishing, bilateral relations throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

The personal relations the Soviet leadership built with the Shah appeared to be outstanding. After the 1962 rapprochement, the Shah officially visited the USSR four times and different Politburo members (Brezhnev, Kosygin, and Podgorny) paid four official visits to Iran.¹⁵ This count does not include Kosygin's meeting with the Shah at the opening of the Trans-Iranian pipeline, Podgorny's attendance at the Shah's monumental celebration of 2500 years of Persian monarchy, and other meetings at international forums. Brezhnev's personal notes reveal the respect he held for the Iranian monarch. Indeed, while Brezhnev did not mention the Shah often in his notes, whenever he did, he referred to the Shah as “His Majesty” or “the Shahanshah.” This alone is revealing, but the most interesting entry Brezhnev made about the Shah was in 1977, when meeting Vladimir Vinogradov, the newly appointed Soviet ambassador to Iran. Brezhnev instructed Vinogradov in the following manner:

Pass on my greetings to the Shahanshah. While talking one on one, tell him that you met with me. Tell him that you sensed some unusual feeling [the note continues in third person emulating what Vinogradov would have said to the Shah]: Comrade Brezhnev as if talking to himself said: “Comrade Vinogradov, we are neighbors [with Iran] and we have good relations. What reasons does the Shah have to buy arms in such quantities on such immense sums? Certainly it is the Shah's business, he rules the state, but he surely knows that the USSR will never attack Iran” – at this point [Comrade Brezhnev]

¹³ For more on the Soviet-Iranian rapprochement, 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): 423–444. For more on the Sino-Soviet split and competition for the Third World, see: Jeremy Friedman, *Shadow Cold War: The Sino-Soviet Competition for the Third World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

¹⁴ For Khrushchev's initial attempts and failure to court the Shah, see: Roham Alvandi “Flirting with Neutrality: The Shah, Khrushchev, and the Failed 1959 Soviet-Iranian Negotiations,” *Iranian Studies* 47, no. 3 (2014): 419–440.

¹⁵ In striking contrast to this positive picture, Kuzichkin brings up in his memoirs the story of the attempt on the Shah's life allegedly organized by the KGB and approved by the Presidium of the Central Committee in February 1962 (Kuzichkin wrongly refers to the Presidium as the Politburo, but, from 1952 to 1965, the Central Committee was headed by the Presidium not the Politburo). See, Kuzichkin, *Inside the KGB*, 215–218. However, this speculation is not supported by any evidence in the Presidium documents. Moreover, although the Soviet Union and Iran had a tense period of relations from 1959 to 1962, the Presidium approved the start of new negotiations that ended with Iran's missile base pledge to the Soviet Union in November 1961. Thus, by February 1962, the Soviet Union and Iran were already in the midst of fruitful negotiations, and the Soviet leaders had no reason to order the assassination of the Shah. For the Presidium directive to start the negotiations and the first drafts of the future pledge, see: “Ukazaniia k obmenu mneniiam u iranskoi storoni,” November 23, 1961, RGANI F. 3 Op. 18 D. 6 L. 50–60.

finished his thought. He thinks that our economic cooperation is good and he does not see a perspective for it to worsen. [...] Talking to me he remembered his visit to your country and asked me: “How many times did the Shah visit us? And how many times did our comrades visit Iran ‘on top level’, as we say here?” Probably the time played its role and he was surprised that we owe you on this matter. He asked to pass on that he personally would take care of this issue in order to pay this debt.¹⁶

This amazing exchange provides us with a number of hints about Brezhnev’s personal attitude toward the Shah and Iran. Firstly, it was important for him to tell Vinogradov, word for word, how the ambassador was to pass on this message. The playful tone gives the impression that this is a message of one old friend to another. Secondly, Brezhnev also brought up the topic most concerning to the Soviet leadership with regards to the Shah’s regime: the intensive armament. In the early 1970s, the Shah finally achieved one of the principal, long-term objectives of his reign by transforming Iran into a regional superpower allied with the United States but not completely dependent on them; a position also acknowledged by the Americans. This transformation from a U.S. client state to their main regional ally became possible due to a combination of factors. Primarily, it was the relations the Shah managed to build with Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, who relied on him as “the regional policeman” and their main ally in the Middle East.¹⁷ Consequently, the newest U.S. arms and military technologies became available to the Iranian monarch in large quantities. Simultaneously, the rise of oil revenues, due to the unprecedented jump in oil prices in the early 1970s, provided the Shah with the means to purchase these arsenals. This accumulation of power near its southern borders soon started to disturb the Soviet Union, which resulted in new directives to the KGB residency.

By the mid-1970s, the KGB had around thirty agents (the number differed from year to year) constituting the KGB residency in Iran. The majority of these agents specialized either in political intelligence (PR line) or counterintelligence (KR line). Individual agents worked in scientific and technological intelligence (X line) and the department supporting illegal agents (N line), while the rest had technical duties.¹⁸ Most agents were located in Tehran and worked under cover of the Soviet embassy; the rest had positions in other Soviet institutions in Iran as their cover.¹⁹ Individual agents worked in Mashhad and Bandar Pahlavi; in 1978, following the approval of the head of the KGB, Yurii Andropov, the residency also sent permanent agents to Isfahan, Rasht, and Tabriz. All these agents were subordinate to the head of the residency (the resident), who in turn reported to the head of the Eighth Department of the KGB First Chief Directorate.²⁰

¹⁶ Leonid Brezhnev. *Rabochie i dnevnikovye zapisi. Tom 1: Leonid Brezhnev. Rabochie i dnevnikovye zapisi, 1964–1982 gg.* (Moscow, IstLit, 2016), 757–758.

¹⁷ For more on the Nixon doctrine application to Iran and personal relations between Richard Nixon and Mohammed Reza Shah, see: Roham Alvandi, *Nixon, Kissinger and the Shah: the United States and Iran in the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹⁸ For example, in 1977 there were 35 active agents in the residency, of which 11 were in PR line, 10 were in KR line, 3 were in N line, and 3 were in X line. MITN 1/2, 2–3. The structure of the KGB residencies and the subdivision codenames were first revealed and published by another KGB defector, Oleg Gordievsky. See, Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, *KGB: the Inside Story of Its Foreign Operations from Lenin to Gorbachev* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), Appendix C, 656. In his memoirs, Kuzichkin used English acronyms instead of Russian for the names of different residency lines—e.g., PI (political intelligence) instead of PR (*politicheskaiia razvedka*). For more on Kuzichkin’s description of the structure of the KGB residency in Iran, see: Kuzichkin, *Inside the KGB*, 140.

¹⁹ Apart from the KGB residency, the embassy worked as a cover for Soviet military intelligence: the GRU (*Glavnoe Razvedyvatel’noe Upravlenie*) agents. Kuzichkin, *Inside the KGB*, 141; this information was also confirmed by Mikhail Krutikhin, who was a TASS correspondent in Tehran during the revolution. Author’s interview with Mikhail Krutikhin, Moscow, November 2017.

²⁰ Apart from Iran, the Eighth Department was also responsible for Afghanistan, Turkey and Israel (“Non-Arab Countries of the Near East”). See the structure of the KGB FCD departments in Andrew and Gordievsky, *KGB: the Inside Story*, Appendix C, 652.

The regular objectives of the KGB residency consisted of obtaining intelligence, counter-intelligence, and maintaining contact with its sources among Iran's political leadership. With Iran's intensification of American military equipment purchases in the early 1970s, the residency was staffed with additional X-line agents, whose main specialization was scientific and technological espionage.²¹ However, following Soviet discontent with Iran's rapid militarization, a 1975 Politburo directive instigated major changes in KGB activities. Vasily Mitrokhin's notes suggest that Politburo Resolution 188/130 directed the KGB First Chief Directorate to assume, while planning its activity in Iran, that the destabilization of Iranian political life best suited Soviet state interests. This destabilization was to be supported by "special intelligence methods," with the intended result of creating the conditions for regime change in favor of "progressive democratic forces." In the meantime, all possible measures had to be taken in order to prevent any harm to Soviet-Iranian relations as a result of this intelligence activity.²²

Recent declassification of the Politburo archives allows us to compare Mitrokhin's claims with the actual text of the mentioned resolution, revealing that the Soviet leadership was indeed worried by Iran's growing militarization and strategic influence in the Persian Gulf region.²³ Thus, the resolution included a directive to "the relevant institutions" (e.g., the KGB) "to launch a number of activities to enforce the distrust towards the policy of the Shah and the Iranian government among the governments and public of the Persian Gulf countries." It also included directives "to counter the plans of Iran to create political, economic, and especially military regional alliances" and "counter the attempts of Iran to intensify CENTO activities."²⁴ However, the resolution lacked any directives concerning the destabilization of Iran's domestic situation; instead, it was full of proposed measures to intensify political connections, economic cooperation, and cultural exchange.²⁵ Thus, the resolution serves as definitive evidence that Mitrokhin's claims regarding the Soviet leadership's plans to overthrow the Shah in favor of "progressive democratic forces" were groundless.

In the mid-1970s, Iranian counterintelligence started an active and efficient campaign against the KGB and its collaborators. While available sources do not clarify whether this campaign was a result of the intensification of KGB activities, the timing suggests that it was not a mere coincidence. Most Soviet sources and collaborators in Iran had been recruited in the 1940s, and were thus losing their importance by the late 1970s. General Ahmed Moqarrebi (codename "Man" or "Kerman") was the asset the KGB residency in Iran considered most efficient. Moqarrebi had previously worked in the American military mission in Iran and for the Iranian General Staff. Working for the KGB since 1944, he regularly provided Moscow with information via his connections in the government and at the court. He was even awarded the Order of the Red Banner in 1976, but was uncovered by Iranian counterintelligence and executed for treason.²⁶ The arrest and execution of

²¹ According to Mitrokhin, scientific and technological espionage in the United States was too risky and encountered many obstacles. In 1975, as a consequence, enforced X-line groups were established at KGB residencies in countries that purchased newest American arms. MITN 1/2, 2–3. However, Kuzichkin argued that by the time of his arrival to Tehran in the summer of 1977, there were only two X-line agents in the residency, and "they never produced anything of practical value." Kuzichkin, *Inside the KGB*, 140.

²² MITN 1/2, 17.

²³ "Meropriiatia po dalneishemu razvitiu otnoshenii Sovetskogo Soiuzu s Iranom i protivodeistviiu negativnym tendentsiiam v iranskoj vneshnei politike," August 29, 1975, RGANI F. 3 Op. 69 D. 1806 L. 122–132.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, L. 128.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, L. 126–132.

²⁶ MITN 1/2, 21; Kuzichkin, *Inside the KGB*, 196. Some details of Moqarrebi's service to the KGB and his subsequent exposure are described in the memoirs of Leonid Bogdanov, the KGB resident in Tehran at the time. However, Bogdanov's memoirs are mostly devoted to his later service in Afghanistan, and an episode about "the Iranian agent" (Bogdanov refrains from mentioning the name of the agent, but the details clearly point at Moqarrebi) is just a short digression from this general narrative. See: Leonid Bogdanov, *Afganskaia tetrad'* (Moscow: Natsionalnoe obozrenie, 2004), 34–35.

Moqarrebi was the biggest loss for the KGB spy network, but not the only one. By 1977, further arrests of less influential officials and army officers put the KGB in a situation where it had very scarce connections and no active agents at the Shah's court.

Consequently, the KGB First Chief Directorate intensified its efforts to widen its illegal residency in Iran in 1977. The head of the Directorate "S" (illegal agents), Vadim Kirpichenko, a KGB coordinator responsible for the Middle East, managed to convince the Deputy Head of the KGB, Vladimir Kriuchkov, that the KGB needed to recruit new illegal agents among Iranian students studying abroad.²⁷ However, the rising popular revolution evidently came as a surprise to Soviet intelligence, and forced the KGB to revise its previous plan.

The KGB and the growing turmoil.

In its reports to Moscow in the years preceding the revolution, the residency did not see much potential for a popular uprising and only moderately assessed the chances of opposition forces taking power, instead emphasizing the role of the military: "The most real alternative to the Shah in case of his removal from the political scene is the military. The regime's opposition is weak and divided. In general, current state of the opposition does not pose any threat to the existing regime..."²⁸ A similar report was sent in 1976 by Vladimir Svetozarov, the *Agentstvo Pechati "Novosti"* (APN) correspondent stationed in Tehran to the Department of Propaganda of the CPSU Central Committee. Like some other Soviet journalists abroad, Svetozarov was also working for the KGB.²⁹ Describing the political situation in Iran, Svetozarov stated that the Shah's position was stable and the potential for revolutionary developments in Iran was low. Despite this, he also noted the existence of social tensions and ideological discontent with ongoing westernization across Iran's social groups: "The penetration of moral and ideological values of the imperialist West to Iran is condemned in the circles of democratically attuned representatives of intelligentsia, students and in some parts of the clergy" (emphasis mine).³⁰ Svetozarov also described the protests of religious students in Qom from a year earlier, and confirmed that some religious leaders stood opposed to the Shah's regime. He stressed, though, that it was not the clergy as a social group, but instead certain "unofficial circles of local clergymen." According to Svetozarov's report, some clergy leaders "dared to openly step forward against the strangling of political freedoms and strengthening the influence of the Western bourgeois culture on the youth."³¹

The inclusion of the Shi'i clergy in an overview of political forces is an important sign, implying that the KGB might have considered religious opposition as a meaningful force in Iranian political life. However, the development of the situation in 1978–79 proves that, for Moscow, the appearance of religious authorities as one of the most powerful opposition groups came as a complete surprise. In fact, Soviet leadership of the late 1970s was absolutely unaware of the Iranian religious authorities and their history of involvement in Iranian politics.³² Moreover, even when considering the most scrutinizing academic

²⁷ "V. Kirpichenko to the Residents (following the list) 20302/H. Top Secret." December 30, 1977, cited from Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, *More 'Instructions from the Centre' Top Secret Files on KGB Global Operations 1975–1985* (London, England; Portland, OR: Frank Cass., 1992), 86.

²⁸ MITN 1/2, 38.

²⁹ Svetozarov's allegiance to the KGB is confirmed by the list of agents in Iran from the Mitrokhin Archive. According to this list, his codename for operative work was "Bazarov." See MITN 1/2, 73; Svetozarov's affiliation with the KGB was also confirmed by Mikhail Krutikhin, who served as a TASS correspondent in Tehran in the same period. Author's interview with Mikhail Krutikhin, Moscow, November 2017.

³⁰ "V. Svetozarov to the Department of Propaganda CC CPSU, 'Informatsiia biuro APN v Irane o nekotorykh osobennostiakh ideologicheskoi situatsii v strane,'" February 7, 1976. RGANI F.5 Op. 69 D. 478 L. 2.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Karen Brutents, the deputy head of the International department of the CPSU Central Committee, remembered that nobody in the Soviet leadership had any idea "what an ayatollah was." Karen Brutents, remarks in *The*

literature produced by Soviet Iranian studies specialists prior to the revolution, there was only one monograph exclusively dedicated to the role of the Shi'ī clergy in Iran's sociopolitical life; and it, evidently, never made it to the tables of decision-makers.³³

Thus, as they were on the ground, the KGB happened to be among the few forces that could see political potential in the Iranian clergy. Moreover, both Mitrokhin and Kuzichkin argued that the KGB was also the only force that seemed to realize the importance of Ayatollah Khomeini, and even allegedly tried to get in touch with him. According to Mitrokhin, the KGB Baghdad residency, following a request from the Tehran residency, tried to establish contact with Khomeini in 1975. Such attempts ended with no meaningful results.³⁴ In May 1978, the residency reported to the center about Khomeini's growing influence in Iranian emigration circles and his clear anti-Soviet and anti-communist views. In particular, the report stressed Khomeini's dissatisfaction with events in Afghanistan and his conviction that the April revolution in Afghanistan was a result of Soviet intelligence activities. Yet, according to Soviet agents in Iraq, "a priest (*pop*) [Khomeini] did not consider the toppling of the Shah as an option."³⁵ Our analysis of the Mitrokhin papers forces us to be careful with such claims, but Vladimir Kuzichkin also quoted a KGB agent who claimed that Khomeini had a meeting with Soviet recruiters. During the meeting, a Soviet representative allegedly expressed the Soviet Union's willingness to support Khomeini in case he gained power in Iran.³⁶ Kuzichkin mentions nothing about Khomeini's reaction to this proposal. Overall, even if the KGB had been in contact with Khomeini, it did not play a significant role in the Soviet assessment of the mullahs' political potential.

Oleg Grinevskii, the head of the Department of the Near East at the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the time, claimed in his memoirs that the issue of Iranian protests was presented to Brezhnev for the first time in September 1978. Grinevskii even remembered that Brezhnev's assistant, Andrei Aleksandrov-Agentov, explained the role played by "the Islamic fundamentalists" to the General Secretary. If Grinevskii's memories are accurate, Brezhnev's response says a lot about the perceptions of the Soviet leadership: "It means the Americans are behind all that."³⁷ Similar binary thinking was also evident in the activities of Soviet intelligence. According to Mitrokhin, during a July meeting with Ivan Fadeikin, the KGB resident in Tehran at that time, the KGB head Yurii Andropov stressed the dangerous nature of the Shah's Iran as a potential base near the Soviet Union's southern borders

Intervention in Afghanistan and the Fall of Détente, 96–97. For more on the Soviet misreading of the religious opposition's potential, see: Asinovskiy, "The Soviet Union and the Iranian Revolution."

³³ See Elena Doroshenko, *Shiitskoe dukhovenstvo v sovremennom Irane* (Moscow: Nauka, 1975). Doroshenko's attempts to study Iran's Shi'ī clergy encountered numerous obstacles. The study of religion as a political force was disapproved by the administration of the Institute of Oriental Studies, and only the support of Artyom Arabadzian, the head of the Iran sector, allowed Doroshenko to continue her research. Later, ironically, Arabadzian was among the main critics of the concept of "Islamic" revolution and forbade this term's usage in scholarship produced by the Institute. Author's interview with Nina Mamedova, the head of the sector of Iran of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, May 2016.

³⁴ MITN 1/2, 38.

³⁵ Ibid. Reference to Khomeini as "*pop*," a scornful traditional Russian nickname for an Orthodox priest, reflects the KGB's very generalized and disparaging view of the Iranian clergy.

³⁶ Kuzichkin, *Inside the KGB*, 239.

³⁷ Oleg Grinevskii, *Tainy Sovetskoi diplomatii* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2000), 101. Grinevskii's memoirs need to be approached with a certain degree of skepticism as, at least in part, they do not represent his own memories. Indeed, quotes from some of the secondary sources are found there. Compare, for example, Grinevskii, *Tainy Sovetskoi diplomatii*, 101 to *The Intervention in Afghanistan and the Fall of Détente*, 40. In this particular case, Grinevskii's recollection of the Iranian turmoil being brought to the attention of Brezhnev as early as September 1978 finds no support in the archival materials. On the official level, the Iranian crisis was brought up at the Politburo session for the first time on November 10, 1978, when the evacuation of the families of Soviet specialists from Iran was discussed. Surely the quoted conversation could be private and undocumented, but Grinevskii could hardly have witnessed it. For the Politburo records from November 10, see: "Postanovlenie TsK KPSS 'O merakh po chastichnoi evakuatsii iz Irana chlenov semei sovetskikh spetsialistov,'" November 10, 1978, RGANI F. 3 Op. 70 D. 1205 L. 47.

that “the main adversary” (i.e., the United States) might use. Andropov insisted on continuing the destabilizing activities in Iran in order to influence its relations with its neighbors (primarily, Afghanistan). He allegedly said to Fadeikin: “We need to keep the Shah busy, not to give him a chance to intervene in the affairs of other states.”³⁸ Although August–September 1978 saw Soviet intelligence, for the first time, assume that the Shah might not survive the crisis, Soviet officials took a very cautious approach to the situation, mainly paying attention to the U.S. reaction.³⁹

In November 1978, Soviet leaders started to seriously consider the likelihood of covert American intervention in Iran. The example of the 1953 coup was no longer a mere historical reference, as the scale of the crisis called for the Shah’s main ally to do something. For the Soviet leadership, the potential appearance of the Americans at their doorstep was a serious reason to pay closer attention to the developments in Iran. News from Tehran alarmed the heads of the Soviet military and KGB, Dmitrii Ustinov and Yurii Andropov respectively. Ustinov demanded the Politburo take measures against the Americans and not wait until the U.S. military stood at the Soviet southern borders. Reports of the Soviet ambassador to the United States, Anatolii Dobrynin, also offered little comfort. In one such report, Dobrynin quoted Marshall Shulman, special adviser on Soviet affairs to Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, who told Dobrynin that President Carter “was very worried about the Shah’s destiny.” For the hotheads in the Soviet leadership, the meaning of the phrase was unambiguous: the Americans were about to intervene.⁴⁰

On November 19, 1978, a statement by Leonid Brezhnev was published on the front page of *Pravda*.⁴¹ The General Secretary stated the official position of the Soviet Union with regards to the situation in Iran, warning foreign powers to abstain from any kind of interference in the country’s internal affairs. Brezhnev’s statement incited an immediate reaction from Washington. Secretary of State Vance responded publicly, rejecting Soviet accusations that the U.S. was planning to interfere in Iran’s internal affairs and expressing hope that the Soviet Union would also respect Iran’s sovereignty. In fact, Brezhnev’s statement in *Pravda* must have seriously alarmed the U.S. leadership. According to the *New York Times* column from November 20, Secretary of State Vance, National Security Advisor Brzezinski, and Defense Secretary Brown met at the State Department on Sunday morning, November 19, as soon as reports of Brezhnev’s statement reached Washington. With President Carter in contact by phone from Camp David, they jointly formulated a response. As the *New York Times* correspondent remarked, “only in moments of crisis does the United States comment at the highest levels on Sundays.”⁴² The public response was also followed by a private one, passed by Brzezinski to Ambassador Toon for transmission to Brezhnev. Carter’s message reiterated American concerns about the Soviet desire to use alleged American plans to intervene in Iran as a pretext for their own interference: “I trust it was not your intention to suggest that the incorrect reports to which you refer might be used to justify Soviet interference in Iranian affairs. I am sure you appreciate that

³⁸ MITN 1/2, 50.

³⁹ Leonid Shebarshin, remarks in *The Intervention in Afghanistan and the Fall of Détente*, 40; Grinevskii, *Tainy Sovetskoi diplomatii*, 101.

⁴⁰ Grinevskii, *Tainy Sovetskoi diplomatii*, 102. On November 16, 1978, the crisis in Iran and possibility of American intervention was the first issue on the Politburo agenda. The decision to issue a warning to the Americans through both public and private channels was made during this session. See: “Postanovlenie TsK KPSS ‘K voprosu o polozhenii v Irane,’” November 16, 1978, RGANI F. 3 Op. 70 D. 1206 L. 5.

⁴¹ “Otvét L.I. Brezhneva na vopros korrespondenta Pravdy,” *Pravda*, November 19, 1978, 1. Publication in *Pravda* was preceded by a backchannel private message to President Carter with the same content two days earlier, see: “Letter from Soviet General Secretary Brezhnev to President Carter,” November 17, 1978, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977–1980*, Volume VI, Soviet Union, Document 158 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2013). <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v06/d158>.

⁴² Bernard Gwertzman, “Carter Answers Soviets on Iran,” *The New York Times*, November 20, 1978, A1.

any such interference would be a matter of the utmost gravity to us.”⁴³ As Oleg Grinevskii ironically put it in his memoirs: “Moscow and Washington intimidated each other.”⁴⁴ In fact, Grinevskii claimed that the Politburo never had any clear plan on how to implement Brezhnev’s warnings. The KGB was instructed to use different channels of misinformation to make the Americans think the Soviet military was preparing for serious action. In reality, most of what was intended to create an impression of preparation for action were routine annual exercises.⁴⁵

In December 1978, the Soviet embassy in Tehran sent Moscow a note analyzing the Shi’i clergy’s contemporary role in Iranian political life, particularly in the ongoing protests. The note, which was evidently based on information gathered on the ground by diplomats and KGB agents, detailed the leading role of the clergy, its structure, and leading figures. For example, the note discussed the lack of homogeneity within the clergy, the primary role of Ayatollah Khomeini, and the differences he had with other leaders of the movement, such as Ayatollah Shariatmadari. Moreover, although the note confirmed the “anti-imperialist character of the religious movement,” it warned Moscow that religious leaders “aim to expand their influence on the sociopolitical and economic life of the country,” and in the future it was possible that “positive sides of religious opposition may evaporate.”⁴⁶ This note from the embassy, therefore, reveals that KGB analysts and Soviet diplomats on the ground foresaw, even before the fall of the Shah, the potential of the religious opposition to be both the most important political player and not so “progressive,” the latter of which was how the situation was seen from Moscow. The information imparted to the Soviet leadership from experts in Moscow was strikingly different. As late as the last week of December 1978, experts from the Institute of Oriental Studies argued in their analytical note for the CPSU’s Central Committee that, in case of the liquidation of the Shah’s regime, “conservative religious actors” were less likely to obtain power than the National Front and other “bourgeois forces.”⁴⁷ Although the Politburo clearly did not fully rely on either of these sources and, at that point, was largely driven by Cold War logic, it is still noteworthy that, at the time of crisis, the embassy and KGB saw a much more detailed picture than experts in Moscow.

The KGB, the Iranian Left, and the Islamic Republic

Following the Shah’s departure from Iran on January 16, 1979, the Politburo established a special Commission on Iran that included all influential Politburo members: Foreign Minister Gromyko, Head of the KGB Andropov, Defense Minister Ustinov, and Head of the International Department Ponomarev. Working in this new format, they were supposed to “attentively follow events in Iran, study, and analyze processes going on there, and take

⁴³ “Backchannel Message From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski) to the Ambassador to the Soviet Union (Toon),” November 21, 1978, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977–1980*, Volume VI, Soviet Union, Document 160. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v06/d160>.

⁴⁴ The Carter Administration was certainly much more involved in the Iranian crisis, and its policies surely went beyond intimidating the Soviets. The hotheads in the National Security Council allegedly proposed that the American military mission in Tehran led by General Robert Huyser had to implement a coup similar to the one of 1953. See: Robert Huyser, *Mission to Tehran* (London: Deutsch, 1986); and William Sullivan, *Mission to Iran* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981). However, later members of the NSC argued that this plan was never seriously considered by the Administration. Still, the possibility of a coup kept the Soviet leaders alert, see Gary Sick and Leonid Shebarshin, remarks in *The Intervention in Afghanistan and the Fall of Détente*, 39–52. On the Soviet concerns, see also the remarks of Boris Ponomarev in his conversations with East German officials in Friedman, “The Enemy of My Enemy,” 14–15.

⁴⁵ Grinevskii, *Tainy Sovetskoi diplomatii*, 102–103.

⁴⁶ “Spravka Posol’stva SSSR v Irane ‘Shiitskoe dukhovenstvo i ego rol’ v nyneshnem oppozitsionnom dvizhenii,” December 5, 1978, RGANI F. 5 Op. 75 D. 1190 L. 83–94.

⁴⁷ “Analiticheskaia zapiska Instituta Vostokovedeniia AN SSSR ‘Krizis v Irane i vozmozhnye varianty ego razvitiia,’” December 25, 1978, RGANI F. 5 Op. 75 D. 1190 L. 96–104.

measures accordingly if necessary.”⁴⁸ Although similar to preceding Politburo discussions, in that the Commission’s main preoccupation in January–February 1979 was to deter potential American invasion, Soviet leaders also needed to develop an ideological assessment of the religious opposition and come to terms with their main ally, the exiled Tudeh Party of Iran, about the latter’s strategy.⁴⁹

Five days after the Shah’s departure from Iran, on January 21, *Pravda* published an article decisively in support of the revolution. Among other things, the article touched on the role played by religious leaders. Indeed, according to the article, protests had acquired “a religious coloring” because the political opposition (e.g., the political left) was drained by repression and incapable of leading the masses.⁵⁰ Even before the Shah’s departure, Gromyko mentioned to his subordinates that “the religious coloring” of the Iranian revolution was discussed among Politburo members. For the Politburo, the Shah’s fall was a chance to rid Soviet borders of American intelligence and military advisors—that alone was reason enough to build contact with and support Khomeini. Gromyko also explained that it was important to keep Americans busy in Iran (while still preventing their direct interference) in order to keep them away from Afghanistan.⁵¹

Overall, the Soviet leadership, at the time, shared the perception that “the most important progressive forces of Iran, including the Tudeh, must stand ‘for’ Khomeini.” This did not mean, however, that there was an absolute consensus among Soviet leaders. Based on lengthy interviews with Leonid Shebarshin, Odd Arne Westad argued that there were two visions, as represented by Boris Ponomarev and Yurii Andropov respectively. According to Ponomarev’s International Department, the revolution in Iran could reach the stage where it would be led by the political left. Andropov, on the other hand, was more skeptical, arguing that religious authorities would not give up power in the near future and the political left, especially the Tudeh, were too divided to lead the revolution.⁵² Leonid Shebarshin recalled that in his meeting with Andropov, which was prior to Shebarshin’s departure to Tehran to assume the post of KGB resident, Andropov expressed doubts about some of his comrades’ idealistic expectations. In Andropov’s opinion, the swift interception of the revolutionary initiative by the Tudeh or another “progressive” opposition group was not feasible in the near future:

He [Andropov] received me on the eve of my departure and also few times during my appointment. “Look, brother,” he mentored me before my departure, “the Persians are such people, they can easily make a fool of you, and you will not even notice how it happened!” As if he was continuing some argument, Yurii Vladimirovich warned me against illusions about the fragility and temporality of the place of the Shi’i clergy in power (at that point Khomeini had just returned to Iran). He also added that we needed

⁴⁸ “Zapiska L. Brezhneva v TsK KPSS v sviazi s sobytiiami v Irane,” January 12, 1979, RGANI F. 80 Op. 1 D. 639 L. 1–2.

⁴⁹ Until recently, the functioning of the Politburo Commission on Iran remained a mystery—its very existence was only confirmed by Brezhnev’s note, mentioned above, and remarks in the memoirs of Leonid Shebarshin and Anatolii Cherniaev. Recent declassifications have resolved this mystery: the peak of the Commission’s activity was in January–February 1979, when it submitted two reports to the Politburo with proposed Soviet actions in the wake of the developing revolution. The first report analyzed the situation in Iran in the immediate aftermath of the Shah’s departure, see: “Zapiska Komissii Politburo TsK KPSS po voprosam, kasaiushchimsia Irana,” January 19, 1979, RGANI F.3 Op. 70 D. 1275 L. 168–171. The second report concentrated on measures to counter to the potential American intervention in the wake of Khomeini’s return, see: “Zapiska o dal’neishei linii po protivodeistviuu vmeshatel’stvu SShA vo vnutrennie dela Irana,” February 1, 1979, RGANI F. 3 Op. 70 D. 1283 L. 219–220.

⁵⁰ V. Ovchinnikov, “Mezhdunarodnoe obozrenie,” *Pravda*, January 21, 1979, 5.

⁵¹ Grinevskii, *Tainy Sovetskoi diplomatii*, 104. Grinevskii’s claims about the Politburo discussing “the religious coloring” of the revolution are not reflected in the Politburo protocols. However, his argument that the opportunity to rid Iran of the Americans and keep them busy were the Politburo’s main motivations for initially supporting the revolution is confirmed by the abovementioned Politburo Commission on Iran reports.

⁵² Westad, *Global Cold War*, 297.

to pay more attention to the potential of the democratic movement: “I think the political left do not have perspectives in Iran.” Yurii Vladimirovich turned out to be right.⁵³

There could be numerous explanations for the realist image Shebarshin painted of Andropov. As Andropov’s former subordinate, one explanation could be Shebarshin’s desire to show his boss as the only sensible man in the leadership, whose vision was not “overshadowed by the ideology.” Although Andropov was likely the most realist figure in the late Brezhnev’s Politburo, his political vision was far from pure geopolitical realism; he was still greatly influenced by the ideological worldview.⁵⁴ Consequently, another reasonable explanation could be Andropov’s first-hand access to information from KGB agents on the ground. While we cannot be certain of everything, there is little doubt that Andropov ordered all the information available from Tehran in the preparation of Commission on Iran reports. Thus, as he was better informed than his Politburo colleagues, Andropov could have been in a unique position to analyze the situation in Iran. However, those in the Soviet leadership who expected the Iranian left to take the initiative in the revolution did not base their assumptions purely on ideological dogma, as there were at least two left-wing organizations that played a significant role in the revolution. Indeed, both the Mojāhedīn-e Khalq and Fadā’iyān-e Khalq managed to amass well-coordinated and organized paramilitary forces. These forces were the primary actors in neutralizing the Shah’s army and SAVAK remainders in January–February 1979. The Mojāhedīn and Fadā’iyān were also important in mobilizing the working class. Despite being few in numbers as compared to other Iranian social groups, workers were among the most active in the revolution.⁵⁵ They also played a decisive role in that time, as demonstrated by the strikes at the Abadan oil refinery plants in the fall of 1978, a turning point after which the Shah’s hopes to retain power nearly evaporated.⁵⁶

Following the fall of the Iranian monarchy, radical leftist movements remained active participants in revolutionary developments; indeed, Soviet analysts believed that they significantly contributed to the quick fall of Shapour Bakhtiar’s caretaker government. In his memoirs, Soviet ambassador Vladimir Vinogradov wrote that Bakhtiar and his circle were anxious that left radicals could take power by force and, consequently, Bakhtiar and his government ceased the struggle in order to avoid overwhelming violence.⁵⁷ In the analytical notes produced by the East German embassy in Tehran in March 1979, Vinogradov’s speculations were partly confirmed. According to East German papers, Khomeini and his supporters expected a much longer struggle with Bakhtiar over power, while the decisive actions of the well-organized Mojāhedīn and Fadā’iyān facilitated and quickened the fall of his government.⁵⁸

The Tudeh, Mojāhedīn, Fadā’iyān, and other left-leaning revolutionary groups were not the only ones to use the language of social justice and inequality, as religious leaders—including Khomeini—did not limit themselves to religious and anti-American rhetoric. In many of their proclamations and promises, religious leaders competed with leftist groups, capitalizing on slogans of social justice. This was no secret to Moscow either, as the KGB

⁵³ Shebarshin, *Ruka Moskvyy*, 191.

⁵⁴ Andropov’s ideological worldview is reflected in other episodes described by Shebarshin. For example, Shebarshin remembered how Andropov advised him to read Marx’s “Eighteenth of Brumaire” in order to understand the situation in Iran, see: Shebarshin, *Ruka Moskvyy*, 191. For more on the complexity of Andropov’s political views, see: Vladislav M. Zubok, *Collapse. The Fall of the Soviet Union* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 13–18.

⁵⁵ Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 518; and Peyman Vahabzadeh, *A Guerilla Odyssey: Modernization, Secularism, Democracy, and Fadai Period of National Liberation in Iran, 1971–1979* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2010), 216–222.

⁵⁶ Peyman Jafari, “Fluid history: Oil workers and the Iranian Revolution,” in *Working for Oil: comparative social histories of labor in global oil industries*, ed. Touraj Atabaki et al. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 69–98.

⁵⁷ Vladimir Vinogradov, *Diplomatia: ljudi i sobytia: Iz zapisok posla* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 1998), 418–419.

⁵⁸ Friedman, “The Enemy of My Enemy,” 9.

informed Moscow that the religious opposition had taken over the social agenda from the political left. Religious leaders urged the Iranian people to abandon Western values in order to return to the golden age of equality and social justice. After the establishment of the Islamic Republic, they introduced new taxes to assist the poor and limit the rights of foreign companies to own property in Iran. There is a note in Mitrokhin's papers from the KGB residency in Tehran mentioning that "priests overran the communists" (*poppy oboshli kommunistov*) in the field of populist slogans.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, some in Moscow saw these developments as a positive sign. For example, Semyon Agaev, one of the most authoritative Soviet experts on Iran, argued that Khomeini's socio-economic program only proved his anti-imperialism and made him the most progressive of all new Iranian leaders.⁶⁰

As the religious authorities were capturing ground on the left, the CPSU International department instructed the KGB to assist the Tudeh in forming a joint coalition of "the progressive forces."⁶¹ The KGB's primary task was to start building connections amongst the rest of the political left. With the full legalization of all political parties in Iran, left-leaning groups and factions mushroomed across the country at both the national and regional levels. By 1982, TASS correspondent Mikhail Krutikhin estimated that around 200 communist or left-leaning parties were active in Iran.⁶² However, in the early period of the Islamic Republic, when intercepting the revolutionary initiative still seemed feasible, the Mojāhedīn and Fadā'iyān were the primary targets of Soviet ideologues.

The first of these operations was coordinated by Lev Kostromin, Deputy Head of the Eighth Department of the KGB First Chief Directorate and acting resident after the withdrawal of Ivan Fadeikin in November 1978, before the arrival of Leonid Shebarshin in May 1979.⁶³ The KGB's first attempt to build stable contacts with the Fadā'iyān and Mojāhedīn came in February 1979, soon after it became evident that the monarchy would not be restored. Vladimir Kuzichkin remembered that after February 12, when the police and army disappeared from the streets of Tehran, armed young leftists were the ones maintaining some order in the capital. Two days later, Kuzichkin, along with other KGB officers, was ordered to make contact with some rank and file left-wing revolutionaries. He remembered that most of the young leftists he met that day expressed their sympathy with the Soviet Union. Kuzichkin even assumed that this was a unique, unused opportunity of the Iranian revolution, as the capital city was full of armed young pro-Soviet rebels. However, most of them expected very real and fast support from the Soviets, primarily in the form of a stable delivery of weapons. The KGB received similar requests from the leadership of both movements, and neither the Mojāhedīn nor the Fadā'iyān were ready to compromise or make deals with the Soviets unless the latter were ready to immediately supply them with weapons. According to Kuzichkin, the only agreement they reached was to maintain contact, but only outside Iran, in Europe.⁶⁴

In April 1979, according to Mitrokhin, the Iraqi communist party representative in Iran, Abdel Haba, was instructed by the KGB to conduct negotiations with two members of the

⁵⁹ MITN 1/2, 38.

⁶⁰ Semyon Agaev, "Nekotorye osobennosti istoricheskogo razvitiia Irana i antimonarkhicheskaja, antiimperialisticheskaja revolutsiia 1978–1979 gg.," in *Sovremennyi Iran. Istoriko-sotsiologicheskie problemy revolutsii*, ed. Sofia Kuznetsova (Moscow: INION, 1979), 47.

⁶¹ The Politburo discussed the idea of forming a united "progressive front" in Iran as early as in December 1978, following Nureddin Kiānuri's proposal in his letter to the Politburo. Kiānuri's strategy was one of the primary reasons the Soviets supported his election as the First Secretary of the Tudeh's Executive Committee. Later Soviet leadership and KGB actions towards forming this progressive front followed the Tudeh strategy. For the Politburo's resolution, see: "O deiatel'nosti Narodnoi Partii Irana (NPI) v period poslednikh sobytii v Irane i o položenii v rukovodstve etoi partii," December 28, 1978, RGANI F.3 Op. 72 D. 886 L. 66–70. For more on the Tudeh strategy and Soviet support in 1979, see: Friedman, "The Enemy of My Enemy," 12–18.

⁶² Mikhail Krutikhin, *Levye sily Irana i problema ikh edinstva (1978–1983 gg.)* (Candidate of Sciences Diss.: AON TsK KPSS, 1985), 6.

⁶³ Kuzichkin, *Inside the KGB*, 266.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 257–260.

Fadā'iyān-e Khalq executive committee. However, Soviet proposals did not spark immediate interest among the Fadā'iyān leadership; they refused to join the bloc led by the Tudeh. The Fadā'iyān expressed their readiness "to build practical relations" with Moscow, reemphasizing their desire for arms and money.⁶⁵ However, this request went without a response from Moscow, as the Soviet leadership was unwilling to appear as interfering in Iran's internal affairs. Only a year later, in the summer of 1980, did Soviet intelligence and the Tudeh manage to achieve some success in bringing the Fadā'iyān into an alliance. In the fall of 1979, at the first post-revolutionary plenum of the Central Committee of the Fadā'iyān-e Khalq, the split between the two factions in the organization's leadership became evident. Half a year later, it became official. In a situation characterized by immense pressure from the religious regime, the majority of the Central Committee of the Fadā'iyān-e Khalq decided to agree with the Tudeh strategy of supporting Khomeini's regime.⁶⁶ Certainly, the alliance between the Fadā'iyān (majority) and Tudeh in the summer of 1980 was a success for the Tudeh and Soviet Union, but it did not result in the formation of a truly wide left opposition front.⁶⁷ Moreover, the strategy to transform "Iranian February" into "Iranian October," still dominant in 1979, had long lost its feasibility by 1980.

Unlike with the Fadā'iyān, where the Iraqis acted as intermediaries, with the Mojāhedīn the KGB agents in Iran were directly responsible for conducting negotiations. Reza Sa'ādāti, one of the Mojāhedīn leaders, was the Soviets' main contact in the organization. Acting KGB resident Lev Kostromin organized Sa'ādāti's recruitment and convinced him that contact between the Mojāhedīn and Soviet intelligence was to remain secret. Contact with Sa'ādāti was organized through meetings between him and Soviet agent Vladimir Fisenko. According to Kuzichkin, during a number of meetings, Sa'ādāti passed "some interesting information" to the Soviet residency.⁶⁸ Fisenko and Sa'ādāti, however, were ambushed during one such meeting in April 1979. Both Kuzichkin and Shebarshin argued in their memoirs that the ambush was organized by the CIA and remainders of the SAVAK. However, there is no documented proof of any CIA activity of this kind. It is even hard to establish if the CIA had resources in Tehran in the spring of 1979 to organize such an operation. Yet, even if the CIA had no part in it, the fact that both Kuzichkin and Shebarshin were convinced that the CIA was behind their failure reveals some aspects of the KGB's Cold War thinking. Fisenko was immediately evacuated to the USSR, while Sa'ādāti was executed for treason a few months later. The negotiations with the Mojāhedīn also did not bring the desired alliance.⁶⁹

Thus, the activities of Soviet intelligence in Iran in 1979 encountered some serious obstacles. The objective to form a unified leftist front, as stated by the International Department, was not reached. However, that was not the KGB's only task in Iran, as one of the main functions of KGB representatives in Tehran was to serve as mediators in money transfers from the International Department to the Tudeh.⁷⁰ In return, the KGB passed on the reports of the Tudeh leadership. The residency received encrypted messages from the First Secretary of the Tudeh, Nureddin Kiānuri, every two weeks, and transferred them to Rostislav Ul'ianovskii, the Deputy Head of the International Department overseeing Iran. Apart from technical and day-to-day information, Kiānuri also sent Moscow general reports on the political and revolutionary situation in the country. Kuzichkin remembered that, in describing political circumstances, Kiānuri was quite objective, but all his modesty

⁶⁵ MITN 1/2, 39.

⁶⁶ Friedman, "The Enemy of My Enemy," 28.

⁶⁷ Maziar Behrooz, *Rebels with a Cause: The Failure of the Left in Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), 126.

⁶⁸ Kuzichkin, *Inside the KGB*, 266.

⁶⁹ Shebarshin, *Ruka Moskvy*, 108; and Kuzichkin, *Inside the KGB*, 266–268.

⁷⁰ Some declassified CPSU Central Committee documents confirm numerous money transfers to the Tudeh approved by the Soviet authorities. See, for example, "Postanovlenie Sekretariata TsK KPSS 'O pros'be rukovodstva Narodnoi partii Irana'," June 9, 1980, RGANI F. 89 Op. 32 D. 33 L.1–3; and "Postanovlenie Sekretariata TsK KPSS 'O pros'be rukovodstva Narodnoi partii Irana'," August 20, 1980 RGANI F. 89 Op. 43 D. 2 L.1–2.

disappeared when describing his party's achievements and perspectives.⁷¹ These exaggerations must have contributed to the International Department's prolonged belief that the Tudeh could intercept the revolutionary initiative.

By the end of 1979, the Soviet leadership's chosen strategy in its relations with the new Iranian regime started to gradually fall apart. The illusions of the International Department, namely that Iran could be pushed leftwards and become an ally of the Soviet Union, were crushed by Khomeini's uncompromising consolidation of power. The seizure of the U.S. embassy was certainly a decisive moment in Iran's radical break with the West, and was welcomed in Moscow despite public condemnation of the hostage situation. Yet, the Soviet Union was not getting any closer to replacing the United States in Iran. On the contrary, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan enforced anti-Soviet sentiment across different layers of Iranian society, including among some leftists. More importantly, however, it confirmed Khomeini's claim that the USSR was "the lesser Satan," but a Satan nonetheless. In the view of Iranian traditionalists, the Soviet Union was no less "Western" and its influence no less dangerous and corruptive in terms of ideology. The war in Afghanistan restored the image of the USSR as an imperialist power and revived memories of Russian imperialist attempts to control parts of Iran. Thus, following the invasion of Afghanistan, it was not difficult for Khomeini to gradually turn Iranian popular opinion against the Soviets. However, the Soviet leadership that centered its attention on Afghanistan continued to be interested in supporting Khomeini due to his ongoing conflict with the United States. Apart from general Cold War considerations, this continuing crisis in U.S.-Iranian relations distracted both the U.S. and Iran from Soviet actions in Afghanistan. From the Soviet perspective, it was desirable for this conflict to last as long as possible.

Kuzichkin's defection and the crackdown on the Tudeh

In 1980–81, the hostage crisis and Iran-Iraq war facilitated the religious authorities' consolidation of power, leading to the gradual destruction of all opposition forces in Iran. The Tudeh strategy of supporting the regime made this objective even easier, while the Soviet war in Afghanistan simultaneously transformed the Iranian left into an easy target for accusations of allying with an anti-Islamic force.⁷² The Tudeh was not the first target of the regime's attacks. More active and dangerous guerilla movements, particularly the Mojāhedīn, came under attack in 1980–81, and the Tudeh used this situation to its supposed benefit, supporting the crackdown on the Mojāhedīn in the hopes of becoming the only leading force of the left flank. For most analysts and decision-makers in Moscow, it was already evident that the Tudeh could be the next target. In July 1981, in a conversation with Secretary of State Alexander Haig, Soviet Ambassador Anatolii Dobrynin agreed with his American colleague that the Iranian left "were already going into a meat grinder."⁷³ Similarly, one of the most authoritative Soviet experts on the Middle East, Georgii Mirskii, argued in a scholarly roundtable that Soviet support for Khomeini, on the basis of his anti-Americanism, had already led to the destruction of the Mojāhedīn and could soon lead the Tudeh to the same fate.⁷⁴ Yet, Cold War thinking prevailed over communist solidarity. The Soviet leadership, consciously or not, preferred to sacrifice the Tudeh for

⁷¹ Kuzichkin, *Inside the KGB*, 288–289.

⁷² For more on how the Tudeh strategy facilitated the establishment of religious autocracy, see: Friedman, "The Enemy of My Enemy."

⁷³ "Memorandum of Conversation," July 2, 1981, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1981–1988*, Volume III, Soviet Union, January 1981–January 1983, Document 66. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1981-88v03/d66>.

⁷⁴ "Stenogramma zasedaniia seksii vneshnei politiki Nauchnogo soveta po ekonomicheskim, politicheskim i ideologicheskim problemam Soedinyonnykh Shtatov Ameriki po teme 'Politika SShA na Blizhnem Vostoke'," July 1, 1981, Archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences (ARAN) F.2113 Op.1 D.29 L.45–49. Pyotr Cherkasov, who had access to the IMEMO archive in the early 2000s, claimed that Mirskii also wrote the analytical note to the Central Committee. In

Khomeini's anti-Americanism. For the KGB, however, the destruction of the Tudeh in 1983 was not the main problem; instead, it was the defection of Vladimir Kuzichkin in 1982.

On June 2, 1982, Kuzichkin left the Soviet embassy in Tehran, drove to the Turkish border, and crossed to Turkey using a British passport under the name of Michael Rod. Until this day, the circumstances of and reasons for Kuzichkin's defection remain unclear. Kuzichkin argued in his memoirs that his defection was a spontaneous decision, claiming that he made this choice after discovering that some secret documents he was responsible for had gone missing. Thus, fearing the inevitable consequences, he decided to flee.⁷⁵ Leonid Shebarshin and other KGB veterans, on the other hand, insisted that Kuzichkin had been recruited by British intelligence long before the defection.⁷⁶ Nicholas Barrington, who represented British interests in Tehran, described Kuzichkin's appearance at the British interests section of the Swedish embassy as a total surprise.⁷⁷ As the documents of both intelligence services on this matter remain classified to this day, we cannot be sure as to whether Kuzichkin had been a double agent for some time and, more importantly, if he had been passing information on Soviet contacts with the Tudeh to the British before defecting.

Various sources attribute the regime's crushing of the Tudeh to Kuzichkin's defection. In 1991, an anonymous KGB officer gave an interview to *Moskovskie Novosti* in which he blamed Kuzichkin for trading information on Soviet-Tudeh connections to British intelligence, who in turn told the Iranian regime and thus facilitated the crushing of the Tudeh.⁷⁸ This version of events became popular even before this anonymous revelation; it was mostly discussed in Iranian emigrant circles and had proponents among former high-ranking SAVAK generals.⁷⁹ However, known debriefings of Kuzichkin after his defection do not support this theory: in the two lengthy conversations he had with British diplomats, there is no sign of him passing information on Tudeh activities.

Kuzichkin was debriefed by high-ranking Foreign Office officials: first by Sir Julian Bullard, the Deputy Permanent Under-Secretary of State and Political Director of the FCO

this note, he argued: "there is no reason to see the signs of the course towards revolutionary democracy in the policies of Ayatollah Khomeini." See: Pyotr Cherkasov, *MEMO.Ocherk istorii* (Moscow: Ves' mir, 2016), 450.

⁷⁵ Kuzichkin, *Inside the KGB*, 372–384.

⁷⁶ Shebarshin, *Ruka Moskvy*, 221.

⁷⁷ Nicholas Barrington, *Envoy: A Diplomatic Journey* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 245. Here, Barrington's account contradicts Kuzichkin's memoirs, as Kuzichkin claimed that he never visited the British interest section and had used a forged passport obtained from the department of illegal intelligence in the KGB residency. Kuzichkin, *Inside the KGB*, 377–378.

⁷⁸ Natalia Gevorkian, "Kriuchkovskii dom s chornogo khoda," *Moskovskie novosti*, October 6, 1991, 11. It is important to note the timing of this publication, which was in the aftermath of the unsuccessful August 1991 coup against Mikhail Gorbachev. The Head of the KGB, Vladimir Kriuchkov, was among the coup's leaders and main organizers. Along with the policy of *glasnost'*, which uncovered many of the KGB's historic crimes and that of its predecessors, this fact contributed to an unprecedented outburst of negative public opinion towards the KGB. In that period, the Soviet press published sensational stories daily about the KGB's crimes and mistakes. However, not all such stories were supported by evidence. This particular publication was refuted by Leonid Shebarshin in his interview with *Izvestia*, where he claimed that such accusations were merely revenge on the part of one of his former subordinates, whom Shebarshin had fired from the KGB. See, V. Skosyrev, "Razvedchik vernuvshiia s kholoda," *Izvestia*, October 12, 1991, 4.

⁷⁹ In his thesis, Mehrdad Khonsari provides the testimonies of former SAVAK generals Mohsen Mobasser and Manouchehr Hāshemi, who apparently knew of the connection between Kuzichkin's defection and the crushing of the Tudeh directly from the Head of the Soviet Division in the new Iranian counterintelligence service, SAVAMA, with whom they maintained contact. See, Mehrdad Khonsari, "The National Movement of the Iranian Resistance 1979–1991: The role of a banned opposition movement in international politics" (PhD diss., London School of Economics, 1995). This version also made its way into the press, appearing for the first time in April 1985 in the *Washington Post* ("Defection Hurt Iranian Communists," *Washington Post*, April 3, 1985), and a second time in the same paper with new details about the alleged CIA involvement ("CIA Curried Favor with Khomeini," *Washington Post*, November 19, 1986). The timing of the second publication was hardly a coincidence, as it was published in the midst of the Iran-Contra crisis.

at the time, famous for uncovering the KGB spy network in the UK in 1973; and second by Alan Goodison, the Assistant Under-Secretary of State. Although the transcripts remain classified in The National Archives of the United Kingdom (file FCO 49/1041), Bullard and Goodison's reports are available and give a good sense of the course of these conversations. In these debriefs, both Bullard and Goodison mostly questioned Kuzichkin about the domestic situation in the Soviet Union, including the national minorities issue and the possibility of a Muslim uprising in Central Asia or the Caucasus. Kuzichkin was also queried about Soviet foreign policy and some previous KGB operations. Neither debrief discussed the issue of the Tudeh.⁸⁰ However, it is certainly possible that these were not his only debriefs after defection. Overall, the probability that Kuzichkin influenced the Iranian regime's decision to destroy the Tudeh seems very low. He could, however, have passed information on Soviet emergency extraction plans for the Tudeh leadership, given that he admitted to involvement in doctoring fake documents and planning extraction routes in his memoirs.⁸¹ Kuzichkin could also have passed on the names of KGB servicemen working under diplomatic cover and, thereby, influenced the Iranian regime's decision to expel some Soviet diplomats in May 1983.

Shebarshin, whose career was threatened by Kuzichkin's defection, always denied any connection between Kuzichkin's betrayal and the crushing of the Tudeh. Instead, he insisted that, due to the political circumstances in Iran, the Tudeh's sad destiny had been inevitable.⁸² It is hard to argue with this statement because, from 1981 onwards, both the Tudeh leadership and Soviet representatives in Iran experienced significant pressure from the regime, which only intensified in the spring of 1982. In June, in a private conversation with an American colleague, the Director of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, Evgenii Primakov, asked not be quoted when he admitted, "if the Iranian regime continued to oppose 'progressive transformation', maintained its repression of the Tudeh, and persisted in taking Iran back to the 16th century, there would come a point where the Soviet Union could no longer support it."⁸³

By early spring 1982, the Iranian press was brimming with incriminating publications about the Tudeh. The most serious accusations were the Tudeh's expressed support for the Soviet presence in Afghanistan and attempts to promote Soviet interests in Iran.⁸⁴ In July, the authorities banned the last Tudeh publication, the weekly newspaper *Ettehād-e Mardom*. The prosecutor's office commented that the newspaper "had opposed the laws of Islam and created obstacles for the 'Neither East nor West' policy of the government."⁸⁵

Nureddin Kiānuri later addressed the party leadership, announcing that the party would soon be banned despite its support for the regime.⁸⁶ Leonid Shebarshin remembered that, in June–December 1982, the KGB managed to save some of its agents.⁸⁷ The Tudeh leadership, however, was not among those able to escape. When the arrests started in February 1983, Shebarshin was recalled to Moscow, leaving Iran permanently. In later interviews, he

⁸⁰ See, "Bullard to Broomfield, 'Kuzichkin'," December 16, 1982, The National Archives of the United Kingdom FCO 28/5181, 32; and "Goodison to Broomfield, 'Kuzichkin,'" December 17, 1982, The National Archives of the United Kingdom FCO 28/5181, 33.

⁸¹ Kuzichkin, *Inside the KGB*, 356–359.

⁸² See, Skosyrev, "Razvedchik, vernuvshiisia v kholod."

⁸³ "A.M. Thomson, British embassy in Moscow to D.G. Manning, East European and Soviet Department, Foreign and Commonwealth Office. 'Soviet views on the Middle East,'" July 12, 1982, The National Archives of the United Kingdom FCO 8/4574, 43.

⁸⁴ See for example a publication in *Jomhuri-e Eslāmi*, May 24, 1982. English translation is available in "C.R.J. Rundle, British Interests Section in Tehran to D. Coates, Middle Eastern Department, Foreign and Commonwealth Office. 'The Tudeh Party, The USSR, and Afghanistan,'" May 26, 1982, The National Archives of the United Kingdom FCO 8/4574, 31.

⁸⁵ "N. Barrington, British Interests Section in Tehran to Foreign and Commonwealth Office. 'Iran/USSR relations,'" July 19, 1982, The National Archives of the United Kingdom FCO 8/4574, 41.

⁸⁶ Friedman, "The Enemy of My Enemy," 34.

⁸⁷ Shebarshin, *Ruka Moskvu*, 222.

insisted that he was recalled in order to prevent his expulsion by Iranian authorities; this decision had nothing to do with Moscow's dissatisfaction with Kuzichkin's betrayal.⁸⁸

Despite long preparations to go underground and plans for extraction, the arrests came as a surprise to the Tudeh leadership. Starting on February 6, 1983 and continuing throughout the following days, around 6000 Tudeh members, including Kiānuri and all the leadership, were arrested.⁸⁹ This repression exclusively targeted the Tudeh, as the leadership of the allied Fadā'iyān (majority) was allowed to escape to the Soviet Union and establish its new headquarters in Tashkent. According to Soviet documents, some of the Fadā'iyān continued their half-legal or illegal activities in Iran, at least until 1986, when, following a new wave of repression, they asked the Soviet authorities' permission to join their comrades in the USSR.⁹⁰ In the following months, arrested Tudeh members were tortured and forced to publicly confess to espionage for the USSR. Kiānuri appeared on Iranian national television on April 30 and read out a confession. For the rest of 1983 and part of 1984, these televised Tudeh confessions became a regular ritual.⁹¹ Five days after Kiānuri's television appearance, Soviet Ambassador Vil Boldyrev was summoned to the Iranian foreign ministry and presented with a note demanding the immediate expulsion of 18 Soviet diplomats allegedly involved in espionage.

The Soviet authorities' public reaction to the arrest and confessions of the Tudeh leadership was reserved and moderate. On February 19, *Pravda* published a note in which it reported the arrests and blamed the reactionary circles of the Iranian clergy and bourgeoisie. The note also expressed disappointment with attacks on the Soviet Union perpetrated by the Iranian regime, and pronounced the USSR a staunch supporter of Iranian anti-imperialism.⁹² Clearly intended for the Iranian audience, the note was also transmitted to Iran through the National Voice of Iran radio station and republished in the international communist press.⁹³ There should be no surprise that the Soviet reaction was so mild. This course of action had been expected in Moscow, and saving the Tudeh was not worth potentially losing Iran's anti-American leadership. Karen Brutents remembered his repeated petitions to the Politburo proposing to leak information on the torture of the Tudeh leadership to the Western press, but such petitions always received negative responses. The Politburo

⁸⁸ See, for example: Leonid Shebarshin's interview with Andrei Razbash, *Chas Pik TV Show*, May 15, 1996, <https://www.net-film.ru/film-68444>.

⁸⁹ Friedman, "The Enemy of My Enemy," 34; and Aryeh Yodfat, *The Soviet Union and Revolutionary Iran* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984), 142–143. Some details on how the arrests were conducted can be found in GDR intelligence reports, see: "Information about Anti-Communist Activities in Iran," February 21, 1983, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, BStU, MfS, HVA, Nr. 24. Obtained by Roham Alvandi. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/134852>; "Information of the Security Agencies of the VRB about Activities of the Iranian Government against the Iranian People's Party (Tudeh)," April 25, 1983, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, BStU, MfS, AS 144/86. Obtained by Roham Alvandi and translated by Carla Fischer. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/134846>.

⁹⁰ For the petition of the remaining Fadā'iyān in Iran and the Central Committee Secretariat resolution, see "Postanovlenie Sekretatiata TsK KpSS 'O razmeshchenii v Uzbekskoi SSR gruppy aktivistov Organizatsii fedainov iranskogo naroda (bol'shinstvo)'," December 12, 1986, RGANI F. 89 Op. 13 D. 7 L. 1–7. The resolution also refers to the earlier 1983 TsK resolution (Postanovlenie St-113/81gs OP) that permitted the establishment of the Fadā'iyān (majority) headquarters in Tashkent and provided 130 activists and members of their families, who had earlier crossed from Iran, with housing in Uzbek SSR.

⁹¹ For more on tortures and practices of public confessions in revolutionary Iran, see Ervand Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions: Prisons and Public Recantations in Modern Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). For the details of Kiānuri's statement, see "Iranian Intelligence Service IRNA: "More on Espionage Confession from Leaders of the Tudeh Party"," May 01, 1983, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, BStU, MfS, HA II, 29577, 27–28. Obtained by Roham Alvandi. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/209047>.

⁹² "Vopreki natsionalnym interesam Irana," *Pravda*, February 19, 1983.

⁹³ Yodfat, *The Soviet Union and Revolutionary Iran*, 143.

did not wish to antagonize Iran.⁹⁴ By 1983, the Soviets had been prepared, as Nicholas Barrington put it, “to play it cool and ditch the Tudeh party, if necessary.”⁹⁵

Conclusion

In their book, Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky quoted a former KGB officer who argued that, in the Brezhnev era, the Party and KGB “functioned almost as two branches of the same organization.”⁹⁶ The KGB’s activities in Iran in the 1970s–1980s serve as a great illustration of this argument. Soviet foreign intelligence was primarily the Party’s political tool for gaining information, distributing information (or misinformation), and establishing connections with different political actors abroad. The information gathered by the KGB was supposed to be the main tool the intelligence service had to influence the decision-making process. Yet, the case of the Iranian revolution illustrates the KGB’s inability to look beyond the Party’s imposed ideological worldview. Even when KGB analysts managed to gather such information, they failed to convince the leadership of the importance of their intelligence (e.g., the importance of the Shi’i clergy as a driving force of the revolution). As the available sources show, most of the decisions the leaders made were based on a complicated mix of ideological and geopolitical considerations, with information from the ground playing only a marginal role. It was partly the leadership’s own problem: just as with their subordinates, ideological constraints prevented Politburo members from considering a cold-minded analysis of often exceptional intelligence from the ground. Still, as Christopher Andrew described it, “the Soviet Union suffered from the problem that afflicts all authoritarian regimes—that those who provide them with information whether from open or secret sources, fear to offend them by correcting their misunderstanding of the outside world.”⁹⁷ The Iranian revolution showed that this combination of factors was the primary reason for the KGB’s inability to fulfill its duty to inform and warn the leadership. However, there were also subjective factors that contributed to this failure.

All the memoirists considered here admitted that, by the start of the revolution, the KGB spy network in Iran was in tatters following the SAVAK counterintelligence campaign. It is hard to evaluate to what degree this lack of informed sources at the court and in other layers of Iranian society prevented the KGB from foreseeing the revolution. Based on the assessments of other intelligence services, it is fair to assume that, even with wider access to information, the ideological constraints and bureaucratic culture would have prevented the KGB from such forecasting anyway. Although KGB reports sent to Moscow in the years preceding the revolution clearly indicate that the social crisis was not expected, the details in them—primarily regarding the Shi’i clergy—reveal that KGB agents in Iran, unlike many in Moscow, understood the importance of religious authorities in Iranian political life. Moreover, both Kuzichkin and Mitrokhin claimed that the KGB attempted to contact Ayatollah Khomeini, who was exiled in Iraq. Although these contacts (or attempted contacts) had no practical consequences, they at least signify that, unlike most in the Soviet leadership, the KGB may have been aware of Khomeini’s political weight.

With the revolution gearing up, and especially following the overthrow of the Shah’s regime, the KGB residency in Iran was de facto subordinated to the Politburo Commission on Iran while simultaneously fulfilling the tasks of the International Department. The most important mission that the new resident, Leonid Shebarshin, became responsible for was the establishment of a united front of “progressive” forces. While the Soviet leadership

⁹⁴ John Parker, *Persian dreams: Moscow and Tehran since the fall of the Shah*. (Washington DC:Potomac Books, 2009), 17.

⁹⁵ For Barrington’s comment, see: “N. Barrington, British Interests Section in Tehran to Foreign and Commonwealth Office. ‘Soviet influence in Iran,’” July 12, 1982, The National Archives of the United Kingdom FCO 8/4574, 39.

⁹⁶ Andrew and Gordievsky, *KGB: the Inside Story*, 480–481.

⁹⁷ Christopher Andrew, “The Mitrokhin Archive,” *The RUSI Journal* 145, no. 1 (2000): 55.

chose to support the revolutionary regime led by the clergy, the KGB assisted the Tudeh Party in re-establishing its political influence after a lengthy exile and joining forces with other leftist groups. The formation of this coalition was partly the result of the International Department's ideological vision, which saw the establishment of a stable theocracy in Iran as not viable and the instability that should have followed as a chance to hijack the revolution. It soon became clear that this forecast, based on Marxist-Leninist ideological clichés, was untrue. Even before that, however, attempts to build a united leftist front around the Tudeh failed, as the guerilla movements decisively rejected this alliance. In the following years, the Tudeh continued its support for Khomeini, even when the regime began crushing other leftist movements. During this period, KGB activities were limited to passing messages from the Tudeh leadership to the International Department and passing money in the opposite direction.

The defection of Vladimir Kuzichkin and crackdown on the Tudeh resulted in an almost complete shutdown of KGB activities in Iran. All the KGB managed to do was extract some of its agents, while the CPSU agreed to provide asylum to members of the Tudeh and Fadā'iyān (majority) who managed to escape to the Soviet Union. Relations between Iran and the Soviet Union were essentially frozen until the new rapprochement following Mikhail Gorbachev's transformation of Soviet foreign policy strategy. For the KGB, however, its extensive network and active operations in Iran remained a memory lost to Iran's pre-revolutionary past.

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