



CONFEDERATION OF IRANIAN STUDENTS, NATIONAL UNION

CONFEDERATION OF IRANIAN STUDENTS, NATIONAL UNION (Konfederāsiūn-e jahānī-e moḥaṣṣelin wa dānešjūyān-e irānī etteḥādiya-ye mellī), an organization purporting to be the political and corporate (*šenfti*) representative of Persian students abroad, as well as in Persia, during the 1960s and 1970s. The roots of the Confederation lay in Persian student circles formed in West Germany, England, and France in the late 1950s. After the [coup d'état](#) that overturned the secular nationalist government of Moḥammad Moṣaddeq in 1332 Š./1953 the relatively democratic atmosphere that had prevailed in Persia since the end of World War II was gradually transformed under the increasingly autocratic rule of Moḥammad-Rezā Shah Pahlavī (1320-57 Š./1941-79). The highly political student movement in Persia was crushed a few months after the coup, when on 16 Āḍar 1332 Š./7 December 1953, during the visit of the American vice-president Richard M. Nixon, three students were killed and a number injured as security forces stationed at Tehran University sought to curb a protest (Nirumand, pp. 96-97; *Jonbeš*, pp. 4-5). All other forms of domestic opposition to the government were also suppressed, and for the next seven years the country remained politically quiescent.

In the early 1960s there was a modest revival of opposition activity in Persia, precipitated by domestic economic difficulties and political corruption, coupled with pressure for reform from the administration of John F. Kennedy



in the United States. In this atmosphere the Persian student groups abroad were drawn deeper into political activism. In April 1960 representatives from Germany, France, and England met in Heidelberg and established the Confederation of Iranian Students in Europe (Šākerī and Ḥāmedī, p. 5). In January 1962 the group changed its name to Confederation of Iranian Students, National Union (CISNU), reflecting the incorporation of Persian student organizations from the United States and the association of Tehran University students affiliated with the National front (Šākerī and Ḥāmedī, pp. 5-6, 9). The Iranian Students Association in the United States (ISAUS) had been founded in 1952 under the joint sponsorship of the Persian embassy and American Friends of the Middle East, a front organization of the [Central Intelligence Agency](#) (*Ramparts*, April 1967, p. 24; Gasiorowski, 1991, pp. 128-29). Nevertheless, in the early 1960s, with the reemergence of political opposition in Persia and the fading of the cold-war atmosphere from American universities, ISAUS was taken over by students opposed to the shah's regime. It became a large and significant component of CISNU (*Payām-e dānešjū*, pp. 62-63).

The Confederation was composed of participating national federations, which were in turn made up of local units (*wāḥedhā*). The governing council (Šūrā-ye 'ālī) comprised one representative from each national chapter. Delegates from all the chapters met in annual congresses to elect the five-member general secretariat (Hay'at-e dabīrān) and to vote on major policy questions. The secretariat supervised five committees, responsible for publications, international affairs, defense (of the opposition in Persia), finances, and cultural affairs respectively. In early versions of the Confederation's constitution (*asās-nāma*) the organization was defined as the corporate and political representative of Persian students at home and abroad, within the legal framework of the Persian constitution (see [constitutional revolution](#) of 1323-29 Š./1905-11; *Nāma-ye pārsī*, 1964, pp. 41-44). Over the years, however, the Confederation gradually assumed a more radical orientation, reflecting the shifting balance among factions competing for the members' votes.

Some of the better-known founding members and early activists of CISNU included Ḥamīd 'Enāyat (later a lecturer at the University of Oxford), Mehrdād Bahār, Manūčehr Ṭābetiān, Homāyūn Kātūziān, Ḳosrow Šākerī, Parvīz Nīkkvāh, Manūčehr Ganjī (later minister of education under the shah), Amīr Ṭāherī, Manūčehr Hezārḳānī, Homā Nāṭeq, Nāṣer Pākdāman, Faraj-Allāh Ardalān, 'Alī-Moḥammad Fāṭemī, 'Alī Šākerī, Ḥasan Lebāsčī, Moḥammad



Naḵṣab, Maḥdī Ḳānbābā Tehrānī, Manūčehr Ḥāmedī, Bahman Nīrūmand, Kūroš Lāšā'ī, Ḥasan Māsālī, Abu'l-Ḥasan Banī Ṣadr (later president of the Islamic Republic), Ṣādeq Qoṭbzāda (later foreign minister of the Islamic Republic), Moṣṭafā Čamrān (later minister of defense of the Islamic Republic), and 'Alī Šarī'atī, an influential Islamic writer, who was a graduate student in Paris in 1959-64 and contributed to the Confederation's cultural quarterly, *Nāma-ye pārsī* (Abrahamian, 1982, pp. 463-65; Shakeri, III, pp. 13-14; Šawkat, pp. 311-14). Most of these individuals were also members of or sympathizers with other Persian opposition groups active abroad, including Nahzat-e āzādī-e Īrān (Iran liberation movement), Jāme'a-ye sōsīālīsthā-ye nahzat-e mellī-e Īrān (Socialist league of the Iranian national movement), and other groups closely associated with the National front. A few were members of the pro-Soviet Tudeh party (see [communism ii](#)), but the strength of the latter faction steadily diminished in the later 1960s as new leftist factions, like the splinter groups Sāzmān-e enḡelābī-e Ḥezb-e tūda (Revolutionary organization of the Tudeh party) and Sāzmān-e Mārksīst-Lenīnist-e tūfān (Storm Marxist-Leninist organization) gained influence within the Confederation (*Mā wa konfederāsīūn*, pp. 16-29; Šawkat, pp. 131-42, 320-24). Factions affiliated with these groups operated within the organizational structure of the Confederation, which accorded each a voice corresponding approximately to the size of its voting bloc.

The Confederation was thus a politically autonomous organization. Although some individual members had contacts with opposition figures like Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (Rūḡ-Allāh Ḳomeynī), guerrillas active in Persia, and foreign governments (Šawkat, pp. 263-68, 335; Shakeri, I, pp. 14-20, II, pp. 1-2; Māsālī, pp. 50-61), no other Persian or foreign organization or government controlled or financed its activities. On the contrary, even the shah's security police, Sāzmān-e eṭṭelā'āt wa amnīyat-e kešvar, known as SAVAK, acknowledged the basic financial independence of the Confederation (*Documents on Iranian Secret Police [D.I.S.P.]*, p. 138). It was in fact financed by dues and contributions from members and supporters, sale of its various publications, and funds raised at such special events as Nowrūz celebrations. The finance committee published detailed annual reports on income and expenditures; the latter were not high, as active members and the supporting organizations received no payment (Šawkat, p. 329; CISNU financial report, Frankfurt, 1971).

On 15 Ḳordād 1342 Š./5 June 1963, after the arrest of Khomeini, there was a



major uprising among his followers and other political opponents, including members of the National front; the shah quelled the uprising and suppressed all opposition to his regime. In the next fifteen years the only openly active and organized opposition group that survived was the student movement abroad, led by the Confederation. The expanding influence of this movement was generally recognized in the Western news media, and the shah himself considered it an effective element in the coalition of forces that eventually brought about the overthrow of the monarchy (Pahlavi, pp. 146-48; Radji, pp. 13-15; cf. *Documents on the Pahlavi Reign of Terror [D.P.R.T.]*, pp. 34-40, 60-82, 190-210; *D.I.S.P.*, appendix).

Through militant demonstrations and close cooperation with human-rights, legal, and student organizations, the Confederation spearheaded an international campaign exposing the shah's regime as a repressive dictatorship. After the failure of 1342 Š./1963 the Confederation began to shift to a more radical line, following a similar shift within the opposition at home. While a new generation of Marxist and Islamic activists were working underground to mount a guerilla campaign in Persia, some members of the opposition abroad, including Confederation activists, also decided to prepare for armed opposition. They approached Cuba, Algeria, China, and Palestinian guerrilla organizations for support (Shakeri, I, pp 13-20, II, pp. 1-2; Šawkat, pp. 206-15, 262-67). Although these contacts bore little fruit at first, eventually a small Marxist group operating in Europe and the Middle East established ties with the guerrillas in Persia and in 1350 Š./1971 began to publish in Beirut the fourth series of the journal *Bāktār-e emrūz*, calling for the overthrow of the regime through armed struggle (*Moškelāt*, pp. 92-94).

Throughout this period the Confederation openly recruited members from among the rapidly growing population of Persian students abroad. According to one study, there were about 4,000 Persians studying abroad in 1336 Š./1957, but the number had increased almost eightfold, to about 31,000, by 1344 Š./1965 (*Nāma-ye pārsī*, 1967, p. 45). In 1357 Š./1978 there were around 100,000 Persians studying in foreign countries, about half of them in the United States (Pahlavi, p. 145; *The Los Angeles Times*, 6 January 1979, p. 22). Relative economic prosperity resulting from the rise in Persian oil revenues in the 1960s and 1970s enabled students from varied social backgrounds to seek education abroad as an alternative to the congested universities in Persia. Aside from the numerical increase, therefore, the student population abroad also represented a broader social spectrum than in preceding generations. For



example, in comparison with most of the founders of the Confederation, whose politics had been shaped by the parliamentary and constitutionalist experience of the decade following World War II, the students of the 1960s and 1970s came from less affluent backgrounds and had experienced only the political repression of the 1950s and 1960s. Furthermore, at their foreign universities these younger activists found themselves among increasingly restless European and American student populations in a milieu suffused with the fervor of revolutionary movements in China, Vietnam, Cuba, Algeria, and Palestine. All these factors contributed to both the growth and the radicalization of the Confederation.

Resolutions adopted at the Confederation's fourth congress, held in Cologne on 3-7 January 1965 (pp. 2-4), already reflected a shift from constitutionalist opposition to a more revolutionary stance in support of the regimes in Vietnam, Cuba, and other countries that were "struggling against U.S. imperialism" and condemning the Soviet Union's support for the shah, who was viewed as an American puppet. In that year the Confederation began to publish a new monthly journal, *Šānzdahom-e Ādar* in addition to *Nāma-ye pārsī*. An attempt on the shah's life on 21 Farvardīn 1344 Š./10 April 1965 led to the trial and conviction in Tehran of five former Persian student leaders in England. The Confederation organized a defense campaign involving Amnesty International and the International Commission of Jurists, as well as respected international figures like Jean-Paul Sartre and Bertrand Russell. Eventually the sentences of the five men were reduced, and none was executed (*D.P.R.T.*, pp. 106-19; Shakeri, IV, pp. 18-21; *Was It a Plot . . . ?* pp. 3-9), which Confederation activists counted as a great victory. The organization mounted other such media campaigns and pressed the legal and political defense of Persian political prisoners, who included Ayatollah Maḥmūd Ṭālaqānī (later the second-ranking leader in the Islamic Revolution of 1357-58 Š./1978-79), Maḥdī Bāzargān, the first prime minister of the Islamic Republic, and Bīžan Jazanī and Mas'ūd Rajawī, among the founding members respectively of the two major guerrilla opposition groups, *Sāzmān-e čerīkhā-ye fedā'ī-e kaḷq-e Īrān*, founded in 1360 Š./1971, and *Sāzmān-e mojāhedīn-e kaḷq-e Īrān* (*Šāwkat*, pp. 332-33; see [communism iii](#)).

The Confederation was particularly effective in organizing large public demonstrations in Europe and the United States during visits by the shah or prominent members of the royal family or the government. In these efforts it received considerable support from leftist and other radical groups in the host



countries. One of the most dramatic such events took place in June 1967 during the shah's visit to West Berlin; several thousand people, mobilized by the Confederation and the Sozialistische Deutsche Studentenbund, turned out for a demonstration, which ended in violent confrontation with the police; fifty people were injured and a German student shot to death. This event triggered an upsurge of student activism and the creation of an "extraparliamentary opposition" in the Federal Republic of Germany (*Šānzdahom-e Ādar*, June 1968, pp. 1, 3; on the significance of these events within the European student movement of 1968, see Habermas, p. 15; Statera, pp. 91-94).

The progressive radicalization of the Confederation led to serious internal tensions, however. As Marxist groups came to have a greater voice in the late 1960s, the more traditionalist Islamic activists, among them Banī Šadr, Qoṭbzāda, and Čamrān, withdrew (Shakeri, II, p. 6; Šawkat, pp. 334-35). Toward the end of the decade, during the period of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Maoist groups became more influential and challenged other groups for control of the Confederation. The pro-Tudeh faction was forced out at the beginning of the 1970s, as increasingly stronger condemnations of Soviet relations with the Persian government were issued at Confederation congresses. By the early 1970s the majority of the leaders of the Iranian Student Association in the United States, for example, were Maoist.

In 1350 Š./1971, after the Čerīkhā-ye fedāī had initiated a limited but effective guerrilla campaign against the Persian regime (Ahrahamian, 1980, pp. 3-12), the government declared the Confederation illegal and membership a prison offense, though the organization continued to recruit members abroad. According to Western sources and SAVAK, there were an estimated 2,000-5,000 members in Europe and the United States early in the decade (*The Economist*, 27 March 1971, p. 34; *The Christian Science Monitor*, 2 December 1971, p. 33; *D.I.S.P.*, p. 138), in addition to a large contingent of supporters and sympathizers. The claimants to a truly revolutionary movement within Persia, by that time, were the proponents of guerrilla warfare. Their supporters gained popularity within the Confederation at the same time that the Maoists, accused of taking direction from a foreign government that was increasingly friendly to the shah, were losing ground (Šawkat, pp. 355-56; for Confederation protests against China's new foreign policy, see. e.g., *Šānzdahom-e Ādar*, May 1971, pp. 1, 8). Furthermore, according to SAVAK documents, the government strategy in this period was to attempt to cripple the Confederation through



infiltration and exacerbation of internal conflicts (*D.I.S.P.*, p. 96; cf. *Keyhān*, 30 Farvardīn 1358 Š./19 April 1979, p. 2). It is not clear how successful this strategy was, but several schisms did occur in the mid-1970s.

By that time the pro-guerrilla faction had emerged as the main challenger to the Maoists and the National front, which had originally supported guerrilla activity. The guerrilla faction championed the so-called “authority thesis,” according to which the Confederation was to accept the total authority of guerrilla leaders in Persia and to act simply as their base of support abroad (Shakeri, V, p. 9; Šawkat, pp. 361-64). In 1975 the Confederation approved a new charter (*manšūr*) calling explicitly for the overthrow of the shah’s regime. This was followed by a split with the Maoist factions, which supported the new Chinese policy of reconciliation with the Persian government (Šawkat, pp. 353-55). In the same year, just when the pro-guerrilla faction seemed to have become dominant in the Confederation, the guerrillas in Persia suffered major losses; almost all their original leaders and cadres were either killed or arrested by security forces. As the first signs of impending revolution appeared in Persia in 1356 Š./1977, the incipient opposition, contrary to the expectations of Confederation members and other leftists, found its leadership first among liberals and moderates and eventually within Ayatollah Khomeini’s clerical faction.

During the last few years of its activity in the late 1970s the Confederation took advantage of the [Carter administration](#) policy of support for international “human rights” to assume a major role in alerting American and European news media to political repression in Persia. In June 1976 Confederation activists occupied the Persian consulate in Geneva and obtained documents showing that it had been the headquarters for SAVAK’s European operations (see *D.I.S.P.*). The agency had been gathering intelligence not only on Persian students but also on foreign citizens, including members of the British parliament (*The Times*, 23 July 1976, pp. 1, 7). The columnist Jack Anderson’s articles in *The Washington Post* helped to discredit the shah’s regime and to bring about a congressional investigation of SAVAK activities in the United States (*The Washington Post*, 29 October 1976, p. D 15, 4 November 1976, p. D.C. 11; Dorman and Farhang, p. 146). The most dramatic event of this period was a demonstration against the shah during his visit to Washington, D.C., in November 1977. Approximately 1,000 demonstrators engaged in a violent clash with police and supporters of the shah, during which almost 100 demonstrators and twenty policemen were seriously injured. The students



broke through police lines and came so close to the welcoming ceremony at the White House that tear gas thrown by the police reached the shah and President Jimmy Carter (*Time*, 28 November 1977, pp. 15-16; *The New York Times*, 16 November 1977, pp. 1, 12).

In the following year Persia was engulfed in revolution. Many Persian students returned home to take part directly; those who remained abroad worked together in broad coalitions of independent groups. It was in that year that the final schism occurred within the Confederation; the pro-guerrilla faction established its own student organization (Šawkat, p. 363), and the Confederation was thus effectively dissolved before the Revolution began.

In the two decades preceding the Revolution of 1357 Š./1979 the Confederation had represented the only continuous organized sociopolitical movement operating openly in opposition to the Persian government. Especially in its early years it succeeded in uniting a wide range of political groups in a single organizational structure. It achieved its basic goal of focusing international attention on repression in Persia, thus ensuring a measure of restraint on the part of the regime in its treatment of political opponents. The Confederation also brought political awareness to thousands of young, educated Persians, many of whom later became members of the nation's intellectual and political elite.

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In addition, much valuable information has been gathered in taped interviews with leaders and activists of the CISNU, who also shared their private collections of CISNU documents.