



FEDĀ'ĪĀN-E ESLĀM

FEDĀ'ĪĀN-E ESLĀM, a Shi'ite fundamentalist group with a strong activist political orientation. It was founded in 1945 by a charismatic figure, Sayyed Mojtabā Mīrlawḥī (b. 1923; d. 1955). Claiming descent from the Safavids who had established the Shi'ite state in Persia in the early 16th century, Mīrlawḥī adopted the princely title Nawwāb Ṣafawī. After graduating from the German Technical School in Tehran (Madrasa-ye ṣan'atī) and a stint as an employee of the [Anglo-Iranian Oil Company](#) in Ābādān, Nawwāb traveled to Najaf in 1943 and became a theology student (Wāḥedī, 1, pp. 7-9; Amīnī, pp. 126-27).

During his stay in Najaf, Nawwāb became fully aware of the anti-Shi'ite writings of the noted Persian historian and intellectual, Aḥmad Kasrawī (e.g., *Šī'agarī*, Tehran, 1321 Š./1942). Nawwāb soon acquired the clerics' deep disdain for Kasrawī and decided to return to Tehran in 1945 to take immediate action (Kazemi, 1984, pp. 160-67). With four hundred tomans borrowed from Ayatollah Ḥājj Shaikh Moḥammad-Ḥasan Ṭālaqānī, he purchased a gun and attempted unsuccessfully to assassinate Kasrawī on a Tehran street on 14 May 1945. Nawwāb, who was arrested on the same day, was released soon afterwards and announced through broadsheets the formation of the Fedā'īān (Wāḥedī, 1991, pp. 9-21; Amīnī, pp. 127-29; Šarīf Rāzī, p. 284).

The formative period.

Undaunted by his initial failure, Nawwāb arranged successfully for two of his followers, the brothers Sayyed Ḥosayn and Sayyed 'Alī-Moḥammad Emāmī, to murder Kasrawī and his secretary on 11 March 1946 at the Ministry of Justice



(Davānī, pp. 2, 195-98; Šarīf Rāzī, pp. 8, 278-84; 'Erāqī, pp. 19-28; Amīnī, pp. 129-30). This episode marks an important turning point for the Fedā'īān. The publicity surrounding the event was fueled by fiery speeches, broadsheets, and newspaper accounts announcing the existence of the Fedā'īān and their activities to “purify” Persia from anti-Islamic practices. The tacit approval of the leading cleric of Najaf, Ayatollah Ḥājj Āqā Ḥosayn Qomī, of the assassination of Kasrawī and his demand for the acquittal of the Emāmī brothers helped to legitimize the Fedā'īān and gave the organization ample opportunity to recruit new members and broaden the scope of its activities (Wāḥedī, 1991, p. 29; Amīnī, pp. 129-31).

The Fedā'īān's public stature was enhanced when it formed an alliance (1946-51) with the well-known Ayatollah Sayyed Abu'l-Qāsem Kāšānī (Faghfoory, pp. 164-203; Richard, pp. 108-13). A series of public activities, including demonstrations for Kāšānī and against the Zionists in Palestine, as well as a number of violent acts against significant public officials, marked this period (Amīnī, pp. 130-32; 'Āqelī, I, pp. 414-20).

The attempt on the shah's life on 4 February 1949 provided the ruler with an opportunity to seize the initiative by establishing control over the cabinet and the Majles. Martial law was restored, the Tudeh party was outlawed, a number of leading politicians and journalists were arrested, and the Fedā'īān's patron, Ayatollah Kāšānī, was accused of collusion and exiled for some sixteen months to the Levant. The Constitutional Assembly met in May and empowered the Shah to dissolve the Majles. Two close confidants of the shah, 'Abd-al-Ḥosayn Hažīr, former prime minister and minister of the royal court, and Manūčehr Eqbāl (q.v.), the new minister of the interior were entrusted with the task of preventing the election of “undesirable elements” to the Constitutional Assembly, the 16th Majles, and the First Senate. Nonetheless, the elections for the Majles in October were vigorously contested by Moḥammad Mošaddeq, leader of the emerging National Front (Jebha-ye mellī), who also criticized irregularities in the electoral process. The assassination of Hažīr on 4 November by the diehard Fedā'īān member Ḥosayn Emāmī induced a strong element of panic in the regime which led to the suspension of the elections and a new vote in Tehran. This event, and the significant part played by the Fedā'īān in protecting the ballot boxes from being tampered with by professional knife-wielding thugs (*čāqūkeš*), were instrumental to the successful election of National Front candidates from Tehran to the 16th Majles, including Mošaddeq, Kāšānī, Moẓaffar Baqā'ī, and Ḥosayn Makkī, who



formed the core of the highly vocal and popular minority fraction in the Majles ('Erāqī, pp. 41-45; Amīnī, pp. 132-34; for the role of knife-wielders in Persian politics, see Kazemi, 1980, pp. 1-2).

The Fedā'īān presence in the holy city of Qom as well as a public speech by Nawwāb highly critical of the apolitical 'ulamā' and, more specifically, Grand Ayatollah Ḥajj āqā Ḥosayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī Borūjerdī, the leading Shi'ite authority and the head of the religious center in Qom, caused a tense uproar at the Shi'ite center ('Erāqī, p. 50). This dispute is in many respects indicative of the Fedā'īān's complicated relationship with the leading clerics, some of whom supported the Fedā'īān while others opposed the upstart and shadowy organization ("Āyāt-Allāh al-'Ozmā",; Golsorkī; Akhavi, pp. 66-68).

The Fedā'īān's most daring assassination occurred on 7 March 1951 when Prime Minister Ḥajj 'Alī Razmārā was gunned down by Kalīl Ṭahmāsbī at the Šāh Mosque. Razmārā had been involved in intense negotiations with the British for a new oil agreement. But the proposed agreement was opposed by major segments of society, including the newly formed National Front under the leadership of Moṣaddeq, which was supported by Ayatollah Kāšānī. Razmārā's assassination placed the Fedā'īān at the center of the oil nationalization issue with all its profound pathos and deeply felt sentiments. Through this daring act, the organization had become a direct participant and an important force in a critical national issue. After spending a relatively short time in jail, the assassin was greeted upon his release as a hero by Ayatollah Kāšānī and others (Amīnī, pp. 135-37). Shortly after this event, the dean of the Faculty of Law and Political Science of Tehran University, 'Abd-al-Ḥamīd Zangana, was also assassinated on 19 March (Āqelī, I, pp. 442-44). Although the Fedā'īān were not involved, their activities had contributed to the atmosphere that promoted political violation and vigilantism.

The Fedā'īān and the Moṣaddeq government. When Moṣaddeq led the National Front to power in April 1951, Fedā'īān fortunes took a downward turn as the incompatibilities between the two groups became more apparent. With oil already nationalized and Ayatollah Kāšānī allied with Moṣaddeq, the Fedā'īān lost simultaneously an abiding public issue and a powerful patron. Moṣaddeq's secularism was also incompatible with the Fedā'īān's profoundly religious orientation ('Erāqī, pp. 95-99; Cottam, 152). The break in the Fedā'īān-Kāšānī alliance and the Fedā'īān's continued political agitation landed its top leadership in jail. Nawwāb was not released from prison until February 1953 (Amīnī, pp. 136-37).



The Fedā'īān were then unwittingly caught up in the web of a successful plot by foreign and domestic anti-Moṣaddeq forces to exploit the fear of religious groups about the menace of a Communist takeover in Persia. On 2 January 1953, the cleric Ḥājj Sayyed 'Alī-Akbar Borqa'ī, a leading member of the Partisans of Peace (Jam'iyat-e havādārān-e ṣolh), a front organization for the pro-Soviet Tudeh party, returned to Qom from the International Peace Congress in Vienna. A group of agitators, who were actually recruited by anti-Moṣaddeq plotters, appeared at the front of the shrine in Qom to welcome Borqa'ī and shout highly charged slogans: “death to Islam and the Qur'ān and to Ayatollah Borūjerdī.” The news soon reached the Fayẓīya *madrassa*, and a group of students under Shaikh Faẓl-Allāh Maḥallātī, a zealous Fedā'īān member, rushed to the scene and clashed with the demonstrators. With the support of Ḥājj Āqā (later Ayatollah) Ruhollah Khomeini (Rūḥ-Allāh Komeynī), then an influential political-minded teacher at the Qom religious center, Fedā'īān sympathizers mobilized a major urban riot in Qom against the Tudeh party. A violent demonstration two days later by religious students and the *bāzārīs* led to a bloody clash with the police and left one dead and eleven injured (Bahrāmī, pp. 2-4; Rāzī, I, pp. 311-33). Khomeini was charged by Borūjerdī to investigate the case, interview the media correspondents, and file a complaint. Maḥallātī, who was appointed by Khomeini as his representative in the Revolutionary Guard (Sepāh-e pāsdārān-e enqelāb-e eslāmī) in the early 1980s, later stated that the entire incident had been part of a well-orchestrated plot to frighten the 'ulamā' and thus deepen the fissure between them and the Moṣaddeq government (Maḥallātī, pp. 348-55). The Fedā'īān's anti-Moṣaddeq activities culminated on 14 February 1952 when Maḥdī 'Abd-e Ḳodā'ī, a fourteen year-old member of the organization, attempted to assassinate Ḥosayn Fāṭemī, a well-known journalist, deputy prime minister (later foreign minister), and close confidant of Moṣaddeq (Āqelī, II, pp. 331-32).

There are no accurate statistics for the Fedā'īān's actual membership. All the available evidence, including the various accounts since the revolution, put the membership at no more than a few hundred. The number of sympathizers during the Fedā'īān's heyday was substantially larger, reaching perhaps as many as several thousands. The Fedā'īān's geographic base was predominantly urban with heavy concentration in a few major cities, such as Tehran, Mašhad, and Qom. They recruited primarily among the illiterate or semi-literate peddlers, shopkeepers, and young artisans.

The Fedā'īān's importance in Persian politics was due to several related



factors. First, they were exceptionally successful as a terrorist organization, evoking tremendous fear with their daring acts of assassination. Second, their espousal of oil nationalization and strong advocacy of Persia's sovereignty had popular support. Third, the Fedā'īān maintained critical ties with elements of the clergy—particularly with Ayatollah Kāšānī and Ayatollah Khomeini, but apparently to a lesser degree also with Ayatollah Maḥmūd Ṭālaqānī, Ayatollah Šehāb-al-Dīn Najafī Mar'ašī, and others—and benefited from this patronage (Šarīf Rāzī, pp. 8, 291). Fourth, and related to the previous point, the Fedā'īān had important contacts in the *bāzār*. These contacts served both as sources for the organization's funds and as yet another way to reinforce their relationship with the clerics through the well-established *bāzār*-mosque nexus. The Fedā'īān also tried to reach out to Muslims beyond Persia's borders. Nawwāb made trips to Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, and other Islamic countries. But due to particularistic Shi'ite factors and other limitations, the Fedā'īān's international appeal and success was at best minimal.

The Fedā'īān and the coup d'état of 1953. The clashes of Fedā'īān with the National Front government, increasing animosity between Mošaddeq and Kāšānī, and the 'olamā's general support of the coup d'état of 1953 prompted the Fedā'īān to remain inactive during the coup and toward the government of General Fażl-Allāh Zāhedī. The main action was a leaflet issued by Nawwāb six days after the coup indicating, with no reference to the coup itself, that rule by a shah or a prime minister without observance of God's law is illegitimate (Amīnī, p. 138). A split in the leadership and the departure of 'Abd-Allāh Karbāšcīān, the publisher of the pro-Fedā'īān paper *Nabard-e mellat* ("People's battle"), weakened the organization. Efforts by the shah to co-opt and silence Nawwāb through financial rewards and offers of an ambassadorship to an Islamic country were rumored ('Erāqī, pp. 128-29). Nawwāb became fully disillusioned with the Shah's regime, however, when the Persian government decided to join the Baghdad Pact. The unsuccessful attempt to assassinate prime minister Ḥosayn 'Alā' on 16 November 1955, on the eve of his departure to Baghdad to ratify Persia's participation in the pact, was the death knell for the Fedā'īān. The government proceeded to arrest the Fedā'īān's leaders and past associates, including Ayatollah Kāšānī. Kāšānī and other associates were soon released, but the Fedā'īān's top leaders were put on trial and convicted. Several members were given varied jail sentences. Nawwāb and three of his close associates, including Razmārā's assassin, were executed by a firing squad on 18 January 1956 (*Gāh-nāma* II, p. 796).



The Fedā'īān and the 1963 riots. Elements from the Fedā'īān continued their clandestine operations. Some were involved in the three separate groups that coalesced after March 1963 and became known as the Coalition of Islamic Associations (Hay'athā-ye mo'talefa-ye eslāmī), which played an active role in the religiously inspired riots of 15 Kordād/5 June 1963 to protest the shah's land reform program and women's suffrage, and the arrest of Ayatollah Khomeini ('Erāqī, pp. 164-91). Their anti-government posture became more pronounced after the riots were crushed by the regime and Ayatollah Khomeini was forced into exile. A significant culprit in the view of these groups was Prime Minister Ḥasan-'Alī Maṣṣūr, who was blamed for reintroducing the despised capitulatory rights granted to the U.S. military personnel stationed in Persia. On 21 January 1965 Maṣṣūr was assassinated by Moḥammad Bokārā'ī, a member of the militant branch of the Coalition of Islamic Associations, at the entrance to the Majles; the government executed four members of the group. During the trials in a military tribunal, once again the government alleged connections between individuals in this organization and the Fedā'īān.

Fedā'īān and the 1979 revolution. In the aftermath of the revolution three abortive attempts were made by a number of old members or sympathizers of the Fedā'īān to restore the organization: first, by Shaikh Ṣādeq Kalkālī with 'Abd-Allāh Karbāsčīān; second, by Shaikh Moḥammad-Mahdī 'Abd-e Kōdā'ī, Shaikh Moḥammad-'Alī Lavāsānī, and Jawād Wāḥedī; and finally by Abu'l-Qāsem Rafī'ī, a former security chief of the Fedā'īān (Richard, pp. 76-79). However, the Coalition of Islamic Associations which grew from the former members and sympathizers of the Fedā'īān, with their well established connections to Ayatollah Khomeini and his lieutenants since 1963 and their role as a major faction in the government of the Islamic Republic, must be considered as the main carriers of the Fedā'īān's legacy in post-revolutionary Persia.

The Fedā'īān's ideology. The Fedā'īān's major ideological statement, *Rāhnamā-ye ḥaqā'eq* (Guide to truth) was published in 1950 in Tehran and reissued after the 1978-79 revolution. This ninety-two page document, written in a plain style, portrays vividly the Fedā'īān's vision of an Islamic state and society (Kazemi, 1985, pp. 118-35; Richard, pp. 54-73; Rahnema and Nomani, pp. 73-96). It gives a detailed account of all the non-Islamic practices current at the time in Persia and calls for an Islamic state in which the practices of the *šarī'a* would reign supreme. It is pervaded with a highly moralistic overtone and



looks deterministically to a final utopian society where all ills and evils will have been eradicated through the force of religion.

The overarching principles of the Fedā'īān program call for a full application of Islamic law, complete administration of the Islamic judicial system, including *qeṣāṣ* (“law of retaliation”) and other forms of punishment. The program also demands abolition of all non-Islamic laws and prohibition of all forms of immoral behavior, including gambling, prostitution, consumption of alcoholic beverages, etc. (Rahnema and Nomani, p. 81). Their ideological handbook discusses all major government institutions and assigns them proper Islamic roles. It expects the parliament to legislate only Islamic laws and the shah to supervise the administration of all Shi'ite shrines properly and to look after the poor. Monarchy is acceptable as long as it functions according to Islamic laws and precepts. For the Fedā'īān, clerics have a central leadership role as educators, judges, and moral guides to the people.

The Fedā'īān's program calls for the creation of an essentially egalitarian society, where wealth is distributed fairly and the needs of the poor are met. It values labor and thrift and stresses the importance of legitimate business activity. It praises the simple grocery shop as the exemplar of proper economic behavior, where hard work, fairness, and thrift guide its operations. The program particularly spares no harsh words for those who engage in usury, bribery, and corruption.

The Fedā'īān recognize women as principal carriers of virtue and the keystone to an ethical family life. Their legal rights and privileges, however, are restricted, essentially reducing them to no more than second-class citizens. The program also advocates the formation of numerous houses all over the country to facilitate practice of the religious institution of temporary marriage. Significant restrictions, such as the poll tax (*jezya*), are also placed on recognized religious minorities—Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians—who are minimally tolerated by the Fedā'īān. No such attitude is extended to the Baha'is (q.v.), who are despised and rejected.

There are important similarities between much of the Fedā'īān's basic views and certain principles and actions of the Islamic Republic of Iran: the Fedā'īān and Ayatollah Khomeini were in accord on issues such as the role of clerics, morality and ethics, Islamic justice, the place of the underclass, the rights of women and religious minorities, and attitudes toward foreign powers (Ferdows, pp. 243-53; Rahnema and Nomani, pp. 83-84; Enayat, p. 95). In a real



sense, some critical but modified Fedā'īān goals have become enshrined in the core structures and ideological positions of the Islamic Republic of Iran and are safeguarded by the Coalition of Islamic Associations and their allies (e.g., Anṣār-e Ḥezb-Allāh) with domination in the legislative, judicial and some executive branches, including the Revolutionary Guard (Sepāh-e pāsdārān-e enḡelāb-e Eslāmī), and the Intelligence Ministry (Wezārat-e eṡṡelā'āt) as well as in such gigantic enterprises as the Foundation of the Impoverished (Bonyād-e mostaẓ'afān). Furthermore, published accounts by Ayatollahs Sayyed 'Alī Kāmēnā'ī (pp. 171-75), the supreme spiritual leader of the Islamic Republic, and 'Alī-Akbar Hāšemī Rafsanjānī (pp. 108-12), the powerful chair of the Discretionary Council (Šūrā-ye mašleḡat-e neẓām), all point directly to the important formative impact of Nawwāb's charismatic appeal in their early careers and anti-government activities.

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