

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 1

FOREIGN REPORT

(Published in The Economist Newspaper
30 May 1979)

Birth of an opposition in Iran

The fragmentation of the loose coalition of forces that united to bring down the Shah has raised the prospect of a belated resistance campaign by elements who are opposed both to Ayatollah Khomeini's Moslem fundamentalists and to the Marxist left. The power-struggle in Teheran is bewilderingly complex. The key Iranian groups involved in the contest are:

1. Khomeini's Islamic Revolutionary Council, representing the most fanatical and remorseless leaders of Shia Islam.
2. The more moderate Islamic clergy, who have become increasingly identified with Ayatollah Shariat-Madari.
3. The pro-Soviet Tudeh party, whose influence is particularly strong among workers in the southern oilfields around Abadan, and the recently-formed Iranian Communist party, which was created as a rival to the Tudeh party, but is suspected by some observers of being another Soviet front (see below);
4. The two revolutionary guerrilla movements, the Fedayeen - of declared Marxist-Leninist leanings - and the Mujaheddin, which maintains links with Khomeini's Islamic supporters.
5. The remnants of the Iranian armed forces.
6. A clandestine network of pro-Shah junior army officers and former Savak officials who may have been involved in the recent assassination campaign against Khomeini's leading supporters that claimed the life of Ayatollah Motahari. (A shadowy group called Forhan has claimed responsibility for many of these attacks and has set out to sow terror among Khomeini's key supporters.)
7. Regional and separatist forces, including not only the Kurds, who pose the most serious military challenge, but the proponents of an 'Arabistan' in the south-west of the country, and the Azerbaijani secessionists who were encouraged by the Russians in the immediate aftermath of the second world war.

Most western observers were surprised by the trance-like way in which the Shah's army chiefs reacted to Khomeini's return to Teheran - and in which many of them subsequently submitted to the death sentences handed down by the revolutionary Islamic tribunals. Their passivity was the product of (a) explicit orders from the Shah not to intervene and (b) American dissuasion (see FOREIGN REPORT No. 1569). However, not all surviving officers of more junior rank are disposed to let the revolution run its course. Although their position remains fairly hopeless - with huge quantities of weapons in the hands of left-wing militias and Khomeini's Islamic Guardians, and a Palestinian unit acting as the nucleus of a revolutionary secret police in Teheran - they can now count on a greater degree of outside backing than in the past. The Israelis, for a start, have nothing to lose by aiding the opposition to a regime that has declared its total support for the Palestinian cause, claims to be willing to provide a base for international terrorist operations and has 'executed' a prominent local Jewish businessman. Significantly, the Israelis were restrained by pressure from the Carter administration from lending greater support to efforts to head off Khomeini's revolution last year.

CONTINUED