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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
NATIONAL FOREIGN ASSESSMENT CENTER

30 November 1978

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

IRAN: THE NATIONAL FRONT

Summary

The organized political opposition to the Shah of Iran centers around the National Front--a coalition group established by former Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq in 1949 on a program of opposition to Britain's exploitation of Iran's oil. After the Shah removed Mossadeq from power in 1953 the Front went into a long decline. It existed tenuously with parts of it splitting off only to rejoin later.

The Front has reappeared in the last year as a loose association of intellectuals and political activists. It includes a wide range of parties from moderates to radical leftists, but not Communists. Ideological and personal feuds, some decades old, weaken its cohesion and have damaged its ability to negotiate during the current disorder.

The National Front has not put forward a formal program other than calling for a return to the 1906 constitution.

*This memorandum was prepared by the Iran Analytical Center of the Office of Regional and Political Analysis. Questions and comments may be addressed*

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In general, most National Front leaders advocate a reduced role for the Shah, civil liberties, an end to corruption, some form of socialism, and a non-aligned or independent foreign policy that would loosen ties with the US. The more specific demands of the various elements of the Front range from abolition of the monarchy to acceptance of a figurehead, but since early November most leaders in the Front have moved closer to the hardline views of the exiled leader of Iran's Shia Muslim clergy, Ayatollah Khomeini, who insists on abolition.

Although the Front does have some popular support--especially among intellectuals and the middle class--and has drawn large crowds to some of its rallies--it is Khomeini who has the largest backing among the demonstrators and rioters who have plunged Iran into chaos. The power of Khomeini has disturbed some of the Front's leaders who have tried to arrange an accommodation between the Shah and Khomeini without success.



Should the Front come to power, ideological and personal divisions would probably widen and prevent a realistic program or an effective administration. A Front-dominated government would be likely to drive hard bargains on oil issues, press for a non-aligned foreign policy, and turn away from the Shah's support for conservative regimes in the Persian Gulf area.

#### Mossadeq--The "Golden Age" of the National Front

Since the late 1940s the major organized political opposition to the Shah has come from the National Front, a wide assortment of political activists who maintain that the last legal government in Iran was that of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq, removed from power by the Shah in 1953.

The Front came into being in 1949 when Mossadeq, then a deputy in the Majlis (the lower house of parliament) joined

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eight other deputies in promoting a vague but popular program calling for neutralism, independence from foreign domination, a fight against corruption, and a reduction in the powers of the Shah. Mossadeq's immediate goal was the elimination of British influence in Iran and the nationalization of the oil industry.

The original nine parliamentary members were soon joined by other nationalist-minded groups and individuals, and the association became the strongest grass roots political organization in Iran since the constitutional movement around the turn of the century. Mossadeq showed a keen awareness of the fears and prejudices of the Iranian people. The National Front did not create the program it advocated but gave voice and direction to feelings that were, and still are, widespread in Iranian society. Mossadeq was appointed Prime Minister in April 1951. A prolonged struggle for power ensued between Mossadeq and the Shah--ending in Mossadeq's ouster in August 1953. In early August Mossadeq demanded control over the military. The Shah fled briefly to Rome but was reinstated by the army, led by General Zahedi.

By the time of Mossadeq's downfall in 1953, his popularity had begun to ebb. Many nationalists had come to realize that Mossadeq was incapable of producing the reforms the country needed, and some were frightened by what was perceived as a growing threat from the Communist Tudeh Party.

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The Shah cracked down on the Front after 1953. The Front was declared illegal, Mossadeq was kept under house arrest in internal exile, and many other members of the organization were imprisoned. Mossadeq's Foreign Minister, Hossein Fatemi, was executed.

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### Realignments and Quarrels

The post-Mossadeq years have been chaotic for the National Front. The Front initially dedicated all its efforts to restoring Mossadeq to power. It split several ways, between professional white collar workers on one side and religious and bazaar elements on the other, and between radical activists and moderates.

The Shah's announcement in 1960 that elections would be held encouraged a revival of the National Front. A new Front was organized on 27 July 1960 under the leadership of Allahyar Saleh, an old-line supporter of Mossadeq. During the elections the Front appeared weak, disunited, and even apathetic, but the organization gained strength because of the public reaction to the government's rigging of the elections. It gained more ground in January 1961 when Saleh was elected to the Majlis in a second round of elections.

Divisions continued to plague the Front as the various wings of the organization quarreled. In May 1961 the cleavage deepened as a significant wing of the coalition split off to form the Freedom Movement of Iran led by Mehdi Bazargan. Bazargan gained the support of Mossadeq but re-joined the Front in a loose alliance in September 1961.

The Shah cracked down on the National Front again in 1963 after the Front rebuffed his offer to participate in a coalition government. The Front had demanded that the Shah return to constitutional rule and give up many of his powers. Saleh and Bazargan were imprisoned.

Throughout the later 1960s and early 1970s the National Front--like most opposition groups in Iran--was largely dormant. Mossadeq died on 5 March 1967.

An external Front organization appeared during the 1960s with branches in the United States and Western Europe. A key figure in the external Front is Ali Shaygan. In general terms the external organization has been more radical than the domestic group and has been more closely tied to leftist and

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student groups. There is little evidence available on the strength of the expatriate organization in the Front or in Iran.

### Appeal and Constituency

The National Front since its inception has always been vague in its political message--a reflection of the disparate elements in the coalition. The Front has, however, traditionally espoused constitutionalism as its main theme--harkening back to the constitutional movement of the early 20th century in Iran that produced the 1906 revolution.

By espousing a return to the 1906 constitution, the National Front has consistently found a receptive audience in Iran. A return to the 1906 constitution would mean a significant reduction in the Shah's powers. The constitution stipulates that the Shah act as a constitutional monarch, subject to the control of the majlis and the religious leadership, and gives the latter the power to review all legislation to ensure compatibility with Islamic law.

In recent years the Front's spokesmen have also been actively involved in promoting the human rights cause in Iran. Such groups as the Committee for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedom are closely affiliated with the Front. Front spokesmen repeatedly have blasted the Shah for his "dictatorial, absolutist regime" that has imposed a "reign of terror." The excesses of SAVAK, the Shah's security and intelligence force, have been widely publicized by the Front.

The Front has also long advocated a change in Iran's close relationship with the West. Mossadeq made an end to Britain's influence over Iran's oil wealth the centerpiece of his platform. In a public statement on 24 August 1978 National Front spokesman Karim Sanjabi outlined three principles:

--the protection of human rights and the restoration of constitutional rule;

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--true independence from the influence of foreign powers over Iran's natural resources; and

--an independent (non-aligned) foreign policy.



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Most of the members of the Front also espouse some form of socialism. There is no unified Front approach to the issue other than general calls for democratic socialism. Because many of the Front's most prominent leaders have been educated in Western Europe, especially France, their concept of socialism is close to that of European social democrats.

The Front has consistently refused to allow the Communist Tudeh Party to join and has generally rejected cooperation with the Tudeh. Nonetheless, most Front spokesmen have argued that the Tudeh should be free to participate openly and legally in Iranian politics.

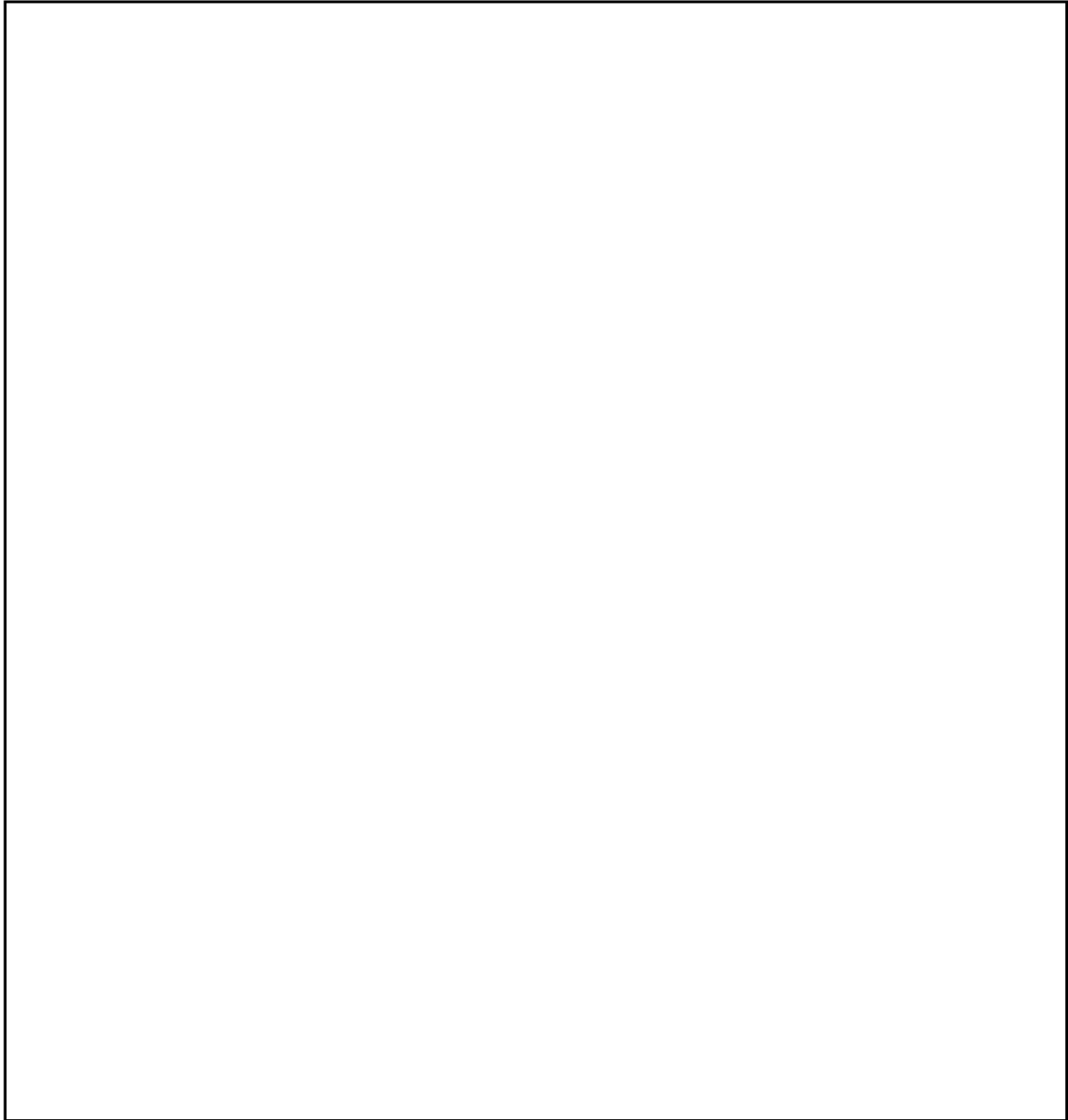
The National Front has never been a mass-based organization. None of its constituent elements appears to have any viable organization. Although the Front has been able to attract large crowds to some of its rallies, it is the religious leadership that can bring out the demonstrators and mobs, not the National Front.

While the Front does have supporters in the clergy, bazaars, and lower classes, it draws its greatest support from middle-class professionals, students, and intellectuals. Front spokesman Sanjabi told an interviewer that the Front "is composed of liberals, traders, intellectuals, and students, who want democracy, real independence, and a human form of socialism".

We know little about the Front's relationship with the Iranian military. Senior officers are said to hold the

Front's leaders in contempt as coffeehouse politicians susceptible to Communist penetrations and influences, but junior officers may be more susceptible to the Front's appeal.

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Rivalries and the Future

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The personal interrelationships among the various leaders of the National Front have a significant influence on its activities.

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In general terms, the Front can probably be divided into three broad factions. The rightist and centrist groups, composing the bulk of the Front, would probably favor a compromise settlement and might participate in elections. The left wing of the Front, however, rejects anything short of the overthrow of the Shah.

Since early November the leftist faction has clearly been in the ascendancy.

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We doubt that the

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moderate elements will break with Khomeini and the left in the near term.

The ideological divisions and personal quarrels that have plagued the National Front since its inception would probably grow larger if the Front came into power. A purely National Front government would probably be unable to produce an effective administration or a realistic government program.

Quarrels would probably develop between leftist leaders of the Front like Beheshti and the rightists like Foruhar. How much socialism to adopt, the role of the clergy in formulating day-to-day policy, and other contentious issues would surely disrupt a National Front government.

Judging by its past performance and statements, a Front dominated government is likely to press for hard bargains on issues related to Iranian oil. The Front would demand a greater Iranian role in the oil industry and higher prices.

Most National Front leaders would probably press for a non-aligned foreign policy that cut many of Iran's relations with West--CENTO, for example, would be an early casualty. Some of the leftist leaders in the Front might push for a closer relationship with the Soviet Union.

We suspect that a Front government might also be less inclined to pursue the Shah's policy of supporting conservative Arab regimes in the Persian Gulf area, like Oman. If leftist elements in the Front came into dominance, they might even encourage dissident groups in Bahrain and Oman.

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