

Devotion and resistance: Bizhan Jazani and the Iranian Fedaii

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Historian Doug Enaa Greene's lecture on the Iranian Marxist theorist Bizhan Jazani, presented to the Center for Marxist Education.

April 30, 2015 – *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal* – The popular image of the Iranian Revolution in the United States focuses on a series of stereotypical bearded mullahs, an exotic and backward oriental society, and of course the seizure of the US embassy by frenzied masses. While it is true that the current government of Iran is a theocratic Islamic state that hijacked the revolution that brought down the US-backed Shah. There is another story, of brave and dedicated communist revolutionaries who sought the liberation of their people from capitalism, imperialism and the establishment of a revolutionary socialist state. Communists like the brilliant Bizhan Jazani, who thought seriously and sincerely about how to make a revolution in Iran.

Jazani, like so many of his generation was willing to go the distance for the communist cause, paying the ultimate price in the end. It is true they did not succeed, both due to their own errors and to those they had no control over. Despite that, they and not the clerics of Iran, deserve to be honoured, warts and all. This is the story of struggle they endured and the revolution they dreamed of.

I. The coup

Bizhan Jazani was born in 1937 into a political family, his father was a member of the Tudeh (or Communist) Party of Iran and at the age of 10, he joined the party's youth wing. As he grew older, Jazani displayed a keen philosophical mind, which would lead him to take a degree in the subject. He also showed a greater knowledge of Iranian history and a keen independent and non-dogmatic spirit in his approach to revolution.^[1] Although Jazani would always remain a Marxist-Leninist, he ultimately believed that the Tudeh Party was not the appropriate vehicle to carry out a revolution. Like many of his radical contemporaries, Jazani broke with the party and tried to forge a new communist path.

Jazani's break with the Tudeh can be traced to the party's response to the 1953 US-backed coup that overthrew Mohammed Mossadegh. Key to understanding these events is the role of oil.

Although the oil industry produced a great deal of wealth, the profits mainly swelled the coffers of British oil companies, and almost none of this went to the Iranian government or to the workers, whose strikes were brutally suppressed. The country remained subservient and dependent on imperialism and most of the countryside was governed by feudal property

relations. There was some development of Iranian infrastructure and industry under the monarchy.^[2] Following World War II, the Shah was driven from power and there was an opening for change.

In 1951, Mossadegh and his National Front came to power, promising to nationalise the oil industry and to break the chains of imperialist dependency. There was a massive swell of nationalist support for the National Front's program, not only among the national bourgeois, but from the working class and the Tudeh. The working class pressed for even more political and economic changes than the government was willing to deliver, and began strikes and demonstrations. The Tudeh, a critical supporter of the government, was also tied to the Soviet Union, who did not want to destabilise a friendly Iran, feared an independent mass movement and worked to defuse the developing radical mood.^[3]

Yet the opposition among the comprador bourgeois, the throne, Britain and the USA were determined to bring down the National Front. In 1953, they staged a successful coup that restored the Shah to his throne and the oil company to British and American companies. The Tudeh was unable to prevent the coup for a multitude of reasons: its dependence on the USSR, lack of initiative among its leaders, factionalism and a complete failure to use its members organised in the armed forces. In the aftermath, the Tudeh was hit hard by repression and many of its members heroically resisted. Overall though, the Tudeh had given up the struggle without ever engaging in battle.^[4]

The new regime of the Shah was completely subordinate to US imperialist interests in the region. A ruthless dictatorship was established, benefitting primarily the throne and a small comprador bourgeoisie who kept the country in a state of dependency and misery. The Shah created his notorious secret police force, the SAVAK, which jailed, tortured and murdered thousands. The primary victims of the Shah's repression fell on its secular opponents: nationalists and communists.

Yet opposition remained and it exploded into the open in 1963 when mass demonstrations erupted against the Shah's arrest of the outspoken Ayatollah Khomeini. These demonstrations were quickly suppressed by the army. Repression was stepped up by the Shah and the last legal openings for dissent were closed. The Tudeh failed to organise during these protests. This event had a profound effect on Jazani and his co-thinkers, producing a major change in their tactics. They were also influenced by their readings on the revolutions in Algeria, Vietnam, China and Cuba and they concluded that armed struggle was the only way forward.^[5]

II. The self-sacrificers^[6]

For the next several years, Jazani and his comrades prepared for the task ahead, organising cells and demonstrations against the regime. However, Jazani had little experience in underground activity or armed action, and in February 1968 he was captured by SAVAK and imprisoned. Along with Jazani, most of the leading members of his group were also arrested. Yet a few of them managed to escape the police dragnet, and they continued the task of organising. Two

members managed to leave Iran for Lebanon, where they joined the Palestinian liberation movement to receive training and arms. Other comrades remained in Iran, to reorganise and recruit new members and prepare for the initiation of armed action in both the cities and the countryside.

In 1970, the remnants of Jazani's organisation made contact with another group of Marxists led by Mas'ud Ahmsdzaeh-heravi and Amir Parviz Pouyan. These activists were younger, from religious backgrounds, less experienced and little exposed to Marxist theory (although showing an affinity for Maoism). Initially, this group organised cells in the universities and developed links with other revolutionary intellectuals, such as Behrouz Dehqani (who was later savagely tortured and killed by SAVAK, without revealing any names). Between 1968 and 1971, the group developed its own agrarian reform program and theory of urban guerrilla warfare influenced by Carlos Marighela, Regis Debray and Che Guevara.

In February 1971, the armed struggle officially began with an attack on the northern police outpost of Siyahkal. Twelve guerrillas made up the strike force that launched this bold operation. The attack was a military defeat with most of the guerrillas either captured or killed. Yet it was a political and moral victory, sparking other groups, both Marxist and Islamic, to take up the gun, frightening the Shah and showing that his rule would not go unchallenged. Two months later, the initiators of the armed struggle formed a revolutionary communist group known as the Organisation of Iranian People's Fedaii Guerrillas. Before discussing some of the political line struggles of the Fedaii, we should state that they lived up to the name "Fedaii", which means self-sacrifice. For the next eight years, the Fedaii would be in the hills and the cities, fighting the armed forces of the Shah guns in hand.

There were two major political lines in the Fedaii, that of Pouyan/Masoud Ahmadzadeh and the other of Jazani. Pouyan and Ahmadzadeh elaborated their position in a number of works. Their ideas were very simple -- the repression of the Shah's regime had lulled the masses into a state of apathy which made it impossible for the Fedaii to establish firm links with the working class. They argued in opposition to the Tudeh Party, who believed that a passive theory of survival whereby radicals needed to hold their organisation together, press for small reforms and wait for better days when political struggle could be conducted. They summed up the Tudeh's position as defeatist and reformist: "What we do is to adopt a number of reformist measures, gather strength, ask the regime to speed up its 'positive' steps and to try and force it into some tactical concessions, the main task is not the overthrow of the 'Shah's Dictatorship' and replacement with a 'people's dictatorship', but is to ask for the gradual change of the 'Shah's dictatorship' into the 'Shah's democracy.'" [\[7\]](#)

Pouyan [\[8\]](#) argued that the passivity of the masses could be shattered by the revolutionary armed struggle, leading to the establishment of a vanguard organisation of the working class. Ahmadzadeh [\[9\]](#) elaborated on this thesis, adopting a *focoist* theory of armed struggle, whereby a small motor of guerrillas could ignite the larger motor of the workers.

Pouyan's faction also had its own socioeconomic analysis of Iranian society. For instance, they believed that Iran was a dependent capitalist society with a comprador bourgeois tied to

imperialism and that the reforms of the Shah's "White Revolution" (discussed below) were reactionary, heightening class contradictions rather than mitigating them – and this created an objectively revolutionary situation. To them, the main blow of revolutionaries needed to be struck against imperialism, the state was secondary. Thus, due to the nascent revolutionary situation, a consistent armed struggle would produce a spontaneous mass revolt. This theory, which did not have the desired results, was dominant in the Fedaii until 1976, when it was finally abandoned for the ideas of Jazani.

Jazani's ideas were elaborated by him in a number of works written in prison, *Armed Struggle in Iran* and a collection of writings entitled *Capitalism and Revolution in Iran*. Despite the harsh conditions of prison, Jazani was able to write on a number of issues, such as land reform, dependency theory, vanguard organisation and military tactics. He also was perhaps alone among Marxists in understanding the popularity of Ayatollah Khomeini.

Although Jazani was a firm advocate of armed struggle, he argued that the Fedaii needed to put the political aspect first and attempt to create links among the working class. This was essential for victory, as he said, "The vanguard is not able to organise the masses for the revolutionary cause if it is not itself the flaring torch and symbol of devotion and resistance."^[10] Jazani acknowledged that the Shah's White Revolution had produced major changes in Iran, but believed that the land reform had eased class conflict in the countryside, meaning that a revolutionary situation did not necessarily exist.

Jazani argued that the armed struggle needed to reflect this, by dividing into two stages. During stage one or the armed propaganda stage, revolutionaries would rise up, strike the dictatorship, organise a vanguard and rally other forces to their banner. Actions would be largely propagandistic – militarily preparing the vanguard and politically preparing the people. Yet he recognised the limits to this, saying: "To put too much value on sensational tactics, and to pay no attention to tactics that can excite the physical support of the masses for the movement, can alienate the former from the latter and ultimately defeat the movement."^[11]

In stage two, a mass people's army would be formed. This meant developing the second leg of the movement, or giving more weight to a political movement among the workers and non-military agitation among the people. It was his belief that the revolution would be led by communists and workers, but as part of a larger alliance of classes, since the working class was too small. Jazani did not believe that the national bourgeoisie was strong enough to lead the revolution and that, while the proletariat may ally with them, communist forces should neither surrender political independence or leadership to them. After victory, Iran would have to pass through a people's democratic stage before passing onto socialism. Under a people's democracy, Iran would carry out reforms of a bourgeois and socialist nature, shattering dependency on imperialism before moving onto socialism.^[12]

It is also significant to note that Jazani also criticised the Tudeh Party and its subservience on the Soviet Union, believing that this was detrimental to the revolutionary movement in Iran. He said, "the Soviets and other powers and world movements have ignored the interests of our movement and have coordinated their relations with Iran according to their own needs."^[13] While the majority of the Fedaii had a positive view of the USSR under Stalin, but a negative one of the

post-Stalin era, Jazani was critical of both. By the 1960s, the USSR had developed friendly relations with the Shah, which put the Tudeh in a difficult position. China also developed close relations with the Shah in the 1970s. The Fedaii did have strong Maoist sympathies, although it was more Guevarist, and maintained independence from both the USSR and China.

Although Jazani's line was eventually adopted by the Fedaii in 1976, too late perhaps, as a revolutionary situation was maturing, he did not live to see it. On April 18, 1975, Jazani, who was still in prison, was assassinated along with six other comrades by SAVAK. During his time in prison, he had not only written extensively for the revolution, but practiced painting and organised resistance among his fellow inmates. With his death, arguably Iran lost one of its finest revolutionary minds and most dedicated communists.

While the debates on the strategic line of Fedaii were hashed out, the war against the regime raged on. During the guerrilla war, the Fedaii lost 172 members, launched nearly 2200 operations – attacking police and army barracks, banks, informers, foreign diplomats and industrialists. Yet the army and the secret police were able to infiltrate the Fedaii and managed to kill or imprison nearly all of its founding members by 1975. The war produced a stalemate and led to fissures among the Fedaii with a change in line in 1976 and a pro-Tudeh split.

Yet the Fedaii had blazed a trail of heroism and sacrifice for the revolution in Iran. The organisation managed to attract significant prestige among intellectuals, students and workers, emerging as the largest Marxist organisation following the revolution in 1979. Even its adversary, the Shah, was forced to pay homage to the Fedaii, saying: “The determination with which they fight is quite unbelievable. Even the women keep battling to their very last gasp. The men carry cyanide tablets in their mouths and commit suicide rather than face capture.”[\[14\]](#)

III. The White Revolution[\[15\]](#)

During the 1960s and 1970s, vast changes came across Iran as the Shah, with the full support of his backers in Washington, began a revolution from above financed by an oil boom known as the White Revolution – modernising, building industry and infrastructure. He nationalised forests, introduced profit sharing for workers, privatised state industry and extended the vote for women. Vast government expenditures were spent on health care and education.

At the same time, a land reform was implemented, changing the class structure of the countryside, eliminating much of the old feudal landowning class. There was a vast movement of people to the cities, from 1966 to 1976, the population in the countryside went down from 62 per cent to less than 50 per cent. Many of these city-bound peasants joined the semi-employed working class (which was also rapidly growing).

There was major growth in not just the comprador sections of the bourgeois tied to the Shah and US imperialism, but to the national bourgeois of bazaar merchants, shopkeepers, clergy and entrepreneurs. Many of these sectors were profoundly religious, building mosques during the period of expansion and helping to extend the influence of the clergy to the rural population.

The religious sections of national bourgeois resented the westernising influences of the Shah, along with his economic dependency on imperialism. They rallied more and more around the popular exiled religious figure, Ayatollah Khomeini. With most avenues of protest closed off, people linked up with the Islamic opposition. Khomeini had a broad appeal to the impoverished masses, conservatives, rural poor and the national bourgeois, promising an eclectic mix of social justice, patriarchy and theocracy.

On the surface, the Shah appeared to be liberalising, he built up an enormous military and secret police force, along with running a notoriously corrupt regime. To solidify his control, he placed restrictions on the merchants, created a one-party state and subjected the clergy to state supervision. The Shah's actions provoked resistance and he responded with brutal repression. By 1975, the oil boom had ended and Iran was hit with inflation, hunger, unemployment and falling revenues which hit all sectors of the population from the workers to the bourgeois.

In 1977, open struggle began in the cities, continuing and growing rapidly through 1979. Massive strikes rocked Iran, leading to workers' demonstrations reminiscent of Petrograd in 1917. Attempts at repression were met with blatant defiance. Strikes ripped through industry after industry. Military rule was instituted, but to no avail, as the army's loyalty began to evaporate.

In January 1979, the Shah was forced to leave Iran. And in the end, it was the workers and peasants, the ordinary people in the streets of Iran, who brought down the Shah. In these final days of the Shah's rule, the Fedaii, emerged from the countryside during the tail end of the revolution. There were still armed forces in Tehran, loyal to the Shah, who refused to stand down and hoped for a last minute coup. The Fedaii and the armed people went into battle, successfully seizing armories and barracks, and distributed their captured arms to the masses.[\[16\]](#)

After the revolution, it was unclear who would rule Iran. There were the secular liberals from the Mossadeq era. The Tudeh still had prestige. The popular Khomeini returned from exile. Workers were forming their own councils. And there was of course, the Fedaii.

IV. The revolution hijacked

It is beyond the scope of this essay to give a full accounting of the Iranian Revolution, but a few words must be said. After the overthrow of the Shah, Ayatollah Khomeini was victorious. He was able to unite behind him the national bourgeoisie with his defence of Iran's industry; gullible sections of the left with his fierce opposition to US imperialism; conservatives and clergy with his opposition to secularism and the revolutionary left; the masses with his promise of freeing them from dependent capitalism and Islamic promises of social justice. By the early 1980s, Khomeini established a theocratic national bourgeois regime independent of the USA, but maintained by terror, that suppressed national minorities and the left.

Following the revolution, the Fedaii were the largest left current with support in the universities and sections of the working class. Its popularity was clear in demonstrations where it could gather up to half a million supporters.^[17] Its program was in opposition to a national bourgeois regime and in favour of people's democracy and socialism. Yet they made a number of key tactical errors that prevented it seizing the opportunities opened by the revolution.

For one, the Fedaii maintained an ambivalent attitude toward the *shoras*, which were Iranian workers' councils that had spread across the country in the aftermath of the revolution. The *shoras* represented the potential power of the working class, which could have been harnessed and centralised by a vanguard party to push the revolution in a radical direction. While the Fedaii did not dismiss the *shoras* the way the Tudeh did, they looked at them mainly as recruiting grounds for their organisation and ignored the potential of proletarian power they represented. Splits within the left and a coordinated assault by the Islamic Republic on the councils and the workers' movement meant that the *shoras* were effectively brought to heel within a few years.^[18]

Part of the reason that some of the Fedaii and most of the wider left did not wholeheartedly support the *shoras* was because they genuinely believed that Khomeini was a progressive anti-imperialist. Therefore, any workers' demands that threatened Khomeini or the "progressive" national bourgeoisie were opposed by wide sections of the left, especially the Tudeh. The Tudeh, was second to none in wanting to strip the *shoras* of any revolutionary content and make them strictly trade union bodies in support of the Islamic Republic.

The Tudeh position toward the Islamic Republic was outlined by its general secretary Kianouri as follows: "We have criticised the establishment. We have made criticism over the position of liberty in the state and about the rights of women. We have criticised Islamic fanaticism – we are against the non-progressive ideas of these conservative elements. But for us, the positive side of Ayatollah Khomeini is so important that the negative side means nothing. We think he is an obstacle to fanaticism: he is more progressive than other elements."^[19]

Following the revolution, the Fedaii also split over whether to support the Islamic Republic.^[20] A majority faction of the Fedaii, closely allied with the Tudeh, came out with its own position of critical support for the "anti-imperialist" Islamic Republic. However, a minority of the Fedaii saved the honour of Marxism in Iran by opposing the Islamic Republic.

What followed the split in the Fedaii was one of the most shameful episodes in the history of the left. The Tudeh and the Fedaii Majority condemned the Fedaii Minority as counterrevolutionary and openly collaborated with the Islamic Republic by handing over inside information on the minority such as the names of members which led to the arrest and execution of their members. Such a "generous service" provided by the Tudeh and the Fedaii Majority to the Islamic Republic did not stop their own suppression by 1983. A further humiliation was inflicted on the Tudeh when its leaders were forced to confess to heinous crimes during public show trials.^[21]

The Fedaii Minority and the Kurdish left found they had to take to the hills once again to fight the Islamic Republic. Yet divisions in their ranks and the repressive force of the state prevented them from being able to mount a lasting challenge.^[22] A moving story of communist opposition

was also provided by the Maoist Communist Party of Iran (Sarbedaran, which literally means “those who are about to be hanged”) which launched an armed campaign on the city of Amol in 1982, and this bold move resulted in the capture and execution of at least 250 militants.^[23]

In the late 1980s, the prisons of Iran that were filled with socialists and communists were emptied in a mass execution of thousands. Despite the ferocious repression, this was not the end of the left in Iran. Small remnants of the Fedaii and other groups remain in exile. And though it is illegal to be a Marxist in Iran, there are still underground worker and socialist groups.

V. **Lucha** **continua**

So in lieu of a conclusion, since the struggle in Iran is ongoing, I would like to say that people like Bizhan Jazani, the Fedaii guerrillas and thousands of socialists, communists and thousands of revolutionary workers fought and died for a socialist revolution in Iran. It is true that they made many mistakes, some of them dishonourable and unforgivable, but so many of them gave all they had for a noble cause.

These are the true heroes of the Iranian Revolution, not the religious reactionaries who hijacked their revolution and had them murdered.

Notes

[1] For Jazani's background see Mazaiar Behrooz, *Rebels With a Cause: The Failure of the Left in Iran* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 53-4 and Bizhan Jazani, *Capitalism and Revolution in Iran* (London: Zed Books, 1980), i-iii.

[2] For Jazani's own analysis of the development under the Shah see 1980, 11-19.

[3] For the Soviet position on Iran and its relation with the Tudeh see Behrooz 2000, 9-10, 22-5.

[4] For background on the 1953 coup see William Blum, *Killing Hope: US Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II* (Monroe: Common Courage, 2004), 64-71; Jazani's own view on the coup and the role of the Tudeh can be found in 1980, 19-33; Behrooz 2000, 1-25.

[5] For the impact of the 1963 protests on the clerics see Jazani 1980, 62-4 and for the effect on the left see Behrooz 2000, 35-6 and 43.

[6] The information for this section is drawn primarily from Behrooz 2000, 43-94. See also Ervand Abrahamian, “The Guerrilla Movement in Iran, 1963-1977,” *MERIP Reports*, No. 86, *The Left Forces in Iran* (Mar. - Apr., 1980): 3-15.

[7] Quoted in Behrooz 2000, 56.

[8] Pouyan's views are elaborated in depth in "The Necessity of Armed Struggle and Refutation of the Theory of "Survival," Urban Guerrilla. <http://urbanguerrilla.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/pouyan.pdf>

[9] Ahmadzadeh's view's on armed struggle and Iranian society can be found in "Armed Struggle; both a Strategy and a Tactic," The Iranian People's Fadaee Guerrillas. <http://www.siahkal.com/english/Massoud.htm>

[10] Quoted in Behrooz 2000, 48.

[11] See Bizhan Jazani, "Armed Struggle in Iran" in Walter Laqueur, ed. *Voices of Terror: Manifestos, Writings and Manuals of Al Qaeda, Hamas, and Other Terrorists from Around the World Through the Ages* (New York: Reed Press, 2004), 158.

[12] Jazani's strategy is elaborated in 1980 "Dependent Capitalism" 114-122 and "The Revolutionary Forces" 123-44.

[13] Quoted in Behrooz 2000, 61.

[14] Quoted in Behrooz 2000, 50.

[15] The information in this section is drawn mainly from Henry Heller, *The Cold War and the New Imperialism* (New York: Monthly Review, 2006), 220-4; Maryam Poya "Iran 1979" in Colin Barker, *Revolutionary Rehearsals* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2002), 123-41; Jazani "Dependent Capitalism" 1980, 70-110; Andreas Malm and Shora Esmailan, *Iran on the Brink: Rising Workers and Threats of War* (London: Pluto Books, 2007), 8-12, 16-39; Behrooz 2000, 95-134.

[16] For the Fedaii's role in the revolution see Behrooz 2000, 68.

[17] Malm and Esmailan 2002, 17 and

[18] For more background on the left and the shoras see Malm and Esmailan 2002, 13-5, 17-8, 2-3, 25; Poya 2002, 143-162; Assef Bayat, "Workers' Control after the Revolution," *MERIP Reports*, No. 113, (Mar. - Apr., 1983), pp. 19-23, 33-34; Chris Goodey, "Workers' Councils in Iranian Factories Author," *MERIP Reports*, No. 88 (Jun., 1980): 5-9.

[19] Quoted in Robert Fisk, *The Great War for Civilization: The Conquest of the Middle East* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 121.

[20] One position that sharply divided the left was over conservative views towards the women's movement. See Hammed Shahidian, "The Iranian Left and the "Woman Question" in the Revolution of 1978-79, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (May, 1994): 225-41.

[21]Behrooz 2000, 124-30.

[22]Malm and Esmailan 2002 38

[23]For the Maoists see Behrooz 2000, 133 and Union of Iranian Communists, "Defeated Armies Learn Well — Summation from them Union of Iranian Communists (Sarbedaran)," *A World to Win* 4 (1985): 45-65.

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