

ЭКОНОМИКА И ПОЛИТИКА

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SHADOWS IN THE GARDEN: WOMEN AGENTS UNDERGROUND
AND COMMUNIST ACTIVISM IN MID-20TH CENTURY IRAN

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Abstract: *This article traces the careers and fates of several Iranian female communists who were not professional intelligence agents but engaged in clandestine activities. They are presented primarily through their own writings – memoirs and letters – and documents preserved in Russian archives. Socialist ideas resonated strongly in early 20th century Iran, and the women examined here were driven by a zeal to improve the hard lot faced by many of their fellow Iranians. They hailed from diverse family backgrounds: Mariam Firuz's roots lay in the aristocracy; Zuleykā Asadi came from the working class; and Akhtar Kiānuri's family had been prominent in the clergy. Their husbands or fathers were also communists and spent time in jail. All of the women traveled to the Soviet Union to study, drawn to the Communist University for Laborers of the East in Moscow, known by its acronym of KUTV and called a "Red Mecca" by some Iranian students. Upon returning to Iran, these women were forced to work underground as the communist party was banned in the country for much of the 20th century, with members and sympathizers harassed, arrested and accused of espionage. They wrote for different readers, perhaps romanticizing and glossing at times, while offering startlingly honest revelations at others, especially regarding the push and pull of relations with the Soviet Union. Their fates were also very different. The wave of revolution both raised individuals to new heights and tossed them to the shore as it churned onward. While Mariam Firuz became a living legend, Akhtar and others faded into obscurity, and Zuleykā and countless others were never known.*

Keywords: Iran, communist activism, women, Tudeh Party, Akhtar Kiānuri, Mariam Firuz, Zuleykha Asadi.

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Twentieth century Iran was often a hotbed of espionage, sabotage, and illegal activism fueled both by great games between geopolitical powerhouses and by internal pressure for social change. At various times, Germans, British, Soviets, Americans, and of course Iranians were working underground. Soviet encouragement of progressive Iranian movements played a large role. An internal SAVAK publication from the 1950s, a book called *Communism in Iran*¹, written by General Ali Zibāyi, chief interrogator in the Tudeh trials following Mosaddeq's overthrow,

¹ The book became widely available only in the 1980s.

captures the atmosphere, painting a harrowing and perhaps exaggerated picture of subterfuge and sabotage, in which members of the communist Tudeh Party

... read and distributed Marxist books, wrote in secret codes, kept tabs on right-wing officers, made hand grenades, stored arms, smuggled people out of the country, embezzled money from state banks, provided firearms to party members and the Fedayan-e Islam, and, most serious of all, helped a pro-Mosaddeq revolt among the Qashqayis by disabling some planes and sending arms and ammunition to the tribesmen [Abrahamian, 1999, p. 94].

This article will concentrate on a handful of Iranian female activists and agents aligned with the Soviet Union. Two hailed from Iranian aristocracy, while others came from the working class. Many had experienced hardship and were motivated by an honest desire to improve living conditions in their home country. Some worked in concert with their husbands, and some were inspired by politically active fathers. Several were doctors, having received medical training in the Soviet Union. A few became famous, while others remain unknown and unsung, having left only scant paper trails in the archives.

The texts presented here run the gamut from limited to greater access to the experiences and feelings of their authors, from the more polished accounts of well-known political figures to the raw honesty of letters by a young doctor cooperating with Soviet intelligence, never intended for publication.

Much of the primary source material leveraged has not been previously published and comes from The Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (RGASPI).

The “Smithy of Cadres” in Moscow
 “In Moscow there is a Red Mecca.”
 Iranian student at KUTV

One of the primary institutions in the Soviet Union for training not only educators but operatives from the Muslim East and Asia was KUTV — The Communist University for Toilers of the East — established in 1921 for “Eastern” students to learn about their own countries from a communist perspective. While not all of the women agents considered here studied at KUTV, all were influenced by it in some way. Every year, the KUTV student body included several young Iranian women. At the end of the first year, three out of the 21 Iranian students were women; yet Iranian intelligence seems to have overlooked or lacked interest in many: the list of Iranian KUTV students in General Zibāyi’s *Communism in Iran* is long but leaves out most of the females [Zibāyi, 1964, p. 145–148].

Some of these idealistic individuals represent the flip side of the “Great Game” of flamboyant master spies: they lived modest lives, secretly passing information or smuggled documents while working to improve living conditions at home. While some may have followed their husbands to the Soviet Union or taken advantage of free schooling, others were possessed of a thirst for change, modernization and justice.

At one of KUTV’s student gatherings, a young Iranian woman from Tehran stood up and declared:

When I heard from my comrades about KUTV in Moscow, I didn’t believe them. Once I actually began studying at KUTV, I wrote to my comrades about it, and they wrote back to me from Persia about what an incredible impression my description had made on them, “to know that in Moscow there is a Red Mecca” [Ravandi-Fadai, 2015, p. 718].

Another Iranian woman, a 22-year-old from Astara going by the Russified name of Kumeeva, began studying at KUTV in 1929. She came from a peasant family and was a member of the Iranian Komsomol, or Communist Youth Organization. After a brief stint at KUTV, she returned to Iran to join her husband Iskander as an agent provocateur in Tabriz, and there her trail goes cold [Ravandi-Fadai, 2015, p. 718–719].

Jamileh Rushdi studied at KUTV from 1926 to 1929. The Russian archives preserve very little about her past, except that she had worked at a women's educational association in Tehran before enrolling at KUTV. *Communism in Iran* lists a “*bānu-ye Jamile*” from Tehran, the wife of Ali Akbar Kaveh, as having studied at KUTV [Zibāyi, 1964, p. 147]. She may or may not be the same young woman. In a 1929 critique of her KUTV thesis paper, “The Agrarian Question in Persia”, lecturer Gdalii Gel’bras² praises her analysis of the feudal system in contemporary Persia but criticizes her incomplete understanding of the “class nature” of Reza Shah’s government [RGASPI, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 138, p. 37]. It is not known when or even whether she returned to Iran, but if SAVAK were aware she had studied at KUTV, her activities in Iran would have been watched.

AKHTAR: THE MULLAH’S GRANDDAUGHTER

“In Moscow, where I experienced the first impulse
to fight for women’s rights...”

Akhtar Kiānuri

We know much more about Akhtar Kiānuri (1906–1994) [Akhtar Case File, p. 150] who studied at KUTV in the late 1920s. She was born in 1906 and hailed from a politically active family in Tehran. She would mark the third generation of political activism in a family history that reflects much of the contradiction, violence, and evolution of political thought in early 20th century Iran: Akhtar’s relatives served in the court of the shah, and her grandfather, Sheikh Fazl-ulla Nuri, was a well-known conservative mullah who fought against the Constitutional Revolution and even staged a coup in the Majlis with the help of the Russian Cossack Brigade. He was hanged by the Constitutionalists in 1909.

His revolutionary son, however, was as progressive as his father had been conservative: Mirzā Mehdi Nuri took the side of the democratizing movement that had killed his father. Mirzā was also killed for political reasons, but ironically, by a member of the very same Russian Cossack Brigade that had helped his father, and apparently in retaliation for his agitation against Russia and Great Britain’s presence in Iran [RGASPI, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 4, p. 157].

There were no means to support the family after the murder of Akhtar’s father. In a handwritten autobiography from 1953 preserved in the Russian archives, Akhtar describes in the third person how the shock waves of her family’s revolutionary past affected her childhood:

Mirzā Mehdi [Akhtar’s father] had publicly renounced his father (the reactionary Sheikh Fazulla) and refused his inheritance. Thus, he had nothing to bequeath his family after death, and the family had a tough time. By selling her personal effects, the mother was able to raise her children. From an early age, Akhtar made a little money by sewing. When she had finished the first grade of middle school, she began teaching, and during the second year she cooked for students in evening courses [RGASPI, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 4, p. 157].

² A former Soviet trade representative in Iran who often used the pseudonym of Ranjbar.

Mirzā Mehdi Nuri's political legacy still reverberated in the family: Akhtar was involved in communist party movements by her early 20s, around 1927–28 [Abrahamian, 1999, p. 79]. The biography continues:

Looking for a way to get into the movement for the liberation of Iranian women, she joined the circle “Jam’iyat-e Vatānkhān”, but work in the circle wasn’t satisfying, so she became acquainted with the female communist Muhafferid (the wife of Firuz...) and decided together with her to organize a more active circle. They founded “Bidāri-ye Nesvān”, which was de facto under the leadership of the Communist Party (until its liquidation by the Shah’s police) and conducted active work (organizing evening courses, educational evenings, a reading room, etc. [RGASPI, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 4, p. 158]).

According to a Soviet case file, Akhtar married “while still a girl” and was not happy. Her much older husband had a relative in the Iranian “political police,” and his wife’s growing leftist leanings may have become a source of tension. At any rate, Akhtar’s political activism began around the time of their split. Her case file states that “party comrades” in Iran were able to help her with the divorce [RGASPI, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 4, p. 150]. She now wed Abdul Samed Kambakhsh, the son of a Qajar prince. In 1915, his family had sent him to Russia to complete his studies, and he had remained there during the turbulent years of revolution, until 1920 [Abrahamian, 1983, p. 296; RGASPI, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 4, p. 4]. By the time he met Akhtar, he had become a committed communist, gained fluency in Russian, and personally witnessed the October Revolution as a student in St. Petersburg [RGASPI, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 4, p. 4]. Kambakhsh was a pilot and military man. He was also no stranger to controversy: radical and often under suspicion because of his Russian ties. Historian Cosroe Chaqueri describes him as “an influential Tudeh party leader widely known in Persia for his close connections with the Soviet intelligence service (OGPU/NKVD/KGB)” [Chaqueri, 2012]³.

These were difficult times for the communist movement in Iran. In 1927 Moscow withdrew support for progressive forces in Iran due to a tentative rapprochement with Reza Shah, who was growing increasingly intolerant of opposition. In 1928, Akhtar left Iran for the Soviet Union [RGASPI, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 4, p. 153], where her husband was studying, and they remained there until 1932 or 1933⁴. While he trained at Soviet flight schools [RGASPI, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 4, p. 4], she studied at KUTV and then at a medical institute as an obstetrician and midwife. They became a part of the Soviet “smithy of cadres” being trained to spread technological advancement as well as ideology throughout the East. The socialist revolutionary environment acted as a catalyst on Akhtar, who later wrote that it was in Moscow “where I experienced the first impulse to fight for women’s rights [RGASPI, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 4, p. 145].” In 1930, Akhtar joined the Komsomol youth organization; and in 1932, the Communist Party [RGASPI, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 4, p. 50].

Less known is Akhtar’s work underground. In 1931, she visited Iran “on vacation” at the request of the Comintern⁵ and the head of the Iranian Communist Party, Sultān-zāde, who was living in Moscow in exile. Akhtar smuggled into Iran cash and communist literature sewn into

³ When the Tudeh Party was formed after World War II, it took two years for Kambakhsh to be admitted, partly because he had cooperated with police when arrested in the 1930s, and partly because he was suspected of “association with the Soviet secret service (regarded as very different to official association with the Soviet leadership)” [Behrooz, 2000, p. 17].

⁴ Kambakhsh left for the Soviet Union in 1927 [Abrahamian, 1983, p. 296]. According to his Soviet case file, Kambakhsh was at flight school in the USSR between 1928 and 1932 [RGASPI, Fund 495, Case 4, Inv. 217, p. 4].

⁵ The Soviet body in Moscow charged with managing and supporting communist parties outside of the USSR.

the lining of her suitcase. She also distributed “contraband” among the Iranian Communist Party leadership, which was largely in hiding and disarray, while at the same time gathering information about the state of party affairs in order to brief Sultān-zāde upon returning to Moscow.

In 1932 or 1933, she and her husband moved back to Iran, where she continued her medical studies as well as her political activism, leading women’s organizations and student strikes. Her case file notes that “Akhtar wields great influence among Iranian women. She is a good orator, in a class above others” [RGASPI, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 4, p. 151].

Her husband, who had already been imprisoned in 1927 on suspicion of working for the Soviets, would serve three more stints in jail after the couple’s return to Iran. Around 1932, almost as soon as he returned, he was arrested for having “ties to the USSR” but released for lack of proof – although he was discharged from the Iranian army [RGASPI, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 4, p. 4]. It was Akhtar who facilitated his communication with the outside world during these periods behind bars [RGASPI, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 4, p. 158].

Kambakhsh was arrested again in 1936 or 1937⁶. While in prison, in September 1939, he helped lead a hunger strike that provoked harsh retaliation from prison officials, leading to worse conditions and even deaths:

Arani and Kambakhsh were transferred [from Qasr Prison] to the Central Jail and thrown into damp solitary cells without proper food, bedding, shoes, or clothing. Arani died five months later during a typhus epidemic. Some claimed the prison “doctor” had given him a lethal injection. Others claimed typhus-infested clothes had been placed in his cell [Abrahamian, 1999, p. 50, 71].

Akhtar’s husband might have met the same fate had a *deus ex machina* not occurred in the form of the August 1941 Anglo-Soviet occupation of Iran. A general amnesty followed, and Kambakhsh was released. The same year, the Tudeh Party came into being. Akhtar joined in 1945, two years after the party had begun accepting women [RGASPI, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 4, p. 150]. During the war, Akhtar studied at medical school in Tehran, graduating in 1944. She also organized three student strikes in the mid-1940s [RGASPI, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 4, p. 159].

When Soviet forces withdrew from the north of Iran in May of 1946, the Iranian government’s patience with leftist movements again wore thin. Again, Kambakhsh was a wanted man, this time accused of helping to stoke the revolt in Iranian Azerbaijan against the government in Tehran [Abrahamian, 1983, p. 296]. A Soviet note marked “secret” from 1947 supports this accusation, blaming him and others for ordering Tudeh regional committees in Northern Iran to prepare to launch an uprising and begin teaching members how to use weapons, all without permission from the Central Committee [RGASPI, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 4, p. 94]. That December Kambakhsh escaped to the USSR, but Akhtar remained in Iran.

As Akhtar was a person of interest to the Iranian government and needed permission to leave Iran, the couple managed to reunite only in 1948. Eventually, Iranian authorities granted her permission to travel to Paris for medical attention, but her real destination was a women’s conference to be held by the International Federation of Democratic Women in Budapest, where she would see her husband. Akhtar’s brother Mahmud was an artillery commander in the Iranian army and vouched for her travel plans [RGASPI, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 4, p. 159]. The Soviet case file contains a short assessment of Mahmud’s character: “He is on the sidelines in the democratic movement, but he is loyal to it. He is smart, honest and has earned trust” [RGASPI, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 4, p. 160].

⁶ His case file states 1936, but Abrahamian has 1937 [Abrahamian, 1983, p. 296].

The Russian archives preserve the plans for the meeting:

The ambassador of the USSR in Iran, comrade Sadchikov, has requested permission for Central Committee member of the People's Party [Tudeh] Kambakhsh, currently illegally in the USSR, to meet with his wife, Akhtar Khanum Kianuri, who has left Iran for an international women's conference in Budapest.

Moreover, comrade Sadchikov requests some material assistance for Akhtar Khanum Kianuri in Paris and Budapest, as the means provided for her trip by the Central Committee of the People's Party of Iran are extremely limited.

Comrade Bagirov assesses Kambakhsh's comportment and work in the USSR positively, but he says he has no information regarding Kambakhsh's wife's political work in Iran.

Comrade Sadchikov characterizes Kia Nuri, Akhtar Khanum [sic] positively. In spite of the difficult political situation in the country, she is carrying out great work for our interests as a member of the leadership of the Iranian Association for Cultural Ties with the USSR.

When asked about the possibility of meeting with his wife, Kambakhsh, who is in Moscow on assignment, [said] he considers it necessary to arrange the meeting in Hungary, since a trip by her to the USSR would disclose Kambakhsh's location and might result in her persecution upon returning to Iran [RGASPI, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 4, p. 107].

There is no record of the actual meeting, but Akhtar returned to Iran. On February 4, 1949, the day a memorial service was being held for Kambakhsh's dead prison-mate Arani, an assassination attempt was made on Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi at Tehran University [Farmānfarmāyān, 1995, p. 73]. The Tudeh Party was implicated and again banned. Kambakhsh, who was presumably still in the Soviet Union, was sentenced *in absentia* to death [RGASPI, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 4, p. 5]. Historian Mahriar Behrooz writes that "there is little doubt that Kambakhsh, a member of the radical faction, approved the venture" [Behrooz, 2000, p. 21], an assertion supported in the Soviet case file on Kambakhsh [RGASPI, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 4, p. 5]. Akhtar was sentenced to 3 years in prison, where she joined many other party members and activists, but a military tribunal granted her early release on grounds of poor health [RGASPI, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 4, p. 151, 153].

In 1953, Akhtar emigrated to the Soviet Union. But already on August 17 of that year, she wrote a letter to Suslov⁷ demanding work and making no secret of her dissatisfaction with her circumstances in the Soviet Union. She may have been emboldened by that fact that Stalin had died in March and attitudes toward authority were changing:

I emigrated to the USSR in 1953 only because my husband was here as an emigrant, a member of the Central Committee of the People's Party [Tudeh]. I had been harassed, arrested, jailed, and then placed under surveillance [in Iran].

After arriving in Moscow, members of the SK NPI [Central Committee of the People's Party] told me that I met all the requirements to be recommended for the VsHP [Higher Party School] and that the needs of our homeland required us to utilize our time here in the USSR to improve our qualifications and deepen our scientific knowledge. I made no objection, as befits a party member, but the party members did not follow through [RGASPI, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 4, p. 145].

⁷ Mikhail Andreevich Suslov, a high ranking Soviet official close to Stalin. After Stalin's death, Suslov experienced a temporary demotion but remained influential and at the time of Akhtar's letter headed the International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR.

Akhtar complains that despite her extensive medical education in Iran and the Soviet Union and her well-known book about gynecology [Abrahamian, 1983, p. 335] she is unable to get work in her field of expertise, unable to provide for her adopted son, and forced to live off of her husband's stipend [*RGASPI*, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 4, p. 101–102]. She chides Suslov that in Moscow, “where I experienced the first impulse to fight for women's rights, having myself been forced to work practically as a housekeeper” [*RGASPI*, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 4, p. 145], her extensive qualifications apparently mean little, and her opportunities are not much brighter than when she was a young girl in Tehran, forced to earn bread money by sewing.

It is possible that she and her husband were treated less than royally in Moscow due to lingering Soviet displeasure over Kiānuri's actions in Iran, such as the charge of precipitously attempting to incite a rebellion in Iranian Azerbaijan. Some of the many denunciations from various quarters may have had an effect as well. Other Iranian activists had suffered much worse, including execution, on the basis of denunciations in the Stalinist purges of the late 1930s.

By mid-December 1957, the couple had left for East Germany, having received permission and travel assistance from the Central Committee of the Communist Party [*RGASPI*, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 4, p. 142]. Akhtar and Kambakhsh would spend the rest of their lives in exile in East Germany, fading out of relevance for the communist movement in Iran. Kambakhsh died in December of 1971 [*RGASPI*, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 4, p. 1]. Other sources report that Akhtar died in 1993 in Leipzig, Germany [Abrahamian, 1983, p. 335].

MARIAM FIRUZ: THE “RED PRINCESS

Akhtar's brother, Nur-al-Din Kiānuri, was also a fervent communist and a member of the Tudeh Party – and eventually its leader⁸. In 1944, Kiānuri married a new Tudeh member (women had been accepted only the previous year [Behrooz, 2012]), a divorcée brimming with political zeal who called herself Mariam Firuz:

... when I saw written in the [Tudeh] party program that “In this organization, a woman has just as much right as a man does, and must strive for women's rights and defend them”, this was a great stimulus for me, because I had a goal and this goal had found a place where I was able to defend women. I saw this was the only place that had any value for women [Farmānfarmāyān, 1995, p. 32].

Mariam and her new husband were young, idealistic activists, and they were to make a political power couple, one that would endure many setbacks, accusations and hardships. They would be accused of spying for the Soviets and British on several occasions and from different quarters. Whether or not those accusations were true – Mariam herself insisted in her memoirs: “I hate spies and spying and consider it wrong” [Farmānfarmāyān, 1995, p. 53] – the two were certainly forced at times to live the life of espionage agents, with shifting identities and long periods in hiding, exile, and prison [Behrooz, 2012].

Mariam hailed from an aristocratic background, the daughter of a Qajar prince from the illustrious Farmānfarmā family, and was educated at the Jean d'Arc French school in Tehran. As had been the case with her sister-in-law Akhtar, Mariam's first marriage ended quickly. After four years, she and the aristocrat Colonel Abāsali Esfandiāry (27 years her senior) divorced. The same year, 1943, she joined the Tudeh Party – the first year it allowed female members. Like other activists and members of her own family, she changed her name, dropping the aristocratic

⁸ In a tangled relationship typical of the internal strife in the Iranian communist movement, Kiānuri would be an on-again, off-again ally and opponent of his brother-in-law Kambakhsh [Behrooz, 2000, p. 20–21].

surname Farmānfarmā in favor of Firuz, her grandfather's given name⁹. And this would not be her last name change. The contrast between her high birth and socialist sympathies was noted both by the Iranian press, which dubbed her the "Red Princess" [Afshar, 2008], and by other activists:

When I wanted to join this movement, Kiā [Kiānuri] was against it and said, "They won't accept you with your family's position and status, and they won't give permission." I said, "It isn't about being 'accepted' or not."

I had chosen a path. Without his knowledge, I made contact with the Women's Organization [Behrooz, 2012]¹⁰. Only later did he become aware of it. But after some time passed, I understood that he was right. The fact was that Tudeh members could not accept that a woman from such a family would engage in such activities out of conviction [Farmānfarmāyān, 1995, p. 52].

Mariam nonetheless persisted and was finally accepted as a party member. She recalled that some of her peers "said I joined the party primarily as a British infiltrator. They should be ashamed of themselves [*xāk bar sarešān*]!" [Farmānfarmāyān, 1995, p. 52]. Her non-proletarian background provided decades of fodder for her enemies in the constant internal wrangling that often paralyzed the communist movement in Iran, and it was noted in Soviet case files, such as this KGB memo:

Kiānuri's wife is Mariam Firuz, the daughter of a famous prince in Iran, Nasrat-od-Dowle Firuz Mirza. Several of her relatives serve in the shah's court, and she is in correspondence with them.

An opinion exists among NPI¹¹ party members regarding Kiānuri and his wife, that they are traitors [RGASPI, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 4, p. 24].

After the 1949 attempt on the Shah's life, Kiānuri was arrested in the same sweep that brought Akhtar and many other Tudeh members to jail. He would be sentenced to 10 years. Mariam writes:

That same night [of the assassination attempt], agents of the regime suddenly burst into our home, turned everything upside down, and arrested Kiā [Kiānuri]. I walked him to the car and said goodbye.

I knew that soon they would come looking for me. At dawn I entrusted my children to a certain lady, and I myself went to hide at my sister's home [Farmānfarmāyān, 1995, p. 72–73].

She would soon be moving again. Mariam was given the death sentence *in absentia* [Abrahamian, 1999, p. 85]¹², and thus began 4–5 years of life as a fugitive, what Mariam called her "season of wandering and homelessness" [Farmānfarmāyān, 1995, p. 78].

I remember well one day I had made an appointment with someone and went to Alborz Street, tired and hungry. The person came, and I said I had no place to stay. I was taken to a

⁹ Biographical facts in this paragraph from: [Behrooz, 2012].

¹⁰ Woman's Democratic Organization (*Taškīlāt-e demokrātik-e zanān*), associated with Tudeh. "Firuz would maintain a life-long affiliation with this organization" [Behrooz, 2012].

¹¹ People's Party of Iran (Narodnaya Partiya Irana), i. e. Tudeh.

¹² Firuz's Soviet case file reports a sentence of 5 years [RGASPI, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 132, P. 20–21; Afshar, 2008]; while she herself states she does not remember the exact sentence but that she was sentenced twice *in absentia*, once "punitively" [*ta'dibi*] and the second time, for life [Farmānfarmāyān, 1995, p. 75].

home, the residence of a Mrs. Sāremy, a Tudeh member who was herself in danger. But she was enormously kind and warm and took me in as if I had been her relative.

It was the same way with many women – associated and not associated with Tudeh – who gave me passage through such difficult conditions, and these ladies who took me in treated me with much kindness [Farmānfarmāyān, 1995, p. 74].

Other episodes from this period are downright noiresque, such as this case of mistaken identity:

One day I was in a taxi passing by my mother's house, and I saw an unusual commotion. Right away I called to my sister and asked her what was happening. It turned out that a woman who resembled me had entered my mother's house, and the police imagined that woman was me. They burst into the home and ransacked everything right down to the trunks. Since they couldn't find me, they took my brothers, tossed them into a police van in a pathetic and disrespectful manner, and brought them before the chief of police. When Mokhtāri¹³ saw them, he asked: "Do you gentlemen have an order to be here?" My brothers asked what the meaning of it all was, why they had been brought there. They asked again: "What do you want?" He said he was sorry, a mistake had been made, and begged their forgiveness. They say that beforehand, Mokhtāri had telephoned the Shah and given him the good tidings of Mariam's arrest, and that the Shah himself had then announced it at a banquet [Farmānfarmāyān, 1995, p. 75].

The police were somewhat embarrassed, and her brothers were released.

In 1950, yet another capricious shift of fate befell the Tudeh Party in the form of new prime minister Ali Razmārā, "a career soldier" but also "a sophisticated cosmopolitan... intimately aware of how important it was for Iranian leaders to placate foreign powers" [Kinzer, 2008, p. 72]. Accordingly, the prime minister made promises to the British, Americans and Soviets – assuring the latter that the Tudeh leaders imprisoned for the recent attempt on the Shah's life would be freed. The Shah himself may have been less than entirely convinced of their guilt [Abrahamian, 1999, p. 85], and soon Prime Minister Razmārā "quietly relaxed police controls on the left" and "named an officer with left-wing sympathies to be in charge of the main prison" [Abrahamian, 1983, p. 334]¹⁴. Mariam's husband and nine other Tudeh leaders were able to stage a break-out, nearly 2 years [Kiānuri, 1992, p. 194] after – in Iranian prison jargon – passing "under the eight" (*zir-e hašt*), the eight-ribbed vault at the entrance to Qasr prison [Ahmadi, Hoseyniyun, 2008, p. 74]¹⁵. Kiānuri describes their escape in his memoirs:

It was not hard... Our friends in the prison administration forged an order on army headquarters stationary with Razmārā's signature and arrived at the prison in an army truck with the order: that we be transferred [Kiānuri, 1992, p. 194].

Two guards came with us... They transferred us to safe houses that had been prepared beforehand. [Prison administrators] now call inside the prison and learn that the guards are gone. They call the municipal police, who contact army headquarters, and it's understood

¹³ Perhaps Rokneddin Mokhtāri (1887–1970), sometime police chief and musician.

¹⁴ Prime Minister Razmārā was assassinated a year after his appointment, precisely for his intimate awareness of the importance of placating foreign powers, in this case, placating the British resistance to sharing oil profits [Kinzer, 2008, p. 77–78].

¹⁵ Kiānuri was initially brought to Qasr but spent much of his time at a prison in Yazd before being returned to Qasr prior to his escape.

that we've escaped. A search of the city was launched immediately with airplanes checking surrounding roads. But they had missed their chance; we were already hidden within the city of Tehran [Kiānuri, 1992, p. 195].

It seems Mariam was not involved in the preparations and learned of the escape from a paperboy on the street calling out the daily news, but the home where she was staying was quickly turned into a safe house for Kiānuri and the two accomplice guards [Kiānuri, 1992, p. 77]. While the pressure and anxiety of life on the run began to wear other Tudeh fugitives down, and many emigrated to the Soviet Union, Mariam and her husband resisted leaving, considering it their duty to continue activist work in Iran [Kiānuri, 1992, p. 77].

One day, however, Kiānuri told his wife he had been summoned to Moscow: "He said to me: They are telling me it will be a temporary visit, but I am convinced I will not return". With the collusion of Tudeh sympathizers in the army, he was smuggled out of Kermanshah and into Iraq [Kiānuri, 1992, p. 77], where he was received by the Communist Party [Soudavar, 2008] before traveling to Italy and assuming a new name: Dr. Silvio Macetti. But it was not yet time for Mariam to become Maria Macetti [RGASPI, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 132, p. 4]: "I stayed, and conditions were difficult. The nets were getting tighter every day" [Farmānfarmāyān, 1995, p. 77].

Mosaddeq's overthrow in 1953 not only opened the floodgates for a fresh wave of persecution against the left but severely limited Mariam's options: Mosaddeq's relatives had been an important part of her refuge network [Behrooz, 2012]. Scholar Fatema Soudavar, the widow of Mariam's brother, describes Mariam's three years of underground existence during the post-Mosaddeq crackdown:

She was constantly on the move, at times lodging with trusted relatives and friends, at other times with unsuspected party members, rarely more than a few nights in any single place. The police had been told to be on the lookout for a tall lady hiding behind a chador. Mariam was tall and well-built enough to be conspicuous, yet somehow managed to avoid detection. Over the years I have again and again come across people who have told me in whispers about how they were 'friends of Mariam Khanum', meaning that, as sympathizers, they had given refuge to a woman they admired [Soudavar, 2008].

Over half a century later, Tudeh member Bābak Amirkhosravi recalled Mariam's unexpected appearance in the middle of the capital during this dangerous time:

I was near the Alborz School when I saw a woman in a chador approaching me with a smile on her face. She walked right up to me. I took a closer look and realized it was Maryam Firuz. We were both glad of this chance encounter and gabbed for an hour. In those tough years, Maryam was a friend to the party and its leaders, organizing hiding places and relocating people. I know that during this period, because Party finances were in such an awful state, she sold her remaining property and put the money at the Party's disposal... Many of her sacrifices for the cause of the Party have yet to be revealed [Amirxosravi, 2008].

Then, "finally, about 9 months to a year from the time Kiā had left, one day I was also called to the Soviet Union. Although it was very difficult for me, I went" [Farmānfarmāyān, 1995, p. 78]. She followed the same route as her husband, driving from Kermanshah to Baghdad, and flying from there to Rome. Finally, the Macetti pair was complete: Mariam became Maria Macetti, spouse of Silvio Macetti, first mentioned as such in a Soviet document from 1957 [RGASPI, Fund

495, Inv. 217, Case 132, p. 2]. In Rome, she received her Soviet visa and is listed on February 18, 1961, among a group of Iranians staying in the Soviet Union:

List of foreign party officials currently in the USSR as part of a party delegation to study the experience of the KPSS [Communist Party of the Soviet Union] and vacationing and receiving treatment as of 8/23/60

...

33. Masetti [sic] – the wife of a member of the TsKNPI [Central Committee of the People's Part of Iran], arrived on 8/1/60 and currently in hospital [RGASPI, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 132, p. 8].

Mariam and her husband were seen as suspect by many different players but perhaps most strongly by members of their own party, who condemned them at the party's first plenum in exile in 1956 – recriminations that were part of the continuing aftershocks from the 1953 coup [Behrooz, 2012].

Four letters sent by the Executive Committee "to the leadership abroad" lay these internal tensions and suspicions bare:

The first letter, signed jointly by Bahrami, Yazdi and Joudat, blames the party's failures on Kiānuri and his faction... It accuses Kiānuri of sectarian, bureaucratic and opportunistic acts, and suggests that the nation-wide party organisation was in a sorry state. The letter then turns to personal aspects of the leadership's relationship. It suggests that the executive committee had observed morally corrupt (*fesād-e axlāq*) behaviour on the part of Maryam Firouz, Qoreishi and Lankarani, and states that written evidence of this had been given to Kiānuri, but to no avail. The term 'morally corrupt behaviour' in this context has strong sexual connotations, and suggests infidelity on the part of Firouz and two of Kiānuri's lieutenants. Iranian political culture is not known for its openness in sexual and marital issues, and for such issues to have found their way into the underground correspondence of a communist party points to a serious deterioration of personal relationships [Behrooz, 2000, p. 143].

The Russian archives contain several denunciations and negative assessments of Mariam and her husband. An April 1966 brief, based on a message from a Deputy KGB Chairman, expresses clear doubts on the Soviet side as to the couple's trustworthiness:

Kiānuri's wife, Mariam Firuz, is the daughter of one of Iran's largest landowners, Prince Nasratdoule Firuz Mirza. Several of her relatives serve in the court of the shah, and she maintains a correspondence with them.

An opinion exists among members of the NPI [People's Party of Iran, i.e. Tudeh] regarding Kiānuri and his wife, that they are traitors.

Kambahsh, Kiānuri, Kasemi and Forutan (the last two were expelled from membership in the Central Committee for engaging in schismatic activities; and in December of 1965, Forutan fled East Germany for West Germany) are in continual communication [RGASPI, Fund 495, Inv. 217, Case 132, p. 5].

But Mariam and Kiānuri weathered the storms of infighting in the Soviet Union until the Islamic Revolution in 1979, which brought with it a new tolerance for those who had been oppressed under the monarchy. Political exiles began to come home, including Mariam and her husband. Tudeh was an official party again, and Mariam joined its politburo and ran for the

Majlis and the Assembly of Experts [Abrahamian, 1999, p. 193]. Her husband became head of the party.

Soon, however, the new government resumed the customary state suspicion toward Tudeh. In 1983, the party was again banned, and Mariam and her husband were arrested [Afshar, 2008]. In May 1983, Kiānuri, with 16 other party leaders, confessed on Iranian television “that he had been spying for the Soviet Union since 1945” [*New York Times*, May 6, 1983]. Mariam did not appear in the televised recantations. Historian Ervand Abrahamian comments on her absence: “It is not clear whether her absence was due to clerical sensitivity about women participating in such shows – especially at the same table as men – or due to the fact that her interrogation had left her ear and spine permanently impaired. She had trouble hearing and sitting” [Abrahamian, 1999, p. 193]. According to Soudavar, the reason was that “Mariam consistently refused to recant or admit to any treasonable acts” [Soudavar, p. 2008].

Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Iran Galindo Pohl visited Kiānuri in prison and reported that the Tudeh leader told him both he and his wife had been tortured into making false confessions, lifting his “badly set broken arm” as evidence. Pohl wrote that “Mariam Firuz had difficulty hearing, swallowing food, and sitting down because of beatings suffered” [Abrahamian, 1999, p. 223]. In the early 1990s, when he was out of prison but under house arrest, Kiānuri “categorically denied that he and his colleagues had confessed to espionage” [Abrahamian, 1999, p. 223–224].

The couple remained in Tehran until the end of their lives. The furor accompanying the revolution subsided – the two had again weathered the storm. Kiānuri died in 1999; and Mariam, in 2008 at the age of 94. Soudavar notes in her *in memoriam* that the last time she visited Mariam, the elegant older lady had two portraits prominently displayed on her bookshelf: one of then-President Khatami, and the other of Che Guevara [Soudavar, 2008].

СОКРАЩЕНИЯ / ABBREVIATIONS

РГАСПИ – Российский государственный архив социально-политической истории [RGASPI – Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History].

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