

Ankabut-e Sorkh – a Soviet-backed Clandestine Organization in early 1950's Iran.

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Abstract

This research looks at the activity of an unknown top-secret subversive group called Ankabut-e Sorkh (“The Red Spider”), that operated in Iran in the early 1950's. Fully inspired and funded by the Soviet Union, at first glance it aimed at sparking a revolution in Iran. Nonetheless, the objectives of Ankabut-e Sorkh not only involved a call for the end of the monarchy in Iran but were more complex in nature. The slogans it invoked were directed at the poorly educated masses to fight for the freedom of the oppressed workers and farmers. Thus, only they could become members of the organization. It strongly refrained from accepting any intellectuals. Ankabut-e Sorkh was also at odds with Tudeh, the main leftist Iranian party that, although operating underground, remained the most powerful organization of the Iranian left-wing political scene.

This research on Ankabut-e Sorkh aims to introduce this organization to a wider audience. It draws mostly upon counterintelligence sources produced by the Second Directorate of the General Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces.

Keywords: *Iran, Ankabut-e Sorkh, Intelligence Services, Soviet Union, communism, Tudeh*

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1 Introduction. Sources

The history of the Russian quest for domination of Iran can be traced back to the Russo-Persian war of the 18th century and the conquest of the Caucasus and northern provinces such as Gilan, Mazandaran and Golestan by Tsar Peter the Great's empire. Through the following decades, in order to secure its southern borders¹ and "inhibit third parties from gaining influence inside Iran at Russia's expense"² tsarist Russia – later replaced by the Soviet Union – maintained continuous relations with Iran. The official contacts made by diplomats, cultural institutions and tradesman were followed by unofficial ones, hidden from plain sight and performed by the intelligence services. The Soviet Union's secret support for various Iranian leftist separatist groups such as *Jangali*³ [Men of the forest] operating in Gilan, the *Azerbaijan Democratic Party*⁴, and the *Democratic Party of Kurdistan*⁵, both established on Soviet orders, and finally the Tudeh Party⁶, the best-known leftist party in Iran, has been well researched. However, this article will reveal that those

¹ For more on Soviet motivations in Soviet-Iranian relations see: M. Atkin, *Myths of the Soviet-Iranian Relations* in N. Keddie and M. Gasiorowski (ed.): *Neither East nor West: Iran, the Soviet Union and the United States*, pp. 100–114, and M. Pye, *In the Belly of the Bear? Soviet-Iranian Relations During the Reign of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi*, unpublished doctoral thesis defended in 2015 at the University of St. Andrews: [[www 01](#)], accessed 11 September 2018, pp. 39–40.

² M. Pye, op. cit., p. 40.

³ *Jangali (1915–20)* was a separatist group operating in the Gilan province with Mirza Kuchek Khan as its leader. Before the Bolshevik revolution, they fought the tsarist army that occupied northern Iran. After 1917 they allied with the Soviet Union and with their support proclaimed the Soviet Republic of Gilan (1920–21). See also: P. Dailami, *The Bolsheviks and the Jangali Revolutionary Movement, 1915–1920*, Cahiers du Monde russe et soviétique, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Jan. – Mar., 1990), pp. 43–59.

⁴ The *Azerbaijan Democratic Party (ADP) (1945–79)* was a communist party directly installed and utterly subordinated by the USSR. It was established in 1945 by Ja'far Pishevari, a leading communist who began his political career in 1920 as a founder of The Communist Party of Iran. In 1947, the USSR withdrew its support for the ADP and shifted toward Tudeh. Pishevari died in a car accident in June 1947 that is believed to have been orchestrated by Soviet Intelligence services. See M. Pye, op. cit., pp. 62–63.

⁵ The *Democratic Party of Kurdistan (1946)* was launched with Soviet support in 1945 by Kurdish nationalists. In 1946 it proclaimed the independent Republic of Mahabad that lasted less than a year and capitulated to Iranian authorities in December 1946.

⁶ The *Tudeh Party, (hezb-e Tudeh)* was an Iranian communist party established in 1941 that operated legally until 1949, when it was dissolved due to an unsuccessful attempt on Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Since then it operated underground. Nonetheless in 1953, just before the coup d'état on Mosaddeq, it was considered the "country's only real political organization". See M. Behrooz, *Tudeh factionalism and the 1953 coup in Iran*, International Journal of Middle East Studies no. 33, (2001) p. 363.



entities were not the only ones directly established or supported with the USSR's money and know-how.

The aim of this research is, by analyzing Iranian counterintelligence documents, to introduce one such unknown Iranian clandestine organization – Ankabut-e Sorkh⁷ [The Red Spider]⁸ – to a wider audience and attempt to reveal the actual reason for the Soviet Union establishing this new organization. Thus far, the author has not found any mention of this organization apart from the information included in primary sources such as Iranian counterintelligence documents. Between 1 October 1953 and 10 June 1954, the Second Directorate of the General Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces⁹ produced a total of 43 documents related to Ankabut-e Sorkh. All of them are gathered in a book entitled *Chap dar Iran be revayat-e asnad-e tarikhi-ye SAVAK. Ankabut-e Sorkh, (The Left in Iran According to SAVAK's Historical Documents. The Red Spider)* published by *Markaz-e Barresi-ye Asnad-e Tarikhi-ye Vezarat-e Ettela'at (Centre of the Iranian Historical Documents of the Ministry of Intelligence)* in 1378 [1999]. The book consists of document copies (facsimile) along with their transcripts¹⁰. There are two types of documents

⁷ Within the documents we do not find the precise name. There are several names that refer to it; *The Red Spider Party (hezb-e Ankabut-e sorkh)*, *The Republican Red Spider Party (hezb-e Ankabut-e sorkh-e jomhuri)* and finally *The Red Spider's State Committee (komite-ye eyalati-ye Ankabut-e sorkh)*. Therefore, for the purpose of this article we refer to it as an “organization” or “Ankabut-e Sorkh”.

⁸ Interestingly, the association of the Soviet Union and its associates with red spiders, nets, webs, was popular in the Soviet Block; eg. in the 1980's in Poland, the nickname “red spider” had an utterly negative connotation and described those who signed up to the Komsomol-type pro-government organizations in order to enjoy privileges.

⁹ Pers. *Rokn-e dovvom-e setad-e artesh*, between 1941 and 1957, was the only Iranian institution that performed the duties of intelligence and counterintelligence, both in Iran and abroad. Thus, it performed activities that in other countries were divided between civilian and military institutions and furthermore by separate intelligence and counterintelligence offices. It followed the French model of the *Deuxième Bureau de l'État-major* general, since most of the Iranian military officers that founded the basis of the Iranian army, had been trained in French military schools. The Second Directorate's priority was to collect information from abroad related to new technologies, weapons and war/defence strategies etc. of foreign countries. It was only in 1957 when the SAVAK (*Sazman-e Amniyat va Ettela'at-e Keshvar*) was created that some responsibilities were transferred to the new entity. However until then, due to the relatively small scale of the Second Directorate, it struggled to perform all its duties and so its performance was far from satisfactory especially in terms of domestic counterintelligence activities, which were not considered a priority.

¹⁰ It should be mentioned that at some point the facsimile and transcripts differ. In some documents, the dates are missing or the names are wrongly transcribed. In almost all the docu-



within the book. The first include the formal internal reports, orders and instructions distributed within the Iranian power structures such as the police, various ministries and military in order to track Ankabut-e Sorkh's activities. The second type consists of written testimonies made by the intelligence services' informants. The latter seem to have been noted down word for word, since they are replete with grammatical and spelling mistakes, especially when foreign names appear.

It must be noted that since the Centre of the Iranian Historical Documents is a state-run entity, it is highly possible that the published documents are only a selection made arbitrarily on the basis of an unknown selection key. Although in the preface of the book it is clearly stated that those are the only documents found in the above-mentioned centre, it is possible that more documents related to the Ankabut-e Sorkh may exist in other institutions. Nevertheless, according to the authors of the collection, "it was impossible to gather them all together"¹¹.

2 Ignore the illiterates. The beginning of Ankabut-e Sorkh

The precise date of Ankabut-e Sorkh's establishment is impossible to estimate; nonetheless, in two documents we find testimonies that point to the 1949/1950 period. In a paper dated January 1954, one of the informants notes that "Ankabut-e Sorkh has been operating for the past 4 years"¹² and in another one the informant, when asked by an intelligence officer about the origins of the organization, answers that it was established in 1328 which would cover the time from 20 March 1949 up to 19 March 1950¹³.

1949 as the year when the Ankabut-e Sorkh was founded seems to be crucial as it was early this year that the Tudeh Party was proscribed and went

ments only the main text had been transcribed while omitting the addressee, sender, or the control mark indicating whether the document contains classified or restricted information.

¹¹ *Chap dar Iran be revayat-e asnad-e tarikhi-ye SAVAK. Ankabut-e Sorkh*, Markaz-e Barresi-ye Asnad-e Tarikhi-ye Iran, Introduction, Teheran 1378 [1999].

¹² *Chap dar Iran...*, op. cit., p. 25.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 37.



into hiding¹⁴. Moscow heavily complained about the outlawing of Tudeh¹⁵, although they seemed to “proscribe” it too and instead address directly the workers and farmers that were recruited from the “most severe opponents to the United States of America”¹⁶. However, it was not necessarily the Tudeh outlaw that made the Soviets decide to bring this new entity to life. In 1948 Tudeh suffered a severe split in its leadership that could worry their sovereignty¹⁷.

However, the collection of the documents offered by the Centre of the Iranian Historical Documents do not cover first years of the organization’s activity. We cannot say with utter certainty whether such documents existed and have survived. It is also possible that the person responsible for accepting the documents for the publication refused to add them, or there were literally no documents produced within this time, and only in 1953 did the Iranian secret services start their intelligence work on Ankabut-e Sorkh. The information that we find in the documents sheds a little light on this question. A document dated 1 October 1953 inclines towards a hypothesis that it was newly discovered but not necessarily new. We read: “I inform that there is a new party/communist organization established that is called Ankabut-e Sorkh”¹⁸. The officer who wrote this claim calls Ankabut-e Sorkh a *new organization*, which would suggest that the Iranian intelligence services indeed knew nothing about it before October 1953.

Nonetheless as we read further, we learn that, according to one of the informants: “the party [Ankabut-e Sorkh] is ignored by the Intelligence Services, although they are surely aware of its existence”¹⁹. The note – written

¹⁴ In February 1949, after an unsuccessful attempt on Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi’s life, allegedly by one of the Tudeh’s members, the party was delegalized and since that date had to operate underground. All its assets were confiscated and many of its members arrested. However, according to Maziar Behrooz, the repressions were “*not very severe nor systematic, which helped party to survive although it had no experience in underground activity.*” See M. Behrooz, *Tudeh factionalism and the 1953 coup in Iran*, pp. 363–382.

¹⁵ R. Hermann, *The Role of Iran in Soviet Perceptions and Policy 1946–1988*, in *Neither East nor West. Iran, The Soviet Union, and The United States*, pp. 63–99, edited by Nikki R. Keddie and Mark J. Gasiorowski, p. 67.

¹⁶ *Chap dar Iran...*, op. cit., p. 3.

¹⁷ See also: C. Chaqueri, *Did the Soviets Play a Role in Founding the Tudeh Party in Iran?*, *Cahiers du Monde russe*, 40/3, Juillet – septembre 1999, pp. 497–528.

¹⁸ *Chap dar Iran...*, op. cit., p. 1.

¹⁹ *Chap dar Iran...*, op. cit., p. 43.



for internal use only by Colonel Mohsen Mobasser²⁰, head of the Investigating Department of the Second Directorate of the General Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces – would confirm such a confession and admit that the revelations about Ankabut-e Sorkh’s activities had been received by the Second Directorate although they “were ignored since the informant was poor educated and thus not trustworthy”²¹. Doubtlessly such an approach towards an informant seems suspect, although in the early 50’s Iranian society was still very hierarchical, and even though information was acquired from those less educated, it was scarcely taken into consideration unless proven otherwise. Besides, as Mobasser admits in his memoirs, his office was fairly small, and it was difficult to keep track of all the information coming in. As he said: “no doubt, fulfilling all the objectives it [the Second Directorate] was responsible for, was at least difficult if not impossible”²². Thus, the Second Directorate ignored the organization and did not find its activity interesting or threatening enough to undertake any actions in order to dissolve it up until the last months of 1953 when, according to the documents, appropriate actions were undertaken²³.

Certainly, at the end of 1953 the overall political situation was utterly different. After the 19 August coup d’état, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi²⁴ undertook harsh policies towards Iranian leftist organizations that were more severe than those in 1949. Shah, who was considered to be under the binding influence of the Americans, acted according to their interests and since the main reason for overthrowing Mosaddeq was America’s fear of the rising influence of communism in Iran²⁵, all possible communists were considered

²⁰ Mohsen Mobasser (d. 2016) was one of the officers most entrusted by Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. He served as a head of the Investigating Department of the Second Directorate of the General Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, later as a Head of the National Police, and Deputy Prime Minister. After the Islamic Revolution, he went into hiding. He died in exile in the United Kingdom in 2016.

²¹ *Chap dar Iran...*, op. cit., p. 21.

²² [[www 02](#)] (access: 22.09.2018).

²³ The Tebriz branch of the Ankabut-e Sorkh was dismantled in December 1953. See: *Chap dar Iran...* Op. cit., pp. 16, 18.

²⁴ Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1919–1980) was the second and last shah of the Pahlavi dynasty that ended the period of monarchy in Iran. He took the throne in 1941, after his father was forced to abdicate. His reign is considered to be subordinate to Western powers – mostly the United States.

²⁵ M. Behrooz, *Tudeh factionalism and the 1953 coup in Iran*, p. 370. Such a supposition is also confirmed in letters of Simin Daneshvar, Iranian writer who at the time was on her



a threat. Regardless of the real support of Mosaddeq for the communists, which was rather instrumental than sincere, Mosaddeq was overthrown and replaced with the trusted figure of General Fazollah Zahedi²⁶ who began a crusade on the Iranian leftists²⁷.

3 Soviet inspiration. Leadership and structure

The documents leave no space for speculation as to who stood behind Ankabut-e Sorkh. We can regard this organization not as one supported by the Soviets, but literally established or introduced by them. In the documents we find several names of persons who were perceived as key figures in the organization²⁸. However, it appears to have had two main leaders – Aliev and Seifullah Muradov²⁹. Unfortunately, apart from their activities, which are well-described in the documents, we find little, if nothing, about their origins. According to the testimonies both men were “immigrants who speak Russian better than Persian”³⁰. The names suggest the men could be of Azerbaijani

Fulbright’s scholarship at Stanford University (US); See M. Jafari (ed), *Nameha-ye Simin Daneshvar va Jalal Al-e Ahmad, Ketab-e avval, Nameha-ye Daneshvar be Al-e Ahmad dar safar-e amrikai-ye Daneshvar (1331–1332)*, p. 55.

²⁶ Fazollah Zahedi (1892–1963) was an Iranian general as well as politician. During World War II he collaborated with Nazi Germany. In February 1953 he was detained on the charge of conspiring with foreign powers in order to overthrow Mosaddeq. See A. Krasnowolska (ed.), *Historia Iranu*, p. 847. CIA documents prove he was paid 5 mln USD for arranging a coup d’état in August 1953. See: D. Bayandoor, *Iran and the CIA. The Fall of Mosaddeq Revisited*, pp. 81–82.

²⁷ Along with the leftists, pro-Mosaddeqs were targeted. On aftermath of the coup see M. J. Gasiorowski, *Coup d’état Against Mosaddeq*, in (ed.) M. J. Gasiorowski and M. Byrne, *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran*, pp. 227–260.

²⁸ Apart from Aliev and Muradov who are pictured as the main leaders, the following names appear: Taqi Muradi; Hossein Ibrahim Taj – Abadan branch leader; Javadi; Hossein Mohammadzadeh.

²⁹ *Chap dar Iran...*, op. cit., pp. 1, 37. During the author’s research, the name “Muradov” did not appear, although “Aliev” did crop up in one record. According to the former SAVAK officer, Col. Ali Zibai, a person named Aliev, was one of the 27 founding members of the Tudeh party in 1941. “According to this source, most of those present [at the founding meeting] did not know who Aliev was, and those who did, kept quiet about his identity”. See C. Chaqueri, op. cit. Unfortunately, here we do not learn much more about Aliev, although it confirms to some extent that such a man was active in the leftist milieu.

³⁰ *Chap dar Iran...*, op. cit., p. 21.



origins³¹. Given that since April 1920 Azerbaijan had been one of the Soviet Republics, it is very likely that the USSR, which had a vast forces along the northern Iranian border, had placed some “illegal” spies or case officers to create a new clandestine network. In fact, in the early 50’s, at the very beginning of the Cold War, the Soviets were struggling to maintain their influence over Iran. Indeed, they could not do much as leftist organisations were forced underground and broad presence of the Americans and British as the shah’s advisors, and the oil concession holders were a serious concern for the imperial aspirations of the Stalin government. Due to events as of October 1947 when an expanded US military mission arrived in Tehran in order to train the Iranian army “with respect to its organisation, administrative principles and training methods”³², already “Soviet policymakers viewed Iran as largely lost to Soviet influence, with [...] a political class likely to end up in the Anglo-American camp”³³. Nonetheless, the Soviets tried to get their foot in the door, and Azerbaijan was a natural source of well-trained intelligence operatives.

As we read in the documents, Tehran and Tebriz were the most important spots on Ankabut-e Sorkh’s map. Historically, Tebriz was home to Soviet-inspired activities, and for a short time was the capital of the Azerbaijan Peoples Government, a separatist state, established in 1945 on the command of the Soviet Union. This short-lived state – 1945–1946 – apart from Soviet soldiers, hosted NKVD officers who trained their police officers³⁴, and thus could act as a source of secret agents.

Apart from Tehran and Tebriz, Ankabut-e Sorkh had its branches in Mazanderan, Gorgan, as well as in Abadan in the south of the country³⁵. There is no surprise as to why such provinces constituted a source of members for a Soviet-backed organization as the northern provinces were historically under the Russian and then the USSR’s influence³⁶, whereas in the

³¹ *Aliiev* is a surname that can be found mostly in the Caucasus and Central Asia. It is quite popular in Azerbaijan – eg. Heydar Aliyev, an Azerbaijani NKVD/MGB/KGB officer who served as the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan (1969–82) and, after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1993, was elected president of Azerbaijan (1993–2003) The current president, Ilham Aliyev, is his son.

³² M. Pye, op. cit., p. 40.

³³ A. M. Kalinovsky, *The Soviet Union and Mosaddeq. The Research Notes*. Iranian Studies, 47:3, 401–418.

³⁴ [www 03].

³⁵ *Chap dar Iran...*, op. cit., p. 39.

³⁶ In a Politburo decree to Mir Baghirov, Secretary of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan, containing instructions regarding the organization of a separatist movement in northern



southern Abadan, the communist ideology was supported by many workers at the Abadan refinery³⁷. Furthermore, in the near-by city of Ahvaz, the Soviet Union even had its own vice-consulate³⁸, which could indicate that the Kremlin viewed this region as susceptible to their influence due to the large working class hired in the oil fields and refineries.

In a document dated on 10 December 1953, Muradov even stated that Ankabut-e Sorkh was the continuity of the Azerbaijan Democratic Party³⁹ – a communist party founded in Tebriz in 1945 which ruled the Soviet-backed Azerbaijan Peoples Government⁴⁰. Such a statement could not be more than a mere abbreviation as some of the Ankabut-e Sorkh's members indeed were former members of the Azerbaijan Democratic Party⁴¹. However, although there might be similarities in both organizations' profiles, such as communist orientation and Soviet sponsorship, the very idea that Ankabut-e Sorkh, which was dedicated to the poorly educated and had no profound program⁴², was a continuation of the ADP, capable of forming the Azerbaijan Peoples Government and a program of wide reforms seems doubtful⁴³. Furthermore, the ADP was an openly operating party whereas Ankabut-e Sorkh was meant to be a clandestine organization.

The aforementioned leaders, Aliiev and Muradov, were undoubtedly educated people. They served as the organization's masterminds, chaired the

Iran, we read “*at the same time [of preparatory works in Azerbaijan] develop a separatist movement in the provinces of Gilan, Mazanderan, Gorgan and Khorasan*. See: Decree of the CC CPSU Politburo to Mir Baghirov CC Secretary of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan, *Measures to Organize a Separationist Movement in Southern Azerbaijan and Other Provinces of Northern Iran*, July 06, 1945, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, GAPPOD AzR, f. 1, op. 89, d. 90, II. 4–5. Obtained by Jamil Hasanali. Translated for CWIHP by Gary Goldberg, [www 04].

³⁷ The Tudeh party also had a vast support in Abadan as well as the Ahvaz oil fields. See: A. Y. Yodfat, *The Soviet Union and Revolutionary Iran*, p. 55.

³⁸ See: M. Pye, op. cit., p. 51.

³⁹ *Chap dar Iran...*, op. cit., p. 7, 34.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

⁴¹ The ADP, after its defeat in 1946, moved to Baku, where under the protection of Baghirov, who was the First Secretary of the Azerbaijan Communist Party, operated well until Stalin's death in 1953. After the destalinization of the USSR, it began to struggle and finally merged with Tudeh in 1960. See: M. Behrooz, *Rebels with a Cause: The Failure of the Left in Iran*.

⁴² In a document dated 23 January 1954, an informant states that there is “*no profound manifesto of the organization, but their ideological books and newspapers are read*” See: *Chap dar Iran...*, op. cit., p. 37.

⁴³ Furthermore, the ADP advocated that “*All classes in Iran – landowners, merchants, intellectuals, workers, and peasants – must unite to protect their state*”. See: E. Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, p. 410.



meetings and passed the orders⁴⁴. Further reading of the documents makes it clear that being educated must have been an exception probably reserved for the leaders and Ankabut-e Sorkh itself was dedicated mainly to those who were illiterate and poorly educated. In a note written by an intelligence officer who reported on the letters that Ankabut-e Sorkh sent to various politicians, we read: “after an analysis of slogans and expressions used in the letters it is confirmed that they must have been written by plebeians, illiterates or immigrants”⁴⁵. In fact Ankabut-e Sorkh strictly refused to acquire its members from intelligentsia circles. In a document dated 10 November 1953 we can find that: “Ankabut-e Sorkh does not accept educated people, but only working class and peasants”⁴⁶. This point was stressed in particular and the official reason was a fear “that the intelligentsia have contacts with the notorious Zahedi government and would betray the organization’s goals”⁴⁷.

Since Ankabut-e Sorkh was meant to be a clandestine organization, its structure was built in a manner that provided a high level of security. Ankabut-e Sorkh was divided into *houze* (circles)⁴⁸ and each of the *houze* consisted of 5 *shabake* (networks). Finally, each *shabake*, for safety reasons, consisted of 6–7 persons only⁴⁹. Unfortunately, we do not find any information on the total number of *houze* within the Ankabut-e Sorkh structure; nonetheless, one of the documents gives us a hint of the scale, as we read that the whole organization consisted of 2,500 members⁵⁰. At this point it is necessary to mention that members of each *houze* knew only their closest comrades. The organization profile was kept very low; therefore, it is hard to tell to what extent the above mentioned numbers are accurate.

Each member possessed a special ID card. It was a red card that contained symbols related to the Soviet Union. Apart from picturing a red star in the middle of the card, there was the USSR national emblem – the hammer and

⁴⁴ *Chap dar Iran...*, op. cit., p. 6

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 21.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 6, 21.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

⁴⁸ The term *houze* is used rather in respect of the theological seminar centres where the shi’a clergymen are trained. Thus, it is an interesting nomenclature given that it is used by leftists, usually associated with secularism or even atheism.

⁴⁹ *Chap dar Iran...*, op. cit., p. 38.

⁵⁰ *Chap dar Iran...*, p. 2. As to compare: at the very beginning of the Tudeh Party in October 1941 they could count on 2,000–2,500 supporters. In 1952, Tudeh was estimated to be supported by 20,000 core members, at least 8,000 of them in Tehran alone. See: M. Behrooz, *Tudeh factionalism and the 1953 coup in Iran*, pp. 363–382, and C. Chaqueri, op. cit., p. 504.



sickle – along with a small VKP(b)⁵¹ abbreviation and a red spider emblem engraved at the bottom and all this underlined with the sign “*The Red Spider of the Republic of Iran*”. There were no pictures nor names on the card, although each ID card featured a code number that enabled the identification of the owner⁵².

On the one hand, conspiracy seemed to be an important issue as Ankabut-e Sorkh’s members were often reminded of not speaking a word about the organization; on the other, the very idea of ID cards given to everyone seems to deny it. The process of acquiring new members also bears such a contradictory procedure. Firstly, each candidate had to be supported by two organization members. But at the same time, both of them had to confirm in writing that they personally knew the candidate⁵³. Furthermore, along with the testimonies, two pictures of the candidate were enclosed and sent to the headquarters⁵⁴. After the positive verification of the data and a six-month trial period, the ID card was issued and passed to the new member⁵⁵. It was only in December 1953, when the organization’s branch in Tabriz was discovered by the authorities, that the Ankabut-e Sorkh management ordered its members not to bring ID cards to their meetings⁵⁶.

4 Modus operandi

The more documents we read, the more Ankabut-e Sorkh connections with the Soviet Union we find. One of the informants in the document dated 24 January 1954, by saying “Muradov contacts the Russian Embassy as well as VOKS⁵⁷”⁵⁸ clearly states that the leaders were responsible for contacting

⁵¹ *Wsehsoyuznaya komunisticheskaya partia bolshevikov* – All-Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks).

⁵² *Chap dar Iran...*, op. cit., p. 40.

⁵³ There is no information on how those who were illiterate, for example, could confirm a new member.

⁵⁴ *Chap dar Iran...*, op. cit., p. 39. Although it is not stated clearly within the documents where the headquarters were, we can assume they were in Tehran as in one document this city is depicted as the organizational centre. See. *Chap dar Iran...*, op. cit., p. 3.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

⁵⁷ VOKS (*Vsesoiuznoe Obshchestvo Kul’turnoi Sviasi s zagranitsej* – *All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries*) was a Soviet organization that was officially to promote international cultural exchange but in fact was used for foreign intelligence operations.

⁵⁸ *Chap dar Iran...*, op. cit., p. 42.



Soviet diplomats as well as other USSR institutions. Various documents provide us with a depiction of how such relations were conducted. Usually a group of three – Muradov or Aliev and two others – would approach the Soviet embassy. The two men either tried to distract the police that guarded the premises or simply watched out for a policeman coming. If the coast was clear, they would give Muradov/Aliev a sign and the latter would enter the embassy⁵⁹.

It is important to note that the practice illustrated above was not typical for a professional foreign intelligence service. Use of a personal channel was possible only in an extraordinary or emergency situation, whereas daily contact was based on the other means of communication such as dead drops, radio station, or encryption etc⁶⁰. However, the documents do not mention any.

In the documents we also find an answer to what would have happened if either of the men were detained. In the document dated 25 November 1953, we read that once Muradov was captured by a policeman while leaving the Soviet embassy and just a small amount of money – around 100 tomans⁶¹ – was enough to bribe the public officer⁶².

If indeed the personal contact with the embassy was the only means of communication, we can thus assume that in acting with such nonchalance, the Soviets had an absolute certitude that Iranian counter-intelligence services and the police were of low quality and incompetent, or the Soviets themselves were incompetent. The latter cannot be rejected since in the early period of the organization's activity, the USSR embassy in Tehran was home to seven young and inexperienced intelligence officers⁶³. It was only in August 1953 when a highly professional specialist on Iran, Colonel

⁵⁹ Ibidem, pp. 4, 42.

⁶⁰ See: P. Pleskot, *Dyplomata, czyli szpieg? Działalność służb kontrwywiadowczych PRL wobec zachodnich placówek dyplomatycznych w Warszawie (1956–1989)* [*Diplomat as a spy? The Activity of People's Republic of Poland Counterintelligence Services on the Foreign Diplomatic Missions in Warsaw (1956–1989)*], s. 192–194. And: P. Piotrowski, *Formy działalności operacyjnej wywiadu cywilnego PRL. Instrukcja pracy wywiadowczej Departamentu I MSW z 1972 r.* [*The Forms of the Operational Activity of the Polish Civilian Intelligence. Manual for the Intelligence Activities of the Department 1st of Ministry of Interior*], [in:] *Aparat Represji w Polsce Ludowej 1944–1989*, nr 1, p. 316–342.

⁶¹ 1 toman = 10 rials; 1 USD = 32,50 rials [in]: M. Bahmani-Oskooee, *History of the Rial and Foreign Exchange Policy in Iran*, *Iranian Economic Review*, Vol. 10, No. 14, Fall 2005.

⁶² *Chap dar Iran...*, op. cit., p. 4.

⁶³ G. A. Orlov, ed. S. N. Lebediev, *Istoria Rossijskoy Vneshnoy Razvedki* v.5. 1945–1965, p. 482.



Andrey Makarovitch Otroshchenko, veteran of the foreign Soviet intelligence, arrived at the Tehran embassy⁶⁴. On the other hand, from that little note we can draw an assumption that the Soviet embassy was carefully watched and the police was ordered to detain anyone who would contact the premises. Contemporary Russian sources seem to confirm this hypothesis as on the official site of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service we read that at the time “the intelligence station at the embassy worked under difficult circumstances. The Iranian authorities strengthened their observation of the Soviet embassy”⁶⁵.

Certainly, according to the documents, contacts with the Soviet embassy were crucial as all the directions and propaganda materials were distributed through this channel and passed on to the group members at their weekly meetings⁶⁶. According to the documents, those sessions were held in hiding, in cafés outside the Tehran city centre or in private houses in small groups consisting of just one *shabake*. Interestingly, there were separate meetings for men and women⁶⁷, which could suggest that the Soviets respected the customs and cultural habits of simple and poor people who very often came from traditional society.

During such meetings, Muradov or Aliev, as leaders, read the current issue of the Russian newspaper – Pravda (*The Truth*)⁶⁸ – in the original language, which later would be translated into Persian. Sometimes they would also bring propaganda materials prepared directly by VOKS in which the Soviet Union was praised. Apart from glorifying the remarkable economic condition of the Soviet regime by starting “each meeting [...] by reading the fabulous news about the USSR and the prosperity of its peasants and workers”⁶⁹, the leaders also delivered information that could refer to Soviet fears. One of them was the possibility of the American and British influence over the shah intensifying and further sidelining the Soviets. Thus, Muradov cursed the Zahedi government and its submission to the Western imperialist powers and

⁶⁴ Before the World War II Otroshchenko also served as a NKVD resident in Tehran. See: [www 05].

⁶⁵ [www 06] (access: 22.09.2018).

⁶⁶ *Chap dar Iran...*, op. cit., p. 37.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 39

⁶⁸ *Pravda* was an official newspaper of the Communist Party of the USSR that began its publication in 1912, before the Bolshevik Revolution. It served as a conduit for the publication of official policies.

⁶⁹ *Chap dar Iran...*, op. cit., p. 38.



even accused the general of preparing a war against the Soviet Union and emphasising that the role of Ankabut-e Sorkh was to prevent such an event – “we will not let Iran act against our sovereign interests, against the Soviet Union, we will not let an war between Iran and the USSR erupt”⁷⁰. In the meantime, such an approach did not stop the organization’s agitation for a revolution that would be followed by World War III⁷¹.

5 Revolution is our goal! The aim of the organization

In one of the first completed documents, dated 17 November 1953, an officer states: “Ankabut-e Sorkh propagate a communist ideology”⁷². Unlike the Tudeh party, which at the beginning of its operation tried to hide its communist background in order to avoid the atheistic connotation that could drive away more traditional people, Ankabut-e Sorkh clearly underlined its communist profile by stating, “Workers and peasants should take over the government of the country and establish a new communist rule”⁷³.

As for the brand of communism introduced by Lenin, revolution was obligatory in order to change the structure of society, and all the communist entities should strive towards it⁷⁴, and this was the official stance of Ankabut-e Sorkh. According to the information gathered by the Second Directorate the organization was brought to life and nourished in order to start a revolution that would establish a new communist order in Iran⁷⁵. Such an objective was nothing new among the Iranian leftists as in the past there were already parties, and organizations that called for changes through revolt. One might mention the Edalat⁷⁶ or Jangali Movement in Gilan, both pursuing a communist coup d’état⁷⁷. According to information we find in the documents, it was the USSR who would give the sign to start the revolution

⁷⁰ Ibidem, p. 24.

⁷¹ In a note dated 19 January 1954, Muradov stated that Ankabut-e Sorkh’s revolution would initiate World War III. See: Ibidem, p. 20.

⁷² *Chap dar Iran...*, op. cit., p. 2.

⁷³ Ibidem, p. 25.

⁷⁴ W. I. Lenin, *Państwo a rewolucja*, Spółdzielnia Księgarska Książka, Warszawa 1927.

⁷⁵ *Chap dar Iran...*, op. cit., p. 13.

⁷⁶ Edalat [*Justice*], the Communist Party of Iran, was a party established in 1917 in Gilan, northern Iran under the direct influence of the Bolshevik revolution. It was outlawed in 1921.

⁷⁷ Shireen T. Hunter in her book *Iran Divided* indicates that Edalat cooperated with the



and Ankabut-e Sorkh would be responsible for conducting it, as well as for providing volunteers that would come out onto the streets⁷⁸. According to the informants it was the USSR that was to provide Ankabut-e Sorkh with the weapons⁷⁹ needed to conduct the revolution⁸⁰. Doubtlessly, the Soviets viewed this organization mostly as an instrument that would incite rebellion: “For the Kremlin, Tudeh is a parliamentary party whereas Ankabut-e Sorkh is a guerrilla organization”⁸¹.

Although officially revolution was a primary goal of this clandestine organization, we know that by 1949 one of the main ambitions of the early Soviet Union, which was the export of a Bolshevik Revolution to other countries, was no longer a priority. It should be pointed out that Stalin gave up on this idea back in the 1920’s and moved towards the concept of building a Soviet Empire⁸². Furthermore, according to Natalia Yegorova, after the World War II Stalin was sceptical about Iran’s revolutionary potential and believed it only possible with Russian military troops on Iranian soil⁸³. However, they withdrew in 1946, and 3 years later, when Ankabut-e Sorkh was most probably created, their presence was a mere memory. Nor did Stalin have a good opinion of Iranian farmers and workers, as he wrote to Ja’far Pishevari, the founder of the Azerbaijan Democratic Party, that there was “no profound revolutionary crisis in Iran. There are few workers in Iran and they are poorly organized. The Iranian peasantry still does not show any serious activism”⁸⁴.

The slogans Ankabut-e Sorkh employed perfectly matched the catch phrases used everywhere else where the Bolshevik revolution’s influence

Bolsheviks, recruiting volunteers for the Red Army, and the Bolsheviks supported them in their pursuit of a similar revolution in Iran. See: S. D. Hunter, *Iran Divided. The Historical Roots of Iranian Debates on Identity, Culture, and Governance in the Twenty-First Century*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014.

⁷⁸ *Chap dar Iran...*, op. cit., p. 27.

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 48.

⁸⁰ Interestingly, in the documents we also find an information that the Tudeh Party, once supported by the USSR, now collected money from *bazaris* in order to buy weapons from the Soviets. See: *Chap dar Iran...*, op. cit., p. 9.

⁸¹ *Chap dar Iran...*, op. cit., p. 48.

⁸² See: I. Kershaw, *To hell and back. Europe 1914 – 1949*, New York 2016, and C. Chaqueri, op. cit., p. 501. Furthermore, in his interview with journalist Roy Howard in March 1938, Stalin stressed that: *The export of revolution is nonsense*. See a full transcript of the interview: [[www 07](#)] (access: February 1st, 2019).

⁸³ N. Yegorova, *The “Iran Crisis” of 1945–46. A view from the Russian Archives*, Cold War International Project, Washington D.C. 1996.

⁸⁴ Joseph Stalin to Ja’far Pishevari, May 8, 1946, translated by Vladislav Zubok, in N. Yegorova, op. cit. 23–24.



reached. They requested: “land for peasants, factories for workers, and power for the proletariat”⁸⁵.

Regarding the government that Ankabut-e Sorkh’s members aimed at creating, we do not have any direct indication on how it was supposed to look, although we can assume that there would be a government comprised of one communist party, which should be led by the peasants and workers themselves since “a communist party is built of proletarians and thus its directorate should reflect this”⁸⁶.

6 Tudeh under surveillance. The real goal of the organization.

Given that conducting a revolution could be impossible in Iran, was there any other purpose for the existence of Ankabut-e Sorkh? The documents provide an answer: the organization was also established to “watch over the Tudeh party and inform the Soviet embassy about each and every step it takes”⁸⁷. If indeed Ankabut-e Sorkh was established in 1949, soon after outlawing the Tudeh, it seems that the Soviets somewhat lost their trust and confidence concerning the latter. The USSR could have decided to back up their interests with a new entity since, as Artemy M. Kalinovsky argues, “neither Moscow nor the Soviet Embassy in Tehran expected much in terms of popular support for the Tudeh”⁸⁸.

In the documents we find a series of hints that the USSR authorities were highly disappointed by Tudeh’s performance. Seifullah Muradov, whose information were prepared directly by the Soviet embassy staff or VOKS, during a meeting held on 19 January 1954, stated that: “it’s been several years since Tudeh has been operating in Iran and yet it had not been able to achieve anything”⁸⁹. In a document dated 20 April 1954, we read that the Soviet Union used to finance Tudeh, although it then ceased to do so, as the party did not fulfil its given objectives⁹⁰. Therefore, in order to regain control over Tudeh, which in the early 50’s was forced to operate illegally and, despite all odds,

⁸⁵ *Chap dar Iran...*, op. cit., p. 23.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 23.

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

⁸⁸ A. M. Kalinovsky, op. cit., pp. 401–418.

⁸⁹ *Chap dar Iran...*, op. cit., p. 51.

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*.



was rather on the rise, the Soviets desperately tried to find a proper solution. It seems that the Soviets decided to create a completely different entity with a reverse member profile. Since Tudeh was considered a party of the intelligentsia, this time the Soviets aimed at the poorly educated. However, bearing in mind the problems with controlling Tudeh – that its members were too independent – the Soviets targeted the less educated, who simply seemed easier to manipulate. Most probably, the Soviets this time wanted to be sure that the organization would be utterly subordinate to them with no surprises. Such a tendency points towards, as James Pickett puts it, “an ambition on the part of VOKS and Iranian leftists that went beyond propaganda targeted narrowly at the intelligentsia”⁹¹. Besides, Ankabut-e Sorkh’s role as a spy in Tudeh actually was not that ambitious, so ongoing reports on Tudeh’s activities seemed feasible.

No doubts, even if the Soviets perceived Iran as a secondary front for its operations, they still tried to shape the clandestine communist scene. They built, at first sight, an odd hierarchy whereby Ankabut-e Sorkh – although consisting of the poorly educated – covertly supervised the actions of Tudeh. It is doubtful that this goal was clear to an average organization member; nonetheless, the manner that Tudeh was pictured by Ankabut-e Sorkh leaders aimed at evoking reluctance at least. At Ankabut-e Sorkh meetings, it was often repeated that Tudeh did not meet Soviet expectations and emphasised that “Tudeh was not capable of conducting a revolution”⁹² and “the money and weapons that Tudeh once obtained from the USSR, would now be given to Ankabut-e Sorkh”⁹³. Furthermore, Tudeh was even accused of collaboration with the British⁹⁴, and so seemed to be a corrupt and inefficient party. The spirit of competition with Tudeh along with the sense of superiority over the latter was strongly stressed at the organization’s meetings. Reading the report dated 6 April 1954, we learn that “no Iranian worker or peasant need any directions or permissions from above, from Tudeh. Iranian workers and peasants are able to be their own leaders”⁹⁵.

It is hard to imagine that a group of simple workers and farmers could have taken Tudeh’s place, although as a group that was responsible solely

⁹¹ J. Pickett, *Soviet Civilization through a Persian Lens: Iranian Intellectuals, Cultural Diplomacy and Socialist Modernity 1941–55*, *Iranian Studies*, 48:5, 2015, p. 808.

⁹² *Chap dar Iran...*, op. cit., p. 20.

⁹³ *Ibidem*, p. 51.

⁹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 38.

⁹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 46.



for spying on Tudeh, it had everything it needed. Seemingly, the Soviets understood what was difficult for Colonel Mobasser to comprehend – that even the poorly educated could become good informants. From the documents we learn that the same informants attended both Ankabut-e Sorkh and Tudeh meetings. The sources also claimed that Tudeh was not aware of the new organization; however, in one document, albeit without any dates nor other specifications, we can read that Karim Shokohi, a Tudeh's spy had learned that "there is a new entity supported by the Soviets that is hidden away from Tudeh and is highly dangerous"⁹⁶. Furthermore, Ankabut-e Sorkh could have indeed been interesting for workers and farmers who had previously trusted Tudeh. In the documents we find information that in November 1953 more than 500 Tudeh members joined Ankabut-e Sorkh. It is possible that this transfer was caused by the disappointment that arose from the coup d'état against Mosaddeq when Tudeh was just a step away from victory by seizing the city of Tehran for two days. As Aryeh Y. Yodfat argues, "Tudeh seemed to be awaiting instructions from Moscow, but nothing came"⁹⁷ and the party itself lacked competent leadership⁹⁸.

7 Conclusions

The 1953's coup d'état sparked the decline of Tudeh. In the following years, thousands of its members were arrested, others had to flee the country. Although we do not have clear evidence when and how Ankabut-e Sorkh was dismantled, we can assume it happened more or less at the same time as the repressions against Tudeh escalated. The documents provide us with information about the final recognition of the threat posed by Ankabut-e Sorkh in May 1954.

Although the Soviets put considerable effort into supporting leftist organizations, they could not have been less successful. They were not able to prevent either the strengthening of the position of the Western powers in Iran, or Iran joining the Baghdad Pact in 1955⁹⁹, where the leading role

⁹⁶ *Chap dar Iran...*, op. cit., p. 55.

⁹⁷ A. Y. Yodfat, *The Soviet Union and Revolutionary Iran*, p. 22.

⁹⁸ M. Behrooz, *The 1953 Coup in Iran and the Legacy of Tudeh*, ... op. cit.

⁹⁹ The Baghdad Pact was a military multilateral defence treaty signed by Turkey, Iraq, United Kingdom, Pakistan and Iran in 1955. In 1959 it changed its name to the Central Treaty Organization – CENTO. It was dissolved in 1979, after the Islamic Revolution in Iran.



was entrusted to British. In fact, establishing organization such as Ankabut-e Sorkh, with revolution as an official goal, seemed to be just a cover, an excuse serving as a lure. The real aim looked more like some kind of a cross check on Tudeh and its performance after the party's outlawing or, even more likely, after the party management's rift in 1948. Support for Ankabut-e Sorkh did not necessarily mean abandoning Tudeh, but its current unstable situation could have led the Kremlin to double check on it. Such an approach can be perceived as a standard Soviet *modus operandi*, although it might also hint that the USSR was not as strong as the Iranian authorities or Americans discerned. As Maziar Behrooz observed, in 1953, the American intelligence services were convinced that the USSR posed a serious threat to Iran which, due to its deteriorating economy along with nationalist government, could collapse and fall into the Soviet camp¹⁰⁰. However, the lack of support for Tudeh before and during the 1953 coup d'état as well as the Soviet policy toward Iran that did not change significantly after Stalin's death and still considered Iran as secondary in their priority¹⁰¹ all suggest that Iran was not under any direct threat of a "Bolshevik revolution". Even if the Soviets, after the initial havoc caused by the power struggle in the Politburo after the Stalin's death, sent Otroshchenko to Tehran in August 1953, it was already too late for any serious action because soon afterwards the severe repression of the Iranian left began and many of the Soviet *illegals* ceased their operations and sought help from Moscow. Even such an experienced comrade as Colonel Otroschenko could not help much. In fact, the situation of official Soviet diplomacy in Iran significantly deteriorated and only the KGB noted occasional successes¹⁰². Even though the presented documents do not provide a clear answer as to the Kremlin's motivation in establishing Ankabut-e Sorkh, nonetheless this research sheds some new light on the issue of Soviet interference in Iranian politics.

It appears that the next step that should be undertaken in the research on Ankabut-e Sorkh is an examination of Russian archives to determine if there are any documents related to the organization produced by the Soviet embassy in Tehran, consular missions in Iran or Soviet intelligence stations that would build a much more complex picture of the organization and

¹⁰⁰M. Behrooz, *Tudeh factionalism and the 1953 coup in Iran*, p. 378.

¹⁰¹G. Roberts, *Moscow's Cold War on the Periphery: Soviet Policy in Greece, Iran, and Turkey, 1943-8*, *Journal of Contemporary History* 46, no. 1 (2011): pp. 58-81.

¹⁰²M. Pye, *op.cit.*, p. 20.



the motivations that stood behind its foundation. One possible problem that might arise is that access to the materials produced by the Soviet intelligence would be mostly denied. However, a study that confronts the two points of view would be of an immense value and would objectify any depiction of this organization.

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