

# China's Political Influence in Turkey and Iran during the Cold War: A Comparison of the Revolutionary Organization of the Tudeh Party of Iran and the Proletarian Revolutionary Enlightenment Movement

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## Abstract

This study analyses the ideological influence of the People's Republic of China (PRC) over the non-state political domains in the Middle East during the Cold War. It offers a comparative analysis of the two largest pro-Chinese leftist political groups in Turkey and Iran during the period between 1960 and 1980: the Revolutionary Organization of the Tudeh Party of Iran (ROTP) in Iran and the Proletarian Revolutionary Enlightenment Party (PRE) in Turkey. It analyses these movements by focusing on their similarities and differences. This study claims that the pro-Chinese leftist political movements in Iran developed closer military and financial relations with the PRC than did their Turkish counterparts. In doing so, the study contributes to the literature on comparative political thought on the Cold War era, which largely tends to focus on the Soviet influence over the domains of politics and its impact on the international relations of Turkey and Iran. Moreover, this work critically challenges the debates over the relations between the PRC and the Middle East, expanding the academic focus beyond trade relations and military affairs towards political ideology debates. By the same token, it aims to scrutinize alternative political instruments of the PRC during this era.

**Keywords:** Cold War Studies, Comparative Political Thought, Turkey, Iran, China.

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## Soğuk Savaş'ta Çin'in Türkiye ve İran'daki Siyasi Etkisi: İran Tudeh Partisi Devrimci Örgütü ve Proleter Devrimci Aydınlik Hareketi'nin Bir Karşılaştırması

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### Öz

Bu çalışma, Soğuk Savaş döneminde, Çin Halk Cumhuriyeti'nin (ÇHC) Ortadoğu'da devlet dışı alandaki ideolojik etkisini analiz etmektedir. Çalışma, 1960-1980 arası dönemde İran ve Türkiye'de Çin yanlısı sol siyasi örgütlerin karşılaştırmalı bir analizini yapmaktadır. Çalışmada, İran Tudeh Partisi Devrimci Örgütü ve Proleter Devrimci Aydınlik Hareketi'nin benzerlik ve farklılıkları tartışılmaktadır. Bahse konu dönemde, İran'daki Çin yanlısı siyasi örgütlerin, Türkiye'deki muadillerine oranla ÇHC ile daha yakın askeri ve finansal ilişkilere girdikleri iddia edilmektedir. Çalışma, büyük ölçüde Sovyetlerin siyasi etkisine ve bu etkinin Türkiye ile İran'ın uluslararası ilişkilerine yansımalarına odaklanma eğiliminde olan Soğuk Savaş dönemi karşılaştırmalı siyasi düşünce literatürüne katkıda bulunmaktadır. Buna ek olarak, ÇHC ile Ortadoğu ilişkilerine dair akademik tartışmaları, ticari ilişkiler ve askeri meselelerin ötesinde, siyasi ideolojiye doğru genişletmektedir. Bu bağlamda, ÇHC'nin bu dönem bölgeye yönelik olarak kullandığı alternatif siyasi araçlar da incelenmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Soğuk Savaş Çalışmaları, Karşılaştırmalı Siyasi Düşünce, Türkiye, İran, Çin.

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## **1. Introduction**

This study aims to address a largely neglected domain in Cold War studies: the ideological impact of China in the Middle East. The People's Republic of China (PRC) was one of the main actors of the ideological struggle of the Cold War era, together with the United States of America (USA) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). However, unlike the USA and the USSR, the role played by the PRC has generally been neglected in the Cold War literature, especially in relation to the Middle East. There are several reasons for this neglect. First of all, the PRC was seen as a power that was geographically remote and culturally distinct from the region (Calabrese, 1991). In addition, for most of the Cold War, the Middle East was considered to be dominated by the power struggle between the USSR and USA with no space remaining for other political actors (Zhang, 1999, p. 150). A small stream of literature addressing the relationship between the PRC and the Middle East has mostly focused on themes of oil politics, economic relations, and military cooperation (Dorsey, 2017; Burton, 2020; Chaziza, 2020).

This study analyses the ideological impact of the PRC in Turkey and Iran between 1960 and 1980. By closely examining previously unused and underused sources, it comparatively analyses the two largest pro-Chinese, Maoist actors in these two contexts: the Revolutionary Organization of the Tudeh Party of Iran (ROTPI) in Iran and the Proletarian Revolutionary Enlightenment Party (*Proleter Devrimci Aydınlik*, PRE) in Turkey. It analyses these movements by focusing on their similarities and differences, claiming that the ROTPI developed relatively closer military and financial relations with the PRC than its Turkish counterpart did.

The approach adopted in this study is mainly historical. This work does not aim to utilize a strict comparative methodology; its approach is closer to the so-called contrast of context approach (Skocpol and Somers, 1980). It analyses the relations of these organizations by comparing them, following the argument of Skocpol and Somers that "the task of the contrast-oriented comparative historian is facilitated when maximally different cases within given bounds are chosen for comparison" (p. 174). In other words, it is worthwhile to compare entities that have enough in common "within given bounds" but are still "maximally different cases" in order to make a contrast-oriented comparison. Iran and Turkey, I argue, with their distinct

and similar qualities, meet these criteria of the comparative method and prove to be appropriate units of analysis. The comparative nature of this study and the breadth of the period considered lead to a reliance on mostly secondary sources. However, primary sources such as unpublished dissertations and autobiographies are also used.

The structure of this study reflects its main aim of drawing general conclusions about the differences and similarities of the Maoist organizations in Turkey and Iran as well as their relations with the PRC. This study is composed of five parts, including the introduction and conclusion. The next section explores the role of ideology and propaganda in PRC-Middle East relations. The third section focuses on Maoism and its political influences in Iran and Turkey, centring on the respective largest pro-Chinese organizations of these countries, namely the ROTPI and PRE. Finally, the differences and similarities between the two contexts will be discussed.

## **2. Role of Ideology and Propaganda in PRC-Middle East Relations**

Much of the literature on the relations between the PRC and the Middle East has focused on certain aspects, such as the geopolitical importance of the Middle East for the PRC, Muslim minorities living in China and their relations with Islamism, the rising oil needs of the country, and other economic and security aspects (Rynhold, 1998). The main tools in these relations are considered as diplomacy, trade, and military. In the relevant literature to date, due attention has not been paid to the ideological influence of China in the Middle East and particularly in Turkey and Iran.<sup>1</sup> However, the PRC not only established economic and military relations with these countries but also ideologically influenced them. In the period from the 1960s to 1970s, Maoism, as the dominant ideology of the PRC, spread outside the borders of the country. To quote Edward Said's concept of "travelling theory" (Said, 1983), Maoism went beyond its emerging context and gained popularity around the world. Like many revolutionary countries, the PRC used ideology to export its revolution. However, the

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<sup>1</sup> Two major exceptions are Üngör, 2013 and Figueroa, 2020.

exportation of the revolution was not the only reason why the PRC used ideology. In this era, the ruling elites of the PRC also used Maoism as a tool to obtain their most pragmatic foreign policy needs. This particularly intensified after the Sino-Soviet split of the 1960s. In order to offset the international isolation of the country, the PRC used ideology as a tool. Accordingly, the country developed propaganda devices to extend its ideological influence.

The most important propaganda tool was arguably radio. Radio Beijing began its international broadcasts in 1945. At first, it was more of a regional broadcaster, mainly used as a propaganda tool against the government of Taiwan. From the 1950s, however, it extended its reach and started broadcasting in Europe, Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East (Wasburn, 1985, p. 40). Particularly after the Suez Crisis of 1956, it started broadcasting in Turkish, Arabic, and Persian. In this era, some themes stood out in its broadcasts. China opposed the imperialist policies of the Western powers and supported the Arabs in the Arab-Israeli Wars. Radio Beijing employed Arab academics and journalists from organizations such as the National Liberation Front of Algeria, the Palestine Liberation Organization, and the Iraqi and Sudanese Communist Parties and started to use them in its propaganda (Al-Sudairi, 2014). It also launched a special program for Arabs in 1958, naming it "Our Arab brothers and sisters, we are with you". Radio Beijing produced special programs not only for Arabs but also for Turks and Iranians. For example, it broadcast a Persian and Turkish program specifically entitled "Chinese Muslims" to emphasize religious freedom in the PRC. In this program, it not only portrayed the lives of Hui Muslims living in the PRC but also used religious language while broadcasting mosque visits in Beijing. Radio Beijing also frequently included Uyghur folk songs in its broadcast stream (Üngör, 2009, p.154).

The ideological influence of the PRC was not limited to Radio Beijing broadcasts. In line with the political developments of the era, the political spheres in both Turkey and Iran were influenced by global Maoism. Between 1960 and 1980, many political movements in these countries, built relations with the PRC on both practical and ideological levels. The next section will discuss global Maoism and its influence in Iran and Turkey.

### **3. Maoism and Its Political Influences in Iran and Turkey: the ROTPI and PRE**

Maoism is the sum of the political practice and political thoughts of Mao Zedong, the founder of the PRC. It differs from classical Marxist-Bolshevik model in two main respects. First, the role of social classes in Maoism differs from that in the classical model. The main agent of revolutionary action in the Bolshevik model is the urban working class, while in Maoism, it is the peasantry and rural masses. According to Maoism, since most of the world's population lives in rural areas, the potential for revolution is more intense there. This was supported by many victorious movements backed by revolutionary rural masses, such as in Vietnam, Cambodia, and China. Secondly, contrary to the classical Marxist model, the ruling classes are defined differently in Maoism. Not only the bourgeoisie but also landlords and "colonial collaborators" are among the members of the ruling classes. The Maoists propose a "protracted people's war" against these groups. Moreover, the Maoist understanding of the revolutionary party and its role also differs from that of the classical model. In the classical model, the role of the "vanguard party" is to apply revolutionary theory, while in the Maoist model, the theory emerges from within the "mass line". The hierarchy between the masses found in the Bolshevik model is rejected by Maoists. Revolution, according to Maoism, is a long and uninterrupted process. Mobilizing large parts of rural populations to revolt against the ruling elite using guerrilla warfare is the method for a successful revolution (Gregor & Chang, 1978).

There was always ideological tension between the PRC and the USSR, but its effects on the international arena were particularly seen after the Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s. The Sino-Soviet split was one of the most significant developments of the Cold War, which affected not only China and the Soviet Union but also global political movements. In 1963, the PRC declared that socialism in the Soviet Union had failed and a capitalist system had emerged in that country. It developed this argument after the USSR's intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968. It declared that the Soviets were an imperialist power, acting for their own imperial purposes under the guise of socialism. In the 1970s, the official position of the PRC was that the USSR was a more dangerous imperial power than the USA. As a result of this split, the PRC increased its support for and propaganda

efforts among Asian, African, and Middle Eastern leftists. This especially accelerated after the Cultural Revolution that started in the second half of the 1960s. In this era, the PRC became the protector of the “Third World”. During this period, Maoist political movements attracted enormous support in many countries, especially in Indonesia, Tanzania, India, and Cambodia (Lovell, 2019). The intensity and success of these propaganda efforts were related to some degree of geographical and cultural proximity. In Southeast Asia, and especially in Cambodia and Vietnam, Maoist movements were more intensely supported by the PRC. They succeeded in seizing power, as in the case of Pol Pot in Cambodia (Galway, 2008). These efforts were more limited in the Middle East compared to Southeast Asia.

The 1960s and 1970s were years of rapid social and political change for both Turkey and Iran. During this period, leftist movements transformed, grew, and expanded their influence in both countries. Until then, the few movements that had been able to survive were illegal pro-Soviet leftist organizations. The Communist Party of Turkey, founded in Turkey in the 1920s, and the Tudeh (“Masses”) Party, founded in Iran in 1941, were the two main organizations of the old left. Therefore, in both countries, Maoist political movements first manifested themselves in a break with these parties, like other pro-Chinese groups that split off from official communist parties elsewhere around the globe (Cronin, 2000, p.237). It is interesting to note that although diplomatic ties between China and these countries were established later, in the 1970s, Maoism had already started to receive support in the 1960s. In this era, indirect channels, as tools of propaganda for parties and political factions, became the main way for political activists in Turkey and Iran to get to know about the PRC.

Maoist movements first began to spread within the Iranian left. The leftist opposition in Iran was largely pacified following the 1953 coup, being the main loser of the era. Tudeh lost much of its network inside Iran. In the 1950s, it became largely a party in exile. When opposition began to rebound in the 1960s, it spread largely in exile, particularly among Iranian students abroad. These student groups were at the forefront of the first Maoist movements. The first Maoist organization in Iranian politics was established in 1964 among Iranian students in Western Europe. A group of Tudeh Party sympathizers in Western Europe, the Iranian Students Confederation, criticized the Tudeh leadership and announced that they

had adopted Maoist ideology. This Tudeh splinter group took the name of the Revolutionary Organization of the Tudeh Party of Iran (ROTPI). This was one of the biggest divides among the Iranian left and resulted in most of Tudeh's European cadres joining this new organization.

This split had its origin in the Sino-Soviet split as well as Tudeh's performance in the 1950s. Tudeh's stance during the 1953 coup had created disillusionment among leftist youth. The new group cited Tudeh's persistent subordination to the USSR as the main reason for it to have remained passive during the coup (Vaghafi, 2016, p.83). Instead of the Soviet Revolution of 1917, the Chinese example came to be seen as the blueprint for a revolution in Iran. The organization's leaders sympathized with the Cuban revolution for a short time, but afterwards, they started to embrace Maoism more openly.

The ROTPI leaders concluded that Tudeh was an opportunistic party from its inception, mainly working for Soviet interests. In order to fight the Iranian regime, they argued, a new party needed to be founded to work among the peasants, create a people's army, and surround Iranian cities from rural bases (Behrooz, 1999, p.40). They "found in China a useful set of rhetorical tools to criticize the inertia of the Soviet-aligned Tudeh and gain influence among the increasingly radical Iranian student population abroad" (Figueroa, 2020, p. 138). They began publishing Persian translations of the works of Mao Zedong among Iranian students abroad, circulating Maoist pamphlets and periodicals while also developing political relations with the PRC. They received political and ideological support from the PRC and, in return, supported the PRC's political propaganda efforts in Iran and among Iranian students studying abroad. Beginning in the mid-1960s, a significant portion of the Iranian student movement abroad began embracing Maoism (Matin-Asgari, 2014). During this period, the entire administration of the Iranian Student Union in Europe and most of the Iranian Student Union in the United States became Maoist. Inside Iran, the organization developed a three-stage plan of action in line with Maoist politics. Accordingly, first of all, a people's army would be established. Propaganda activities would be carried out among the rural population. In line with the Maoist dictum, the countryside should surround *the cities and seize power by armed force*. Iranian cities would be surrounded from the countryside. A map of the rural areas where revolutionary work would be carried out was prepared

and the organization sent student guerrillas to the Iranian countryside. The first actions of the organization were successful. However, when one of the organization's sympathizers attempted to assassinate Reza Shah, it drew the attention of the state's intelligence service to the organization. In 1965, the organization went through a significant period of detentions and trials.

As the second step of the three-stage plan, members of the organization carried out organizational activities among nomadic tribes. They attempted an uprising, partly in the Persian region, but that attempt was quickly suppressed by security forces. Finally, they sent a group of militants to support a tribal uprising in Iranian Kurdistan, but that uprising was also suppressed and the militants were forced to return. As a result, despite all its international ties and PRC support, the organization did not succeed in finding a base in Iran. The cadres sent to the country from Europe were identified in a short time and did not have an opportunity to develop the organization. In 1967, the European cadres that had formed the main body of the organization were divided ideologically. By the early 1970s, the organization was largely liquidated (Behrooz, 2004, pp. 194-195).

In Turkey, the first and largest organization to adopt Maoism in the political arena was the Proletarian Revolutionary Enlightenment Party, led by Doğu Perinçek, in 1969. This movement had also broken away from another intellectual circle, in this case one connected to the political magazine *Aydınlık Sosyalist Dergi* ("Enlightenment Socialist Journal"). The main split was with Mihri Belli, who was a member of the central committee of the Turkish Communist Party. Similarly, to the ROTPI, the PRE also evolved within pro-Soviet political groups in Turkey. The domestic political debates of the era in Turkey were the main reason for this split. The "National Democratic Revolution" thesis, which was a popular theory in the leftist politics of the period, bears some resemblance to Maoism. To summarize roughly, the proponents of the thesis claimed that Turkey was still a semi-feudal society being exploited by Western powers. Accordingly, a national-democratic revolution was the prerequisite for socialist revolution. In order to achieve that, the proletariat, rural masses, and military-bureaucratic elite needed to establish an alliance. This point of view is similar to Maoist theses such as the "common front" and "new democracy". Therefore, this thesis brought Turkish leftists of the period closer to Maoism, including those of the PRE. They published translations

from Chinese propaganda journals, the most famous of which was the Chinese Communist Party's political theory journal, *Red Flag*.<sup>2</sup> Although the group began employing Maoism as a tool for a Turkish revolution, its position on the PRC's foreign policy was not straightforward at the beginning and it was not a strong supporter of it. For example, in the 1968 Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia, the group supported the Soviet Union. This support was incompatible with the foreign policy of the PRC, which opposed the occupation (Üngör, 2013, p. 178).

With time, the PRE abandoned this position. Especially after the 1970s, it started to take sides more directly with the foreign policy of the PRC, eventually becoming the foremost defender of the PRC's foreign policy stances within Turkish politics. This period is rich in examples of alignment with the PRC's foreign policy. International developments were generally interpreted in the context of the conflict between the PRC and the USSR, and attitudes were assumed accordingly. The organization described the USSR as a revisionist power in its publications, arguing that the USA and USSR were the two big imperialist countries, but that US imperialism was decaying while Soviet imperialism was rising. Thus, the USSR was more dangerous and more powerful. It was also stated that the USSR did not support workers' revolutionary wars in the Middle East, but instead the petty bourgeoisie. Therefore, it was an enemy to be fought for the liberation of the peoples. The PRE even claimed that the Sino-Soviet struggle was a class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie (Zhu, 2019, p. 52).

The organization also did not approve of relations with countries that appeared to be pro-Soviet. For example, Cuba, despite being a socialist country, was referred to as a "mercenary" of Moscow and its "social imperialism" because of its closeness with the Soviet Union, and leftist organizations from Turkey that sent representatives to the Youth Congress held in Cuba were criticized for doing so. Again, in line with the PRC's foreign policy, Cambodia was openly supported in the Vietnam-Cambodia conflict, which was one of the main points of conflict between the PRC and USSR at the time. Doğu Perinçek, the main theorist of the PRE, called on

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<sup>2</sup> *Red Flag* was a political theory journal established in 1958 under Mao's personal order to establish a journal that would focus on theoretical study and propaganda of Chinese communism.

the Turkish government to support the Cambodian regime led by Pol Pot in his article entitled “Cambodia Is a Man of Its Word”, which he published in the journal *Aydınlık*, the media organ of the organization (Yardımoğlu, 2016, p. 95). The PRE’s anti-Soviet policy continued until the late 1970s. For example, the organization referred to the Soviet administration as the new tsars of Moscow in its 1978 program. These new tsars, it was stated, had imitated Hitler and tried to spread their influence using military power. (Atagenç, 2018, p. 34).

Unlike its counterpart in Iran, the PRE did not participate in rural guerrilla activities or engage in armed conflict with Turkish security forces. It pursued its activities in the legal domain. In the late 1970s, it founded a political party called the Workers’ and Peasants’ Party of Turkey (*Türkiye İşçi Köylü Partisi*, TİKP) and participated in electoral politics. As a result of the military coup of 12 September 1980, the party was banned together with other political parties in Turkey.

#### **4. Similarities and Differences**

Although the Maoist movements in Turkey and Iran were founded with different motives and under different social and historical conditions, they were based on similar foundations. First of all, they existed within a similar international environment. The main development in this international environment was the Sino-Soviet split. This rift had many reflections not only in Iran and Turkey, but also on a global level. The weakening of Soviet control among leftist movements created an ideological split within the left, the main result of which was the weakening of the perception that the USSR was the leader of the global Communist movement. Many leftist groups in both Iran and Turkey were divided in this era. By the same token, many groups used this international context to expand their own spheres of influence (Zabih, 2011, pp. 17-18), approaching one of the two blocks and asking for support in the process. Therefore, the main factor in the emergence of Maoist leftist movements in both Iran and Turkey was this split in the international arena. Being on the side of China and against the Soviets was the common point of these movements.

During this era, pro-Chinese movements had a structural advantage over pro-Soviet groups in both Iran and Turkey. The 1960s was a period in

which political movements expanded to include the majority of society. This rapid expansion resulted in the general sensitivities of society manifesting in the political arena as well. One of these sensitivities was the anti-Russian feelings of the masses. In both Turkey and Iran, these feelings had historical roots. Memories of the Ottoman-Russian wars in the former case and Russian involvement in the Constitutional Revolution and Iranian domestic affairs in the twentieth century in the latter were vivid. In contrast, relations with China were not burdened with negative memories. The PRC was seen as a neutral power, not an enemy that had interfered before. Therefore, it had more popularity among the masses.

Another factor that expanded the popularity of Maoism in both countries was the Soviet theory of “peaceful coexistence”. In 1956, Khrushchev, as General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, began the process of de-Stalinization and also announced a change in the country’s foreign policy. This change of discourse in the USSR’s foreign policy, aiming at “peaceful coexistence” with the capitalist world, was called “revisionism” by Mao. During this period, the USSR supported the administration of General Qasim in Iraq, which was not communist but was anti-American. The Soviets further advised communist groups in Iraq to do the same. This change in Soviet foreign policy stirred up reactions from leftist movements across the Middle East. In particular, young leftists who were politicized in this period became critical of pro-Soviet communist parties (Doğan & Ünüvar, 2007). In contrast, the PRC generally concurred with the more confrontational political line maintained by communist parties and received wide support from these young leftists. For these critical masses, the PRC represented genuine revolutionary opposition to Soviet revisionism. The words of Ergun Aydınoglu, who was also involved in the leftist political movement in the period in question, illustrate the mood among Turkish leftists:

...In a country like Turkey, China’s radical-looking arguments have a strong appeal. Defending some of the ‘revisionist’ theses of the Soviets is not easy for the left cadres who have entered the race for radicalism. For this reason, the theses of the Soviets such as ‘peaceful coexistence’ or the peaceful transition to socialism, which are often mentioned in their discussions with China, are often ignored by the former [Turkish Communist Party] cadres... Values such as radicalism, revolutionary certainty, and intransigence with

imperialism, especially for young cadres, are now mostly represented by Chinese or Cuban communists (as quoted by *Üngör*, 2013, p. 174).

Likewise, the pacifist attitude of the Tudeh Party in the 1953 coup that resulted in the overthrow of Iran's elected prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh, and the subsequent purge against the left, also increased the orientation towards Maoism, which represented radicalism (Vaghafi, 2016, p. 83). The rapprochement in the relations between the Soviet Union and the Iranian state as of the 1960s, and especially the support given by the USSR to the 1963 Land Reform in Iran, was another factor that inspired the leftist political movement of the period to review its relationship with the Soviets (Javadzadeh, 2007, p. 177).

Another factor that increased the popularity of Maoism in Iran and Turkey was the similarity with China's own socio-economic conditions. During this period, the populations of Iran and Turkey mostly lived in rural areas, as was also the case in China.<sup>3</sup> This resulted in economic similarity between China and these countries. Maoist organizations claimed that Iran and Turkey were semi-feudal and semi-colonial countries. Therefore, they further claimed, the working-class movement required by classical socialism was underdeveloped in these countries (Doğan & Ünüvar, 2007; Vaghafi, 2016). Accordingly, they stressed Maoism's idea that rural masses were the most important actors of the revolution and that the path to follow should be surrounding the cities from the countryside. This was in contrast to other leftist organizations that emphasized the urban working class.

Having established that the political movements in Iran and Turkey were ideologically influenced by Maoism, it is also interesting to look at the practical relations of these movements with the PRC. These organizations were generally illegal and maintaining financial relations with a foreign country was problematic in terms of both legal and political ethics. Therefore, available sources on these subjects are limited. However, as time continues to pass, we can identify some traces of these relationships in the memories of the activists of the period. As stated above, the leading group in this regard was the ROTPI, whose relations with China had started even before

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<sup>3</sup> While the urban population of Turkey was 31.9% in 1960, it had increased to 43.9% in 1980. This rate increased from 33.7% in 1960 to 50% in 1980 in Iran. See United Nations Population Division. World urbanization prospects (2018).

its official establishment. When the first split in the Tudeh Party occurred among Iranian students abroad and an opposition emerged, Chinese representatives in the Communist Youth League invited the opposition to the Chinese embassy in London. They then further invited them to China. The trip was a success; the delegates met with representatives from the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. They were told that the party's relations with Tudeh were severed after the Sino-Soviet split, which had left the Persian section of Radio Beijing unable to function. They were asked for help. The student opposition was impressed by the success of Chinese socialism and interest in Maoism continued to develop. These visits were repeated throughout the era and financial relations between the two parties were also maintained. Visitors were paid for their expenses. A trip for multiple cadres might cost more than \$14,000, so the financial support can be said to have been substantial (Figueroa, 2020, p. 150).

After the official establishment of the ROTPI in 1965, these financial relations with the PRC grew. Their relationship was at such a level that the organization received annual support of \$20,000 from the PRC and sent many of its militants to that country for ideological and military training (Behrooz, 1999, p. 88). Kurosh Lashai, one of the founders of the party, who later became a confessor and worked with the Iranian state throughout the 1970s, tells in his memoirs that although the PRC provided financial support to the organization, it advised the Iranian Maoists to forge their own path and not follow Chinese tradition as a method of revolution (Matin-Asgari, 2007). According to Iraj Kashkuli who was also in a leadership position in this era, the ROTPI had formed groups of 7-8 people since the mid-1960s and sent them to the PRC via Pakistan. These groups received practical and theoretical training in guerrilla warfare there. Their training, carried out through Chinese translators, consisted of topics such as using explosives and guerrilla tactics. What Kashkuli remembers as the most emphasized subject in the training sessions is the importance for the acceptance of the Maoist view by the Iranian group that Soviet policy be seen as revisionist (Vaghafi, 2016, pp. 89-90). In other words, the training served the aim of finding supporters for the PRC's foreign policy positions in the international arena, apart from revolutionary solidarity. According to Lashai, this turned the official discourse and literature of the ROTPI into "mere replicas of Chinese government propaganda" (Matin-Asgari 2007, p. 145).

In addition to military training, a group of ROTPI supporters were sent to China to work for the Persian branch of Radio Beijing. This was a professional job for which they received pay. Although the group wanted to broadcast propaganda against the Iranian regime by radio, that idea was rejected by the Chinese authorities. The Chinese insisted on apolitical subjects such as agricultural statistics and, more importantly, on the Chinese view of world affairs (Figuroa, 2020, p. 156). An Iranian dissident who worked as a translator for Radio Beijing later explained that the Chinese authorities did not allow him to say anything that would personally offend the Shah of Iran because the PRC considered Iran an indispensable ally at that time. Although the Shah of Iran did not recognize the PRC, he also did not recognize Taiwan, so there was a sort of mutual relationship existing, which the PRC did not want to weaken (Üngör, 2009, p. 271).

In contrast, we find the only testimony that there may have been material relations between the PRC and the PRE in the memories of Gün Zileli, one of the leaders of that movement. In his memoirs, Zileli states that he was invited to the PRC as the official representative of the party, was hosted by the Chinese state, and was told about the official theses of the PRC during this visit. Zileli's testimony also shows financial relations, albeit limited, between the two groups. According to Zileli, on the last day of his visit to the PRC, a meeting was held with the head of the delegation and officials of the Chinese Communist Party to "review the accounts"; as a result of the meeting, it was revealed that the European representative of the PRE had received financial aid from the PRC without the knowledge of the party. This financial aid, amounting to 90,000 marks and \$25,000, was justified by the fact that the party was in a difficult situation due to the extraordinary conditions of Turkey. However, the aid was not delivered to the party; it was embezzled by the European representative (Zileli, 2013, pp. 124-136). This testimony shows that regardless of whether the financial aid was received by party decision or unilaterally delivered to the party, the PRC had no reservations about entering financial relations with a leftist organization of Turkish origin.

Apart from this testimony, there is no other evidence that Turkish Maoists received military and theoretical training from the PRC. In other words, the relationship between the Turkish Maoists and the PRC, unlike their Iranian counterparts' relationship with the PRC, was more ideological

than practical. As discussed above, the PRE sided with the PRC in its split with the USSR, remaining a firm defender of its political arguments. For this purpose, it even entered into political conflict with the pro-Soviet and independent groups within the Turkish left. However, in terms of practical relations, it was no different from other pro-Soviet or independent groups in the Turkish left. Like other organizations of the period, it was in Palestine and Lebanon as a training ground. The group acted together with Palestinian organizations, especially the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. In other words, the practical relationship that developed was not with the PRC, but rather with the Arab left (Zileli, 2011).

We can speculate *on* several factors behind this difference. First of all, there was a basic difference between the PRE and the ROTPI. The PRE did not have a paramilitary branch and did not engage in guerrilla *warfare against the Turkish government*. As mentioned above, their only military and ideological partnership was with the Arab left, and that was for a very limited time. They generally operated in the legal domain, and this reduced their need for financial and military support. Therefore, they did not look to the PRC for assistance.

Secondly, China is geographically closer to Iran than Turkey. This geographical difference paved the way for Iranian militants to reach the PRC more easily than their Turkish counterparts, via India and Pakistan, where pro-PRC Maoist groups were strong. The PRC gave financial and military support to the Maoist organizations active in Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan, and that support was one of the reasons for the militarization of the political movements in the region (Chakrabarti, 1986). The proximity of Iranian Maoism to this political Maoist ecosystem can be seen as a factor that increased its practical relations with China. Again, in connection to this, Iranian organizations and Maoist organizations active in Afghanistan and Pakistan, particularly in places closer to the Iranian border, were influenced by each other at various levels and were able to form transnational ties (Niamatullah, 2012). Shahram Khosravi's semi-autobiographical work on border ethnography, *'Illegal' Traveller*, describes how these transnational ties were active even in the 1980s, after the Iranian revolution, and how Iranian illegal immigrants were exposed to political propaganda and organized by representatives of leftist organizations on the

borders of Pakistan and India (Khosravi, 2010). This example illustrates how transnational political networks took root between Iran and its eastern neighbours. Such transnational networks and relationships did not exist for Turkish Maoism. Turkey's transnational relations and transitivity were with its southern neighbours. The relationship that developed with Lebanon and Palestine in the 1970s and the similar relationship that developed with Iraq after 1990 can be given as examples.

Another factor may be the more international structure of the ROTPI compared to the PRE movement. For Turkey, most of the first-generation leftist leaders were educated abroad, with examples ranging from Nazım Hikmet, who studied at Moscow's Communist University of the Toilers of the East, to Mihri Belli and Behice Boran, who studied in the USA. This was also the case for Iran. The founders of the Iranian Tudeh Party were mostly educated in Germany. However, by the 1960s, leftist movements tended to spread towards more local strata of society, especially in Turkey. In this period, leftist movements became popular among university students living in larger cities. The leftist opinion leaders of this period in Turkey were usually among young people, whose connections with the outside world were not much stronger than those of the rest of the society. Turkey's protectionist import substitution economy also limited the relations of Turkish youth with international actors. However, the quadrupling of oil prices in this era made Iran *a very rich country*. This sudden wealth, combined with the Shah's desire for personal westernization, changed the conditions of higher education in the country. Iran became the country that sent the most students abroad in this period in terms of both number and percentage of population. There is still a significant volume of Iranian university students in many parts of the world today, especially in Western Europe and the USA. These students have become socialized and open to international influences in international environments. Iranian Maoism was born out of these trends (Nasrabadi & Matin-Asgari, 2016). The relations between the PRC and Iranian students also developed within this specific context of international relations. Iranian higher education was highly internationalized, whereas this was not the case for Turkey. As Turkish education remained highly local during this period, the Turkish left accordingly had limited opportunities to build transnational relations.

## **5. Conclusion**

This study has provided a comparison of two pro-Chinese leftist organizations in Turkey and Iran between 1960 and 1980. It has discussed the similarities and differences of these groups as well as the political context that produced the popularity of Maoism amongst the left in these two countries. It has also identified the factors that influenced the depth of their relations with the PRC.

Since the period analysed in this study, China, Iran, and Turkey have all undergone major political and social transformations. In the 1980s, China entered an era of reform and opening. This reform process also influenced its international relations. The country has gradually abandoned the export of revolution and ended its support of leftist organizations. In Iran, meanwhile, the political sphere was completely transformed after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The Iranian left was repressed, and members and supporters of leftist organizations, including the Maoists, were arrested, executed, or forced into exile. In Turkey, a similar collapse of the political left occurred after the military coup of 1980. In its attempt to restore order, the military managed to eliminate the illegal left. After the restoration of democracy, some groups from the Turkish left reorganized and re-emerged. The PRE was one of them. The leader of the organization, Doğu Perinçek, founded a series of legal political parties. Although the group mostly emphasizes Kemalism instead of Maoism, it continues to take a largely anti-West and pro-China foreign policy position as of 2021.

## **Disclosure**

The article is exempt from the Ethics Committee Decision. There are no participants. The author received no financial support from any institution and there's no conflict of interest. No material subject to copyright is included.

## **Beyan**

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