

A CALL TO PROGRESSIVES

■ *The Belgian Solidarity Movement with the Iranian Revolution (1976-1978)*¹

- *Sacha Habibi* -

On the first weekend of May 1978, while Iran had been going through waves of bloody protests for four months, a symposium was held at the Brussels's International Press Centre to address repression in the shah's country. Although it only gathered about a hundred people, this meeting's organisation was international. Along with two Belgian committees, four associations, respectively from France, West Germany, Britain and Italy, were in charge. The speakers, both scholars and artists, came from across Western Europe, and of course from Iran. This symposium led to the elaboration of what a journalist for *Le Monde* would soon call "a genuine report on Iran, a work instrument intended for journalists and the Western political world".² As global as this meeting may have seemed, two other Belgian associations supporting the Iranian people were missing from its organisers. Even though they were not significantly smaller than the organising committees, these associations were generally less firmly rooted in Belgium. In this article, the reasons behind the various degrees of success of international solidarity organisations will be explored through the Iranian case.

The Belgian solidarity movements with peoples from Chile, Nicaragua, Palestine, South Africa or Vietnam, not to mention non-Third World countries like Poland or Spain, resonated widely. In contrast, the solidarity movement with the Iranian people had much less traction, at least in the 1970s. Yet, at the end of the decade, Iran experienced a revolution that led to the fall of the *shah* (king) and hence to the end of a monarchy that had lasted several millennia.³ This event had a considerable echo internationally.⁴

One might wonder why some solidarity movements receive more attention than others. Factors like self-projection, political agendas or contacts with people coming from the targeted countries may be involved.⁵ Iran indeed has few historical links with Belgium, except for the sending of Belgian civil servants to help improve the Persian/Iranian administration in the first half of the twentieth century, and only a few hundred Iranians were living in Belgium at the time under consideration here.⁶ Still, as small as they were, the Belgian solidarities with the Iranian protest movement

did find some success, going as far as organising the above-mentioned symposium. The means through which they managed to function are clear from the documents they left behind: pre-existing organisations (which constitute the Belgian “social movement sector”⁷) provided them with various resources which allowed them to work.

However, all the groups campaigning for solidarity with the Iranian people did not manage to mobilise the Belgian social movement sector to the same extent. As already suggested, two associations had a much more limited action. This article will argue that the political climate that was prevailing among the Belgian left following the call to progressives made by the president of the Socialist Party in 1969 – often subsumed under the label “gathering of the progressives” (*rassemblement des progressistes*) – shaped the opportunities of these international solidarity movements, as it provided the organising committees with more resources than the associations that did not take part in the above-mentioned symposium. Doing so, this paper aims to point out that, despite being

3. This article is published with aid from the research unit Traverses (ULiège). It is based on a chapter of my master’s thesis “*Un appel à tous les démocrates belges épris de paix et de liberté. Les solidarités avec la Révolution iranienne en Belgique (1976-1978)*”, University of Liège, 2020, 118-173. I am grateful to Catherine Lanneau, Pierre-Olivier de Broux, Eric Geerckens, Valentin Rebour and Charel Roemer for their comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this paper. Any errors belong to the author.

2. “*Un véritable dossier sur l’Iran, un instrument de travail destiné aux journalistes et au monde politique occidental*” (*Le Monde*, 10 May 1978, 4).

3. The expression “Iranian Revolution” will be preferred to that of “Islamic Revolution” because the latter implies a teleological view of this event: indeed, the Iranian protest movement was not predestined to lead to the Islamic Republic’s advent. In the same way, this event will be identified as the “1978-1979” Revolution, since most of the protests that led to the fall of the shah (on 16 January 1979) occurred during the year 1978. Therefore, referring to the “1979 Islamic Revolution” partakes of a reductive vision, limiting the Revolution to the making of the Islamic Republic. Historian Afshin Matin-Asgari gives an example of how this bias affects scholarly works: AFSHIN MATIN-ASGARI, *Iranian Student Opposition to the Shah*, Costa Mesa, 2002, 3.

4. JOHN L. ESPOSITO (ed.), *The Iranian Revolution: Its Global Impact*, Miami, 1990. Contrary to what the title implies, this collective work focuses on Third World regions. Closer to Belgium, see BENJAMIN BENGOCBEYI, “L’ayatollah Khomeiny, la France et la Révolution islamique”, *Revue d’histoire diplomatique*, 132/2, 2018, 187-200.

5. KIM CHRISTIAENS, *Orchestrating Solidarity: Third World Agency, Transnational Networks & The Belgian Mobilization for Vietnam and Latin America, 1960s–1980s*, PhD thesis, KULeuven, 2013, 345-346.

6. In Belgium, sociologist Nader Vahabi has estimated the number of unnaturalized Iranians (who constitute the majority of the population) at roughly 400 for the year 1970 (NADER VAHABI, *La migration iranienne en Belgique. Une diaspora par défaut*, Paris, 2011, 105). This estimation, however, is approximate, given that it is based on interviews that he has conducted.

7. JOHN D. MCCARTHY & MAYER N. ZALD, *The Trend of Social Movements in America: Professionalization and Resource Mobilization*, Morristown, 1973. The authors coined the concept of “social movement organization”, defined as “a complex or formal organization which identifies its preferences with a social movement or a counter-movement and attempts to implement those goals” (page 1218). These organisations form “social movement industries” in specific fields, forming themselves a “social movement sector” at the national level.

essentially transnational, solidarity movements nevertheless had to contend with national political and social contexts to establish local sections, which they strongly relied on. This observation does not diminish these movements' transnational connections, which will also be discussed, but it is their national materialisations that will be deliberately foregrounded here.

One might wonder why such a small movement has been chosen. In recent decades, some historians, whether they claim to belong to the micro-historical tradition or not, have restored the legitimacy of small-scale case studies. One argument that has been raised to justify these studies lies in the notion of the "exceptionally normal"⁸, coined by Italian historian Edoardo Grendi: marginal cases speak volumes about the norm, whether because they challenge established paradigms or because they are only seemingly exceptional. But the Belgian solidarity movement with the Iranian people is clearly not exceptional, in the sense that it is not atypical, nor is it particularly under-documented. Yet, it reveals how social movements can interact with a network of organisations. Its interest lies precisely in its size: small movements rely all the more on this type of network. Given Belgium's weak links with Iran, this movement is also not associated with a specific ideological or religious tradition that would attract solidarity in particular Belgian circles, unlike other small international solidarity movements.⁹

I. Theoretical Bases

This first section will briefly describe the Belgian solidarity movement with the Iranian people, before reviewing a series of useful contributions by the literature on both international solidarity

movements and the Iranian opposition. It will then present the theoretical tools that will be mobilised. Finally, the sources will be outlined before I delve into the actual analysis of these organisations' networks.

The Belgian Solidarity Movement with the Iranian People

Both Belgian committees and associations supporting the Iranian people were active between 1976 and 1978. The committees were respectively French- and Dutch-speaking. The former is called *Comité belge de solidarité avec le peuple iranien*, abbreviated *Comité solidarité Iran* (CSI)¹⁰. Comprising six members, it was created at the initiative of an Iranian communist, who will be identified hereafter. The Dutch-speaking committee is called *Vlaams Iran komitee* (VIK)¹¹. Little information is available on its genesis, but its five members were all linked to the *Kommunistische Partij van België* (KPB)¹².

Besides the committees, two associations, both based at the *Université libre de Bruxelles* (ULB)¹³, took part in this movement. While the ideological allegiance of the *Association islamique des étudiants iraniens de Belgique* (Islamic Association of Iranian Students of Belgium) is explicit, the *Association des étudiants iraniens en Belgique* (Association of Iranian Students in Belgium) is more opaque. A look at its archives, however, reveals its affiliation to the Confederation of Iranian Students, a Maoist branch of the Confederation of Iranian Students *National Union*.¹⁴ As will be seen, these Maoist inclinations are confirmed by the rhetoric used by this association.

Measuring a social movement organisation's "success" is a difficult task. In the present case, the com-

8. EDOARDO GRENDI, "Micro-analisi e storia sociale", *Quaderni storici*, 12/2 (35), 1977, 512.

9. JOREN JANSSENS, "Tussen de wapens en het volk. Vlaamse en Europese solidariteit met de Guatemalteekse revolutie, 1979-1996", *Brood & Rozen*, 22/1, 2017, 4-27. Catholic circles have been particularly active towards Guatemala.

10. Belgian Solidarity Committee with the Iranian People, abbreviated Iran Solidarity Committee.

11. Flemish Iran Committee.

12. Communist Party of Belgium.

13. Free University of Brussels.

14. AFSHIN MATIN-ASGARI, *Iranian Student Opposition to the Shah*, 144.

mon goal of the aforementioned organisations was to raise awareness among the Belgian population about the situation in Iran. Attempting to grasp these groups' impact on Belgian society would be illusory, but the means that they had at their disposal, as well as the variety of milieux they were in contact with, provide a good indication of their potential outreach. In this respect, the committees achieved greater success than the associations, which remained mere student circles all along.

This situation is not surprising as far as the Islamic association is concerned: the Islamic opposition in the West was globally weaker than the leftist tendencies until the very dawn of the Revolution, although it did find some echo in decolonial milieux.¹⁵ But the balance of power between "orthodox" communists and Maoists is more intriguing. At the time discussed here, the Iranian communist party Tudeh was indeed losing influence in many Western-European countries, challenged by the ideological complexification of the Iranian opposition movement. This loss of influence benefited Maoists, but also nationalists and social democrats (although the Tudeh party continued to be influential).

This observation is illustrated by a few well-studied cases among the Iranian students' favourite destinations, namely the United States, West Germany and France.¹⁶ France probably provides the best example of the Tudeh party's relative loss of influence. In the Federal Republic of Germany (where leftist movements maintained a special relationship with the Iranian opposition since Benno Ohnesorg's death at least¹⁷), the Iranian communist party remained rather strong, but the Maoists still managed to form several active

groups.¹⁸ Even across the Atlantic, self-proclaimed Maoists were increasingly numerous among the American solidarity movement with the Iranian people, despite the restoration of diplomatic relations between China and Iran in 1971.¹⁹

Nevertheless, it can be stated that Maoist Iranian opponents were globally gaining ground in the West, to the detriment of the Tudeh party. It must be said that, from a general perspective, orthodox communism had been losing momentum in the West at least since Khrushchev's 1956 secret speech. Some anti-imperialist far leftists, especially among student milieux, started to claim their adherence to a roughly defined "Maoism". The ideological content of Maoism is indeed tough to define, for Mao's political thought has known many evolutions. Western Maoism (which can be considered the only actual one, given that the Chinese Communist Party rejects this label) is more of a Western appropriation of a foreign, "exotic" ideology, against the background of rejection of the USSR, than a monolithic political family.²⁰ Therefore, the term "Maoist" will be used here to refer to groups that explicitly claim this ideology. The "New Left" label has also been coined to refer to groups including such Maoists, but its vagueness makes it a less suitable concept in this case.

In the second half of the 1970s, Maoism itself was losing some of its aura following Mao's death, the disclosure of the horrors of the Cultural Revolution and the failure of some Western militant groups. But Maoist organisational structures were still standing.²¹ Yet, in Belgium, the political climate of the gathering of progressives allowed the orthodox communist opponents of Iran to find more support than the Maoists. No Trotskyist Iranian

15. *idem*, 160.

16. *idem*, 131. Students indeed form a major part of the Iranian immigration, and are the most active category in the opposition.

17. On 2 June 1967, West German student Benno Ohnesorg was killed by a police officer while taking part in a demonstration against the visit of the shah in West Berlin. He became a symbol in far-leftist milieux, where this event was interpreted as a fascist resurgence.

18. VALENTIN REBOUR, "Les étudiants iraniens en France et en RFA sous le shah, une communauté transnationale (1960-1979)?", in NADER VAHABI (ed.), *Une société civile iranienne en diaspora. Essai sociologique*, Paris, 2020, 57-73.

19. MANJEH MORADIAN, *This Flame Within: Iranian Revolutionaries in the United States*, Durham and London, 2022, 178.

20. JULIA LOVELL, *Maoism: A Global History*, London, 2019, 25-26.

21. DAVID M. JONES & M. L. R. SMITH, *The Strategy of Maoism in the West: Rage and the Radical Left*, Cheltenham, 2022, 178.

associations, such as existed in the United Kingdom and the United States²², have been identified in Belgium. Nor has any social democratic group, or one related to the National Front, although it could be said that these traditions somewhat permeated the CSI (as will be seen). Regarding the Islamic association, its shallow rooting is not surprising in view of the situation in the neighbouring countries. For these reasons, this article will focus on the balance of power between communists and Maoists.

International Solidarities

International solidarities can take various forms.²³ The struggle for human rights, pacifism, development aid and anticolonialism are only a few of them. If the struggle for human rights belongs to a more ancient tradition, most of these movements developed from the late 1960s onward, with the emergence of what came to be referred to as “new social movements”. Due to this newness, but also to epistemological stances, these solidarity movements have only recently received substantial attention: political scientists and sociologists started looking into them in the early 1990s, while historians did not do so until the following decade. They were mostly a product of civil society, although one could argue the existence of solidarities involving states. Scholars have highlighted a major distinction between humanitarian and political solidarities: while the former only seeks to relieve a foreign community’s grievances, the latter intends to tackle their structural causes through advocacy for social changes.²⁴ As will be

made clear, it is assumed in this article that international political solidarities (let alone humanitarian ones) are often tinged with ideological inclinations, at least to a certain extent.

Evidently, the motivations behind these movements have raised many questions. Moral values, emotions or, more recently, political stakes have been put forward. The philanthropic selflessness that can be attributed, at first sight, to international solidarities has been challenged because of their abundance in allegedly individualistic Western societies.²⁵ International solidarity movements involve actors defending the interests of others, thereby making the question of their motives even more central. However, the debate over their alleged altruism has not yet been settled: although a prominent researcher like Charles Tilly identifies authentic cases of altruism²⁶, this very notion has been debated, given the vagueness surrounding the identification of a movement’s members (who is and who is not?).²⁷

In Belgium, historian Kim Christiaens has emphasised the role played by people coming from the targeted countries, whether they are abroad or on site, on international solidarity movements.²⁸ However, all immigrants do not actively campaign for issues in their home countries: as shown by historian Idesbald Goddeeris in the case of Belgian solidarities with *Solidarność*, some of them may adopt a rather passive stance.²⁹ A handful of politically active immigrants thus constitute a major dynamic. Besides, “passive” immigrants can also exercise influence by nurturing feelings among the local population. But once again, the pressure

22. AFSHIN MATIN-ASGARI, *Iranian Student Opposition to the Shah*, 147.

23. Valuable information for this literature review has been found in two collective works, among others: MARCO GIUGNI & FLORENCE PASSY (eds.), *Political Altruism? Solidarity Movements in International Perspective*, Lanham, 2011, 3-25; KIM CHRISTIAENS, JOHN NIEUWENHUYIS & CHAREL ROEMER (eds.), *International Solidarity in the Low Countries during the Twentieth Century: New Perspectives and Themes*, Oldenburg, 2020, 1-23.

24. SIGRID BARINGHORST, *Politik als Kampagne. Zur medialen Erzeugung von Solidarität*, Opladen, 1998.

25. ROBERT WÜTHNOW, *Acts of Compassion: Caring for Others and Helping Ourselves*, Princeton, 1991.

26. CHARLES TILLY, “Do Unto Others”, in MARCO GIUGNI & FLORENCE PASSY (eds.), *Political Altruism?*, 27-50.

27. RUUD KOOPMANS & PAUL STATHAM, “Political Claims Analysis: Integrating Protest Event and Political Discourse Approaches”, *Mobilization*, 4/2, 1999, 203-221.

28. KIM CHRISTIAENS, *Orchestrating Solidarity*, 353-362.

29. IDESBALD GODDEERIS, “Solidarity or Indifference? Polish Migrants in Belgium and *Solidarność*”, in KIM CHRISTIAENS, JOHN NIEUWENHUYIS & CHAREL ROEMER (eds.), *International Solidarity in the Low Countries during the Twentieth Century*, 371-397.

exerted is not proportionate to the number of immigrants; Goddeeris has even suggested that small communities of immigrants could facilitate the expression of solidarity within the local population. The extent of a solidarity movement is therefore not perfectly commensurate with the size of the immigrant community.

The Iranian Opposition Movement Abroad

Active immigrants nonetheless play an important part in triggering international solidarity movements. This criterion will be used to distinguish international solidarities from opposition movements abroad: if an opposition movement manages to mobilise foreign members (who can nevertheless have ties with the targeted country), it becomes an international solidarity movement.

The Iranian case has been studied more as abroad opposition than as international solidarity. This movement formed a significant part of the opposition to the shah's regime, as shown by Matin-Asgari, who further insists on the importance of the above-mentioned Confederation of Iranian Students *National Union* (which later gave birth to the Maoist Confederation of Iranian Students) as the main opposition force.³⁰ As suggested by its name, the original Confederation included several student organisations operating at national levels in the Western Bloc.

Scholars have also attempted to resituate this movement within the Western historiography. In a handbook dedicated to the 1960s, Matin-Asgari has pleaded, along with Manijeh Nasrabadi, for the inclusion of Iranian activism in the global 1968 movements.³¹ More recently, Nasrabadi

(who now publishes under the name of Manijeh Moradian) has written a monograph on the Iranian opposition movements in the United States prior to and during the Iranian Revolution. In a similar dynamic, she situates the Iranian movement within the global anti-imperialist Third-Worldist movement, arguing that “affects of solidarity” have driven Iranians’ mobilisation for other movements, and reciprocally.³²

Most of these works have been written by former or current activists, who do not conceal their backgrounds. As well documented and relevant as their analyses may be, bursts of passion can appear here and there. Recently, younger scholars have begun to address this subject, whether they have Iranian origins or not. Incidentally, these researchers (some of whom are yet American) have also moved away from the United States to look into the Western European situation.³³

As already stated, international solidarities globally belong to the broad category of “new social movements”. During the past decades, theoretical and methodological tools have been developed to study these movements, some of which will be used in this paper. Before delving into the analysis proper, it is necessary to detail these tools.

Social Movements and Their Theoretical Paradigms

In the first half of the twentieth century, the conception of collective actions as purely irrational, which is now rightly decried, focused on spontaneous behaviours such as crowd movements and sometimes demonstrations, but neglected organised social movements. Since then, these movements have been rationalised, perhaps

30. AFSHIN MATIN-ASGARI, *Iranian Student Opposition to the Shah*, 163.

31. MANIJEH NASRABADI & AFSHIN MATIN-ASGARI, “The Iranian Student Movement and the Making of Global 1968”, in CHEN JIAN *et al.* (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of the Global Sixties: Between Protest and Nation Building*, London, 2018, 443-456.

32. MANIJEH MORADIAN, *This Flame Within*.

33. VALENTIN REBOUR, “Les étudiants iraniens en France et en RFA sous le shah”; KEANU HEYDARI, “L’exil politique, les carrières migratoires et l’Union des étudiants iraniens en France. Une étude de cas”, in NADER VAHABI (ed.), *L’exil iranien, diversité d’un phénomène*, Paris, 2023, 69-88.

excessively. This has led economist Mancur Olson to highlight a paradox at the dawn of the appearance of new social movements: if every individual seeks to optimise their interest, why would some get involved in social movements, and thereby increase their costs, when they are bound to enjoy the same profits as if they had not (since everybody benefits from social gains)?³⁴

The main explanation suggested by Olson to solve this paradox pertains to the presence of selective incentives, driven by benefits derived exclusively from participation in the movement, besides collective incentives. These selective incentives can be material, social (relationships with other participants) or moral (the feeling of doing what is right).

Therefore, the actors' involvement depends on their interpretation of the grievances addressed by a movement, of its chances of success and of the benefits they can draw from it (the latter factor being necessarily selective as far as one-way international solidarity movements are concerned). The interpretation operations conditioning one's commitment have been associated with Goffman's concept of framing, coined in a wider context to refer to the operation through which actors give meaning to their experiences.³⁵ In the field of social movements, framing operations occur not only during the actors' involvement, but also afterwards, when discussing the issues to address or the methods to use. Likewise, the movement's protagonists are not the only ones whose framing is at stake; antagonists, media and decision-makers also act according to their interpretations.

Social movements' studies lie within a "bottom-up" approach going beyond the analysis of strictly political institutions to take into account non-

political actors. But political institutions still play a part in these movements, if only by interacting with them. In his study of the black protest movement, sociologist Doug McAdam has proposed a "political process model" (borrowing from Rule and Tilly's³⁶, but with a different content) which makes the development of social movements dependent on large political opportunities and access to established networks of organisations (the latter being, as will be seen, crucial to the present case study). He also stresses the necessity for a "cognitive liberation" process, echoing the above-mentioned framing operation, to trigger the movement.³⁷ In its posterity, the political process model has often been reduced to the first condition identified by McAdam, namely political opportunity structure. Yet, political institutions are not the only ones providing social movements with opportunities and constraints; so do organisational networks, but also the media and law courts.

Within the opportunity structure, social movements mobilise resources to achieve their goals. These resources can be of different types: moral, cultural, human, material or organisational. Likewise, they can be gathered through self-production, by aggregating several individuals' resources or by co-opting those of another organisation, or gained through the patronage of one individual with a strong capital base.³⁸ Among the works that have been grouped together under the "resource mobilisation" label, McCarthy and Zald's entrepreneurial analogy has been particularly popular. In their model, "constituent" organisations provide resources for "adherents", as in the solidarity movement with the Iranian people.³⁹

Besides frame analysis, political opportunity structure and resource mobilisation, a stream of other

34. MANCUR OLSON, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*, Cambridge, 1965.

35. ERVING GOFFMAN, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, New York, 1974.

36. JAMES RULE & CHARLES TILLY, "Political Process in Revolutionary France, 1830-1832", in JOHN M. MERRIMAN (ed.), *1830 in France*, Chicago, 1975, 41-85.

37. DOUG MCADAM, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970*, Chicago, 1982.

38. BOB EDWARDS, JOHN D. MCCARTHY & DANE R. MATAIC, "The Resource Context of Social Movements", in DAVID A. SNOW et al. (eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, 2nd edition, Hoboken, 2019, 79-97.

39. JOHN D. MCCARTHY & MAYER N. ZALD (eds.), *Social Movements in an Organizational Society: Collected Essays*, New Brunswick, 1987.

concepts (that will sometimes be used in the following pages) have been coined to analyse social movements. Unfortunately most of these concepts have become hackneyed through attempts to apply them to an ever-widening range of elements. Political opportunity structure, for example, has come to refer to every contextual dimension influencing social movements, while the concept of resource has become a catch-all referring to any element that is useful to the movement, including incentives. In our opinion, this phenomenon pertains to some scholars' ambition to propose a comprehensive model capable of accounting for all the aspects of social movements. Rejecting this idea, I conceive these concepts as complementary and will use them accordingly.

Sources and Plan

In order to shed light on the network of Belgian solidarity with the Iranian protest movement, archival material will be used, mainly coming from the social movements' archives centre AMSAB-ISG and the ULB, where Iranian opposition associations have left traces. Since one of these was a non-profit organisation, the *ad hoc* appendix to the official journal *Moniteur belge* will also be used. These documents have made it possible to identify some of the associations' members; thanks to this, a few interviews could be conducted, bringing original information, only limited by the witnesses' memories. Finally, the documents to which these sources refer will also be mobilised, newspapers in particular.

Before analysing the different associations' networks, it is necessary to consider their members' motives, as well as the dynamics that led to their commitment (II). Their respective networks will thus be investigated. The committees' Belgian relations will be examined first (III), before those

of the two student associations (IV). Despite their limited presence at a local level, these associations still enjoyed support from an international network, as will be seen. So did the committees, in addition to their Belgian networks (V). Finally, the reasons behind their various levels of success will be brought to light (VI).

II. Dynamics of Mobilisation

In the 1970s, two main associations were created in Belgium in order to support the Iranian protest movement. The CSI was created in 1976, officially by four members: the communist cadre Robert Datchet (1922–1976), the canon François Houtart (1925–2017), a pacifist activist and a socialist trade unionist.⁴⁰ The latter wishes to remain anonymous, therefore he will be named J. B. hereafter. Upon closer inspection, it appears that a fifth person was the committee's kingpin: Mohammad Zahedi. Zahedi was an Iranian communist, who arrived in Belgium in the early 1960s to study engineering and who joined the Iranian communist Tudeh party abroad during his studies. In our view, the four other members' names were given prominence because of their connections, but they were certainly not the most active members.⁴¹ As a matter of fact, Datchet passed away too early to play a significant role in the committee. The CSI was later joined by another socialist trade unionist, namely Jean-Louis Stalport (1950–1997). Although all its members were men, their spouses joined them in some activities.

The VIK, for its part, was active since at least 1976. At some point in 1978, it became a non-profit organisation (while the CSI always remained a *de facto* association).⁴² It comprised five members (one of them a woman), among them two communist cadres and a conscientious objector. One of the communist cadres, Bert Vermeiren (1946–2016),

40. For data protection reasons, some members' names will not be mentioned here.

41. Author's interview with J. B., 29 January 2020.

42. *Recueil des actes concernant les associations sans but lucratif et les établissements d'utilité publique jouissant de la personnalité civile et contenant des actes d'associations d'assurance mutuelle. Annexe au Moniteur belge*, 29 June 1978, no 5150, 2396–2397.

was the committee's president, while the conscientious objector was its treasurer. Both were already mentioned as contact persons in the VIK's publications before it became a non-profit. Either they were the only members of the committee back then or they had a more significant role than the others. Finally, a political cartoonist, Willy Wolsztajn, frequently worked with both committees. He was not, strictly speaking, a member of any of these, but he can be considered a "satellite".

The CSI: From Individual Action...

Before he became the kingpin of the CSI, Zahedi was its instigator. His commitment to the Iranian protest movement is not at all surprising: he shared a common identity with the Iranian people and his connections in Iran provided him with information on the socio-political situation. Altogether, these factors formed catalysts for feelings of discontent. What is more, Zahedi grasped the Iranian situation through the lens of his Marxist persuasion and thereby strongly condemned the shah's regime.

Feelings like discontent, which are responsible for contentious social movements, have long been considered irrational by scholars. This qualification invalidates not only the motives behind such movements, but also the subsequent forms of mobilisation: since the actors are driven by irrational incentives, their action can only be viewed as irrational. Conversely, social movements often show elaborated organisational patterns. Still, feelings cannot be understood as solely rational incentives systematically resulting from a cost-benefit analysis. In cultural theorist Lauren Berlant's words, I thus consider them to be "non-rational", that is, escaping the realm of rationality without being opposed to it.⁴³

Discontent is a necessary but insufficient cause for commitment. Actors only get involved in social movements when they have enough expectations regarding their potential outcomes.⁴⁴ In other words, they only commit when they believe their action can be efficient. These expectations depend on the political opportunity structure, but also on the way actors perceive it.

Of course, the number of actors involved is a parameter that raises one's expectations. Yet, few Iranian immigrants (who have a high commitment potential) were living in Belgium during the 1970s. Matin-Asgari has shown that Iranian students were the main opposition force abroad under the shah⁴⁵, yet according to UNESCO, only 185 were enrolled in higher education in Belgium in 1977.⁴⁶ In order to harness human resources, Zahedi had to appeal to other sociological groups, thereby adopting the methods of the new generation of Iranian opponents abroad. After appealing to fellow Iranian expatriates during the 1950s and the first part of the 1960s, these opponents now appealed to Western citizens, and modified their action repertoires to this end.⁴⁷

Human resources provide indirect access to other kinds of resources, especially when the actors have previously gathered significant capitals (in Bourdieu's broad sense), through former experiences of activism for instance. In this case, as we will see, they provided Zahedi with the material and organisational resources of the structures they were members of.

...to Structured Association

Before appealing to these other "founding members", Zahedi needed to come into contact with

43. LAUREN G. BERLANT, "Unfeeling Kerry", *Theory & Event*, 8/2, 2005, <<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/187843>>, accessed 19 December 2022.

44. WILLIAM A. GAMSON, *Talking Politics*, New York, 1992, 6.

45. AFSHIN MATIN-ASGARI, *Iranian Student Opposition to the Shah*, 163.

46. UNESCO, *Statistical Yearbook 1980*, Paris, 1982, 643.

47. VALENTIN REBOUR, "De la déclamation de poèmes à l'occupation d'ambassade: l'expérience migratoire des étudiants iraniens en exil en France (1950-1979)", *Journal of International Mobility*, 9, 2021, 11-27.

them. He did so through the same organisations that they would then help him to mobilise: for example, J. B. became his legal adviser through the trade union *Fédération générale du travail de Belgique* (FGTB)⁴⁸, and he met Wolsztajn thanks to the Communist Party.⁴⁹ It should be noted that Zahedi had an astonishingly developed social embeddedness in Belgium for an immigrant. He then nurtured interpersonal relationships, some of them eventually turning into friendships which deepened the recruited members' commitment to varying degrees.

Still, the recruited members also had their own agency. If they agreed to take part in this movement, it was because they somehow believed in it; their mobilisation process should not be considered mere psychological manipulation. Once again, their ideological backgrounds fostered their commitment, since they were compelled to be consistent with their values, although they shared little common identity with the Iranian people. In this regard, Zahedi's associates can be regarded as what sociologist Verta Taylor would call activists "in abeyance"⁵⁰. They got involved in the Iranian solidarity movement because they were appealed to, but one could argue that they could have been active in other like-valued movements.

Once the CSI had aggregated enough resources to work, it used them in order to achieve a second goal, that is, a broader yet less dedicated mobilisation. The idea was not so much to seek full members (organisers) anymore, but rather sympathisers who were supposed to help on punctual actions by giving them breadth. Ultimately, these actions aimed at calling upon the Belgian government, and other forms of power such as the media, to put pressure on the Iranian regime. Resorting to foreign governments in order to influence one's own regime is a frequent feature of contentious politics; this is what political scientists Margaret

Keck and Kathryn Sikkink have called the "boomerang pattern"⁵¹.

The VIK

Unfortunately, I were not able to gather as much information about the VIK: few documents are available and no interview could be conducted. Therefore, no attempt will be made to answer the interrogation about how its members were mobilised. Still, hypotheses can be put forward about *why* they committed.

Given their sociological profiles, the moral imperative to be consistent with their values was probably among the VIK's members' incentives to militate for the Iranian protest movement, as they apparently shared little common identity with the Iranian people. Indeed, no link with Iran has been found in any of the biographical information I was able to gather on them. Besides, their goal was similar to that of the CSI: mobilising sympathisers on a large scale to put pressure on the Belgian government. Once again, the VIK's members came from different organisations which acted as potential resources providers.

One feature is striking when looking at the VIK's network of organisations: all of them were closely related to the Flemish branch of the Communist Party. This lack of political plurality raises a suspicion of entryism, a subject that will be discussed later.

Two Student Associations

As will be seen, the CSI and the VIK sometimes collaborated by connecting their networks. But two other Belgian associations supporting the Iranian

48. General Labour Federation of Belgium.

49. Author's interview with Mohammad Zahedi, 2 September 2020.

50. VERTA TAYLOR, "Social Movement Continuity: The Women's Movement in Abeyance", *American Sociological Review*, 54/5, 1989, 761-775.

51. MARGARET KECK & KATHRYN SIKKINK, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*, Ithaca, 1998, 12.

people, that have already been mentioned, were completely disconnected thereof: the Association of Iranian Students in Belgium and the Islamic Association of Iranian Students of Belgium.

Once again, little information is available on these associations. In the light of their names, it can be assumed that both were mainly composed of Iranians. They thus shared a strong common identity with the Iranian people. They also belonged to ideological families that were strongly opposed to the shah's regime, one Maoist (Association of Iranian Students in Belgium) and the other Islamic (Islamic Association of Iranian Students of Belgium). Both equally attempted to mobilise outside the narrow circle of Iranian students, but as will be seen, their success was very limited.

In a nutshell, the CSI was thus created at the initiative of an Iranian communist who approached activists in abeyance to use their resources in order to gather even more supporters. This mobilisation's ultimate goal was to get the Belgian government, as well as other channels such as the media, to put pressure on the Iranian regime. As regards to the VIK, its members were probably once in abeyance too, although the reason for their commitment remains unknown. They also tried to mobilise a large number of people, and their political homogeneity raises the question of the potential entryism hidden behind their movement. Finally, two student associations of respectively Maoist and Islamic allegiances, consisting of Iranian students, tried to rally support with less success.

III. The Committees' Belgian Network

The importance of social movements organisations as resources' providers for nascent social movements has already been insisted on. Having described the motives behind the actors' commit-

ment at both micro- and meso-levels, we must now explore the means through which they were able to work. These means must be sought on their organisational networks' side, as will be shown.

Socialists, Trade Unionists and Catholics

The relation between the CSI and the French-speaking *Parti socialiste de Belgique* (PSB)⁵² was not a tight one (Diagram 1). A member of the former, Stalport, would eventually join the latter, but at the time studied here, he had not done so yet. However, the PSB's organ *Le Peuple* sometimes promoted the CSI's activities, like an international symposium addressing repression in Iran held in Brussels on 6-7 May 1978.⁵³ Organised along with the VIK, this symposium gathered academics as well as activists.

The PSB was not the only socialist institution the CSI interacted with. The socialist trade union FGTB had members in common with the committee, namely Stalport and J. B. The FGTB's newspaper *La Wallonie* also promoted the 67 May 1978 symposium, although in a more succinct fashion.⁵⁴ The links between the CSI and the FGTB partly explain the former's connections with the PSB, since both the trade union and the party belonged to the same political family. In Belgium, components of the three main historical political families (namely Liberals, Socialists and Catholics) have maintained close links between one another. The word "pillars", which refers to them, expresses this closeness.⁵⁵

The CSI also interacted with components of another of these pillars: the Catholics. One member of the committee, the canon Houtart, was a prominent Catholic figure in Belgium. Both a priest and an academic, Houtart taught sociology at the *Université catholique de Louvain* (UCL)⁵⁶

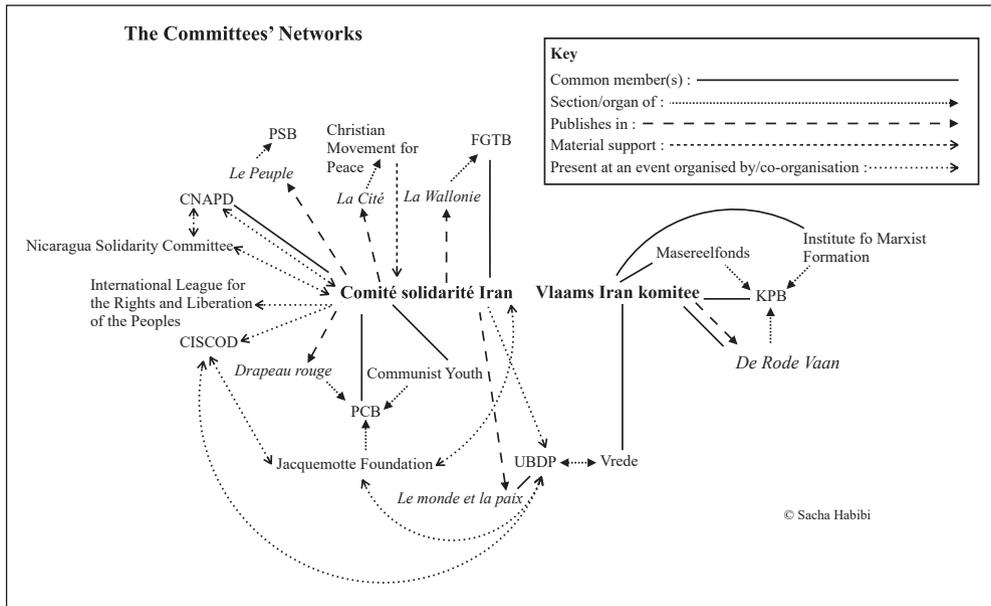
52. Socialist Party of Belgium.

53. *Le Peuple*, 6 May 1978, 4.

54. *La Wallonie*, 9 May 1978, 8.

55. LYNN BRUYÈRE et al. (eds.), *Piliers, déparisation et clivage philosophique en Belgique*, Brussels, 2019.

56. Catholic University of Louvain.



The Committees' Networks.

from 1958 onward. Having travelled a lot, especially in Latin America, he was close to the liberation theology movement which originated in this region. This movement gathered Third World actors who sought to obtain freedom and independence themselves through the Christian doctrine, as well as their supporters.⁵⁷ As an anticapitalist, Houtart was active in solidarity movements with Cuba, Vietnam, Nicaragua and even Sri Lanka.⁵⁸ His interest for non-Christian countries like Iran (albeit a limited one) may seem surprising, but he cherished an ecumenical conception of religion and humanity. At the UCL, he even devoted a course to the Islamic Republic of Iran in the early 1980s.⁵⁹

Even though he was seemingly not the most active member, Houtart's connections were often helpful for the CSI. When the Iranian communist writer Behazin (1915–2006) was arrested in the fall of 1977, the Christian Labour Movement-related newspaper *La Cité* published an article on the subject.⁶⁰ Since *La Cité* did not usually publish content about Iran, it is likely that Houtart interceded. The support of the Christian Movement for Peace even went further as it hosted the committee in its office at the latter's creation. When the CSI appealed for solidarity with Behazin, the Christian Movement for Peace apparently answered actively, as emphasised by the committee itself.⁶¹ Meanwhile, the other main Christian pacifist organisation in Belgium *Pax Christi* did not explicitly appear in the committees' networks. Given that *Pax Christi* was originally created as an alternative to the Christian Movement for Peace's left-wing sympathies, its absence is not that surprising.⁶²

The CNAPD

On 22 September 1978, the CSI organised a demonstration with another organisation called *Comité national d'action pour la paix et le développement* (CNAPD)⁶³, along with a Nicaraguan committee. It was a demonstration of solidarity with the Iranian, Nicaraguan and Chilean peoples. The satellite member of both the CSI and the VIK, Wolsztajn, was also a member of the CNAPD, where he represented the Communist Youth. Created in 1970, the CNAPD was more of a coordination body than a proper organisation. First involved in development cooperation, it also worked for peace-seeking (as suggested by its name) and for democracy on an international scale. It was made up of several political, trade union and Catholic associations struggling for peace, Third World development, anti-racism and human rights. It supported local initiatives that fell within its global values.⁶⁴

The CNAPD is a good example of how entangled new social movements' values can be. Although pacifism and humanitarian aid were merely secondary dynamics as far as Iran was concerned (as will be seen), the CNAPD joined forces with the CSI on the democratic field. As a result, Iran was put forward in a demonstration alongside countries that were more concerned with development cooperation. The CSI also interacted with a smaller development cooperation organisation: the *Cercle d'information et de réflexion sur le service civil et la coopération au développement* (CISCOD)⁶⁵, a student association created in 1968 in the Anthropology Department of

57. CAROLINE SAPPPIA & PAUL SERVAIS (eds.), *Les relations de Louvain avec l'Amérique latine. Entre évangélisation, théologie de la libération et mouvements étudiants*, Louvain-la-Neuve, 2006.

58. CARLOS TABLADA PÉREZ (ed.), *The Decline of Certainties. Founding Struggles Anew: The Biography of François Houtart*, Panama, 2018. This book is made of transcriptions of Tablada Pérez's interviews with Houtart.

59. ARCA, *Archives du CETRI*, no 54.

60. *La Cité*, 28 November 1977, 3.

61. *Le Bulletin d'information du Comité solidarité Iran*, 5, March 1978, 6 (AMSAB-ISG, *Comité solidarité Iran*, PAD/2447).

62. LUC VANDEWEYER, "Katholieke vredesactie in een bedreigd België (1914-1963)", in ROGER BURGGRAEVE, JOHAN DE TAVERNIER & LUC VANDEWEYER (eds.), *Van rechtvaardige oorlog naar rechtvaardige vrede. Katholieken tussen militarisme en pacifisme in historisch-theologisch perspectief*, Leuven, 1993, 143-147.

63. National Action Committee for Peace and Development.

64. PATRICK STOUTHUYSEN, *In de ban van de bom. De politisering van het Belgisch veiligheidsbeleid, 1945-1985*, Brussels, 1992, 80-81.

65. Information and Reflection Circle on Civilian Service and Development Cooperation.

the ULB⁶⁶, organised (in collaboration with two non-student communist organisations) an international solidarity festival to which the CSI was invited on 8-9 September 1977.

Communist Cliques⁶⁷

Although the CSI gathered activists with different left-wing ideological affiliations, it was closer to communist organisations. All of these revolved around the *Parti communiste de Belgique* (PCB)⁶⁸, the French-speaking wing of the Communist Party. As already said, Wolsztajn was both a member of the Communist Youth and a satellite of both committees. The CSI also published articles in the PCB's organ *Le Drapeau rouge*. In fact, this periodical was the main one to cover the committee's activities. A third PCB-related organisation also interacted with the CSI: the Joseph Jacquemotte Foundation. Created in 1961, this foundation was a research and education centre specialised in the history of labour movements.

Similarly, the VIK was deeply rooted in the Dutch-speaking KPB's clique. The difference is that this relation was exclusive, since all the members of the VIK were directly or indirectly related to the KPB. At least two out of the five committee's activists were fully members of the party, including the president Bert Vermeiren.⁶⁹ Vermeiren was

also a member of the *Instituut voor Marxistische vorming* (Institute for Marxist Formation), which was created by the KPB.⁷⁰ The other common member shared by the VIK and the party helped with the distribution of the party's organ *De Rode Vaan*. Finally, the only female activist in the VIK also worked for the *Masereelfonds*, a Flemish association created in 1971 by members of the KPB to emancipate Flemish from Walloon communists from a cultural point of view.⁷¹

These institutions' incentives to support Iran rely on the same values as those of the previous ones. But in the Cold War context, this type of campaign was under suspicion coming from Western political parties with ambiguous stances towards the USSR like the PCB-KPB. Indeed, social movements then were an arena for hidden political agendas, as will be seen when discussing the World Peace Council. Although tendencies that were more sceptical towards Moscow's policy were starting to emerge within the Belgian communist parties (subsumed under the "Eurocommunist" label), their management was still largely faithful to the Soviets (not without exceptions).⁷²

The presence of communists raises the suspicion of entryism, on the VIK's side in particular. As already stated, little evidence is available on the Flemish committee's motives. The fact that its network was limited to communist organisations

66. CHRISTOPHE VERHEYDEN, *De archieven van het Universitair Centrum voor Ontwikkeling en Vrede (UCOV), het Universitair Centrum voor Ontwikkelingssamenwerking (UCOS) en de Internationale Vereniging van de Universitaire dagen van de Vrede (JUP) bewaard in het Universiteitsarchief van de VUB. Studie van de archiefvormers, studie van de archiefvorming, toepassing van PALLAS en inventarisering*, masters thesis, VUB, 2007, 12. The CISCOD is actually an extension of a previous association founded in the 1960s.

67. The word "clique" is here used in its technical sense, without the pejorative connotation that is often associated with it. In a milestone article, sociologist Tom Burns defined cliques as groups sharing "sub-cultural norms", whose members are both willing to be and accepted by their peers. The word "cabal", which refers to power-seeking cliques, is undue in this case (TOM BURNS, "The Reference of Conduct in Small Groups: Cliques and Cabals in Occupational Milieux", *Human Relations*, 8, 1955, 467-486).

68. Communist Party of Belgium.

69. I have not been able to precisely identify all the members of the VIK.

70. *Verklaring en discussiedocument van de Vlaamse Raad van de KP*, 3 September 1991, cited by JAN BUELINCKX, *Radicaal-links in België en de val van de Muur. Hoe overleefden de KP, de SAP en de PVDA de val van het 'reëel bestaande socialisme'?*, masters thesis, UGhent, 2002, note 158.

71. NICO WOUTERS, "Frans Masereelfonds", in *Nieuwe Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging*, <https://nevb.be/wiki/Frans_Masereelfonds>, published on 8 January 2019, accessed 4 April 2022.

72. NICOLAS NAIF, *L'eurocommunisme en Belgique. Crises et débats autour d'une voie belge au socialisme (1954-1982)*, Brussels, 2004, 147-208.

not always openly displaying their links with the KPB strengthens this suspicion. Communist parties were often accused of entryism because this political strategy was rooted in a communist tradition (Trotskyism in particular). But in this case, the “entryism” labelling is unsuitable given that the PCB-KPB did not attempt to infiltrate any organisation.⁷³ Electoral considerations were probably among its motives (especially since the party only held two seats in the Chamber of Representatives – four if counting the Democratic and Progressive Union cartel – and one in the Senate⁷⁴), but even so, this movement cannot be considered purely entryist. Moreover, these electoral considerations might be among the other involved political pillars’ incentives as well.

Between Pacifism, Democracy and Communism

Along with the Jacquemotte Foundation and the CISCOD, the 8–9 September 1977 international solidarity festival was organised by the *Union belge pour la défense de la paix* (UBDP)⁷⁵. One year before that, Zahedi had published a feature on Iran in *Le Monde et la paix*⁷⁶, which turned out to be the UBDP’s periodical. On its side, the VIK shared one member with an organisation called *Vrede* (“Peace” in Dutch).⁷⁷

Both the UBDP and *Vrede* were Belgian sections of an international pacifist organisation, the World Peace Council. Created in 1950, this council had

close ties with the USSR. It was quite dependent on Soviet financing and it supported the USSR’s foreign policy. Still, the World Peace Council included a few anti-Soviet elements, therefore hosting a constant power struggle.⁷⁸ The CSI and VIK’s links with this organisation show once again the importance of their communist roots.

By the mid-1970s, the UBDP and *Vrede* had lost the relative monopoly they once had in the field of pacifism. As a result, they changed their working method and started collaborating more with other organisations.⁷⁹ Yet, *Vrede*’s 1971 creation by its predecessor, the *Belgische unie voor de verdediging van de vrede* (BUVV)⁸⁰, should not be perceived as a strategical or ideological shift; the organisation only needed to create a non-profit association to receive subsidies by the Ministry of Culture.⁸¹

Still in the far-leftist realm, one member of the CSI was also a member of the International Association of Democratic Lawyers. The committee eventually published an article on human rights in Iran in the Association’s Belgian section’s periodical, *Le Journal des juristes démocrates*.⁸² Created after the war, the International Association of Democratic Lawyers also had ambiguous relations with the USSR, although it was theoretically independent. But its Belgian section had started distancing itself from the international organisation as soon as 1949 until it was totally reformed in the mid-1970s. From then on, the Belgian section opened up to political pluralism. However, its political

73. NICOLAS SIGOILLOT, *L’entrisme au sein du Parti travailliste britannique, 1920-1992*, PhD thesis, Burgundy Franche-Comté University, 2022, 28-33.

74. “Les élections législatives du 10 mars 1974”, *Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP*, 638, 1974, 1-36.

75. Belgian Union in Defence of Peace.

76. *Le Monde et la paix*, 7-8, August–September 1978, 4-5.

77. PATRICK STOUTHUYSEN, *In de ban van de bom*, 62-64.

78. GÜNTER WERNICKE, “The Unity of Peace and Socialism? The World Peace Council on a Cold War Tightrope between the Peace Struggle and Intrasystemic Communist Conflicts”, *Peace and Change*, 26/3, 2011, 332-351.

79. JOHN NIEUWENHUYSEN, “Belgium’s Wider Peace Front? Isabelle Blume, the Peace Movement and the Issue of the Middle East (1950s-1970s)”, in KIM CHRISTIAENS, JOHN NIEUWENHUYSEN & CHAREL ROEMER (eds.), *International Solidarity in the Low Countries during the Twentieth Century*, 288.

80. Belgian Union in Defence of Peace.

81. SARAH CLAES, *Vrede zonder rechtvaardigheid is geen vrede: geschiedenis van de BUVV/vzw Vrede, 1949-1994*, master’s thesis, UGhent, 1996, 92.

82. *Le Journal des juristes démocrates*, 11, March-April 1977, 2.

roots did not completely vanish and many later members continued to be far left.⁸³

Both the CSI and the VIK thus had strong communist connections. But the CSI also managed to appeal to non-communist international solidarity organisations. Some of these were even rooted in anti-communist political traditions (like that of the socialists or Catholics). Although international solidarities were not free from national political stakes, especially outside the humanitarian realm, they were not mere products of national political antagonisms either. Some of these organisations were not even directly concerned by the CSI's main values (this will be developed in the next section). In our opinion, interpersonal relationships have contributed to allowing the CSI to transcend communist milieu: Zahedi is often described by his fellow committee members as "a friend"⁸⁴.

Ideological Incentives

One might wonder why all these institutions agreed to help the CSI. At this stage, it can be stated that their common ideological incentives rely on democracy, human rights and self-determination. These values were indeed often invoked by both committees. For democracy and human rights, the reasons were rather clear: the shah had recently established a one-party system and his repressive policy left little room for civil and political rights.⁸⁵

Paradoxically, he had set himself up as the champion of human rights on the international stage. In 1968, Teheran hosted the first UN International Conference on Human Rights. On this occasion, the shah claimed that the laws contained in the cylinder of Cyrus the Great (539 BCE) made the ancient Persian monarch a trailblazer in that field. Today, most scholars agree that these measures cannot be considered "human rights" in the modern sense.⁸⁶

Regarding self-determination, its relevance is due to the influence of the United States in Iran, even though the country never was an actual colony. The CSI even ran a stall at the Peoples' Festival organised by the International League for the Rights and Liberation of the Peoples at Brussels's Congress Centre on 12-13 November 1977. This League was created in 1976 by a foundation led by Italian lawyer and socialist parliamentarian Lelio Basso (1903-1978), who had already been a member of the Bertrand Russell nongovernmental Tribunal on Vietnam and founder of the Russell Tribunal on Latin America.⁸⁷ It promoted the *Universal Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples*, also proclaimed in 1976 during an international conference organised by the Basso Foundation in Algiers (a place meant to symbolise the Conference's non-aligned aspirations). The final text condemned imperialism and the neocolonialism stemming from it, while stressing the peoples' right to self-determination.⁸⁸

83. Study and testimony day on the Belgian Association of Democratic Lawyers from 1973 to 1993, organised on 14 June 2017 at the ULB's Maison des sciences humaines. The video recording is available at the CARCOB.

84. This case is not the only one in which friendship-type relations play an important role: see CHAREL ROEMER, "Connecting People, Generating Concern: Early Belgian Solidarity with the Liberation Struggle in South Africa and the Portuguese Colonies", in KIM CHRISTIAENS, JOHN NIEUWENHUYNS & CHAREL ROEMER (eds.), *International Solidarity in the Low Countries during the Twentieth Century*, 241-274.

85. ALI GHEISSARI & VALI NASR, *Democracy in Iran: History and the Quest for Liberty*, Oxford, 2006, 64. The authors rely on sources arguing that the establishment of the single party *Rastakhiz* (Resurrection) was an attempt to reach out to politically alienated Iranian citizens.

86. The main argument against the "first human rights bill" qualification for Cyrus's Cylinder is the fact that it is freely granted by a monarch, who is thereby not compelled to it (LYNN HUNT, *Inventing Human Rights: A History*, New York, 2007, 115).

87. ROBERTO COLOZZA, "Basso Lelio", in *Le Maitron. Dictionnaire biographique. Mouvement ouvrier, mouvement social*, <<https://maitron.fr/spip.php?article141569>>, originally published on 27 August 2012, last updated on 16 February 2016, accessed 16 May 2022.

88. LELIO AND LISLI BASSO FOUNDATION, *Inventario Serie Conferenza Internazionale di Algeri (1-4 luglio 1976). Dichiarazione Universale dei Diritti dei Popoli*, <https://www.fondazionebasso.it/2015/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/FILB_Algeri_inv_2016.pdf>, published in 2016, accessed 17 May 2022. For a modest overview of the (dated) literature on this declaration, see ANDREW BYRNES & GABRIELLE SIMM (eds.), *Peoples' Tribunals and International Law*, Cambridge, 2017, 43 (note 3).

	1975	1980	1985
Chile	0,708	0,743	0,761
Nicaragua	0,583	0,593	0,601
Iran	0,571	0,578	0,615

Table 1. Human Development Index in Chile, Nicaragua and Iran (1975–1985). Source: United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2007/2008. Fighting Climate Change: Human Solidarity in a Divided World*, New York, 2007, 234-237.

Although it aimed to be inclusive, the League was thus born in leftist milieus.

Other common incentives, however, are absent in this case. For instance, Iran was not directly targeted by pacifist struggles. Although the shah had conducted a few military campaigns during his reign, he was mostly seen as a guarantor of stability in the Gulf region from the Western point of view.⁸⁹ Yet, in Belgium, the pacifist cause has a deep tradition, dating back at least to the end of World War II, and several institutions have been in keeping with this legacy. This heritage even led some scholars to object to its *new* social movement label.⁹⁰ Still, the blooming of new social movements gave pacifism a renewed impetus. Before the 1960s, the movement was heterogeneous, made up of short-lived associations, and it attracted few adherents.⁹¹ The Catholic peace movements, for their part, were encouraged by the 1963 encyclical *Pacem in Terris*.⁹²

If Iran's place in pacifist struggles was relatively insignificant, it was also mostly not the object of substantial humanitarian aid campaigns, at least in Belgium (except for a few minor fundraising activ-

ities that will be mentioned later). The expression "humanitarian aid" has been preferred here to that of "development cooperation", because the latter implies a will to improve a country's long-term self-sufficiency, which is not necessarily the case of the former.⁹³ The expression "development cooperation" will therefore only be used to refer to organisations that carry it out overall (although some of their campaigns merely fall within the scope of humanitarian aid) and to countries that are generally targeted by it.

It would be wrong to believe that Iran was more developed than other countries subject to humanitarian aid campaigns. When comparing their human development index (a zero-to-one scale created by the United Nations Development Programme which takes into account the GDP per capita, life expectancy and education level), Iran was found to be behind Chile and Nicaragua, two countries that were the focus of some humanitarian campaigns at that time⁹⁴, for the period studied here (Table 1). Given the relative scarcity of available data in regard to Vietnam,⁹⁵ this country will not be included in the comparison.

89. MARK J. GASIOROWSKI, *U.S. Foreign Policy and the Shah: Building a Client State in Iran*, Ithaca, 1991.

90. PATRICK STOUTHUYSEN, "Oud en nieuw in één. De vredesbeweging als atypische nieuwe sociale beweging", *Journal of Belgian History*, 34/3, 2004, 399-419.

91. NADINE LUBELSKI-BERNARD, "Les mouvements de la paix en Belgique (1945-1960)", in MAURICE VAIÏSE (ed.), *Le pacifisme en Europe. Des années 1920 aux années 1950*, Brussels, 1993, 373-395.

92. JOHAN DE TAVERNIER, "Van rechtvaardige oorlog naar prudent pacifisme. Het kerkelijke vredesdenken van 1963 tot heden", in ROGER BURGGRAEVE, JOHAN DE TAVERNIER & LUC VANDEWEYER (eds.), *Van rechtvaardige oorlog naar rechtvaardige vrede*, 153-184.

93. HUGO SLIM, "Dissolving the Difference between Humanitarianism and Development: The Mixing of a Rights-Based Solution", *Development in Practice*, 10/3-4, 2000, 491-494. The author here advocates giving up this distinction for practical reasons.

94. KIM CHRISTIAENS, "Belgium: The Chilean Factor and the Changing Dimension of Solidarity Activism", in KIM CHRISTIAENS, IDESBALD GODDEERIS & MAGALY RODRIGUEZ GARCÍA (eds.), *European Solidarity with Chile, 1970s-1980s*, Frankfurt, 2014, 207-237; ID., "Een verdedigingslinie van de revolutie. Nicaraguacómités in België en politieke solidariteit in een transnationaal netwerk (1977-1990)", *Brood & Rozen*, 14/4, 2009, 29-49.

95. KIM CHRISTIAENS, "Die Suche nach wirksamer Solidarität. Der vietnamesische Faktor bei der Mobilisierung gegen den Vietnamkrieg in Belgien in den 1960er- und frühen 1970er-Jahren", *Jahrbuch fuer Forschungen zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung*, 11/2, 2012, 77-101. Other benchmarks could have been chosen, but these are among the most topical cases at the time studied here.



Picture of the CSI at the 12-13 November 1977 Peoples' Festival. Source: Le Bulletin d'information du Comité solidarité Iran, 4, December 1977, 15 (AMSAB-ISG, Comité solidarité Iran, PAD/2447).

The human development index only gives a general idea of a country's development level, and it covers an array of nuances. A closer look suggests that Iran's poor index had little to do with its GDP rate, which was higher than Chili's and Nicaragua's until 1979 (it was only in 1980 that Chili's GDP exceeded that of Iran).⁹⁶ More at issue was its population's life expectancy, which was lower than that of the other two countries.⁹⁷

The data available on the instruction level are too incomplete to proceed to a comparison. The level of education on which the human development index is based lies on two sub-indicators: the literacy and schooling rates. In regard to the former, the official Iranian *Statistical Yearbook* gives, for the year 1976, a global literacy rate of 47.5%.⁹⁸ However, the UNESCO gives a less optimistic assessment for the same year: 36.5%.⁹⁹ The fact that the UNESCO does not take into account the under-15 population may explain this difference; the Pahlavi dynasty had undertaken a school system modernisation policy which sped up in 1963 and the people who were under 15 years old in 1976 were precisely the ones who benefited from this modernisation. It may also be an overestimation by the Iranian government, albeit published under the Islamic Republic era. Either way, the Iranian literacy rate was quite low.

Therefore, one might wonder why few humanitarian aid campaigns focused on Iran. Perhaps it is because Iran's GDP was not that low and poverty issues were rather due to unequal distribution than

to a lack of income. Another hypothesis is that the Belgian civil society did not feel the need to help this country because Iran's development was already supported by national states, the United States in particular. The US-supported modernisation policy was still underway in Iran in the 1970s. But the reasons for the small number of humanitarian campaigns must also be partly contingent.

Still, some development cooperation organisations supported the committees in their political action, just as pacifist organisations did. This shows how, in the 1970s, these causes were entangled with principles of democracy, human rights and self-determination. From the committees' point of view, these values provided moral resources justifying their action. Yet, it should not be assumed that the committees merely instrumentalised these values; their members may have genuinely believed in them.

In short, the committees (the CSI in particular) enjoyed the support of organisations belonging to different progressive political families: communists, socialists and progressive Catholics.¹⁰⁰ They could also rely on heterogeneous organisations like the CNAPD. If the moral incentives behind these organisations' help to the committees mainly included democracy, human rights and self-determination, the committees were not the only ones to invoke these principles: the ULB student associations also did. Yet, as will be seen, these associations' Belgian networks were much more limited.

96. "GDP per capita in Chile, Nicaragua and Iran in current US \$ (1975-1985)", *World Bank Website*, <<https://data.worldbank.org/>>, accessed 23 March 2022. The data used here come from the World Bank's and the OECD's national accounts.

97. "Life expectancy at birth in years in Chile, Nicaragua and Iran (1975-1985)", *World Bank Website*, <<https://data.worldbank.org/>>, accessed 23 March 2022. The data used here come from the UN Population Division and national statistical offices.

98. *Sāl-nāma 1371 [Yearbook 1992-1993]*, 122, cited by AHMAD ASHRAF, "Education VII. General Survey of Modern Education", in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, <<https://iranicaonline.org/articles/education-vii-general-survey-of-modern-education>>, originally published in 1997, last updated in 2011, accessed 24 March 2022.

99. UNESCO'S INSTITUTE FOR STATISTICS, "Iran's Literacy rate among the population aged 15 years and older", <<http://uis.unesco.org/en/country/ir?theme=education-and-literacy>>, accessed 24 March 2022.

100. In the Belgian context, historian Jean-Louis Jadouille advocates using the expression "progressive Catholics" instead of "Christian democrats", in order to distinguish them from their French counterparts, whose history and claims are different (JEAN-LOUIS JADUILLE, *Chrétiens modernes ? L'engagement des intellectuels catholiques "progressistes" belges de 1945 à 1958 à travers La Revue nouvelle, La Relève et l'édition belge de Témoinage chrétien*, Louvain-la-Neuve, 2003, 301-302).

IV. The Student Associations

At the ULB, the Association of Iranian Students in Belgium was active during the Revolution. It was the Belgian section of a worldwide organisation, the Confederation of Iranian Students. Also active at the ULB was the Islamic Association of Iranian Students of Belgium, the Belgian section of the Islamic Students' Association. Unlike the committee (with which they maintained either conflicting or nonexistent relations), these associations struggled to establish roots in Belgium.

A Maoist Student Association

Created in Europe in 1960, the Confederation of Iranian Students was an independent student organisation. Soon, it opened up to Iranian students in North America, changing its name to Confederation of Iranian Students *National Union*. Despite being based abroad, it was nevertheless very active, organising demonstrations whenever the shah visited a Western country. As said earlier, it gradually became more left-wing, until it was disbanded in the mid-1970s. A number of smaller organisations then rose from the ashes of the Confederation, including a group that used the original name of the Confederation, without the "National Union" epithet. This new Confederation of Iranian Students was a Maoist group called the "Revolutionary Organization" during the National Union years.¹⁰¹

Back then, the Confederation was already established at the ULB (at least since 1974). After the general dissolution, it was no longer active there, but the Association of Iranian Students in Belgium

started to be. This association claimed to be part of the Confederation of Iranian Students, probably the new Maoist organisation discussed above. Its Maoist allegiance was confirmed when reading its archives: while using a Marxist rhetoric, the Association strongly condemned Soviet imperialism, preaching "the need for a united struggle of the Iranian people against reaction and imperialism, against the two super-powers in particular¹⁰²". Among its activities, it promoted two fundraising campaigns launched by the Confederation. The first one was in favour of Iranian political prisoners. It was held at the end of November 1977, the month which was traditionally dedicated to them.¹⁰³ The second one was for the victims of an earthquake that occurred in September 1978, in the midst of the Revolution.¹⁰⁴ These campaigns are the only two humanitarian initiatives that have been identified.

The Association of Iranian Students in Belgium interacted with the CSI. Or rather, it interacted with the Belgian section of the Organization of Democratic Youth and Students of Iran (ODYSI), which will be discussed later. The reason why the CSI and the Belgian section of the ODYSI were mingled was that the former's kingpin, Zahedi, was also the latter's representative.¹⁰⁵ Yet, the CSI cannot be regarded as the successor of ODYSI, since the latter's activity continued after the CSI's creation. It bears mentioning that the relation between the Association and the ODYSI section was very hostile.

At the beginning of the year 1978, a fight broke out on the ULB campus between the two groups. According to the ODYSI section, the Maoist association attacked a stall where the former had dis-

101. AFSHIN MATIN-ASGARI, *Iranian Student Opposition to the Shah*, 50-61. The Revolutionary Organization was initially created within the pro-Soviet Tudeh party, but at the time discussed here, it claimed to be Maoist.

102. "La nécessité d'un combat unifié du peuple iranien contre la réaction et l'impérialisme, particulièrement les deux super-puissances." *Iran Information* (Organ of the Association of Iranian Students in Belgium), 1, January 1977, 2 (AMSAB-ISG, *Confédération des étudiants iraniens (union nationale)*, PAD/5710).

103. Call for donations in favour of Iranian political prisoners, 1 December 1977 (ULB, *Association of Iranian Students in Belgium*, 19SS/CE).

104. Call for donations in favour of Iranian disaster victims, 27 September 1978 (ULB, *Association of Iranian Students in Belgium*, 19SS/CE).

105. Author's interview with Mohammad Zahedi, 2 September 2020.

played some of their publications.¹⁰⁶ The Maoists denied the accusation, claiming that they had only asked the ODYSI to leave, whereupon the latter had assaulted them.¹⁰⁷ The interesting point here is that, following this incident, both associations called for the university community's support, but the ODYSI apparently received the most, the CISCOD, Communist Youth and a stream of immigrant associations (Tunisian, Turkish, Rwandan, Moroccan, Senegalese and Algerian) expressing their sympathy towards them.

Indeed, the Association seems to have touched a lesser audience. Outside the ULB, there are few traces of its activities, except for an issue of its organ kept at the AMSAB-ISG. Even within the university, these traces are not overabundant. Its lack of resonance cannot be attributed to a voluntary sectarianism, given the Association's multiple appeals to other ideological groups. In 1976, a project of reunification of the Confederation of Iranian Students National Union, which would ultimately be aborted, came into being. On this occasion, its provisional committee called for support, a call that was relayed by the Association as reaching out to "all the *progressives* to unite in this month's actions in the defence of political prisoners¹⁰⁸". As we will see, this rhetorical strategy was similar to that of the CSI. Their discourse partly pertains to the Confederation's momentary quest for convergence, but it is also in line with the Association's long-term strategy.

In our view, the Association's lack of resonance is rather due to its superficial embeddedness in the Belgian society. Despite the material support of

its international organisation, it was not able to find enough resonance in Belgium. It did interact with the Maoist party AMADA (*Alle macht aan de arbeiders*¹⁰⁹), one of the most important Maoist organisations of that time, or *Internationale Solidariteit* (the organ of the Anti-imperialist League, an offshoot of AMADA)¹¹⁰, both printing its publications, but it remained a mere student circle all along. It must be reminded that, in the second half of the 1970s, the enthusiasm towards Maoist ideas was fading, because of the Chinese Cultural Revolution's impact among other factors. But most importantly, Maoists were not included in the experiments involving the gathering of progressives that were ongoing across Belgium.

An Islamic Student Association

Besides this Maoist association, an Islamic Association of Iranian Students of Belgium was also operating at the ULB during the Revolution. The first traces of its activities date back to the Qom riots of January 8, 1978, which, according to most scholars, mark the beginning of the Iranian Revolution. This Islamic association was also the Belgian section of another worldwide organisation, the Islamic Students' Association.

The first section of the Islamic Students' Association was created in 1942 at the University of Teheran. Its foundation was a reaction to the alleged anti-Islamic propaganda conveyed by the Tudeh party and the Baha'is (a religious group that had been persecuted in Iran since the reign of the shah's father) among student milieux. It then spread to other Iranian cities like Mashhad, Shiraz

106. *Censure à l'ULB*, pamphlet, 18 January 1978 (ULB, *Organisation de la jeunesse et des étudiants démocrates iraniens (ODYSI)*, 21SS/CE).

107. 8 December 1977 Communiqué (ULB, *Association of Iranian Students in Belgium*, 19SS/CE).

108. "Tous les progressistes à s'unir dans les actions de ce mois pour la défense des prisonniers politiques."

Call by the Provisional Commission of Federations and Groups Organizing the 17th Congress of the Confederation of Iranian Students to take part in the Iranian political prisoners' month, 22 November 1976 (ULB, *Association of Iranian Students in Belgium*, 19SS/CE). Author's italics.

109. All Power to the Workers.

110. PASCAL DELWIT, *PTB. Nouvelle gauche, vieille recette*, Brussels, 2014, 120-126. The author's scepticism towards the Maoist party must be taken into account.

or Tabriz. At the end of the 1950s, it extended abroad, where it became more politicised.¹¹¹

Unlike its Maoist counterpart, the Islamic Association of Iranian Students of Belgium did not interact with the CSI. In fact, it seems to have been unable to establish any connections with the Belgian civil society, in spite of its international organisation's material support. Yet, this Association also called to "Belgian and foreign *progressives* and democrats to bring their support to the Iranian people's legitimate struggle against the shah's fascist policy¹¹²". Its shallow rooting should be examined in the light of the configuration of the Muslim community network at that time. Islam was not officially recognised in Belgium until 1974 and Muslim immigrants had little opportunities to organise themselves before the 1980s, especially in Brussels.¹¹³ This was even truer for the Shi'a Iranian diaspora, considering its limited extent in Belgium. Given the ethnic and religious differences within the Belgian Muslim immigrant community, this small Iranian religious association found it difficult to find mediators.

Both student associations thus also tried to reach Belgian progressives, but with very little success, which is linked to the poor embeddedness of their political families in Belgium. In view of the neighbouring countries' situation, this fact is not very surprising regarding the Islamic opposition, but much more so regarding the Maoists. In Belgium, the latter still got support from AMADA, but not enough to be considered truly rooted. Indeed, neither Maoists nor Islamists were included in the ongoing gathering of progressives' experiments then.

V. The Committees' International Network

As seen with both the Maoist and the Islamic associations, international connections are not enough for an association to be fully established on a national scale. Nevertheless, they still provided invaluable resources for them, helping these associations to broaden their scope as well as their action repertoires. Beyond their Belgian network(s), the CSI and the VIK also enjoyed international connections.

Iranian Committees Abroad

Besides the CSI and the VIK, the already mentioned 6-7 May 1978 symposium addressing repression in Iran was organised by a few non-Belgian associations supporting the Iranian people, mainly French, West German and British. Later in the organising process, an Italian committee joined in as well. Overall, this planning took nearly a year, from the first meeting in Paris in June 1977, through a meeting held in Bonn in October 1977, to the final one in Brussels at the beginning of the year 1978. According to the CSI, the different committees worked together in a non-hierarchical fashion.¹¹⁴ Language seems to have been no obstacle here, probably thanks to the presence of Persian-speaking members among each committee.

As one could expect, the CSI was very close to a French counterpart, the *Association française d'amitié et de solidarité avec le peuple d'Iran* (French Association of Friendship and Solidarity

111. HAMID ALGAR, "Anjoman (Organization) II. Religious", in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, <<https://iranicaonline.org/articles/anjoman-gathering-association-society-general-designation-of-many-private-and-public-associations#pt2>>, originally published in 1985, last updated in 2011, accessed 11 March 2022.

112. "[...] *les progressistes et les démocrates belges et étrangers à apporter leur soutien à la juste lutte du peuple iranien contre la dictature et la politique fasciste du Chah.*" Communiqué by the Islamic Association of Iranian Students of Belgium, 21 February 1978 (ULB, *Islamic Association of Iranian Students in Belgium*, 20SS/CE). Author's italics.

113. CORINNE TORREKENS, *Islams de Belgique. Enjeux et perspectives*, Brussels, 2020, 62–63.

114. *Le Bulletin d'information du Comité solidarité Iran*, 3, September 1977, 10.

with the People of Iran). This association's bulletin could be purchased from the CSI, which eventually relayed one of its articles on a trade agreement concluded between Iran and the United States, that these two organisations considered unfair.¹¹⁵ The French association's secretary general, Moroccan-born international lawyer and human rights activist Nuri Albala (1943–2009), also gave lectures at different symposia organised by the CSI. Albala's communist leanings brought him closer to the committee.¹¹⁶

Still in the French-speaking world, the CSI often referred to the *Comité suisse de défense des prisonniers politiques iraniens* (Swiss Committee in Defence of Iranian Political Prisoners). In May 1977, the CSI relayed the Swiss committee's campaign against the blackmailing of Kazem Rajavi (1934–1990), an Iranian immigrant in Switzerland whose brother had been jailed in Iran. Rajavi's brother was a member of the People's Mujaheddin, a guerrilla organisation drawing on both Islamic and Marxist traditions.¹¹⁷ According to the CSI, the Iranian regime ordered Kazem Rajavi "to prostrate himself [...] before the shah"¹¹⁸.

The Swiss committee seems to have been close to several opposition organisations revolving around the Iranian National Front, a democratic and nationalist group created in 1949 by Dr Mossadegh's circle. These organisations include the Liberation Movement of Iran or the Iranian Committee in Defence of Freedom and Human Rights.¹¹⁹ After Mossadegh's overthrow in 1953, several like-minded intellectuals had created a second National Front in the early 1960s. At the same time, its religious wing also created the Liberation Movement of Iran. The Committee in Defence of

Freedom and Human Rights then issued from the same circles. Following a clash with the secular elements, the religious branch seceded and created a third Front in 1965, which is the one examined here.¹²⁰ The Swiss committee's proximity with both the Liberation Movement and a Mujaheddin prisoner may seem surprising, but it must be stated that the Mujaheddin's organisation was originally created within the Liberation Movement. In its contacts with the Swiss committee, the CSI thus relayed the activities of an association that was close to another political family, advocating for a political prisoner of a rival political allegiance.

At the time focused on here, West Germany was Iranian students' second favourite destination, after the United States.¹²¹ Therefore, it is not surprising that many Iranian opposition organisations blossomed in the Federal Republic. The CSI was in contact with several of them. At Belgium's northern border, neither the CSI nor the VIK had any Dutch contact. The CSI only mentions a group of parliamentarians involved with Iran in the Netherlands. This did not prevent the CSI from collaborating with Amnesty International's Dutch section, which was in charge of Amnesty's activities in Flanders for a long time, before the creation of a local section.¹²²

Behind the United States and West Germany, the United Kingdom was Iranian students' third favourite destination. Of course, the Belgian committees worked with British Iranian associations too, most notably with the Committee Against Repression in Iran, founded by students with connections with the Labour Party and the British trade union movement.¹²³ The Worldwide Association of Iranian Political Prisoners and Mar-

115. *Le Bulletin d'information du Comité solidarité Iran*, 2, May 1977, 8.

116. Several contemporary sources identify him as a member of the French Communist Party, like *Est & Ouest. Bulletin mensuel d'études et d'informations politiques internationales*, 630, 1979, 186.

117. MAZIAR BEHROOZ, *Rebels with a Cause: The Failure of the Left in Iran*, London and New York, 1999, 70-73.

118. "De se prosterner [...] devant le Chah". *Le Bulletin d'information du Comité solidarité Iran*, 2, May 1977, 8.

119. Comité suisse de défense des prisonniers politiques iraniens, *Voyage au pays de la peur: Iran 1978*, pamphlet.

120. ERVAND ABRAHAMIAN, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, Princeton, 1983, 460-461.

121. AFSHIN MATIN-ASGARI, *Iranian Student Opposition*, 131.

122. JESSICA LANGOUCHE, "Het archief van Amnesty International Vlaanderen", *Brood & Rozen*, 16/4, 2011, 76-83.

123. ERVAND ABRAHAMIAN, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, 499.

tyrs' Families, which was based in England and whose creation was saluted by the CSI, appears to have been less political. Finally, a group of parliamentarians also addressed the Iranian issue in the United Kingdom. This group was probably once again the Labour Party, which sustained relations with the Iranian opposition.¹²⁴

The above-mentioned associations were generally based in northwest Europe, but the Belgian committees also collaborated with one southwest association, namely the Italian *Comitato unitario per la democrazia in Iran* (United Committee for Democracy in Iran). Created in 1975, this association recruited both Iranian immigrants and Italian citizens, from different political families, much like the CSI.¹²⁵ It came into contact with the other committees later on, in the spring of 1978, probably because its creation was more recent. Before that, the CSI had mentioned the existence of a temporary committee in Italy, but had not yet collaborated with it.¹²⁶

On an international scale, the CSI thus collaborated with various left-wing groups. Yet, one major opposition organisation was seemingly absent from its international network, at least as far as direct contacts were concerned: the Confederation of Iranian Students appears to have shared no contact with the CSI. As already seen, the ODYSI had a confrontation with the Confederation's local section at the ULB in 1978, which shows the competition between both ideological traditions.

The ODYSI

As mentioned earlier, apart from being the CSI's kingpin, Zahedi was also the ODYSI's representative in Belgium. This explains the CSI's collab-

oration with this organisation, which was also involved in the 22 September 1978 demonstration of solidarity with the Iranian, Nicaraguan and Chilean peoples. But the CSI was not the only Belgian association to work with the organisation; the VIK also collaborated to a few cartoons ordered to Wolsztajn by the ODYSI (see illustrations 5 and 6).

The ODYSI was the Tudeh's student organisation. It was created in 1974, when the Tudeh faction seceded from the Confederation of Iranian Students National Union, which the Maoist elements had taken control of. It was thus in conflict with the latter, and with its fellow Maoist-led successors: the ODYSI regularly criticised the Confederation of Iranian Students through its organ *Arman*. The ULB campus fight shows how far this rivalry went, even on a local scale. Interestingly, the ODYSI did not only claim its Tudeh tradition, but also the Iranian National Front's: indeed, the CSI once described Mossadegh as a "great patriot"¹²⁷, and J. B. further states that Zahedi often referred to his political project.¹²⁸ This shows that Zahedi was not unsympathetic to the values of the Iranian "third way", which drew on both Marxist and Mossadeghist traditions. However, he was nonetheless affiliated to the Tudeh party.

Amnesty International

Still outside the Belgian borders, both the CSI and the VIK collaborated with a less political organisation, namely Amnesty International. Firstly, one of the CSI's members – probably Zahedi – gave a talk at a congress on political prisoners and human rights in Iran, organised by the Dutch section of Amnesty in Amsterdam on 18-19 February 1977. Then, the VIK relayed an Iranian political prisoners' adoption campaign, initiated by Amnesty

124. AFSHIN MATIN-ASGARI, *Iranian Student Opposition*, 154.

125. DANIELA SARESELLA, "Studenti e rifugiati: i giovani iraniani nell'Italia del secondo dopoguerra", *Mediterranea - ricerche storiche*, 54, 2022, 119-120.

126. *Le Bulletin d'information du Comité solidarité Iran*, 1, February 1977, 6.

127. *Le Bulletin d'information du Comité solidarité Iran*, 7, September 1978, 5.

128. Author's interview with J. B., 29 January 2020.



Poster representing the 'Fight for the National Liberation of Iran' as a board game, drawn by Willy Wolsztajn for the VIK, with the cooperation of the ODYSI in 1977. Source: AMSAB-ISC, Ghent.

International.¹²⁹ The idea behind this type of campaign, which Amnesty was accustomed to, was for Western citizens to choose a political prisoner whom they advocated for, writing numerous letters to the Iranian embassy.

Created in 1961, Amnesty International is a worldwide organisation fighting for the liberation of political prisoners. In the 1970s, it started denouncing torture and death penalty too. At this point, Amnesty was a mass organisation, with 500,000 members coming from 160 countries in 1977.¹³⁰ The same year, it received the Nobel Peace Prize. As international as Amnesty aimed to be, it was still largely concentrated in the West: out of the 2305 local groups that the organisation had in 1979, 2268 were located in the Western Bloc.¹³¹ Nevertheless, Amnesty was deeply attached to its political neutrality. It enjoyed an extensive international influence (up to the UN¹³²), which benefited the smaller associations working with it, like the ones discussed here.

Amnesty provided both committees with moral resources, most notably legitimacy, especially after it received the Nobel Peace Prize on 10 October 1977. In order to transcend political divisions, the committees' tactic went beyond summoning consensual values like the ones previously listed: they also co-opted an institution that had managed to gather universal moral legitimacy, hoping that it would reflect on them.

Both the CSI and the VIK collaborated with foreign associations supporting the Iranian protest movement. Most of these associations had similar political leanings, whether they had communist sympathies or they brought together local progressives (like the Italian committee). Paradoxically, this configuration sometimes led the Belgian committees to maintain contacts (albeit indirect ones) with

other opposition groups like the National Front or the People's Mujaheddin (through the Swiss committee). But the ODYSI's relations with these groups were not purely opposing: as already said, it sometimes summoned Mossadegh's legacy as its own. More conflicting was the organisation's relation with the Maoist Confederation of Iranian Students, which explains their lack of connections (even indirect ones). Finally, both the CSI and the VIK also had relations with the politically neutral association Amnesty, which granted them legitimacy.

VI. The Belgian Social Movement Sector

Now that the networks of the committees and the student associations have been described, both at national and international levels, the reasons behind their various degrees of success can be developed. As already said, these reasons are to be sought in the Belgian socio-political context.

The Gathering of Progressives

Many European countries have known moments of convergence between their left-wing parties. In Belgium, this political pattern was known as the "gathering of progressives". Two main periods have seen experiments falling within this concept: starting from the end of World War II, the first one ran out of steam with the emergence of divisive debates like the Royal Question or the School Pact of 1958. The gathering of progressives was then revived by the call made by the president of the Socialist Party, Leo Collard, in 1969. Although it quickly faced reluctance, the Democratic and Progressive Union cartel's survival bears witness to the persistence of the idea at least until the second half of the 1970s, not to mention occasional common trade union fronts.¹³³

129. *Iran Infoblad. Tijdschrift van het Vlaams Irancomitee*, 2, 1978, 16-19 (AMSAB-ISG, *Vlaams Iran komitee*, PAD/10.499).

130. JOACHIM J. SAVELSBERG, *Representing Mass Violence: Conflicting Responses to Human Rights Violations in Darfur*, Berkeley, 2015, 64.

131. STEPHEN HOPGOOD, *Keepers of the Flame: Understanding Amnesty International*, Ithaca, 2006, 171.

132. AMÉLIE VERFAILLIE, *Breaker of Chains, Diplomat of Change? Amnesty International's Advocacy for Human Rights at the United Nations (1961-mid-80s)*, PhD thesis, Ghent University, 2019.

133. MARIE-THÉRÈSE COENEN & SERGE GOVAERT (eds.), *Le Rassemblement des progressistes. 1944-1976*, Brussels, 1999.

It is striking how the CSI's composition reflects the political institutions' reception of the call to progressives. The latter was originally addressed to progressive Catholics, but quickly found an echo in communist circles, which even took over the idea, while the Walloon left-wing Catholics were torn between the defence of workers and the defence of the Church. Socialists, for their part, massively supported the idea, but were divided regarding its materialisation. Similarly, the CSI largely involved communists and socialists (including trade unionists), while progressive Catholics were timidly present. The Liberals were completely absent, whether because they did not agree to join the CSI, or because they were not approached. When addressing the CSI's composition, J. B. indeed ironically states that "there was a mix of Communists, Socialists... I'll stop there, there were no Liberals¹³⁴."

On the Flemish side, the call to progressives had a weaker impact on left-wing Catholics, who turned a deaf ear to this appeal. This partly explains the VIK's struggle to mobilise support outside communist milieux. The FGVB's Flemish counterpart, the *Algemeen Belgisch vakverbond* (ABVV)¹³⁵, for its part, shared no member with any of the committees. Yet, the ABVV had taken part in several international solidarity movements in the previous years, sometimes even forming alliances with communists.¹³⁶ This shows that the call to progressives did not totally determine the Iranian movement's composition; it rather generated a climate that shaped its opportunities.

It would be hasty to state that the CSI was consciously built in the spirit of the gathering of progressives. Still, it benefited from the above-men-

tioned climate. Alliances between progressive forces was a frequent feature in solidarity movements, but this one's configuration puts it in line with Collard's appeal. A more ancient solidarity movement with the Middle East, namely the solidarity movement with the Palestinian people, also saw Catholics enter the stage at that time. Historian John Nieuwenhuys argues that their involvement was due to the Second Vatican Council, which triggered Catholic activism in Belgium.¹³⁷ Still, the Council's spirit (which echoed the encyclical *Pacem in Terris*) found a convincing materialisation in the Catholic involvement in the gathering of progressives. One could argue that Maoists and Trotskyists were also active towards the Palestinian people, but they had been so before the gathering of progressives came back to the fore in the early 1970s.

It is not sure either that Zahedi did not knowingly attempt to take advantage of this climate. Originally, the CSI appealed to "all the *progressive* organisations and all the Belgians enamoured of peace and freedom, regardless of their political or religious tendency¹³⁸". In the following numbers of the CSI's bulletin, similar calls were often made, sometimes substituting the word "progressives" for "democrats".

A Toughened Network

In order to work, the committees thus relied on uneven networks of organisations, whose receptiveness was enhanced by Collard's call to progressives. In the meantime, these organisations' interest in international solidarities had developed, just like their cooperation in that field. Even

134. "Il y avait à la fois des communistes, des socialistes... Je m'arrêterai là, il n'y avait pas de libéraux." Author's interview with J. B., 29 January 2020.

135. General Belgian Trade Union.

136. KIM CHRISTIAENS, *Orchestrating Solidarity*, 199.

137. JOHN NIEUWENHUYNS, *Belgitude après la "Nakba"*. *Une histoire des mouvements belges de solidarité avec le peuple palestinien (1948–1982)*, PhD thesis, ULB, 2021, 422.

138. "Toutes les organisations progressistes et tous les Belges épris de paix et de liberté, et indépendamment de leur tendance politique ou religieuse". *Le Bulletin d'information du Comité solidarité Iran*, 1, February 1977, 3 (author's italics). To be precise, this appeal was first made by the CSI's forerunner – the ODYSI, that will be discussed hereafter –, but was then taken up by the CSI.

the FGTB, whose pacifist commitment had laboriously emerged in the course of the Cold War's first decades, started committing to international solidarities in the 1970s.¹³⁹ But the best illustration of this evolution lies in the CNAPD.

The CNAPD's support to the CSI was a one-shot, but two of its constituent associations, the Christian Movement for Peace and the UBDP/*Vrede*, helped the Iranian committee too. Their participation in the CNAPD was indicative of their increasing consideration for international solidarities, just like the creation of the CISCOD shows how students were increasingly active in this field. At the time of its collaboration with the CSI, the CNAPD has already gained some legitimacy through previous campaigns, as its former president Pierre Galand argues:

“During the following years [after the 1970 creation of the CNAPD] demonstrations of solidarity with struggling peoples in Latin America, in Southern Africa, in Vietnam, the denouncing of arms trade, of racism, the struggle for a right to organise in the army, for a status for emigrants, for conscientious objection, the struggle against professional army and arms expenditure, allow the CNAPD to assert its capacity for mobilisation and to further the deepening of the discussion between progressive organisations.”¹⁴⁰

Galand suggests here that the CNAPD itself was an initiative taken in the spirit of the gathering of progressives, an analysis that also appears under other pens.¹⁴¹

Elsewhere in the West

These observations lead to interrogations about the situation in neighbouring countries. Without claiming to cover the entire situation, I will present a number of observations here. France had also known moments of convergence between its left-wing forces, most notably the 1936 Popular Front, but in the second half of the 1970s, the relation between the Socialist and Communist parties was rather centrifugal. After 1974, the Communists indeed began to fear the Socialist Party's electoral success, which was disrupting the balance of power. Additionally, they looked unfavourably on Mitterrand's Atlanticist leanings. Despite the Socialists' endeavours, this situation eventually led to a breakdown.¹⁴²

As regards the French Maoists, they were going through a crisis in the second half of the 1970s¹⁴³, but despite AMADA's relative electoral success in 1977, the Maoists could rely on stronger organisational structures in France than in Belgium¹⁴⁴ (like the publication *L'Humanité rouge*, which provided much support to Iranian Maoists in Strasbourg¹⁴⁵). This situation explains, at least partly, why the relation between Iranian communists and Maoists was more balanced in France than in Belgium.

West Germany had an even more rooted Maoist tradition, and in the 1970s, at least 100,000 West-Germans were involved in the so-named “K-groups”, most of which claimed to be Maoist.¹⁴⁶ The Chinese Cultural Revolution indeed

139. LUDO BETTENS, “Le combat pour la paix, un combat syndical? Les relations contrastées entre le mouvement pacifiste et le syndicat socialiste”, *Analyse de l'IHOES*, 174, 2017, 1-12.

140. “Au cours des années suivantes les manifestations de solidarité avec les peuples en lutte en Amérique latine, en Afrique australe, au Viêt Nam, les dénonciations du commerce des armes, du racisme, la lutte en faveur d'un droit syndical à l'armée, d'un statut des émigrés, de l'objection de conscience, la lutte contre l'armée de métier et les dépenses d'armements, permettent au CNAPD d'affirmer sa capacité de mobilisation et favorisent l'approfondissement du débat entre organisations progressistes.” PIERRE GALAND, “Le CNAPD – Belgique”, *International Review of Community Development*, 52, 1984, 174.

141. KIM CHRISTIAENS, *Orchestrating Solidarity*, 133.

142. ALAIN BERGOUNIOUX & GÉRARD GRUNBERG, “L'Union de la gauche et l'ère Mitterrand (1965-1995)”, in JEAN-JACQUES BECKER & GILLES CANDAR (eds.), *Histoire des gauches en France*, vol. 2, Paris, 2004, 280-285.

143. FRANÇOIS HOURMANT, *Années Mao en France. Avant, pendant et après mai 68*, Paris, 2018, 241-252.

144. ROBERT J. ALEXANDER, *Maoism in the Developed World*, Westport, 2001, 59-64; 67-78.

145. VALENTIN REBOUR, “Les étudiants iraniens en France et en RFA sous le shah”, 67.

146. ANDREAS KÜHN, *Stalins Enkel, Maos Söhne. Die Lebenswelt der K-Gruppen in der Bundesrepublik der 70er Jahre*, Frankfurt, 2005, 287.

provided an alternative model for far leftists, many of whom gave up the idea of seizing state power to focus on transforming mentalities.¹⁴⁷ Before its split, the Confederation of Iranian Students National Union had been close to these groups¹⁴⁸ and it is likely that its Maoist successors also relied on local structures.

As for the United States, the appeal of Maoism as an alternative among radical leftists can be partly explained by the relatively dominant anti-communist sentiment against the USSR. Maoist Iranians thus found more resonance in this country. In her study of the Iranian opposition in the United States, Moradian has highlighted a series of convergence points between the Iranian Twelver Shi'a and the Maoist traditions, which probably broadened the Iranian appeal for this ideology on a global scale. According to her, the Shi'a cult of self-sacrifice met that of Maoism. Both traditions were similarly vehement in their criticism of Western cultural imperialism.¹⁴⁹

VII. Conclusion

This article was prompted by the observation that all the Belgian organisations supporting the Iranian people had not met the same success. The study of their ideological backgrounds has clearly shown that the Iranian communist opposition was dominant in the Belgian solidarity movement, outshining the Maoists. This configuration contrasts with that of neighbouring countries, where the power struggle was more balanced, Maoists sometimes even outclassing communists. Given the importance of third-party organisations for solidarity movements, the key to this situation has been sought in the Belgian social movement sector.

An in-depth analysis of the organisations' networks has shown that the communist movement

had taken advantage of the climate surrounding the gathering of progressives, induced by Collard's appeal in 1969 and which marginalised Maoists. As far as the Islamists were concerned, their lack of embeddedness was due to the Belgian Muslim organisational structure, which was still in its infancy. As already stated, the situation of the Islamic Iranian opposition was similar in neighbouring countries, but not that of Maoists, hence the initial questioning.

Of course, Maoism was no monolithic ideological family. Even within the Iranian Maoist opposition following the Confederation of Iranian Students National Union's split, a rival group called Tufan co-existed with the new Maoist Confederation (although they sometimes collaborated¹⁵⁰). Likewise, several (and sometimes antagonistic) Maoist groups were active in the above-mentioned countries. The presence of Maoists did not systematically allow the Confederation of Iranian Students to find an echo, but it provided networks that could potentially be activated.

One could argue that the reason why the Belgian communist committees gained more traction than the Maoist associations was that the former were run by professional activists, while the latter were run by students. Although this factor is not entirely irrelevant, raising it as the main explanation would entail disregarding the origins of the CSI, which also derived from a student association. Both the Maoist association and the student section of the ODYSI sought support from the Belgian social movement sector, but the latter found more success. The professional activists actually joined the movement at a later stage, rendering this explanation tautological. Moreover, as Charel Roemer has pointed out, international solidarity movements led by students can sometimes take on an importance that leads them to collaborate with such professional activists.¹⁵¹

147. QUINN SLOBODIAN, *Foreign Front: Third World Politics in Sixties West Germany*, Durham and London, 2012, 170-199.

148. AFSHIN MATIN-ASGARI, *Iranian Student Opposition to the Shah*, 136.

149. MANIJEH MORADIAN, *This Flame Within*, 195-196.

150. AFSHIN MATIN-ASGARI, *Iranian Student Opposition to the Shah*, 155-156.

151. CHAREL ROEMER, "Connecting People, Generating Concern", 263-264.

Iran was not the only solidarity movement that was affected by the dynamics of the gathering of progressives in Belgium. For example, Christiaens argues that the solidarity with Chile has served as a “toehold” for this idea in the 1970s.¹⁵² But as shown in this article, the reverse is also true: the climate and practical realisations of the gathering of progressives (like the CNAPD) were useful for international solidarity movements as well.

Of course, the climate of the gathering of progressives is not the only factor that has favoured the committees’ success compared to that of the students’ associations. Among the other factors, I would like to insist here on a dynamic that is

often disregarded in historical analyses. One of the tasks of every historian is to highlight, retrospectively, certain factors (or “causes”, although this term can sometimes be misused) that facilitated an event or a phenomenon. But history is not exact science, and some factors are unavoidably left aside. Among them, contingency has often been overlooked. The fact that the gathering of progressives contributed to the committees’ consolidation does not mean that they were bound to find more success, and these events could have taken a different turn.¹⁵³ In this regard, personal encounters between Zahedi and the CSI’s future members influenced (without determining) the events that followed.

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Abbreviations

- ABVV: *Algemeen Belgisch vakverbond* (General Belgian Trade Union)
 AMADA: *Alle macht aan de arbeiders* (All Power to the Workers)
 AMSAB-ISG: *Archief en museum van de socialistische arbeidersbeweging – Instituut voor sociale geschiedenis* (Archives and Museum of the Socialist Labour Movement – Institute of Social History)
 ARCA: *Archives du monde catholique* (Archives of the Catholic World)
 BUVV: *Belgische unie voor de verdediging van de vrede* (Belgian Union in Defence of Peace)
 CISCOD: *Cercle d’information et de réflexion sur le service civil et la coopération au développement* (Information and Reflection Circle on Civilian Service and Development Cooperation)
 CNAPD: *Comité national d’action pour la paix et le développement* (National Action Committee for Peace and Development)
 CSI: *Comité solidarité Iran* (Iran Solidarity Committee)
 FGFB: *Fédération générale du travail de Belgique* (General Labour Federation of Belgium)
 KPB: *Kommunistische Partij van België* (Communist Party of Belgium)
 ODYSI: Organization of Democratic Youth and Students of Iran
 PCB: *Parti communiste de Belgique* (Communist Party of Belgium)
 PSB: *Parti socialiste belge* (Belgian Socialist Party)
 UBDP: *Union belge pour la défense de la paix* (Belgian Union in Defence of Peace)
 UCL: *Université catholique de Louvain* (Catholic University of Louvain)
 ULB: *Université libre de Bruxelles* (Free University of Brussels)
 VIK: *Vlaams Iran komitee* (Flemish Iran Committee)

152. KIM CHRISTIAENS, *Orchestrating Solidarity*, 176.

153. CRISTIANA OGHINA-PAVIE, “Hasard et contingence en histoire”, *Raison présente*, 198, 2016, 89-97.

