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Mujahideen-e-Khalq (MEK)

Part I: Genesis and Early Years

The history, background, and activities of the Mujahideen-e-Khalq (MEK - also referred to as the People's Mujahideen of Iran – PMOI) offers a fascinating window into the contemporary importance played by the Islamic Republic of Iran in key decisions of U.S. foreign policy relating to the Middle East. Currently the largest militant group opposed to the current Islamic regime in Iran, analyzing the MEK also presents a complex parallel to the diplomatic debate currently raging on how to deal with Iran's nuclear ambitions within the context of both the wider Middle East region and the larger international community. As equally interesting as the MEK's modern relevance is their historical organizational narrative dating back to the early 1960's as an originally anti-Western student group.

First started in 1963 by a group of college students from Tehran University, the MEK's stated goal was to work towards the overthrow of Iran's pro-Western monarchy, the Pahlavi dynasty, and to return to the socialist system that former Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq was working towards in the 1950's.¹ In the first several years of

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the group's founding, the MEK primarily focused on developing and spreading a coherent ideology that combined elements of a secular view of Islam and blending this into a Marxist philosophy. However, beginning in the early 1970's, and in keeping with their goal of weakening both the Pahlavi's and their prime benefactor, the United States of America, the MEK began carrying out a series of terrorist acts focused mainly on bombing various infrastructure targets, such as Tehran's electrical grid, within Iran.

TIMELINE

1963-1977 – MEK is founded with initial funding assistance from the KGB and begins to carry out an armed campaign to overthrow the Iranian monarchy, the Pahlavi dynasty, and install an Islamic socialist government

1978-1981 – After initially participating in and supporting the takeover of the Iranian government by Islamist-theocratic elements, MEK splits with and attempts a failed armed uprising against the new Iranian revolutionary regime under Ayatollah Khomeini. The “Supreme Guide” of the MEK, Massoud Rajavi, flees to Paris with key supporters aboard a hijacked airplane

1982 – France's socialist government brokers a deal between the MEK and the Iraqi government of Saddam Hussein, then at war with Iran, to allow the MEK to set up training camps in Iraq to conduct low intensity operations inside Iran

1991 – MEK's 10,000 strong paramilitary force assists Saddam Hussein in putting down the post-Desert Storm Kurdish and Shiite uprising, resulting in over 100,000 dead

2001 – MEK claims to officially renounce the use of violence in pursuit of its political goals

2002 – The political wing of the MEK, the National Council of Resistance in Iran (NCRI), holds a press conference in Paris to announce the disclosure of two previously undisclosed Iranian nuclear facilities, the Natanz Uranium Enrichment Facility and the Arak Heavy Water Production Plant, bringing renewed intensity to international scrutiny of the Iranian regime's covert nuclear weaponization aims.

2003 – U.S.-led coalition force grants prisoner of war status to MEK members in Iraq and concentrates 4,000 disarmed combatants into Camp Ashraf, northeast of Baghdad in Diyala Province

June 2008 – UK government removes MEK from list of banned terrorist organizations, citing no evidence linking the group to terrorist activities

During this period, the U.S. had a fairly robust economic and military advisor presence in the country, and the MEK carried out several targeted assassinations of U.S. military and civilian personnel working on defense contracts with the Iranian government.ⁱⁱ Today's current debate with both the U.S. administration and the EU on whether the MEK is indeed a terrorist entity focuses mainly on this period of the MEK's activities, with memories of these attacks on U.S. citizens keeping the MEK on the State Department's list of terrorist entities.ⁱⁱⁱ However, in June of 2008, the British government removed the MEK from its list of banned terrorist organizations after a successful legal challenge brought by representatives of the group, with the government ruling that they could find no evidence that the group is currently involved in terrorist activities.^{iv}

Part II: Enemies of the Revolution

As events in Iran came to a revolutionary head in the late 1970's, the MEK joined the Islamic theocratic elements in their attempts to overthrow the Iranian monarchy, and afterwards further advocated the takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in 1979, resulting in the hostage crisis that took well over a year to resolve and resulted in the cessation of diplomatic relations between the two countries.^v However, the alliance between the MEK and the theocratic movement that swept to power was shortlived as the new regime of Ayatollah Khomeini began to consolidate power and saw the MEK, with their thousands of armed supporters, as a threat to their power base. Consequently, during the early years of Khomeini's regime, thousands of MEK members were arrested and, of this number, hundreds were subsequently executed on the grounds of being enemies of the state.

As a direct result of this hostile internal environment within Iran, the key leadership cell of the MEK fled to France aboard a hijacked commercial airliner in 1981, including the two primary leaders – Massoud Rajavi, titled as the MEK’s Supreme Guide, and his wife, Maryam Rajavi. France made an attractive outside location for the MEK to reconstitute and reorganize itself, as the socialist government of Jacques Chirac was in power and was willing to play host to the group as a temporary exile location. Following on this ideological similarity between the two, in 1982 the French government used its diplomatic weight to broker a deal with the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein to allow the MEK to set up training camps in eastern Iraq to serve as a base for cross border raids and low intensity operations in Iran to destabilize the theocratic regime. This event is significant in the history of the MEK for several reasons, but chief among them is that prior to this deal, the MEK enjoyed a fairly large support base within Iran among the average population. But by agreeing to this deal with the Iraqi government while Iran and Iraq were in the midst of a brutal 8 year war, the perception of the MEK began to shift from being viewed as freedom fighters to traitors by the Iranian populace, consequently causing a massive erosion in their support base within Iran. Another detrimental effect of this alliance with Saddam Hussein was an increased paranoia by the Iranian regime of internal opponents, with some conservative estimates that during the mid to late 1980’s the regime executed thousands of suspected MEK members or sympathizers.

Throughout the rest of the 1980’s, the MEK continued a busy pace of activity, including forming the umbrella Iranian dissident political group known as the National Council of Resistance in Iran (NCRI).^{vi} The idea behind the NCRI was to form an overall group consisting of all Iranian internal disenfranchised groups opposed to the Iranian

regime, yet in reality the NCRI was, and remains, the political wing of the MEK with the Rajavi's as the two key leaders. The NCRI was formed to serve as a sort of government in exile to highlight and differentiate itself from the Iranian government and illustrate to the Iranian people how they would govern in the place of the current theocratic regime. The key tenets of the NCRI's political platform are the support for free and fair democratic elections, female equality under the law, and equal rights for all religious and cultural minorities within Iran.^{vii}

As the key difference between the NCRI and the current Iranian regime, the NCRI advocates the separation between church and state, making the status of this group one of the principal sticking points in any diplomatic negotiations between Iran and most western governments. The regime feels greatly threatened by the goals of the MEK and the NCRI and has sought since the early 1980's to have them designated as a terrorist entity and discourage any western power from providing a base of support to their operations. Conversely, as the western powers, primarily the United States, do not have much leverage in their diplomatic dealings with Iran, the importance of the MEK has risen as a potential bargaining chip with the regime to influence certain behavior. Currently, debates on the status of the MEK have taken a twofold importance: negotiations with Iran to become a helpful and not detrimental presence as Iraq rebuilds itself, and negotiations by key world powers with Iran to ensure Iran doesn't seek a nuclear weapons capability.

Opponents of the MEK, including former members who left the group, have leveled claims that the group is nothing more than a cult of personality built around glorifying the figures of Massoud and Maryam Rajavi. Going further, these opponents

claim that the Rajavi's, who style themselves as the rightful leaders of Iran, have no interest in establishing a pluralistic, democratic Iran and merely want to replace the current theocratic regime with a more harsh and insulated Marxist socialist structure. Further, the numbers of active supporters of the MEK have undergone drastic reduction since its heyday in the 1970's, going from tens of thousands of supporters to, by some current estimates, only a few hundred active members. The primary reasons behind this reduced support has likely been a confluence of the various means by which the MEK has sought to keep itself relevant in the current political scene. Chiefly, their alliance with Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq War and their support of him again in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War in the suppression of the Kurdish and Shia revolt greatly turned off what little support base they had in Iran.

Camp Ashraf – Concentration Camp or HUMINT Operations Center?

As part of the deal with Saddam's regime in the early 1980's, the MEK was given a piece of territory northeast of Baghdad called Camp Ashraf to use as a base of operations for cross border raids and disruptions inside Iran. At one point having tens of thousands of armed fighters, by the time of the 2003 invasion Camp Ashraf housed only a few thousand fighters. Granted prisoner of war status by the coalition, and being disarmed but allowed to remain at the camp, the status of this site has caused a high degree of friction with the Iranian regime, who want the group members to be turned over to them before any serious discussions of becoming a constructive presence in Iraq develop.

With the current debate over Iran's nuclear program, combined with the MEK's demonstrated HUMINT network operating within Iran penetrating sensitive military and civilian nuclear installations, debate has turned to whether western powers should leverage this capability to better inform their own intelligence picture of the Iranian regime's goals and intentions. There are also rumors swirling that the leader of the MEK, Massoud Rajavi, who has not been seen in public since 2003, is in fact at Camp Ashraf running and coordinating intelligence operations targeting Iranian nuclear sites on behalf of unnamed Western intelligence agencies.

Part III: U.S. Interest in the MEK

The most morally complex analysis of the MEK's current importance mirrors an argument that has been playing out within the wider U.S. Intelligence Community since

the beginning of the Clinton Administration in 1993. Whether or not it is morally acceptable to use human intelligence sources that can be explicitly tied to criminal or terrorist organizations in order to further foreign policy objectives or to fill intelligence gaps that cannot otherwise be filled by conventional means. This long running debate, usually associated with methods used in the prosecution and hunt for Al Qaeda senior leadership targets operating in denied areas as part of the central Global War on Terror (GWOT), is currently being broadened to include arguments on what it will take – and how far to go - for the IC to gain a better intelligence picture of what is going on inside Iran.

This debate has led to the rise and fall of the MEK's political fortunes over the last six years, beginning with the National Council of Resistance in Iran's (NCRI) – the MEK's political and public relations wing – groundbreaking press conference in Paris in 2002 whereby the existence of two previously unreported Iranian nuclear facilities was revealed to the public.^{viii} The revelation of these facilities, the Natanz Uranium Enrichment Facility and the Arak Heavy Water Plant, by the NCRI served to highlight both the depth and expertise of the placement and access of the MEK's human intelligence network operating within Iran, especially when compared to most western intelligence agencies startlingly incomplete and often historical reporting on Iranian activity, both nuclear and conventional military related.

Since these 2002 disclosures, the NCRI has continued their series of press conferences to announce further nuclear related developments within Iran, providing assessments on key civilian nuclear officials and military leadership involved in the nuclear effort, Iranian operated front companies involved in the foreign procurement

effort for nuclear related commodities, and senior leadership decision making on the direction and stated goals of the nuclear program.^{ix} Such periodic announcements have put the U.S. and other Western countries seeking a solution to Iran's nuclear ambitions in a rather uncomfortable position of having to decide whether to deal with the MEK as a proxy in the effort to glean better intelligence on Iran.

The strength of the U.S. intelligence agencies involved in targeting Iran for exploitation lie in technical collection means, primarily signals intelligence (SIGINT) and overhead imagery intelligence (IMINT), with reliable HUMINT sources being an extreme shortfall and falling last in the primary systems used to inform U.S. policy makers on Iran. As this is clearly a MEK core strength, based on conservative estimates of their support base operating in all segments of Iranian society, the concern of doing business with a formally sanctioned terrorist entity has been brought back into focus.

Currently, as the Bush administration is preparing to leave office and will likely be handing off Iran strategy to the next president, the status and potential role of the MEK in any dealings with Iran is bound to be high on the agenda. For the U.S., having control of the MEK through their primary base in Iraq represents an enticing bargaining chip with the Iranian regime. But this also serves a double-edged sword, as the Iranians view the MEK's continued presence in Iraq as a dangerous threat to their regime's survival and have declared that they will not look to be helpful presence in Iraqi internal affairs until the MEK members are handed over to their custody. While such an act by the U.S. would almost certainly be a death sentence for those MEK members at Camp Ashraf, this represents a good opportunity for some creative diplomacy to occur whereby the Iranian regime could agree to an increased transparency in their nuclear program in

exchange for a determination of some type of final settlement of the MEK issue. Regardless of what happens, the modern importance of Iran to U.S. foreign policy interests essentially guarantees that the MEK will continue to play an important, though nebulous, role in U.S.-Iran relations.

ⁱ Petherick, Christopher J. *The CIA in Iran – the 1953 Coup and the Origins of the US-Iran Divide*. New York: Independent Books, 2003.

ⁱⁱ Pollack, Kenneth. *The Persian Puzzle – the Conflict Between Iran and America*. Random House Books, 2005.

ⁱⁱⁱ U.S. Department of State. Fact Sheet – Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism. 08 April 2008. Foreign Terrorist Organizations. <<http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/fs/08/103392.htm>>.

^{iv} United Kingdom Foreign & Commonwealth Office. 05 July 2008. Foreign Secretary Statement on the Deproscription of Mojahedin-e-Khalq (MeK). <<http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/newsroom/latest-news/?view=PressR&id=3319002>>.

^v Bowden, Mark. Guests of the Ayatollah: The Iran Hostage Crisis: the First Battle in America's War with Militant Islam. Grove Press, 2007.

^{vi} Wisconsin Project on Nuclear Arms Control. 29 July 2008. The National Council of Resistance of Iran - Background. <<http://www.iranwatch.org/privateviews/ncri/perspex-ncri-aboutncri.pdf>>.

^{vii} National Council of Resistance of Iran. 13 June 2005. Overview – National Council of Resistance of Iran. <<http://ncr-iran.org/content/view/27/158/>>.

^{viii} International Crisis Group Middle East Report No. 18. 27 October 2003. Dealing With Iran's Nuclear Program. <<http://www.iranwatch.org/privateviews/icg/perspex-icg-irannuclear-102703.pdf>>.

^{ix} National Council of Resistance of Iran. 08 April 2008. Iran Regime Expedites Move Towards the Nuclear Bomb. <<http://ncr-iran.org/content/view/5075/154/>>.