

Monsters of the Left: The Mujahedin al-Khalq

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Few terrorists groups garner the bipartisan endorsement and support that Iran's Mujahedin al-Khalq Organization [MKO] has. On October 20, 2005, several congressmen and many aides attended a briefing in Congress. Maryam Rajavi, co-leader of the group and self-styled president-elect of Iran, addressed the gathering by video from France.^[1] She received a warm reception. Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee (D-Texas) thanked "Sister Maryam."^[2] A bipartisan group of U.S. Congressmen have signed petitions calling for the U.S. Department of State to lift its 1997 classification of the group as a terrorist organization.^[3] In an April 8, 2003 interview, Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.), chairwoman of the House International Relations Committee's Central Asia and Middle East Subcommittee said, "This group loves the United States. They're assisting us in the war on terrorism; they're pro-U.S. This group has not been fighting against the U.S. It's simply not true."^[4] Ros-Lehtinen is wrong. Unfortunately, hers is a mistake common to some on the left and the right who care deeply about Iranian freedom but fail to understand the nature of a group which, in public, says the right things about freedom and democracy but, in reality is dedicated to the opposite. Maryam Rajavi and her husband Masud are adept at public relations and adroit at reinvention, but the organization over which they preside eschews democracy and embraces terrorism, autocracy, and Marxism.

Origins

The roots of the MKO lie in the early 1960s. For years, clerical and feudal interests had blocked real reform in Iran. Society was paralyzed. In 1961, under pressure from the Kennedy administration, the Shah appointed as prime minister 'Ali Amini, an Iranian aristocrat and former ambassador to the United States, whom Washington respected as a reformer. Amini began to challenge the traditional classes and interest groups who had long hampered reform. In January 1962, the Shah decreed Iran's first real land reform. The Shah assumed the mantle of reforming crusader. He launched "the Shah-People Revolution," better known as the "White Revolution." Its six points were: land reform, nationalization of forests, sale of government-owned factories to finance land reform, women's suffrage, a Literacy Corps in which conscripts could serve as an alternative to the army, and distribution to workers of part of factories' profits. Such reform cut deep into the fabric of Iranian society, angering social conservatives, clerics, and xenophobic nationalists.

Against this backdrop and angered by both the growing secularization of Iranian politics and the influx of foreigners, engineer and Islamic activist Mehdi Bazargan formed the Liberation Movement of Iran. His goal was to combine Iranian nationalism with Islamism. "We refuse to divorce religion from politics... because Shi'i Islam is an integral part of our popular culture,"^[5] the group stated in its inaugural declaration. Ayatollah

Mahmud Taleqani, a free-thinking and modernizing cleric introduced to Marxist thought while imprisoned in the 1930s, became a mentor to Bazargan who, in turn, would become provisional prime minister during the first days of the 1979 revolution.

In July 1962, Amini resigned in anger over both the Shah's military spending and anger at what he considered the stinginess of other U.S. aid. Chaos reigned supreme. The ayatollahs seized the initiative. Islamic groups marched against social reforms and the new laws which restricted the clergy's traditional privileges. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini rose to prominence as the head of the clerical opposition.

By 1963, what little tolerance the Shah had for the opposition evaporated. On June 5, 1963, he ordered Khomeini's arrest. Rioting erupted and ended only after the police killed several hundred students and demonstrators.

Ironically, even as the Shah's crackdown sent oppositionists underground, his reforms catalyzed their growth. State scholarships enabled a far greater range of Iranians to receive higher education than at any previous time in history. University campuses became incubators of opposition. Young radicals looked abroad and drew inspiration from revolutionary movements in Algeria, Vietnam, Cuba, and elsewhere.

The Birth of the Mujahedin-i Khalq

Following the 1963 crackdown, Bazargan's Liberation Movement splintered. While older members drew inspiration from the left-leaning nationalist and ousted Prime Minister Muhammad Musaddiq who flirted with mob violence but did not sanction terrorism, many younger members argued political reform impossible and embraced armed struggle. These younger members, including a University of Tehran political science student named Masud Rajavi, coalesced into a discussion group which, in 1965, would form the Mujahedin al-Khalq. It would be another seven years before the MKO would emerge from its self-imposed veil of secrecy and declare itself to the wider world.

The MKO preached a combination of Marxism and Islamism. They argued that not only did God create the world, but he also set forth a historical evolution in which a classless society would supplant capitalist inequity. Such a radical re-interpretation of Islam bred division, not only with the secular and capitalist state, but also with the traditional, conservative clergy which resented the MKO argument that "Shi'i *ʿulama* [religious scholars], just like the Sunnis, have failed to grasp the real essence of Qur'anic dynamism."[\[6\]](#) Rajavi and other MKO ideologues reinterpreted religion to justify terrorism. Death during armed struggle, they said, was consistent with traditional Shi'i glorification of martyrdom. They created a precedent from which they and later terrorist groups like Lebanese Hizbullah could and did justify suicide bombing, a plague which afflicts the region to the present.

In order to prepare itself for armed struggle, the MKO reached out to the Palestinian Liberation Organization. In 1970, several leading MKO, including Rajavi received terrorist training in PLO camps in Jordan and Lebanon. The group subsequently cemented links to the Libyan regime of Mu'ammar Qadhafi and to the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, the Soviet Union's Arabian Peninsula satellite.

The MKO's first attempt to create a terrorist spectacle failed. A prison informant betrayed their plans to blow up a power station to disrupt the 1971 celebrations surrounding the 2500th anniversary of the Persian monarchy. An attempt to kidnap the Shah's nephew also failed. However, the subsequent trial and execution of those involved bolstered the prestige of the organization. At his trial, Rajavi gave a rousing anti-imperialist speech in which he accused the United States, western banks, and multinational corporations of most of Iran and the developing world's ills. "The main goal now," Rajavi declared, "is to free Iran of U.S. imperialism." [7] The military tribunal was harsh: They condemned 11 MKO leaders, including Rajavi, to death. The Iranian government commuted the sentences of one co-conspirator and Rajavi to life imprisonment after Rajavi's brother launched an international clemency campaign. The execution of the MKO's founders and so many early members positioned Rajavi well to consolidate organization control upon his January 1979 release.

While dealt a mighty blow, the MKO rebounded. It recruited new members in Iranian high schools, universities, prisons, and among the thousands of Iranian university students studying in Western Europe and the United States. The group also established a radio station in Baghdad from which to broadcast anti-regime propaganda into Iran. The MKO latched onto the teachings of the left-leaning Ayatollah 'Ali Shariati, who openly preached a similar but less radical message. They used Shariati's preaching as a launching point for underground discussion and indoctrination.

The imprisonment and execution of its leadership did not eviscerate the organization. It soon struck again. In May 30 and 31, 1972, shortly before President Richard Nixon's state visit to Iran, the MKO launched a wave of bomb attacks which targeted the Iran-American Society, the U.S. Information Office, the Hotel International, Pepsi Cola, General Motors, and the Marine Oil Company. They failed to assassinate General Harold Price, head of the U.S. Military Mission in Iran. Less than three months later, they bombed the Jordanian embassy to revenge King Hussein's September 1970 crackdown on their PLO patrons. In 1973, the MKO bombed the Pan-American Airlines building, Shell Oil, and Radio City Cinema in Tehran, and assassinated Colonel Lewis Hawkins, the deputy chief of the U.S. military mission. They did not only target foreigners. In a wave of bombings that continued into 1975, the MKO group attacked clubs, stores, police facilities, minority-owned businesses, factories it accused of having "Israeli connections," and symbols of state and capitalism.

Not all was well within the MKO leadership. In 1975, the group divided into a Marxist faction that eschewed Islam, and a Muslim faction which did not. Baruch College historian Ervand Abrahamian, whose dispassionate and academic study of the MKO is the most thorough, argued that the shift of many MKO leaders to Marxism stemmed had three causes: Disillusionment with Ayatollah Khomeini, inability to win over the secular intelligentsia, and the influence of other radical groups like the Feda'iyen. [8] Rajavi headed the Muslim Mujahedin branch in Qasr prison. Both groups continued their attacks on government and Western targets, all the while striking at each other. While the Marxist MKO was unsuccessful in an attempt to assassinate a senior U.S. diplomat, it killed three American employees of Rockwell International.

The Islamic Revolution

While both MKO factions participated in the Islamic Revolution, the Muslim MKO found shelter under the banner of Taleqani and rode the Revolution to prominence. They claimed some credit for the seizure of the U.S. embassy and subsequent hostage taking, and later demonstrated against their release. The Muslim faction did not eschew Marxism. Rajavi and the MKO supported the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and opposed the Afghan mujahedin struggling against it.

In the wake of the Islamic Revolution, Rajavi consolidated his control over the organization.^[9] Rajavi divided the leadership into a Politburo and a Central Committee, and created a number of organizations to recruit and train new members. This proliferation of front organization, all serving an ideological and disciplined leadership, remains characteristic of the group today.

It was not long before Rajavi and the MKO came into conflict with the clerical circles surrounding Khomeini. Relations between the MKO and Khomeini had been long strained. While Khomeini's theological justification of clerical rule was a radical reworking of traditional Shi'i jurisprudence, he was otherwise conservative. He considered the MKO's blending of Islam with Marxism, as well as the group's denial of past jurisprudence, to be anathema. When an MKO delegation had visited Khomeini in Najaf in 1972, rather than offer the support they sought, he lectured them on true Islam.

Within a year of Khomeini's return to Iran, his followers began to label Rajavi and the MKO "unbelievers" and "hypocrites." The MKO, in return, accused Khomeini of hijacking the revolution and imposing dictatorship. Prior to the Islamic Revolution, Khomeini promised the masses Islamic democracy, even as he consolidated dictatorship. The MKO sought to replicate his strategy, for practical, not idealistic, aims.

Khomeini had the upper hand, though. He closed the group's offices, banned its papers, and forced the MKO underground. The MKO was not his only target, though. As he consolidated power, he moved against President Abulhasan Bani Sadr^[10] whose independence and moderation undercut Khomeini's theocratic ambitions. While Bani Sadr did not join the MKO, he formed a tacit alliance with the group which, in turn, benefited from the President's prestige.

Both Bani Sadr and the MKO called for national protests on June 20, 1980, and demonstrators heeded their call. Perhaps a half million poured into the streets in Tehran; many more turned out in cities across Iran. But Khomeini and his supporters in the Islamic Republic Party were ready. They labeled anyone marching in support of the MKO to be enemies of God, subject to summary execution. They kept their word. Khomeini's followers killed hundreds. The warden of Evin Prison, Tehran's main political prison, bragged of his execution of teenage girls.

Khomeini's opponents responded. Terrorists—their affiliation unclear—blew up the Islamic Republic Party headquarters, killing hardline Ayatollah Mohammed Hosseini Beheshti, founder of the Islamic Republic's judiciary, and 72 party members. Khomeini used the attack as reason to accelerate his purge. A reign of terror began. Thousands perished before Islamic Republic firing squads and upon its gallows. As Khomeini consolidated control, Iranians' willingness to support for the MKO evaporated.

The MKO did not surrender, though. It drove its terrorist campaign to a fever pitch, assassinating several hundred regime officials and Revolutionary Guards, and bombing the homes and offices of clerics. The group also targeted judges who passed sentence against their members. The MKO used suicide bombers with deadly effect, killing in separate incidents the Friday prayer leaders of Tehran and Shiraz. At its peak in July 1982, the group assassinated, on average, three regime officials per day; publicly, the MKO has claimed responsibility for the murders of over 10,000 people in Iran since 1981. But while the terrorist campaign shook the Islamic Republic to its core, it also claimed many innocent victims.

Rajavi and Bani Sadr both fled to Paris during Khomeini's crackdown. While Bani Sadr and others had joined with the MKO under the banner of the National Council, such formal ties were short-lived. By 1984 the former president and many other groups left the umbrella, upset with the MKO's ideology and Rajavi's dictatorial tendencies.

Still more MKO supporters fled to Iraq, where they accepted the protection of President Saddam Hussein. What little support the group had once enjoyed in Iran evaporated, as Iranians saw the MKO rally in support of a dictator who launched a war that, by its conclusion in 1988, killed several hundred thousand Iranians. Ordinary Iranians are quite vocal in their hatred of the Islamic Republic and ridicule its current Supreme Leader 'Ali Khamene'i. Many ask about Reza Pahlavi, the U.S.-based son of the late Shah. Others speak of other opposition groups, and many more rally to the names of the Islamic Republic's own dissidents. But, without exception, all spew venom toward the MKO. The group violence and its betrayal of Iranian nationalism lost it all popular support in Iran.

Nor did the MKO win Iraqi support. Iraqi intelligence coordinated MKO activities.^[11] Iraqi Kurds and Shi'a accuse the group of participating in reprisals against Iraqi civilians following the March 1991 uprising. According to Qubad Talabani, son of Iraqi president Jalal Talabani, "Up until the fall of the regime, they were part and parcel of the Iraqi military. And they were heavily involved in suppressing the Kurdish uprising of 1991."^[12]

Reinvention

While the MKO lost both its revolutionary power struggle and the battle for Iranian hearts and minds, Rajavi has worked tirelessly to reinvent the MKO's image. Again, he sought power in and sympathy from so many members' martyrdom. At first, the group reached out to its old leftist and Arab nationalist patrons in Algeria, Lebanon, and among the PLO. It also sent delegations to the Italian and Greek Communist Parties, the Indian Socialist Party, and the British Labour Party. It found a sympathetic audience among left-leaning human rights organization and academics. The group targeted European parliamentarians. More than 3,000 parliamentarians signed a 1986 petition of support.^[13]

The admission of Ayatollah Hossein 'Ali Montazeri, long-time Khomeini deputy, that Khomeini ordered the executions of 3,000 incarcerated MKO allowed the organization to further play the martyr card.^[14] The National Council of Resistance's website

describes an international organization with "official contacts with most European countries... [and] amicable relations with Middle Eastern nations." The group has continued its petition drives. Congressional aides describe how the group sends pretty young women into the halls of Congress and various parliaments with innocuous petitions. Most lawmakers have little idea of the baggage the group carries. The MKO devotees get results. The group brags, "In 1992, in a joint global initiative, 1,500 parliamentarians declared their support for the NCR as the democratic alternative to the Khomeini regime. This included a majority in the US House of Representatives."[\[15\]](#) Abrahamian speculated that the MKO sought to replicate the PLO's strategy of winning recognition as the representatives of the Palestinian people through the international community. It continues to post endorsements, many taken out of context, on its website.[\[16\]](#)

Within the United States, MKO members tell Congressmen, their staffs, and other policymakers what they want to hear: That the MKO is the only opposition movement capable of ousting the unpopular and repressive Islamic Republic. They are slick. Friendly lawmakers and commentators get Christmas baskets full of nuts and sweets. Well-dressed and well-spoken representatives of MKO front organizations approach American writers, politicians, and pundits who are critical of the regime.

The enemy of an adversary is not necessarily a friend, though. Such is the logic that caused State Department realists in the Reagan administration to support a dictator like Saddam Hussein. The MKO have little in their record to suggest democracy to be a goal. While they opposed the Islamic Republic only after Khomeini purged them from power, the group sought to replace Khomeini's dictatorship with its own. They omit and often deny their past anti-U.S. and anti-Western terrorism.

Today, Masud Rajavi—and his second wife Maryam—work to impose totalitarian control over its membership. Portraits of Masud and Maryam loom large in MKO demonstrations and facilities. In the West, the group forbids its members from reading anything but MKO newspapers and publications. Many MKO live in communal households and participate in mandatory study groups. In Camp Ashraf, Iraq, where many members sit in limbo following Saddam's fall, MKO minders enforce celibacy, employ cult methods to break down individual will, and shield members from unsupervised exposure to outsiders.[\[17\]](#)

How the Left Empowers the MKO Today

Prior to Iraq's liberation, there was rare interagency agreement about the MKO within the U.S. government. From Foggy Bottom to the Pentagon to the Old Executive Office Building, there was rare unanimity. As a terrorist organization closely allied with Saddam's regime, the MKO should be considered combatants if they raised arms, and prisoners if they did not. The Islamic Republic might want the group for crimes both real and imagined, but the fate of MKO stranded in Iraq would ultimately rest with the new Iraqi judiciary, which might want to try individual members for atrocities committed in 1991.

During Iraq's liberation, U.S. troops surrounded Camp Ashraf, the main MKO base in Iraq. Those MKO who did not flee during the war stood down. The U.S. military confined 3,800 MKO "security detainees" in the Camp.[\[18\]](#) The Iranian government demanded forced repatriation and, through intermediaries, offered to trade al-Qaeda members sheltering in Iran for MKO members captured in Iraq. This offer was refused for three reasons: The priority of the Iraqi judiciary in the matter, Iran's own lack of due process, and the fact that belief that Iran should turn over al-Qaeda terrorists in the interest of justice, not for a *quid pro quo*.

How did the Left subsequently bolster Rajavi and empower the MKO? On May 10, 2003 Agence France Presse quoted General Ray Odierno, commander of the 4th Infantry Division, as saying, "I would say that any organization that has given up their equipment to the coalition clearly is cooperating with us, and I believe that should lead to a review of whether they are still a terrorist organization or not." Odierno's statement was unwise. He had no authorization to make such a comment nor did it reflect anything but his own opinion. The MKO are masters of propaganda; he was unaware of the group's history. Complacency in the face of an opponent's overwhelming firepower makes an adversary smart, not democratic.

The gaffe made, the Pentagon fumbled its response. Its policy hierarchy and public affairs machinery were more effective at editing each others' grammar than at damage control. Despite subsequent interagency clarifications, left-wing pundits and academic conspiracy theorists went into overdrive. They knowingly conflated a single general's off-hand remark into a statement of policy, and then they conflated the uniformed services with civilian staff. "...The Neocons in the Pentagon have some sort of weird alliance with the MEK [MKO] mad bombers," University of Michigan Professor Juan Cole wrote.[\[19\]](#) Cole's anti-Semitic and partisan-driven conspiracy theories played into Rajavi's hands by enabling the group to project a false image of support where none existed. Partisan bloggers like Laura Rozen, off-kilter academics like Cole and Brown University anthropologist William O. Beeman, Knight-Ridder and *Washington Post* correspondents, and *New York Times* columnists, repeated the story, substituting hypothesis for fact, citing each other and justifying their beliefs with anonymous sources. None can produce an iota of evidence. While the MKO has the support of a handful of congressmen and a small number pundits, Rajavi has no support in the power centers of Washington. Nevertheless, he bolsters his supporters' morale and basks in the claim of support, however false.

Even in the era of resurgent realism, some issues should remain absolute. Terrorism, the deliberate targeting of civilians for political gain, should never be acceptable. Mitigating factors do not exist. True, in August 2003 the MKO exposed Iran's covert nuclear enrichment program. It continues to penetrate Iran's defenses and assassinate its opponents. This, though, is more a result of corruption and the Islamic Republic's crumbling control over its periphery. The MKO—and any other group—can bribe officials and penetrate defenses. This should not give reason, on the hundredth anniversary of Iran's Constitutional Revolution, to advance or reward Rajavi's life-long megalomaniacal quest for power and his backward blend of Marxism and Islamism. Many "monsters of the left" use the rhetoric of democracy to realize their ambition.

Masud and Maryam Rajavi, and the organization over which they exert dictatorial control, are no exception. The Islamic Republic of Iran victimizes its people and threatens U.S. and regional security. The solution to the problem rests, not with empowering a group or individuals just as bad, but rather in supporting the Iranian people in their quest for liberty, freedom, and democracy.

[1] For the text of Rajavi's speech, see: <http://ncr-iran.org/content/view/476/1/>

[2] Guy Dinmore. "Iran Opposition Groups seeks US Legitimacy." *Financial Times*. October 6, 2005.

[3] For the State Department background and justification of the MKO terrorist classification, see: <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/pgtrpt/2003/31711.htm>. For the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Asset Control designation, see: <http://www.treas.gov/offices/enforcement/ofac/actions/20030815.shtml>

[4] *The Hill*. April 8, 2003. <http://www.hillnews.com/news/040803/roslehtinen.aspx>

[5] Quoted in Ervand Abrahamian. *The Iranian Mojahedin*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 83. Much of this article's description of the MKO's early history is drawn from Abrahamian's account.

[6] *Cheguneh Qur'an Biamuzim (How to Study the Qur'an)*, as quoted in Abrahamian, 97.

[7] As quoted in Abrahamian, 135.

[8] Abrahamian, 149.

[9] U.S. Department of State. "Background Information: National Council of Resistance, Moslem Iranian Students Society, Iran Relief Fund, People's Mojaheddin Organization of Iran, Mojahedin-e-Khalq, Iran Liberation, Iranian People's Resistance." March 13, 1986.

[10] Bani Sadr's website: <http://www.banisadr.com.fr/>

[11] Ibrahim al-Marashi. "Iraq's Security and Intelligence Network: A Guide and Analysis." *Middle East Review of International Affairs*. September 2002. <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2002/issue3/jv6n3a1.html>

[12] Eli Lake. "Iranian Group Asks State To Lift Terror Designation." *New York Sun*. April 15, 2005.

[13] Abrahamian, 245.

[14] Grand Ayatollah Hossein 'Ali Montazeri. *Khatarat-i Ayatollah Montazeri*. (Spanga, Sweden: Baran, 2000), 243-251.

[15] See: "International Support" on the official website of the National Council of Resistance of Iran <http://www.iran-e-azad.org/english/ncri.html#intsup>

[16] See: "Foreign Affairs Committee of the National Council of Resistance of Iran." <http://www.ncr-iran.org/>

[17] Elizabeth Rubin. "The Cult of Rajavi." *The New York Times*. July 13, 2003.

[18] Agence France Press, Sept. 18, 2003.

[19] <http://www.juancole.com/2004/08/republican-convention-we-did-not-seek.html>