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## The Inside Story of America's Favorite Terrorist Group

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Ever since the fall of Saddam Hussein, the Iranian MEK (short for Mujahedeen-e Khalge) has been a thorny spoil of war for the United

States. Originally an armed anti-Shah movement, they came to fight the clerical regime they helped impose only to move on to supporting Iraq in its war against the ayatollah and his minions. Having targeted and killed several prominent Americans during their heyday in the 1970s, they are on the U.S. list of terrorist organizations. Now, about three thousand members of the group—seasoned in fighting the Iranian regime and stationed by Saddam in a place called Camp Ashraf—are American captives in Iraq. In the last few years, their fate has been the subject of constant squabbles in Washington and between Washington and Baghdad. With an apparently endless supply of funds at their disposal, MEK members have repeatedly and unsuccessfully petitioned the federal government to have their names taken off the terrorist list. In a few days, Secretary Clinton will have to decide how to answer their pleas.

And so their remarkably well-oiled machine of PR firms, powerful American politicians (all handsomely paid for services rendered) and other pressure groups is now at it again. These advocates repeat what the MEK and its many front organizations claim: The group has jettisoned its violent past and is now, in its new incarnation, a key component of the democratic movement.

At the same time, another equally well-oiled machine, this one even including lobbyists paid for by the clerical regime in Tehran, is working against delisting MEK, calling the group a dangerous cult with Iranian, Iraqi and American blood on its hands. Many in Iraq (either taking their cues from the current leadership or with an eye toward the days when MEK was an enforcer for the Saddam regime) are opposed to the group's continued residence in their country.

MEK was formed in opposition to the Shah in the mid-sixties, and before long virtually its entire leadership was arrested and sent to the firing squad. The only early leader to survive was Masud Rajavi, who continues to rule the group to this day. In the seventies, the remaining members sent a representative to Najaf to work with Khomeini, then living in exile. Khomeini's supporters in Tehran, including Rafsanjani and Montazeri, convinced the ayatollah to allow the use of religious funds to support the families of those MEK members who had been imprisoned or executed. Yet Khomeini never fully trusted the group; its ideology seemed a dangerous combination of Marxism and its own interpretation of Shiism. As one Iranian critic put it, MEK is "Stalinism minus the vodka."

After the revolution, MEK was amongst the most stalwart supporters of the clerical regime. It grew in number and stature rapidly, soon becoming the most formidable organization in the country. The MEK used its increasing power to pressure the government into increasingly radical action—from more summary trials and executions to the occupation of the American embassy. Simultaneously it adopted close ties with Moscow, and particularly with the KGB. One of its leaders, named Saadati, was arrested while passing to the KGB a counterespionage file the group had taken when it attacked the Shah's secret-police offices. In return, the kgb promised to give the MEK a full list of CIA agents in Iran.

But eventually MEK fell afoul of the regime and began to fight the power holders in Tehran. Young men and women were sent in droves to armed street demonstrations. Khomeini's regime responded with remarkable brutality, slaughtering thousands of the organization's members. The group returned the favor and killed, by its own claims, more than two thousand regime leaders. MEK was in fact the first group in Iran (and arguably in the region) to use suicide bombers.

Eventually the group had no choice but to take its surviving cadres out of the country. On January

7, 1986, in a letter to the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party, the MEK requested the Soviets “give temporary asylum” to any member of the organization that fled across the border into the Soviet Union. Concurrent with the request for asylum, in another letter to the “Dear Comrades” of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, MEK asked for a loan of three hundred million dollars to continue their “revolutionary anti-imperialist” actions (see: anti-Americanism). This request came on the heels of a twelve-page letter from Rajavi to “Dear Comrade Gorbachev” in which he began by praising the Soviet Union’s efforts “against imperialist adventurism.” To support his organization’s loan application, Rajavi informed Gorbachev that the MEK “has faced the most concentrated efforts of officials from the United States” and offered supporting documents in an appendix.

It is not clear how the Soviets responded, but MEK soon settled in Iraq, helping Saddam Hussein in his war with Iran. In 1988, the group—lead by Rajavi and his wife, Maryam—engaged in three operations, conducted with the help of the Iraqi army, against Iranian forces. By all accounts, all three were badly bungled. Several thousands were killed on both sides. Moreover, in Iranian prisons, on Khomeini’s direct order, about four thousand MEK prisoners, who were serving time on earlier charges, were summarily executed lest they help the invading MEK units.

When American forces attacked Iraq, according to Iraqi documents captured and declassified by the U.S. military, Rajavi met with Saddam’s top intelligence operatives and agreed to use MEK forces against insurgents, freeing the Republican Guard to fight the Americans. The report of the meeting was sent directly to Saddam’s son, Odey. It is little wonder that the current Iraqi regime is opposed to the MEK—a stance constantly fueled by the Iranian regime.

Throughout this bloody history, replete with tactical and strategic blunders, Rajavi and Maryam have remained the absolute leaders of MEK. They are worshipped by their adherents. The organization’s members and their advocates tell the world they have jettisoned their past and are now dedicated to democracy. In cults, however, leaders remain unchanged.

The reality is that the MEK has fought the clerical regime more effectively than any other group. It is also true that throughout nearly all of its history, the same couple has ruled the organization, and there are many claims that they rule it with an iron fist. Only if there is free and fair discussion of the current leadership under democratic conditions (and under international supervision), and only after a new, fresh leadership is freely and democratically elected should the United States even consider the idea of removing the group from its terrorist list.

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