

## THE CHANGING IDEOLOGY OF THE PEOPLE'S MOJAHEDIN ORGANIZATION OF IRAN

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The People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran, or Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization (MKO), is one of few Iranian political organizations that was founded prior to the 1979 Iranian Revolution and still exists today. However, the organization has experienced lots of change in its ideology and list of political allies in its almost 60-year-old history. At the same time, the MKO has mostly stayed loyal to its main political goal – to topple the ruling regime in Iran, whether it be the Shah's government or the Islamic Republic.

The shifts in the MKO's ideology and activities can be explained with extensive repressions against the group by the Shah's regime as well as the Islamic Republic, which killed thousands of members of this group; the organization ending up under the leadership of Massoud Rajavi and then his wife Maryam Rajavi; and the geopolitical changes that dramatically altered the list of the MKO's political allies.

The MKO was founded as an Islamist Marxist political organization in 1965 by six graduates of the University of Tehran: Mohammad Hanifnezhad, Said Mohsen, Mohammad Asgarizadeh, Rasul Moshkinfam, Ali Asghar Badizadegan and Ahmad Rezai.<sup>1</sup> The ideology of the group was close to the worldview of Ali Shariati (1933-1977), an Iranian revolutionary intellectual who was trying to modernize and reinterpret Shia Islam. Shariati was also confronting the Shia Islamic clergy with "true Islam" that served the "oppressed" rather than the ruling elite. He also shared leftist anti-imperialist ideas but considered Shia Islam as a path of the struggle for Iran rather than Western radical ideologies.<sup>2</sup>

However, it is hard to say how much connections did the MKO have with Shariati, and the founders had already established the organization and reached the similar political conclusions as Shariati before he started teaching his ideas in Iran. One of the first theoretical work, "Hussein's Movement", was written by Ahmad Rezai, the key ideologue of the group, who argued that Imam Hussein's revolt against Caliph Yazid was aimed against feudal landlords and exploiting merchant capitalists as well as against usurper caliphs.<sup>3</sup> For the Mojahedin, this fight was continuing, and they should have joined it.

Nevertheless, the ideological shifts started to emerge already in 1970s. The growing MKO launched guerrilla war against Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in 1971, which was met with heavy crackdown, arrests, and execution of most of the initial leadership of the organization, including Hanifnezhad.<sup>4</sup> The future leader Massoud Rajavi who was also arrested survived the execution with the support of his Switzerland-based lawyer brother, Kazem Rajavi<sup>5</sup>, and eventually released shortly before the 1979 revolution.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the heavy crackdown and elimination of the initial leadership, the MKO continued to grow, and the leadership fell into the hands of its Marxist faction, which finally led to the schism in 1975. The MKO leadership released a manifesto that year, abandoning Islam in favour of Marxism-Leninism, because Islam was a "mass opiate" and a "petit bourgeois utopian ideology".<sup>7</sup> This move was not received well by the Islamist faction of the group. Surprisingly, it was the Marxist faction that did not retain the MKO

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<sup>1</sup> Abrahamian, Ervand. *Iran between Two Revolutions*. Princeton University Press, 1982, 489.

<sup>2</sup> Abrahamian, Ervand. *Radical Islam: The Iranian Mojahedin*. London: Tauris, 1989, 110.

<sup>3</sup> Abrahamian. *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 491.

<sup>4</sup> Abrahamian. *Radical Islam: The Iranian Mojahedin*, 131.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 135.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 170.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 145.

brand eventually, merging with some Maoist groups during the revolution to form the Combat Organization on the Road of the Emancipation of the Working Class (Peykar in short). Interestingly, when the MKO decided to improve its image in the West in later years, it would blame the Marxist faction for its multiple attacks on US military and commercial offices in Iran in 1970s.<sup>8</sup>

Soon after Rajavi was released, the MKO fell again under the leadership of the Islamist faction and most importantly Rajavi himself. The MKO and the People's Fadaian Organization, another major leftist guerrilla group, actively participated in the street battles during the 1979 Revolution and further increased their influence in the initial period after the revolution. The MKO tried initially to act as opposition in the newly established Islamic Republic, including by participating in elections, but eventually turned against it and its founder, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, in 1981. They threw their support behind the first President Abolhassan Banisadr and declared war on the Islamic establishment after Banisadr was impeached in June 1981.

The MKO enjoyed large support at the time and could call up hundreds of thousands of people into the streets<sup>9</sup>, but the ensued crackdown from the Islamic Republic in following months killed thousands of the MKO members in either street battles or by executions.<sup>10</sup> Many others were also arrested and were killed later during the 1988 executions of political prisoners by the Islamic Republic.<sup>11</sup> Rajavi and most of the leadership managed to flee to France, where they established the National Resistance Council of Iran (NCRI) along with Banisadr and several other exiled opposition groups.<sup>12</sup>

However, the broad coalition in the NCRI soon collapsed as other parties did not like the outright dominance of the MKO in the council as well as their dealings with Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, which was fighting a bloody war with Iran. The MKO then moved to Iraq to continue its fight against the Islamic Republic from there. The group launched an invasion into Iran in July 1988 weeks after the end of the Iran-Iraq War, dubbed Operation Eternal Light, which resulted in a disaster with more than a thousand of its members killed.<sup>12</sup>

The crackdown, arrests, executions, and failed military operations further depleted the number of members of the organization and the MKO started to collect new members from among the Iranian prisoners of war in Iraq as well as with the alleged human trafficking.<sup>13</sup> This increased the ratio of members being fully controlled by the leadership.

Massoud Rajavi was also turning the organization into his private realm by isolating the group from the rest of Iranian opposition. Firstly, he launched the “ideological revolution” back in France when he married Maryam Azadanlu (later Maryam Rajavi), who divorced another MKO member Mehdi Abrishamchi in process. This fact and their lavish wedding were frowned upon by other groups. Secondly, Rajavi alienated other Iranians by becoming an ally of Saddam Hussein, a move disliked by the opponents of the Islamic Republic as well. Finally, Rajavi turned the group into what often is described as a “cult” by extensive control of members' private lives, enforced celibacy, divorces, family separations and gender segregation. The allegation that the group is a “cult” is further reinforced with the fact that the MKO still maintains that Massoud Rajavi is alive, despite his disappearance during the 2003 US invasion of Iraq.

Another dramatic change in the ideology of the MKO happened in its geopolitical vector. The organization espoused anti-imperialism and anti-Americanism before and after the revolution. It launched attacks on US military and commercial offices in 1970s and welcomed the 1979 seizure of the US embassy

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<sup>8</sup> Masters, Jonathan. “Mujahadeen-e-Khalq (MEK).” Council on Foreign Relations. Council on Foreign Relations, July 28, 2014. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/mujahadeen-e-khalq-mek>.

<sup>9</sup> Abrahamian, *Radical Islam: The Iranian Mojahedin*, 218.

<sup>10</sup> Abrahamian. *Tortured Confessions: Prisons and Public Recantations in Modern Iran*, 129.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Goulka, Jeremiah, Lydia Hansell, Elizabeth Wilke, and Judith Larson, *The Mujahedin-e Khalq in Iraq: A Policy Conundrum*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009, 58.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

in Tehran.<sup>14</sup> The group remained in the anti-Western camp by allying itself with Saddam Hussein, who also found himself in the international isolation after the Kuwait War. Although the MKO maintained presence in Europe and the USA throughout those years, it was blacklisted as a terrorist organization by the US and the EU in 1997 and 2002, respectively.<sup>15</sup>

The group fell in further vulnerable position after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, as the new Iraqi government did not want them to stay in the country. The MKO was also accused of helping Hussein's quashing of Kurdish and Shia rebellions in the 1990s and the post-Hussein Iraq was not a welcome space for the group. After years-long process, the MKO was removed from terrorist organizations list (EU – 2009, USA – 2012) and the US eventually negotiated the resettlement of the group to Albania, which materialized from 2013 to 2016.<sup>16</sup>

Throughout the years, the MKO abandoned its anti-Western ideas and expanded the list of its international backers. The organization holds annual Free Iran conference, which is attended by various Western politicians with views against the Islamic Republic as well as Saudi officials. The most notable figures to appear at MKO conferences were US hawkish politicians, including John Bolton, who was US President Donald Trump's National Security Adviser.<sup>17</sup>

There are several reasons the MKO managed to cultivate these relationships. Firstly, Iran has emerged as a major regional actor in the past two decades with extensive influence in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and among Palestinian groups. The US and its Western allies as well as Israel, Saudi Arabia and several Persian Gulf countries consider it as a threat. Secondly, despite the lack of popularity, the MKO keeps its relevance among hardline anti-Islamic Republic groups with lobbying and some successful political campaigns against Iran's Islamic establishment. The 2002 reveal of secret Iranian nuclear facilities<sup>18</sup> can be named as one of the most successful acts of the group, which was one of the things that led to the standoff between Iran and the West and extensive sanctions on Tehran.

Furthermore, the Islamic Republic itself is helping the MKO to keep the relevance with its constant antagonizing the group in its public discourse. The Islamic Republic labels the Mojahedin as "Monafeqin"<sup>19</sup>, an Islamic term meaning the "hypocrites", and keeps linking its opponents to the MKO to discredit them and have charged many political prisoners with having links to the group. The confrontation between the Islamic Republic and the MKO has caused some diplomatic scandals for Tehran as well. These include the case of Assadollah Assadi, an Iranian diplomat convicted in Belgium in 2021 for planning to place a bomb at the Free Iran conference<sup>20</sup>, and Albania severing diplomatic ties with Iran in 2022 after an alleged Iranian state-sponsored hacking of Albanian state electronic system.<sup>21</sup>

Therefore, it can be said that the Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization is a very different group compared to what it was in its initial years. It has retained bits of the initial ideology but has mostly turned from a major guerrilla Islamist Marxist organization to a tightly controlled exiled group with the Rajavis' personality cult. The MKO also went from attacking US citizens in Iran in 1970s to allying with hawkish US politicians, which can be explained with the changing geopolitics. The group has remained loyal to its objective, which is the overthrow of the Islamic Republic, and has kept its relevance via lobbying and anti-Islamic Republic campaigns as well as with the Islamic Republic branding it as its top-tier enemies.

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<sup>14</sup> Abrahamian, *Radical Islam: The Iranian Mojahedin*, 196.

<sup>15</sup> Goulka et al, *The Mujahedin-e Khalq in Iraq: A Policy Conundrum*, 91.

<sup>16</sup> Karcic, Harun. "How Albania Ended up in Iran's Cyber Crosshairs." *Foreign Policy*, November 8, 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/11/08/albania-iran-cyberattack-mek-us-israel/>.

<sup>17</sup> Tabrizy, Nilo. "M.E.K.: The Group John Bolton Wants to Rule Iran." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, May 7, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/07/world/middleeast/john-bolton-regime-change-iran.html>.

<sup>18</sup> "Iran and Nuclear Weapons." C-Span Network website, August 14, 2002. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?172005-1%2Firan-nuclear-weapons>.

<sup>19</sup> Abrahamian. *Tortured Confessions: Prisons and Public Recantations in Modern Iran*, 147.

<sup>20</sup> "France Bomb Plot: Iran Diplomat Assadollah Assadi Sentenced to 20 Years." *BBC News*. BBC, February 4, 2021. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-55931633>.

<sup>21</sup> Karcic, Harun. "How Albania Ended up in Iran's Cyber Crosshairs."