

The collective action of Mujahedeen-e Khalq Organization (MKO): evolution, interests and current situation

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Abstract

For over three decades MKO has survived and operated against the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran supported by Saddam Hussein (in eighties) and for several personalities of the U.S. and some European governments in nowadays under National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI). Led by the charismatic Maryam Rajavi, wife of the movement's official leader Massoud Rajavi, MKO promotes the establishment of "The Democratic Islamic Republic of Iran", a project that displays that Islam, democracy and human rights can be implemented in "a future and new Iranian state. However, its history full of political treachery, terrorist acts and harassment against its own members, casts doubt on the authenticity of its political project which, with the unfavorable international environment faced since the departure of the U.S. troops from Iraq in 2009, questions its legitimacy and future as a political organization.

Keywords: *MKO, National Council of Resistance, Massoud Rajavi, Maryam Rajavi.*

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From Revolutionaries to enemies of the revolution

It was under the Nehzat-e Azadi-ye Iran (Iran Freedom Movement) led by Mehdi Bazargan and Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleqani¹, where emerged the seed of Mujahedin e Khalq Organization or "Fighters of the People of Iran (MKO)² and others guerrilla organizations formed by middle class people interested in fighting against politics promoted by the Shah of Iran after the coup against Mohammed Mossadeq in 1953.

The MKO was born with a Shiite Islamic speech which adapted the philosophy of some Marxist revolutionary thinkers such as Che Guevara and Mao Tse Tung (besides the nationalist influence of Franz Fanon) with the clear goal of "creating, based in the deepest religious traditions of the Iranian people, a revolutionary movement to eliminate social injustice and moral pollution of imperialism, thereby achieving relative class society (*nizam al-Tawhid*)"³.

The experiment of bringing together Marxism and Islam gave different results from other interpretations of Islamic religion in those days. MKO created, for example, its own interpretation of the Quran and its own version of the Kitab al Balagha (Peak of eloquence) in order to make statements such as the fact that every Muslim was a guerrilla man and not just a believer, that it was necessary to teach religious men how to

¹ Mahmud Taleqani was a man of religion with a very high reputation and legitimacy in Iran during the seventies. Some analysts have questioned the success of the 1979 revolution without his cooperation since enjoyed the support of several political fronts, from the nationalist, religious and some Marxist guerrillas including the Mujeheden to secular Marxists as Fedayeen. Much of the "social harmonization" that faced the Shah of Iran's revolution was through the work and speeches of Taleqani who months after breaking ground continued to influence the consolidation of the new Islamic government after a public appeal to the people of Iran to ratify the twelve-point declaration which established the leadership of Khomeini. Later, Taleqani expressed concern about a government of one man in Iran with his position against efforts to create a consultative council popular. Born in 1910 and died in September 1979 and today is remembered as a pillar of the revolution and as a man who used to say that the true Islamic government would be one that will work for people and their social enforcement. See further in Vakili, Abdollah., "In Search of Revolutionary Islam. The case of Taleqani and the Mojahedin", The Muslim World, (88), 1998, pp. 22.

² MKO was formed between 1964 and 1965 by many members between them Saeed Mohsen, Ali Asghar, Mohammed Badi Zadegan and Hanafi Nezhad. They studied the forms of protest around the world and classify MKO between the so called block of "intellectual and social criticism" which played an important role as Islam itself in political scenarios.

³ Jungyun, Gill & De Fronzo, James., "A Comparative Framework for the Analysis of International Student Movements", *Social Movements Studies*, (8) 3: 2009, p. 18.

convert Islam religion in a revolutionary force between others⁴. Despite this and before revolution, MKO approached to Khomeini's team through Ayatollah Rafsanjani who at those days used to say:

*"We consider any form of struggle against SAVAK as a blessing"*⁵

The times after the revolutionary process changed this alliance. Ideologically, the conflict with the MKO focused on the concept of "Islamic state" where *Velayat al Faqih* Khomeini's system was not compatible with the project of *Nizam al Tawhid* causing MKO to take up arms against Khomeini himself and carried out several attacks against the new government officials and even, unfortunately, innocent people inside Iran. MKO which was led by Massoud Rajavi in that period, had become in the enemy of revolution in a few years.

Iraq: from enemies of the revolution to terrorist organization

During the eighties, MKO estimated half a million supporters just in Tehran⁶. The strength of the movement led to its leaders to create the National Council of Resistance (NCRI), an attempt to bring a conglomerate of groups that, as in the revolution, have felt the same objective but now against Khomeini. This organization had the support of groups and personalities of the size of Bani Sadr and members of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran, who would carry out their main activities from Paris under the chairmanship of Maryam Rajavi⁷.

NCRI began to promote a political agenda with different objectives such as freedom of speech, press without censorship, the abolition of the courts established by

⁴ Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization., *Sharh Mokhtasar-e Zendegi-e Inghelabi Panj Shahid AZ Sazeman-e Mojahedin-e Khalq*, Teheran, Mojahedin-e Khalq Publications, 1974, pp. 13-14.

⁵ Ali Akbar, Hashemi-Rafsanjani., *Engelab ya besat-e jadid* (Revolución o nueva misión), Qom, Yafar Publishers, 1985.

⁶ Singleton, A., *Saddam's Private Army. How Rajavi Changed Iran's Mojahedin from Armed Revolutionaries to an Armed Cult*, UK, Drukkerik, 2003, pp. 210.

⁷ Rajavi, Maryam., *Maryam Rajavi: her life, her thoughts*. NCRI, Paris, 1995, pp. 24.

Khomeini, the guarantee of women's rights, the abolition of differences of belief and gender and the pursuit of a free market economy⁸.

In 1986 Massoud Rajavi agreed an alliance with Saddam Hussein's government in order to promote his cause. This tactic would have counterproductive effects in the internal social base of MKO where public opinion not fully understood this decision (since the Iraq conflict had impregnated nationalistic feelings and internal cohesion to most Iranians).⁹ The evidence was clear, Massoud Rajavi was raised to change the strategy of armed resistance from Iran to Iraq, particularly from the Ashraf Camp, situated in the north of the Arab country, a place that had been donated by Saddam Hussein not only to be used as a residence for MKO members (most of whom had left Iran) but also for military activities, administrative duties as translations and even personal assistance through the National Liberation Army (NLA), the armed wing of MKO.

At that time, it is estimated that the MKO had a network of between 30 000 and 50 000 active in the NLA, the group responsible for a series of attacks against the Islamic government both inside and outside Iran. The most striking event of these operations is known by the simultaneous attack over eleven Iranian embassies in 1992¹⁰.

Attacks along the nineties brought the U.S. and Europe to declare the group a terrorist organization¹¹. Moreover, persecution by the intelligence apparatus of the Islamic Republic has intensified given the brutality and effectiveness of MKO terrorist attacks¹².

⁸ Cafarella, Nicole., *Mujahidee-e Khalq (MEK) Dossier*, Center for Policing Terrorism, Washington, 2005, p. 5.

⁹ Senator Robert Torricelli. Statement made at a press conference on Capitol Hill on 8 June 1995. Cited in Brie, André et al., *People's Mojahedin of Iran. Mission Report*. Friends of a Free Iran of European Parliament, Bruselas, 2005, pág. 23.

¹⁰ Information, Analysis and Advice for the Parliament. "Research Note: Behind the Mujahidee-e Khalq (MeK)", *Department of the Parliamentary Library*, (43), 2003. pp 1-2.

¹¹ The U.S government did it in 1997 and European Union in 2002.

¹² Davari, Abbas., *About MOIS Publication "Saddam's Private Army" And a Glance at Emma Nicholson's activities against Iranian Resistance*, Amirkhiz Publications, Ashraf, 2005, pág. 13.

The geopolitics of human rights: from terrorist to freedom fighters?

However, the status of Saddam Hussein would change after the 9/11 events and MKO position would suffer a misfortune because the ally that had allowed it to operate for more than two decades was at risk of falling. Thus, the NCRI made an attempt to shield itself against international situation leading to the MKO to give a media coup, this was, the filter of information on the Iranian nuclear program in 2002 saying that the Islamic Republic was in possession of the necessary components to build a nuclear bomb which, according to its information, could have been achieved by the end of that year¹³. The purpose of this leak was win U.S. support by offering to provide information on the Iranian issue while its time in Iraq was increasingly standing out.

Anyway, MKO face bad times during operation "Enduring Freedom" in which the U.S. bombed some of the bases of the NLA, forcing it to disarm and declare itself a ceasefire in April 2003. These events coincided with the arrest of Maryam Rajavi in Paris and another 165 leaders of the NCRI in June of that year on charges of terrorism in Europe¹⁴.

The ceasefire did not mean the MKO. According to a report of an institute specialized intelligence, there was considerable confusion with regard to MKO in the U.S. because, officially, it was a group listed as a terrorist organization with which, however, U.S. forces had entered into a ceasefire as a "hostile force"¹⁵. It was so until 2004, when the Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld would determine the legal status of the organization classifying it as "protected persons" (rather than prisoners of war) under the terms of the 4th. Geneva Convention on the Rights of War¹⁶.

¹³ Squassoni, Sharon, *Iran's Nuclear Program: Recent Developments*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, RS21592, August 15, 2003. Pp 1-2.

¹⁴ MKO Watch. "The arrest of Maryam Rajavi in France and the Court case against her", *MKO Watch*, available at www.mekwatch.org accessed December 27, 2010.

¹⁵ Goulka., J., et al., *Mujahedeen e Khalq in Iraq: a policy of Conundrum*, RAND, Santa Monica, 2009. P.7.

¹⁶ The 4th Geneva Convention, in its Article 4, deals with the protection of civilians in times of war and under occupation by an occupying power. The same article defines as protected persons "any civilian who is under the stewardship of the occupier and who are not nationals of the occupied country". In this case, the MKO residents in Ashraf

But the biggest diplomatic success of the organization from its exile in Iraq has been its removal from the official list of terrorist organizations of the EU in January 2009¹⁷, an event that allowed it to collect a new identity and image within Europe, a region where most fans would report from this event up to now. The survival of MKO would commit fight against the Islamic Republic under a different framework, this means, a “new group of pro-democracy secular court (and not a court armed Islamic-Marxist anymore) that would opt for non-violent methods”.

After such diplomatic triumphs, MKO continued its efforts to create an important lobby in Europe and the U.S. through NCRI (although in the U.S it is still considered a terrorist organization)¹⁸. Among the main groups it can mentioned the Iran Policy Committee based in Washington and the Friends of a Free Iran, the latter within the European Parliament with MEPs from Belgium, Spain and Holland. Among its new methods used today it includes the use of the Internet as the main medium of communication, printed propaganda, discussion forums and seminars as well as radio and television programs on private channels¹⁹.

However, the situation within the NCRI is not entirely clear, especially with regard to the status of Ashraf Camps residents, (estimated in 3 500people) because there has been information collected from Human Rights Organizations where some Ashraf residents accuse MKO leaders to deprive them of freedoms and even to lead them to brutal punishments such as imprisonment and deprivation of food thoroughly “if you do not obey the orders of their superior elements”²⁰.

are Iranian nationals who are in that situation and who have applied this legislation because Iran, the country to which he belongs, is a signatory to the convention. Additionally, Article 3 of the same document states that protected persons must be treated humanely and not be subject to act of coercion, punishment or retaliation.

See the all text of the Convention at <http://www.icrc.org/web/spa/sitespa0.nsf/html/5TDKYK>

¹⁷ Mark, John, “EU takes Iran opposition group off terrorist list”, *Reuters*, January 26 2009, available at <http://uk.reuters.com/article/asiaCrisis/idUKLQ200287>, accessed February 30, 2011.

¹⁸ See the last reply to MKO by the U.S. Condoleezza Rice number 6480 in Federal Register, 74(7), January 12, 2009.

¹⁹ Chen, Hsinchun. et al., “Uncovering the Dark Web: A case study of Jihad on the Web”; *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and technology*, 59(8): 2008, pp. 1347-1359.

²⁰ Human Rights Watch, *No Exit: Human Rights Abuses Inside the MKO Camps* (May 2005). Available at <http://hrw.org/backgrounder/mena/iran0505/iran0505.pdf>, accessed February 16, 2011.

Ashraf's situation is complicated because the implementation of the 4 th. Geneva Convention require the U.S. role as an occupying power in Iraq, role that, from January 1, 2009, do not exist anymore due to the control of the territory has passed into the hands of the new Iraqi government. So, a thing has changed dramatically. The new government of Nour al Maliki, has only two options for the residents: to be repatriated to Iran or to find a third country for resettlement. The point is clear: Iraq does not want the MKO in Ashraf and the push for its exile is growing every day²¹.

Some final comments

MKO have survived because of the alliances that have been promoted throughout its history. At first, Marxism gave the possibility of bringing a considerable number of intellectuals against the Shah as well as they used Islam to be closer to Khomeini. Today, they have adopted human rights discourse for approaching to U.S. and Europe following the same strategy of many years ago, that is, to find a powerful ally to help them seize power in Iran.

The efforts of MKO currently rely on two things: to discredit the Islamic Republic by the lack of freedom among its people and the mistakes made in its domestic and foreign policy, and to achieve, as it did with the EU two years ago, that U.S. remove them from its official terrorist organizations list to gain more legal legitimacy in their actions, which would help to erase the historical memory of the series of actions that have tarnished the organization who have questioned the veracity of your project as a political alternative in Iran.

MKO do not enjoy popularity inside Iran. Its heyday has passed and the support they had in revolutionary times has almost completely disappeared due to, on the one hand, the resentment that caused its alliance with Saddam Hussein in the mid-eighties

You can also see Human Rights Watch, *Statement on Responses to Human Rights Watch Report on Abuses by the Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization (MKO)*, available at http://hrw.org/english/docs/2006/02/15/iran12678_txt.htm , accessed February 16, 2011.

²¹ BBC News Online, "Iraq releases Iranian dissidents", *BBC Online*, October 7, 2009, available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8295323.stm, accessed March 10, 2011.

and, by the other, its position against nuclear program (while the program is seen as a legitimate right by most of the Iranian population). This will not be well seen by the Iranian population, especially in young people, sector that has turned more to see movements like Mousavi (the so-called green movement) or the old Movement for Freedom Iran, as *more serious* opposition movements than the promulgated by the enigmatic group of Rajavi.

Finally, there are still some things to look forward to elucidate the organization's future black. The U.S. refusal to remove them from its blacklist of terrorist organizations is one of them as well as the current situation of the residents of Ashraf, issues that need more detailed discussion in a separate work, an effort that goes beyond the objective of this short paper.

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