

## MEK in nutshell

MEK (Mujahedin e Khalegh [People's Holy Warrior]) or PMOI (People's Mujahedin Organisation of Iran) was established by three University students in 1965; after uprising of 1963 against Shah's regime. Professor Ervand Abrahamian in his book called Iranian Mujahidin describes composition of the original members of the MEK as: 'Of the fifteen in the Central Committee and the Ideological Team, all were born between 1938 and 1948, and most between 1943 and 1946. Many of them had therefore been in their late teens at the time of the 1963 Uprising and in their early twenties when the discussion group first formed. All but two of the fifteen had attended university; six had graduated from the Technical College. Nine were engineers. Thirteen had attended Tehran University. Almost all came from lower-middle-class homes: twelve came from clerical or religious bazaari homes.'<sup>i</sup>

Again Abrahamian describes MEK's ideology as: 'a combination of Islam and Marxism'. He adds: MEK 'From Shii Islam they borrowed 'notions of martyrdom'; from classical Marxist theories of class struggle and historical determinism; and neo-Marxist concepts of armed struggle, guerrilla warfare and revolutionary heroism. From Bazargan {The first prime minister of Iran after the revolution and founder of 'freedom movement' where MEK was originated from.}; Taleqani (One of the great Ayatollahs and a founder member of 'freedom movement')<sup>ii</sup> and Ouzegan, the Mujahidin derived the view that Islam was not only compatible with reason, science and modernity, but was also the main world religion that whole-heartedly favoured human equality, social justice and national liberation. From Marx they obtained their perception of economics, history, and society, especially the concept of the class struggle. From Lenin they acquired the economic interpretation of imperialism and revolutionary contempt for all forms of reformism. From Che Guevara and Debray, they learnt the contemporary arguments about Third World dependency and the New Left polemics against the old communist parties, especially against the old school's preference for organizations over spontaneity; trade unions over guerrilla bands; industrial workers over radical intellectuals; tactical alliances over uncompromising zeal; and of course, the political struggle over the armed struggle {Of course those familiar with MEK; know that these days they are not talking about any of these concepts, once an integral part of their ideology.} Finally, from Marighella and Guillen (a Spanish anarchist living in South America) they obtained a modern version of the Bakuninist strategy for making revolution. According to this strategy, once a small but well-organized and highly dedicated group of armed revolutionaries dared openly to assault the authorities, their heroic example inspires others to follow suit until eventually the whole state disintegrates {The last time they used this argument was in 1988 when they predict if with their few thousand combatant, they attack Iran from Iraq and with help of Iraqi army, people will follow them and they can create an avalanche overthrowing the Iranian government. We all know the result of this prediction of Mr. Rajavi; resulting death of more than thousand combatants, one quarter of MEK's members at the time.} In this way, the nineteenth-century Russian anarchist notion of 'propaganda by deed' entered Iran and inevitably reinforced the traditional Shii concept of heroic martyrdom.'<sup>iii</sup>

MEK's strategy and tactics therefore as other 'revolutionary organisation of fifties and sixties was based on guerrilla war some starting from villages and others as MEK from cities. They believed by disturbing peace and stability of the Shah's regime, by even show of their heroic action and their

martyrs, they can force people into a revolution against Shah and his advocates the United States, UK and Israel.

In 1971 before their first operation, almost all the MEK's members and leadership were arrested. Later, in 1972, all the members of the central committee were executed, except for Masoud Rajavi whose sentence was commuted to life imprisonment.

By mid-1975 those Mujahidin who were out of prison, suddenly and without any visible warning, published a vehemently anti-Islamic tract, indicating a change in their ideology to Marxism. From then on there were two rival Mujahidin organizations. One was the Muslim Mujahidin, mainly in prison, which refused to relinquish the original name and accused the opposing faction of gaining control through a bloody coup d'état. After the Islamic Revolution, the group that had been under the leadership of Masoud Rajavi in prison, managed to reclaim the original title. The opposing, Marxist Mujahidin, had merged with some Maoist groups during the revolution to form the Paykar organisation, but eventually, in the mid '80s, their leaders publicly announced the dissolution of the group.

After the 1979 Iranian revolution, MEK's policy to recruit new members, at least on the surface, changed into peaceful and political activities, with slogans such as 'Death to Imperialism, Death to Zionism, and long live freedom'. Due to these changes and the group's past history of struggles against the Shah's dictatorship, their support for Ayatollah Khomeini (calling him Imam, father and the leader), and with more than fifty martyrs, MEK soon changed from a small guerrilla organisation into a popular movement. It was now able to attract tens of thousands of young people, mainly students from both schools and universities, to its public meetings.

On 20 June 1981, Rajavi, the leader of MEK, believing he could be the Iranian Lenin and repeat the Bolshevik's October Revolution, asked all MEK's members and supporters to pour into the streets of Tehran and overthrow the government. He thought that when these young students began marching in Tehran, people would follow them and they could have their velvet revolution, forcing the revolutionary government to surrender the leadership of the country to him. Members and supporters followed his order, but the rest of the population did not. The result was violence from both sides and the arrest and execution of many young supporters, many of them under 18 years of age.

By the next day, 21 June, MEK had changed from a popular organisation into a clandestine, terrorist one, isolated from the wider society. Two years later, the MEK publication, *Mojahed* (4 July 1983), claimed the number of top officials and supporters of the new Iranian government killed by MEK as 2,800, and announced (8 September 1983) the names and particulars of 7,746 people, members and supporters of MEK and other organisations, killed by either armed struggle or firing squad.

In July 1981, Rajavi and many top members of MEK escaped from Iran for refuge in Paris. To survive, MEK, with terrorism as its only strategy and tactic, and in total isolation from the wider society, had no choice but to complete its transformation into an extreme, violent and destructive cult employing the most sophisticated methods of mind control and 'brainwashing'.

In 1985, Rajavi, in Paris, married Maryam (the wife of his First Lieutenant, Mehdi Abrishamchii), and announced the beginning of a process called the 'Ideological Revolution' for which he asked all members to accept him as their ideological or absolute leader. The processes involved in the 'ideological revolution' saw MEK completing its metamorphosis into a destructive cult. Professor Ervand Abrahamian has explained this change of MEK into a cult, as follows:

'By mid-1987, the Mujahidin Organization had all the main attributes of a cult. It had its own revered leader whom it referred to formally as the Rahbar (Guide or leader) and informally as the Imam-e Hal (The present Imam) - this title was strikingly similar to that of Imam-e Zaman (Imam of the Age) which Shii throughout the ages had used to describe their expected Messiah. The organization had granted unlimited powers to its charismatic leader: Rajavi, as if to flaunt his powers, with a mere stroke of the pen in late 1986 dissolved the entire Central Committee and set up instead a 500-person Central Council. The Mujahidin had created a rigid hierarchy in which instructions flowed from above and the primary responsibility of the rank and file was to obey without asking too many questions. It had produced its own handbooks, censorship index, world outlook, historical interpretations and, of course, distinct ideology - an ideology which, despite the organization's denials, tried to synthesize the religious message of Shiism with the social science of Marxism. It had its own slogans, insignia, icons, relics, ceremonies, rituals, and liturgy. It had formulated its own esoteric terminology injecting new meaning into old Islamic words and sometimes coining entirely new terms. It had its own history, martyrs, hagiographies, honoured families. It even had its own calendar. ... The organization had adopted its own dress code and physical appearance. It had developed an all-consuming hatred for the clerical regime and, at the same time, the burning conviction that its own radical version of Shiism was the one and only true interpretation of Islam. It had begun to see the world as divided into two contradictory forces: on one side was the Mujahidin, the vanguard of the select, and those willing to accept its leadership; on the other side was Khomeini, the forces of darkness, and anyone refusing to accept the Mujahidin leadership. It had set up in Iraq its own communes, printing presses, militia, training camps, barracks, clinics, schools, and even prisons, known as 're-education centres'. The Mujahidin had formulated its own vision of the forthcoming new revolution: according to this vision, the Islamic Republic would inevitably collapse because of mass unpopularity; the people would then pour into the streets with slogan 'Iran is Rajavi, Rajavi Is Iran', and miraculously the Mujahidin would be able to establish the Democratic Islamic Republic. Clearly by 1988 very few outside the inner circles of the true believers accepted such a far-fetched notion of the future. As the New Revolution took on the shape of the second coming, the Mujahidin became increasingly a world unto itself.<sup>iv</sup>

In 1986, Rajavi left Paris for Baghdad, to lead MEK in fighting against their country, side by side with Saddam Hussein and Iraqi forces. Between 1986 and 1989 they fought against the Iranian army alongside Iraqis. As a result thousands of members were killed and at the same time they claimed to have killed more than fifty thousands of Iranians.

In 1990, Rajavi was in deadlock due to a ceasefire between Iran and Iraq and after the loss of a quarter of his followers, he announced the second phase of the 'Ideological Revolution'. He ordered all members to divorce their spouses. A year later to end all family ties within the organisation, with the excuse of the war in Iraq, Rajavi ordered all children (800) to be moved from Iraq to Europe and America, to be adopted by MEK supporters.

In 1994, Rajavi announced a further phase of the 'Ideological Revolution' called 'self divorce'. During this process all members were forced to surrender their individuality and their personality to the group and change into some kind of 'ant-like' human, following orders of the leaders according to their instinct.

After the fall of Saddam Hussein, MEK was forced to surrender its arms to the American forces, leaving almost 3,400 remaining members of the group in Iraq, waiting to see what was going to happen to them and where they were going next. While Maryam Rajavi (Rajavi's wife and co-leader of the cult), left Baghdad for Paris, Masoud Rajavi vanished; with nobody except for some high-ranking members knowing where he was.

On 17 June 2003, Maryam Rajavi and 150 MEK members were arrested by the French police. Following MEK orders, about ten members set themselves on fire in front of several French embassies in protest; two died<sup>v</sup>, and as a result the French authorities surrendered and freed the prisoners.<sup>vi</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Abrahamian Ervand; 'The Iranian Mojahedin'; Yale University Press; 1989. P: 91

<sup>ii</sup> Any remarks within { } are ours.

<sup>iii</sup> Abrahamian Ervand; 'The Iranian Mojahedin'; Yale University Press; 1989. P: 100

<sup>iv</sup> Abrahamian Ervand; 'The Iranian Mojahedin'; Yale University Press; 1989. PP: 260. 261

<sup>v</sup> Goulka, Jeremiah, Hansell, Lydia, Wilke, Elizabeth and Larson, Judith. 2009. *The Mujahedin-e Khalq in Iraq: A Policy Conundrum*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND. Available at: <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG871> [accessed: 30 October 2012] PP: 75, 76

<sup>vi</sup> or further information, see Abrahamian 'Iranian Mojahedin' (1989); Goulka, Jeremiah, Hansell, Lydia, Wilke, Elizabeth and Larson, Judith. 2009. *The Mujahedin-e Khalq in Iraq: A Policy Conundrum*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND. Available at: <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG871> [accessed: 30 October 2012]. and the author's memoir Banisadr, Masoud. 2004. *Masoud: Memoirs of an Iranian Rebel*. London: Saqi Books.