ROLE AND EVOLUTION
OF THE MOJAHEDIN E-KALGH

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Various names and acronyms are behind the general structure of the group historically known as Mojahedin e-Khalg. PMOI (People’s Mojahedin Organization of Iran), NLA or NLAI (National Liberation Army of Iran), NCR (National Council of Resistance), NCRI (National Council of resistance of Iran), MISS (Muslim Iranian Student’s Society) are only few of the various brands adopted by the Mojahedin e-Khalg.

Despite this multiform structure, however, the pyramid of power behind the MEK (or MKO Mojahedin e-Khalg Organization) is quite small and precisely identified: Massoud and Maryam Rajavi.

THE BIRTH OF MEK

There are very few precise details concerning the birth of the Mojahedin e-Khalg in Iran. Strict intelligence control and repression by Savak officers and the general change in hierarchy following the first phase of the Islamic Revolution, resulted in the loss of many of the historical records concerning this organization.

MEK’s original structure could be – at least in part – re-conducted to the few survivors of the Liberation Movement of Iran. This was a pro-Mossadeq political entity established in Iran at the beginning of the Sixties and crushed by Savak after a failed uprising in 1963 also backed by the radical cleric Mahmoud Taleqani.

Founded in the first mid of the 60s, the primary structure of MEK was formed as a students’ organization of Islamic-Marxist orientation. Such a particular hybrid had its roots in a sort of diaspora within the communist forces in Iran, following the Soviet occupation of the country during and after the Second World War.

Mohammad Hanif-Nezhad, Saied Mohsen and Ali-Asghar Badi-Zadegan are today considered the founders of the group, in 1965, although after a six-year period of incubation.

Traditionally coming from the most educated and skilled segment of society and of the new Iranian bourgeoisie, the young cadre of the Mojahedin e-Khalg started massively and courageously protesting against the Shah and the Imperial regime in the late Sixties.

Unlike the Communists of the Tudeh party, MEK activities were characterized by its spectacular dimension. MEK’s goal was to show a tenacious capability to the security forces of the Shah, with no space for useless political debates and dialogue.
MEK strategy was clearly that of demonstrating a fierce and concrete ability to hit the heart of the system, showing the masses the weakness of the Imperial regime and the fragility of the Shah.

Such a scheme, clearly reflecting the traditional attitude and organizational structure of the “combatant groups” of the Sixties and the Seventies, could not be interpreted as a purely and merely local experience.

MEK members had solid international experience, as students and as individual travellers to Europe, and it would have been unlikely not to contact European groups or Soviet cadre in order to gain concrete support. Techniques and methods later adopted largely confirm such an assumption.

In 1971, Savak promoted an intensive repression against the movement, eventually killing some of its members and sending many others to jail. Well conceived security measures, mainly deriving from a typical cell structure, avoided massive destruction of the movements. Doing so, however, sparked the emergence of a new generation of militants, gradually undermining the initial and basic ideological substrate of MEK.

At the beginning of the revolution, in an attempt to stop violence and save the monarchy, the Shah released some of the MEK prisoners, who soon after however joined their former comrades and the revolutionary forces.

Between 1975 and 1979, MEK groups became very popular within urban areas. The old generation of combatants, still strictly linked to the ideological principles of marxism and within the rigid scheme of scism, made all possible efforts to gain “hearts and souls” of the local population. Leaflets, pamphlets and improvised speeches in public places, were part of a constant action to raise funds and consensus among the population.

During the revolution, MEK groups were certainly among the most active and effective in terms of action. Given their Islamic-Marxist orientation, they were also a sort of trait d’union between the various forces, especially between the radical religious and the communists of the Tudeh party.

Their contribution to the success of the revolution is undeniable, in certain cases a decisive factor. MEK’s initial political and operational ability is also demonstrated by the fact that they avoided any form of premature confrontation with the religious leaders, soon after the revolution.

Their political banishment and following condemnation as an outlaw structure dates back to 1981, and there were two precise reasons behind this event.

First, the new ruling class and especially the Ayatollah Khomeini, were not interested at all in having such a political counterpart. The role and the popularity of the Mojahedin e-Khalq were at their height, and the risk of a secular or liberal diversion was considered by the religious leaders not only possible, but above all likely. Provoking MEK, was then the only option to force them again acting as combatant.
The second reason is internal. The first generation of Mojahedin was heavily decimated by SAVAK during the last years of the Pahlavi regime. Those who survived the first phase of repression and torture were soon challenged by the new cadres, often less committed ideologically and more interested in political domination.

The combination of these two factors inevitably provoked a clash between religious forces and Mojahedin, eventually terminating with a new, and if possible worse, phase of repression and the need to flee or to run into secrecy.

**POST REVOLUTIONARY MEK AND THE RISE OF THE MOJAHEDIN’S ARMY**

With the end of the brief political participation of MEK to the post revolutionary Iran, the greatest part of its members left the country, while a small portion of them – those not directly compromised and still under cell’s coverage – remained in the country.

The elder generations and those not willing to join the armed structure in the military struggle against Iran, expatriated – often with the status of refugees – to Europe and to the United States.

At the end of 1981 MEK’s main structure was therefore divided mainly among Europe, North America and the Middle East.

They spent some years in France, hosted and openly financed by the French government. They set up their headquarter near Paris, trying to gather all the anti-Iranian forces in exile, to be eventually recognised – at least for some years – as the only and real opposition movement abroad.

Part of the young combatant structure later accepted Saddam Hussein’s offer of asylum and, subsequently, agreed to constitute a military force theoretically autonomous and equipped by the Iraqi army.

The cells and adherents remaining in Iran were quite few and unskilled. Many MEK members blamed directly Masssoud Rajavi for such a condition, since he imposed to the well trained cadre of the group to reach him in Paris.

Nevertheless they were able to conduct an armed struggle within the country characterized by spectacular initial results. As in the case, in 1981, of the bombs exploded in the head office of the Islamic Republic Party and the Premier’s office, killing some 70 high-ranking Iranian officials, including chief Justice Ayatollah Mohammad Beheshti, President Mohammad-Ali Rajaei, and the Premier, Mohammad-Javad Bahonar.

Despite some great and visible success in Iran through armed or bomb attacks to the regime’s officials and structure, soon after repression and lack of support from abroad provoked a major downturn in actions.

The greatest part of MEK activities were then moved to Europe, and gradually transformed merely in political actions.
MASSOUD RAJAVI

Very little historical information is available on Massoud Rajavi, mainly due to the last twenty years of exaltation of the governing couple. Massoud Rajavi (Tehran, 1948) joined the Mojahedin in 1966, when he was already a student in political law at Tehran University.

He was selected by Mohammad Hanif-Nezhad, and very soon became one of the most active members of the ideological faction, being made member of the Central Committee in 1969.

Massoud’s political activity had been recurrently described as individualist and unprejudiced, and above all, his ideological and political line had always been based on the need for “total victory”. This means that the base of Massoud’s ideological structure is largely founded on a pure and revolutionary concept of Marxism, along with a personal interpretation of the Islamic principles. These are mainly constituted by parallelisms and forced interpretations of Islam, along with a generic respect and approval for the traditional and pure behavioural code of conduct.

“Total victory” then means specifically “total war” or, in other words, no room for adversaries. Massoud’s thought is then still based on the negation of compromise and of the possibility of transforming Iran from inside through a political – and peaceful – struggle.

In 1971, after the massive arrests made by Savak, he was the only surviving member of the Central Committee, probably also due to pressures exercised by his brother abroad on the international community.

Many Mojahedin and non-MEK members accused Rajavi of betrayal in such occasion, but it is likely that the only reason why he survived the firing squad in 1971 is due to the position and the protest of his brother abroad – he was an Ambassador in Africa.

He also survived the 1975 MEK split, when some members of the group announced a reform of MEK into a pure marxist organisation, refusing religious instances and starting a fierce and bloody fight among the free members. In this occasion, from the prison where he was jailed, he issued a proclamation for the restoration of the basic principles and the pure Marxist-Islamic roots of the movement. Doing so, also because he was the only survived member of the original leading group, he became the new leader of the “real” Mojahedin e-Kalg, gathering the greatest part of the loyal forces behind him.

In 1979, when he was freed – along with many other prisoners – he took part in the last days of the revolution. His prestige therefore quickly rose. He began challenging Khomeini directly, while gaining consensus within its own structure and among the masses. What was clearly becoming evident, was that Khomeini was concretely establishing the Islamic Republic, and that it was quite
simple for Rajavi to promote and present a moderate Islamic model, as an alternative to the rigid and repressive structure of the Islamic Republic. But the first great mistake made by Rajavi, was that of trying an independent and not subordinate political role, sharing the arena with Khomeini.

Despite Khomeini’s initial opening for a political participation of the Mojahedin in the sharing of power, although minimal, Rajavi refused to order the lay down of MEK’s armed units, being eventually accused of being a counter-revolutionary force. With such an explicit consensus, Hizballah’s (Party of God) units loyal to the Leader started intensifying their attacks on the MEK groups, in order to provoke an armed answer.

It was in this context, without any practical possible form of support by the President Bani Sadr and the Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan, that Rajavi risked his last card. On June 20th 1981, Mojahedin organized a massive demonstration, planned as a show of force and to gather additional support within the population. The intervention of Hizballah’s forces and other paramilitary units, provoked an armed confrontation and the direct action of all the armed revolutionary units in order to crush what since then has been called the “failed golpe of 30 Khordad”. This was the last chapter of MEK activities in Iran, and the beginning of a radical transformation of the group.

A political group was established in 1981, based in Paris, within a more general context of alliances with the former President Bani Sadr. The name of the party, National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), is just the first of a long series of names and acronyms composing the “political arm” of the Mojahedin e-Khalq. Created as a mirror, to show the West that a democratic Iran still exist, the NCRI was in reality organized and managed more as a personal reign of Rajavi. The alliance with Bani Sadr ended in March 1983, and was essentially provoked by Rajavi’s growing interest for an agreement with Saddam Hussein.

In Paris Rajavi was able to gain support from French authorities, and at the same time he started organizing its military units along with its political and “civil” structure, mainly devoted to raise funds and consensus all over the Western world.

In 1987 the National Liberation Army was formed and eventually based in Iraq, taking part to the last phases of the Iran-Iraq war. MEK military units had been accused, by both Iranian and post-Saddam Iraqis, to have assisted in suppressing internal Iraqi opposition, as well as to have acted in certain cases as a security force for Saddam’s regime.

MEK FORCES IN IRAQ

Military units of the Mojhaedin e-Khalq based in Iraq under the flag of the National Liberation Army, were essentially based in seven facilities starting from
1986. Four were in the Baghdad area (the headquarter, Camp Ashraf at Khalis, Camp Anzali at Jalawla and Camp Bonyad Alavi), one in Kut (Camp Faezeh), one in Basra (Camp Habib) and one in Al-Amarah (Camp Homayoun).

NLA forces took part in the last phases of the Iran-Iraq war essentially operating across the Iranian border, carrying out missions against isolated garrisons and secondary military targets.

In some occasions they contributed to more important general operations along with regular Iraqi troops, and rarely they operated alone in long range missions well inside the Iranian territory. In one of these operations MEK forces conquered the city of Mehran, surprisingly demonstrating to be able to penetrate well inside the Iranian territory.

After the end of the war they continued to support Saddam Hussein's regime, eventually deciding to back it also in 1991 during the first Gulf War. It is not clear if NLA forces participated in the invasion of Kuwait and if later they were involved in any ground operation during the allied re-conquest. For sure MEK units helped Iraqi forces in re-establishing order in south Iraq during the Shiite revolt of 1991.

Activities during the remaining part of the Nineties were rare and mainly concentrated against small border garrisons.

In 2003, just after the fall of Saddam Hussein, almost 4,000 NLA forces immediately surrendered to the U.S. V Corps. Mainly concentrated in the area of camp Ashraf, NLA's heavy weapons were taken by U.S. Army personnel, and munitions depots destroyed.

**TODAY'S STRUCTURE OF THE MOJAHEDIN E-KHALG**

Since 1986 Mojahedin e-Khalq has adopted a complex organizational matrix. The new organizational chart was based on a political structure, officially entitled to represent and govern the whole group, based in Europe and with branches in North America, Africa, Middle East and European countries other than France. Then there was the military structure, based in Iraq and articulated on a group of men and women with an eteogeneous military background, equipped with light and heavy weapons provided by Iraq.

Officially today the leader of the political structure is Maryam Rajavi, wife of Massoud and historical member of the group.

The truth however is that MEK has been transformed in a sort of closed and vertical structure totally dominated by Massoud and Maryam Rajavi, where Massoud still holds the real power on the entire structure.

He decided to move to Iraq, officially presenting his wife as the leader of the entire Mojahedin e-Khalq group for two specific reasons.

The first was to show a radical transformation within MEK, also offering
the idea of a modern and democratic movement led by a woman and totally dedicated to the establishment of freedom and of a liberal society in Iran. Having Maryam Rajavi as image for the movement, means operating a huge image campaign mainly directed toward the American and European audiences. A campaign to gain support and funds for the group, and also to distract interest from another issue: the participation of Massoud Rajavi in military actions against Iran along and under the protective umbrella of Saddam Hussein, considered in the Eighties to be one of the most dangerous men in the region and in the world.

Doing so, Massoud Rajavi could move to Iraq concentrating on military actions against the regime hoping – or believing – that a military victory was still possible in 1987.

Rajavi considered the MEK armed forces as a strategic weapon for its cause. Not in the sense of utilizing it to defeat the regime, but as a pretorian guard for him and the group in the day he would have victoriously entered Iran.

The relevance of the armed forces was then only that of disposing of a real and effective force to control the situation in an hypotetic future post-teocratie Iran. It was not relevant for him who could provoke such a condition; the dominant factor was that of having the possibility to control and dominate a post-conflict scenario.

Doing so, the European structure actively started presenting several activities and programs all over the Western world to raise attention on the group’s cause, while very little information circulated regarding the fate and the activity of Massoud Rajavi.

When Iraq and Iran signed a cease-fire agreement in 1988, it was then clear to the Rajavis that the original plan had failed.

Massoud Rajavi always refused to dismantle the military structure, considering it always fundamental for the future control of Iran in the day MEK will win and enter Tehran. Nevertheless, inactivity and the deteriorating Iraqi context, forced him to close the group granting a growing form of support to its patron, Saddam Hussein.

In this way, MEK military units were involved in some of the most cruel operations inside Iraq, being eventually forced to a sort of total isolation from either the Iraqi and the Iranian context.

It is in this period that the military structure suffered a gradual but severe and unique transformation. It became the personal reign of Massoud Rajavi, where the rules and the law are those of the leader and of his court, and slowly turning more into a sect rather than being a military structure.

Individual liberties are today limited inside the group; womens’ right subject to a totally independent and particular set of rules stated by the group and essentially limiting freedom.
Also in term of ideology, the Islamic-Marxist interpretation typical of MEK’s line have been abandoned and replaced by the cult for the leader and of the leading committee, composed of the Rajavis and, subordinately, of their strict entourage. Even the political arm of the group, officially but not effectively governed by Maryam Rajavi, lost a considerable part of its strength and support, as demonstrated by the U.S position and by the French new attitude against the Mojahedin e-Khalg.

Today, after the war in Iraq, it is unclear what will be the future of the group and of the entire movement. Massoud Rajavi is officially hiding in clandestinity since the Americans arrived in Iraq, although many sources claim that he is actually detained by U.S. Military forces.

IRAN AND THE MOJAHEDIN E-KHALG

Mojahedin e-Khalg could count on a large and spontaneous support in Iran before and just after the revolution. Their anti-imperialist connotation, and their concrete anti-Shah programs granted them a huge popularity and a growing form of support among the masses and within various segments of the Iranian society.

They still had a large number of supporters in the first phase of the post-revolutionary period, even after the end of their open political participation. Mojahedin e-Khalg have gradually lost their reputation and popularity during the early 1980s because of their inability to re-organize and to effectively represent a democratic and unitarian form of opposition abroad.

Guerrilla and bombing actions in Iran, although initially even seen with admiration when targeting governmental targets, were later gradually and almost totally perceived as ignominous terrorist attacks because of the constant heavy losses of civil lives.

In the middle of the eighties, Iranians started considering MEK nothing more that an undiscriminating and straightforward terrorist group now unable to gain any effective result and criminally responsible for many civil casualties among the population.

Between 1986 and 1987, however, the gradually negative attitude of the Iranians against the Mujahedin e-Khalg has been dramatically transformed in total and open opposition, if not rage and hatred.

Massoud Rajavi’s alliance with Saddam Hussein, MEK’s involvement the war against Iran and the Iranian people, and the participation of MEK cells in providing Iraqi artillery and missile units the coordinates for targets inside Iran and in urban areas, provoked the end of any possible alternative for Mojahedin e-Khalg in the country.

The largest part of the population, even today, consider Mojahedin, with-
out discrimination between military and civil structure, as a terrorist entity. A group not reflecting in any case a common Iranian position and certainly not representing the real face of the Iranian diaspora or an alternative to the present government. In many case, inside and outside Iran, they are openly considered as a structure to be fought and destroyed, and that must be banned by any public or national form of participation.

Considering any political or participative hypothesis regarding MEK in Iran, today, is therefore highly unlikely.

THE U.S. AND THE MOJHAEDIN E-KHALQ

Mojhaed in e-Khalq units were well known by the U.S. government and security forces since the beginning of the Seventies. In their opposition to the Shah’s regime they were fanatically anti-imperialists, and often involved in anti-Western and specifically anti-American activities.

At the end of the Seventies MEK forces killed two American citizens in Tehran. The two victims were technicians working for Rockwell who had been accused of being American spies supporting the regime.

Since then, MEK has been unofficially considered by U.S. security and intelligence forces as a terrorist and guerrilla group, without however taking any initiative against it.

MEK units have also been considered responsible for the murder of a number of American soldiers in Iran before the revolution, even if a clear involvement of the group has never been proven, and they openly supported the takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran.

There were a certain number of MEK students attending American universities before the fall of the Shah, and one of the few actions taken by the U.S. Government during the Seventies was that of formally allowing SAVAK operations against them on U.S. soil.

After the fall of the Shah and eventually the end of the political role of MEK within the Islamic Republic, MEK has been assessed ambiguously by the U.S. Government. Although considered as an opportunity against the Iranian regime, their ideological stands and – above all – their leadership, never convinced nor was considered as a tool to shape and to use against Tehran.

MEK has been since then only unofficially supported, and the most valuable part of this low profile relationship has been the flow of information available inside Iran.

Despite the – sometimes – interesting set of information provided, especially those on the nuclear program in Iran, the Mojhaed in e-Khalq structure was never judged as reliable and as the political alternative to the teocratic regime.
In 1997, the U.S. Department of State added MEK to the list of the international terrorist organizations, without however taking any particular action against its militants on U.S. soil or abroad. In 1998, in an amendment, the political arms of the group was also included.

Nevertheless, many American politicians have openly supported MEK, presenting them as the democratizing alternative to the regime and asking for concrete and decisive support for the group. In several occasions, U.S. congressmen took part in MEK conferences or meetings, showing their support and total commitment.

There are various interpretations regarding why the U.S. decided to insert MEK in the official list of terrorists. Appeasing Mohammad Khatami just after his election, as a positive sign from the United States Government, or as a move against Saddam’s Iraq, are the two most credible reasons. The first in particular is accredited by many members of the Clinton administration, quoting a precise will of the president to unlock the Iranian situation. The decision, moreover, provoked a huge protest both within the Iranian community close to MEK positions and within American political and governmental circles, asking on the contrary for a stronger U.S. involvement in supporting MEK.

In 2003, just before the intervention in Iraq, surprisingly the U.S. authorities closed the MEK offices in Washington, and in the same period the French raided Mojahedien sanctuaries in France arresting almost 200 people, including Maryam Rajavi.

Today’s sphere of the U.S.-MEK relations may be described as a sort of limbo. Despite a certain number of political requests for open and heavy support for the group, no one seems effectively consider them as an opportunity, especially in this critical period of the U.S.-Iran relations.

MEK are suffering, and will probably always suffer, for their unclear ideological and motivational dimension and, above all, for their leadership.

The “enemy of my enemy is my friend” logic, adopted by the U.S. with respect to Mojahedien e-Khalq for many years, seems to have reached an end, and no other rationale is evident in the current landscape, except that of them being merely transformed into informing agents.
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