

Memoirs of an Iranian Rebel
(London: Saqi Books, 2004).

The Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization (MKO), or the People's Combatants Organization, was established in 1965 as an armed, underground group opposed to the Pahlavi regime and seeking to establish a "monotheistic classless society." Fusing aspects of Marxism-Leninism and political Islam, the MKO played an important role in mobilizing urban, educated Iranians during the Islamic Revolution, yet quickly fell out with Ayatollah

Ruhollah Khomeini and his inner circle in the post-revolutionary period. Driven out of Iran, Masoud Rajavi and the Central Committee moved the MKO's headquarters to Western Europe and then after 1986 to Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Aside from its official history, little has been written in English about the inner workings of this highly secretive group.

The memoir of Masoud Banisadr, until 1996 a US and European representative of the National Council for Resistance (NCR), the MKO's nominally independent political wing, helps present a picture of the organization as it functioned from the late 1970s. Masoud is especially timely, since the MKO, though deemed a "terrorist organization" by the State Department and several European governments, has been identified by neo-conservatives Daniel Pipes and Patrick Clawson as a candidate to bring "the tide of freedom" to Iran. The book seriously challenges such assumptions. In fact, Banisadr's detailed life story corroborates a recent Human Rights Watch report, which describes the MKO's systematic abuse and torture of members who challenge the Central Committee or seek to defect.

Banisadr, a cousin of the first popularly elected president of the Islamic Republic, and his wife were postgraduate students in Britain during the 1979 revolution. They became involved with the MKO and its affiliates after the fall of the Shah. A self-described "social democrat" at the time of the revolution, Banisadr was attracted to an ideology that "seemed indistinguishable from [Ali] Shariati's," the thinker he had read and admired while still in Iran. Interestingly, he acknowledges that many MKO supporters did not "know much about the Mojahedin ideology, especially as it differed from that of other Muslims and Marxists." For him, "it was enough to know that they supported democracy, independence and progress."

At almost 500 pages, Masoud is a meticulous, but often meandering and disjointed, book. Yet, for the patient reader, it is crammed with poignant details of how the MKO has maintained organizational unity despite external hostility and the many unsavory practices described by Banisadr. He tells us how the various "bases" scattered across Europe created a combination of complex, opaque hierarchy and communal living arrangements, how songs and military drills were used as rituals to develop a sense of solidarity among middle-class college graduates, and how in order to raise funds the MKO established businesses, such as a stand that "introduced the joys of kebabs" to Durham.

But what will receive the most attention are the disturbing psycho-logical techniques employed to force members to relinquish all sense of individual identity, to monitor each other and to disavow feelings for all people other than the married couple who make up the ideological and spiritual leadership of the MKO, Masoud and Maryam Rajavi. From the outset, the MKO encouraged members to distance themselves from their families, unless they could support the cause monetarily or through activities in Iran. The detachment from greater society, however, reached new levels after 1985 when the Rajavis announced various stages of the "ideo-logical revolution," whereby the MKO sought to reposition itself against the more consolidated regime in Iran. This "revolution" was initiated by the "marriage of the century," in which Rajavi wed Maryam Azodanlu, who had been married to another leading member until shortly beforehand. All MKO members were expected to go through their own "ideological revolutions" in order to become true Mojahedin and demonstrate their loyalty. This was done at regular group confessionals ("cooking pots") in which Mojahedin would admonish themselves and each other, as well as through writing reports on one's weaknesses, burning "bourgeois" luxury items, limiting and even ending relations between the sexes, and divorcing one's spouse to prevent "con-tradictions." The latter step was said to remove the main "buffer" preventing true understanding of the revolution, embodied in "the ideological mother" Maryam Rajavi, the only bridge to her husband. The meetings, taped sermons by the Rajavis and limits on outside sources of information created what Banisadr calls the "mystical efficacy of drip-fed propaganda."

This politico-theological apparatus surely helped to create some devoted followers, as demonstrated when several Mojahedin set themselves on fire when France briefly arrested Maryam Rajavi in 2003. Yet Banisadr describes how this psychologically abusive atmosphere, combined with growing doubts about the MKO's military capability and political skill, led many other members to question the leadership and eventually quit. Banisadr's suggestions and criticisms were met with indifference and public personal con-demnation, so much so that he began to doubt his own character. Unlike others who ended up attempting suicide or in Abu Ghraib prison for their criticisms, Banisadr was able to leave with relative ease, because he spent much of his time abroad and still had an extended family, including his ex-wife, living in Britain.

Masoud does not fully explain why Banisadr joined the MKO, as opposed to another political party, or why he left when he did. Nor does it offer an alternative politics to the one offered by the MKO. Like many autobiographies, it is too self-reflective to take these analytical steps or challenge the teleology of the narrative. Instead, Banisadr paints a picture of an organization that, over time, corrupted its members' idealistic vigor and organizing acumen into a means for self-abnegation with the only relationship of any significance being that between the individual member and the two-headed Rajavi beloved. After reading Masoud, it is difficult to imagine, as Pipes and Clawson apparently do, that the MKO will be able to mobilize its small, psychologically fragile membership or recruit more Iranians in order to overthrow the Islamic Republic, let alone establish a transparent political regime and foster a pluralistic society. .

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