

Misled Martyrs by Judith Neurink

Synopsis

How Iranian terrorists became America's best friends
By Judith Neurink

Prologue

A burning sacrifice for the leader

An Iranian woman sets herself alight outside of the French embassy in London. She sacrifices her life for the freedom of her leader, Maryam Rajavi, after her arrest by the French police on terrorism and fraud charges. She is one of at least ten members of Rajavi's Iranian resistance group, the Mujahedin Khalq, who set themselves on fire in protest at the treatment of their adored leader.

These events made me wonder how people reach the point where they believe that giving up their lives will benefit their leader. How did the political organization of God's Fighters of the People become a sect? What happened to the members for them to allow this to happen? Since there has not been much independently published on the group, I spoke to former members, visited their meetings and tried to find out how a political organization changes into a cult.

Chapter 1

Those who are not with us are against us
Yasser Ezati was born into the Mujahedin Khalq. He lived through most of the history of the organization. Taken away from his parents during the Gulf War in 1991, he lived with foster parents and in children's homes. He returned to become part of the Mujahedin Army in Iraq, and was imprisoned by the organization when he refused to conform to their rules – with his father as his jailer.



His father must have been attracted to the Mujahedin Khalq when it was a resistance group of young Iranians against the Shah. The Mujahedin combined a Marxist vision with an Islamic one and had great followers amongst the young. The Shah arrested most of its leaders and executed many of them, except for Massoud Rajavi, who became the main, and eventually its sole leader. When the revolution came in 1979, the organization was well disposed towards Khomeini. But soon there was a struggle between Ayatollah Khomeini and Rajavi. The leadership of the Mujahedin fled to France, establishing the new MKO headquarters in Paris. Members who stayed behind in Iran returned to their original role in a resistance group.

Massoud Rajavi then joined forces with Saddam Hussein – who was fighting Iran in a bloody war – and eventually moved his group to a military camp in Iraq.

Chapter 2

Saddam Hussein's private army

Yasser Ezati draws a map of the Ashraf Camp, the main camp of the Mujahedin Khalq in Iraq, and recalls daily life there. In the first few years in Iraq Rajavi wanted to train his people for attacks in Iran which were meant to persuade the Iranians to rise up against Ayatollah Khomeini. But from 1986 onwards the policy changed, and the Mujahedin army increasingly became Saddam's Special Forces. They were of great importance in the Iraqi war against Iran, and were later essential in ending the Kurdish uprising in 1991.

And meanwhile, Rajavi planned his invasion to Iran, to get the support of the people to start a revolution. In 1988, when the war between Iran and Iraq ended, this operation led to the deaths of thousands of its members.

Rajavi had to survive and manage to keep his group together. He demanded total loyalty to the organization from members. Married couples were forced to divorce, brothers and sisters were separated into different camps or units, and later the children were sent away to Europe. Those who resisted were subject to group meetings and intimidation, and were often sent to jail.

Rajavi then took his friend's wife, Maryam, as his own wife, and made her a member of the leadership. The political organization was changing into a sect.

Chapter 3

The Rajavi Doctrine-divide and conquer

Yasser Ezati could not really draw a complete map of the Ashraf Camp, as no one really had an overall picture of it. In the Mujahedin information was power, an important part of the Rajavi Doctrine. Rajavi placed himself above his members as a religious leader. He convinced them in the course of long, tiring meetings to conform to his wishes, to go through 'revolutions', losing more and more of their own identity. Massoud Khodabandeh was his former security man, and after leaving the organization he did extensive research into the methods Rajavi used for his indoctrination of members, his use of their hatred against the regime in Iran to keep them together, and their sentiments about the hardship there to force them to accept their own situation. And even to accept Rajavi's adaptation of Islam to serve his own needs.

Chapter 4

Torturing for Rajavi

Yasser Ezati knew her well, as he had lived with her family in Canada for a year – Neda Hassani, the young woman who turned herself into a torch outside the French embassy in London. She was sweet, clever, but also very fundamentalist, he says. Neda went to the Mujahedin in Iraq to fight in their army, to fight for the freedom of her people, and in the end, gave her own life for the cause.

Marjan Malek was recruited as an asylum seeker in the Netherlands, and changed from a non-political person into a soldier for Rajavi. She went to Tehran for an attack on an army barracks. Marjan was caught, as was Arash Sameti Pour. Recruited as a teenager in the United States, he was trained in the Ashraf Camp for an attack in Iran. He too was ready to die for the organization, and lost his arm when he tried to kill himself with a grenade after being caught. 'I almost died, because Rajavi needs martyrs,' he says, 'he needs martyrs to prove his case and to attract new members. My life was not important to him.'

Chapter 5

The great theft of the children

Yasser Ezati was ten-years-old when he was taken away from his parents - together with hundreds of other Mujahedin children. Some went to live with members in the West, and some in children's homes. Yasser went to both: he spent three years with three different families in Canada, and afterwards stayed in three different children's homes in Germany.

Subsequently he, like many other Mujahedin teenagers, was persuaded to join the Mujahedin army in Iraq.

For many people the theft of their children was the last straw and led them to leave the organization. Sometimes they spent years relocating their children. Like Habib Khorami, who eventually found his son Bahador in Canada. But after they were reunited, the judge accused Habib of kidnapping his own son. Bahador now lives in Iran with his grandparents to keep him safe from the Mujahedin recruiters, but he longs to live with his father. Marjan Malek's daughters grew up in the Netherlands, with a female member of the organization. One day they were told that their mother had been killed, and now was a martyr. Then Marjan phoned them from Iran, and visited them. She then asked them to come and live with her again. The girls were torn between two mothers, and their conflicting ideologies.

Chapter 6

Europe as a trap and escape route

As a child Yasser Ezati often stood in the shopping center of Cologne with the pictures of victims in Iran, collecting money for the Mujahedin Khalq. Many members in Europe worked like this, until the governments discovered that the funds did not go to aid organizations, but to buy weapons.

The Mujahedin helped Marjan Malek in 1994, after her application for asylum in the Netherlands was refused. The organization found her a new lawyer, and a new life story for the asylum procedure. They took her to live in one of their group accommodations. She felt she had no choice after she was filmed at a mass meeting of the Mujahedin in The Hague. Europe is important for recruitment, but also serves as an escape route. Massoud Khodabandeh came to Paris with Maryam Rajavi, to help put the organization on the political map in Europe. But the indoctrination was less strict, and his eyes were opened: he was not at all working for Iran, but only for the good of Massoud Rajavi. Like Khodabandeh, many people left the organization after being sent to Europe.

Chapter 7

Chocolate or bruises

The Mujahedin jailed Yasser Ezati when he protested against the life in Ashraf Camp, and the treatment from the sexually starved men in his group. His father was his jailer, and would not talk to him because he was angry about his son's behavior.

For a long time the organization kept the jails a secret from its members, but many people who could not agree with the 'revolutions' and the changes were jailed. They could hardly believe their own comrades did this to them. They were beaten into false confessions, and were then treated to chocolates after signed the false documents.

And many who would not back down were given to Saddam Hussein and jailed in prisons like Abu Ghoraib, and were eventually sent to Iran as part of a prisoner-of-war exchange for captured Iraqis.

Chapter 8

From robot back to human being

Yasser Ezati has only just left the Mujahedin Khalq and still has a long way to go. He does not understand it yet, but it will take many years to get the organization out of his system.

'The hardest thing is to regain your own identity,' says Massoud Khodabandeh. But former members must also learn how to handle money, how to make even the simplest of decisions, like which shirt to buy. Stepping out of the Mujahedin Khalq is like quitting a heroin habit - it is a complete change of lifestyle. They have lost part of their past, and their comrades are no longer their friends, while new friends are hard to come by when you do not trust people easily.

On the other hand the organization does not leave them in peace, as they are now considered to be enemies. They are called spies by the organization, and sometimes they fall victim to revenge. The most active former members are threatened with violence.

Some turn around completely and now use the emotion they once felt for the Mujahedin against them. Women in Iran, among them Marjan Malek, have formed their own organization, Nejat, that uses more or less the same propaganda methods as the Mujahedin Khalq. They organize bus trips for family members to the last Mujahedin camp in Iraq, to show the members they are still alive and their information is not correct. But for many Nejat is an Iranian government organization, and the members are spies.

Chapter 9

Young and easy to recruit

He does not understand how it happened, but it took only a few hours for Yasser Ezati to be talked into joining the Mujahedin army in Iraq, even though he was one of the most critical of the boys in his home in Cologne. Recruitment for the Mujahedin Khalq is carried out in a clever and aggressive way - much like the radical Muslims recruit their new members. This chapter looks at the methods used in groups like the Al-Qaida network, and compares them with the way the Mujahedin Khalq recruits their members.

Teenagers are easy prey. Like Arash Sameti Pour, who at his American computer course fell in love with an Iranian girl who wanted to join the Mujahedin army in Iraq. He went with her, believing he would be fighting to help his people. Even though he knew the situation in Iran was much different from what the Mujahedin told him, it took just six months to indoctrinate him onto wanting to save the Iranian people.

Chapter 10

The terror of good and evil

The day after September 11, 2001 the Mujahedin Khalq was celebrating, says Yasser Ezati. 'I have seen the planes fly into those towers a thousand times.' That day Massoud Rajavi showed his real face. 'Look what a conservative man from the mountains can do against the United States,' he said to his army, 'and we, with all of our equipment cannot do anything against Iran!' This chapter looks at terrorism; are the Mujahedin Khalq a terrorist group, how do they compare with the groups in the Al-Qaida network, why do people think they need violence and terror to assist their case, how can believers, obsessed with good and evil, become murderers? And also: how can Rajavi, after showing his joy at the attack on the United States, still agree to work with the Americans after they conquered Iraq and the Mujahedin camps? Was he working with them, while he served Saddam? How can the American neo-conservatives believe they can use the blatantly anti-American Mujahedin towards a regime change in Iran?

Final

The enemy of my enemy is my friend

Yasser Ezati remembers how months before the American invasion in Iraq Massoud Rajavi spoke to his people. When the American conquer Iraq, most of the region will be under their command, except for Iran, he said. Ezati understood from this meeting that the Americans would help the Mujahedin to free the Iranian people.

Looking at what happened after the invasion, it seems the Americans went easy on the Mujahedin Khalq. They controlled the entrance to Ashraf Camp, protecting hundreds of members who wanted to leave, but left Rajavi's command in place. Mujahedin could still travel, and the contact between Europe and the camp was close. American journalists report about CIA-plans for missions inside Iran to find nuclear sites and destroy them- and so it will became clear the Mujahedin were meant to be involved in this.

Rajavi, who has been silent in Ashraf Camp since the invasion, seems to have found a new friend - or to be more precise: an enemy of Iran whom he found to be a useful friend.