

Behind the Mujahideen-e-Khalq (MeK)

Introduction

Raids conducted by the Australian Federal Police (AFP) in June 2003 on the homes of Iranian Australians reportedly suspected of involvement with the Iranian opposition group, the MeK, have raised questions about the justification for such action, particularly as the MeK is not a proscribed organisation in Australia.

The MeK is the largest of the Iranian opposition groups, and is sometimes referred to as the Mujahideen-e-Khalq Organisation (MKO), or The People's Mujahideen Organisation of Iran (PMOI). The group also maintains a military wing in Iraq, known as the National Liberation Army (NLA).

Background¹

The MeK was formed in the mid-1960s as a splinter group of the Liberation Movement of Iran. The MeK's philosophy mixes Marxist and Islamic principles, and its primary objective is to overthrow and replace the Iranian Government with its own secularist administration.

In the early 1970s, the MeK fought an armed struggle against the Shah, whose Government the MeK viewed as a puppet regime of the US.

During the 1970s, the MeK was accused of conducting several assassinations of US military personnel and civilians working in Iran, and of actively supporting the takeover of the US Embassy in Tehran in 1979. That same year, the MeK helped to overthrow the Shah and install the new Shiite regime led by the Ayatollah Khomeini.

Ironically, despite popular support, the MeK came under increasing attack for its secularist ideology, from the very regime it helped install.

After being driven out of Iran, the MeK resettled in Paris. Having supported Iraq during the Iran–Iraq War, the MeK moved most of its

operations there in 1987, whereupon the NLA was formed.

At the end of the Gulf War in 1991, the MeK was alleged to have assisted the Iraqi Republican Guard in suppressing Shiite and Kurdish uprisings, although this has always been denied by the MeK.

The US designated the MeK as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation (FTO) in 1997, on the basis that it kills civilians. Although civilians have died as a result of MeK operations, the mass indiscriminate killing associated with some terrorist groups does not appear to have ever been the MeK's objective or favoured tactic.

The MeK has now lost three appeals (1999, 2001 and 2003) to the US Government to be removed from the list of FTOs, and its terrorist status was reaffirmed each time. The MeK has continued to protest worldwide against its listing², with the overt support of some US political figures.³

In the lead-up to the 2003 war in Iraq, it was suggested the MeK's camps in Iraq were likely hiding places for components of the Iraqi illegal weapons programmes⁴ and that the MeK/NLA might be used to defend Iraqi cities against a US-led attack.⁵

Following initial US bombing of MeK bases in Iraq, the US apparently negotiated with the MeK forces to stop bombing MeK bases provided the MeK did not attack US troops.⁶ Apart from the obvious short-term benefit of securing protection from an armed rebel group allied with the Iraqi regime, the long-term objective of the US Government is believed to have been an attempt to preserve the only major armed opposition to the Iranian regime.⁷

Activities and Tactics

The MeK's attacks have largely been conducted within Iran against the Iranian Government. Most of its activities overseas, including Australia,

are limited to political demonstrations, publicity campaigns and fundraising, rather than acts of terrorism.⁸

The notable exception is the simultaneous attacks conducted by the MeK in April 1992 on Iranian embassies in eleven countries, in retaliation for the bombing of MeK bases in Iraq by the Iranian Air Force just days earlier. The Iranian Embassy in Canberra was over-run and some staff were seriously injured.

The attacks abruptly highlighted the MeK's ability to coordinate a global campaign of violence in a short space of time, and once again thrust the MeK onto the world stage. The sudden violence of the 1992 attacks may have dented the MeK's image as 'freedom fighters', and possibly convinced people that the MeK was indeed a terrorist organisation.

Indeed, such activities clearly fall within the definition of 'politically motivated violence' as used by ASIO, and would now also constitute a terrorist act under the *Criminal Code Act 1995*.⁹

Germany's Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) has noted that the MeK's publicity campaigns often include attempts to contact members of parliament (MPs) to inform them of the MeK's goals, encourage political support, and influence parliamentary debate about Iran.¹⁰ Similar petitioning of Australian MPs has also been known to occur.

Whilst the MeK is not considered capable of overthrowing the Iranian Government on its own, and is believed to have lost much of its popular support within Iran since siding with Iraq,¹¹ it has continued to demonstrate its ability to conduct assassinations, sabotage and other attacks in Iran. As such, the MeK remains a serious threat to Iranian officials, the group's main targets.

Membership and Leadership

The MeK claims to have a 30 000 – 50 000 strong armed guerrilla force, based in Iraq, but a membership of between 15 000 – 20 000 is considered more likely.¹² MeK supporters exist worldwide.

The principal leader of the MeK, and President-in-exile, is a woman called Maryam Rajavi (whose official website is located at <http://www.iran-e-azad.org/english/president.html>). Another woman, Moshgan Parsaii, is Secretary-General of the organisation. Maryam's husband, Massoud, is said to be in charge of the military wing, a third of which are believed to be women.¹³

Political Representation

The MeK is the dominant member of the political coalition of Iranian opposition groups known as the National Council of Resistance of Iran¹⁴ (NCRI), which considers itself to be a Government-in-exile, and is also led by Massoud Rajavi.

Formed in 1981, the NCRI has offices in Europe and Washington, where it enjoys limited US political support.¹⁵ The NCRI's vision for Iran is a secularist Government which supports gender equality, political pluralism and the separation of church and State.¹⁶

It is currently illegal in Australia to fund or resource the NCRI.

Funding and Support

The MeK claims to be supported from both within Iran and overseas. Massoud Rajavi claimed in a 1994 interview that donations that year alone had amounted to US\$45 million.¹⁷

The MeK is also known to operate behind Iranian expatriate or refugee organisations to collect funds for the MeK. Seven Iranians were arrested in 2001 in the US after US\$400 000 was found to have been transferred to a MeK front organisation in the United Arab Emirates, which the FBI claims was ultimately used to buy weapons.¹⁸

Current Status of the MeK

The MeK is a banned terrorist organisation in both the UK and the US. The European Union listed the MeK as a terrorist group in May 2002.

The MeK is currently not listed as a terrorist organisation in Australia or Canada. The MeK is also not on the UN's list of terrorist organisations, additions to which must have a

demonstrated link with the Taliban and/or al-Qaeda in order to qualify.

However, the MeK does appear on Australia's list of entities, the assets of which must be frozen. This means that since late 2001 it has been a criminal offence in Australia under the provisions of the *Charter of the United Nations Act 1945* and the Charter of the United Nations (Terrorism and Dealings with Assets) Regulations 2002, to fund or resource the group. Together, this legislation ratifies Australia's obligation under UN Security Council Resolution 1373 to suppress the financing of terrorism.

The exact reasons for the recent AFP raids on MeK supporters have not been disclosed. Perhaps the fact that reports did not mention any involvement by ASIO in the raids, suggests the matter is of a criminal, rather than security-related nature.

As funding the MeK is illegal, the raids were presumably conducted on this basis, particularly as those raided said the police asked if they had sent money overseas.¹⁹

It has been suggested, however, that the sudden move against the MeK has more to do with a recently signed Memorandum of Understanding with Iran and a visit to Australia by an Iranian delegation in the weeks preceding the raids, than actually investigating possible terrorism. However, the Government has denied the raids were politically motivated.²⁰

It is possible the Government is preparing to ban the MeK in Australia under the new Criminal Code Amendment (Terrorist Organisations) Bill 2003, which, if passed, will enable Australia to proscribe groups such as the MeK in the absence of any UN listing.

Despite the MeK's violent track record, it does not appear to pose a present or prospective threat to Australia, and it might therefore be difficult to obtain bipartisan support for its categorisation in Australia as a terrorist organisation.

1. Unless otherwise indicated, background sourced primarily from Jim Tinsley and Rob Fannee, 'Mujahideen-e-Khalq (MeK)', *Jane's Terrorism Intelligence Centre*, at <http://jtic.janes.com> (21 May 2003) and Council on Foreign Relations, 'Mujahideen-e-Khalq', *Terrorism: Q&A*, <http://www.terrorismanswers.com/groups/mujahideen.html> (22 May 2003).
2. For example – see report in *Iran Liberation*, 9 December 2002, at

<http://www.iran.mojahedin.org/Pages/english/IL/2000/pdf/IL160.pdf> (12 June 2003).

3. *The Hill*, 2 April 2003, at <http://www.hillnews.com/news/040203/terrorist.asp> (4 June 2003).
4. *Institute of War and Peace Reporting (IWPR)*, www.iwpr.net, (22 May 2003).
5. DEBKAfile, 20 April 2003, at <http://www.debka.com/article.php?aid=468> (5 June 2003).
6. *reason online*, 9 May 2003, at <http://reason.com/links/links050903.shtml> (5 June 2003).
7. *IWPR*, op. cit.
8. For example – MeK Press Release, 31 May 2003 at http://mojahedin.org/Pages/news/f_ennews.html (6 June 2003).
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11. Jim Tinsley and Rob Fannee, op. cit.
12. *ibid.*
13. Council on Foreign Relations, op. cit.
14. Its website is at <http://www.iran-e-azad.org/english/ncri.html>.
15. *The Hill*, op. cit.
16. NCRI at <http://www.iran-e-azad.org/english/ncri.html#struc> (12 June 2003).
17. Jim Tinsley and Rob Fannee, op. cit.
18. Council on Foreign Relations, op. cit.
19. 'Police Raids on Iranian "Rebels"', *news.com.au*, 4 June 2003, at http://www.news.com.au/common/story_page/0.4057.6541568%5E421.00.html (4 June 2003).
20. *ABC 7.30 Report*, 4 June 2003, at <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2003/s872271.htm> (5 June 2003).

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