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Our Men in Iran?

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Posted by *Seymour M. Hersh*

<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2012/04/mek.html>

From the air, the terrain of the Department of Energy's Nevada National Security Site, with its arid high plains and remote mountain peaks, has the look of northwest

Iran. The site, some sixty-five miles northwest of Las Vegas, was once used for nuclear testing, and now includes a counterintelligence training facility and a private airport capable of handling Boeing 737 aircraft. It's a restricted area, and inhospitable—in certain sections, the curious are warned that the site's security personnel are authorized to use deadly force, if necessary, against intruders.

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An Iranian mystery: Just who are the MEK?

By Owen Bennett Jones

[BBC News \(http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-17615065\)](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-17615065)

How do you get a group described by the US government as a cult and an officially designated foreign terrorist organisation to be viewed by many congressmen and parliamentarians as champions of human rights and secular democracy?

It would challenge even the most talented PR executive.

The starkly differing perceptions of the Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK) or People's Mujahideen Organisation of Iran (PMOI) could be a case study in the power of image management - of what can be achieved not with guns but by the way information is disseminated.

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It was here that the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) conducted training, beginning in 2005, for members of the Mujahideen-e-Khalq, a dissident Iranian opposition group known in the West as the M.E.K. The M.E.K. had its beginnings as a Marxist-Islamist student-led group and, in the nineteen-seventies, it was linked to the assassination of six American citizens. It was initially part of the broad-based revolution that led to the 1979 overthrow of the Shah of Iran. But, within a few years, the group was waging a bloody internal war with the ruling clerics, and, in 1997, it was listed as a foreign terrorist organization by the State Department. In 2002, the M.E.K. earned some international credibility by publicly revealing—accurately—that Iran had begun enriching uranium at a secret underground location. Mohamed ElBaradei, who at the time was the director general of the International Atomic

Energy Agency, the United Nations' nuclear monitoring agency, told me later that he had been informed that the information was supplied by the Mossad. The M.E.K.'s ties with Western intelligence deepened after the fall of the Iraqi regime in 2003, and JSOC began operating inside Iran in an effort to substantiate the Bush Administration's fears that Iran was building the bomb at one or more secret underground locations. Funds were covertly passed to a number of dissident organizations, for intelligence collection and, ultimately, for anti-regime terrorist activities. Directly, or indirectly, the M.E.K. ended up with resources like arms and intelligence. Some American-supported covert operations continue in Iran today, according to past and present intelligence officials and military consultants.

Despite the growing ties, and a much-intensified lobbying effort organized by its advocates, M.E.K. has remained on the State Department's list of foreign



terrorist organizations—which meant that secrecy was essential in the Nevada training. “We did train them here, and washed them through the Energy Department because the D.O.E. owns all this land in southern Nevada,” a former senior American intelligence official told me. “We were deploying them over long distances in the desert and mountains, and building their capacity in communications—coordinating comms is a big deal.” (A spokesman for J.S.O.C. said that “U.S. Special Operations Forces were neither aware of nor involved in the training of M.E.K. members.”)

The training ended sometime before President Obama took office, the former official said. In a separate interview, a retired

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four-star general, who has advised the Bush and Obama Administrations on national-security issues, said that he had been privately briefed in 2005 about the training of Iranians associated with the M.E.K. in Nevada by an American involved in the program. They got “the standard training,” he said, “in comms, crypto [cryptography], small-unit tactics, and weaponry—that went on for six months,” the retired general said. “They were kept in little pods.” He also was told, he said, that the men doing the training were from JSOC, which, by 2005, had become a major instrument in the Bush Administration’s global war on terror. “The JSOC trainers were not front-line guys who had been in the field, but second- and third-tier guys—trainers and the like—and they started going off the reservation. ‘If we’re going to teach you tactics, let me show you some really sexy stuff...’”

It was the ad-hoc training

that provoked the worried telephone calls to him, the former general said. “I told one of the guys who called me that they were all in over their heads, and all of them could end up trouble unless they got something in writing. The Iranians are very, very good at counter-intelligence, and stuff like this is just too hard to contain.” The site in Nevada was being utilized at the same time, he said, for advanced training of elite Iraqi combat units. (The retired general said he only knew of the one M.E.K.-affiliated group that went through the training course; the former senior intelligence official said that he was aware of training that went on through 2007.)

Allan Gerson, a Washington attorney for the M.E.K., notes that the M.E.K. has publicly and repeatedly renounced terror. Gerson said he would not comment on the alleged training in Nevada. But such training, if true, he said, would be “especially incongruent with the State Department’s

decision to continue to maintain the M.E.K. on the terrorist list. How can the U.S. train those on State’s foreign terrorist list, when others face criminal penalties for providing a nickel to the same organization?”

Robert Baer, a retired C.I.A. agent who is fluent in Arabic and had worked under cover in Kurdistan and throughout the Middle East in his career, initially had told me in early 2004 of being recruited by a private American company—working, so he believed, on behalf of the Bush Administration—to return to Iraq. “They wanted me to help the M.E.K. collect intelligence on Iran’s nuclear program,” Baer recalled. “They thought I knew Farsi, which I did not. I said I’d get back to them, but never did.” Baer, now living in California, recalled that it was made clear to him at the time that the operation was “a long-term thing—not just a one-shot deal.”

Massoud Khodabandeh, an I.T. expert now living in England who consults for the Iraqi government, cont.p4

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was an official with the M.E.K. before defecting in 1996. In a telephone interview, he acknowledged that he is an avowed enemy of the M.E.K., and has advocated against the group. Khodabandeh said that he had been with the group since before the fall of the Shah and, as a computer expert, was deeply involved in intelligence activities as well as providing security for the M.E.K. leadership. For the past decade, he and his English wife have run a support program for other defectors. Khodabandeh told me that he had heard from more recent defectors about the training in Nevada. He was told that the communications training in Nevada involved more than teaching how to keep in contact during attacks—it also involved communication intercepts. The United States, he said, at one point found a way to penetrate some major Iranian communications systems. At the time, he said, the U.S. provided M.E.K. operatives with the ability to

intercept telephone calls and text messages inside Iran—which M.E.K. operatives translated and shared



with American signals intelligence experts. He does not know whether this activity is ongoing.

Five Iranian nuclear scientists have been assassinated since 2007. M.E.K. spokesmen have denied any involvement in the killings, but early last month NBC News quoted two senior Obama Administration officials as confirming that the attacks were carried out by M.E.K. units that were financed and trained by Mossad, the Israeli secret

service. NBC further quoted the Administration officials as denying any American involvement in the M.E.K. activities. The former senior intelligence official I spoke with seconded the NBC report that the Israelis were working with the M.E.K., adding that the operations benefitted from American intelligence. He said that the targets were not "Einsteins"; "The goal is to affect Iranian psychology and morale," he said, and to "demoralize the whole system—nuclear delivery vehicles, nuclear enrichment facilities, power plants." Attacks have also been carried out on pipelines. He added that the operations are "primarily being done by M.E.K. through liaison with the Israelis, but the United States is now providing the intelligence." An adviser to the special-operations community told me that the links between the United States and M.E.K. activities inside Iran had been long-standing. "Everything being done inside Iran now is being done with surrogates," cont.p5

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he said.

The sources I spoke to were unable to say whether the people trained in Nevada were now involved in operations in Iran or elsewhere. But they pointed to the general benefit of American support. "The M.E.K. was a total joke," the senior Pentagon consultant said, "and now it's a real network inside Iran. How did the M.E.K. get so much more efficient?" he asked rhetorically. "Part of it is the training in Nevada. Part of it is logistical support in Kurdistan, and part of it is inside Iran. M.E.K. now has a capacity for efficient operations that it never had before."

In mid-January, a few days after an assassination by car bomb of an Iranian nuclear scientist in Tehran, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, at a town-hall meeting of soldiers at Fort Bliss, Texas, acknowledged that the U.S. government has "some ideas as to who might be involved, but we don't know exactly who was involved." He added, "But I can tell you one thing: the United States was not involved in that kind of effort. That's not what the United States does."

An Iranian mystery: Just who are the MEK?

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The organisation has a history of ideological and tactical flexibility.

Since the 1970s, its rhetoric has changed from Islamist to secular; from socialist to capitalist; from pro-Iranian-revolution to anti-Iranian-revolution; from pro-Saddam to pro-American; from violent to peaceful. And there is another dichotomy - it has admiring supporters and ardent critics. Take, for example, the US military officers who had to deal with the MEK after they invaded Iraq in 2003.

Not only was the MEK heavily armed and designated as terrorist by the US government, it also had some very striking internal social policies.

For example, it required its members in Iraq to divorce. Why? Because love was distracting them from their struggle against the mullahs in Iran.

And the trouble is that people love their children too. So the MEK leadership asked its members to send



their children away to foster families in Europe. Europe would be safer, the group explained. Some parents have not seen their children for 20 years and more.

And just to add to the mix, former members consistently describe participating in regular public confessions of their sexual fantasies. You might think that would set alarm bells ringing - and for some US officers it did.

One colonel I spoke to, who had daily contact with the MEK leadership for six months in 2004, said that the organisation was a cult, and that some of the members who wanted to get out had to run away.

And yet another officer, who was there at precisely the same time and is now a retired general, has become an active lobbyist on the MEK's behalf. With his open smile and earnest friendly manner, he is a good advocate. "Cult? How about admirably focused group?" he says. "And I never heard of anyone being held

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An Iranian mystery: Just who are the MEK?

Cont.p5

against their will."

We later emailed him about a former member who claimed to have told the general to his face that people were held against their will. "He's lying," the general replied. You just have to decide which side to believe. Ex-MEK member Eduard Termado is now living in Germany. His face is scarred to the point of being misshapen. His complexion is grey, his skin blotched and waxy, and his forehead constantly covered in dribbling beads of sweat - but then he spent nine years as a prisoner of war in Iraq.

He joined the MEK hoping to help Iranian democracy and did not like what he saw. He says that after three years he asked to leave, but was told he couldn't. He stayed for 12 years.

He now says joining the MEK was the biggest mistake of his life and he has expressed that feeling in an unusual way. He has married and produced three children. "My family is my

protest against the MEK," he says. There are many other stories. Children who never forgave their parents for abandoning them. Children who did forgive and are now joyously



reunited. Divorcees who have got out of the organisation saying they still love their former spouses who are still in. In over 25 years of reporting, I have been lied to often enough but, as successive former MEK members told what they had been through, their tears seemed real enough to me. And yet a significant number of politicians in the US and UK would say I was tricked because the former MEK members who spread these kind of stories are, in fact, Iranian agents.

Again, who to believe?

In the US in particular, an impressive array of public figures have spoken in defence of the MEK.

There are more than 30 big names - people like Rudy Giuliani former mayor of New York, Howard Dean at one time the democratic presidential hopeful, a retired governor, a former head of the FBI.

Many get paid. Of those who have declared their earnings, the going rate for a pro-MEK speech seems to be \$20,000 (£12,500) for 10 minutes. But then many other prominent MEK supporters act without payment. Why do people take such strong positions on the MEK?

After a month talking to people on both sides of the argument, I am left thinking this. Some supporters are paid, others see the MEK through the prism of Iran - they will just support anything that offers hope of change there. Many are well motivated but some are naive. And the former members?

Some are embittered, others just seem broken. Which is when it occurred to me - the perception people have of the MEK may say more about them than about the organisation itself. It is so difficult to pin down you can see your own reflection in it.

LETTERS OF THE IRANIAN FAMILIES IN IRAQ

The families of the members trapped in the Rajavi Cult in Iraq, who have been picketing outside the Ashraf Garrison for more than two years and merely wish to visit their loved ones and know about their situations, have written a letter to the Prime Minister of Iraq Mr. Nuri Maleki and the UN Representative in Iraq Mr. Martin Kobler.

Letter to the UN Representative

Dear Mr. Kobler

With regards, we are a number of Iranian families picketing outside Ashraf Garrison whose loved ones have been held captive by the Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization (MKO) for many years and we are still been denied visits with them yet.

Now that they are transferred to Camp Liberty, we wish to have face to face meetings with our loved ones who are staying in that camp. We urge you to adopt the means in order to facilitate the families to reach this goal and have meeting with their relatives.

We wish to thank you in advance for your efforts and we are anxiously waiting to hear good news from you.

Best Wishes

Families picketing outside Ashraf Garrison

2012/4/13



Letter to the Prime Minister

Dear Mr. Nuri Maleki

In the name of God

With best regards, we are a number of Iranian families picketing outside the Ashraf Garrison and we have the following requests:

1. We wish to visit our loved ones immediately in Camp Liberty in order to make sure about their circumstances.
2. We support your efforts as well as the Iraqi Government to separate the rank and file from the leaders of the MKO and we demand for the recognition of their asylum states as individuals rather than as an organization.
3. We also request to have a meeting with your representative in Baghdad in order to explain our suggestions and requests as well as informing you about the MKO practices regarding our loved ones in Ashraf and in Liberty.

We wish to thank you in advance and your government and we are anxiously waiting for the outcome of your efforts.

Best Wishes

Families picketing outside Ashraf Garrison

2012/4/13

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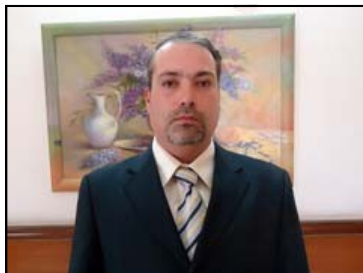

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Ehsan Bidi Announcement of Separation from MKO



Training Terrorists in Nevada: Seymour Hersh on U.S. Aid to Iranian Group Tied to Scientist Killings

Democracy Now, April 16 2012
http://www.democracynow.org/2012/4/10/training_terrorists_in_nevada_seymour_hersh



Journalist Seymour Hersh has revealed that the Bush administration secretly trained an Iranian opposition group on the State Department's list of foreign terrorists. Hersh reports the U.S. Joint Special Operations Command trained operatives from Mujahideen-e-Khalq, or MEK, at a secret site in Nevada beginning in 2005. According to Hersh, MEK members were trained in intercepting communications, cryptography, weaponry and small unit tactics at the Nevada site up until President Obama took office. The MEK has been listed as a foreign terrorist groups since 1997 and is linked to a number of attacks, spanning from the murders of six U.S. citizens in the 1970s to the recent wave of assassinations targeting Iranian nuclear scientists. Hersh also discusses the role of Israeli intelligence and notes the Obama administration knew about the training, "because they have access to what was going on in the previous administration in this area in terms of the MEK, in terms of operations inside Iran." His new report for The New Yorker blog, "Our Men in Iran?," comes as nuclear talks are set to resume this week between Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency. [includes rush transcript]