

ParsBrief

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Some Other MKO Members Return to Iran

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Nejat society

Twelve MKO members, who have been released from the clutch of terrorist cult, will enter Tehran on Wednesday.

According to the political correspondent of Fars News agency, 28 other members of MKO had returned to Iran in the previous weeks by the assistance of Red Cross.

They were transferred from Iraq to Iran by Red Cross's airplane.

an official of Nejat Association said: "some other separated members of MKO will return to Iran as soon as possible."

"The exact number of them is not still clear but one of them has called his brother in Iran and has informed him," he added.

He said: "by pursuing the case through official channels, we confirmed the validity of this event and these MKO members are supposed to enter Iran officially."

After Iraq was occupied by US forces, a large number of MKO members asked to leave the group. Some of them have returned to the country and their family by the efforts of Iranian authorities.

Some MeK members returned to Iran

The Washington Times, January 10, 2005

Washington, DC, Jan. 10 (UPI) -- The State Department said Monday some members of an Iranian rebel group have voluntarily repatriated to Iran from Iraq.

The Mujahedin-e-Khalq group is struggling to topple the Iranian regime but because of its involvement in bombings and other similar activities in the past the State Department considers it a foreign terrorist outfit.

An unspecified number of MeK activists, who were fighting against the Iranian regime with Saddam Hussein's support, were stranded in Iraq after U.S. troops removed the Iraqi dictator.

They were placed in a camp and were not allowed to leave despite demands by MEK supporters to allow them to participate in activities against Iran.

But Erel said some of these MeK workers, "found not to have engaged in terrorist activity have (now) been voluntarily repatriated to Iran."

"There are others who do not want to go back to Iran, and third-country repatriation options are being looked at," he added.

The State Department official, however, said the U.S. position on the MeK has not changed. "It's a foreign terrorist organization and we're dealing with them as a foreign terrorist organization."

Thursday December 16, 2004

Iran criticizes EU hosting exile leader speech

TEHRAN (Reuters) – Iran on Thursday accused the European Parliament of "supporting terrorism" by hosting a overthrowing the Islamic state's clerical leadership.

Iran's Foreign Ministry said the speech to a private meeting of the parliament by Maryam Rajavi, the self-styled president-elect of the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), "is unacceptable and an act in line with supporting terrorism."

The NCRI is the political arm of the People's Mujahideen guerrilla movement, which the United States and the UE consider a terrorist organization.

In her speech on Wednesday Rajavi accused the European Union of appeasing Tehran by entering diplomatic negotiations with Iran over its nuclear programme and urged MEPs to support a policy regime change for Iran.

Rajavi was hosted by Alejo Vidal – Quasdas, a vice-president of the European Parliament, and two MEPs who co-chair a group called Friends of a Free Iran. Paulo Casaca of Portugal and Struan Stevenson of Britain.

"The European Parliament should be careful that the relations of a few of its members with this group will only discredit the European Parliament and results in a loss of public trust on it," Iran's Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

Appeals court reinstates terrorism indictments

Reversal of lower court ruling seen as Bush administration victory

The Associated Press

Dec. 20, 2004

[Read the Court's Ruling on the Appeal

[http://www.ca9.uscourts.gov/ca9/newopinions.nsf/104D4F5DCC3F408A88256F70005869D3/\\$file/0250355.pdf?openelement](http://www.ca9.uscourts.gov/ca9/newopinions.nsf/104D4F5DCC3F408A88256F70005869D3/$file/0250355.pdf?openelement)

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SAN FRANCISCO - A federal appeals court Monday reinstated indictments against seven defendants accused of raising money for a terrorist organization with links to ousted Iraqi ruler Saddam Hussein.

In a victory for the Bush administration's war on terrorism, the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals reversed a Los Angeles federal judge who declared the 1996 terrorism financing law unconstitutional.

The law makes it illegal to funnel money — “material support” — to organizations the State Department says are linked to terrorism, about 30 groups in all.

Before the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, the government rarely used the law. The administration has since used it to win dozens of terrorism convictions nationwide, from Lackawanna, N.Y., to Seattle and Portland, Ore.

One legal expert criticized the decision.

“This is a troubling result for a nation that believes in freedom of association,” said David Cole, an expert on the law in question at the Georgetown University Law Center.

2001 indictment

The case stems from a 2001 indictment against the seven Los Angeles defendants for allegedly providing several hundred thousand dollars to the Mujahedin-e Khalq, which the appeals court said “participated in various terrorist activities against the Iranian regime” and “carried out terrorist activities with the support” of Saddam's regime.

U.S. District Judge Robert Takasugi invalidated the law, saying it did not provide the groups a proper forum to contest their terror designations. His ruling had no immediate effect beyond the Los Angeles case.

On Monday, a three-judge panel of the San Francisco-based federal appeals court overruled the judge — and went a step further, saying individuals accused of supporting the listed groups cannot challenge whether the groups should be listed.

Mirrors Virginia appellate ruling

The government, the court said, must prove only “that a particular organization was designated at the time the material support was given, not whether the government made a correct designation.”

The decision mirrors a ruling this year by the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Richmond, Va., upholding the conviction of a man who funneled money to the militant Hezbollah organization while insisting he had a right to challenge that group's listing.

"The Justice Department is pleased that yet another court has upheld the constitutionality of the material support statute, a key weapon in our arsenal of legal remedies in the war on terror," spokesman John Nowacki said.

The seven Los Angeles defendants said it was a violation of their First Amendment rights to be prohibited from contributing money to groups they say are not terror organizations, and they should have the right to prove the group in question should not be on the State Department's list. No trial date has been set in their case.

U.S. Hopes of Iran Change Have Little to Hang On

Tyler Marshall and Sebastian Rotella. Los Angeles Times. Los Angeles, Calif.: Dec 5, 2004.

They came from across America and, 15,000 strong, marched to Capitol Hill on a chilly autumn day to denounce the fundamentalist Islamic government in Iran and appeal for action by the Bush administration.

The protesters, mostly Iranian exiles or Iranian Americans, cheered speakers who offered words of support for the People's Mujahedin of Iran, the best-organized group opposing the regime in Tehran.

"Iran will be [America's] focus in the near future, and the People's Mujahedin are our best bet to counter the regime," Rep. Bob Filner (D-San Diego) told the crowd at last month's protest.

Although there is little dispute that the group is committed to overthrowing Tehran's ruling mullahs, the People's Mujahedin also carries some hefty baggage: It is on the State Department's list of terrorist organizations.

The group, also known as the Mujahedin Khalq, has been accused of being a totalitarian cult whose members killed Americans in the 1970s. It was involved in the 1979 U.S. Embassy takeover in Tehran and eventually took refuge in Iraq, where it cozied up to Saddam Hussein and fought for his regime in its 1980s war against Iran. Until last year, it had heavy weapons, including tanks, at its disposal.

The troubles surrounding the People's Mujahedin are emblematic of a larger problem facing advocates of change in Iran: the lack of viable alternatives.

The prospect of a political vacuum looms large as U.S. policymakers grapple with ways to prevent a hostile Islamic government from moving closer to mastering the technology to build a nuclear bomb and the means to deliver it.

The Iranian regime, which equates dissent with treason, has effectively blocked the growth of internal opposition groups. Meanwhile, exile organizations are either too small to be effective or, like the People's Mujahedin and the monarchists who supported the late shah, lack broad appeal.

Asked about possible U.S. support for regime opponents, a senior Bush administration official responded: "What opposition?"

The dearth of organized Iranian opposition does not mean the ruling clerics enjoy strong support, regional experts stress.

Gary G. Sick, a former National Security Council member for Iran, was involved in negotiations during the embassy takeover. He said evidence, including voting patterns, suggested that between 70% and 80% of the Iranian electorate opposed the ruling clerics and would be happy to see them replaced.

"The opposition is enormous, but at the moment, it's a leaderless movement," said Sick, who now teaches at Columbia University.

"It's a society in dissidence, but the people are not out in the streets fighting the regime," said Olivier Roy, a scholar at the Center for International Studies and Research, a think tank in Paris.

Middle East specialists and Bush administration officials cite a variety of reasons that, despite such a high level of discontent, there remains so little organized opposition in Iran and among the vast Iranian diaspora, which is concentrated in the U.S. and Western Europe.

They note that the moderate Iranian president, Mohammad Khatami, failed to deliver on his stunning 1997 electoral mandate for democratic reform. Khatami was unable to mobilize the electorate or establish new parties to counter the hard-liners, who gained time to regroup and launch a systematic crackdown that crippled the reformist movement, they said.

A sense of disillusionment among potential democratic activists who have watched the 1979 revolution yield not freedom but a tyranny of another kind is also a factor, experts said.

"There's no counterrevolutionary drive to spill the blood of others," said Reuel Marc Gerecht, a former CIA Middle East specialist who is now with the conservative American Enterprise Institute in Washington. "Until this happens, it's hard to see people taking the necessary risks to build the kind of network needed to overturn the regime."

The Iranian diaspora's successful integration into Western countries, concern about reprisals against relatives in Iran and what experts describe as a general lack of cohesion have combined to blunt the development of a broad opposition movement in exile, analysts said.

The People's Mujahedin, clearly the largest and most effective of the existing opposition groups, as well as the only one with its own military capability, is surrounded by controversy.

Although the group professes to support democracy, equality for women and human rights, former members accuse it of exploiting its followers by separating families, confiscating their wealth, worshiping group leaders like gurus and maintaining control through torture, beating and kidnapping.

A group closely linked to the People's Mujahedin, the National Council of Resistance in Iran, has scored intelligence coups, exposing previously unknown aspects of Tehran's nuclear program. On Thursday, it released alleged details of a new Iranian long-range missile.

But there is a debate on whether the revelations have come from the group's own network inside Iran, as it claims, or was merely fed by Israeli and Western intelligence agencies, as critics claim.

According to Paris-based expert Roy, the 4,500-member People's Mujahedin is the only significant armed resistance movement to the Iranian regime. Before the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the group possessed tanks, armored personnel carriers and hundreds of heavy weapons.

Yet he too noted its many liabilities, including the fact it is designated a terrorist organization in both the United States and Europe. The group, which traces its roots back to opposition to the shah in the 1960s, is headed by a couple, Massoud and Maryam Rajavi, and is now based outside Paris.

Those who speak for the group deny terrorist activities and reject other accusations, including its alleged cooperation with Saddam Hussein's intelligence service and the killings of U.S. military officers and civilian employees working in support of the shah's government.

"None of this is true," said Ali Safavi, who is president of a privately funded Middle East policy research group in the Washington area and is closely associated with the People's Mujahedin. Safavi claims that most of the accusations against the group are regime- instigated lies meant to discredit the group.

The Clinton administration's decision to designate the People's Mujahedin a terrorist organization in 1997 was intended as a goodwill gesture toward Tehran amid hopes that Khatami's election might lead to a diplomatic opening, some officials said at the time.

U.S. warplanes were ordered to bomb its camps in Iraq during and immediately after last year's invasion of Iraq despite the group's declaration that it would not oppose advancing American forces. But the strikes were called off after the group disarmed -- voluntarily, it says -- to American forces.

The U.S. Army's 4th Infantry Division commander, Maj. Gen. Raymond Odierno, who negotiated the disarmament, reportedly suggested its status as a terrorist organization should be reviewed.

In France, the group's image was shattered in June 2003 by a massive raid on Maryam Rajavi's compound in Auvers-sur-Oise, a placid town outside Paris. The operation resulted in

the arrest of Maryam Rajavi and more than 150 members, most of whom, including Rajavi, were released on bail in the following weeks.

In the weeks after the raid, at least nine of Rajavi's followers across Europe set themselves on fire to protest the terrorism charges filed against Rajavi and her inner circle. At least three of the protesters died from their burns, and critics charge that the group's leaders ordered the self-immolations.

French prosecutors plan to bring Rajavi and her aides to trial on charges of leading a terrorist sect that was preparing to undertake violent actions in Europe and Iran after the loss of its military sanctuary in Hussein's Iraq. Critics also say the organization has carried out attacks on civilians in Iran and Iraq and had a close partnership with Hussein's security forces.

The organization "has slid into a terrorist logic," Pierre de Bousquet de Florian, director of the French domestic intelligence service, said in an interview with Le Figaro newspaper in June 2003.

"The statements about the ... goal of bringing democracy to Iran must be contrasted with the extraordinarily autocratic character of the movement, which is dominated by an excessive cult of personality," De Bousquet said.

Like cults everywhere, the People's Mujahedin relies on classic techniques of psychological manipulation, such as isolation and brainwashing, said Massoud Khodabandeh, who broke with the group in 1996 after years as a bodyguard and telecommunications expert for the Rajavis.

"First in importance is the sect culture. Then comes the terrorism," Khodabandeh said in a recent interview. "Compared to Al Qaeda, it's more of a sect than an operational terrorist group. But there has been terrorism. And the burnings last year showed the potential of the members for being terrorists. If you can kill yourself without questions, you can kill someone else without questions."

Such allegations reduce the group's appeal to regime opponents, despite its disciplined organization and military potential. Because of all this, political analysts believe any change of power in Tehran is unlikely in the short-term.

Iran: Cult Or Opposition Group? A Look At The Mujahedin Khalq

By Kathleen Knox

The U.S. has struck a cease-fire in Iraq with an unlikely group -- the Mujahedin Khalq, or People's Mujahedin. The armed Iranian opposition group has sought for decades to overthrow

Iran's Islamic government, activity that's earned the group's political front some support among politicians in Europe and the United States. But the United States still lists it as a terrorist organization -- and some have likened it more to a cult than an opposition movement.

Prague, 7 May 2003 (RFE/RL) -- In the Iraqi desert near the border with Iran, Iranian fighters are training to overthrow Tehran's Islamic government.

The rebels driving tanks and learning to use artillery in this unit in Ashraf are distinctive in one key respect -- they're all women, many of them Iranian exiles from around the world, like Laleh Tarighi, who grew up in Britain.

"It is the best decision I made in my life," Tarighi said of joining the group. "I would say it is the best place here for any Iranian or other people, as well. I'd say we have a goal: we have been fighting for Iran to get Iranian people out of that situation."

Tarighi and her fellow rebels-in-headscarves belong to the Mujahedin Khalq, or People's Mujahedin, an armed Iranian opposition group of several thousand men and women with bases in Iraq.

It has sought the overthrow of the Iranian government for decades and is held responsible for a string of bombings and mortar attacks that have killed a number of top Iranian government and military officials -- as well as several U.S. soldiers and civilians in the 1970s.

The United States considers the Mujahedin Khalq a terrorist group and bombed its bases in the first stages of the latest Iraq war. But in recent weeks, U.S. forces have taken a softer line on Mujahedin Khalq fighters. Last month, they struck a cease-fire so the rebels can keep their weapons in what's described as a "non-combat formation."

The deal rattled the Iranian government. The Foreign Ministry in Tehran said this week that it's unacceptable for the United States to be in partnership with what it called "terrorist hypocrites." And it warned the United States not to allow the group to attack Iran from Iraq.

The cease-fire has also raised questions of double standards. Critics say a cease-fire is a strange way to deal with terrorists who've killed more Americans than any other Iranian group. But despite the cease-fire and recruits such as Tarighi, analysts say the outlook for the Mujahedin Khalq has never been bleaker. They say the cease-fire is a temporary arrangement to create security on the ground. And they say it's not likely to lead to broader backing for the group, which ultimately will probably have to disarm or leave Iraq.

The Mujahedin Khalq was formed in the 1960s on a platform that mixed Marxism with Islamism. The group took part in the 1979 revolution that replaced the Shah with the regime of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. But it soon split with Khomeini. Many of its leaders were killed, and it was forced to leave Iran in 1981.

Aside from a brief stint in France, the group has been based in Iraq ever since. It received financial and military support from Saddam Hussein's regime and even sided with Iraq during the Iraq-Iran War of the 1980s -- a move that cost it most of its credibility at home.

The organization is really made up of three overlapping groups. The fighters belong to the National Liberation Army (NLA) of Iran, which is the armed wing of the Mujahedin Khalq. That, in turn, controls the political front, called the National Council of Resistance of Iran.

Ali Ansari, head of the Center for Iranian Studies at Durham University in the United Kingdom, told RFE/RL: "They used to get a lot of money from Saddam Hussein. They were based north of Baghdad, and they used to do a lot of the dirty work of the Saddam Hussein regime. They were essentially Iranian mercenaries. They did very little agitating in Iran, and frankly they didn't have the credibility to do it."

Ansari says the movement has evolved into a leadership cult centered around Masud Rajavi and his wife, Maryam. There are reports that members are not allowed to marry -- as well as some older claims that married members were forced to divorce.

"Masud Rajavi takes the role of leader, in an imitation of the leader in Iran, and then his wife has been sort of 'elected' -- in very thick inverted commas -- as president," Ansari said. "So they have this dual structure of husband and wife team, and frankly it's caused quite a bit of discomfort from those Iranian families who find that their young idealistic types have headed off to Iraq to be part of the armed wing of the mujahedin."

Rajani joined the group early on while he was still a law student at the University of Tehran. He appears to have taken control of the group while in prison in the 1970s.

RFE/RL tried to contact the National Council of Resistance officials in France and Britain, but they were unavailable for comment. In previous interviews, however, they have denied that members of the Mujahedin Khalq are terrorists. And they dismiss other criticism as propaganda put out by their opponents or agents for the Iranian government.

Certainly, the group's talk of women's rights and the need for greater democracy has earned it support among politicians in Europe and America. Some see it as the best alternative to Iran's current regime. But that support can hardly be described as unwavering.

A few years ago, 30 U.S. senators asked the administration to reconsider its designation of the Mujahedin Khalq as a terrorist group. Some of them later backtracked on that request.

In 1997, London representatives of the National Council of Resistance associated with top government officials -- but one month later, Maryam Rajavi was banned from the United Kingdom.

Ansari said the current cease-fire is only a temporary measure and is unlikely to lead to broader backing for the group. "The Americans have made it very clear and the [British] Foreign Office has been quite adamant on this -- and also expressed quite a lot of concern at

the initial reports -- that this is purely a temporary measure to restore order before they proceed with the disarming of various groups, not just the Mujahedin Khalq but various militias in Iraq, and then they will sort problems out from there. I think there will be very strong agitation in America both ways, but I think those who have concrete interests in Iran will realize that to back the Mujahedin Khalq in any sort of anti-Iran policy would be a cataclysmic mistake," he said.

Kenneth Katzman, a Middle East analyst with the Congressional Research Service in Washington, said he would be very surprised if Iraq's future government allows Mujahedin Khalq fighters to stay on Iraqi territory, since it's likely to be much more friendly toward Tehran than was Saddam Hussein's regime.

"I would certainly envision some sort of arrangement between Iran and this new Iraqi government to have the NLA expelled from Iraq," Katzman said. "I very much doubt that this cease-fire is going to reflect a permanent situation where the NLA is going to continue to base itself on Iraqi territory and especially if the Shi'ite Islamic parties are dominant in a new Iraqi government, like [SCIRI leader Ayatollah] Mohammad Baqer al-Hakim. He's very close to the Iranian leadership, and it's not a stretch of the imagination to say that he would try to move very quickly to get the People's Mujahedin army out of Iraq."

But at the Ashraf base, commander Pari Bakhsai said that prospect does not concern her. "We are not worried about the future because the Iranian resistance [was] not born in Iraq and is not going to die in Iraq, even if the new Iraqi government and the Tehran regime reach an agreement about us," she said. "Our roots are deep in Iranian history, and we are confident that our destiny will be in Iran."

(Azam Gorgin and Amir Katouzian of RFE/RL's Persian Service contributed to this story.)