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1. Iraq orders MKO terrorist group to return occupied land
2. From U.S. Silent on Raids against PJAK to aggressive lobbying for MKO
3. Inside Mujahidin-e Khalq's Massive Lobbying Push
4. An Iranian Cult and Its American Friends
5. Mujahedin Khalq Machine vs. the Iranian-American Community
6. Why Are Prominent Americans Lobbying for an MKO Terrorist Group?
7. Attendees Bused Into MEK Rally, Some of Whom 'Don't Really Understand What The MEK Is'
8. The Lobbying that Shouldn't be Happening



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Iraq orders MKO terrorist group to return occupied land

Press TV, Baghdad, August 04, 2011

Iraqi police are seen at one of the entrances leading to Camp Ashraf, the military base of the terrorist Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization (MKO) in Iraq's Diyala province. (File photo)

An Iraqi court has mandated the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization (MKO) to return thousands of hectares of land that the terrorist group occupied to set up its military base in eastern Iraq.

Sheikh Ali al-Zahiri, head of the support council of the Iraqi city of Khalis, said on Tuesday that the Diyala Province court has ordered the terrorist group to return 5,000 hectares of land located inside Camp Ashraf, where the MKO terrorists are located, to the Iraqi owners, IRIB reported.

The outlawed MKO fled to Iraq in the 1980s, where it enjoyed the support of executed Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein and set up Camp Ashraf in the northeastern town of Khalis, Diyala.

The court ruling also required the MKO to pay compensation to 150 Iraqi families for the terrorist group's illegitimate use of the land over the past three decades.

The development comes as hundreds of Diyala residents staged a demonstration last Tuesday, calling for the expulsion of the MKO elements in Iraq. The Iraqis also demanded the return of more than 36,000 hectares of their land occupied by the notorious terrorist organization.

The MKO -- listed as a terrorist organization by much of the international community -- has committed numerous terrorist acts against Iranian officials and civilians as well as the people of Iraq.

The MKO cooperated with Saddam in the massacres of Iraqi Kurds and in suppressing the 1991 uprisings in southern Iraq.

Since Saddam was deposed in 2003, the Iraqi government has set numerous deadlines for the terrorist group to leave the country but the MKO has managed to maintain its base with US support.

From U.S. Silent on Raids against PJAK to aggressive lobbying for MKO

Barbara Slavin, IPS, Washington, August 05, 2011

Iran and the United States don't agree on much these days, but there are a few views they hold in common.

Both regard the Kurdish Party of Free Life for Kurdistan (PJAK) and the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK) or People's Holy Warriors as terrorist organisations.

In the last few weeks, Iranian forces have been shelling PJAK camps and fighters near and across the Iranian border in Iraqi Kurdistan.

According to an Iranian source who has been reliable in the past and who spoke on condition of anonymity, U.S. forces observed the fighting from the air and did nothing to stop it. In fact, the source said, "There was good coordination [between Iran and the United States] to destroy this terrorist organisation."

An Iraqi Kurdish official, also speaking on condition of anonymity, disputed the report of U.S. tacit cooperation against PJAK. The official said the U.S. military presence in Iraq is "insignificant" and far from the Iraq-Iran border. He added that the United States would be more inclined to back PJAK because "it's anti-Iran".

Asked if the U.S. had, at a minimum, condoned Iranian attacks on three PJAK camps, however, George Little, the chief Pentagon spokesman, had no comment. He also declined to comment on any possible links between the Iranian Kurdish operation and a recent decrease in attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq by Iran-backed Iraqi Shiite militants.

The world's largest ethnic minority without its own state, Kurds are scattered across mountainous regions of Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria. They have the greatest freedom in Iraq, thanks to U.S. protection since the 1991 Gulf War and an autonomous status confirmed after the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003.

Patrick Clawson, a Middle East expert at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said U.S. tacit approval for the Iranian raids was "entirely plausible" given U.S. opposition to Kurdish militants.

"The U.S. was signaling the KRG [Kurdistan Regional Government] that you can't just let this problem fester," Clawson told IPS. He noted that the PKK or Kurdistan Workers Party, the parent organization of PJAK, had recently intensified attacks in Turkey.

A State Department official told IPS in an email that "PJAK was created in 2004 as a splinter group of the PKK to appeal to Iranian Kurds." The official, who asked not to be named, noted that the PKK was "a designated Foreign Terrorist Organization that has been involved in the targeting of the Turkish government for more than 20 years."

The State Department also regards the MEK – an Iranian opposition group that has about 3,000 members in Iraq – as terrorist but that designation is currently under review and has provoked growing controversy in Washington.

Originally a Marxist-Islamist group that killed Americans in Iran before the 1979 revolution and Iranian officials both before and after the revolution, it has been designated since the terrorist list's inception in 1997. MEK officials insist the group has renounced violence and deserves to come off.

In recent months, MEK supporters have engaged in an aggressive lobbying campaign in Washington that has included a number of events at which former senior U.S. officials have received hefty sums to speak. Among them: ex-FBI chief Louis Freeh, former attorney general Michael Mukasey and former Central Command head Anthony Zinni.

The MEK has scant support within Iran because it sided with Iraq during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war. Former members say the organization is a cult fixated on leader Maryam Rajavi and her husband, Massoud, whose whereabouts are unknown. A State Department official told IPS that "attempts to paint the MEK as the poster child for the democracy movement in Iran are grossly ironic."

Unlike PJAK, however, the group has not committed violent acts in recent years. It has been unable to attack Iran because its main base in Iraq – Camp Ashraf – has been under U.S. control since 2003 and in the Iraqi government's hands since 2008.

One argument used by supporters of de-listing is that it will help resolve the humanitarian plight of MEK members who remain at Camp Ashraf. However, the State Department official said that taking the group off the list would not mean that they could come to the United States.

U.S. law "places a permanent, non-movable bar to immigration in the way of anyone who has ties to a Foreign Terrorist Organization," the official told IPS. He said this includes "those who provided material support to, or received military-type training from the group, as many MEK members have".

U.S. diplomats have been trying to arrange new homes for the camp residents but have been hampered by the fact that their leaders refuse to accept refugee status.

Maziar Bahari, an Iranian-Canadian journalist imprisoned in Iran after disputed 2009 presidential elections, said the MEK needs to keep the camp to maintain control of its foot-soldiers. He said that U.S. officials feared a "Jonestown in Ashraf" if attempts were made to remove camp residents by force. He was referring to the mass suicide in Guyana in 1978 of hundreds of fanatical followers of a self-styled prophet, Jim Jones.

Bahari, speaking at a conference in Washington Thursday sponsored by the National Iranian American Council, a non-partisan group that advocates for Iranian Americans and opposes the MEK, expressed sympathy for MEK members but said it would be a mistake to take the group off the State Department list at this time.

Given the group's violent past and violent potential, Bahari said, "It would send a very wrong signal [to Iranians] about America's intentions in Iran."

*Barbara Slavin also spoke at the NIAC event but did not advocate keeping the MEK on the terrorist list or removing it. She did question the group's democratic credentials.

Inside Mujahidin-e Khalq's Massive Lobbying Push

Daniel Larison, theamericanconservative.com, August 9th, 2011

The Christian Science Monitor has an extensive article on the Mujahidin-e Khalq's lobbying efforts. It reviews the terrorist group's history and the debate over removing it from the Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) list, but it goes into much greater detail in describing how the MEK has been getting the support of many prominent American advocates. The most disturbing thing in the article is the claim that top national security officials wouldn't have heard about the MEK prior to being approached by the group's representatives:

"Top-level national security officials never heard about the MEK; it never rose to their level until now," says another US official. "So when MEK representatives show them a political platform comprised of the '15 greatest ideas of Western civilization,' it looks pretty compelling."

If you knew nothing about the group until now, and you were extremely gullible, I suppose it could be. Ignorance would help to account for why so many former officials and politicians would be willing to associate themselves with the cause of a terrorist group, but it is hardly reassuring that "top-level" national security officials are so ignorant of the recent history of Iran and Iraq that being approached by representatives of this group wouldn't raise any red flags. It shouldn't come as a surprise that these officials don't understand the

region's politics and history very well, but that is just one more reason not to heed their recommendations on how to treat the MEK.

The article goes on to list quotes from Rudy Giuliani, Howard Dean, and a number of former Bush administration officials, all of whom are on the record saying embarrassing things in praise of the MEK. Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell may have qualified for the most egregious flattery when he said, "MEK is a force for good, and the best hope we have." While these people may not be able to appreciate what this sounds like to most Iranians, having so many prominent national figures in the U.S. singing this group's praises signals to Iranians that Americans see both the Iranian people and the regime as our enemy. If the State Department were so unwise as to remove the MEK from the FTO list, that would mark this administration as being more hostile towards Iran than the two administrations before it.

Confirming just how creepy the cult of personality built around Maryam Rajavi is, the article describes Camp Ashraf:

Her portrait – along with that of husband and co-leader Massoud Rajavi, who has been in hiding since 2003 – is as ubiquitous at Camp Ashraf as Saddam Hussein's once was across Iraq, and Ayatollah Khomeini's still is in Iran. Every day at the camp, the MEK motto is heard: "Iran is Rajavi, Rajavi is Iran. Iran is Maryam, Maryam is Iran."

Obviously, a new totalitarian political cult is not what Iranians need or want. The group has eagerly started saying all of the right things about democracy, but the group's organization and practices show that it has no values in common with the Iranian opposition or with the United States. In the past, the State Department has understood this:

A US State Dept. report in 1994 dismissed MEK efforts to reinvent itself. Noting the MEK's "dedication to armed struggle"; the "fact that they deny or distort sections of their history, such as the use of violence"; the "dictatorial methods" of their leadership; and the "cult-like behavior of its members," the State Dept. concluded that the MEK's "29-year record of behavior does not substantiate its capability or intention to be democratic."

Nothing about the MEK has changed in the last seventeen years, except that it has become more adept at getting Americans opposed to the Iranian government to work on its behalf. As Trita Parsi explains, the only thing that has made the decision to keep the MEK on the list remotely controversial is that the group's lobbying is much greater this time around:

The momentum to remove the terrorist status "is all about [the MEK's] ability to muster a political lobbying campaign," says Parsi. If the decision were based on "the merits of the case, this would be as uncontroversial as the four times that the Bush administration re-listed them. Four times. No controversy."

Put another way, not even the Bush administration was willing to accept the MEK's reinvention, and they were hardly interested in fostering good relations with Tehran. The Obama administration should likewise reject the appeals of these paid advocates for a terrorist group.

An Iranian Cult and Its American Friends

ELIZABETH RUBIN, New York Times, August 14, 2011

A FEW weeks ago I received an e-mail from an acquaintance with the subject line: Have you seen the video everyone is talking about? I clicked play, and there was Howard Dean, on March 19 in Berlin, at his most impassioned, extolling the virtues of a woman named Maryam Rajavi and insisting that America should recognize her as the president of Iran. Ms. Rajavi and her husband, Massoud, are the leaders of a militant Iranian opposition group called the Mujahedeen Khalq, or Warriors of God. The group's forces have been based for the last 25 years in Iraq, where I visited them shortly after the fall of Saddam Hussein in April 2003. Mr. Dean's speech stunned me. But then came Rudolph W. Giuliani saying virtually the same thing. At a conference in Paris last December, an emotional Mr. Giuliani told Ms. Rajavi, "These are the most important yearnings of the human soul that you support, and for your organization to be described as a terrorist organization is just simply a disgrace." I thought I was watching The Onion News Network. Did Mr. Giuliani know whom he was talking about? Evidently not. In fact, an unlikely chorus of the group's backers - some of whom have received speaking fees, others of whom are inspired by their conviction that the Iranian government must fall at any cost - have gathered around Mujahedeen Khalq at conferences in capitals across the globe.

This group of luminaries includes two former chairmen of the joint chiefs of staff, Gens. Hugh H. Shelton and Peter Pace; Wesley K. Clark, the former NATO commander; Gen. James L. Jones, who was President Obama's national security adviser; Louis J. Freeh, the former F.B.I. director; the former intelligence officials Dennis C. Blair and Michael V. Hayden; the former New Mexico governor Bill Richardson; the former attorney general Michael B. Mukasey, and Lee H. Hamilton, a former congressman who was co-chairman of the 9/11 Commission. Indeed, the Rajavis and Mujahedeen Khalq are spending millions in an attempt to persuade the Obama administration, and in particular Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, to take them off the national list of terrorist groups, where the group was listed in 1997. Delisting the group would enable it to lobby Congress for support in the same way that the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998 allowed the Iraqi exile Ahmad Chalabi to do. Mrs. Clinton should ignore their P.R. campaign. Mujahedeen Khalq is not only irrelevant to the cause of Iran's democratic activists, but a totalitarian cult that will come back to haunt us. When I arrived at Camp Ashraf, the base of the group's operations, in April 2003, I thought I'd entered a fictional world of female worker bees. Everywhere I saw women dressed exactly alike, in khaki uniforms and mud-colored head scarves, driving back and forth in white pickup trucks, staring ahead in a daze as if they were working at a factory in Maoist China. I met dozens of young women buried in the mouths of tanks, busily tinkering with the engines. One by one, the girls bounded up to me and my two minders to recite their transformations from human beings to acolytes of Ms. Rajavi. One said she had been suicidal in Iran until she found Ms. Rajavi on the Internet.

At Camp Ashraf, 40 miles north of Baghdad, near the Iranian border, 3,400 members of the militant group reside in total isolation on a 14-square-mile tract of harsh desert land. Access to the Internet, phones and information about the outside world is prohibited. Posters of Ms. Rajavi and her smiling green eyes abound. Meanwhile, she lives in luxury in France; her husband has remained in hiding since the United States occupied Iraq in 2003. During the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, the group served as Mr. Hussein's own private militia opposing the theocratic government in Tehran. For two decades, he gave the group money, weapons, jeeps and military bases along the border with Iran. In return, the Rajavis pledged their fealty. In 1991, when Mr. Hussein crushed a Shiite uprising in the south and attempted to carry out genocide against the Kurds in the north, the Rajavis and their army joined his forces in mowing down fleeing Kurds. Ms. Rajavi told her disciples, "Take the Kurds under your tanks, and save your bullets for the Iranian Revolutionary

Guards." Many followers escaped in disgust. So the Rajavis then began preying on Iranian refugees and asylum seekers in Europe to fill their ranks. The Rajavis promise them salaries, marriage, family, freedom and a great cause - fighting the Iranian government. Then the unwitting youths arrive in Iraq. What is most disturbing is how the group treats its members. After the Iran-Iraq war, Mr. Rajavi orchestrated an ill-planned offensive, deploying thousands of young men and women into Iran on a mass martyrdom operation. Instead of capturing Iran, as they believed they would, thousands of them were slaughtered, including parents, husbands and wives of those I met in Iraq in 2003.

After my visit, I met and spoke to men and women who had escaped from the group's clutches. Many had to be deprogrammed. They recounted how people were locked up if they disagreed with the leadership or tried to escape; some were even killed. Friendships and all emotional relationships are forbidden. From the time they are toddlers, boys and girls are not allowed to speak to each other. Each day at Camp Ashraf you had to report your dreams and thoughts. If a man was turned on by the scent of a woman or a whiff of perfume, he had to confess. Members had to attend weekly ideological cleansings in which they publicly confessed their sexual desires. Members were even forced to divorce and take a vow of lifelong celibacy to ensure that all their energy and love would be directed toward Maryam and Massoud. Mr. Hamilton and Generals Jones and Clark have been paid speakers' fees by front groups for Mujahedeen Khalq and have spoken in support of the group in public conferences. They claimed ignorance of how the group treated its members. "I don't know a lot about the group," Mr. Hamilton told me over the phone last week. But in 1994, when he was chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Mr. Hamilton received a report describing the group as a violent cult with a distinct ideology synthesizing Marxism and messianic Shiism. At a February conference in Paris, Mr. Dean praised the group's extraordinary "bill of rights." And General Jones said to Ms. Rajavi: "It is time for those of us from the United States who have come to know and admire you and your colleagues and your goals to do what is required to recognize the legitimacy of your movement and your ideals." When I asked General Jones last week if he knew that some considered the group a totalitarian cult, he replied, "This is the first time I've heard anything about this."

He said he'd checked with military and F.B.I. officials. "I wanted to make sure we weren't supporting a group that was doing nefarious things that I don't know about," he said. "Nobody brought it up, so I didn't know what questions to ask." IN fact, a 2004 F.B.I. report on the group detailed a joint investigation by the American and German police, which revealed that the group's cell in Cologne, Germany, had used money from a complex fraud scheme to buy military equipment. The group used children with multiple identities to claim multiple benefit checks from the German government. Evidence also showed that the group had obtained money in Los Angeles to purchase GPS units to increase the accuracy of planned mortar attacks on Tehran. It is possible that such plots do not bother General Jones and other supporters of the group. But Iraq will no longer tolerate its presence. Its government wants the Mujahedeen Khalq out of the country by the end of the year. In April, Iraqi forces attacked Camp Ashraf. General Jones and other supporters of the group were outraged. They are right that we should have compassion for those trapped inside the camp. A 2009 RAND Corporation study found that at least 70 percent of the group's members there were being held against their will. If the group's American cheerleaders cared for those at the camp half as much as they did for the Rajavis, they would be insisting on private Red Cross visits with each man and woman at Camp Ashraf. American officials who support the group like to quote the saying, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend." By this logic, the group's opposition to the Tehran theocracy justifies American backing. But there is another saying to consider: "The means are the ends." By using the Mujahedeen Khalq to provoke Tehran, we will end up damaging our integrity and reputation, and weaken the legitimate democracy movement within Iran.

As a senior State Department official told me, "They are the best financed and organized, but they are so despised inside Iran that they have no traction." Iranian democracy activists say the group, if it had had the chance, could have become the Khmer Rouge of Iran. "They are considered traitors and killers of Iranian kids," said the official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because the Mujahedeen Khalq's status on the terrorist list is under review. "They are so unpopular that we think any gesture of support to them would disqualify and discredit us as being interested in democratic reform." If the group is taken off the terrorist list, it will be able to freely lobby the American government under the guise of an Iranian democracy movement. Recent history has shown that the United States often ends up misguidedly supporting not only the wrong exile groups in the Middle East, but the least relevant ones. We cannot afford to be so naïve or misguided again.

Mujahedin Khalq Machine vs. the Iranian-American Community

Trita Parsi, Huffington Post, August 17 2011

In the past few weeks, the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK) has been launching relentless attacks against the National Iranian American Council (NIAC). The immediate reason is the Iranian-American campaign spearheaded by NIAC to keep the MEK on the U.S.'s terrorist list. NIAC and others have launched this campaign because delisting the MEK would unleash a major force for a U.S.-Iran war, undermine the peaceful pro-democracy movement in Iran while empowering anti-democratic hardliners, and put the free voices of the Iranian-American community under threat.

The MEK's attacks are not new. The MEK and neo-conservative elements supporting them have for years been orchestrating attacks against prominent Iranian American individuals and institutions who do not subscribe to their views. The targets have included not just me and NIAC, but also individuals like Ramin Jahanbeglou, Vali Nasr, and Shirin Ebadi. Indeed, the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has detailed how the MEK accuses any and all of its detractors of being agents of the Islamic Republic.

NIAC poses a threat to the MEK in many ways - because we give the Iranian-American community a voice in Washington that opposes war, opposes indiscriminate sanctions and supports human rights and indigenous democratization in Iran.

The MEK has a radically different agenda, and like some of its neoconservative counterparts, wants to silence independent voices opposing their pro-war agenda.

The MEK and these neo-conservatives sought hard to hide the true source and reasons for the attacks against prominent Iranian Americans and NIAC. The MEK knows very well how despised they are in the Iranian-American community. More often than not, their attack dogs pretend to be Monarchists or of some other denomination. Few, if any, admit their ties to the MEK. And these neo-conservatives know that the attacks will appear more credible if they have an Iranian face.

But recently, the MEK's desperation has shone through. Now, they no longer pretend to be disconnected from their campaigns against other Iranian Americans. Their attacks are posted on their own websites, and the attackers openly declare their dedication and loyalty to the MEK.

In this new desperation, they have also revealed their larger agenda. In a recent article, the MEK juxtaposed NIAC's current campaign to educate the public about the ramifications of delisting the MEK from terror list against an analysis I wrote in 2007 describing the likely consequences of the Bush administration's plan to include the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC) on that same list.

The purpose of this comparison is to support the baseless claims by the MEK and its network of supporters that NIAC supports the regime in Iran.

The comparison falls flat. The designation would have had no economic impact on the IRGC, which was already exhaustively sanctioned by the United States. Instead, the designation was intended to advance a cause for war before the Bush administration's term ended. Indeed, the entire issue seemed ripped straight out of the Iraq war playbook. This is why several leading U.S. policymakers opposed the measure, including the bipartisan leadership of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (led by now Vice-President Joseph Biden and Republican Senator Richard Lugar).

Senator Joe Lieberman, one of the strongest advocates for an Iran war in the Senate, later introduced the idea in legislative form and added language that explicitly gave a green light to conducting military action against Iran. The Kyl-Lieberman amendment stated the following:

(4) to support the prudent and calibrated use of all instruments of United States national power in Iraq, including diplomatic, economic, intelligence, and military instruments, in support of the policy described in paragraph (3) with respect to the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran and its proxies.

The call for the "use of all instruments" including military instruments is what constituted a green light for war. In reality, the amendment had less to do with listing the IRGC as a terrorist organization than supporting military action against Iran before Bush's term came to an end.

The amendment caused a storm in the Senate - and even the Democratic primary debates - because it was rightly seen as an effort to start a war with Iran. Opposition from anti-war groups and Lieberman's colleagues in the eventually saw the above paragraph deleted from the amendment.

To suggest that my analysis, or Senator Biden and others' opposition to this move, was favorable to the IRGC is preposterous. Indeed, NIAC has been a key supporter of precision sanctions targeting the IRGC and leaders of the Islamic Republic.

And herein lies the difference between NIAC's approach and the tactics of the MEK and these neo-conservatives. Though they pretend to target the IRGC, their policies in reality pave the way for a war that would see hundreds of thousands dead. NIAC and the Iranian-American community as a whole, on the other hand, puts the well being of the peoples of the America and Iran at the center. We have consistently opposed war, and instead pursued policies that would target the IRGC and the leaders of the Islamic Republic without hurting the Iranian people or risking a war that would be disastrous for both countries.

The questions people should ask themselves is why the MEK and these neo-conservatives consistently support policies that on the surface appear to target the clerical regime, but in reality drive the US and Iran towards a military confrontation.

Our ability to give the Iranian-American community an opportunity to be heard in Washington DC is a threat both to the agenda of the MEK and that of these neo-conservatives. Therefore, the attacks against independent voices in the Iranian-American community and NIAC will continue. But as the community comes to understand the agenda of the MEK, it will no longer buy their conspiracy theories.

Why Are Prominent Americans Lobbying for an MKO Terrorist Group?

MJ Rosenberg, Huffington Post, August 24, 2011

It is not hard to imagine how Americans would react if they learned that Al Qaeda had It is not hard to imagine how Americans would react if they learned that Al Qaeda had hired top

lobbyists to help promote its agenda in Congress. Or if they heard that influential active and retired government officials were being paid to attest to Hezbollah's good character. They would be appalled.

But, amazingly, a group similar to Al Qaeda and Hezbollah is doing just that. It is the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK), an Iranian exile group that is on the Department of State's list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations alongside other more prominent groups such as Al Qaeda, Hezbollah, Hamas, and Al-Shabaab.

The MEK wants to be removed from the terrorist list because, by law, its presence there prevents it from directly promoting its agenda in Washington, and most importantly, from fundraising. So it has recruited some of officialdom's biggest names to convince Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to "delist" MEK and free it from the current limitations on its activities. News reports predict that Clinton is seriously considering the move and will make a decision by month's end.

According to the New York Times, among the "luminaries" promoting "delisting" are former New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani; former Vermont governor Howard Dean; former NATO commander Wesley K. Clark, President Obama's former national security adviser Gen. James Jones; former F.B.I. director, Louis Freeh; former New Mexico governor Bill Richardson; former attorney general Michael B. Mukasey; and Lee H. Hamilton, the former congressman who was co-chairman of the 9/11 Commission. The Times report notes that the MEK endorsers are paid handsome sums (up to \$100,000) for speaking out in its behalf.

The MEK's hired guns say that it does not belong on the list because it long ago abandoned its violent ways. But its record is so long and so bloody that only the very credulous can believe that it turned a new leaf. And there is doubt whether the MEK is even a peaceful movement today. An FBI report from 2004 noted that the agency had reason to believe that the group was still "planning and executing acts of terrorism."

It is hard to keep up with the MEK, which changes its positions and alliances as often as a teenager changes baseball caps. That is, in part, because it is more like a cult than a political organization. (Even its supporters agree with that.) Its members are required to lay aside all personal desires and devote themselves completely to the MEK leader in a manner eerily similar to the Jim Jones Jonestown cult.

The Mujahedin-e Khalq started out supporting the Iranian revolution that drove out the Shah and replaced him with the Islamic Republic of Ayatollah Khomeini. That was in the 1970's, a decade during which the MEK assassinated six U.S. military advisers and civilians in Iran and then participated in the seizure and hostage taking at the American embassy in 1979. It was among Ayatollah Khomeini's most militant supporters and opposed any compromises with the United States which it called "the satanic force threatening the world...."

But it soon broke violently with the Ayatollah Khomeini regime and dedicated itself to overthrowing it. It relocated to, of all places, Iraq and allied itself with Iran's then arch enemy, Saddam Hussein. Saddam gave the MEK a military base inside the country, from which to conduct its war against Iran and Saddam's other enemies.

During the Iran-Iraq war, the Times notes, MEK "served as Mr. Hussein's own private militia....For two decades he gave the group money, weapons, jeeps and military bases along the border with Iran." In 1991, the MEK helped Saddam crush the Shiite uprising in the south and eradicate the Kurds in the north. Reports of Iranian dead at the hands of the MEK range from several hundred to thousands.

Following the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, American forces disarmed the MEK camp, although some 3,400 MEK members remain there today despite the natural determination of the current government to get a pro-Saddam encampment out of the country. (Most observers believe that a large percentage of the people at the camp are being held against their will, with no means to escape or place to escape to.)

And that brings us back to the current effort to "delist" the MEK. One of the ostensible reasons MEK's advocates use is that "delisting" would allow innocent people in the camp to get out and seek refuge in other countries. But freeing the captives can be accomplished through the combined efforts of the U.S. military, the International Red Cross and the United Nations who can go in and separate out the hostages from the terrorists, who should be prosecuted. Delisting is irrelevant in that context.

So why the effort to delist? The MEK wants to be free to ensconce itself in Washington and other world capitals and play the role of a legitimate Iranian opposition, similar to what Ahmad Chalabi and his Iraqi National Congress did prior to the Iraq war. Also like the Chalabi group, the MEK seeks to align itself with American neoconservatives (many of whom already support it) and agitate for a U.S. invasion of their home country.

That analogy is an especially telling one because the MEK is despised in the nation it would like to "liberate." According to Ray Tayekh, a scholar at the Council on Foreign Relations, the MEK has absolutely no standing whatsoever to play a role in Iran, and not just because Iranians hate the organization for having joined Saddam's war against the country.

At a House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing last month, he testified that the group's "alliance with Saddam and its cult-like dispositions have alienated even the radical segments of intelligentsia that once found its ideological template attractive. ... The Iranian populace is seeking ways of liberalizing its society and not embracing yet another ideological movement with totalitarian tendencies."

Given all this, it is amazing that any American would ally himself with the MEK. After all, what end does delisting serve other than to liberate a former terrorist group so that it might more effectively promote U.S. involvement in another Middle East war. That is, in fact, precisely why prominent neocons support delisting, just as they supported Chalabi.

"If the group is taken off the list, not as a result of an objective review, but by virtue of their lobbying prowess, several repercussions can be envisioned," Trita Parsi, president of the National Iranian American Council, a pro-democracy group, wrote earlier this year.

Some of these serious repercussions would be felt by the Iranian people. Because the group is despised by Iranians across the ideological, political and social spectrum, legitimizing it here might delegitimize the democracy movement there. [..]

It is likely that most of the people who lend their names to the MEK's campaign have no idea what the group is and simply accepts money from it as an honorarium for making a speech, as if the MEK was like any other group that opposes the Iranian regime and supports U.S. policy goals. It isn't. The MEK is indeed an enemy of the Iranian regime. But it is also our enemy. In other words, sometimes the enemy of our enemy is not our friend.

Attendees Bused Into MEK Rally, Some of Whom 'Don't Really Understand What The MEK Is'

Zaid Jilani, ThinkProgress.com, Aug 26, 2011

A large crowd gathered today outside the State Department today to protest the designation of the Mujahedeen-e Khalq (MEK) as a "foreign terror organization." Police at the scene told ThinkProgress the groups organizing the demonstration said at least two thousand people were there, though the estimate seemed high.

The MEK's profile has risen as stateside supporters — including former government officials — have launched a massive, coordinated, and multi-million dollar campaign to have them removed from the terror rolls. Critics argue that the group may still have designs on committing violent acts and that their public support in Iran is virtually non-existent.

Among Iranians, who dominated the crowd, many said they rallied for the MEK because they supported democracy in Iran and opposed the post-revolutionary Islamic regime. But many apparent non-Iranians came out as well, most wearing flags, headbands, and even yellow vests with images of the group's leaders — Maryam and Massoud Rajavi — on the chest. Of this group, few seemed to have many details about the MEK, and instead pledged vague notions of support for human rights and democracy, often even getting the name of the MEK wrong.

Watch a video of conference attendees here:

Some of the attendees had been bused and flown in at no personal cost, receiving transportation and in some cases lodging and meals.

One attendee who spoke with ThinkProgress, Melvin Santiago, 23, a homeless man living in shelters in Staten Island, New York, said he'd found out about the protest from a friend he'd come with. They made the trip along with about 100 other people in four rented coach buses.

"He saw [a flier] yesterday passing by the church," said Santiago of his friend. "He usually goes there for the food pantry."

On a day's notice, Santiago said he hadn't had a chance to learn too much about the MEK — he thought the group was called "Ashraff," which is the name of the camp in Iraq where 3,400 members currently live.

Some of the other attendees knew little about the MEK's history. The State Department designated the group in 1997 and made allegations of decades of terrorism, including against Americans when the U.S. had good relations with the Shah before the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Two attendees from Arkansas, who'd come up with an Iranian friend who lives nearby, said that they suspected collusion — "hanky panky" — between the State Department and the Islamic Republic.

Others had an interest in Iran. One attendee said he lived in Iran and played professional basketball there. He said he supported human rights in Iran. He said the reverend at his church informed him about the rally, though he admitted that "to be honest, I don't really understand what the MEK is."

The Lobbying that Shouldn't be Happening

Paul R. Pillar, the National Interest, August 27, 2011

The extraordinary lobbying campaign on behalf of the sometime Marxist/Islamist cult/terrorist group known as the Mujahedin-e Khalq is getting waged on ever more fronts. The specific objective is to get the Obama administration to remove the MEK from the list of foreign terrorist organizations. Wherever the money to fund the campaign is coming from, some of the largest expenditures so far have been in the form of fat speaking fees to notables who are willing to accept the check and come out in favor of delisting the group. Some of these high-profile hired advocates later acknowledged they did not have all that much knowledge about the MEK.

Having purchased advocacy at the high end, the organizers of the campaign are now buying it at the low end. For a demonstration outside the State Department on Friday, demonstrators who, it is probably fair to say, know even less about the MEK than the big-name speakers were bused in from as far as New York City. Many demonstrators were provided not only the transportation but also in some cases lodging and meals. One of the participants, a 23-year-old homeless man from Staten Island named Melvin Santiago, said he learned about the demonstration from a friend who in turn got word of it through a flyer

distributed in front of a church—where the friend, said Santiago, “usually goes for the food pantry.”

Those who have sold their advocacy for big bucks deserve shame; those who have done so for a meal or two maybe deserve our pity. Those who have gotten mixed up in the campaign through a crude belief that Iran is an enemy and the enemy of my enemy is my friend need to realize that being an enemy's enemy does not make one a friend. Those who have some notion that the MEK can serve as a force for opposing authoritarianism in Iran are badly mistaken about the nature of the group—a good description of which is in a recent piece by Elizabeth Rubin in the New York Times. [...]

Even setting all that aside, there is an important procedural issue involved. On this issue alone, the pro-MEK campaign is objectionable. The decision of the secretary of state that the campaign is attempting to influence is not some subjective act of crafting policy. It is supposed to be a straightforward application of the terms of the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996, which created the formal list of foreign terrorist organizations (creation of such a list having been necessitated by other provisions in the act, such as the criminalization of material support to terrorist groups). The procedure for listing or recertifying FTOs, as they are called, involves not only the State Department but also the Justice Department and the intelligence community. It is a long legal and administrative procedure, as I can testify from having been involved in the creation of the initial list of FTOs after passage of the 1996 law. The criteria to be applied involve such things as involvement in terrorist activity and effects on U.S. interests (which is not to be equated with terrorist attacks being directed against U.S. targets). Having conducted an anti-U.S. terrorist attack recently is not one of the criteria; if it were, many current FTOs—such as Lebanese Hizballah—would not be on the list.

Abbas Milani, in an otherwise informative piece in these spaces about the MEK, unfortunately suggests equivalence between the well-funded pro-MEK campaign and statements that have been critical of the campaign and the group. Milani even talks about Iranian regime funding of anti-MEK lobbyists. (That last point is a little puzzling. The regime assuredly hates the MEK as much as most Iranians do and, if the group were delisted, would get plenty of mileage from loudly proclaiming that this action shows how phony is any U.S. affirmation of supporting democracy in Iran. But precisely for that reason, and because of how the action would help to discredit the democratic opposition in Iran, the more strategically minded hardliners in the regime probably would quietly welcome delisting.) Whatever the Iranian regime may be doing, the statements critical of the pro-MEK campaign that I am familiar with (and have participated in myself) have nothing to do with the regime, and they are not an attempt to lobby the secretary of state. Instead, they are a calling to account of the large and illegitimate campaign that is trying to pressure the secretary. The calling to account would not be necessary if the pro-MEK campaign were not being waged. The MEK has been recertified as an FTO several times in the past with no noise about it in the street, on speakers' platforms, or in opinion columns.

The secretary of state should pay no heed to what Melvin Santiago and the other hungry homeless outside her office window are saying, or to what the high-paid hired guns are saying, about the MEK. Nor does she need to pay any attention to what people like me are saying about the group. She should keep the windows closed and just pay attention to the terms of the law and to what officials in the departments and agencies involved say about whether the terms of the law still apply in this case.