

# ParsBrief

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- MKO BARRED FROM ALL ACTIVITIES IN IRAQ
- IRAN CRITICIZES U.S. FOR PROTECTING MKO
- boucher`s opinion on MEK
- Friends or foes? Cultlike group stuck between three powers
- A look inside
- A truce with Pentagon
- Exchange offered
- A deadly mission
- Stretching the truth
- 'All that is left is the fear'



## **MKO BARRED FROM ALL ACTIVITIES IN IRAQ**

Iraqi Deputy Foreign Minister Hamid al-Bayati told ISNA in Tehran on 3 August that Iran and Iraq currently have "good, deep and solid" relations and "Iraqis believe they must have good relations with Iran." He termed statements against Iran by Defense Minister al-Khuza'i and Interior Minister Falah Hassan al-Naqib (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 21 July 2004) "their personal views," not "the official position of the Iraqi government." The official position is that "Iraq considers Iran a neighboring Muslim state, not an enemy," ISNA quoted him as saying. Al-Bayati said he is in Tehran to plan a visit "soon" by Prime Minister Allawi. A joint Iran-Iraq committee, he said, will at an unspecified date "examine all issues and problems between Iran and Iraq, including the war," ISNA reported. Iran and Iraq fought an eight-year war after former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein invaded Iran in 1980. Iran is demanding reparations.

VS ...AND SAYS IRANIAN REBELS BARRED FROM ALL ACTIVITIES Al-Bayati said that the Iraqi government has decided that the Mujahedin Khalq Organization (MKO), an Iranian opposition group currently confined to a camp in Iraq, "must not engage in any...political activities or other programs in Iraq," ISNA reported. Iran wants the group, designated a terrorist group by the U.S. State Department, expelled and its leaders sent to Iran for trial (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 27 and 28 July 2004). "They are merely allowed to meet their basic human needs, including food and drink, and are barred from any and all activity," ISNA quoted al-Bayati as saying. So far, he said, the "Iraqi government has had no control over this group," which has been guarded by coalition forces. The MKO "are not permitted to remain in Iraq," al-Bayati said, and the International Committee of the Red Cross is interviewing members to "find them a place," or send them to Iran or a third country, if they wish. Separately, Expediency Council Chairman Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani said in a Tehran meeting on 3 August with Iraqi Finance Minister Adil Abd al-Mahdi that Iran wants the MKO expelled, following a previous Governing Council decision that "America is preventing from being implemented," IRNA reported

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## **IRAN CRITICIZES U.S. FOR PROTECTING MKO**

Iran criticized the United States for "making a tool" of the antiterror campaign after Washington granted protected status to the anti-Iranian terrorist group Mujahedin Khalq in Iraq, IRNA reported on 27 July (see "RFE/RL Newslines," 27 July 2004). "We already knew that America is not serious in fighting terrorism," Foreign Ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Assefi said. "America...is seeking to legally justify its support for terrorists only out of spite against and enmity with Iran's quest for independence." The U.S. State Department previously listed the MKO as a "foreign terrorist organization." "The American people must be worried more than anybody else since other terrorist groups can now be granted protection and given privileges of a good terrorist," Assefi said. KR

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## **Boucher's opinion on MEK**

Here's how State Department spokesman Richard Boucher answered questions about MEK at a briefing last year:

QUESTION: Richard, do you have any language on the Mujahedin-e Khalq, the Foreign Terrorist Organization whose bases have been targeted recently by U.S. military in Iraq?

MR. BOUCHER: Slow down. The answer is yes. I just have to find it. But the language I have is to say what you just told me, that Mujahedin-e Khalq is designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the Department of State, as we note in our Patterns of Global Terrorism Report. This group mixes Marxist ideology and Islam and is engaged in anti-Western attacks, including support for the takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in 1979 and terrorist attacks inside Iran during the 1970s that killed several U.S. military personnel and civilians.

## Friends or foes? Cultlike group stuck between three powers

Members of the Iranian opposition group Mujahedeen Khalq gather by the entrance of their camp at Baqubah, 45 miles northeast of Baghdad.

The Seattle Times/January 4, 2004

By Scott Peterson

Tehran, Iran --The case of those holed up in Camp Ashraf, near Baghdad, remains a quirky piece of unfinished business left over from the American campaign to oust Saddam Hussein. It continues to leave a trail of broken lives. U.S. troops are guarding some 3,800 militants of the Mujahedeen Khalq (MEK) -the only armed opposition to the ruling clerics of Iran.

Officially, both the U.S. and Iran label the MEK a terrorist group. The U.S.-appointed Iraq Governing Council concurs: Citing the "black history of this terrorist organization" and its years of working closely with Saddam, it has ordered the expulsion of the MEK.

But the MEK's fate is unclear. While the Iraqis want it disbanded, the politically savvy group still has support among some U.S. officials, who see it as a potential tool against Iran, a country that President Bush has called part of an "axis of evil."

Some MEK tips have led to recent revelations about key aspects of Iran's clandestine nuclear program, though many others have proved unreliable. Long a diplomatic hot potato -which Tehran has offered to solve, by exchanging MEK militants for al-Qaida players now in Iran -the MEK continues to complicate U.S.-Iran-Iraq relations.

### A look inside

The voices of former MEK militants give a rare glimpse inside a group they say demands a cultlike control over members, practices Mao-style self-denunciations, and requires worship of husband-and-wife leaders Massoud and Maryam Rajavi.

Recruited from the United States and Europe, or even drawn directly from Iranians held in Iraqi prisoner-of-war camps and jails, the former fighters describe a high level of fear, and speak of their own awakening -and freedom from the MEK's grip -as if it's an epiphany.

The U.S. State Department lists the MEK as a terrorist group that conducted assassinations against American citizens in the 1970s -and was behind bombings and killings of hundreds of members of the Iranian regime starting in the early 1980s.

By one count, after the recent invasion of Iraq, the MEK surrendered to U.S. troops 300 tanks, 250 armored personnel carriers, 250 artillery pieces and 10,000 small arms. Still, the group is reported to be able to continue antiregime broadcasts into Iran.

## A truce with Pentagon

The Pentagon -after bombing MEK camps in Iraq in the first stages of the invasion -quickly worked out a truce with the group that some civilian hawks in the Pentagon believe should be supported and turned into a U.S. tool of opposition against the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Militants who were once ready to die for the MEK, however, now have some advice for those who may want to use the Mujahedeen in the same way the Northern Alliance was used against the Taliban.

"I don't think the U.S. can take advantage of this group," says Arash Sametipour, a former MEK militant recruited in the U.S. He survived his own attempts to kill himself with cyanide capsules and a hand grenade that blew away his right hand after botching an assassination attempt in Tehran in early 2000.

"This organization does not like the U.S. It is a mixture of Mao and Marxism, and (leader Massoud) Rajavi acts like Stalin," he says.

Ostensibly under U.S. guard, the MEK still keeps its small arms. U.S. officials said in November they were being screened for war crimes and terrorism. The Pentagon denies reports that the militants are able to freely roam or conduct attacks.

Reacting to the expulsion order last month, the MEK claimed the "vast majority of the Iraqi people" support its presence, and that the decision to shut it down "merely reflects the fantasies and illusions of the mullah's regime, which regards ... us as the biggest obstacle to its export of fundamentalism ... and theocratic dictatorship in Iraq."

MEK representatives could not be contacted for further comment.

Western diplomats and analysts agree that the MEK has very little support inside Iran itself. Though many Iranians take issue with their clerical rulers, MEK members are widely seen to be traitors, as they fought alongside Iraqi troops against Iran in the 1980s.

Most Iraqis, too, have little time for the MEK, which helped Saddam's security forces brutally put down the Kurdish uprising after the Gulf War in 1991 and helped Baghdad quell Shiite unrest in 1999. The group, however, said in a Dec. 11 statement that throughout its 17 years in Iraq, it had never interfered in Iraq's internal affairs.

Last summer, the State Department outlawed several MEK-affiliated groups in the United States. In June, France arrested 150 activists, including self-declared "president-elect" Maryam Rajavi.

The crackdowns sparked some to publicly commit suicide by setting themselves afire -a type of protest that some suggest could be repeated if the MEK is forced out of Iraq.

Within days of the expulsion order, lawyers for the MEK -arguing that expulsion would violate the laws of war -are reported to have sent letters to Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and others, asking the Pentagon to overrule the move.

### Exchange offered

A senior Pentagon official said the United States was exploring the option of sending former MEK members to a country other than Iran.

"They ought to be vetted," he said, "and anyone who is a criminal deserves to be punished somehow. But they don't have to go back (to Iran). If they are not guilty of crimes, there are various places they could go."

The MEK has already turned into a bargaining chip, Tehran has floated a handover of the MEK leadership by the United States to Iran in exchange for senior al-Qaida leaders now in Iran. And the interim government in Iraq is not alone in trying to disband the MEK. Former members now back in Iran run an agency called the Nejat "Freedom" Committee, which aims to reunite hundreds of Iranian families with MEK militants.

An amnesty offer from President Mohammad Khatami -coupled with relatively soft treatment of recently captured MEK operatives and the expulsion deadline -is sparking new hope. In Geneva last month, Khatami said Iran was ready to accept MEK fighters who "are in Iraq and regret" past acts. "We will welcome them and judge them according to the law," he said.

"The first thing we must do is tell them: 'You are called terrorists all over the world, even by the U.S., and you can't go anywhere,' " says Hora Shalchi, a former operative who carried out two mortar attacks in Tehran and served prison time before joining Nejat. "The only place you will be welcome is home, in Iran."

Nejat members and Camp Ashraf veterans -some still in prison in Iran -speak of a wish to "rescue" MEK members from the Iraq camps. Most activists, they contend, are "prisoners" of the organization with little access to news from the outside world and are told they will be tortured and killed if they return to Iran.

But the message of a dozen former militants interviewed for this article -half of them still imprisoned by Iran's Revolutionary Court -is that the MEK is no longer deemed a critical threat by the Iranian regime.

And so brutal treatment of the past has given way to a new strategy.

### A deadly mission

The path that led many away from the MEK is often similar to that of Shalchi.

She joined the MEK in 1996 because her parents were "loyal" supporters. She soon found herself at Camp Ashraf as part of a special squad that she says trained in isolation for "terror operations."

Shalchi returned to Iran in the spring of 2001, crossing the border on foot "like a pregnant woman" with five 60-mm mortar rounds, half a mortar launch tube and a Colt .45 pistol tucked under her chador -and cyanide tablets ready under her tongue. Her female MEK teammate carried three more mortars, and the other half of the launch tube.

Their target was a sprawling military base in Tehran. In the getaway car, unaware of the operation, were Shalchi's parents, her young brother and a girl.

"I was so brainwashed, I took my 6-year-old daughter with me," Shalchi recalls. "I didn't think that she could be the first person to be hurt."

With hands shaking nervously, Shalchi blasted the mortars but missed the target. The young women were then chased down by a crowd. Shalchi fired her gun to scare off a young man and found out later she had wounded him in the shoulder.

Echoing the experience of several captured MEK fighters, her first doubts came in Tehran. "We were told, 'Any bullet you shoot, Iranians will applaud you. All of the people really support you,'" Shalchi says. "But we weren't accepted by anybody. There was no support. They told us a lot of lies."

Then, back in Iraq, her eyes were opened further, Shalchi says. She was admonished for not killing the boy.

Life is not easy in Camp Ashraf for militants who raise questions, a trait of those recruited in the United States. Arash Sametipour -the failed assassin who tried to kill himself -traveled from the Northern Virginia Community College to Iraq, and suffered from the daily self-criticism.

"They beat me down so much, after six months it worked -I became (MEK) in my mind," says Sametipour. "When you face such an organization, you think: 'All the problems are myself; the organization is clean.' If you have a question, it has an answer, and it's only me who doesn't understand."

Sametipour expected to die in custody. But instead he was interrogated and given prison time that he says includes newspapers, TV and even a call home to his parents in the United States.

"What I saw were very logical interrogations. ... They did not look at us as enemies, but as people who need help," Sametipour says. "They told us: 'You are not a threat to our government.' "

Also arriving from America was Mohamed Akbarin, who had been hitchhiking around the United States and studying mechanical engineering at Boston's Northeastern University when he joined the MEK in the mid-1980s.

Because he spoke English, Akbarin was chosen as a helicopter pilot, helped orchestrate trips for foreign journalists and later -after an unsuccessful escape attempt -spent time in Iraqi and MEK jails.

He will never forget one incident in the mid-1990s that taught him the reality of fear for some MEK cadres. One man was accused of trying to escape. "They found him, beat him up and poured gas on him, as though they were going to burn him," Akbarin recalls.

As an organizer of "guest" visits to Ashraf Camp, Akbarin says, he saw deception tactics firsthand. When the MEK mounted large military parades, for example, Iraqi helicopters were used.

"We painted our symbol across Iraqi ones, and when it was done, we would wash it off or repaint it," Akbarin says. To boost troop strength, fighters would parade past two or three times.

### Stretching the truth

Akbarin was not the only MEK fighter to notice the gap between fact and fiction. Babak Amin crossed to Iran in 2001 and carried out nine attacks aimed at disrupting Iran's elections.

Today Amin is serving a 10-year sentence in Tehran's Evin prison. But as he sent reports of his 2001 attacks back to Iraq using a satellite phone, he was surprised to see how embellished his exploits became on MEK Web sites.

In one case, he says, he fired three small rifle grenades, which landed innocuously in the yard of a quasi-government building. On the Web, the attack was turned into a three-pronged attack with several groups of mujahedeen, using rocket-propelled grenades.

In another case, Amin reported injuring one person during a shootout near the Defense Ministry. The MEK declared that 10 of Iran's security forces were killed.

"From the first day I came back to Iran after 15 years, we were facing exactly the opposite of what we were told by the MEK," says Amin. "People are really brainwashed."

### 'All that is left is the fear'

That was also the feeling of Mohsen Hashemi, even though he and his family had long supported the MEK and even produced three "martyrs" for the cause.

Hashemi worked as an MEK agent in Iran for years. But then he was brought to Iraq. As soon as he arrived, Hashemi was jailed for 2-1/2 months and doubts began to grow. Then he saw



political videotapes in which, he says, MEK leader Rajavi "compared himself with Jesus and God, and claimed he was the 12th imam of Shiite Islam who had returned."

Hashemi says he finally had a breakdown after attending his first speech by Rajavi. He came out of the hall, "sat in the toilet and cried for 15 minutes," he says. "I realized I made such a mistake, to work so many years for this Dracula."

"The most important part of the organization has collapsed - all that is left is the fear," says Hashemi. "They are afraid to come back here."