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US to flood Romania with terrorists

Ilya Kharlamov – Voice of Russia - January 10, 2014

Washington may turn Romania into a hotbed of tension, which will prove quite a headache both to Romania proper and the neighbouring countries. The point is the United States is making efforts to move several thousand members of the People's Mujahedin of Iran organization (Mujahedin-e Khalq) from Iraq to Romania. The so-called civilized society's care for radical Islamists is due to the fact that the Mujahedin see their mission in fighting Iran, which the West also seeks to weaken by all means available.

Both Iran and Iraq see Mujahedin-e Khalq as a terrorist organization. The armed wing of the organization, - the National Liberation Army of Iran, is believed to have founded the National Council of Resistance of Iran, which brings together all of Iran's opposition forces. Those who opposed the rule of the Shah of Iran started their resistance in the middle of the 1960s on a romantic idea of building a class-free socialist society, but as time went on, the idea degenerated into mass-scale terrorist attacks and acts of sabotage. The Iranian authorities' sharp rebuff caused Mujahedin-e Khalq to move to the neighbouring Iraq, whence it launched armed attacks on Iran during the Iran-Iraq War and helped the Iraqi regime to quash Kurdish rebellions. Mujahedin-e Khalq went on with its attacks on Iran in the subsequent years taking advice from and controlled by the United States.

But the impressive "record of service" (some 50,000 people killed, including Iran's top-echelon officials) proved no hindrance to the EU and US recent decision to strike Mujahedin-e Khalq off their list of terrorist organizations. The EU and the US obviously proceeded from the assumption that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend", although the two saw Mujahedin-e Khalq as terrorists just a short while ago.

Washington's plan to deploy the Islamists in Romania is inappropriate at the very least, says Russian expert in Oriental Studies Boris Dolgov, and elaborates.

"If the Romanian leaders have certain doubts, and they will certainly question the correctness of the decision, then they should stiffly oppose the move. The organization acts against Iran, Tehran sees it as terrorist, Mujahedin-e Khalq is known for numerous

terrorist attacks and life attempts. Besides, the US plan is at variance with the recent trend towards improving relations between Washington and Tehran. Also, a presence of Islamic militants will serve to aggravate tension in the region. It's obvious that peaceful coexistence with the people of other religions is the last thing the Islamists will think of when arriving in Romania".

So far, the US attempts have proved futile, even though Romania heavily depends on Washington. The US sees Romania as an important nation in terms of its geopolitical interests, and has been patronizing Bucharest throughout the post-Soviet period. But the pay Washington has demanded seems clearly excessive.

Yet, when the US State Secretary John Kerry met with his Romanian counterpart Titus Corlațean in Brussels in December, they took up the issue of moving the Mujahedin in question to Romania, according to some reports. A year earlier, Germany and Albania said they were prepared to accommodate Mujahedin-e Khalq militants. But the organization chiefs insist on a compact settlement of all three thousand militants, who are currently making their home at a US military base in Iraq. But the Albanian and German authorities see this as too dangerous. The terrorist leaders are in a stalemate. They are welcome nowhere, while in Iraq they have been coming under rocket fire recently. The organization activists put the blame at the current Iraqi government's door, namely because the Iraqi Cabinet has been openly demanding that the terrorists be removed from the country.

Action on the US plan is fraught with danger, but is highly improbable, points out an expert with the Moscow-based Institute for Strategic Studies and Analysis, Sergei Demidenko, and elaborates.

"A transfer of a large group of people, drilled ideologically and militarily, to an unstable European area will clearly add no quiet to the area. But Romania will hardly approve the scenario, since Bucharest realizes that Romanians will otherwise have to deal with people of specific mentality, oriented to fighting the non-Moslems, or kuffar, which is about the only thing they can do at all. But if the events do follow that scenario, this will only serve to further aggravate the situation around Islamic radicalism in Europe, the more so since the European security services can do nothing to counter Al-Qaeda militants who are active in southern Europe".

Of course, one may admit by a stretch of imagination that sticking to its friends in trouble is kind of noble of the United States; the more so since the US is due to build a military base in Romania, where the militants could be accommodated at first. Also, the recent agreement on Iran's nuclear programme involving the United States will hardly prove a

watershed event in the Iran-US standoff. Washington has not forgone up the plan to deploy its missile defence system in Europe to defend the West from Iran's missile strike. Whether to accept the members of an organization, placed on a par with Taliban and Al-Qaeda, or not depends wholly on the Romanian government, which will likewise be solely responsible for its decision. The authorities of the neighbouring Ukraine will also have food for thought. The well-trained fighters may prove effective as a force to change the government or at least rock the unstable situation, for they are not used to sitting idly.

The Other Lobby: MEK's Crusade Against US-Iran Negotiations

John Glaser, Antiwar.com, January 31, 2014

If you say it out loud, it seems too preposterous to be true. Four high-profile former government officials are getting paid by an Iranian dissident group that until 2012 was an officially designated terrorist organization to publicly oppose the Obama administration's diplomatic efforts with Iran.

BuzzFeed's Rosie Gray attended a briefing in the Dirksen Senate office building on Capitol Hill sponsored by "an Iranian exile group related to the Mujahedin-e-Khalq (MEK)." The former government officials speaking out on behalf of this group against diplomacy with Iran included "former Vermont Governor Howard Dean, former Ambassador to Morocco Marc Ginsberg, General James L. Jones, and former US Special Envoy for Nuclear Nonproliferation Robert Joseph."

Robert Joseph described the diplomacy as "appeasement" and urged additional sanctions, which Obama has promised to veto, to stop "Iran's nuclear quest."

Howard Dean refused to answer questions as to whether he was still getting boatloads of money from MEK groups and even went so far as to say that U.S.-Iran negotiations should not go forward until the Obama administration agrees to grant some kind of asylum to the 3,000 MEK activists sheltered by the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein that are now living in a U.S. military base called Camp Liberty.

"We ought to sign no agreement until those 3000 people are safe," Dean said.

Rewind to 2003. George W. Bush included Saddam Hussein's support for terrorists like MEK in his propaganda justifying the invasion of Iraq. "Iraq shelters terrorist groups including the Mujahedin-e-Khalq Organization," reads a document in the archives of the White House's website, "which has used terrorist violence against Iran and in the 1970s was responsible for killing several US military personnel and US civilians."

As recently as 2007, a State Department report warned that the MEK, retains “the capacity and will” to attack “Europe, the Middle East, the United States, Canada, and beyond.”

Many experts, including current senior U.S. officials, believe that the MEK, backed by Israel, is the group responsible for assassinating Iran’s civilian nuclear scientists in what are clear-cut terrorist acts.

This is the group lobbying hard to get high-profile U.S. officials to come out publicly against the U.S.-Iran negotiations, which supporters say is the only thing with any chance of verifiably curtailing Iran’s nuclear program and keeping Washington off the inevitable war path to Tehran.

Like I said, reality seems stranger than fiction in this case.

MeK-Paid Officials Blast Deal as ‘Appeasement’

Jason Ditz, Anti War, January 29, 2014

The Mujahedin-e Khalq has been called a lot of things over the years: terrorists, a cult, even (by themselves) a “government-in-exile.” One thing that is undeniable at this point is that they wield considerable influence among US officials past and present, and that lobbying heft is being thrown behind stopping the Iran nuclear deal.

Former Governor Howard Dean (D – VT), a major MeK enthusiast, was among the speech-givers at a recent sponsored “briefing” that condemned the deal, saying any deal must be conditioned on imposing some sort of deal on Iraq to deal with MeK exiles there. Former US Special Envoy Robert Joseph concurred, and blasted the current deal as “appeasement.”

The MeK is putting a lot of effort behind the same Senate sanctions bill that the Israel Lobby is so staunchly behind. The bill would violate the Iran deal by imposing new sanctions, and would effectively kill negotiations.

While the depth of the MeK’s funding of this is, like much of their lobbying, strictly off-the-record (Gov. Dean openly refused to answer questions about how much he was paid for his statement), the group appears to still envision itself being the benefactors of US-imposed regime change in Iran, and is willing to pull out all the stops to see to it that diplomacy does not succeed and rapprochement remains impossible.

Iraq, UN, EU agree to move 3164 MEK to Romania

PUKmedia, February 05 2014

Iraq has reached an agreement with the United Nations and the European Union to move the remaining members of the Iranian Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK) to the Romanian territories as soon as possible.

The Iraqi Government had discussed with the European Union Ambassadors, the agreement between Iraq and the UN to move the remaining MEK members in Liberty camp (located near the capital Baghdad) to a third country, as it became impossible for the MEK to remain in Iraq after having information regarding their involvement in cooperating with Saddam Hussain in oppression of 1991 revolution in Iraq.

MP from the State of Law, Foud al-Duraki said in a statement to PUKmedia that the third country had been agreed on by Iraq, UN and EU which shall be Romania. “the Iraqi Government do not want MEK members to stay in Iraq, as they participated in oppression of 1991 revolution in Iraq with the former regime” al-Duraki added.

The Iraqi Government had designated \$500 thousand to transport the MEK members from Iraq, Iraqi Minister of Human Rights, Muhammad al-Shaya’a announced. Another € 22 million (EUR) from the European Union shall also be designated to transport MEK members out of Iraq.

3164 members of the MEK, had been transported to Huriya camp under the supervision of UNAMI to be moved to a third country (Romania).

Reported by Nazik Muhammad from Baghdad

EU to offer €22 million aid for MKO members’ resettlement

Voice of Russian, arabic (translated by Habilian Association), February 01 2014

The European Union plans to provide 20 million euros in aid for the relocation of Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK, a.k.a. MKO) members outside Iraq.

According to the Arabic-language website Voice of Russia, in her meeting with the Iraqi minister of Human Rights, head of the European Union Delegation in Iraq Ambassador Jana Hybášková, said the EU plans to allocate 22 million euros for the relocation of MKO members outside Iraq in order to respond to Iraq’s requests.

The Iraqi Minister of Human Rights said the GOI has been seriously obligated to the agreement signed with the United Nations.

The United Nations and the Government of Iraq signed on December 25, 2011, a memorandum of understanding (MoU) for a humanitarian and peaceful resolution of the situation of the MKO members in Iraq.

Mohammed Shia al-Sudani criticized as “irresponsible” the countries who are constantly expressing concern over the condition of MKO members in Iraq, but refuse to accept them in their countries.

A number of other representatives of diplomatic delegations in Iraq were also present at the meeting.

Germany’s ambassador to Iraq referred to his country’s readiness to accept 100 members of the MKO, adding “87 of them had been living in Germany.”

American Deputy Assistant Secretary talks directly with Mojahedin Khalq in Iraq

Associated Press, Baghdad, January 12, 2014

[...]

The U.S. Embassy also said McGurk visited Friday with members of Mujahedeen-e-Khalq, the militant wing of the National Council of Resistance of Iran, whose camp outside Baghdad came under rocket attack last month. The statement said the U.S. diplomat stressed the urgency of relocating the residents of Camp Hurriya to another country.

The dissident group, which opposes Iran’s clerical regime, joined forces with Saddam Hussein’s forces during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war, and several thousand of its members were given sanctuary in Iraq. It renounced violence in 2001, and was removed from a U.S. terrorist list last year.

Iraq’s current Shiite-led government, which has strong ties with neighboring Shiite powerhouse Iran, considers the MEK’s presence in Iraq illegal and is eager to get rid of them. The refugee camp is home to about 3,100 people.

Small Band of Iranian Exiles Gets Lots of Attention in U.S.

By Dave Seminara, The Washington Diplomat, January 28, 2014

In Washington, there are very few issues that unite Republicans and Democrats. One is support for Israel and condemnation of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Yet the story of how an exiled Iranian dissident group secured bipartisan support from a host of heavyweight Washington insiders and fought its way off of the State Department’s list of designated terrorist organizations illustrates how power is wielded in Washington, and how former officials continue to influence American foreign policy.

The Mujahedeen-e Khalq (MEK), also known as the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran and People's Holy Warriors, inspires fierce passion among its followers, deep skepticism among its critics, and more than its fair share of conspiracy theories. With its shadowy past, shifting ideologies and deep pockets, the MEK has been called "the most powerful lobby you've never heard of." It has evolved from killing Americans to courting them — and supporting the Iranian Revolution to becoming its sworn enemy.

Violent History

The MEK was one of two Marxist guerrilla student groups formed in the 1960s to topple Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the U.S.-backed Shah of Iran.

Photos: Larry Luxner

Iranian-American activists protest in Washington, D.C., in June 2009 demanding protection for members of the Mujahedeen-e Khalq (MEK) in Camp Ashraf. The MEK says the Iraqi government periodically attacked the camp, where some 3,000 MEK members have since been moved to another camp near Baghdad after being taken off the State Department's list of terrorist organizations.

"They played an important role in bringing down the Shah," said John Ghazvinian, a historian who is working on a book about the history of U.S.-Iranian relations. "But they fell out of favor and [Ayatollah] Khomeini condemned them as hypocrites. He called them the 'Hypocrites of the People' and said you can't be Marxists and Muslims at the same time."

In the '70s and '80s, the group committed acts of terrorism against the Islamic theocracy, killing scores of Iranians, plus six Americans. In perhaps their most notorious attack, MEK operatives blew up the headquarters of the Islamic Republic Party in 1981, killing more than 70 prominent Iranian politicians, including members of parliament, clerics and cabinet ministers. Two months later, they killed the prime minister and newly elected president.

"That massive campaign of terrorism turned Iranian people completely against them," said Ghazvinian.

During the Iran-Iraq War, the group was given refuge by Saddam Hussein, and it mounted attacks on Iran from within Iraqi territory and joined Hussein's brutal crackdown on the Kurdish rebellion. The State Department placed the MEK on its list of designated terrorist groups in 1997 for a "swath of terror" that targeted Americans and killed thousands of Iranians. But the group, which in the last decade has renounced violence, was removed from the State Department's terrorist list in September 2012 after an intense lobbying campaign involving dozens of prominent American officials, including former directors of the FBI and CIA, generals and prominent politicians, most of them recently retired.

Limbo at Liberty

The U.S. military disarmed the MEK after the invasion of Iraq in 2003, reportedly securing their cooperation in exchange for a pledge to protect them at Camp Ashraf. The group provided intelligence on Iran's nuclear program — some charge that the information was funneled to them by Israeli intelligence — and began to win allies in the Department of Defense by sounding the right notes about democracy, women's empowerment and freedom of speech.

Since control of Camp Ashraf was returned to Iraq in 2009, more than 100 MEK members have been killed, allegedly by Iraqi security forces with ties to Iran. MEK supporters believe that the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad is deliberately targeting their group, now about 3,200 strong and located in the former Camp Liberty near Baghdad, acting on orders from the Iranian regime, which still views them as traitors.

The bulk of MEK members moved to Liberty (also called Camp Hurriya) last year, reportedly as a condition for being taken off the State Department's terrorist list. (From there, U.N. and State officials hope to resettle them in third countries.)

About 100 members remain at Camp Ashraf, where 52 people were killed in a Sept. 1 attack that the MEK blamed on Iraqi security forces (a separate rocket attack on Camp Liberty in late December reportedly killed three people). The circumstances of the Ashraf attack remain murky. Nevertheless, the deaths sparked outrage in various quarters of Washington.

Rep. Ted Poe (R-Texas) decried what he called a "massacre." Sen. Robert Menendez (D-N.J.), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, demanded that Iraq do more to find the seven members who were allegedly taken hostage during the attack. Both suggested withholding U.S. weapons sales to Baghdad until it cooperates. Marc Ginsberg, former U.S. ambassador to Morocco under the Clinton administration, evoked the memory of John F. Kennedy and his advocacy for refugees to push President Obama to help the Iranian dissidents. Reporter James Morrison of the Washington Times's Embassy Row column has written about the MEK no fewer than a dozen times last year alone.

Beltway Cause Célèbre

The plight of these 3,000 stranded Iranians has certainly taken up an inordinate amount of bandwidth in Washington, as strange bedfellows offer a full-throated defense of a group that has been described by critics and former members as a cult.

The MEK is part of an umbrella coalition known as the National Council of Resistance of Iran, a Paris-based “parliament in exile” led for decades by Maryam Rajavi and her husband Massoud (Maryam is now the main figurehead). Interestingly, feminism is part of the group’s ideology, and the MEK is “the only army in the world with a commander corps composed mostly of women,” according to Elizabeth Rubin, a former Council on Foreign Relations press fellow.

Critics though say the group is hardly a beacon of democracy and women’s rights. Defectors have accused it of being a totalitarian cult that forced its members to divorce and stay celibate (so they could focus on fighting Iran) and confess their sexual fantasies in public. The MEK counters that many former members are really Iranian agents out to tarnish them.

Despite its opacity and relative obscurity, analysts agree that the MEK has been able to punch above its weight in Washington. The bipartisan roster of prominent supporters includes: R. James Woolsey and Porter J. Goss, both former CIA directors; Louis J. Freeh, the former FBI director; President George W. Bush’s homeland security secretary, Tom Ridge, his attorney general, Michael B. Mukasey, and his chief of staff, Andrew Card; former National Security Adviser Gen. James L. Jones; former U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. John Bolton; former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani; former Pennsylvania Gov. Edward Rendell; former House Speakers Dennis Hastert and Newt Gingrich; and former Vermont Governor and Chairman of the Democratic National Committee Howard Dean, among many others.

“You had people who had made their names as terrorism fighters in the Bush administration offering to speak on behalf of the MEK, which was on the terrorist list at the time, for \$10,000,” said Jeremiah Goulka, a writer and former analyst at the Rand Corp. who was the lead author of a lengthy 2009 report on the MEK. (The MEK took issue with the report, hiring a crisis communications firm to publish its own rebuttal. Goulka says he spent a year researching the report in the United States and in Iraq, along with its co-authors, and stands by it.)

Many on the MEK’s list of prominent supporters were indeed paid by the group to deliver speeches, sometimes reportedly charging up to \$40,000 per speaking engagement. Rendell told the Washington Post that he was paid more than \$150,000 in expenses. The MEK also recruited journalists as speakers. According to ProPublica, the group paid Carl Bernstein of Watergate fame \$12,000 and Clarence Page, a columnist for the Chicago Tribune, \$20,000.

A number of the MEK's high-profile supporters spoke on its behalf while it was still designated as a terrorist group, often through speaker agencies or third-party Iranian-American organizations. According to news reports, the Treasury Department investigated Rendell's receipt of money from the MEK but apparently declined to pursue the matter.

Glenn Greenwald, writing for Salon, pointed out that numerous Muslims inside the United States "have been prosecuted for providing 'material support for terrorism' for doing far less than these American politicians are publicly doing on behalf of a designated terrorist group."

An Iran analyst who works for a major think tank in Washington, D.C., but didn't want to speak for attribution because he feared a backlash from MEK supporters, said that the MEK's well-funded lobbying campaign, which included full-page ads in prominent newspapers as well as high-powered advocacy, was what got them off the State Department's list of terrorist groups.

"They are paying a lot of influential people big sums of money to come and speak at their events, and I think that's had an impact," he said. "They're a marginal actor on the Iran issue, but they garner support because they spend a lot of money."

Hired Guns?

How does a group of Iranian dissidents, most of them stranded in a refugee camp in Iraq, afford millions of dollars to advertise and pay big-name politicians to make speeches? A story in NBC News from February 2012, citing unnamed U.S. officials, asserted that the MEK was financed by Israeli intelligence, which also reportedly used MEK operatives to assassinate Iranian nuclear scientists. The MEK issued a statement denying the allegations.

Ghazvinian thinks the MEK-Israel connection is credible.

"The Israelis have a long history of using the MEK as a sort of foil," the historian said. "In 2002, when the allegations about Iran's nuclear programs hit the headlines, they were presented to the world as having come from the MEK, but they probably came from Israel. The revelations were handed to the MEK because the Mossad didn't want to be obvious. Better to present the information as coming from this 'Iranian opposition group.' It made it look to the world like it was Iranians blowing the whistle, but that was probably not what happened."

Goulka said he wasn't sure if the MEK would risk getting involved in covert activities like the assassination of Iranian nuclear scientists because, at that time, the group was making a major push to get off the State Department's list of terrorist organizations.

Despite being on that list, Seymour Hersh, writing in the New Yorker, reported in 2012 that the U.S. Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) trained MEK operatives at a secret site in Nevada beginning in 2005. A JSOC spokesperson denied the report.

Still, suspicions linger that the group hasn't completely left its militancy days behind it and is being recruited as a proxy to fight Iran, much like it was by Saddam Hussein years ago.

'American Honor'

The MEK declined numerous interview requests, but in an interview with The Diplomat, Howard Dean said that he wasn't under any illusions about the MEK's past — or the present-day humanitarian situation it finds itself in. Dean acknowledged being paid by the MEK to make speeches at their conferences over the years but declined to say how much he received, insisting that it was only his "normal speaking fee." But he said that he would be a supporter of the MEK regardless of whether they paid him.

"That's what really annoys me about journalists," he said, referring to insinuations in the media that he was paid by the MEK in exchange for his support. "What they say is, because I gave a speech for the MEK, therefore my argument doesn't mean anything.... I was never paid to speak on their behalf. I was paid to speak at their conferences and I say what I damn well please, which is what I always do. There's a lot of snideness and assumptions. If you think we can all be bought by speaking fees, that's your privilege."

Dean alleged that many supposedly nonpartisan Iran analysts in the United States are actually on the Islamic Republic's payroll, and he insisted that there was an "Arabist rump" at the State Department that was soft on Iran and unhelpful to the MEK. He also maintains that senior American military commanders convinced the MEK to disarm after the invasion of Iraq and promised them protection.

"Thirty-one hundred unarmed people get herded into what has turned into a prison camp — we talked them into that. We thought it was the best way to get them out of Iraq in one piece," he told us. "Since then, the State Department has done very little to keep them safe. They are in danger every single day. They're being abused every day."

The group was issued identity cards, but it's unclear how U.S. officials could pledge to protect MEK members, knowing that U.S. troops wouldn't be in the country indefinitely. Dean maintained that retired U.S. Army Col. Wes Martin or retired Brig. Gen. David Phillips could verify what was promised to the MEK. The Diplomat learned that both are now members of the U.S. Foundation for Liberty, a nonprofit group that appears to be working on behalf of MEK members in Iraq. The foundation did not respond to a request to make Phillips or Martin available for an interview.

The State Department appointed a senior advisor, Jonathan Wine, to help resettle those in Camp Hurriya, and the United Nations has been in the process of determining their refugee status. Albania has agreed to take about 200 MEK exiles, but no other country has stepped forward to accept any others. Dean says Washington should organize an airlift to bring the 3,100 remaining members to the United States, where he believes they should be allowed to stay permanently as refugees.

“It’s a matter of American honor,” he argued. “Are we willing to let 3,100 now civilians die? I don’t think that would preserve American honor.”

But if the State Department is reluctant to issue visas for Iraqi and Afghan interpreters who risked their lives to help Americans during those wars, it’s doubtful Washington would bring over 3,000 Iranians that up until fairly recently were officially deemed terrorists. Moreover, Ghazvinian warned that action could derail sensitive talks with Iran on the nuclear issue.

“At a time when we’re possibly about to make headway with Iran in the nuclear negotiations, it strikes me that giving asylum to 3,000 MEK is quite possibly the dumbest thing we could do,” he said. “Even dumber than adding new sanctions.”

MEK’s Chances Back Home

Yet some neoconservatives and avid supporters of Israel on the left hold the group up as a possible democratic alternative to the clerical regime in Iran. But Iran scholars and analysts say that notion is wishful thinking.

“The MEK is a lot like Ahmed Chalabi was for Iraq,” said Goulka, referring to the Iraqi dissident accused of trumping up intelligence on Iraq’s phantom weapons of mass destruction to goad the United States into war.

The Iran analyst who spoke to The Diplomat on background said that hardcore opponents of Iran have reflexively backed the MEK, without knowing much about the group.

“There’s a tendency to support any group that opposes the Islamic Republic without delving very deep into what that group stands for,” he said.

Goulka’s report for Rand alleged that the MEK leadership engaged in cult-like practices after leaving Iran.

“Families were broken up, there was mandatory divorce, there is mandatory celebratory,” he said. “They separate friends. They tell family members back home in Iran that members were killed by the regime, so they don’t try to get in touch. They keep diaries of their sexual thoughts and then discuss them. They’re publicly jeered for having them but if they deny having them, they are criticized because they must be lying.”

In 2005, Human Rights Watch issued a report alleging that the MEK engaged in serious human rights abuses from 1991 until February 2003, prior to the fall of Saddam Hussein's government, including "prolonged deprivation of liberty and torture."

Elizabeth Rubin of the New York Times Magazine visited Camp Ashraf just after U.S. forces invaded Iraq. "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," she wrote.

The State Department itself once had harsh words for the group. In a 1994 report to Congress, it said that co-founder Massoud Rajavi "fostered a cult of personality" around himself and that "internally, the Mujahedin run their organization autocratically, suppressing dissent and eschewing tolerance of differing viewpoints."

Massoud Rajavi himself hasn't been seen publicly in more than a decade, only adding to the enigma of the MEK. Regardless, both the State Department and the European Union seemed to have changed their tunes about the Iranian exile group, removing it from their respective terrorist lists.

But Ghazvinian, who has spent time in Iran recently to conduct research for his book, says the group has scant support in Europe and North America, and virtually none in Iran.

"The MEK is the one thing that most Iranians of any political persuasion can agree on," he said. "They are viewed as traitors to their country."