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20 People Move to Albania; New Revelations of Abuses in the MKO Albania

Nejat Bloggers, February 13, 2016

On Tuesday February 9th a group of 20 residents of TTL Camp in Iraq fled to Albania. This was the second group of MKO members who were relocated in Tirana, this year. Survivors of the MKO who left the group after they were resettled in Albania report that the MKO leaders use tricks to deceive HCR officials and to maintain their hegemony over the cult members. According to the Survivor's Website, "Massoud Rajavi forced Liberty residents to claim to be single in their interviews with the HCR."

Forced divorce was part of Massoud Rajavi's project to turn his organization into a cult of personality. Under his order, married members were indoctrinated to divorce their spouses so celibacy became a rule in the Cult of Rajavi.

Besides, the cult authorities have ordered Liberty residents to claim that they are single while filling the forms of the HCR. Members are band from writing the names of their ex-spouses in the forms because being re-linked with their spouses facilitates their release from the cult.

Rajavi's new tricks to keep members isolated and separated from their family is not surprising. This policy began three decades ago when Rajavi's panic of love and emotion for family emerged. He knows that contacting family including spouses results in departure from the bars of the cult. A married refuge seeker is more probable to be granted refuge. This is what Rajavi doesn't want to take place.

Anne Khodabandeh: Deceptive Recruitment - from Canada to Colorado Mujahedin Khalq's Cultism

Anne Khodabandeh (Singleton), Iranian.com, February 10, 2016

A father from Aurora, Colorado managed a last minute rescue of his daughter and two other girls from the nightmare of travelling to Syria. He said he'd had no previous indication that she had been radicalised, but that his intuition kicked in when he discovered that her passport was missing and he found texts to Lufthansa airlines and a local taxi firm on her phone.

Once his daughter was home safe he learned how ISIS tricked his daughter and others over the internet.

"ISIS plays on Muslims' emotions," he said. "They play on the [idea] that you are living in a country where people are going to go to hell. Your parents, since they are living there, they are the same like these other people, even if your parents are Muslim. And you need to save yourself. How am I going to save myself? You need to come over here .. live under Islamic rule. We're going to give you a house, you're going to get married. You're going to get to have nice kids, have a nice life ... and it's a noble cause. But all that's wrong. All that's wrong. There is no safe place there. People are all on the run. There's always fighting going on somewhere. There's no houses, there's no nice life. There are just a bunch of terrorists. And for these females to get there, they're just going to get raped, get killed."

This put me in mind of a young Iranian woman I got to know in London in 1996 just as I was on the point of finally severing all ties with the Mojahedin Khalq (MEK) terrorist cult. Interestingly it was through Neda Hassani that I met my future husband because she worked in the MEK's Westminster based PR office where he was also stationed and I was sent to work with her. How ironic it seems now that while Massoud and I were leaving, she was getting more deeply involved. Like ships in the night we passed each other by, unaware of our future destinies. Even at the time I remember trying to talk to her and explain that the MEK are not what she thought they were. But of course, the radicalisation process had already begun and she couldn't heed my warnings.

Neda was in London for only a brief time before being dispatched to the military training camp in Iraq. Her parents had sent her from Canada after she had finished her studies and had just begun working. Neda had told me she hadn't wanted to leave Canada and that she enjoyed her new job there. But the MEK had persuaded her parents that she would be in moral danger if she stayed in Canada, that she would abandon her Iranian upbringing

and become a wild, immoral girl, taking drugs, drinking and having a series of boyfriends. Of course, anyone who met Neda could instantly see that she wasn't that kind of person. Her parents should have been tremendously proud of this kind, thoughtful, ambitious young woman who exuded joie de vivre.

Instead the MEK tricked them into believing that their harsh military camps in Iraq were the ideal place to keep her safe from bourgeoisie Western corruption. The MEK, they were told, promoted women and gave them responsibilities above men. Neda, they were told, would be at the forefront of a noble struggle to free Iran and that she would remain celibate until 'after the revolution'.

As long-time peripheral supporters of the MEK, Neda's parents had no idea of the reality behind the lies and propaganda. They had no idea of the cultic abuse taking place in Iraq turning ordinary people into disposable brainwashed gladiators.

The next time I came across Neda was in a photograph for a magazine article taken in Camp Ashraf showing her sitting on a tank with another combatant looking relaxed and happy. The writer had clearly been easily fooled by such appearances and wrote in glowing praise about the women there. This was in direct contrast with another article The Cult of Rajavi by Elizabeth Rubin in The New York Times magazine on July 13, 2003. Rubin had also visited Camp Ashraf but was not fooled by the MEK's talk. She graphically described the cultic conditions in the camp, and the bizarre behaviour of the group and its members, especially the women.

This article was published one month after Neda Hassani's death. Neda died from her injuries after setting herself on fire in London to 'protect' MEK second-in-command Maryam Rajavi. Rajavi, who had been arrested on terrorism charges in Paris only days before, ordered several members to commit self-immolation to force the French government to let her go. Neda's family found a poem to Maryam Rajavi written the night before she died which said "Against the flow of savage winds, I give my spirit to protect you".

What kind of brainwashing does it take to get a young woman who has everything to live for to kill herself so that someone else wouldn't have to face criminal charges? As a leader of a terrorist cult, Maryam Rajavi had already ordered the deaths of thousands of Iranians and Iraqis. This was business as usual for her. But Neda's death wasn't even for the cause her parents believed in. They sent her to Iraq to struggle for the freedom of the Iranian people, not the freedom of a vain and cruel woman.

Former members of cults like the MEK are familiar with the deception and psychological manipulation exerted on the members. They now see that young people in Western countries are being deceived in much the same way by ISIS.

Fortunately for the young women in Aurora, at least one parent was vigilant and courageous enough to rescue them. I like to think that Neda's parents very quickly became aware of their mistake. Certainly when her mother was asked if others should follow her daughter's example she told reporters: "I hope not, I hope not".

I don't know what lesson can be drawn from this except that every society needs to learn about deceptive recruitment and cultic abuse. People – young and old – who know how deceptive psychological manipulation is used will not succumb to its persuasions.

Howard Dean Says He's Not a Lobbyist But He Sure Acts Like One

The Intercept, By Lee Fang, January 21, 2016

Last week, we reported that Howard Dean, former presidential candidate and current supporter of Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign, had attacked Bernie Sanders for supporting a single-payer health plan, claiming that having the government pay for everyone's health care would "undo people's health care" and result in "chaos." In our story, we noted that Dean, once a proponent of single-payer, now works for the lobbying practice of Dentons, a law firm retained to lobby on behalf of a number of pharmaceutical and for-profit health care interests.

In response, Dean tweeted: "I continue to support Single pay or [sic] and I do not Lobby."

He tweeted the next day: "The Intercept=The Daily Caller of the left. Same propaganda techniques."

Dean did not respond to multiple requests for comment. Dentons' director of communications, Bennett Kleinberg, wrote to us to say, "Howard Dean is a senior advisor with Dentons in our Public Policy and Regulation practice. However, he is not a registered lobbyist and does not lobby public officials on behalf of clients of the Firm."

Since joining the lobbying industry, Dean has oddly argued on multiple occasions that he does "not lobby." But he engages in virtually every lobbying activity imaginable, helping corporate interests reach out to lawmakers on legislation, advising them on political strategy, and using his credibility as a former liberal lion to build public support on behalf of his lobby firm clients.

In his new career, he has helped drug companies maintain monopoly power, reversed his old positions on Medicare prices, and worked to undermine a critical component of the Affordable Care Act. Though known for his anti-war rhetoric in 2004, Dean has accepted money from Mojahedin-e Khalq, an extremist group seeking regime change in Iran and has criticized President Obama's negotiations with Iran.

The fact that Dean is not a registered lobbyist reflects a distinction that is largely meaningless in today's Washington. Thousands of other professionals in the lobbying business have either never registered or de-registered and lobby registration law has almost never been enforced. Newt Gingrich, who was widely criticized in 2011 for acting as a lobbyist for various clients without registering, was hired last year by Dentons' lobbying practice, where he works closely with Dean to consult with clients on political strategy. As Legal Times reported, the Dean-Gingrich team is now a selling point for Dentons as the "pair aims to become another Washington-based bipartisan tag team who can act as political soothsayers for whichever corporate clients call upon them."

Helping keep drugs expensive

In 2009, Dean joined the lobbying division of the law firm McKenna Long & Aldridge LLP, which represents a number of health care interests. Through the firm, he was retained that year to work for Biotechnology Industry Organization, or BIO, a lobbying group for biotech and pharmaceutical companies.

After being retained by BIO, Dean authored an opinion column for The Hill newspaper arguing in support of a bill backed by his client that called for extending the exclusivity period for drugs made from living organisms, such as vaccines or Herceptin/trastuzumab, a treatment for breast cancer.

Dean claimed in the piece that a "commonsense and fair approach, similar to the process and timeline currently in place for generic versions of chemical-based medicines, would allow the original developer of the biologic to protect the proprietary data used to develop the medicine for at least 12 years."

Dean's call for extending the exclusivity period for biologics — a move that would boost prices for life-saving drugs — shocked patient and consumer advocates. Dean did not initially disclose that he was working for BIO in his column, although The Hill later updated his byline to note that Dean's law firm represented biotech companies.

The inside story of Dean's work for the biotech lobby was revealed in an article by BioCentury, a trade publication. According to the report, Dean and his former campaign manager Joe Trippi were hired by BIO to help move forward the biologic legislation backed by the industry. Jim Greenwood, the president of BIO, told BioCentury that Dean was

brought on to help with messaging, strategy, and even to contact lawmakers on Capitol Hill on behalf of the industry. BIO made clear that Dean was hired specifically for his reputation as a liberal. “As a physician clearly focused on health care, a Democrat leader and clearly to left of center, his efforts were impactful,” Greenwood said.

Dean defended his efforts to BioCentury by saying, “I do not lobby.”

In the end, a version of the biologic legislation was folded into the Affordable Care Act.

“Howard Dean navigated around the lobbying rules to push Democrats to back big drug companies on the term of the monopoly for biologic drugs,” said Jamie Love, the director of Knowledge Ecology International, a nonprofit organization that addresses human rights aspects of intellectual property rights and medical innovation. “His ‘trust me, I’m a doctor’ routine was worth billions to Roche and the other companies he represented on this. Now it is very hard to undo the damage.”

Bashing PhRMA, then parroting it

On the 2004 campaign trail, Dean criticized the role of health care lobbyists in setting prescription drug policies, such as the deal engineered by drug companies that prevents Medicare from using its bargaining power as the Veterans Administration does to negotiate for lower drug prices. Such a change would save over \$116 billion over 10 years. Dean told the Associated Press: “As president, a high and early legislative priority of my new administration would be to improve the prescription drug benefit to create one that is affordable, federally administered, and for all of America’s seniors; uses the government’s buying power on behalf of 41 million seniors to negotiate and drive down drug prices; contains meaningful cost containment including reimportation of safe, effective medicines.” But Dean, whose new employer, Dentons, represents the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America, the powerful drug lobby group known as PhRMA, has now changed his tune. During a discussion with Gingrich last year, Dean reversed his position and said he is now against allowing Medicare to bargain for lower drug prices. Dean told the audience that some expensive drugs, like those used to treat hepatitis C, could eventually save money long term, a claim Inside Health Policy noted closely echoed drugmakers’ arguments.

In September of last year, Dean took his newfound love of drug companies to the pages of the New York Times. In a letter to the editor opposing an op-ed that proposed to allow Medicare to bargain for cheaper prices, Dean wrote that “schemes to launch a federal attack on one of the last growing, innovative industries in America are in the long run

counterproductive for both job creation and, more important, for the health of human beings around the world.”

Working to undermine Obamacare

In 2013, Dean again surprised health care advocates by publishing a Wall Street Journal opinion column criticizing a key component of the Affordable Care Act: the Independent Payment Advisory Board, also known as IPAB. The board is designed to allow a group of experts to make recommendations on how Medicare can save money, but only in ways that do not reduce benefits and low-income subsidies or raise premiums. Dean, repeating GOP arguments against the board, called IPAB “essentially a health-care rationing body,” and he said it should be repealed.

Health policy experts reacted furiously. The New Republic writer Jonathan Cohn noted that it was quite puzzling that Dean, supposedly a supporter of government programs designed to use evidence-based approaches to set provider payment rates, would suddenly decide to oppose IPAB. “Or maybe it’s not so strange to hear Dean say this,” Cohn wrote. “Since his career in politics ended, Dean has found a home in the K Street establishment he once held in such disdain.”

“Shame on Howard Dean,” wrote economist J. Bradford DeLong, who noted that it appears as though Dean was “being mendacious to try to protect the profits of the clients of McKenna Long & Aldridge.”

Dean conceded to Time that his firm has clients that oppose IPAB, but refused to disclose them.

And in December 2009, as the Affordable Care Act nearly died as conservative opposition grew to a fever pitch and Democratic leaders struggled to find enough votes to move it forward, Dean appeared on national network news programs to call for President Obama to scrap the legislation and start over, a process that would have doomed any chance for health care reform.

Paid by Iranian extremist group, bashing Iran negotiations

The Mojahedin-e Khalq, an exiled Iranian group that has attempted for years to overthrow the government of Iran, paid Dean to help in its campaign to be delisted as a U.S.-recognized terrorist group. In 2011, the Wall Street Journal reported that Dean was receiving speaking fees from the group. Around that time, Dean began vociferously arguing on behalf of the MEK, even though he conceded that he had known little about the group before joining its cause.

That year, Dean traveled along with other paid MEK supporters, including Rudy Giuliani, to appear in Berlin with the group and demand that Western nations recognize the MEK

leader Maryam Rajavi as the president of Iran. In addition to carrying out a campaign of terrorism against Iran, the MEK helped Saddam Hussein after the Gulf War crush rebellions in Iraq's Shiite and Kurdish communities. "Take the Kurds under your tanks, and save your bullets for the Iranian Revolutionary Guards," Rajavi once said.

In 2014, Dean came out against President Obama's policy of engagement with Iran, declaring that the U.S. negotiations failed to account for the interests of the MEK. (Dean even spoke on Capitol Hill on behalf of an MEK-affiliated group, which posted the video online.) Last year, Dean continued to advocate against a nuclear accord with Iran, calling Secretary of State John Kerry and Obama "far, far too eager for a deal with Iran."

Dean's success on the other side of the revolving door rests in part on his credibility as a left-wing icon. And yet, despite his fiery rhetoric on the campaign trail in 2003, Dean by most accounts governed Vermont as a business-friendly, moderate Democrat. Even his record on single-payer is far less supportive than what he has attempted to project.

In 1991, as the lieutenant governor of Vermont, Dean testified in support of single-payer. But as governor, he quickly backtracked, claiming that single-payer would be too expensive for the state.

John McClaughry, Dean's Republican opponent for governor during the 1991 election, recalls that Dean continually shifted the goal posts for single-payer. "I don't know that Howard has any fixed principles about this issue — it's what sells at the moment," McClaughry said.

Dean's evolution as a politician is discussed at length during the first Huffington Post podcast Candidate Confessional. During the interview, Dean explains that he knew well before the infamous post-Iowa caucus scream that he had little chance of becoming president as an insurrectionist populist. He yearned to be regarded as a serious, establishment-friendly politician, but was too slow in making the transition as a candidate.

"I couldn't make the turn to become an establishment candidate," he lamented.

Contact the author:

MEK: When terrorists are armed, funded and respected

By Mohsen Hosseini, November 4, 2015

MEK terrorist group killed more than 17,000 Iranians during their terrorist activities inside Iran and in their war effort against Iran alongside Saddam. This makes Iran, one of the major victims of terrorism in the world.

Assassinating Americans in Iran

The Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization (People's Mujahedin of Iran also known as MEK, MKO or PMOI) was formed on the basis of Marxism and Islam; later Islam was removed from MEK's doctrine (1). This group, established in 1965 in a bid to overthrow the Shah, harbored an anti-Western and anti-U.S. ideology (2). They also formed alliances with other Iranian Marxist groups such as the Organization of Iranian People's Fedai Guerrillas.

But both of them had a marginal role in the Shah's overthrow during the Islamic Revolution which was mainly fought by the supporters of Ayatollah Khomeini. MEK leaders were mostly imprisoned by the Shah's security apparatus and couldn't play a direct role in the 1979 Revolution (3).

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Due to their intense anti-American approach, MEK killed many US officials, including three officers who had been military advisors under the Shah and three civilian contractors working in Iran (4). They also kidnapped the US Ambassador to Iran (5). They were the main elements for occupying the US embassy in Tehran, and when the embassy staff were released they called it a "surrender" (6).

Killing Iranian officials for losing elections

Although supporters of Ayatollah Khomeini had never sympathized with MEK elements, MEK's enmity became acute when the head of this group was banned from running for presidential elections, which was followed by a heavy MEK loss at parliamentary elections in 1981. It was then that MEK started its terrorist activities in Iran; they bombed the headquarters of the Islamic Republic Party, which had won both the presidency and the parliament in landslide victories. The bomb killed Mohammad Beheshti, Head of Iran's Judicial System who was also the party leader, as well as four cabinet ministers, plus 24 members of Parliament along with 43 other government officials and party members.

.The headquarters of the Islamic Republic Party after the MEK-led explosion

Two months after this bombing, another major attack shook the Iranian capital; a bomb was embedded in the room where government cabinet meeting was held, killing the newly elected President Rajai and Prime Minister Bahonar. One of the members of MEK staff later confessed to the assassination campaign by MEK that killed up to ten thousand innocent civilians in a span of six months (7).

The table at which president Rajai and Prime Minister Bahonar were sitting

Cooperation with Saddam against Iran

After these deadly attacks, MEK moved to Iraq in 1986 and allied with Saddam in his offensive against Iran. With this act of treason, they lost all favor in Iran (8) and became a subject of hate among all Iranians (9). This feeling of hate was to such a degree that around this same time, the group developed the undesirable nickname of Munafiqeen or Hypocrites.

After these deadly attacks, MEK moved to Iraq in 1986 and allied with Saddam in his offensive against Iran. With this act of treason, they lost all favor in Iran (8) and became a subject of hate among all Iranians.

In Saddam's war against Iran, the Munafiqeen provided Iraq with intelligence and even attacked Iran militarily by an army of MEK members. They were also an asset for the Iraqi dictator when the time came for the bloody crackdown of the Iraqi Shia and Kurdish populations (10). Press reports cite MEK leader Maryam Rajavi encouraging MEK members to 'take the Kurds under your tanks'(11). This terrorist organization was backed by Saddam until 2003.

.Masoud Rajavi, former head of MEK terrorist group, is shaking hands with Saddam
U.S. recognized MEK as a terrorist group but trained them as well

Based on these facts, US State Department put the MEK on their list of international terrorist organizations on October 8, 1997. Since 2010, this terrorist group's henchmen have assassinated four senior nuclear scientists in Iran.

Later, it was revealed by a 2012 NBC News report that MEK's brutal assassination of Iranian nuclear scientists has been committed via "training and arming by Israel's secret service" (12). The report also conveyed that what was being said by US officials confirmed the same "charges leveled by Iran's leaders"(13) about the Israeli involvement in the killings in Iran.

Iranian nuclear scientists who were assassinated by US-Israeli backed MEK terrorists in Iran

Later it was revealed that the US was also behind these terrorist assassinations by provided intelligence to the MEK (14). Prize-winning journalist Seymour Hersh revealed in an interview with Democracy Now that the Bush administration secretly trained the Mujahedin-e Khalq terrorist group when it was still included on the State Department's list of foreign terrorists. Writing for The New Yorker magazine, Hersh reported that:

"The US Joint Special Operations Command trained operatives from Mujahideen-e-Khalq, or MEK, at a secret site in Nevada beginning in 2005." (15)

Later it was revealed that this training was held at Department of Energy's Nevada National Security Site, located about 65 miles northwest of Las Vegas (16).

Maryam Rajavi, the current head of MEK terrorist group

Apart from its terrorist credentials, MEK has also developed cult-like characteristics. Far from being democratic, it is run in an autocratic style by a husband and wife who have fostered a cult personality. The MEK leader claims to emulate the Prophet Mohamad. Some of its members left the group and returned to Iran based on an amnesty offered to the group members by Iranian officials. These former members talked about torture and long periods of confinement for disloyalty.

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Human rights abuses (17) in MEK camps also included physical abuse, lack of exit options, forced celibacy, emotional isolation, extremely degrading peer pressure, forced labor, sleep deprivation, intense ideological exploitation and isolation (18).

MEK Bribed Congress and US officials for being delisted

Besides these killings and MEK's recent terrorist activities (19) in Europe, the US (20) and Asia (21), there are many other proofs (22) that point to the terrorist nature of this group confirming that MEK has not abandoned violence. US Department of State, in its 2008 report (23) mentions MEK as a terrorist organization and this is contrary to the claim made by MEK members at the time that they had renounced violence.

But in the end, the United States terror delisted this group, despite recognizing their history of terrorist activities and allegations of abuse against its own members (24). This move unfroze MEK's millions of dollars of blocked assets, which were used by the group to further lobby the US Congress (25).

It is quite noteworthy that US officials (26) received funds to support MEK even while this group was still on the list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations (27). According to internal reports, the list of names of such officials makes a long list to ponder (28). Those members of Congress who received money were the ones who also pushed for the terror delisting of the MEK (29).

American politicians were paid to deliver speeches in support for the MEK terrorist group and to claim that this group was actually an opposition to the ruling elected government of the Islamic Republic of Iran rather than a terrorist group with a record of assassinating

almost 17,000 innocent Iranians (30). This number makes Iran one of the biggest victims of terrorism in the world.

Former Democratic National Committee chairman, Ed Rendell has openly declared that he has given about eight speeches in support of delisting MEK and has been paid a total of \$150,000 or \$160,000 for it (31). In an article mentioning the names of American officials guilty of taking a pro-MEK stance, Aljazeera reports (32):

“George W. Bush's Attorney General Michael Mukasey has described MEK members as ‘courageous freedom fighters’. President Barack Obama's former national security advisor, General James L. Jones, gave a speech at an MEK conference dominated by non-Iranians. Their events have also been attended by former Homeland Security chief Tom Ridge, former NATO supreme commander Wesley Clark and former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani.”

The US support for this hated group added to a more feeling of distrust among Iranians toward the U.S. government.

*Mohsen Hosseini has a Masters degree in North American Studies (Tehran University). He was also an editor at Mehr News Agency.

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Living and Escaping a Terrorist Cult

Fair Observer, By Anna Pivovarchuk and Masoud Banisadr, January 8, 2016

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Masoud Banisadr, a former member of Mujahedeen-e-Khalq.

In 1965, Mujahedeen-e-Khalq (MeK) was established in Iran in opposition to US imperialism. Espousing a blend of Marxism and Islam, the group helped bring about the Iranian Revolution of 1979. However, after breaking with the revolutionary government, MeK embarked on a terrorism campaign and was forced into exile, losing followers in Iran after its support for Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq War.

MeK was designated as a terrorist organization by the US State Department until 2012. The Iranian government estimates that MeK activity has claimed some 12,000 Iranian lives over the last three decades.

Operating from exile, the organization had all the trappings of a cult. Attracting young, idealistic Muslims with slogans of Islamic justice and social freedom, it disrupted familial and social ties, forcing members to divorce their spouses and abandon relatives, making them dependent on the group through isolation, misinformation and manipulation.

Masoud Banisadr, a cousin of former Iranian President Abolhassan Banisadr, joined MeK while studying in Britain and served in its political wing for nearly 20 years. Finally leaving the group in 1996, he now writes about the dangers of cult ideology and the appeal of extremism. His books include *Masoud: Memoirs of an Iranian Rebel* and *Destructive and Terrorist Cults: A New Kind of Slavery*.

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Masoud Banisadr about what first attracted him to the MeK and what eventually forced him to escape.

Anna Pivovarchuk: How was MeK different from other political organizations? What is your definition of a cult, and how does it fit into that image?

Masoud Banisadr: Cults resemble slavery more than they do political parties, which are idea-based. Cults, on the contrary, are leader- and behavior-based. They claim to have an ideology that is useful for recruitment, to use it as a mind manipulation tool and to glue followers to each other. But when you look at them closely, you will see that they have taken shape around a leader and a code of behavior dictated by that leader.

Cult dogmas are shaped around behavior. For example, for a cult member, it is more important how he looks than how he thinks. In MeK, you could say I don't believe in this or that principal of Islam, and nobody cared much. But if you behaved differently, if you didn't

follow or have enough loyalty toward the leader, you couldn't stay in MeK for a second—same as al-Qaeda, same as Daesh [Islamic State]. In all of these organizations, you can see that what is important is survival of the group and absolute loyalty and obedience toward the leader.

The other main difference is that a cult is a way of life, and as slavery there is no way out of it till you die. When you are a member of a cult, it is the whole of you. Your motherhood and sisterhood is defined by being member of a cult. Your work is defined by being a member of a cult.

Pivovarchuk: So what makes people join a cult in the first place? Are there some common reasons?

Banisadr: I think people are recruited by cults rather than joining them freely. However, some people might be more vulnerable than others to fall in the trap of cults due to three main reasons.

The first is personal: I might have a problem of belonging, identity or not having a sense of purpose in life. These days, many young people lack a sense of belonging. Family ties are not as strong as before. Religion is not as important as before. Even nationality is not as relevant as before. This lack of feeling of belonging might attract them toward gangs, cults or groups of any sort to feed that longing. Imagine a young Muslim on the street who has nothing: Suddenly, when he joins a group like al-Qaeda or Daesh, he becomes a warrior, a martyr, a great hero. It's a great change. People either love you or hate you, but at least you are not insignificant anymore.

The second is the cause: ideological, political, or philosophical, mainly as a means to seek justice. If you feel or see injustice and discrimination against yourself or against your community or religion, you feel you have to do something. Many young Muslims feel injustice against Palestinians in Israel, or they see the rise of Islamophobia in Western countries and feel they have to do something against it. Cults feed on injustice and claim they can offer people a way to seek justice. Cults also give an illusion of a sense of honor and a way for an ordinary normal person to feel that he/she can have an honorable life and that if one dies for the cause, they will be remembered as a martyr or a hero.

And the third reason might be that you have been born into a cult. Your parents have been followers of a cult, and as a result you have been raised in the cult.

Pivovarchuk: You talk about the personality of a cult leader being very important. You have to get people to buy into your narrative. How is that achieved?

Banisadr: After being recruited comes their mind manipulation. Although they have recruited you, using some sort of doctrine, or cause, forcing you to accept that if you join

their cult you will become a better person. Still, they have to change you into a committed or, if I may say, blind follower or a “zealot” member. And here comes mind manipulation that I have divided in three intertwined stages.

The first stage is rational trickery and influence techniques that change your belief system. For example, if you are attached to the family, through some rational trickery, through some influence techniques, they can persuade you that your new family are the cult members rather than your parents or your siblings. They persuade you to fight for them— [as] the only way that you can seek justice for yourself or your community. Then using some influence techniques they will force you to do something to affiliate yourself with the group. They might start with small requests and then build on those small steps and gradually pull you deeper and deeper into their swamp.

The next stage is of “mind control”—control of environment and control of behavior. Because at this stage you are divided between who you were and who you are going to be, your feelings, your personality will force you to go back toward who you were.

I was born the year when the first democratically elected prime minister of Iran, Mohammad Mosaddegh was violently overthrown by a CIA coup. It affected my generation and the later ones deeply.

To overcome the effect of your old feelings, cult leaders have to isolate you from the society and your past life; this will be done through control of environment. There is an Iranian expression that says, “Whoever leaves your eyes will eventually leave your heart.” By stopping you from having any contact with your parents and friends, gradually cults can stop you remembering your feelings toward your loved ones.

They can change your personality gradually by changing your behavior. For example, if you look at the people who became followers of Daesh or al-Qaeda, you can immediately see a change of appearances and behavior. For example, they grow a beard, or they grow or cut their hair, their clothes change, and also their behavior will change—in extreme form of it, used by Daesh. You have seen in the media that they have asked a British-born person to behead another person, or even destroy shrine of a Muslim saint. By doing that, Daesh will force that person to stand against his old personality by an extreme change of behavior. It is also a way of dehumanizing the outsiders and isolating a new follower not only from the society, but also from history, tradition, ethic and culture of his previous being.

Pivovarchuk: How important is this isolation from family and friends in altering someone’s idea of yourself? In your personal experience, what have you been told to do or asked to do?

Banisadr: When you say that I am a person, what does it mean? I am a person because of my set of beliefs, because of my principles, because of the way I think, because of the things that I enjoy, because of my relation to my family, my relation to parents, siblings, wife, children and so on. If you lose them one by one, then eventually you become an “unperson.” Nobody.

For example, I was in the last year of my PhD. But the way that MeK educated me, I was feeling ashamed of being a PhD student, not proud of it. Why? Because they were telling me that while I was studying and wanted to become a doctor, followers of the group were in prison under torture during the shah’s time. So instead of fighting, instead of sacrificing my life for the people, selfishly, I was studying. So instead of being proud of who I was, I was ashamed of it.

I was even ashamed of my family, because of my family name—because of my cousin, who was the president of Iran.

This is the new you—this new personality of yours. You change into a nobody, and you define yourself according to your cult personality. What is your rank in the cult? What is the relationship between you and the leader of the cult? How have you behaved in the cult? How successful have you been in the pursuit of the cult’s objectives?

I am calling it slavery because you change into an “unperson.” Your relationship with everybody else is defined via your relationship with the cult leader. Because whatever you do, you are not gaining anything for yourself and even your family and your society but for the cult leader. Like slaves whose existence was defined through their relationship to the master, and the fruit of their life was going to the master.

In MeK, we were not even allowed to think of our children and their wellbeing. The logic behind it was that while children in Iran are suffering, you wouldn’t dare let yourself think about your own children. As with slavery, you are a parent, but you are not a parent. You are a supervisor of your children, a person responsible for educating a child so he can change into another follower/slave of the leader/master. You have to teach your children: instead of loving you, love the leader. Instead of remembering grandparents, remember those who have sacrificed their life for the cult.

In slavery, at least in your dreams, in your desires, you are free. You can desire freedom because you can see that you are a slave. In your dream, you can remember your old life. Your country, your family. But in cults you can’t. Because through brainwashing, they have changed you into your own jailer. You even don’t dream of freedom as you are educated to think that you are freest person on earth.

Pivovarchuk: In your book, you say that you underwent a transformation from a “liberal middle-class semi-intellectual” to a zealot ready to die for the leader. It shows that those who join cults are not stupid or naïve, but that it’s a complicated psychological process. What caused this transformation that you talk about?

Banisadr: For me personally, I guess I have to go back to three slogans of the Iranian Revolution: independence, freedom and Islamic Republic.

I was born the year when the first democratically elected prime minister of Iran, Mohammad Mosaddegh was violently overthrown by a CIA coup. It affected my generation and the later ones deeply. We wanted independence because we used to feel that our country was ruled by Americans—not physically, but we knew that the shah was a puppet of the US. So independence was very important to us.

The first thing to understand is what attracts young Muslims to these groups. I believe it is injustice—injustice against Muslims in different countries. It is very important we recognize this.

The second one was freedom, which was opposite of the dictatorship, and the censorship of shah’s regime. We understood political freedom more than any other freedom, probably because of the lack of it. So when we talked about freedom, we meant political freedom rather than liberalism as it is in the West, where it is mostly about personal freedom. During the shah’s regime, we almost had all personal freedom enjoyed by the Western youth, but there was a total lack of political freedom.

The third one was the Islamic Republic, which was mainly about social justice promised in Islam. We felt that people were divided between the superrich and super-poor, and if you were part of the system you could have everything. What attracted me among many other young people to the revolution were these three ideas, these slogans.

After the revolution, because I was in the UK, I couldn’t see for myself what was going on in Iran. I couldn’t judge for myself. The only source of information we had about what is going on in Iran was MeK papers. Even Western media, because they were against the Islamic Revolution and the new government in Iran, were feeding us with the same kind of news—all negative ones. So we felt that our country was even more unjust than before. What happened to freedom and Islamic justice?

MeK was even telling us that sooner or later, this new government would become the puppet of the United States. That because they cannot run the country, they will need the help of foreigners and will invite Americans and British. As you can see, for us it looked like everything was ruined and lost.

Pivovarchuk: What made you change your mind? What was the catalyst for you leaving the MeK?

Banisadr: As I mentioned before, cults—I believe all cults—have one weakness. They can change you, they can change your set of beliefs and everything, they can change your behavior, your appearance and so on. But they are unable to change one very important thing: They are unable to wipe out your memories. There are some fantasy stories where people have been brainwashed and have lost their memories and have found completely new personalities. That is fiction.

If you do not think about your feelings toward your past life, friends and families, your feeling toward them is still alive—though it is passive, paralyzed or asleep.

Anything can make it active. Anything can make it active. A smell reminds you of your childhood. A flower, a color or kindness from a stranger. Walking in the streets, seeing somebody who looks like your mother. Seeing love between a parent and children in the street. For the majority of followers of groups like MeK, Daesh and al-Qaeda that have been isolated (both psychologically and physically) from society and normal life, it is more difficult to save themselves because their feelings toward their loved ones cannot be triggered and remembered.

But for a person like me, who had to travel to different countries to represent the group politically at the United Nations in Europe and the United States, the situation was different, because I could see other ordinary people.

The first thing that forced me to remember ordinary kindness was when I was traveling from France to the United States. I was so tired that I slept on the airplane, from the beginning almost to the end. When I woke up, there was an old lady sitting beside me, and I found out that she kept for me whatever was given out in the plane. It was a very natural, ordinary kindness, but it affected me greatly to understand ordinary life, ordinary human behavior, because in the cult you will categorize ordinary people just above animals. They dehumanize outsiders, so followers are ready to do anything for the cult. As you have noticed, followers of Daesh are ready to behead other human beings without any remorse or doubt.

In MeK, if you were called ordinary, it meant that they had called you a dog or a pig. To be ordinary is worse than any other swear words. And suddenly, I was facing the beauty of being ordinary. Beauty through love, through understanding, through simple empathy and compassion.

And the second thing that saved me was seeing my daughter and old friends in the UK. Remembering my love for my daughter. My family and friends.

And also after that, I was lucky because of my back problem I had to be hospitalized. And because the group was so busy with the different political meetings that Maryam Rajavi [wife of Masoud Rajavi and co-leader of MEK] had in London, they forgot about me. So for almost a month, or three weeks, I was in the hospital without having any kind of connection to the group.

In the hospital I could see other people. I remember there was a guy beside me who had an accident and his hands were in plaster. I used to give him lunch and I even helped him to shave. And he showed me kindness as well. These kinds of things suddenly force you to remember who you were and who you truly are: a human being.

Remembering feelings suddenly forced me to wake up from a very, very bad dream. Although I can admit that still I could not understand what was happening or what had happened. I could not understand the political deception; I could not understand the hypocrisy of the group. But I could understand and I could see who I was. I could see my old personality, I could see my old feelings, and I think this was the trigger that helped me leave the group.

Pivovarchuk: How long would you say it took you to process all that had happened to you?

Banisadr: Very long. They say you can leave a cult, but it takes a long time for the cult to leave you. Because it infiltrated your mind, your heart, your philosophy, your way of thinking, and it's very difficult to get rid of it.

I think for a year I couldn't understand it as a cult. I couldn't understand the procedure as brainwashing or mind manipulation. After I started writing my memoirs—gradually, because I was remembering stage by stage what had happened—I think it was in the last chapter of the book that I finally felt that it was a cult and I had been brainwashed.

Pivovarchuk: How did this realization make you feel?

Banisadr: It was great and horrible at the same time. If you find a very close friend has robbed you, it hurts; if you find him violating your trust and dignity and deceiving you for years, it hurts much more. Then imagine finding out a guy who you thought of as a saint and the holiest person on earth has been just a charlatan wanting to make you his slave through manipulating your mind—robbing not only your wealth, health and happiness, but your individuality, personality and humanity. Then you will understand what I felt.

After that comes realization of nothingness, loneliness and powerlessness. You feel you are free to do anything you like, but you are neither who you were before the cult, nor a follower of the cult.

So you ask yourself, who am I? If I am going to buy clothes for myself, what should I buy? What kind of food do I enjoy? Suddenly making any decision became huge. Impossible. I used to get help from my daughter. Ask her to choose for me, to buy clothes.

What do you consider as honor, and what are you proud of? What are your political or philosophical beliefs? And how do you run your daily life and make a new relation? All these are very big questions.

When people look at you, they see a grown man. But I can say that somehow you are a newborn child without the support of parents. There is no solid wall to lean on. You are really vulnerable, and there is nobody to tell you what has happened to you and how should you find your way.

Suddenly you're coming out of a cult penniless—the things that I knew were obsolete. For example, I went to a job interview, and they asked me, "What do you know?" I answered: mathematics, chemical engineering, programming and so on. The guy asked me, "Okay, very good, nice great, what kind of programming do you know?" I started saying, "Fortran, Assembly, basic language..." And he looked at me: "Where are you from?"

Suddenly I realized that I knew nothing. I even didn't have common sense of ordinary people. I had lost it. If you wanted to talk with me about music or movies, or the kind of programs I like on TV, I didn't have a clue what to say. So what kind of connection and communication could I have with you?

After that you will face another big problem: how to get rid of the cult in your mind. How to change your behavior. How to change your way of thinking, your worldview from a black-and-white into a colorful one. How to see bad and good beside each other. How to get rid of the cult's way of thinking, what they have forced you to believe and accept as reality. All this will take a lot of time.

Pivovarchuk: Ironically, what they tried to isolate you from—your family, your children—has become something that brought you back to normality. As you said, you can't destroy memory, so there's this hope that people can find their way back.

Banisadr: I think so. And this is my advice to parents of all those children who have been recruited by cults: show them love. Instead of arguing and discussing political, religious or philosophical issues, give them love. Let them remember the kind of relationship, the kind of emotion that they had with you. The kind of feelings that existed between you. In this way, they can remember who they were, and in this way they can find a way to get rid of cultic manipulation and become somebody again.

Pivovarchuk: It's interesting that you mentioned that, because obviously there's been a lot of attention given to Islamic extremism and groups like al-Qaeda, al-Shabab, ISIS. How do we stop people from joining? Where does this battle for their hearts and minds begin?

Banisadr: The first thing to understand is what attracts young Muslims to these groups. I believe it is injustice—injustice against Muslims in different countries. It is very important we recognize this. For politicians and the media to recognize it—accept that yes, there is injustice against, for example, Palestinians in Israel. There are double-standards toward Israel. We understand this, we accept this. This acceptance is very important.

Then we have to separate the religion of Islam and Muslims from these groups. Calling them Islamic or Muslim is a horrible thing to do. Why? Because we are enabling them to recruit from a 1.6 billion population pool. If you call them Muslim, you will create sympathy, shared ideas and religion between them and these 1.6 billion Muslims. Even these Muslims might see them as their own children—they might see them as their fellow Muslims in need of help and support.

So it's a very big mistake, which unfortunately many mass media and some politicians make and in a way will help these groups to recruit even more. By calling these terrorist groups Muslim and using Islamic State instead of Daesh, first they enable these groups to recruit more. At the same time, they advocate Islamophobia among non-Muslims in society, and finally alienate ordinary Muslims from the rest of the society.

Therefore, Muslims in the West think of themselves more as Muslim than, for example, as British. Even if the media want to talk about ideology of these groups, they should use the name of their ideology—Wahhabism or Takfiri—and not Islam. The same thing they do when they want to talk about other groups such as David Koresh's or Jim Jones's cults, or when they talk about the Moonies.

Second, we have to educate young people about Islam as a religion of peace and tolerance, and at the same time, we have to educate them about cult and mind manipulation—to immunize them against mind manipulation of the cults. To teach them how people can be manipulated, how people can be influenced, be tricked by rational manners. How they can be brainwashed.

Finally, we have to show them a way out of the cult. Instead of criminalizing them, which will stop them coming back. We should realize that followers of a cult are victims as well—a victim of mind manipulation and not a criminal. If we help them and show them kindness and education, they can change into an antidote of cults and terrorism. It is very important for those who have left Daesh and al-Qaeda to say what they have witnessed and educate other people not to fall in the trap of cults.

By criminalizing them, by putting them in prison, we change them into heroes of the next generation of terrorist cults. By executing them, we make them into martyrs.

Pivovarchuk: Can Iran and the US work together against Daesh successfully?

Banisadr: To get rid of Daesh and al-Qaeda in the Middle East, to find a long-lasting peace and stability in the region, America and Iran have to talk and work with each other. But can they? True, every week in the Friday prayer, Iranians chant “Death to America,” but what they mean is “Death to those Americans who tried to destroy our country and still want to do so.”

After all, while no American has ever been killed by any Iranian (except those killed by MeK), but on the opposite side. The CIA overthrew the first democratically-elected prime minister of Iran; America established and supported the shah’s dictatorship; supported Saddam Hussein’s war and his chemical attacks against Iran. During aggression of Saddam against Iran, Americans even shot down Iran Air Flight 655, an Iran Air civilian passenger flight from Tehran to Dubai in 1988, killing all 290 passengers, without any proper apology.

And now some warmongering American politicians are supporting MeK, who have been the lobbying force behind the sanctions against Iran and are lobbying Western countries to attack the country, praying for the destruction of Iran so they might become its new rulers. They are mostly hated in Iran, and I believe this will add to why Iranians don’t trust Americans.

As long as America doesn’t review its foreign policy, realizing who its friends and who its enemies are, and the Western media doesn’t stop this propaganda against Iran based on its love for Saudi petrol dollars, we will hardly see any improvement in Iran-US relations. And, unfortunately, we have to witness growth of Saudi-backed Wahhabi terrorist groups and more instability and suffering in the region.