

Prepared statement by

**Ray Takeyh**

*Senior Fellow*

*Council on Foreign Relations*

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## Hearing on “Massacre at Camp Ashraf: Implications for U.S. Policy”

The Mujahidin-i Khalq (MEK) was founded in Iran in the early 1960s, as one of the many opposition groups that were agitating against the Shah’s monarchy. Early on the MEK quickly distinguished itself from other dissident forces by the discursive nature of its ideology that sought to somehow amalgamate Islam and Marxism. Islam was supposed to provide the values while Marxism offered a pathway for organizing the society and defeating the forces of capitalism, imperialism and feudalism. The MEK’s foundational philosophy stressed that Islam’s ideal society was an egalitarian one that had been corrupted over time by class division. To reclaim God’s original mandate one had to mobilize the society against the prevailing order. In essence, MEK’s ideology is a curious mixture of seemingly incompatible dogmas. From Shiite Islam, they appropriated the powerful symbol of martyrdom; from Marxism they claimed various stages of historical development; from Lenin they embraced the importance of a vanguard party committed to mass mobilization, and from Third World revolutionaries they took the primacy of guerrilla warfare and violence as indispensable agents of political change.

The core of MEK’s ideology has always been anti-imperialism which it has historically defined as opposition to U.S. interests. The MEK opposed the Shah partly because of his close associations with the United States. MEK’s anti-American compulsions propelled it toward embracing an entire spectrum of radical forces ranging from the Vietcong to the PLO. Given its mission of liberating the working class and expunging the influence of predatory capitalism, the United States has traditionally been identified as a source of exploitation and injustice in MEK literature. As the organization has lost its Iraqi patron and finds itself

without any reliable allies, it has somehow modulated its language and sought to moderate its anti-American tone. Such convenient posturing should not distract attention from its well-honed ideological animus to the United States.

Terror has always been a hallmark of MEK's strategy for assuming power. Through much of its past, the party exulted violence as a heroic expression of legitimate dissent. One of the central precepts of the party is that a highly-dedicated group of militants could spark a mass revolution by bravely confronting superior power of the state and assaulting its authority. Once, the masses observe that the state is vulnerable to violence, than they will shed their inhibitions and join the protest, thus sparking the larger revolution. Thus, the most suitable means of affecting political change is necessarily violence. Although in its advocacy in Western capitals, the MEK emphasizes its commitment to democracy and free expression, in neither deed nor word has it forsworn its violent pedigree.

During the 1970s, at the height of its revolutionary ardor, the MEK was fairly indiscriminate about its targets of violence. Among the victims of MEK terror have been American installations and military personnel. The MEK's Communiqué Number 3 stressed that violence against the United States was permissible given America's suppression of legitimate revolutionary movements in Palestine and Vietnam. The first such attack came in May 1972 on the occasion of President Richard Nixon's visit to Iran. To derail that visit, the MEK bombed the U.S Information Office and targeted American companies such as General Motors and Pan-American airways. That same year, the party attempted to assassinate General Harold Price, the Chief of U.S. Military Mission in Iran. Although General Price escaped his assassins, the MEK did tragically succeed in murdering Colonel Lewis Hawkins, the Deputy Chief of Military Mission outside his house.

It must be stressed that throughout the 1970s, the MEK did have a following among the Iranian intelligentsia and the working class. Its revolutionary message and its resistance to the Shah's regime proved alluring to many university students. The MEK was part of the revolutionary coalition that overthrew the Shah only to find itself increasingly on the margins of power. The critical year for the changing fortunes of MEK seems to be 1981. On June 28, 1981 a massive bomb destroyed the headquarters of the Islamic Republican Party, killing more than 100 individuals, including four cabinet members, six deputy ministers and twenty-seven members of the parliament. The episode sparked the internal war that destroyed the last remnants of the left-wing opposition. Pitched battles in the streets, summary executions of MEK guerrillas and closure of all critical press became the order of the day. Before the year was over, the regime had executed approximately six thousand of its opponents. In one of its more gruesome displays, the pictures of those executed were exhibited in the front pages of the newspapers. In the end, the Islamic Republic's superior fire power and sheer brutality allowed it to triumph and effectively end popular dissent. The MEK's

political infrastructure in Iran was effectively subdued. However, a series of decisions by the MEK leadership itself ensured that the party would never reclaim its place of influence in Iran.

As it went into exile, MEK's willingness to side with Saddam's Iraq against Iran in the Iran-Iraq war disturbed its already diminished cadre. During a key 1983 meeting between Masud Rajavi and Tariq Aziz, an alliance was forged. The MEK personnel often fought alongside of their Iraqi counterparts and were used in some of the war more daring missions. Given the highly nationalistic nature of the Iranian populace such an act was viewed as a betrayal of the homeland and not just a legitimate act of opposition against the regime. The MEK would go on to behave as Saddam's Praetorian Guard, as they were employed by him to repress the Iraqi Shia uprising of 1991. Given the fact that the Shia community is having a leading role in the future of Iraq, such miscalculation has alienated the MEK from the rulers of Iraq. The Baghdad regime's hostility to the MEK cannot be seen as a function of its ties with Tehran, but as a legacy of MEK's alliance with Saddam.

During its prolonged exile, MEK steadily transformed itself from a political movement into a cult-like organization. The movement no longer cultivated other opposition parties or attempted to broaden its appeal beyond its narrow constituents. Militancy and ideological discipline have displaced political pragmatism. The daily life of the members reflected this change as they had to submit themselves to the authority of the party and renounce all their previous ties. In the end, all that was left of a movement that appealed to a segment of the Iranian population is a cult-like party with a discursive ideology and a disturbing legacy of terror.

Despite its activism in Western capitals, the MEK commands very little support within Iran. Its alliance with Saddam and its cult-like dispositions have alienated even the radical segments of intelligentsia that once found its ideological template attractive. The main opposition force in Iran remains the Green Movement that features not just liberal activists but clerical dissidents, and middle class elements chaffing under the theocracy's repressive rule. The Iranian populace is seeking ways of liberalizing its society and not embracing yet another ideological movement with totalitarian tendencies.

### **Iran-Iraq Relations and the MEK**

During its seven-decade monopoly of power, Iraq's Sunni minority dismissed and relegated the Shiites to the margins of the society. The Ba'athist regime would go on to extract a cruel revenge for any signs of Shiite political agitation and demands for representation commensurate with its demographic power. The esteemed men of religion would be persecuted, the Shiites' southern habitat would be subject to a man-made ecological disaster, and the ancient shrine cities reduced to squalor. The Ba'athist malevolence was nowhere more evident than in its treatment of the Shiite uprising of 1991. The Ba'athist retaliation was

brutal: summary executions, the razing of cities and massive deportations became the order of the day. The fact that the MEK is implicated in that act of violence is not lost on Iraq's current leaders.

The fortunes of history rarely change with the rapidity that confronted the Sunni minority in 2003. The American invasion accompanied by expectations about "democratic transformation" irrevocably altered Iraq's political landscape. The Shiites, confident of their numerical majority, viewed the democratic process with optimism and proved patient with the vicissitudes of the postwar order. The remarkable aspect of Iraq was how the Shiite clerical estate had managed to preserve its essential infrastructure of influence. Despite the Ba'athist onslaught, the quietism of the Ayatollahs allowed them to maintain their seminaries and mosques. At a time when all organized political activity was viciously suppressed, the clerical class would assume prominence. Ironically, Iraqi society had undergone decades of forced secularization, but the Shiite political parties that now emerged would be either led by clerics or men of religious devotion. The United States had to adjust and deal with religiously-oriented parties that did not always share its views.

As the Islamic Republic contemplates its policy in Iraq it has to content with a number of difficult positions. The overarching objective of Tehran is to prevent Iraq from once more emerging as an ideological and strategic threat. Thus, it is critical for the theocratic regime to ensure the Shiites' political primacy. However, Iran must also guard against any civil war that could threaten Iraq's territorial cohesion. Dismemberment of Iraq into three fledgling states at odds with each other would confront Iran with more instability in its immediate neighborhood. In the meantime, Iran desires a withdrawal of American forces, as its hegemonic aspirations can never be ensured so long as a sizeable contingent of U.S. troops remains in the area. To pursue its competing goals, Iran has embraced a contradictory policy of pushing for elections and the accommodation of responsible Sunni elements while at the same time subsidizing Shiite militias who are bent on violence and disorder.

To a great extent, Iran's policy today is driven by its own prolonged war with Saddam's Iraq. Iran is a country that lives its history. The war is far from a faded memory—it is debated in lecture halls, street gatherings and scholarly conferences. After more than two decades of reflection, a relative consensus has finally emerged within Iran's body politic that suggests that the cause of Iraq's persistent aggression was the Sunni domination of its politics. The minority Sunni population sought to justify its monopoly of power by embracing a radical pan-Arabist foreign policy that called for Iraq to lead the Middle East. Thus, the Sunnis were ruling Iraq not for crass parochial purposes but for the larger cause of Arab solidarity. Such a posture inevitably led to conflicts between Iraq and its neighbors. One of the primary victims of the Sunni misadventures was the Islamic Republic. However, Iraq is a land of sectarian divisions and contrasting identities. The Shiites and Kurds also possess a foreign policy orientation, but one that calls for a better relationship with Iraq's non-Arab neighbors.

Iran's model of operation in Iraq is drawn from its experiences in Lebanon in the early 1980s. At that time, Iran amalgamated a variety of Shiite parties into the lethal and popular Hezbollah. Since the removal of Saddam, Iran has similarly been busy strengthening the Shiite forces by subsidizing their political activities and arming their militias. Iran hopes that the Shiites will continue to exploit their demographic advantage to solidify their gains. Nonetheless, as Iraq moves toward its democratic path, it is likely to have serious disagreements with Tehran. The scope of Iranian interference in Iraqi politics is beginning to alienate even the most pliable Shiite parties. The Iraqi populace that spent decades seeking relief from Saddam's rule is unlikely to acquiesce to such external interventions in their politics. The overarching theme of Iraqi politics today is a desire for restored sovereignty and genuine independence. Baghdad would like to have friendly and formal relations with Iran, but it is unlikely to submit to Iranian mischievousness in its internal affairs. The notion that Iraq and its Shiite government are mere subsidiaries of Iran is spurious and utterly without foundation.

In the long-run, Iraq represents important economic challenges to Iran. As Iraq's oil facilities rehabilitate and its production increases, it is likely to further damage Iran's prospects. A democratic Iraq is a far better place to attract international investments than a theocratic tyranny at odds with the international community over its nuclear aspirations. Although the global demand for oil is likely to remain high, the coming Iraqi production will diminish the appeal of Iran with its dilapidated petroleum facilities and truculent leadership. All this is not to suggest that Iran-Iraqi relations will ever degenerate into the hostility and tensions of Saddam's period, but nevertheless, a competitive relations is more likely than an alliance of unequals.

The one issue that has brought Tehran and Baghdad together is their mutual antipathy to the MEK presence in Iraq. As mentioned, the roots of Iraqi regime's hostility to MEK stem from its intimate ties with Saddam's regime. In essence, the Iraqi government has its own legitimate reasons for seeking to evict the MEK from their sanctuary. To be sure, such an act would garner Iraq further Iranian goodwill, but the core motivation for the conduct of Baghdad lies in MEK's own checkered history within Iraq.

The question that continues to bedevil the MEK debate is what to do with the residents of Camp Ashraf. It would be wrong and immoral to forcefully repatriate inhabitants of the camp back to Iran. Given the fact that the Islamic Republic lacks even the basic rudiments of an impartial justice system, they are likely to be met with certain death. Nonetheless, the international community under the auspices of the United Nations should begin to search for new homeland for the MEK personnel today stuck in a country that does not want them. The MEK cadre cannot remain in Iraq and cannot be returned to Iran. The question then becomes an internationally-mandated search for a new home for them.