

Backgrounders

Mujahadeen-e-Khalq (MEK)

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Introduction

The People's Mujahadeen of Iran, more commonly known as the Mujahadeen-e-Khalq or MEK, is a controversial Iranian resistance group; it was once listed as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) by the United States for its alleged killing of U.S. personnel in Iran during the 1970s, and for its ties to former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein. Recognizing the group's rejection of violence, the State Department [delisted the MEK in late 2012](#) but voiced ongoing concerns about its alleged mistreatment of its members.

The MEK helped Islamists overthrow the Western-backed Shah in 1979, but broke violently with the clerics shortly after the revolution and were forced into exile in France in 1981. The group moved its base of operations to eastern Iraq in 1986, but in recent years the pro-Iranian government of Nouri al-Maliki has pushed for the exiled group to relocate. In mid-2014, some 3,000 MEK members resided at [Camp Hurriya \(Liberty\)](#) near Baghdad, awaiting resettlement to third countries.

Roots of Resistance

The MEK was founded in 1965 by leftist Iranian students opposed to the monarchy of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and its supporters in the West, including the United States. Many of the MEK's most influential founding members—including leader Massoud Rajavi—were imprisoned by the Shah in the 1970s, and several were executed.

Throughout the decade, the MEK orchestrated terrorist attacks against the state that killed several Americans working in Iran, including military officers and civilian contractors, according to the U.S. State Department. (By 1978, some 45,000 of the 60,000 [foreigners working in Iran](#) were Americans.) The MEK denies any involvement with these incidents, asserting that they were the work of a breakaway Marxist-Leninist faction, known as Peykar, which hijacked the movement after the arrest of Rajavi.

Some analysts support this. "Rajavi, upon release from prison during the revolution, had to rebuild the organization, which had been badly battered by the Peykar experience," said [Patrick Clawson](#), director of research at the Washington Institute, in a CFR interview.

The MEK participated in the 1979 revolution that swept Ayatollah Khomeini into power, but refutes U.S. government claims that it also supported the hostage-taking raid on the U.S. Embassy in November of that year. "Though denied by the MEK, analysis based on eyewitness accounts and MEK documents demonstrates that MEK members participated in and supported the 1979 takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and that the MEK later argued against the early release [of] the American

hostages," said a [2011 State Department report on terrorism](#).

Experts say MEK's ideology—initially a blend of Marxism, feminism, and Islamism—as well as its popular support in the initial post-revolutionary period put it at odds with the new clerical regime, which cracked down violently on the potential political rival. The mullahs arrested and executed thousands of Mujahadeen, who retaliated by assassinating dozens of senior government officials, including the president and prime minister in August 1981, according to the U.S. State Department. The month prior, Rajavi established in Tehran the [National Council of Resistance of Iran](#) (NCRI), also known as the MEK's "parliament in exile," but he and the group's leadership were quickly driven into exile in Paris.

Support for Saddam

In 1986, the government of Jacques Chirac [expelled Rajavi](#) and much of the MEK as part of a deal with Tehran that freed French hostages held by pro-Iranian groups in Lebanon. According to the U.S. State Department, the MEK was then welcomed into Iraq, where it supported Saddam Hussein's war against Iran (1980-88) and reportedly helped quash Kurdish uprisings in the north and Shia unrest in the south (1991). Saddam armed the MEK near the end of the Iran conflict "with heavy military equipment and deployed thousands of [MEK fighters](#) in suicidal, mass wave attacks against Iranian forces." [Iran's Revolutionary Guards](#) killed some two thousand MEK in the ill-fated assault known as Operation Eternal Light. (The MEK denies any role in the suppression of Kurdish and Shiite unrest in Iraq in 1991.)

The MEK's campaign against the Islamic Republic, including multiple targeted attacks on high-ranking officials, continued throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. The group demonstrated its global reach in April 1992 with [coordinated raids on diplomatic missions](#) in ten countries, including the Iranian Mission to the United Nations in New York. (The MEK said that the attacks were retaliation for Iranian air strikes on the group's base outside Baghdad.) In 2003, French police arrested more than 150 MEK members for allegedly plotting and [financing terrorist attacks](#). The EU had labeled the MEK a terrorist organization the prior year (it was delisted in 2009). The Iranian government blames the MEK for the deaths of more than 12,000 Iranians over the past three decades.

Searching For a New Home

As part of the 2003 invasion, U.S. forces initially attacked MEK military targets in Iraq despite the group's claims of neutrality. The two sides eventually negotiated a cease-fire that disarmed MEK members and confined them to Camp Ashraf, a 14-square-mile former Iraqi military base in the country's northeast. In 2004, U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld [designated the group as civilian "protected persons"](#) under the Geneva Convention—a designation that ran against the recommendations of the U.S. Department of State, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and the International Committee of the Red Cross.

According to a [2009 RAND report](#), the decision was "extremely controversial because it appeared that the United States selectively chose to apply the Geneva Conventions to a designated terrorist organization and, further, to grant it special status." That designation expired after Iraq regained full sovereignty in January 2009.

The MEK had long feared that a transition to [Iraqi control of Ashraf \(PDF\)](#) would result in their eviction. As U.S. forces pulled out of Ashraf in April 2011, violence broke out between the Iraqi military and camp residents. Thirty-five MEK were killed, according to the UN. After the incident, Iraq reiterated its vow to close Ashraf following full U.S. withdrawal at the end of 2011.

Iraq and the UN reached an agreement with MEK in December of that year that would relocate Ashraf residents to Camp Liberty outside Baghdad, a "[temporary transit station](#)" from which group members could eventually be taken in by other countries. As of May 2014, approximately 3,000 MEK members resided at [Camp Hurriya \(Liberty\)](#), near Baghdad, awaiting resettlement to third countries.

Leadership & Ideology

The MEK has long been led jointly by husband-and-wife team Massoud and Maryam Rajavi, and is reputedly the largest militant Iranian opposition group committed to the overthrow of the Islamic Republic. It is also "the only army in the world with a commander corps composed mostly of women," said former CFR press fellow Elizabeth Rubin. Maryam Rajavi joined the resistance as a student in Tehran in the early 1970s and, at the behest of her husband, assumed joint control of the group in 1985. Feminism and allegiance to the Rajavi family are pillars of [MEK ideology](#), which was founded on both Islam and Marxism—though the group has denied its affiliation with the latter.

Many analysts, including Rubin, have characterized the [MEK as a cult](#), citing the group's fealty to the Rajavis. Older women were reportedly required to divorce their husbands in the late 1980s, and younger girls cannot marry or have children.

The NCRI elected Maryam Rajavi as "Iran's future president" in 1993 and, according to the group's website, expects to oversee a six-month democratic transition in Iran "once the mullahs are toppled." Based out of Paris, she also serves as the group's chief international ambassador. [NCRI's political platform](#) includes support for human rights, women, capitalism, religious freedom, minority rights, and Iran's integration into the global community.

Massoud Rajavi disappeared following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003; his whereabouts and current status are unknown. Some analysts believe he is dead. "Cult leaders generally don't retire," said [Karim Sadjadpour](#), an Iran expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, in a CFR interview. "They either die or go to prison. I'd be surprised if Massoud Rajavi is still alive."

Size & Support Structure

The U.S. State Department, in an August 2011 report, put [MEK global membership](#) between 5,000 and 10,000, with significant contingents in Paris and other European capitals where the group maintains offices.

The group operates a well-funded, highly sophisticated [network of advocates in the United States](#), enlisting in recent years the support of dozens of high-profile officials from both political parties, including former New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani and former governors Edward Rendell and Howard Dean. Much of this advocacy was centered on a campaign to delist the MEK as a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization. In September 2012, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton removed the group from the FTO list and thereby unfroze the MEK's U.S. assets and allowed it to transact with U.S. entities. The NCRI opened a Washington, DC, office in April 2013.

Prior to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Saddam was the MEK's primary financier, experts say. But in recent years, the group claims to rely on the largesse of wealthy Iranian expatriates in the United States and Europe, and others opposed the clerical regime in Tehran.

Continuing Controversy

The debate over the MEK's legitimacy as a peaceful Iranian resistance group has attracted both critics and supporters over the years. The group's advocates assert that Secretary of State Madeleine Albright

listed the MEK as a foreign terrorist group in October 1997 as part of a diplomatic effort to open dialogue with moderates in Tehran. Some reporting at the time attests to this. "One senior Clinton administration official said inclusion of the People's Mujahadeen was intended as a [goodwill gesture to Tehran](#) and its newly elected moderate president, Mohammad Khatami," wrote Norman Kempster in the *LA Times*.

Some Western backers believe the group serves as a strategic counterweight to the clerical regime in Iran. Writing in *The Hill* in 2014, Raymond Tanter, president of the Iran Policy Committee, a Washington, DC-based advocacy group, argued that MEK "dissidents [in Camp Liberty] have historic ties in the area that can help [tilt the balance against radical Sunnis](#) and counter an extremist 'Shiite arc' of Tehran and its counterpart in Damascus."

Critics of the MEK question the group's motives and commitment to nonviolence and human rights. The State Department [noted such reservations](#) upon delisting the group in September 2012: "With today's actions, the Department does not overlook or forget the MEK's past acts of terrorism...The Department also has serious concerns about the MEK as an organization, particularly with regard to allegations of abuse committed against its own members."

As tens of thousands gathered for an annual rally for the NCRI in France in June 2014, a [spokesman for the French Foreign Ministry](#) condemned the group for its "violent and non-democratic inspirations," "cult nature," and "intense campaign of influence and disinformation."

Others believe Western support for the MEK distracts from or, worse, undercuts the efforts of more mainstream Iranian opposition groups like the [Green Movement](#), which assembled millions of peaceful protestors in the aftermath of the disputed 2009 presidential election.

Additional Resources

This CFR backgrounder explores [Iran's Revolutionary Guards](#).

This CFR Crisis Guide provides an in-depth, multimedia look at [Iran's history](#), its evolution as an Islamic Republic, and its controversial nuclear program.

This study by RAND's National Defense Research Institute examines the unique detention issues that arose from [MEK's capture in Iraq](#) by U.S.-led coalition forces in 2003.

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