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U.S. Agendas in Iran May Present a Public Diplomacy Quagmire ^[1]

Editor's Note: Research Associate Reza Aslan, a scholar of religions and the author of No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam (Random House), recently published in paperback, submits this examination of a public diplomacy challenge for the United States and its image in Iran and surrounding Muslim countries. Aslan offers that current U.S. policy considerations may provide an untenable challenge for public diplomacy practitioners.

Over the last few months, there have been an increasing number of reports that the Pentagon, under special instructions from the vice president's office, has been using an Iranian terrorist organization called the Mujahedin-e Kalq (MEK) to conduct stealth operations in Iran in anticipation of a possible military attack. Indeed, a number of recent bombing attacks in Baluchistan and Khuzestan have been linked to MEK fighters who have infiltrated Iran's borders from bases in Iraq and Pakistan. It seems the purpose of these infiltrations is not only to set up possible staging grounds for an invasion but also to stir up Iran's small Sunni community (centered in these regions) to help bring down the clerical regime once the bombs start falling. The strategic use of the MEK, therefore, is a sign that, as Seymour Hersh reported in the *New Yorker*, the Administration believes that a sustained bombing campaign would not only halt Iran's nuclear program, but would also weaken the clerical regime to the point that Iranians would be compelled to rise up and overthrow it.

The idea that the MEK could serve as an Iranian version of the Iraqi National Congress once again demonstrates the almost willful ignorance this administration when it comes to the people, politics, religion, and culture of the Middle East. The MEK is a pseudo-Marxist organization that, along with its Paris-based political wing, the National Council of Resistance in Iran (NCRI), has been on both the U.S. and E.U. terrorist watch-lists for years. However, since the invasion of Iraq brought with it the specter of seriously pursuing regime change in Iran, the MEK has begun to transform itself into the Iranian equivalent of Ahmed Chalabi's ill-fated INC. In fact, the MEK may be the only internationally recognized terrorist organization in the world with offices in D.C. and an open line to some very influential members of Congress, including Senator Sam Brownback (R-Kan) and Representatives Gary Ackerman (D-NY) and Bob Filner (D-CA), not to mention neo-con avatars Richard Perle and Daniel Pipes.

Formed in the 1960s as an anti-imperialist organization, the MEK gained fame for their guerilla tactics, which killed dozens of Muhammad Reza Shah's political cronies and several American soldiers and civilian contractors working in Iran. However, after the Shah's expulsion in 1979, both the secular-minded democrats who formed the provisional government and the religious factions who followed the Ayatollah Khomeini rejected the MEK and their radical Marxist agenda, forcing its members to flee to Iraq. There, in exchange for assistance and intelligence during the Iran/Iraq war, the MEK was protected and armed by

Saddam Hussein.

The ceasefire between Iran and Iraq in 1988 put the MEK in a vulnerable position. Isolated in remote camps on the border of Iraq, the group gradually transformed from a revolutionary Marxist guerrilla organization into a fanatical cult of personality centered on absolute devotion to its husband-and-wife leaders, Maryam and Massoud Rajavi. As with most cults, it is incredibly difficult to break through the veil of secrecy that shrouds the MEK. However, based on the research of Professor Ervand Abrahamian, who has written extensively on the group, and the testimony of former members who have escaped the organization, a horrifying history of terrorist activity, mass murder, and human rights abuses has emerged.

According to published reports by Human Rights Watch, MEK members are forced to line up every morning in front of pictures of Maryam and Massoud to salute them and sing their praises. Members who have criticized the Rajavis or their organization have been detained against their will -- some have committed suicide to escape. The Rajavis have outlawed all contact between their male and female followers. Celibacy is strictly enforced, and all members must undergo weekly ideological cleansings in which they are compelled to publicly confess their sexual desires. Many MEK members are orphans who joined the organization as children. They refer to themselves as martyrs and have been conditioned for absolute obedience to the Rajavis. Indeed, when French authorities arrested Maryam Rajavi in 2002 for her involvement in terrorist activities, nine of her followers immolated themselves in protest.

After the American invasion of Iraq, the MEK was rounded up and detained while diplomats in the U.S. and Iran began negotiations for a prisoner exchange. The Iranians were willing to hand over dozens of Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters they had captured trying to cross the country's borders in return for members of the MEK who had been charged with terrorist activities in Iran. The Iraqi leaders of the interim government encouraged the exchange of prisoners and called for the expulsion the MEK from Iraq. The Iraqis had good reason to want the MEK brought to justice. After all, the group took an active role in Saddam Hussein's brutal massacre of the Kurds and Shi'ites who rose up after the Persian Gulf War.

But before negotiations with Iran could continue, the MEK was inexplicably granted protected status under the Geneva Convention. At the time, the move was lauded by neo-cons like Daniel Pipes, who wrote an op-ed for the Washington Institute for Near Eastern Policy arguing that the MEK offers "an excellent way to intimidate and gain leverage over Tehran." Since then, the organization has been increasingly viewed as the most viable alternative to Iran's clerical regime. More than 150 members of Congress have signed a letter to the State Department demanding that the MEK be removed from its terrorist list. Speaking at a rally organized last year by the NCRI in D.C., Representative Bob Filner (D-CA) referred to the group as, "our best hope to counter the [Iranian] regime." Filner is not alone in trumpeting the MEK. Senator Sam Brownback (R-Kansas), whose Iran Freedom Act calls for funding Iranian opposition groups like the MEK, told me in a phone interview conducted last year that, "there are serious questions to be raised about [the MEK's] terrorist designation, particularly in light of the intelligence they have provided on Iran's nuclear program."

It is true that the MEK has been a major source of U.S. intelligence on Iran's clandestine nuclear activity. Some of that intelligence, including information on Iran's nuclear program at Natanz, seems to have originated with Israeli intelligence services, who then filtered the information to the US through the MEK. However, a great deal of the intelligence provided by members of the MEK has proven to be unsubstantiated and unquestionably tainted by the

organization's own personal interests. Moreover, the MEK's support for Saddam Hussein during his horrific eight-year war with Iran has made it the only group Iranians detest more than their own clerical regime. It is for this reason that some of the most ardent opponents of the clerical regime are wary of their influence in the U.S. Michael Ledeen, founder of the Coalition for Democracy in Iran (CDI) and one of the most vocal supporters of regime change in Iran bluntly dismisses the possibility of cooperating with MEK. "I do not think we should have anything to do with...a terrorist organization despised by most Iranians."

Still, despite its checkered past and its dubious intelligence claims, the MEK seems to have once again emerged as a viable partner in the pursuit of regime change in Iran. Of course, when an unreliable and, as some would argue, criminal exile group begins furnishing the U.S. government with intelligence designed specifically to encourage it to preemptively strike a foreign country so as to bring about regime change, we should all stand up and take notice.

In the run-up to the Iraq war, the president assured Americans he would exhaust all his diplomatic options before considering war. We now know this was a lie. Plans for the invasion of Iraq had begun soon after the attacks of September 11, 2001 and were unlikely to be derailed by any act of diplomacy short of Saddam Hussein's withdrawal from Iraq. If the reports about the MEK's infiltration into Iran are true, then it could mean the president is once again lying about working toward a diplomatic option in Iran, even while preparing for an second pre-emptive invasion.
