

Iran's Troubling Opposition

Contributed by AMIR TAHERI - WSJ; Page A15
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On Monday the British parliament removed the People's Mujahedeen of Iran (MEK) from the U.K.'s list of banned terrorist organizations. The decision upholds a Court of Appeals' ruling in May that there is no evidence linking the Iranian opposition group to terrorism, and that it should be free to recruit, organize and raise money in Britain.

Western and Arab intelligence services have long appreciated the MEK for its sources deep inside Iran. The group was the first to provide evidence of Tehran's secret nuclear project. But the U.S. and Continental Europe shouldn't rush to follow London's move. Although the People's Mujahedeen has won the support of many Western politicians, it is not the force for democratic change it claims to be.

The MEK was founded in 1965 after a split in a Marxist-Leninist movement that had waged a guerrilla war in northern Iran. Its ideology emerged as a mix of Islam and Marxism, with ingredients from the Islamist pamphleteer Ali Shariati, who advocated an "Islam without a clergy."

With help from the KGB, the group engaged in a campaign against the former shah of Iran and sent cadres to Cuba, East Germany and Palestinian camps in Lebanon to train as guerrillas. Its hit men assassinated a dozen people, including an Iranian general and five American military and civilian technicians in the 1970s. An operation in 1971 to kidnap the U.S. ambassador to Tehran, Douglas MacArthur III, failed. But it helped the group heighten its profile among anti-shah terrorist outfits.

Later, the MEK would play a key role in the events that swept Ayatollah Khomeini to power. The break with the mullahs came when the People's Mujahedeen, under its "Supreme Guide" Massoud Rajavi, attempted an armed uprising against the new regime in 1981. Not allowed to field candidates in presidential and parliamentary elections, the MEK sent hit squads to assassinate prominent mullahs and raided several military bases.

Khomeini's reaction was savage. More than 15,000 MEK militants and sympathizers were jailed and some 3,000 executed. Mr. Rajavi fled to Paris aboard a jetliner his supporters had hijacked, taking with him Abol-Hassan Banisadr, the first president of the Khomeinist republic. In a second wave of executions in 1988, Khomeini put more than 4,000 MEK members and sympathizers to death.

In Paris, meanwhile, France's Socialist government negotiated a deal in 1982 between the MEK and the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein, which was then engaged in a war against Iran. Mr. Rajavi frequently visited Baghdad and formed a close relationship with Saddam, who set up camps in Iraq to train MEK militants for sabotage operations against Iran. Even after the 1988 cease-fire between Tehran and Baghdad, Mr. Rajavi, with Saddam's approval, continued a low-intensity war against Iran from Iraqi territory.

Mr. Rajavi's relationship with Saddam would get the MEK involved even in genocide. In 1991, the MEK's 10,000-strong force in Iraq helped Saddam in his brutal campaign against the Kurds and Iraqi Shiites, a campaign that left over 100,000 dead. The MEK saw Iraqi Shiites as allies of Iran and thus enemies of itself. This is why the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has opened proceedings against the MEK for "crimes against humanity." In 2003, the U.S.-led coalition extended prisoner-of-war protection to MEK members in Iraq, including some 4,000 combatants, now disarmed, in Camp Ashraf northeast of Baghdad. Mr. Rajavi is under "restricted residence" in Baghdad.

Over the years, the MEK has suffered waves of defections, each producing fresh testimonies depicting it as a sect dedicated to the cult of Mr. Rajavi and his estranged wife, Maryam Azedanloo-Qajar. Mr. Rajavi declared her the "President of the Republic of Iran" almost two decades ago.

Does all of this mean that the British decision is morally wrong and perhaps politically counterproductive? Four years ago, my answer would have been an unequivocal yes. Today, I am not so sure.

To start with, the group, which has never practiced terrorism on British soil, has not committed any terrorist act since January 2003, when it attacked an Iranian village close to the border with Iraq.

Besides, being blacklisted has not forced the MEK to mend its ways. Instead, the leadership has used the fact that it was put on a terror list to portray itself as a wrongly prosecuted community that required secretive modus operandi and Stalinist discipline from its members.

It also is somewhat hypocritical for Europeans to put the MEK on a terrorist list but deal with the Khomeinist regime, the leading sponsor of terror in the world, as if it were a respectable government. What's more, Tehran exploits the MEK's terrorist label to brand all Iranian opposition groups as "terrorists and traitors."

Finally, blacklisting the MEK makes it harder for other Iranian opposition groups to establish contact with it, and to isolate its terrorist elements and integrate its rank-and-file into a broader popular movement for a democratic Iran.

Despite its bloody history, the MEK continues to enjoy much support inside Iran and among Iranian exiles. Some sympathize with the sufferings of its members: No other political group has sustained so many losses at the hands of the mullahs. Others see the MEK as a valuable asset in the fight against Tehran because it is the only group considered to be as ruthless as the mullahs themselves. These pragmatists like to cite a Persian proverb: "Only a hound from Mazandaran could catch the fox of the Mazandaran forest."

But before Continental Europe and the U.S. take the MEK off their terrorist lists, it needs to reform itself as some other violent groups have. Northern Ireland's Sinn Fein is an example.

To start with, the MEK has to recognize and accept responsibility for its murderous past. A sincere mea culpa could help it out of its moral and political ghetto.

Next, the MEK should publicly renounce terror and commit itself to working for a new Iranian system based on pluralism, the rule of law and democratic elections.

It is also important that the MEK cooperate with Iraqi justice to shed light on the group's role in the repression of Shiites and Kurds under Saddam. Such cooperation would include handing over MEK figures sought by Iraqi prosecutors. The MEK also has to develop a new leadership for itself through open, transparent and multicandidate elections.

Some Iranians may feel that, given its past crimes, the MEK doesn't deserve a second chance. Nevertheless, there has been a change of generations in the MEK. Many of those who murdered innocent people or betrayed Iran by working for Saddam have died or retired; the rest have dwindled to a small minority. The MEK now faces a stark choice: Reform and become a pluralistic group working for Iranian democracy, or remain an obscure sect undeserving of Western support.

Mr. Taheri's new book, "The Persian Night," is scheduled for publication by Encounter Books later this year.

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