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IRANIAN POPULAR ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE MEK

Summary

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***** THIS IS A COMBINED MESSAGE *****

SUBJECT: IRANIAN POPULAR ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE MEK

1. (SBU) NOTE: The following cable is based on input from State Department Iran-watchers and consular interviewing officers in the main posts that interact with Iranians on a regular basis, i.e. ANKARA, BAKU, BERLIN, DUBAI AND ISTANBUL. END NOTE.

2. (SBU)

SUMMARY: Showing a unanimity rare among Iranians, anecdotal information gleaned from both ordinary Iranians living

inside Iran and abroad and from Iran analysts strongly indicates that the 'Mujahedin-e Khalq' (MEK) opposition group has no significant popular support inside Iran. To the extent that Iranian respondents are familiar with the MEK they express severe dislike for this group, primarily due to its alliance with Saddam Hussein during the eight-year Iran-Iraq war. All Iranians queried tended to disbelieve the MEK's expressed allegiance to the ideals of human rights and democracy, with even hardened Iranian oppositionists and persecuted religious minorities such as the Iranian Baha'i saying they would prefer the current Iranian government to an MEK-affiliated one. Many Iranian respondents believe that any indication of USG support for the MEK would seriously harm USG popularity among ordinary Iranians, even among those Iranians who oppose the current Iranian government, would fuel anti-American sentiment, and would likely empower Iranian hardliners.

END SUMMARY.

3. (SBU) MEK - BACKGROUND [see Appendix]: Originally a 1960s Islamic-Marxist group dedicated to violent overthrow of the Pahlavi regime, the 'Mujahedin-e Khalq' (MEK- a.k.a. 'The People's Warriors') was one of the main popular organizations to emerge in the early days of the 1979 Revolution. The increasing ascendancy by clerical elements supporting Ayatollah Khomeini after the revolution led to this group's gradual elimination from the ruling coalition and its eventual flight from Iran in the early 1980s. Using Iraq as its base, the MEK mounted attacks against Iranian military during the latter stages of the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war, then after the 1988 Iran-Iraq cease-fire it continued attacks against Iranian leadership until it was forced to stand down its Iraq-based operations as a result of 'Operation Iraqi Freedom' in 2003. Currently, MEK supporters claim the group has renounced violence as a tool and seeks a secular, democratic Iran, while its detractors claim it is more a cult of personality centered on a leadership unchanged since 1979 than a popular-based political movement. Its membership in its 'Camp Ashraf' base in Iraq consists of a few thousand rank-and-file members, mostly either older original 'first generation' members from the 1970s or younger Iranians from poorer ethnic minorities such as Iranian Baluch. Since deprived of Iraq government funding since 2003 the MEK has increasingly relied on fundraising in Europe under various front organizations that use popular antipathy towards the Islamic Republic to solicit money. END BACKGROUND.

4. (SBU) In January and February 2011 State Department Iran-watchers and consular officers in the main posts that interact with Iranians on a regular basis (Ankara, Baku, Berlin, Dubai and Istanbul) asked Iranian contacts and visa applicants their opinions on the MEK.

POPULAR FEEDBACK

5. (SBU) In speaking to hundreds of Iranians both in the preceding two months and before, ordinary Iranians were almost uniformly dismissive of the MEK, reacting with either disdain or apathy, their responses strongly indicating a lack of any significant popular support for the MEK among Iranians living in Iran. Among older Iranians this lack of support was largely due to MEK support of Saddam Hussein's Iraq in the Iran-Iraq war. Among younger Iranians (i.e. most of the population) this lack of support was derived from both the MEK's 'treasonous acts' in supporting Iraq

during the war and also from a near-total lack of information due to the absence of any MEK influence inside Iran.

6. (SBU) The following direct quotes reflect what was heard from ordinary Iranians both inside Iran and abroad:

--- "The MEK are detested among the young and old in Iran, although many young Iranians don't know much about them, and to the extent they do it is in relation to their pro-Iraqi activities during the Iran-Iraq war. Many young Iranians familiar with the MEKs lack of any support inside Iran wonder why this group is so well-supported abroad and in international organizations."

--- "They are hated among Iranians, since their hands are stained with the blood of their fellow countrymen."

--- "I'm an Iranian Bahai [i.e. the most persecuted religious minority in Iran] and I can tell you that even Bahais in Iran would much prefer the current Iranian government to any MEK government."

--- "We are scared of them because we think they want power. They are like Fidel Castro in Cuba. They will turn Iran into a North Korea or Cuba. It's not correct to call them a terrorist group. **THOUGH: THEY JUST WANT POWER. THEY DO NOT HAVE** the support of the majority of people. They are not democratic just because they appointed a lady as 'President of Iran'."

--- "They were supported and loved during the Revolution, especially among young people. We loved them. They were beautiful people. But their Marxist-Islamic ideology has passed away. The group's ideology is far away from the people now."

--- "Aside from their cooperation with Saddam against Iran, their leadership is immoral - Masoud Rajavi has forced himself on many women, with Maryam's awareness, and in their camp in Iraq they separate children from their parents. I had a distant relative who joined the MEK and once he did so the rest of the family disowned him."

--- "Nobody likes them."

--- "They have no support in Iran."

--- "The group is not popular. People hate them, and they are terrorists. They killed many people."

--- "Once they fought for what they believed in and they had some support but now we don't really know who they are and what they do."

--- "They are a terrorist organization."

--- "The MEK is a joke."

--- "They are a bunch of #@\$*!" [from a young Iranian male]

--- "The MEK under the leadership of Masoud Rajavi and President Marjam Rajavi are meaningless in the domestic Iranian political spectrum and totally marginalized. They try however, with great effort, to create the impression that they are the most significant Iranian exiled opposition group."

ANALYSTS ON MEK

7. (SBU) The above-cited characterization of the MEK by ordinary Iranians was replicated in feedback from political analysts focused on contemporary Iran, all of whom were Iranian by birth. Without exception these analysts said that the MEK lacked any significant popular support inside Iran, with Iranian popular reactions to the MEK varying from rank ignorance (mostly among the young) to extreme aversion (to those more familiar with their history).

8. (SBU) The following direct quotes from prominent analysts of contemporary Iran, all of whom are Iranian by birth, reflect the feedback received:

--- "Right after the 1979 revolution the MEK had considerable support in Iran, especially among the youth. Even after the MEK began its campaign of assassination of official figures in June 1981 and the regime responded by executing several thousand of MEK supporters, there was still sympathy. But then MEK leadership left Iran and went first to France and then Iraq, began collaborating with Saddam Hussein's regime, and acting as its spies. This turned the tide against the MEK, and the Iranian people began despising MEK for its support of Saddam, for its revealing information about Iran, and for still continuing its campaign of assassination while the nation was involved in a long war. That has not changed, and in fact it has become stronger, since all sorts of horror stories have been told to the public by former MEK members who had become disillusioned with the leadership and wanted to leave Iraq and Camp Ashraf but were tortured and then delivered to Saddams intelligence as Iranian spies. It was also revealed that the MEK had a direct role in putting down the Shiites uprising in southern Iraq and the Kurdish uprising in northern Iraq right after the first Persian Gulf war. The fact that MEK revealed some information about Iran's nuclear program also angered a lot of people, because they consider it treason. The net result is that, with losing thousands of its members to executions and consistent opposition to the IRIG, the MEK has no significant base of support in Iran. Given that 70 percent of the population is under 35, they do not even know who the MEK are. Iranians who know about the MEK consider it nothing but a religio-political cult. MEK has the same power structure as does the IRIG: It has a "Supreme Leader," Masoud Rajavi; a "President," Maryam Rajavi, and it demands absolute obedience of the leadership. So, as we say in Persian, "az chaaleh dar biyaam to chaah biyoftim?" (We are getting ourselves out a small ditch in order to fall down in a deep well?)."

--- "The trick used by the MEK is to approach the "simple man on the street" or politicians with little expertise on Iran and convince them that they are collecting signatures or money to protest human rights violations in Iran. These signatures are then used by the organization as proof of support for the organization's broader political agenda. The organization works under a number of PSEUDONYMS. THE RECENT PROTEST MOVEMENT in Iran that followed the 2009 elections showed quite clearly that the MEK has no noticeable support inside Iran and is isolated amongst exiled Iranians as well."

--- "Generally speaking I encountered two things concerning the MEK from living in Iran. The older generations' has a disdain for the MEK because of their belief that MEK contributed mightily to the radicalism and violence of the early years of the revolution and for its siding with Saddam in the Iran-Iraq War. This disdain was not merely based on the fact that the government held MEK responsible for the bombings of the early revolutionary years. In addition, many liberal and/or secular people whom I know still hold MEK responsible for the radical Islamist turn of the revolution that was then manipulated by more established clerics. The younger generation's views on the MEK are characterized by apathy and lack of basic knowledge about the group, its leadership, and its political positions. I have not found any evidence that MEK has been able to fire the imagination of a single university or high school student in Iran. Believe it or not, the few students who

express interest in radical politics, instead of reform, were much more interested in Marxism than MEK."

--- "Outside Iran, a handful of groups and individuals have sought to emerge as centers of opposition. Among these groups is the MEK. It has no political base inside Iran and no genuine support on the Iranian street. The MEK, an organization based in Iraq that enjoyed the Baathist regime's support, lost any following it may have had in Iran when it fought on Iraq's behalf during the 1980-1988 war. Widespread Iranian distaste for the MEK has been cemented by its numerous terrorist attacks against innocent Iranian civilians and Iranian government officials. Since Saddam Hussein's fall, the MEK now depends almost entirely on the goodwill of the United States, which placed it on its list of foreign terrorist organizations and, at most, seems prepared to use it as a source of intelligence and leverage in its dealings with Iran.

The most prominent international human rights organizations -- including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International -- have determined the MEK to be undemocratic, with a cult-like organizational structure and modus operandi that belies its claim to be a vehicle for democratic change.

During my time living and working in Iran, it became quite clear that the MEK is not at all popular among the Iranian people. Of the literally hundreds of people I interviewed and/or spoke with in Iran about the MEK, not one had anything positive to say about it. When Iran's [2009] post-election turbulence commenced, the MEK quickly sought to join the frenzy of brewing opposition to the current government inside Iran. But by claiming links to this indigenous opposition, the MEK connected their name to genuinely disenfranchised voters, thereby providing the Iranian government with yet another excuse to "discredit" and crackdown on peaceful protesters.

Increased U.S. government support for the MEK will empower Ahmadinejad and other hardliners in Iran, thereby increasing their [Ahmadinejad and the other hardliners] overall domestic support exponentially. Never has the level of cohesion among regime "insiders" been so low [but] supporting the MEK will provide Iranian government insiders with a foreign-based threat that can be exploited to heal fractures within the regime, increase the number of Iranians that rally around the flag, and eliminate indigenous political opposition -- thereby hurting the very people that America seeks to help. Ironically, if the U.S. wants to help Ahmadinejad and the hardliners cement a long-term dictatorship in Iran, support for the Mojahedin is the way to do it. It will significantly reduce any chance of real rapprochement with the Iranian government, and severely curtail indigenous democratic progress in Iran. The Iranian people won't forgive or forget this -- particularly given the history surrounding U.S. policies toward Mossadegh and the Shah. And this is one of the cardinal sins poisoning U.S.-Iran relations to this day. It is worth noting that increasing American support for the MEK is a step that the Bush administration -- even at the height of its openly hostile Iran policy -- wasn't willing to take. Even they understood that increased support for the MEK will exacerbate all of the challenges and problems that Iran policy currently poses to the USG."

--- "The MEK is a dead political group in Iran, even if its specter is not anymore haunting the Iranian people. The MEK has no considerable support in the country, either among the elites or

among the ordinary people, whether in the capital Tehran or in the PROVINCES. WHILE IRANIANS FOLLOW ON A DAILY BASIS different opposition websites, the MEK website is one of the poorest regarding the amount of its viewers (this fact is easily provable by checking the traffic the website has comparing to others). The truth is the MEK is one of the most hated political groups in Iran. If Iranians would be asked to choose between MEK and IRGC - Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps - they would definitely go for the latter. The MEK is mostly known as a terrorist group in Iran; people are afraid of the group's obsolete ideology, its aggressive and vengeful rhetoric and its authoritarian leadership. The Iranian regime is aware how notorious the MEK is and takes advantage of this in certain political situations. During the 2009 unrests, the MEK's support of the Iranian protestors was a gift for the regime, as it led many people hesitate to come anymore to the streets evidently afraid of their paving the path for MEK to take advantage of the situation. Regardless, the government accused the MEK of initiating terrorist attacks and gunning down people in the streets.

Any U.S. support for MEK would extremely damage its reputation amongst Iranians and would increase anti-American sentiments in Iran. People would regard such an act not as animosity towards the regime but towards the nation. They would assume that the U.S. intentions are not to promote freedom and democracy in Iran, but simply to spoil the country. The Iranian regime would definitely take advantage of such a situation, showing it as a proof of its claims of calling Americans as the enemy of the nation." --- "The MEK are an Islamist-Socialist cult whose membership numbers in the thousands. Their popular support in Iran is negligible. Over a four year period living in and traveling to Iran I never met anyone who expressed any affinity for them. On the contrary they are widely perceived as brainwashed traitors who fought alongside Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war. The U.S. government should stay as far away from them as possible. Even [former NSC head] General Jones recent interactions with them have spurred concerned rumors among Iranian democracy activists that Washington may be flirting with the MEK."

9. (SBU) COMMENT: The results of this admittedly unscientific polling of contacts and ordinary Iranians concerning the MEK confirms what those familiar with Iran already assumed to be the case: regardless of whether the USG deems it a terrorist organization, the MEK lacks any significant popular support in Iran, and to the extent Iranians know about this group they are far more likely to oppose it than support it. The pro-human rights and democratic ideals which the MEK now claims to espouse are ones which the USG also emphasizes in our own Iran policy. But one does not need to support the MEK to promote these goals, and indeed it seems to be the case that any increased show of USG support for this group will not help the cause of freedom and democracy in Iran, but will only adversely impact popular perceptions of the USG among ordinary Iranians, and could also strengthen support for Ahmadinejad and other hardliners.

END COMMENT.

APPENDIX: MEK HISTORY

1965: MEK Founded on Islamic-Marxist ideology by former members of Iran's nationalist "Freedom Movement of Iran."

1970s: MEK engaged in ideological work combined with armed struggle

against the Pahlavi regime, to include terrorist killings of US military and civilian personnel in Iran.

1975: MEK splits into two groups, Marxist and Islamist, with the Marxist group changing its name to "Paykar."

1979 Masoud Rajavi assumes MEK leadership, and MEK becomes one of the main political groups active during the 1979 Islamic Revolution. MEK supports US Embassy takeover in November 1979.

1979-81: Like Iranian nationalists and leftists elements, MEK influence in government slowly eliminated by the clerical elements supporting Ayatollah Khomeini.

Early 1980s: As IRIG moves against MEK, MEK elements inside Iran mount massive assassination campaigns against the IRIG leadership, killing approximately 70 high-ranking IRIG officials in one June 1981 bombing, with another MEK bombing two months later killing the IRIG President and Prime Minister. Hundreds of MEK supporters and members either arrested or killed. Masoud Rajavi forced to flee Iran in 1981, and majority of MEK relocates in France.

1981-1986: Using France as base of operations, MEK continues campaign of violence against Iranian government figures.

1986-1988: In 1986 due to improved Iran-France relations MEK relocates headquarters to Iraq, relaying on Iraq for basing, financial support, and training. During Iran-Iraq war Its "NATIONAL LIBERATION ARMY" UNDER CONTROL OF THE IRAQI MILITARY mounts attacks against the Iranian military, causing it to lose massive support among the Iranian people.

1988: Mass execution of MEK prisoners inside Iran by IRIG.

1989 - 2003: MEK continues assassination attacks against IRIG officials, receiving major financial support from Saddam Hussein, to include:

- 1992 (April): MEK conducts near-simultaneous attacks on Iranian embassies and installations in 13 countries.
- 1999 (April): MEK assassinates key Iranian military officers, to include deputy chief of the Iranian Armed Forces General Staff, Brigadier General Ali Sayyaad Shirazi.
- 2000 (February): MEK launches series of attacks against Iran, to include a mortar attack against a major Iranian leadership complex in Tehran.
- 2000-01: MEK conducts regular mortar attacks and hit-and-run raids against Iranian military and law enforcement personnel, as well as government buildings near the Iran-Iraq border.

1991: MEK assists Iraqi Republican Guards in crackdown on anti-Saddam Iraqi Shia and Kurds.

2001: FBI arrested seven Iranians in the United States who funneled \$400,000 to an MEK-affiliated organization in the UAE which used the funds to purchase weapons.

2003: At start of Operation Iraqi Freedom MEK leadership negotiated a cease-fire with Coalition Forces and voluntarily surrenders their heavy-arms to Coalition control.

2003: French authorities arrest 160 MEK members at operational bases they believed the MEK was using to coordinate financing and planning for terrorist attacks.

Post-2003: high-level MEK leave MEK's "Camp Ashraf" in Iraq, relocating in various European capitals.

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