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FBI's Operation Suture

Margin: "Even if you have to pay them off, do it. It's not as if we haven't done it before."

- Top Mujahedin official in June 1988, instructing MEK operatives to launch a campaign to buy influence in the U.S. Congress

The FBI is reopening a long-dormant investigation of the People's Mujahedin Organization of Iran, following the official designation of the group on the State Department's list of international terrorist organizations, The Iran Brief has learned. An FBI spokesman said the case was "too sensitive" for him to comment on specifics.

From 1982-1990, the FBI had an undercover investigation, code-named "Operation Suture," targeting Mujahedin activities in the United States, The Iran Brief has learned from sources involved in that investigation. Using Iranian-Americans the FBI infiltrated into the organization, they tracked the movements of top Mujahedin officials, learned about their fund-raising and recruitment activities, and mapped out the organization's extensive network of front companies in the United States, which an FBI source said numbered "in the hundreds."

The FBI even sent one undercover agent to a Mujahedin military training camp in Iraq, where he heard daily celebrations over the camp public address system of the hit teams who assassinated U.S. military officers serving in Iran in the 1970s. The MEK claims it has changed since its days as a Soviet-backed anti-U.S. organization, and now supports democracy in Iran.

While Operation Suture was underway in the mid-1980s, the Drug Enforcement Administration was pursuing two separate investigations against Mujahedin operatives involved in smuggling drugs into the United States through Europe, including heroin smuggling through Madrid, Spain, a source who was involved in the DEA investigation said. Neither DEA investigation led to prosecution.

Operation Suture was shut down toward the end of 1990 following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, when the Bureau needed to refocus its efforts to thwart a dramatic upsurge in Iraqi terrorist activities in the United States. Until then, it had produced two arrests, with more in the pipeline.

Busted in LA: In 1989, the head of Mujahedin operations in the North America, Aladdin Touran, was arrested by the FBI in Los Angeles for entering the United States

using a false Swedish travel document. He was held for two weeks in Los Angeles, and eventually signed a plea bargain agreeing to leave the United States and never return. Using the alias Hamid Reza Noori-Elika, Touran applied for business visas at U.S. embassies in Switzerland, Sweden, and Germany on four separate occasions between March 17, 1988 and July 27, 1989, court records show. On one occasion, while entering at Dulles International Airport on Aug. 31, 1988, Touran told an INS official under oath that he was "a private businessman coming to the United States to make purchases for his company, Orient Star, and that his true and correct name was Hamid Reza Noori-Elika," court records state. Once in the United States, Touran would appear publicly as the MEK's North American representative, using his real name.

A second MEK operative, Mohammad Nasser Khaki, was arrested in the Washington, DC area in February 1989 on similar charges and condemned to two years in jail. Khaki was arrested at Dulles airport attempting to leave the United States.

Fake IRI documents: Before it was shut down, the FBI was considering indicting Mujahedin members under the RICO act for racketeering, credit card fraud, phone fraud, and illegal fund-raising. They had also uncovered a Virginia print shop used by the MEK to fabricate official Islamic Republic seals and stamps, used for fabricating documents they claimed to have obtained from sources in Iran. Many journalists, especially in Europe, have published such documents received from the Mujahedin without verifying their authenticity. In a letter to Rep. Lee Hamilton in September 20, 1993, the State Department alluded to this by noting that "the PMOI/NCR reporting often contains questionable statements and assertions which do not stand up to later examination. Our intelligence community judges that their reporting is not reliable without validation from other sources."

The FBI never succeeded in convincing Touran, Khaki, or other MEK suspects to become government witnesses against the group, making further prosecution problematic.

But Operation Suture was also hampered by strong Congressional support for the Mujahedin led by Congressmen Mervyn Dymally (D,Ca), Dan Burton (R,Ind), Robert Torricelli (D,NJ), and Gary Ackerman (D,NY), and by then Senator Al Gore (D,Tenn). Some of the Mujahedin's supporters complained to the Bureau and asked that they call off Operation Suture, sources said.

An Iran Brief investigation, first aired in our September issue, found evidence of a Mujahedin effort to buy Congressional favor through coordinated campaign contributions by Mujahedin members and supporters in the United States.

New Jersey Democrat Robert Torricelli was the most direct beneficiary of these contributions, having received more than \$135,000 between April 1993 and November 1996, with an additional \$23,000 going, apparently at his behest, to the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee at the time Torricelli was campaigning for the New Jersey Senate seat vacated by Bill Bradley.

Welcome to the White House: A former FBI undercover operative who penetrated the group now claims that the campaign contributions were directly ordered by the group's leadership in Baghdad, and says he was present at a meeting in Ottawa in mid-1988 where a deputy to group leader Massoud Rajavi, who used the name Mohsen Rezai, told MEK operatives in the U.S. and Canada that they were to launch a massive campaign to buy influence in the U.S. Congress. "Even if you have to pay them off, do it," he quoted Rezai as saying. "It's not as if we haven't done it before."

Despite its contributions to Congressional campaigns, however, the group never succeeded in influencing the policies of the Reagan and Bush administrations, which consistently refused them any support, choosing instead to fund democratic and pro-Monarchist opposition groups working outside Iran.

Following the November 1992 elections, the Mujahedin were suddenly awarded preferential treatment. MEK leader Massoud Rajavi wrote to Clinton asking for American support, and received a polite personal letter in reply which the group published in their propaganda reports as a sign of a new, pro-Mujahedin American policy. Shortly thereafter, the chairman of the Mujahedin's foreign affairs committee, Mohammad Mohaddessin, attended a fund-raiser in Washington, DC with President-elect Clinton and Al Gore, along with other Mujahedin representatives in the United States. Mohaddessin also attended the January 1993 Clinton-Gore inaugural, and was seen by several eye-witnesses in the VIP booth at the Capitol building.

The former undercover agent says he was told in 1993 by a top Mujahedin officer in Virginia that the group was elated with the new administration, because they had cultivated Vice President Al Gore while he was a Senator. He said the Mujahedin officer told him that the group gave Gore's presidential campaign some \$250,000 in cash in 1988, when Gore was in dire need of money, and had remained in close contact with Gore's staff.

A review of Federal Election Commission records, which revealed Mujahedin contributions to the Torricelli campaigns, showed no similar pattern of contributions by known Mujahedin supporters to Gore while he was a United States Senator. Gore's White House office could not be reached to comment. But Republican staffers in the Senate who worked closely with Gore's staff in the late 1980s said it would have been "highly unusual" for Gore to accept cash donations, especially in such large amounts. Cash donations would not show up on FEC records.

A State Department official told The Iran Brief that listing the Mujahedin as a terrorist organization has "opened the doors for the FBI and Treasury to investigate MEK fundraising activities in the United States." Many Iranian-Americans have complained of being harassed by the group in its quest for funds, and have identified a variety of "charities" and front companies it uses for these purposes. One such charity, Iran Aid, was closed down by the FBI in 1987 in California.