

Preventing another Waco – my efforts to dismantle the dangerous destructive Rajavi cult in Camp Ashraf, Iraq

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Background

My husband and I met fifteen years ago as we were both leaving the Iranian opposition group that we had been involved in for half our lives up to that point. Although our experiences of membership had been completely different, the process of our recovery from being with the group was remarkably similar and equally as dark and disturbing. So much so that we researched further into the phenomenon that we had just survived and concluded that the Mojahedin-e Khalq is a mind control cult. This gave rise to a profound but controlled anger directed at the leader of the cult which has not left me, and which acts as my motivation to rescue as many victims of this cult as I can. As ex-members my husband and I established an English language website called iran-interlink.org in 2000 as part of our campaign to expose the MEK for what it really is and to find ways to rescue its members. I wrote a book called 'Saddam's Private Army', and am now writing another about the current situation which I want to talk about. I am a campaigner and activist rather than an academic.

The Mojahedin-e Khalq - known also as the MEK or MKO or PMOI - is usually described in the media as the 'main Iranian opposition group' and presents itself as a democratic, feminist, pro human rights group. But every former member will tell you that it operates internally as a classic cult – it not only uses psychological manipulation to control its members, but as reported by Human Rights Watch in 2005 inflicts extreme punishments on dissenting members – Massoud Rajavi sent around 200 of these to Abu Ghraib prison under Saddam Hussein's regime. So we are basically dealing with a dangerous, destructive cult.

But there are several additional complications for those dealing with and confronting this group.

One is that it was founded on the principle of armed resistance to the Shah of Iran in the 1960s and has continued as a violent group since then. So, the MEK's main currency is martyrdom and murder. It is classed as a terrorist group and remains on the US terrorism list. The MEK has killed thousands upon thousands of Iranians and Iraqis and has martyred many of its own members for the leaders' personal goals. It deliberately makes you feel as though you can't go near it for fear of someone else dying.

The other complication is that because its stated aim is to overthrow the Iranian regime, it has many, many powerful and wealthy backers in the west among the 'regime change pundits' generally found under the umbrella terms 'neoconservatives and Zionists'. For thirty years it has been sustained both politically and financially by powerful western interests.

However although its stated aim is to overthrow the Iranian regime, its actual ideological beliefs are based on the unquestioning worship of its leaders Massoud Rajavi and his wife Maryam.

Our efforts to expose and eventually close down this cult so that its members are freed from enforced membership of a terrorist group, are hampered by these interests who not only have their own political agendas but also have control over much of the media.

A further complication when dealing with this cult is that it has two main bases - the one in France is where the public relations focus is. But the leader - Massoud Rajavi - and the majority of the members live in an isolated camp in the Iraqi desert, a military base of fifty square kilometres called Camp Ashraf. It is this isolation which allowed the leader to deprive the members of every single one of their basic human rights.

We had made progress in exposing the MEK as a cult and many former members took part in activities to challenge the political support for the group and remind everyone that it is a human rights issue – that the members are not there of their own free will and deserve to be acknowledged as victims rather than terrorists.

Then in 2003 there was what we thought a breakthrough. During Operation Iraq Freedom, the MEK was targeted as an enemy force and its bases were initially bombed to force it to surrender. Unfortunately Massoud Rajavi launched a charm offensive and using typical cult deception, persuaded the US forces on the ground, who had no training or experience to deal with such a group, to agree a ceasefire and disarmament instead of forcing the group to surrender. So the group was mistakenly allowed to continue its activities at its headquarters at Camp Ashraf under US military protection for six years even though it is on the US terrorism list and this protection led to the deaths of fourteen US service personnel. An investigation by the American RAND Corporation (the National Defense Research Institute) published in 2009 exposed the many errors and failures of the US military in dealing with this group.

What was interesting for us here in Europe was that almost as soon as the Mojahedin were disarmed and contained in Camp Ashraf in 2003, the families of members started turning up at the camp gate looking for their loved ones. It is remarkable and a true testimony to the strength of family ties that these people – often elderly parents who had sometimes not seen their children for twenty or more years, braved the journey through Iraq at a time of war when thousands of bombs were indiscriminately killing soldiers and civilians.

What was not surprising was that the Mojahedin leaders tried everything they could do to prevent these family reunions. They even persuaded the American soldiers guarding the camp that these families were coming to destroy the camp and to kill the residents and had to be sent away at all costs.

Still the families kept coming – sometimes every year they made the difficult journey. All they were demanding was to meet their loved ones outside the camp, away from the supervision of the MEK leaders. It seems that every human rights body in the world turned a blind eye to this injustice and did nothing to intervene. Most did not even acknowledge that this situation existed.

The MEK continued to deceptively describe its situation in a political context – they were victims of Iranian efforts to get the Iraqi government to destroy the camp. It is true that Iran, Iraq, America, Europe, all have their own political agendas in relation to this group. They all want to use it for their own benefits. Not one single one of them will admit that these are peoples' lives they are dealing

with. Not one single one will admit that these people are trapped in the camp and are not there of their own free will and that we need to reach inside the camp and help rescue them.

Then in January 2009 it seemed another breakthrough was on the horizon. In January 2009 the American military handed over control of Camp Ashraf to the Government of Iraq as a result of the Status of Forces Agreement.

It was hoped the MEK could now be made to open its doors to the families and we could help rescue some of the victims trapped there.

It was not that simple. The MEK closed in on itself and met every effort of the Iraqis to impose Iraqi law on the camp with violent resistance. Unsurprisingly, the Iraqi military finds itself no more trained and experienced than the American military in dealing with a violent cult. In July 2009 eleven MEK were reported killed during violent clashes with Iraqi soldiers. In April this year – only four weeks ago – a further thirty four members were killed. Even though there is evidence that the MEK killed some of its own people it was a disaster for the members and a disaster for the Iraqi government – which is now accused of massacring the residents of Camp Ashraf.

Now the government of Iraq has given the MEK until the end of this year to leave the country. This presents a huge challenge to people like myself who want to find a humanitarian solution to this issue.

Fortunately, however, there are many people in Iraq who actually do understand that this is a cult and who understand the challenges involved in confrontation and disbandment.

In my view, the main issue which needs to take priority in dealing with any cult is that, above all else, it is a human rights issue rather than a political or social, religious or security issue. For this reason it is not desirable to have untrained and unprepared agencies taking lead roles without the guidance of experts – particularly experts in the cult in question.

People like myself not only have the experience of being former members, but have interviewed and campaigned for and supported tens of hundreds of other former members and families of current members. It is on the basis of this expertise that we claim to speak on behalf of the victims of this cult; that is the rank and file members who are currently voiceless and powerless, locked behind the barbed wire fence erected by the cult leaders to prevent their escape and to prevent the world looking in.

We must be part of the process to dismantle the camp. We – the representatives of the victims - are the solution, not the problem. And any solution to this problem will not be possible as long as the camp remains under the control of the cult leader and its western backers.

But what Massoud Rajavi considers the major strength of his cult is the clue to its weakness. Like all cult leaders he has manipulated the relationships of his members. Unlike other cults which dictate who people marry and how many children they have, Rajavi has forced all the members to remain celibate and not to have children. It is forbidden to have a relationship with anyone else but himself. All members must devote themselves totally to him alone. But that means that the members are isolated from absolutely everyone, including one another. And that means that families are the key

to unlocking the prison in which they exist. We know that when cult members are reunited with their families in a free atmosphere it is a key factor in their understanding and escape from the cult.

Since Rajavi's control of the members is based on their lack of normal family relationships it is clear that the way to break the atmosphere inside the camp is to exactly bring the families of members to the gate to reach in to their loved ones.

Then in February 2010 after the Iraqi government had been in control of the camp for a year, a group of families decided spontaneously not to go home. They decided to stay at the camp for as long as it takes to rescue their children.

At first the Iraqis were really displeased. As though they didn't have enough problems to deal with, now they had a bunch of old men and women – not even Iraqis – who refused to go away. In the end they relented and helped with some containers for the families to set up some basic sleeping and cooking facilities. And there they stayed.

They have been there for over a year now. Different families come and go, but some have been there for a year. They have sat in the Iraqi desert in summer and winter with one simple demand – let us have access to our children.

These families have established their own camp outside the gate of the cult's headquarters and have appealed in vain for international help. The MEK refuse to allow the cult members to meet them. The cult views the families as its most dangerous existential threat. The MEK leaders are threatening mass suicide if anyone should try to enter the camp without their permission. The difficulty is how to open the gates of the camp to free the residents without the MEK provoking violence and bloodshed. How do we prevent another Waco?

Plan

It is obvious to anyone who has any knowledge about cults and how they operate that it is not possible to negotiate the dissolution of a cult with its leading members. Any negotiations directly with the MEK only reflect interests of the leader Massoud Rajavi.

The members are not sitting in the camp wondering which third country they will be sent to, or what their future holds. Their only thought at this time is 'Make it stop!' That is, take the unrelenting pressure off and let them breathe again. As I said before, this must be treated as a human rights issue and the only legitimate human rights stance to take is to demand the immediate and unconditional disbandment of the organisational structure of the cult. In simple terms, the leaders of the cult must be separated from the rank and file and each member must be brought back to the real world so that they can determine their own future free from the influence of the cult. This is certainly not the job of the Iraqi military.

Two weeks ago I travelled to Iraq to speak to officials there in order to establish the steps which need to be taken to avoid a situation like Jonestown or Waco in which the cult members commit mass suicide or provoke the Iraqi soldiers to kill them. It is not going to be an easy task and it is possible that more lives are lost in the effort to free the majority. This unfortunately is the nature of this cult and this is the difficulty in trying to dismantle any cult.

What is clear again is that the families of members will be crucial to this plan. The leadership has no weapon no insult not anything which will deter them and force them to go away.