

The Mojahedin-e-Khalq (MEK) or People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI)

February 25, 2025

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

R48433



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The Mojahedin-e-Khalq or MEK (also known as the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran, or PMOI) is an exiled Iranian opposition group. This report provides background on the group, including its origins, its 1997 designation by the U.S. Department of State as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO), its 2012 delisting as an FTO, and other issues.

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Background

The MEK was founded in Iran in the early 1960s to oppose the government of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the last Shah of Iran. The group's foundational ideology has been described by one historian as "a combination of Islam and Marxism."¹ Alongside and in periodic collaboration with other opposition groups of various ideological backgrounds, the MEK in the 1960s and 1970s sought the overthrow of the then-U.S.-backed Shah through guerilla attacks against the Iranian government and other targets. Some of these attacks killed U.S. military personnel stationed in Iran according to a 1994 congressionally mandated State Department report.² The MEK participated in the 1979 Iranian Revolution and, after the fall of the Shah, "supported the takeover of the U.S. embassy, and opposed the release of American hostages" according to the 1994 State Department report.³ The MEK has denied involvement in the 1979 embassy seizure and other attacks on Americans in Iran.⁴

In the early 1980s, the MEK fell out with the newly established Islamic Republic led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and launched attacks against it (including a 1981 bombing that killed Iran's chief justice and dozens of other officials); in response, the government detained and "indiscriminately" executed thousands of MEK supporters.⁵ MEK leader Massoud Rajavi and other MEK figures fled to France in 1981 as the crackdown intensified and founded the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) purporting to act as a government-in-exile. In 1985, Rajavi married Maryam Qajar-Azodanlu, who changed her name to Maryam Rajavi and became secretary-general of the MEK and the "President-Elect" of the NCRI. The Rajavis and other MEK members left France in 1986 for Iraq, where the MEK aided the government of Saddam Hussein in its war against Iran.⁶ Massoud Rajavi has reportedly not been seen in public since 2003 and his whereabouts are unknown; some analysts speculate that he is dead.⁷ According to the State Department report mentioned above, NCRI "disintegrated in the 1980s" as various partners "left the organization because of their objections to Rajavi's dictatorial methods and his unilateral decision to ally with Iraq."⁸

After the 1988 conclusion of the Iran-Iraq War, the MEK remained in Iraq, which they continued to use as a base for attacks both in Iran and abroad. Such attacks included coordinated assaults against Iranian diplomatic installations in 11 countries (including Iran's Mission to the United Nations in New York) in April 1992, and the April 1999 assassination of the deputy chief of the Iranian Armed Forces General Staff.

¹ Ervand Abrahamian, *The Iranian Mojahedin* (Yale University Press, 1992), p. 92.

² U.S. Department of State, *Report on the People's Mojahedin of Iran*, October 28, 1994. The report states that the MEK "are known to have assassinated" six Americans, including three U.S. military personnel, between 1973 and 1976. The report was mandated by Section 523 of the FY1994-1995 Foreign Relations Authorization Act (P.L. 103-236) and is at http://iran.org/news/1994_10-State-Dept-MEK-report.htm.

³ U.S. Department of State, *Report on the People's Mojahedin of Iran*.

⁴ See National Council of Resistance of Iran, U.S. Representative Office, FARA filing at <https://efile.fara.gov/docs/6171-Informational-Materials-20170110-1.pdf>.

⁵ U.S. Department of State, *Report on the People's Mojahedin of Iran*.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Jonathan Masters, "Mujahadeen-e-Khalq (MEK)," Council on Foreign Relations, July 28, 2014. In a 2020 interview, an MEK spokesperson reportedly said, "We can't talk about it" when asked about Massoud Rajavi's whereabouts. Patrick Kingsley, "Highly secretive Iranian rebels are holed up in Albania. They gave us a tour," *New York Times*, February 16, 2020.

⁸ U.S. Department of State, *Report on the People's Mojahedin of Iran*.

Listing as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO)

In October 1997, the State Department made the first designations pursuant to Section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act (as added by Section 302 of the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996, AEDPA, P.L. 104-132), which authorizes the Secretary of State to designate as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) any group that engages in terrorist activity that threatens U.S. national security.⁹ The State Department announced the designation of 30 groups as FTOs, including the MEK.¹⁰ An October 1997 media report on the designations, citing an unnamed senior Clinton Administration official, stated that “inclusion of the [MEK] was intended as a goodwill gesture to Tehran and its newly elected moderate president, Mohammad Khatami,”¹¹ a quote that has since featured prominently in MEK efforts to portray the designation as baseless and politically motivated.¹² A 1999 State Department report announcing the redesignation of most of the original designees (including the MEK) featured several frequently asked questions, including, “Why was the MEK designated?” The report answered:

We have sufficient grounds for concluding that they are a terrorist organization and continue to engage in terrorist violence. The designation is based on activities much more recent than the takeover of our embassy.

Additionally, directing terrorism against a government or entity with whom we have differences does not exclude an organization from designation as an FTO.

MEK is designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization because of the acts they commit, not who they act against and not who they are.¹³

In 1999, the State Department also added “National Council of Resistance” and NCR as aliases of the MEK.¹⁴

In the 2011 *Country Reports on Terrorism* (the last in which the MEK was included as an FTO), the State Department reported the group had 5,000-10,000 members worldwide, with large contingents in Paris and other European capitals, and that the NCRI (“the MEK’s political arm”) had “a global support network with active lobbying and propaganda efforts in major Western capitals. NCRI also has a well-developed media communications strategy.”¹⁵ That report also stated, “Before Operation Iraqi Freedom began in 2003, the MEK received all of its military assistance and most of its financial support from Saddam Hussein. The fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime has led the MEK increasingly to rely on front organizations to solicit contributions from expatriate Iranian communities.”¹⁶

⁹ 8 U.S.C. §1189. For more, see CRS In Focus IF10613, *The Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) List*, by Liana W. Rosen. For follow-up, congressional offices may contact Clayton Thomas.

¹⁰ Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, Public Notice 2612, 62 *Federal Register* 52650, October 8, 1997.

¹¹ Norman Kempster, “U.S. designates 30 groups as terrorists,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 9, 1997.

¹² See, for example, “The resilient MEK: Rebuilding the Iranian Resistance in exile,” PMOI/MEK, September 8, 2021.

¹³ U.S. Department of State, *1999 Report Index*, October 8, 1999, at <https://2001-2009.state.gov/s/ct/rls/rpt/fto/2682.htm>.

¹⁴ Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, Public Notice 3130, 64 *Federal Register* 55112, October 8, 1999.

¹⁵ U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2011*, July 2012, at <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2011/195553.htm>. For more information on the MEK’s reliance on Iranian diaspora communities as a financial support system, see Mark Edmond Clark, “An Analysis of the Role of the Iranian Diaspora in the Financial Support System of the Mujahedin-e Khalq,” in *Terrornomics*, ed. Sean S. Costigan and David Gold (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 65-76.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Delisting as an FTO

In the late 2000s, the MEK mounted a legal and advocacy campaign in the United Kingdom and Europe to seek delisting as a terrorist group; the group was delisted as a terrorist organization by the United Kingdom in 2008 and the European Union in 2009.¹⁷ Seeking to capitalize on that momentum, the MEK petitioned the U.S. State Department to revoke its FTO designation in 2008, pursuant to AEDPA. In January 2009, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice denied the petition but noted in a document provided to the MEK that “the continued designation of the MEK should be reexamined by the Secretary of State in the next two years even if the MEK does not file a petition for revocation,” given the MEK’s claims to have renounced terrorism.¹⁸

In July 2010, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia directed the Secretary to review the designation and to “provide the PMOI the opportunity to review and rebut the unclassified portions of the record on which she relied” in keeping the group on the FTO list.¹⁹ That court ruled again in June 2012 that the Secretary’s “delay in acting on PMOI’s petition for revocation is egregious” and ordered the Secretary to deny or grant the petition within four months.²⁰

The MEK complemented its legal efforts with an advocacy campaign in Congress focused on the status of the group’s members in Iraq.²¹ MEK members in Iraq relinquished weapons to U.S. forces in Iraq in 2003 and remained concentrated largely at a location known as Camp Ashraf. In 2004, then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld designated MEK members as “protected persons” under the Fourth Geneva Convention and U.S.-led coalition forces maintained security at the camp.²² U.S. forces handed security responsibility for the camp to the elected Iraqi government in 2008. As U.S. forces withdrew additional forces from Iraq in 2009, Iraqi government forces asserted greater security control over Camp Ashraf, and conducted operations inside the camp resulting in the deaths and injuries of some MEK camp residents. Some House Members introduced or cosponsored resolutions calling for protections and humanitarian assistance to Camp Ashraf residents (e.g. H.Res. 704, 111th Congress; and, H.Res. 231 and H.Res. 332, 112th Congress). Other Members introduced or cosponsored a resolution calling for the MEK’s delisting as an FTO (H.Res. 60, 112th Congress).

On September 28, 2012, the State Department announced the MEK’s delisting as an FTO. In the announcement, the Department said

With today’s actions, the Department does not overlook or forget the MEK’s past acts of terrorism, including its involvement in the killing of U.S. citizens in Iran in the 1970s and an attack on U.S. soil in 1992. The Department also has serious concerns about the MEK as an organization, particularly with regard to allegations of abuse committed against its own members. The Secretary’s decision today took into account the MEK’s public renunciation of violence, the absence of confirmed acts of terrorism by the MEK for more

¹⁷ For an account of the MEK’s legal campaign in the United Kingdom and European Union, including references to primary sources, see Ben Smith, “The People’s Mujahiddeen of Iran (PMOI),” UK House of Commons Library, Briefing Paper Number CBP 5020, March 7, 2016, pp. 9-12.

¹⁸ *People’s Mojahedin Organization v. United States Department of State*, 613 F.3d 220 (D.C. Cir. 2010).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *In re People’s Mojahedin Organization of Iran*, 680 F.3d 832 (D.C. Cir. 2012).

²¹ Ali Gharib and Eli Clifton, “Long march of the yellow jackets: how a one-time terrorist group prevailed on Capitol Hill,” *Intercept*, February 26, 2015; Ali Harb, “How Iranian MEK went from US terror list to halls of Congress,” *Middle East Eye*, July 17, 2019.

²² Jeremiah Goulka et al., *The Mujahedin-e Khalq in Iraq: A Policy Conundrum*, RAND National Defense Research Institute, July 28, 2009.

than a decade, and their cooperation in the peaceful closure of Camp Ashraf, their historic paramilitary base.²³

In 2013, the MEK left Iraq for Albania, where the group remains at a site called Camp Ashraf-3 and reportedly has periodically faced threats from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).²⁴ The U.S. government provided some diplomatic and financial support for the MEK's move to Albania and the Albanian government's role in hosting the group.²⁵ In June 2023, Albanian police reportedly raided the MEK camp as part of an investigation into "unsanctioned political activities;" the MEK claimed one of its members was killed and dozens injured in the raid.²⁶

Some Members of Congress have remained engaged in MEK-related issues. In the 118th Congress, H.Res. 100, which would have expressed "support for the Iranian people's desire for a democratic, secular, and nonnuclear Republic of Iran," condemned "violations of human rights and state-sponsored terrorism by the Iranian Government," and referenced "opposition leader Mrs. Maryam Rajavi," had 243 cosponsors. H.Res. 1148, which would have expressed the House of Representatives' support for Rajavi's "Ten-Point Plan for the Future of Iran," had 227 cosponsors.²⁷ In December 2023, NCRI asserted that Members of Congress had formed a "Congressional ASHRAF Protection and Rights Advocacy Caucus" and published what NCRI described as the caucus's 'mission statement,' 'statement of purpose,' and 'by-laws.'²⁸ In a January 2025 "Strategic Framework," the NCRI-aligned Organization of Iranian American Communities (OIAC, see below) called for the United States government to "formally recognize" NCRI as a "parliament in exile."²⁹

Role in Iran

As an exiled opposition group, the MEK plays no role in the authoritarian political system of the Islamic Republic. Given the Iranian government's repressive approach to civil liberties and the media, there is not reliable information on the MEK's activities or support within Iran. The MEK claims to be a focal point for broad-based opposition to the Iranian government.³⁰ To bolster the

²³ U.S. Department of State, Delisting of the Mujahdin-e Khalq, September 28, 2012, at <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/09/198443.htm>.

²⁴ Kingsley, "Highly secretive Iranian rebels"; Hollie McKay, "Inside the Albanian compound of an exiled Iranian opposition group," *Coffee or Die Magazine*, September 20, 2022; and, Harun Karcic, "How Albania Ended Up in Iran's Cyber Crosshairs," *Foreign Policy*, November 8, 2022.

²⁵ Pamela Dockins, "US praises Albania for MEK resettlement," *VOA*, February 14, 2016; U.S. Department of State, Remarks Before the Daily Press Briefing, September 12, 2016.

²⁶ Maziar Motamedi, "Why was this Iran dissident group raided in Europe?" *Al Jazeera*, June 21, 2023.

²⁷ Rajavi's Ten-Point Plan, which includes calls for "a republic founded on universal suffrage and pluralism," "separation of religion and state," and "complete gender equality," is available at <https://www.ncr-iran.org/en/maryam-rajavis-ten-point-plan-for-future-iran/>.

²⁸ "Congressional caucus spearheads global initiative to ensure safety and rights of Iranian dissidents in Ashraf-3," National Council of Resistance of Iran, December 21, 2023. See also Matthew Petti, "Congress forms caucus to aid Iranian ex-terror group," *Responsible Statecraft*, January 16, 2024. As of December 2024, the caucus did not appear on the Committee on House Administration's list of Congressional Member Organizations (CMOs) in the 118th Congress. As of February 2025, the caucus does not appear on the CMO list for the 119th Congress. See CMO lists at <https://cha.house.gov/congressional-member-and-staff-organizations>.

²⁹ "Strategic framework for U.S. policy on Iran: Supporting regime change, engaging viable alternative, and facilitating transition," Organization of Iranian-American Communities, January 15, 2025. OIAC's website says the group "supports the 10-point plans by Mrs. Maryam Rajavi for a democratic Iran." See <https://oiac.org/about/>.

³⁰ See, for example, Matin Karim, "The Resistance Units: The frontline of the fight for freedom in Iran," PMOI, February 17, 2025.

group's claims that it has support within Iran, the MEK has argued that it has received information from domestic sources on the government's nuclear program and crackdowns on public protests.³¹ Limited public opinion polling suggests the group may not have broad popular support in Iran or within the Iranian-American diaspora.³² Statements from Iranian government officials as recently as January 2025, as well as alleged Iranian operations against both the MEK and the Albanian government, suggest that Tehran continues to view the MEK as a threat.³³ The January 2025 OIAC "Strategic Framework" asserts that MEK "Iranian Resistance Units" operate covertly in Iran, organizing protests and strikes.³⁴

In a 2022 statement to *Foreign Policy*, a State Department spokesperson was quoted as saying that "the United States does not see the MEK as a viable democratic opposition movement that is representative of the Iranian people."³⁵ The spokesperson also reportedly relayed that the State Department "continues to have serious concerns about the MEK as an organization, including allegations of abuse committed against its own members."³⁶ The group has long faced accusations that it holds members against their will and commits torture—allegations the group denies.³⁷

Relationships with Other Iran-Related Groups in the United States

A number of U.S.-based advocacy groups seek to represent the views and interests of Iranian Americans. While the groups voice support for a free and democratic Iran, they often disagree strongly on U.S. policy approaches. Of these groups, the Organization of Iranian-American Communities (OIAC) appears to be closest to the MEK. OIAC materials and speakers regularly promote Maryam Rajavi, who has spoken (via video) at OIAC events, including a December 2024 OIAC briefing for congressional staff reportedly attended by several Senators and former U.S. military officials.³⁸ OIAC has denounced Reza Pahlavi, the son of the former Shah and so-called "crown prince" whom other advocacy groups (such as the National Union for Democracy in Iran, NUFDI) have promoted.³⁹

³¹ "About the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI/MEK)," PMOI website, at <https://english.mojahedin.org/about-the-peoples-mojahedin-organization-of-iran-pmoi-mek/>.

³² Nancy Gallagher, Ebrahim Mohseni, and Clay Ramsey, "Iranian public opinion at the start of the Raisi Administration: a public opinion study," University of Maryland Center for International and Security Studies, September 2021; Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans, *National Public Opinion Survey of the Iranian American Community 2023*, February 2023.

³³ Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, "Iranian state actors conduct cyber operations against the government of Albania," September 23, 2022; Gerta Zaimi, "Iran's Balkan front: the roots and consequences of Iranian cyberattacks against Albania," Middle East Institute, December 22, 2022; "Killing of senior Iranian judges puts spotlight on exiled opposition group," *Amwaj.media*, January 20, 2025.

³⁴ "Strategic framework for U.S. policy on Iran: Supporting regime change, engaging viable alternative, and facilitating transition," Organization of Iranian-American Communities, January 15, 2025.

³⁵ Harun Karcic, "How Albania ended up in Iran's cyber crosshairs," *Foreign Policy*, November 8, 2022.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *No Exit: Human Rights Abuses Inside the MKO Camps*, Human Rights Watch, May 18, 2005; Kingsley, "Highly secretive Iranian rebels"; Murtaza Hussain and Matthew Cole, "Defectors tell of torture and forced sterilization in militant Iranian cult," *Intercept*, March 22, 2020.

³⁸ "A bipartisan conference in the U.S. Senate examined the path to a free democratic Iran," Organization of Iranian American Communities, December 14, 2024.

³⁹ OIAC, "Reza Pahlavi, son of overthrown shah, is no advocate for a democratic Iran," May 10, 2023.

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