

An Analysis of the Use of Political Marketing
by an Insurgent Group:
A Case Study of the
Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization

By

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Abstract

In his 2005 work entitled The Marketing of Rebellion, author Clifford Bob explores the phenomenon of political marketing and its use by insurgent groups struggling to achieve their aims, most often against a central government opposed to their platform. In his book, Bob makes two central arguments: that courting support from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is central to the success of insurgent groups; and that support is given to insurgent groups from NGOs not because of need, but rather because of political marketing techniques that insurgent groups use to attract that support. Thus, a successful and savvy insurgent group or opposition movement must employ sophisticated political marketing techniques in order to acquire the support they seek, and thus succeed in their struggle.

Using Bob's framework as a model, this paper examines the *Mojahedin-e Khalq* (MeK) and their use of political marketing techniques, largely in the period of 2001-2006. In existence since 1965, the MeK is Iran's largest opposition group, having been formed to oppose the rule of Shah Reza Pahlavi, and currently opposed to the clerical regime in Tehran. The bulk of the group has been based in Iraq since 1986, and has been confined to their main base, Camp Ashraf, since the U.S.-led invasion that toppled the Ba'ath regime in Iraq in 2003. The MeK aggressively uses political marketing to promote their cause and attract support, and thus the paper examines their strategies, discusses characteristics of the MeK, and ultimately offers a series of explanations as to the outcome of their efforts as they stand in 2006.

Résumé

Dans son ouvrage intitulé *The Marketing of Rebellion*, publié en 2005, Clifford Bob se penche sur le phénomène du marketing politique et sur son utilisation par des groupes d'insurgés qui luttent pour atteindre leurs objectifs, le plus souvent contre un gouvernement central qui s'oppose à leur idéologie. Dans son livre, Bob aborde deux thèmes centraux. D'une part, il affirme que le soutien accordé par les organisations non gouvernementales (ONG) aux groupes d'insurgés est essentiel à leur victoire; d'autre part, il avance que si les ONG soutiennent les groupes d'insurgés, ce n'est pas parce que ces derniers en ont besoin, mais plutôt en réponse aux techniques de marketing politique auxquelles ces groupes ont recours pour obtenir ce soutien. Par conséquent, un groupe d'insurgés ou un mouvement d'opposition fort et bien avisé doit mettre en œuvre des techniques de marketing politique élaborées pour avoir accès au soutien voulu et ainsi triompher dans son projet.

En se basant sur l'argumentation de Bob, ce projet analyse le *Mojahedin-e Khalq* (MeK), le groupe d'opposition le plus important d'Iran, et son utilisation du marketing politique, principalement entre 2001 et 2006. Le MeK a été fondé en 1965 en réaction au règne du Shah Reza Pahlavi et s'oppose actuellement au régime théocratique en place à Téhéran. Le noyau du groupe est établi en Irak depuis 1986 et demeure confiné à sa base principale, Camp Ashraf, depuis le renversement du régime du Ba'ath en 2003. Le MeK a abondamment recours au marketing politique pour promouvoir sa cause et obtenir du soutien; le mémoire analyse ses stratégies et ses caractéristiques pour tenter d'expliquer les résultats auxquels ce groupe est arrivé en 2006.

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Literature Review

Although not necessary for a Master's level thesis, given the nature of this study and the type of sources consulted, it is important to briefly discuss the literature used in this thesis. Undoubtedly, there are many Internet sources that have been examined in this study, and this could pose problems for those who are sceptical of the objectivity and general academic worthiness of sources found on the World Wide Web. Despite these apprehensions that some may feel, it is absolutely necessary for Internet sources to be included in this study for two important reasons.

First, the focus of the study involves the years of 2001-2006, and the amount of literature found on the Internet involving the *Mojahedin-e Khalq* (MeK) during that time far outweighs books or articles published on the group. Second, this study involves an analysis of the MeK's use of political marketing during those years, using Internet sources is critical since that medium plays a central role in the MeK's political marketing strategies, from promotion of the group, to communication with members, to disseminating information critical of the current Iranian regime.

Given the nature of this topic, objectivity is paramount when choosing sources. It can be said without exception that media produced by the MeK and/or any of its affiliated organizations are positive in their reporting on the group, whereas any media produced or affiliated with the Iranian government vilifies the MeK at every opportunity. However, this study aims to go beyond the accusations and counter-accusations to look at how the messages are

delivered, and with what effectiveness. Blatantly biased content, or grossly exaggerated facts were unquestionably omitted from this study. In terms of independent authors and articles on the subject of the MeK, all were screened for objectivity and facts were checked with other, non-Web sources wherever possible. In the end, this study aims to provide a balanced and objective assessment of the *Mojahedin-e Khalq* and their use of political marketing in their struggle against the Iranian government, and all attempts were made to have that balanced objectivity reflected in the sources used.

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In the twenty-first century, media has become an integral part of our global society for all actors, from governments, to average citizens, to non-governmental organizations, and all people and groups in between. With media forms evolving seemingly month by month, there are numerous ways that messages can be relayed to a world that is increasingly connected through the Internet, cell phones, television, music, and movies. Whereas a generation ago, twenty-four hour cable news was a novelty and accessible to a fraction of the population, today people can watch up-to-the-minute news broadcasts directly on their cell phone, and undoubtedly in the next decade, this technology will be eclipsed by another faster, clearer means of sending and receiving information.

This flourishing of technology has also meant that the content of those various forms of media has evolved as well. All groups, from miniscule trade unions, to shadowy insurgent groups, to the world's largest governments must be aware that their words and actions will be known in an instant and subsequently analysed and dissected by other groups affected by those words and actions. This reality has made political marketing an increasingly important factor in the considerations of global actors, and not just for national governments, but for the smaller actors as well. Some groups with aspirations to change their status quo and improve their situation must employ clever political marketing techniques in order to attract the attention of a world audience in the hopes that sympathy and support will advance their position. Other groups simply use media and political marketing for less noble and sometimes truly horrifying reasons, such as been seen with the various

insurgent groups in Iraq who broadcast their gruesome acts on the Internet to inspire fear by exacting revenge on their opponents. Whatever the reasons for their acts or the motivation behind them, all are acts of political marketing that affect how the world views these groups.

In a recent book published in 2005, author Clifford Bob examined the concept of political marketing as it relates to insurgent groups. In The Marketing of Rebellion: Insurgents, Media, and International Activism, Bob looked at the phenomenon of political marketing and its use by groups struggling against a central government. Bob makes the argument that with thousands of insurgent groups around the world clamouring for support, and with increasingly scarce resources to go around, support will be given not to the most disadvantaged group, but to the group that markets itself most effectively. In his study, Clifford Bob makes another key argument: that securing support from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is key to an insurgent group succeeding in its goal. Bob studied two insurgent groups – Nigeria's Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) and Mexico's Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) – and found that both were relatively successful in their campaigns to attract worldwide attention to their causes both because they employed savvy political marketing and because they received support from NGOs. Clifford Bob's study does much to advance the scholarship on insurgent groups and the struggles they must overcome in order to secure support for their cause. He studies various aspects of the relationship between NGOs and insurgent groups, and

develops a thorough framework through which one may apply his findings to other such groups engaged in similar struggles.

One such group is the *Mojahedin-e Khalq*, or the People's Mojahedin of Iran, a group who has openly opposed the ruling mullahs in Iran since they wrested control of the country and overthrew Shah Reza Pahlavi in 1979. Known as the MeK, this group is an umbrella organization that includes the National Liberation Army (NLA), the People's Mojahedin of Iran (PMOI), the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), and the Muslim Iranian Student's Society, among other lesser-known wings of the organization. The MeK's struggle against the government in Iran has lasted over forty years, as they were initially a student's group established in the 1960s to oppose the Shah Reza Pahlavi and participated with the Islamists led by Ayatollah Khomeini in the 1979 revolution. During the 1980s and 1990s, the MeK fought against the Iranian government from its bases in Iraq, as well as attacking Iranian government officials abroad. Until 2003 with the American-led invasion of Iraq, the group was supported by the regime of Saddam Hussein, who used the MeK and their military wing, the NLA, as a proxy army to fight against Iran during the Iran-Iraq War. Later, Saddam used the MeK as a sort of personal security force used to subdue restive groups inside Iraq, particularly the Shias and Kurds following their attempted uprisings following Iraq's defeat in the 1991 Gulf War.

Following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003 by U.S.-led coalition forces, instead of arresting or disbanding the MeK, the group was classified

as protected persons under the Geneva Convention, and were subsequently confined to their main base, Camp Ashraf, located approximately 43 miles north of Baghdad. This move by the United States caused much speculation that there were plans to use the MeK as a proxy force against the Iranian regime, seemingly a target of a determined and belligerent Republican administration following President Bush's now-famous 'Axis of Evil' speech of January 29, 2002. Despite the fact that the MeK has been listed as a terrorist group by both the United States and the European Union, there are many politicians on both sides of the Atlantic that would like to see the MeK used as a tool to apply pressure on the Iranian regime, which has been increasingly at odds with Western governments since the disclosure of its alleged nuclear program in 2003. The MeK has sought to utilize this tension between Western governments and Tehran to their advantage, portraying their group as a responsible and Western-friendly alternative to the mullahs who control Iran. However, the MeK's controversial past has meant that attaining support from Western governments and NGOs has been increasingly difficult, and thus the organization has embarked on an aggressive political marketing campaign in order to convince people that they are a legitimate and trustworthy ally in the West's confrontation with Iran. Ultimately, the MeK's goal is to return to Iran and form a government, a goal to which their political marketing activities and strategies are aimed.

With this in mind, the following paper will examine the MeK's use of political marketing using Clifford Bob's framework as outlined in The Marketing of Rebellion. The paper will examine the MeK itself and its political marketing

activities while maintaining the parameters as set out by Bob. The ultimate goal of this paper is to study the tactics employed by the MeK, their effectiveness, the motivation behind them, and ultimately whether they can be considered successful or not. In terms of 'success', which is undoubtedly a subjective term, Clifford Bob has devised a means by which an insurgent group's use of political marketing may be evaluated, using a 'breadth' and 'depth' approach, something which will be elaborated on further in the paper.

In terms of chronology, the paper will seek to limit the study to the period of 2001-2006. This time period has been selected for two reasons: first, because of the significance of the September 11th, 2001 attacks in the United States and how that event affected political marketing considerations for Muslim insurgent groups; and second, because of the significant events that have befallen the MeK during those five years. In 2001, the MeK found itself securely located on Iraqi soil, with the full support of Saddam Hussein and thus little need to seek support from outside of the region. Since then however, the MeK has become a group in limbo, cut off from the generous backing of Saddam Hussein, and with their fate being determined by policy planners in Washington and London. Concentrating on this period also greatly increases the number of sources available on the MeK, with much scholarship on the group appearing on Internet sites. The Internet in fact plays an important role in the political marketing strategies of the MeK, who have had a presence on the World Wide Web since 1996 and use it to organize, promote, and disseminate information to their supporters and sympathizers all over the world.

The ultimate aim of this study is to examine the *Mojahedin-e Khalq* as a group as well as the political marketing strategies that the group employs. The thesis will explore the relationship that the MeK has with NGOs and offer possible explanations as to the extent or limits of that relationship. Furthermore, the internal dynamics of the MeK will be examined in an attempt to explain why, after nearly forty years, the MeK has been unable to return to Iran and mount a credible political challenge to the mullahs who control the country, or, beyond this, increase their support base among expatriate Iranian communities around the world. Clifford Bob's study of MOSOP and EZLN offers a telling view into those organizations, the challenges they faced, and ultimately the steps they took through their political marketing in order to attract the world's attention and thus improve their respective situations. It remains to be seen whether Bob's framework can provide a similar clarity in studying the MeK and their political marketing strategies.

1.1 Clifford Bob's Theory on Political Marketing:

Today in the twenty first century, the world is full of various groups who struggle against oppression, marginalisation, and subjugation in its various forms. These groups, be they political opposition, insurgent groups, liberation movements, or any number of politically marginalized entities, struggle daily to have their voices heard and their messages understood. As most people know, yet many may not realize, certain groups have much greater success in publicizing their cause to the world than others, and consequently some groups are 'known' in the world, whereas there are many others that are not. As an example of this, many people around the world know of the 'Free Tibet' movement that calls for "an end to Chinese occupation of Tibet and for the Tibetans fundamental human rights to be respected"¹, yet few people have even heard of another group called the Uyghurs, who number over seven million and who, like the Tibetans, oppose Chinese domination of their lives.² Beyond China's borders, there are a myriad of groups, from Europe to the Americas and from Asia to Africa, who find themselves in a similar situation: struggling for recognition and support in a world whose attention and aid are both limited. The logical question that arises out of this situation is: why do certain groups succeed in attracting support for their cause, while others languish in obscurity to be further oppressed and eventually forgotten completely?

¹From 'about us' section on www.freetibet.org Accessed April 7, 2006.

² Clifford Bob, *The Marketing of Rebellion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1.

This is the central question in The Marketing of Rebellion by author and professor Clifford Bob. In his book, Bob examines the phenomenon of insurgent groups and their quest for overseas support in their struggles. The challenges behind this undertaking are enormous for most groups, as they must “publicize their plights, portray their conflicts as righteous struggles, and craft their messages to resonate abroad [...] in the face of domestic despotism and international indifference.”³ Some would perhaps think that in our increasingly interconnected, media-saturated world, this would in fact be a simpler undertaking than in times past: the sheer volume of media outlets, forms, and sources and the ease with which one can connect to the world through the Internet cause many to think that if a group needs to tell its story and seek support, it can do so with the click of a mouse. True, the rapid dissemination of media, particularly satellite television and the Internet over the last decade has greatly increased the ‘space’ in which insurgent groups may work within. It has provided the opportunity for many to broadcast their thoughts and causes to the entire world more than any other time in history.

However, with that increased ‘space’ comes a flood of other messages, information, and content that bombard the average citizen on a daily basis. More often than not, an insurgent group’s message and pleas become lost in an ocean of 24-hour news, mass-produced entertainment, and the ever-present stream of advertising which most people consume without a second thought. In examining the phenomenon of insurgent groups and their quest for international support, Clifford Bob suggests that the key aspect of this

³ Clifford Bob, 4.

struggle is a group's use of both NGOs as well as the media in drawing attention and support to its cause. By engaging these two sources of potential interest, Bob argues, an insurgent group can greatly enhance its chances at garnering the international support it requires for success in its struggle. In examining Bob's theory, we can see that it has a number of different facets. To begin, it is important to note that Bob does not see the relationship between NGOs and insurgent groups as simply one-sided, that is, as only benefiting the insurgent groups who seek support. Instead, Bob characterizes the relationship as an exchange, whereby "domestic insurgents stand on one side, seeking money, materiel, information, legitimacy, and access to aid them in their conflicts with powerful opponents"⁴, and NGOs receive what Bob calls "important nonmaterial resources... chief among them is a *raison d'être*, legitimation for the NGO's international activism and proof that its agenda remains unfulfilled."⁵ Thus, it is important to remember that both insurgent groups and NGOs benefit in their own way from arrangements they enter into. Despite this however, there is little doubt that it is the insurgent group that enters into these 'exchanges' from a weaker position, since there are undoubtedly far more groups around the world in need than there are NGOs to fill those needs. Attracting NGO support is therefore highly competitive, and as Bob shows in his study, an insurgent group must adopt specific strategies in order to establish relationships with NGOs and thus gain the support (in whatever form) that they seek. As such, Bob has outlined a series of strategies that an insurgent group must follow in order to mount an

⁴ Clifford Bob, 14-15.

⁵ Ibid, 15.

effective campaign to attract NGOs to their cause, which can be broken down into two categories: raising NGO awareness; and framing to 'match NGOs.

Raising NGO awareness:

As Clifford Bob describes, this process occurs in ways: targeted lobbying of prospective supporters, usually in the supporters' home country; and diffuse consciousness-raising, which usually involves engaging the international press to increase the level of knowledge about the particular group.⁶ In terms of lobbying, this can be accomplished in a variety of ways, each with their own pros and cons. It can be done indirectly, through email, telephone, or letters, however this approach can be seen as impersonal. Personal lobbying on the other hand offers the chance to directly appeal to those NGOs that have been sought out, and "[b]y putting a face on a movement, lobbying makes abstract conflicts concrete."⁷ The potential downside to personal lobbying is that it can make a group look as if they are trying to control the message out of their organisation, which can raise questions about reliability and trustworthiness, yet at the same time, this can be an advantage to an insurgent group, who can then control the delivery and style of their message. Other ways that a group can lobby NGOs is through attendance at international conferences, stationing representatives and missions in foreign capitals, and establishing Web sites that broadcast a group's message to the world.⁸

With diffuse consciousness-raising, insurgent groups will engage the international media in order to get their message out. As with lobbying, this

⁶ Ibid, 23.

⁷ Ibid, 24.

⁸ Ibid, 24-25.

can occur in different ways. Contact with the international and the journalistic media is perhaps the simplest way to raise a group's awareness, and can have numerous positive effects on a group's struggle if the story is framed in a way that paints the group in a positive light. Furthermore, if a group is covered by a media outlet with wide international reach, this can immediately raise a group's image and status. However, this can have adverse effects, such as if the reporting is intending to search out lesser-known, perhaps unscrupulous aspects of an insurgent group, and emphasizes these aspects over those that the group wishes to promote. Although raising awareness through the international media is important to a group's effort, as Bob describes it, "for a challenger to rely on media promotion is risky and uncertain."⁹ To counter this uncertainty, Bob suggests the possibility of engaging public relations firms to help craft a group's image and message, however this is often an expensive undertaking and beyond the financial resources of many insurgent groups. As an alternative, Bob notes that many groups will rely on "political spectacles... (such as) strikes, mass marches, and land invasions,"¹⁰ and even more brazen acts of terror or violence. These actions can take many different forms, but all have the same goal: to draw attention to the group or cause, and increase the level of recognition and attention paid to it.

Matching NGO expectations:

Beyond simply drawing attention to a group's cause and message, Bob proposes a much more direct and proactive approach in assuring an NGO's

⁹ Ibid, 25.

¹⁰ Ibid, 26.

support for an insurgent group, which he terms 'matching'. Simply raising awareness about a certain group will not guarantee that that group will receive the support they seek, since, as noted above, the competition for NGO support is fierce among prospective groups seeking support. Thus, a group must not only raise awareness, but also craft and shape their image, message, and organization in order to improve their odds at receiving support. As Bob describes, the interaction between an insurgent group and an NGO occurs in the context of 'framing', that is, both parties shape themselves in order to announce what and whom they represent, what their goals are, and what they require from the other party. Often times, 'frames' may take the form of generic concepts such as 'rights', and establish building blocks from which to work from.¹¹ If employed successfully, Bob shows that these frames "often congeal into 'brands, with movements constantly re-emphasising distinctive elements that capture distant imaginations."¹² Some examples he gives are Yasser Arafat's *kaffiyeh*; the Dalai Lama's saffron robes; and Subcomandante Marcos' mask. When matching, Bob shows that there are five areas of specific concern where an insurgent group should focus its efforts:

Substantive Matching / Goals:

- This involves targeting NGOs whose objectives and goals most closely match those of the insurgent group itself (ie: an Inuit group concerned with decreasing ice levels in the Arctic will look to Greenpeace instead of Human Rights Watch for support). In order to do this, insurgent groups will often reduce the complexities of their movement and re-frame it as a 'good guy versus bad guy' or David and Goliath challenge. By doing this, insurgent groups can appeal to a wider audience and leave aside the complexities of their struggle that can distract or turn away potential NGO support. Further to this, a savvy insurgent group

¹¹ Ibid, 28.

¹² Ibid

will play up “both their organizational coherence and their courage, rather than their helplessness.”¹³ Finally, insurgent groups often target big-name states and entities as their foes, rather than obscure individuals or organisations. This again emphasizes the grandeur of their struggle, all the while maintaining the generality of their ‘framing’.¹⁴

Cultural Matching

- Culture here refers to two forms: culture in the traditional sense, that is, the norms and customs associated with regions, groups, and peoples around the world; and also the organisational culture of both the NGO and the insurgent group. In terms of organisational culture, Bob writes that most NGOs prefer to deal with insurgent groups who are organized in a similar fashion to themselves. Thus, groups with offices, staff, access to the and presence on Internet, written mission statements, and a hierarchical structure tend to be better positioned to receive support from NGOs. With respect to the traditional notion of ‘culture’, NGOs will tend to support insurgent groups who display characteristics that are similar to their own cultural norms. In doing this, NGOs will look to groups who are democratic in nature, show respect for women’s rights, and are deemed generally ‘progressive’, or at least in line with the NGO’s own cultural norms. It should be noted here that since the vast majority of the largest and best-funded NGOs are based in the West, adherence to some form of ‘Western’ cultural values is important.¹⁵

Tactical Matching

- This refers to the actual form and type of assistance that an NGO can provide to an insurgent group. NGOs can provide a wide array of services to groups in need, from medical aid (Doctors Without Borders), to protective accompaniment (Peace Brigades International), to publishing reports and issuing alerts (Amnesty International). Thus, Bob notes that a group’s odds at gaining support from a specific NGO are much higher if the insurgent group is asking for aid that the NGO regularly provide, rather than something that falls outside the NGO’s standard operational domain.¹⁶

Ethical Matching

- Certainly, an NGO does not want to be seen supporting a group who openly uses violence in order to accomplish its goals, as most

¹³ Ibid, 30-31.

¹⁴ Summarized from Clifford Bob’s section on *substantive matching*, 28-33.

¹⁵ Summarized from Clifford Bob’s section on *cultural matching*, 33-34.

¹⁶ Summarized from Clifford Bob’s section on *tactical matching*, 34-35.

applicable NGOs seek peaceful resolutions to conflicts. However, as Clifford Bob notes, “most insurgent groups live in far rougher neighbourhoods, and their methods must be correspondingly tough.”¹⁷ This creates a dilemma for the insurgent group / NGO exchange paradigm: insurgent groups must often resort to violence in their struggles, however this violent behaviour risks excluding them from NGO support. To overcome this dilemma, Bob shows that insurgent groups will often depict their violent acts as defensive in nature, as simply a necessary response to their opponents’ repression. This dilemma is further complicated by the fact that “In the post 9/11 world...governments around the world have leaped to label movements seeking greater autonomy as terrorists, often with little justification.”¹⁸ Insurgent groups must therefore balance the need to attract NGO support with their use of violence in their struggles.¹⁹

Organizational Matching

- Essentially, this may be summarized as ‘picking a winner’. In discussing this trend, Bob shows that NGOs are more likely to support groups who demonstrate – through their organizational cohesiveness and effectiveness – that they will in fact benefit from the NGO’s support, thereby improving the ‘bottom line’ for NGOs. With limited resources, NGOs are unlikely to support groups who display internal problems, disorganization, and conflicts, as these issues will affect the group’s overall image and their chances at success in their struggle. As such, “smaller, more cohesive movements, those dominated by a single leader, and those managed by professional staffs therefore gain an advantage.”²⁰

Beyond matching however, there are other factors that affect whether an insurgent group will receive support from an NGO. Bob describes these attributes as ‘structural factors affecting success of movement strategies’. Essentially, Bob shows that winning support from an NGO does not simply depend on an insurgent group successfully matching the aforementioned characteristics listed above. Besides the matching strategies that groups must employ, there are structural factors that affect whether or not those

¹⁷ Clifford Bob, 36.

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch, www.hrw.org/campaigns/september11/opportunismwatch.htm Accessed April 14, 2006.

¹⁹ Summarized from Clifford Bob’s section on *ethical matching*, 35-37.

²⁰ Clifford Bob, 38.

Summarized from Clifford Bob’s section on *organizational matching*, 37-41.

strategies are successful. These are separated into two categories:

characteristics of the movement itself (the insurgent group); and the

characteristics of the movement's opponents. With the former, Bob identifies

six important characteristics²¹:

- *Standing*: Does the international community view the group positively? Has it previously won sustained backing by an NGO? Has its members or leaders won any humanitarian awards? Is it recognized through its marketing tactics?
- *Contacts*: Does the group have contacts through the media or other NGOs? Does it have an active diaspora in various cities around the world? Has it established relationships with foreign politicians and governments?
- *Knowledge*: Does the insurgent group have a good understanding of the targeted NGO's expertise, hierarchies, and operations? Are the group's leaders able to communicate effectively in a major Western language? Do they understand how to effectively lobby an NGO?
- *Monetary Resources*: Are the monetary resources of the insurgent group adequate to finance its campaigns to attract support and to pay for other services such as hiring P.R. firms or holding major rallies or events?
- *Organisational Resources*: Does the group display solid unity, coherence, and leadership? Are they well organized enough to mount major rallies, publicize the event(s), and coordinate the activities of all branches of the group?
- *Leadership*: Is the insurgent group headed by a recognizable, charismatic leader? Does this leader direct the group along a sensible path and run the group wisely?

Beyond the characteristics of the group itself, certain characteristics of the group's opponents play a role in determining the effectiveness of the group's efforts to attract NGO support. Bob identifies these as *identity and reactions of opponents*, and it describes certain attributes that can aid an insurgent group's efforts at attracting support. With respect to opponents, Bob shows that "the media and many NGOs pay disproportionate attention to large,

²¹ Characteristics are summarized from Clifford Bob, 43-50.

economically important, or strategically located states.”²² Furthermore, the state’s level of repression plays a role. If the state openly uses violence and intimidation to suppress the insurgent group, this could lead to increased attention and sympathy to the group. Also, if the state has killed the leaders of the group and therefore made them martyrs, the chances are again increased that the insurgent group will receive sympathy and attention from NGOs and the international press. Finally, the international standing of the state plays a role. If the state engages in internationally unpopular behaviour, such as weapons proliferation, open crackdown of dissidents, limiting freedoms, pursuit of weapons of mass destruction, and support to known terrorist organizations (the latter two more so after 9/11), then it is likely that any group opposing that government will attract the support of foreign states and NGOs.²³

Therefore, with this study, author Clifford Bob has laid out a framework through which one can assess whether an insurgent group is likely or not to receive support from NGOs and foreign governments. It should be noted that the term ‘insurgent group’ is meant to convey the notion of a political movement or group that rebels, often using violence, against a civil authority, established leadership, or government in pursuit of their political aims. In his work The Marketing of Rebellion, Bob applies this framework to the study of two movements: Nigeria’s Ogoni movement and Mexico’s Zapatista uprising. The following section will give a historical background on the Mojahedin-e Khalq, which will be the focus of this paper. By understanding the

²² Clifford Bob, 49.

²³ Summarized from Clifford Bob’s section on *identity and reactions of opponents*, 49-51.

background of this group, we can better assess its strategies and the difficulties it might encounter in seeking international support.

1.2 The *Mojahedin-e Khalq* Organisation: A Historical Overview:

Pre-revolution History:

The *Mojahedin-e Khalq* Organisation (MeK) was formed in 1965 by a group of nine graduates from Tehran University who had previously been involved with the National Front, a nationalist organisation tied to Prime Minister Mossadeq in the 1950s.²⁴ These students were heavily influenced by Marxist thought as well as by the writings of Dr. Ali Shari'ati, a renowned Iranian intellectual who wrote about religious sociology and the role of Islam in Iranian life.²⁵ The MeK members were mostly from the middle class, and were well educated for the most part.²⁶ Further to this, it has been noted that the MeK "were inspired by the anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist struggles in Algeria, Vietnam, Cuba, and Palestine."²⁷ The MeK was therefore ideologically opposed to the rule of Shah Reza Pahlavi, which they viewed as the Iranian manifestation of Western imperialism, and thus they sought to mobilize Iranians against the Shah.

²⁴ Asaf Hussein, *Islamic Iran: Revolution and Counter-Revolution* (London: Frances Pinter Publishers Ltd., 1985), 119.

²⁵ Vanessa Martin, *Creating an Islamic State: Khomeini and the Making of a New Iran* (New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2000), 148.

²⁶ Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 116.

²⁷ Mehrzad Boroujerdi, 117.

Although there were other leftist groups opposed to the Shah at the time, the MeK was particularly appealing to many at the time because of their adherence to Islam and their interpretation of the faith as being the only true ideology that could unite the people and challenge the Shah's hold on power. As Ervand Abrahamian notes, the MeK became "the first Iranian organisation to develop systematically a modern revolutionary interpretation of Islam."²⁸ The MeK adopted and adapted many concepts from Marxism and Islam such as resistance, martyrdom, and revolution and successfully blended them to form a message that had great revolutionary appeal for those who felt oppressed under the Shah's rule. Also, the MeK's vision for *nezam-e-tawhidi*, or a classless society, was quite appealing to many at the time.²⁹ It is the MeK's blend of Marxism and Islam that makes the group somewhat of an anomaly in the Muslim world. On the surface, it would seem that Islam, being a God-worshipping religion, would be antithetical to Marxism, of which one of the main tenets is atheism. Yet in forming the MeK, their leaders sought to draw upon what they saw to be the most desirable attributes of both. As an original MeK member recounted in the 1970s, "our original aim was to synthesize the religious values of Islam with the scientific thought of Marxism ... for we were convinced that true Islam was compatible with the theories of social evolution, historical determinism, and the class struggle."³⁰ Therefore, the MeK sought to blend Marxist analysis on feudalism, imperialism,

²⁸ Ibid, 116.

²⁹ Mehrzad Boroujerdi, 117.

³⁰ Ervand Abrahamian, *Radical Islam: The Iranian Mojahedin*, (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers Ltd., 1989), 92.

capitalism, and social economics with an Islamic interpretation emphasizing historical evolution “as an integral part of Islam.”³¹

The MeK began their armed struggle in earnest in the early 1970s after preparations that took place in the years previous. With the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, the MeK looked at the struggle for a free Palestine as a noble fight against an occupying power, and established links with the PLO in 1970 to train MeK fighters in guerrilla warfare in camps located in Jordan and Lebanon.³² Following this training, the MeK initiated political violence against the Shah’s regime in 1971 with a planned attack on the festivities celebrating the 2500th anniversary of the Iranian monarchy, following the lead of the *Feda’yin-e-Khalq*, a secular leftist party with similar aims of overthrowing the monarchy.³³ In August of that year, the MeK began a campaign to target symbols of the regime and of foreign imperialists in Iran. As such, they attacked the offices of Shell, British Petroleum, El Al, and various banks.³⁴ In the aftermath of 1971, sixty-nine members of the *Mojahedin-e Khalq* were arrested and put on trial by a military court, with all being found guilty and eleven being sentenced to death, including three of the founding members of the MeK.³⁵

³¹ Ibid, 93.

³² Asaf Hussein, 120.

³³ The attacks against the regime began on February 8, 1971 when the Feda’yin attacked an Iranian garrison in the village of Siakhal. Although the MeK had intended to strike at the government later that year, the Feda’yin attack accelerated their plans.

Source: Ervand Abrahamian, 128.

³⁴ Asaf Hussein, 120.

³⁵ The three founding members who were put to death were Hanifnezhad, Mohsen, and Banizadegan. The remaining members received sentences between three years and life imprisonment.

Source: Ervand Abrahamian, 135.

Although on the surface this appeared as a victory for the Shah and his elaborate security apparatus, in reality it elevated the MeK members to the status of political and religious martyrs, and thus despite the fact that the arrests and executions greatly weakened the organisation initially, it had a longer term effect of bolstering MeK recruitment. During the same period of tremendous repression by the Shah, the *Mojahedin* sought to cultivate links beyond Iran's borders and as such MeK leaders travelled abroad to meet with the PLO and the leaders of Libya, and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, as well as with Iranian students living in the United States and Europe. They also published their own newspaper and journal, distributed pamphlets that included anti-royalist propaganda and the accounts of those who were arrested in 1971, and established networks within prisons where many MeK members were held, which also helped bolster their recruitment.³⁶ In addition to these activities, the MeK planned a series of attacks to coincide with President Nixon's state visit in 1972 which were carried out successfully for the most part. These included time bomb explosions at the Iran-American Society, the U.S. Information Office, the Hotel International, as well as the offices of Pepsi Cola, General Motors, the Marine Oil Company, and eight other locations around Tehran.³⁷ Furthermore, they targeted specific American military personnel, including General Harold Price who was chief of the U.S. military mission in Iran. Although the plan failed, "the attack and the burning of his car in one of the main thoroughways of Tehran attracted much

³⁶ Ibid, 138-9.

Asaf Hussein, 120.

³⁷ Ervand Abrahamian, 140.

attention.”³⁸ Beyond this, they also succeeded in assassinating Colonel Lewis Hawkins, an American military advisor stationed in Iran.³⁹

Perhaps the most significant event to occur to the *Mojahedin-e-Khalq* during this time was the internal schism that took place within the group in 1975. This schism was multi-faceted and had a myriad of factors that go beyond the scope of this section. However, the end result was a split that occurred between the Marxists and the Islamists in the group, a split that was initiated by the Shah’s purges and imprisonment of segments of MeK members. This change in the balance of power combined with new ideas that were permeating the group, most notably Maoist theories on ‘dialectical materialism’ that pointed to the “fallacies of Islam”.⁴⁰ This schism would split the group, leading to the Maoist faction ultimately forming *Paykar*, a leftist atheist opposition group, with the remaining Muslim members remaining in the MeK. The significance of this split is that it brought Masoud Rajavi to the forefront of the MeK and would establish him as the leader of the group after 1975. Today, the group is led both by Masoud Rajavi and his wife, Maryam. The schism that occurred created an ideological crisis for the MeK, who found themselves balancing theological righteousness with leftist secular epistemology. They did not want to appear too close to the Left for fear of alienating Muslims within the group, yet they also wanted to distinguish themselves from the conservative ulama who opposed many of their proposed progressive reforms, such as a reduced religious role in government

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid, 141.

⁴⁰ Ervand Abrahamian, 146.

and greater rights for women.⁴¹ Thus, in a sense the schism allowed the MeK to find their future ideological leader in Masoud Rajavi as well as their ideological and political space.

The role played by the MeK during the revolution can be described as important yet secondary to that of Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers. As many people know, Khomeini was undoubtedly the central figure in the Iranian Revolution and the person who's most often associated with its success. However, the ayatollah's followers included many groups and parties who all sought the same initial outcome: and end to the Shah's rule. By mid-1978, the MeK had made the strategic decision to ally themselves with Khomeini in their fight against the Shah. Although some would suggest that this was a case of political opportunism on the part of the MeK at the expense of the group's moral foundations (a charge that would be levelled against the MeK again in its future), author A.H.H. Abidi offered a different assessment. As he noted, despite the fact that the MeK had originally established itself as distinct from the traditional ulama that Ayatollah Khomeini now represented, the group was now "coming up from the underground under the cover of Khomeini" by publicly joining Khomeini supporters in street protests against the Shah.⁴² After the Shah's flight from Tehran on January 16th, 1979, the realities of the complicated nature of the movement that forced his exile became clear. The conservative clerics allied under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini gradually gained more support among Iranians, and thus other groups who had been part of the alliance to topple the Shah now found

⁴¹ Mehrzad Boroujerdi, 119.

⁴² A.H.H. Abidi, *Iran at the Crossroads: The Dissent Movement* (New Delhi: Patriot Publishers, 1989), 6

themselves marginalized, including the MeK. Despite the fact that the MeK supported the student's takeover of the U.S. embassy in Tehran in November 1979, this did not prevent them from falling out of favour with the conservative ulama tied to Khomeini.⁴³ Verbal attacks on the MeK intensified, and after some contradictory public statements on where his loyalties lay, various members of the ulama labelled Masoud Rajavi a "spy", a "U.S. puppet", and a "SAVAK agent", and eventually disqualified him as a presidential candidate.⁴⁴

By 1980, clearer lines were being drawn between competing factions in the revolution. Rajavi had grown increasingly closer to Abdolhassan Banisadr, Iran's first post-revolution president, with both men increasingly finding themselves at odds with the IRP and with the conservative *majlis* and parliament.⁴⁵ These two men grew close because they shared a similar fear: the conservative clerics and that a "dictatorship of the mullahs" would emerge, thereby, in their view, negating any progress achieved by the ouster of the Shah.⁴⁶ At this time, Rajavi was certain that he and Banisadr were righteous in their actions, and stepped up criticisms of the *majlis* and the parliament. This coincided with an increase in the circulation of the MeK's newspaper, *Mojahed*, which had reached 500,000, far greater than the circulation of the IRP newspaper.⁴⁷ Having finally had enough from the Banisadr / Rajavi alliance, Khomeini removed Banisadr from the presidency and launched an

⁴³ According to eyewitnesses and *Mojahed*, the Mojahedin's official paper, the Mojahedin supported the November 4, 1979 takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and allegedly argued against an early release of the hostages. Source: Albert Benliot, *Iran: Outlaw, Outcast, or Normal Country?* (New York: Nova Publishers, 2001), 100.

⁴⁴ David Menashri, *Iran: A Decade of War and Revolution* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1990), 145.

⁴⁵ IRP is the Islamic Republican Party.

Source: U.S. Library of Congress. <http://countrystudies.us/iran/91.htm> Accessed April 18, 2006.

⁴⁶ Ervand Abrahamian, 207.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

all-out campaign to eradicate all opposition. Although both Banisadr and Rajavi fled into exile in France in 1981, the MeK stepped up its actions against the Islamic Republic, and destroyed the offices of the IRP in a bomb attack on June 28, 1981.⁴⁸ In response, the government rounded up 200 members of the MeK and other leftist groups and had them executed.⁴⁹ These events in 1981 are tremendously significant as they are the beginning of the armed opposition to the Islamic Republic of Iran by the MeK, a struggle that would continue from 1981 until the present day.

Post-Revolution History:

Upon their exile to France, Banisadr and Rajavi formed the National Resistance Council (NRC), which was to be the political face of the Iranian resistance to the Ayatollah. They declared themselves the true Iranian government-in-exile and asserted that they would return to Iran soon to establish the Democratic Islamic Republic of Iran, with Banisadr as president and Rajavi as chairman of the National Council of the Provisional Government.⁵⁰ After managing to extricate most MeK leaders from Iran, the NRC pressed ahead on the diplomatic, military, and public relations fronts. They spread propaganda, gave many interviews to various foreign press services and newspapers, and sent delegations to various international meetings and organisations.⁵¹ The repercussions of these actions were felt by MeK members who remained in Iran: within the first year (1981-82) of the creation of the NRC, between 30,000 and 50,000 political prisoners were

⁴⁸ Martin Wright, ed., *Iran: The Khomeini Revolution* (Chicago: St. James Press, 1989), 34.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ervand Abrahamian, 243.

⁵¹ Ibid, 244-45.

jailed, and Amnesty International reported that over 2500 executions had taken place in the first eight months since June 1981.⁵²

It must be remembered that these actions were being taken against the MeK and other groups while Iran was at war with Iraq, which attacked Iran in September in 1980 and invaded Iran's Khuzistan province.⁵³ In the hostilities between the two states, Rajavi saw an opportunity to strengthen the MeK's position, while at the same time crippling the Islamic government in Tehran. In January 1983, Rajavi held a meeting with Iraqi foreign minister Tariq Aziz in the French town of Auvers-sur-Oise.⁵⁴ The two sides saw that they could be mutually helped by each other's services (in a 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend' type of rationale), and thus a deal was struck between the NRC and the Hussein government in Baghdad. This is perhaps the most highly contentious move that Rajavi made as leader of the MeK, and one that would prove to haunt the group for years after. Rajavi undoubtedly knew that this rapprochement would be highly unpopular with some within the NRC, yet he justified the decision to ally with Iraq by saying that the war was being fought already, and thus the NRC's and MeK's union with Saddam Hussein could only speed up the conclusion of the war, save Iranian lives and achieve the aim that (Rajavi felt) was desired by the vast majority of Iranians: the ouster of the mullahs who controlled Iran. Furthermore, it has been suggested that perhaps Rajavi suffered from a sense of over-zealous self-righteousness. In his words, "such an initiative can only be taken by someone who is doubly

⁵² Martin Wright, 35.

⁵³ Phil Marshall, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Iran* (London: Bookmarks Publishing, 1988), 104.

⁵⁴ A.H.H. Abidi, 79.

entitled to do so in that he has fought against both the Shah and Khomeini, and whose patriotism cannot be questioned.”⁵⁵

There were other aspects to the relationship that benefited both sides. For the MeK, Saddam Hussein’s deep pockets were a source of funding for MeK arms and bases, their radio station on the Iran-Iraq border, their offices all over the world, their delegations to international organizations and conferences, as well as their extensive support networks through Turkey and into Europe.⁵⁶ For Saddam, the MeK benefited his regime in two important ways: first, it provided him with well-trained, disciplined fighters with an intimate knowledge of Iran and its government (a valuable asset in wartime and particularly valued because of Iran’s numerical advantage in soldiers); second, the MeK also acted as a proxy army for the Iraqi president, and he used the MeK freely to suppress uprisings by the Kurds and Shiites during the Iran-Iraq War and following the 1991 Gulf War.⁵⁷

Internally, the *Mojahedin* underwent a major change in 1985. That year, Masoud Rajavi sought to shake up the group and expel older members of the MeK, ostensibly to modernize the MeK ideologically and place it in stark contrast to the misogynistic rule of the mullahs in Tehran. As such, Rajavi wed Maryam Ghajr-Ozdanlou and made her the co-leader of the MeK. This move was intended to ‘modernize’ and feminize the organisation, and it

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ervand Abrahamian, 248.

⁵⁷ Meir Javedanfar, “Iran: Threats” <http://www.meepas.com/Iranthreats.htm> Accessed April 18, 2006.
Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty “Iraqi Kurds Want MKO Leader Tried”
<http://www.rferl.org/newsline/2005/10/6-SWA/swa-211005.asp> Accessed April 18, 2006.

resulted in numerous females being placed in high-ranking positions within the MeK, while at the same time causing some older members to leave the group out of opposition to this event.⁵⁸ The following year in 1986, Rajavi was forced out of France and fled to Baghdad. Initially, it was said that Rajavi had left by his own decision in order to command operations in Iraq against Iranian forces. Despite this assertion, it was later revealed the France had struck a deal with the government in Tehran whereby they would expel “Iranian dissidents” from France in exchange for Iranian help in securing the release of nine French hostages being held in Lebanon for over 20 months during the Lebanese Civil War.⁵⁹ Although this move to Baghdad was essentially forced upon Rajavi, it had the effect of strengthening the MeK’s ties to Saddam Hussein, which caused great alarm in Banisadr, who as a result backed out of their union as the NRC. Despite losing a valuable ally in their struggle for regime change in Iran (Banisadr had won the 1980 presidential election by a large majority, and thus could legitimately claim to be the rightful president of the country), the MeK pressed on and continued their fight against the mullahs.

One of the more significant moves made by Rajavi upon arriving in Iraq was to establish the National Liberation Army (NLA) in order to formalize the armed struggle against the Iranian government. Prior to this, MeK forces had fought alongside the Iraqi army as a type of paramilitary force. Perhaps due to his self-righteousness, or perhaps as a product of being detached from the

⁵⁸ Mahan Abedin, “Mojahedin-e-Khalq: Saddam’s Iranian Allies”
http://www.jamestown.org/publications_details.php?volume_id=391&issue_id=2881&article_id=23430
Accessed April 24, 2006.

⁵⁹ A.H.H. Abidi, 79.

Iranian populace as a whole for a significant period of time, Masoud Rajavi greatly miscalculated the response he received upon entering certain towns in Iran. As Martin Wright describes, "The NLA had hoped to be welcomed by the populace as liberators, but their harsh treatment of local officials in towns they captured alienated popular support. Large numbers of NLA fighters were reportedly killed after being trapped by Iranian forces."⁶⁰ Furthermore, many Iranians, hardened by years of war and inundated by regime propaganda, had come to see the MeK as saying they were fighting for the Iranian state, while in fact fighting against Iranians, which earned them the new name *Munafiqeen-e-Khalq*, or hypocrites.

Following the conclusion of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988, the MeK again went underground for a period of time, remaining in Iraq and essentially biding their time. Although they did not participate directly in the 1991 Gulf War against U.S.-led coalition forces, a U.S. State Department statement reported that the MeK fought against Iranian troops at the border town of Qasr-I-Shirin (ostensibly as a warning for Iran not to become involved in the hostilities), and "assisted the government of Iraq in suppressing the Shia and Kurdish uprisings in southern Iraq and the Kurdish uprisings in the north."⁶¹ As an official in the Clinton administration had said after the war, "Saddam looked on the Mojahedin as more loyal than some of his own army units."⁶² In 1992, the MeK launched coordinated attacks on Iranian embassies in 13 different countries, including Iran's U.N. mission in New York, thus demonstrating the

⁶⁰ Martin Wright, 50.

⁶¹ United States State Department, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/45323.pdf> Accessed April 20, 2006.

⁶² <http://www.iranian.org/opinion/2003/february/MKO/index.html> Accessed April 20, 2006.

global reach of the organisation.⁶³ Further to this, the MeK struck twice inside of Iran in 1998 and 1999, killing the deputy chief of staff of the Iranian armed forces, as well as the head of the country's prison system.⁶⁴ Despite their continued pressure on the government in Tehran, the MeK suffered a serious blow to their political legitimacy in 1997 when the Clinton administration placed the group on their list of international terrorist organisations. Although the attack within the United States on the Iranian delegation to the U.N. was cited as one reason for the label, some speculate that this was done as a concession to Iran in order to improve relations between the two countries following the election of Mohammad Khatami as president.⁶⁵

1.3 Political Marketing and the MeK:

The MeK's efforts at political marketing have been and will continue to be extremely important to the group for a number of reasons. As the largest and most active Iranian opposition / insurgent group, the MeK must rely on political marketing in the various forms as outlined by Clifford Bob if it hopes to ever accomplish its goals of returning to Iran and forming a government. The need for the MeK to pursue its goals in part through the use of political marketing has been made all the more urgent since 2001 for a number of reasons. Following the September 11th attacks of that year, many people in Western countries became increasingly fearful and antagonistic towards anything referred to as 'terrorist'. With the inclusion of the MeK on the U.S.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Georgetown University and the Iran Policy Committee, "Mujahedin-e-Khalq Organisation (MeK)" http://www.ict.org.il/inter_ter/orgdet.cfm?orgid=24 Accessed April 20, 2006.

⁶⁵ Michael Isikoff and Mark Hosenball, "MKO: Notorious Source" *Newsweek*, 18 May 2005. <http://msnbc.msn.com/id/7902719/site/newsweek/page/3/> Accessed April 26, 2006.

State Department's list of international terrorist groups in 1997, and the group's subsequent inclusion on the E.U.'s terrorism watch list in 2002⁶⁶, the MeK must aggressively market itself as distinct from other more broadly known terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda, Islamic Jihad, and Hezbollah. Furthermore, strategically speaking, the MeK has been without a prime sponsor since 2003 and the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Prior to his ouster, Saddam Hussein was the main beneficiary of the *Mojahedin*, and financed a large part of the group's operations. Thus political marketing will not only serve to improve the group's image and chances of attracting support from NGOs and foreign governments, but also will be used to 'sell' the group as an effective and responsible ally of the West against the current government in Tehran.

This last point has become increasingly important since 2001 with Iran being included in President Bush's 'Axis of Evil' speech.⁶⁷ Since that time, the United States and some of its European allies have been openly critical of the Iranian government and have threatened it over its nuclear program. This confrontation between the U.S. and Iran marks probably the highest point of tension between the two states since the mid-1980s, and has been all the more tense since the election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on June 24, 2005, due to his vociferous anti-American and anti-Israeli speeches. For the MeK, the recent disdain for President Ahmadinejad in Western countries (where the majority of international NGOs are based) and in the international

⁶⁶Payvand's Iran News, "MKO Stays on Updated EU Terror List"
<http://www.payvand.com/news/05/dec/1013.html> Accessed April 24, 2006.

⁶⁷The White House website, "President Delivers State of the Union Address"
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html> Accessed April 24, 2006.

press provides them with an opportunity to place their group in stark contrast to the current Iranian regime. With the proper marketing approach, the MeK could increase its support among NGOs in the West and also among foreign politicians who could hold the key for the group in terms of support both politically and strategically.

However, finding the proper marketing approach could be difficult for the MeK. There are a number of issues from their past which may preclude the MeK from receiving the international support it seeks. Beyond the MeK's alliance with Saddam Hussein and the label of 'hypocrites' that resulted from this, the group's involvement in the U.S. embassy hostage-taking in 1979 could prove to be a significant hurdle for the group to overcome. Beside the obvious disdain that most Americans have for the Iranian students involved in the embassy take-over, the hostage crisis had a larger effect on American views on Islam. As author Mir Zohair Husain shows, "...Americans made the Iranian Revolution and the hostage crisis the basis on which Islam was reduced to a militant, monolithic, and anti-American menace of explosive passions. As far as the Western press was concerned, 'resentment, suspicion, and contempt were characteristic of Islam.'"⁶⁸ Although it has yet to be proven that MeK members were directly involved in the hostage-taking as opposed to supporting it, the mere fact that they supported the actions at the time means that they will undoubtedly be viewed the contempt, suspicion, and resentment that Husain speaks of.

⁶⁸ Mir Zohair Husain, *Global Islamic Politics*, (New York: Longman, 2003), 320-321.

Another reason why the MeK may find marketing itself as a responsible ally of NGOs and Western countries difficult is because of the cult-like image that afflicts the group. Events such as the re-organisation of the group to 'feminize' it in 1985, the defeat of the NLA in 1988 to Iranian forces, and the centralisation of power around Masoud and Maryam Rajavi have led to the MeK acquiring a cult-like status. This claim was backed by assertions that the organisation became increasingly authoritarian in the past decade, that Masoud Rajavi claimed to have a spiritual link to a Shi'a Imam, and by reports that members of the MeK must "undergo their own personal 'ideological revolution' by confessing personal inadequacies in cult-like confession sessions."⁶⁹ This claim of the organisation being cult-like was further reinforced when members of the MeK set themselves on fire in front of French embassies across Europe on June 20, 2003 in protest of a crackdown on MeK leaders in France.⁷⁰ This image of the MeK as a cult will be discussed in further detail in the following chapters, although it is important to underscore the challenges that the MeK faces with its political marketing. The *Mojahedin-e Khalq* is an interesting case study in the use of political marketing by an insurgent group because it not only displays many of the characteristics and strategies that Bob describes in The Marketing of Rebellion, but also because the history, politics, and structure of the MeK provides both advantages and disadvantages for the group with respect to attracting support from NGOs and foreign governments. With this in mind, the following section will look at the MeK's efforts in attracting this support.

⁶⁹ Michael Isikoff and Mark Hosenball, "MKO: Notorious Source" *Newsweek*, 18 May 2005. <http://msnbc.msn.com/id/7902719/site/newsweek/page/3/> Accessed April 26, 2006.

⁷⁰ "Mojahedin Timeline" <http://www.iran-interlink.org/files/child%20pages/Timeline.htm> Accessed April 26, 2006.

Chapter two will now examine the *Mojahedin-e-Khalq's* use of the political marketing techniques as outlined by Clifford Bob in The Marketing of Rebellion. Section one will outline the MeK's strategies for attracting support, both direct and indirect. Section two will look at the group's activities in raising awareness of the organisation. Section three will then examine the MeK's strategies relating to 'framing' to match the characteristics of their targeted supporters. The chapter will conclude with an assessment of the MeK's efforts in these three areas as they relate to Bob's theories on overall movement strategies for attracting support. The issue of *who* the MeK is targeting in its activities will be essential in this chapter. Central to Bob's study are the NGOs themselves, as he argues that it is through the calculated use of NGOs and NGO support that a movement will separate itself from the mass of other insurgent groups who seek support from those who provide it. Thus, the following questions will be posed: Whom does the MeK lobby for support? What strategies do they employ? What NGOs, if any, have the MeK courted for support? What accounts for their decisions relating to their strategies for attracting support?

2.1 The MeK's use of Direct and Indirect Lobbying:

The MeK has used direct lobbying for a number of years, yet changed their focus significantly after 1997. Whereas prior to that year the group focussed on lobbying foreign governments and the United Nations on condemning the government in Tehran for their repression and human rights abuses, events in 1997 caused the *Mojahedin* to engage in 'defensive' lobbying. As previously

mentioned, the Clinton administration placed the MeK on the U.S. list of terrorist organisations in 1997, thus harming the image of the group as well as seriously curtailing their freedom to operate in the United States and Europe (in terms of fund raising, organizing protests, and resistance activities towards the Iranian government). An interesting insight into the lobbying strategies employed by the MeK and their political wing, the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), can be seen in Memoirs of an Iranian Rebel by Masoud Banisadr. This book, published in 2004, offers an inside view into the inner workings of the public relations and political marketing strategies of the MeK prior to their being labelled a terrorist group. Masoud Banisadr is the cousin of Abdolhassan Banisadr, the first post-revolution president of Iran, who was exiled from Iran with Masoud Rajavi in 1981 together formed the National Resistance Council (NRC – later to become the NCRI). Masoud Banisadr left the MeK in 1996 after years of being the organisation's chief representative in the United States, and has since written Memoirs of an Iranian Rebel in order to discuss his experiences in the organisation. This book is a valuable resource when examining the MeK, as it offers a first-hand account of life within the organisation, yet seemingly lacks the biases that would be present had the book been written by a current member of the group.

As Masoud Banisadr shows, during the 1980s the main focus of the MeK's lobbying efforts was aimed at the U.N. in order to pressure the world body into condemning or sanctioning the Iranian regime. As he recounts in his book, "Our purpose at the (United Nations) General Assembly was clear. We

needed to put forward a resolution, with as many sponsors as possible, and have it passed. We also wanted maximum publicity and to that end aimed to hold a press conference at the right time, preferably with some of our tortured brothers and sisters who had escaped Iran. Moreover, it was desirable to have favourable speeches made by representatives of different nations.”⁷¹ Banisadr also explains that the relationships that the MeK had with certain member states at the time were based on a give-take arrangement, as “Our relationships with the sponsor countries were clearly based on mutual interest. They needed us to feed them information on the most recent political events and human rights violations in Iran so as to have ammunition for their speeches. We needed their muscle to make the resolution as strong as possible and preferably to mention our documents.”⁷² According to Banisadr’s reports, the MeK’s focussed its lobbying efforts on the U.N. and on European governments. This was certainly due to the fact that the largest numbers of MeK members were found in Western Europe, and thus their lobbying was directed towards politicians and diplomats from those countries.

With respect to NGOs, the MeK began engaging them in earnest by the late 1980s and early 1990s: “For years we had no dealings with Amnesty International, deemed tools of the British government, but now I opened a dialogue with them and started passing on news as I received it from Iran. In response they issued a series of daily ‘Urgent Action’ statements protesting the executions (of MeK members).”⁷³ Also coinciding with the MeK’s engagement of NGOs was the group’s increased efforts at lobbying American

⁷¹ Masoud Banisadr, *Memoirs of an Iranian Rebel*, (London: Saqi Books, 2004), 265.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid, 300.

politicians in Washington. Masoud Banisadr was transferred to the United States in 1990 and was immediately tasked with heading their diplomacy there. As he describes,

“Our diplomacy there was much more complicated than in Europe: more quantitative than qualitative. Unlike in Europe, we rarely had any relations with members of Congress, but were instead fobbed off onto their aides, as they were almost all totally ignorant about the situation in Iran; all they knew was that Iranians were ‘bad guys’. The aides knew as little as their bosses. In political terms it was virgin territory, which we could cultivate. But, like everything in that country, politics was on a grand scale and so was our work in this field. We had to have some sort of relationship with almost 200 aides to members of the House of Representatives and senators. In addition we had a section called ‘Personalities’, responsible for dealing with politicians and political researchers outside Congress: people in research institutes, public servants, members of the National Security Council, the Pentagon or Voice of America, and later some people from the FBI. Our media section was highly active, and had many contacts with columnists, reporters and editors. Our political strategy was lobbying individuals. We found that representatives were generally amenable to approaches from their constituents, as long as there was no strong objection from anywhere else. Since our aim was maximum propaganda, we usually needed to issue declarations with as many signatures as possible. We could get those signatures with a few phone calls. Instead of having to build a strong base of support, we needed only access to two representatives from opposing parties who were prepared to sponsor our declarations.”⁷⁴

Banisadr’s description of the MeK’s lobbying practices is also corroborated by other accounts provided by journalists and authors. Michael Isikoff, in an article for Newsweek magazine, offered perhaps a deeper understanding into the extent to which the MeK would lobby American politicians. In his article, entitled “Ashcroft’s Baghdad Connection: Why the attorney general and other in Washington have backed a terror group with ties to Iraq”, Isikoff describes the level of support that the MeK received from certain high-ranking U.S. senators. As he writes, “When the National Council of Resistance staged a

⁷⁴ Ibid, 335.

September 2000 rally outside the United Nations to protest a speech by Iranian President Mohammed Khatami, Missouri's two Republican senators— [then-future U.S. attorney general John] Ashcroft and Chris Bond--issued a joint statement of solidarity that was read aloud to a cheering crowd. A delegation of about 500 Iranians from Missouri attended the event--and a picture of a smiling Ashcroft was later included in a colour briefing book used by MKO officials to promote their cause on Capitol Hill. Ashcroft was hardly alone. Among those who actually appeared at the rally and spoke on the group's behalf was one of its leading congressional supporters: Democratic New Jersey Sen. Bob Torricelli. That same year, Senator Ashcroft wrote a letter to Attorney General Janet Reno protesting the detention of an Iranian woman, Mahnaz Samadi, who was a leading spokeswoman for the National Council of Resistance. The case quickly became a cause celebre for the MKO and its supporters in the United States.”⁷⁵ Isikoff's article also goes on to show that Sen. Torricelli once received “more than \$100,000 in campaign contributions from Iranian-Americans who supported (the MeK).”⁷⁶

This claim by Isikoff is supported and indeed greatly elaborated on in an article entitled “Mujahidin Campaign contributions” by *The Iran Brief*, a website and publication that describes itself as “An investigative tool for business executives, government and the media.”⁷⁷ Although its study concerns primarily MeK political contribution in the mid-1990s, *The Iran Brief* details how between April 1993 and November 1996, the MeK contributed

⁷⁵ Michael Isikoff, “Ashcroft's Baghdad Connection: Why the attorney general and other in Washington have backed a terror group with ties to Iraq” *Newsweek* 26 September 2002. As seen on http://www.truthout.org/docs_02/09.30B.nswk.bagdad.htm Accessed May 1, 2006.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ http://www.iran.org/tib/tib_index.htm Accessed May 2, 2006.

more than US\$204,000 to various congressional and senatorial campaigns, with the vast majority (\$132,000) going to Robert Torricelli (D, NJ) for his 1996 US Senate campaign.⁷⁸ The report goes on to state that “During the time-frame of the contributions, the recipients sponsored numerous Congressional resolutions and ‘Dear Colleague’ letters and letters to the President, the Secretary of State, and other top officials, urging U.S. government recognition and support for the Mujahidin, as well as its political front organisation, the National Council of Resistance (NCR), and its Iraq-based military wing, known as the National Liberation Army (NLA).”⁷⁹ Through these various sources, it can clearly be seen that the MeK actively lobbies and indeed financially supports politicians in the U.S. for the expressed purpose of receiving favourable political attention in Washington concerning their cause.

In Europe, the MeK employs a similar strategy, although perhaps on a larger and more overt scale. The lobbying efforts in Europe are headed by the leader of the organisation, Maryam Rajavi, and as such place Mrs. Rajavi as the centrepiece of the MeK’s campaign. Essentially, the lobbying in Europe involves public speeches by Mrs. Rajavi to various political organisations, including the European Parliament, the Belgian Senate, the Liberal Party Group at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and the British Parliamentary jurist delegation.⁸⁰ The texts of these speeches are found on Mrs. Rajavi’s website (www.maryam-rajavi.com), and in general they involve a

⁷⁸ <http://www.iran.org/tib/public/3801.htm> Accessed May 2, 2006.

It should be noted that the impartiality of *the Iran Brief* was examined, and by all counts appears to be impartial and unbiased and is endorsed by the New York Times. The information provided on Sen. Torricelli and other MeK campaign contributions are taken directly from the Federal Election Commission’s records, according to the source.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ <http://www.maryam-rajavi.com/content/blogsection/16/61/> Accessed May 2, 2006.

similar prescription, since the audiences are all Western European politicians: they condemn the current Iranian government controlled by the mullahs and their recent foray into nuclear technology; they emphasize the size and power of the MeK, NLA, and NCRI in a bid to promote the MeK as a sound alternative to the status quo in Iran; they push the notion that appeasement and complacency towards the Iranian regime will bring about dangerous results in the future; and finally they underscore that the MeK simply seeks policy changes from Western governments, both towards the MeK and towards the Iranian government.⁸¹

Beyond the lobbying of large groups of political bodies such as the European Parliament and the Council of Europe, the MeK, through Mrs. Rajavi, also lobbies individual politicians, most likely in an effort to secure influential and sympathetic supporters. Among these 'friends' listed on Rajavi's website are British Parliamentarians and members of the House of Lords, the former Prime Minister of France, the former first lady of France, an Italian senator, as well as Belgian, Spanish, Norwegian, Canadian, and Australian parliamentarians. These efforts, and particularly their prominent documentation on Rajavi's website, are intended to show a broad coalition in support of the MeK and their struggle for change against the Iranian government. These efforts also display the hallmarks of Clifford Bob's 'awareness raising' through direct lobbying. However, what remains to be seen is whether or not the MeK engages NGOs at the same level that it engages and lobbies politicians in Europe and the United States.

⁸¹ <http://www.maryam-rajavi.com/content/blogsection/16/61/> Accessed May 2, 2006.

There are in fact far fewer sources that indicate that the MeK engages NGOs as much as they do politicians. Upon researching the MeK's involvement with or lobbying of NGOs, it becomes clear that the group engages governments and politicians far more than they do NGOs. Despite the early indications by former MeK member Masoud Banisadr that he was involved in passing on information to Amnesty International about the human rights situation in Iran⁸², there are relatively few sources that indicate whether or not the MeK viewed international NGOs as a logical and strategically important source of support (indeed, Banisadr's book seems to indicate that the MeK viewed certain NGOs with scepticism and disdain, referring to Amnesty International as "tools of the British government").⁸³ The reasons for this lack of engagement are perhaps clearer when one looks at the views of two of the largest international NGOs – Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International – towards the MeK.

Although both NGOs have been active in criticizing the Iranian regime's record on a variety of issues, from human rights, to women's rights, to minority rights, to various other issues such as freedom of the press and freedom of religion, they have also become increasingly critical of the practices within the MeK as well. As recent as March 2004, Amnesty International issued a report in their monthly magazine chronicling the reports of abuse by a former member of the MeK, Hossein Mashoufi. The report gives a brief look into one former member's experience in the MeK, and, if

⁸² Masoud Banisadr, 300.

⁸³ Ibid.

true, paints a very unflattering picture of life within the MeK. Of note, the report states the following:

Hossein Mashoufi said the beatings he received from the PMOI (People's Mojahedin Organisation of Iran) severely damaged his kidneys and that he was hospitalised for a time in Baghdad. In July 2001, AI wrote to the PMOI about the reports that Hossein Mashoufi had been tortured in Iraq and received a prompt reply from the organization. It included a letter, allegedly in Hossein Mashoufi's hand, claiming that he had not been detained and that the allegations were false. The PMOI offered to arrange for AI (Amnesty International) to speak with him - while he continued to be under PMOI supervision - if there were further concerns. Following his eventual escape from the PMOI, Hossein Mashoufi sought refugee status in a European country. Research undertaken by AI helped support his successful asylum claim and Hossein Mashoufi is now safe. AI has been able to speak freely with him. He confirmed that he was forced to write the letter stating that he was safe. He also confirmed that he still requires medicine to control the functioning of his kidneys, which remain damaged as a result of the beating he claims to have received at the hands of the PMOI.⁸⁴

There are in fact other reports that criticize the MeK and its practices on the Amnesty International website, all generally explaining similar acts as noted above. Human Rights Watch, for their part, has compiled a much greater list of abuses and questionable practices within the MeK. In a May 2005 report entitled 'No Exit: Human Rights Abuses Inside the Mojahedin Khalq Camps', Human Rights Watch (HRW) interviewed twelve former members of the MeK who were either found in Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq following the 2003 US invasion, or were located in Europe where they were living. The summary of their testimonies reads very much like the Amnesty International report, although in greater detail. Of note, the HRW report summarizes that:

⁸⁴Amnesty International. <http://web.amnesty.org/wire/March2004/PMOI> Accessed May 3, 2006.

The former MKO members reported abuses ranging from detention and persecution of ordinary members wishing to leave the organization, to lengthy solitary confinements, severe beatings, and torture of dissident members. The MKO held political dissidents in its internal prisons during the 1990s and later turned over many of them to Iraqi authorities, who held them in Abu Ghraib. In one case, Mohammad Hussein Sobhani was held in solitary confinement for eight-and-a-half years inside the MKO camps, from September 1992 to January 2001. The witnesses reported two cases of deaths under interrogation. Three dissident members—Abbas Sadeghinejad, Ali Ghashghavi, and Alireza Mir Asgari—witnessed the death of a fellow dissident, Parviz Ahmadi, inside their prison cell in Camp Ashraf. Abbas Sadeghinejad told Human Rights Watch that he also witnessed the death of another prisoner, Ghorbanali Torabi, after Torabi was returned from an interrogation session to a prison cell that he shared with Sadeghinejad.⁸⁵

This excerpt was taken from the 'summary' section of the report, and is elaborated on greatly within the report. These reports were and are extremely damaging to the credibility of the MeK as a viable alternative to the current government in Iran, and perhaps explain why the MeK has lobbied Western politicians and governments more than they have NGOs. This is perhaps also explained by one of Clifford Bob's advantages of personal lobbying, that of controlling the message that a group is trying to present. By directly lobbying governments, politicians, and political bodies, the MeK can confront criticisms such as those found in the reports by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, and present their version of events without the risk of damaging their image and credibility. It should be noted also that the MeK downplayed these reports by saying that it was a former member of Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), described by the MeK as "a notorious mafia

⁸⁵Human Rights Watch. <http://hrw.org/backgrounder/mena/iran0505/index.htm> Accessed May 3, 2006.

of terror, murder, espionage, and organised crime”⁸⁶, that provided, in a systematic way, information to international NGOs about human rights abuses within the MeK in order to discredit the organisation in the eyes of Western nations and the United Nations. The MeK in fact provides an affidavit given to the Federal Appeals Court in Washington D.C. in 2001 by Jamshid Tafrishi, an ex-MOIS mole within the MeK, which explains the Iranian government’s plan to tarnish the image of the MeK through these allegations as retaliation for information that the MeK was providing to the same NGOs on human rights abuses in Iran.⁸⁷ Although these allegations and counter allegations are difficult to verify and lead to questions regarding the credibility of the MeK (perhaps the intended effect of the HRW and Amnesty International reports regardless of their source), they at least shed light on the reasons that the MeK might not feel that lobbying NGOs is a wise course of action for their organisation.

2.2 The MeK’s Activities in Raising Awareness of the Organisation:

With respect to raising awareness of the organisation, the *Mojahedin-e-Khalq* certainly exhibits many if not most of the characteristics and activities that Clifford Bob describes in The Marketing of Rebellion. Masoud Banisadr in fact gives an excellent account of the MeK’s activities in this regard, particularly relating to their public events and gatherings. As an early example of the MeK’s skill in using public events to attract attention to the group, Banisadr describes an incident involving the MeK and the French

⁸⁶ Mohammad Mohadessin, *Enemies of the Ayatollahs: The Iranian Opposition’s War on Islamic Fundamentalism*, (London: Zed Books, 2004), 185.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 186-188.

government. Following the French government's expulsion of 14 MeK members to Gabon as an exchange for the release of French hostages in Lebanon⁸⁸, Masoud Rajavi called on members of the MeK to stage hunger strikes as a protest. As Banisadr describes, "Rajavi asked all our members and supporters to mount hunger strikes in front of the French embassies in their respective countries. In Paris, supporters went on hunger strikes in front of the offices of the UNHCR; the exiles in Gabon also took part. This political fight with the French government lasted nearly forty days, and was the Mojahedin's biggest ever political victory."⁸⁹ He adds, "The strike made headline news almost daily in the French media and in many other countries. The French government was almost universally condemned for its actions. *The Times* reported that 'The British Refugee Council accused the French government yesterday of having violated the international convention on refugees...', while the *New York Times* said Chirac's government had dishonoured itself."⁹⁰ Although this example is from the late 1980s, it shows the MeK's early public relations savvy in dealing with the international press in order to publicize its cause.

Banisadr offers other examples of the MeK's public events that were designed to raise awareness of the group and paint it in a favourable light. One example of this was a military parade that the MeK arranged in Iraq in 1993 to demonstrate the strength of the NLA: "Most of our American and European supporters and members came to help organize it, and all combatants had prepared for the parade for months beforehand. Everything that moved was

⁸⁸ See page 26.

⁸⁹ Masoud Banisadr, 269.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

painted; new flags and emblems were made, roads were rebuilt and trees uprooted and planted around the parade route. The media were invited and plied with imported luxury food and drink, which occasioned some teasing, as there was generally a shortage of everything in Iraq.”⁹¹ The MeK also used press coverage to distort actual events and re-frame the event in a positive light that would prove advantageous for the MeK, as was the case during a Democratic Party fundraiser in Washington, D.C. As Banisadr reveals, “Mohadessin managed to secure an invitation to a dinner party with President Bill Clinton present. Photographs of the party were printed in our papers, described as the official meeting of our representative with the president, who even sent regards to Maryam. The usual courtesies of American politicians were treated as something special, like personal letters of congratulation or messages of support for the organisation.”⁹²

Banisadr goes on to show other ways in which the MeK sought to raise awareness of the organisation and promote its agenda. Of some significance was a weekly television show that dealt with current issues in Iranian politics. It is interesting to note the strategies that Banisadr employed on the television show in order to make it (and by extension, the MeK) more attractive to viewers. One example of this is that the host of the show, who was the wife of a NCR member, purposely did not wear traditionally Islamic or *Mojahedin* dress, but rather a more Westernised attire. Also, “...the questions to which we then provided answers replicated, in tone and content, those we normally

⁹¹ Masoud Banisadr, 344.

⁹² Ibid, 364.

got from ordinary people, even those on the side of the enemy.”⁹³ This is certainly very clever political marketing, as the message is framed in a medium that is popular and wide reaching, and also comes off as progressive and open both due to the nature of the content (i.e.: questions that enemies of the MeK would put to them) as well as the image of the broadcast itself (with a host dressing as she pleases, in contrast to the dress restrictions that are imposed on women in Iran).

As Bob noted in his section on raising awareness, the international press is a logical way that a group can raise its image and status, however this also carries the risk of unfavourable coverage that can certainly harm a movement. Examples of both positive and negative results can be seen with regards to the MeK’s engagement with the international press in recent years. Certainly, it must be noted that many factors affect whether the MeK will receive coverage that is positive or negative. When one examines news sources, the first bias that becomes obvious relates to the orientation of the press service itself. Perhaps it is an obvious fact, but the various press services that are pro-regime in their orientation demonise the MeK at every opportunity, whereas websites, articles and magazines that are produced by one of the many organisations tied to the MeK obviously paint the group in a positive light. With respect to the Western media, again, there seems to be discrepancies based on the topic of the article relating to the MeK. If the article or speech’s focus is on the MeK’s efforts in recent years to expose the Iranian regime’s covert nuclear program, then generally it can be said that the

⁹³ Ibid, 393.

reporting on them is positive. As an example, authors Michael Isikoff and Mark Hosenball, in an article for *Newsweek* magazine, wrote, "Despite the group's notoriety, Bush himself cited purported intelligence gathered by MEK as evidence of the Iranian regime's rapidly accelerating nuclear ambitions. At a March 16th news conference, Bush said Iran's hidden nuclear program had been discovered not because of international inspections but 'because a dissident group pointed it out to the world.' White House aides acknowledged later that the dissident group cited by the president is the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI)..."⁹⁴ Certainly, this must be considered as positive coverage, as few insurgent groups are named by the White House in press briefings, particularly in a manner that pays tribute to the group for their efforts in exposing Iran's nuclear ambitions.

For the most part, it must be said that articles referring to this aspect of the MeK's recent past have been positive, as is further evidenced in a speech by Canadian Member of Parliament David Kilgour, who opined, "If it had not been for the People's Mojahedin Organisation (PMOI) and the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) disclosing Iran's nuclear program in 2002, the Iranian regime may now have had nuclear weapons at its disposal."⁹⁵ This trend of positive reporting relating to the MeK's disclosure of Iran's nuclear activities seems for the most part to be constant with regards to the Western media. However, beyond that particular aspect of the MeK's recent history, the Western media has covered the MeK with a combination of

⁹⁴Michael Isikoff and Mark Hosenball, "MKO: Notorious Source" *Newsweek*, 18 May 2005.
<http://msnbc.msn.com/id/7902719/site/newsweek/page/3/> Accessed April 26, 2006.

⁹⁵ <http://www.david-kilgour.com/mp/Democratic%20Change%20in%20Iran.htm> Accessed May 10, 2006.

scepticism and apprehension due to other factors from the group's past and present.

As Clifford Bob warned in his section on 'raising international awareness', engaging the media can result in both positive and negative reporting about an insurgent group. As Bob states, "for a challenger to rely on media promotion is risky and uncertain...in using the press, insurgents risk losing control over their arguments and image. Indeed, media definitions of a story may lead to damaging revelations about a movement. In most cases...a movement's message filtered through journalistic lenses will not represent an insurgent group's view of the issues."⁹⁶ This caveat provided by Bob is evidenced perfectly by an article written by Elizabeth Rubin for *The New York Times* in July 2003. Shortly after the defeat of Iraq by U.S.-led coalition forces, Rubin travelled to Camp Ashraf, the largest *Mojahedin* base in Iraq, to write a story on the MeK and their future prospects, particularly vis-à-vis U.S. foreign policy. She was hosted by the group on her visit, and was given a tour of the base as well as access to the MeK members stationed there. One would suppose that this cordial reception was afforded to Rubin for two reasons: because she represented a respected American newspaper with wide circulation; and because she is a woman and as such would presumably be impressed by the female-dominated military base. Undoubtedly seeking some positive press from Rubin's visit to the base, the MeK would certainly be frustrated and upset at the content of her article.

⁹⁶ Clifford Bob, 25.

Rubin begins her article by describing and explaining the MeK and their political goals for regime change in Iran. She gives a brief background on the group that covers the past thirty years, discusses the debate among policy-makers in Washington regarding the United States' relationship with the group, and discusses potential future outcomes. She also notes early in the article, in a somewhat complimentary manner, "Led by a charismatic husband-and-wife duo, Maryam and Masoud Rajavi, the Mujahedeen had transformed itself into the only army in the world with a commander corps composed mostly of women."⁹⁷ In describing her initial impressions upon arriving at Camp Ashraf, Rubin notes, "As you pass the checkpoints and dragons' teeth tire crunchers into the tidy military town, you feel you've entered a fictional world of female worker bees."⁹⁸ Rubin's descriptions of the surface features of the MeK – their military precision, the order, the cleanliness, the meticulousness – are indeed positive and give the impression that this group is professional, respectful, and well organized. However as the article continues and Rubin delves into the more nefarious aspects of the MeK's past, the tone of her article changes notably. She continues to interview various female members of the MeK, and receives the general impression that for the most part, the women who had joined the MeK felt that they were empowered by Maryam Rajavi's message and genuinely believed that they were contributing to the liberation of Iran. Under the surface of these stories however, Rubin notes a robotic-quality to the tales of self-empowerment and unwavering allegiance to the Rajavis, and moves to

⁹⁷ Elizabeth Rubin, "The Cult of Rajavi", *The New York Times*, 13 July, 2003 as seen on <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/07/13/magazine/13MUJAHADEEN.html> Accessed May 12, 2006.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

question the leadership of the MeK and the constant allegations of cult-like worship that afflicts the group.

In discussing the most contentious move of the MeK's history, that of allying themselves with Saddam Hussein in 1986 following the group's exile from France, Rubin states, "In 1986, the French began forging ties with Khomeini and kicked out Rajavi and his squads of assassins, who ran into the arms of Saddam Hussein. Hussein had been welcoming the Mujahedeen for several years. Rajavi, in return, betrayed his own countrymen, identifying Iranian military targets for Iraq to bomb, a move most Iranians will never forgive."⁹⁹ Following that, Rubin describes the highly controversial marriage between Maryam and Masoud by saying "The *coup de grace* that metamorphosed the party into something more like a husband-and-wife-led cult was Masoud's spectacular theft of his colleague's wife, Maryam. Masoud fell in love with her and invented an entire political program to elevate her into a revolutionary queen and to justify her divorce from her husband. Women should be equal to men, Masoud claimed, and Maryam should be an equal leader by his side. But working together without being married would be a violation of Islamic law. So he manoeuvred her divorce and called it a 'cultural revolution'."¹⁰⁰

Rubin's article continues to damn the MeK on all fronts, criticizing their brainwashing of children, the lack of freedom of thought and expression in the organisation, the dictatorial nature of the leadership, the sexual segregation within the group, and their role as paramilitaries in the Iraqi army. On the last

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

point, Rubin provides a damning quote by Maryam Rajavi, revealed by a number of former-MeK members. In discussing the MeK's involvement in helping Saddam Hussein suppress the 1991 uprisings of Kurdish and Shia groups following the Gulf War, the author reports that Maryam commanded "Take the Kurds under your tanks, and save your bullets for the Iranian Revolutionary Guards."¹⁰¹ Although the list of criticisms of the MeK is long and continues throughout the remainder of Rubin's article, her conclusion is neatly summed up in the article's final line. It reads, "It seems dangerously myopic that the U.S. is even considering resurrecting the Rajavis and their army of Stepford wives."¹⁰² It must be said that the tone and content of Elizabeth Rubin's article is for the most part mirrored by most recent reporting on the MeK.¹⁰³ It seems that in reviewing and examining the organisation, there is simply too many contentious issues and questionable practices that media sources can dissect, amplify, and focus on when discussing this group. This phenomenon is precisely what Clifford Bob referred to when discussing a group losing control over its argument and image. The MeK may welcome international press coverage of their organisation as it enhances the awareness of the group, but as Elizabeth Rubin's article and countless others like it show, the result can be more detrimental than optimal.

2.3 Recent Efforts at 'Framing' to Match Targeted Supporters:

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ The vast majority of (Western) online and print news sources reviewed for this paper mirrored the findings of Elizabeth Rubin, as many concentrated on either the cult-like image of the group, its relationship with Saddam Hussein, or its image as hypocrites in Iran.

Despite the trend of negative reporting on the MeK, particularly since the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq when the group was once again cast into the spotlight as their role in Iranian politics was brought into question, the group has fought to maintain their image and promote a vision of the organisation that they themselves would like to see portrayed. This will become increasingly important for the MeK as the United States increases diplomatic and political pressure on Iran over their nuclear program. As noted earlier, the years of 2001 to 2006 represent probably the highest level of tension between the United States and Iran since 1979-1981 with the Iranian Revolution and the subsequent control of the country by the mullahs. This tension has also increased greatly since the June 2005 election of President Ahmadinejad and his increasingly defiant anti-Western, anti-Israeli rhetoric. Strategically, it would seem that it is imperative for the MeK to promote and maintain a strong image for the organisation at this time when their interests are so closely in line with the Bush administrations'. As such, the MeK has pursued two political marketing strategies in order to counter negative publicity by the international press and also in order to present their message and cause unhindered by critiques or political circumstances.

The first of these two approaches is through the print media, where the MeK published a book in 2004 entitled Enemies of the Ayatollahs: The Iranian Opposition's War on Islamic Fundamentalism (London: Zed Books 2004, 274 pages). This book was written by Mohammad Mohaddessin, the NCRI's Foreign Affairs Committee chairman, and is intended to criticize both the Iranian government under the mullahs, as well as the West's policies towards

Iran over the past twenty years. This book is squarely aimed at a Western audience, as a brief perusal of the cover and back of the book will reveal. Although it may be cliché not to 'judge a book by its cover', Mohaddessin's book is, at first glance, very cleverly entitled. By naming the book 'Enemies of the Ayatollahs', the MeK is stating unambiguously that their group is to be seen as the antithesis of the ruling clerics in Iran, and as such they are making a veiled appeal to Western readers, saying that if they are opposed to the leadership in Iran, then they are 'with' the MeK. This message of contrast between the MeK and the ruling clerics is reinforced by two images on the cover of the book: at the top there is a picture of young, twenty-something Iranians carrying away a bleeding friend, presumably injured in a confrontation with government security forces; at the bottom, there is a picture of three clerics, old and stoic. The images are intended to represent Iranian society as the MeK sees it: the young and passionate who fight for change, and the aged, emotionless mullahs who oppress the masses.

The back cover of the book is replete with testimonials praising the MeK and its efforts towards political change in Iran. These include James Atkins, former U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Win Griffiths, a British MP and former cabinet minister, Raymond Tanter, former member of the National Security Council, as well as other prominent politicians and professors. The intention is of course to show that these respected Western politicians and educators, knowledgeable in Middle Eastern politics and affairs, are supporters of the MeK and its efforts. All of the reviews are glowing and

generate a sense that the MeK is right in its position and that the West should support this group as a counterbalance to Islamic fundamentalism.

In fact, the issue of Islamic fundamentalism is central to the book, and for good reason. Undoubtedly, Mohaddessin placed the emphasis of his book on this issue and not instead on other issues surrounding the Iranian government, such as the restrictions on freedoms in Iran or the regime's dismal record on human rights. Issues such as these, despite their importance, simply would not generate sufficient interest from a Western readership. This is because issues that pertain to the internal affairs of Iran, including human rights abuses and the state's control of many aspects of everyday life, are of little interest to the average Westerner who is concerned more with what their media presents on a daily basis. For example, the average American is far more likely to be concerned with the issue of illegal immigration in 2006 than with human rights abuses in Iran, largely due to the fact that the main media outlets in the United States (Fox, CNN, NBC, CBS, etc) spend more time covering issues that directly impact their viewers.

Islamic fundamentalism however is an issue that has touched many Western nations, from the September 11th attacks in the United States, to the London subway and bus bombings of 2005, to the Madrid train attacks of 2004, all of which were linked to Muslim extremist groups. Although the book places Islamic fundamentalism at the forefront, Mohaddessin also takes the opportunity to confront the MeK's detractors on all fronts, answering most if not all accusations against the group. How convincing his defences are is up

for debate, however the important issue regarding this book is its use as a political marketing tool. Through slick packaging, clever emphasis, and a 'defence-through-offence' technique, Mohaddessin skilfully uses this form of media to promote the MeK's views and platform in a manner that is tantalizing to the reader.

The second political marketing technique that the MeK has employed in recent years is a series of websites, something Clifford Bob refers to sceptically in terms of its effectiveness in promoting an insurgent group's message. As he writes, "Recently, many local movements have established Web sites replete with documents, flags, maps, and contribution buttons. These serve as beachheads for disseminating carefully screened information to a world audience. But since the unaware are unlikely to stumble on an insurgent's home page, such Web sites are most useful for movements that already have a high profile or existing support base."¹⁰⁴ Bob's description of an insurgent group's use of Web sites seems a perfect fit in terms of the MeK, for they had the financial resources and existing profile to make a website worthwhile. In fact, the MeK can be considered somewhat as pioneers in the use of the Internet by an insurgent group, as former member Masoud Banisadr notes that in 1996, "Maryam (Rajavi) had made the revolutionary decision to use the Internet to communicate with members and supporters."¹⁰⁵ This is in fact quite amazing if one considers that the MeK has thus had a presence on the Internet for over a decade, shortly after *www.cnn.com*, self-

¹⁰⁴ Clifford Bob, 25.

¹⁰⁵ Masoud Banisadr, 457.

described as “the first major news and information website on the Internet”, was established on August 30, 1995.¹⁰⁶

In 2006, the MeK’s employs various websites in order to promote its agenda. Its main sites are *www.maryam-rajavi.com*, *www.iran-e-azad.org*, and *www.ncr-iran.org*. A detailed analysis of each website would go beyond the scope of this chapter, and thus the MeK’s main site (*www.ncr-iran.org*) will be looked at. At first glance, the website appears clean and well designed. In the centre of the page runs a series of news articles relating to either the MeK or the Iranian government. There are numerous articles both demonising the Iranian regime as well as praising the MeK and their efforts to expose Iran’s nuclear program. The majority of the articles are produced by the NCRI themselves, yet these articles are complimented by other news stories by, among others, *Agence France Presse*, *The New York Times*, and the *Associated Press*. The inclusion of these various press reports from around the world give a sense of the international scope of the concern over Iran’s nuclear plans, and works to reinforce the MeK’s claims about the regime and their nuclear plans. What is particularly impressive about the content is the regularity with which it is updated. Whereas some insurgent groups might establish a website on the Internet as a sort of general portal for information on that group’s struggle, the MeK’s main website strives to be an up to date news site dedicated to disseminating information on the Iranian regime’s activities, not unlike the sites produced by major news organisations, albeit on a lesser scale and with more specific content. This daily updating of the

¹⁰⁶ Information from: <http://www.cnn.com>

MeK's main website is also a testament to how serious the group sees their struggle against the Iranian regime, and conveys the image that the group works tirelessly in pursuit of regime change in the country.

Although the nuclear issue has been a central issue since 2003, the website also presents accounts on human rights abuses in Iran (including pictures of executions), Iran's interference in post-Saddam Iraq, and the continuing efforts to have the MeK removed from both the U.S. and E.U. terror lists. In fact, this final point is also an important aspect to the website. On the right side of the website's home page, there are various links to sites dedicated to the removal of the MeK from international terrorism lists, seen as key to any future success for the group by its leaders. These include documents detailing various European political entities and their vowed support for the MeK, among them the Belgian Senate, a large group of British Parliamentarians, and members of the European Parliament. There also appears a link to a petition that one can sign to "appeal to save the lives of political prisoners in Iran", as well as legal opinions from prominent European lawyers and educators on the validity of the inclusion of the MeK on various terror lists.¹⁰⁷ Also of interest is a link to a white paper produced by the Iran Policy Committee, described by the NCRI as an "independent U.S. policy group" which advocates the removal of the MeK from the U.S. list of terrorist organisations. It is interesting to note that the Iran Policy Committee's membership is comprised of some of the same people who provided the

¹⁰⁷ All information in this section taken from <http://www.ncr-iran.org> Accessed May 21, 2006.

glowing reviews for Mohammad Mohaddessin's book, Enemies of the Ayatollahs, including James Atkins and Raymond Tanter.

The NCRI website also includes a video news broadcast updated daily which reinforces the site's efforts to be seen as more than a propaganda tool. The news broadcast, produced by Iranian National Television (INTV), is essentially an up to date report on all issues relating to the *mojahedin*, and runs for approximately ten minutes. Again, as with the MeK's book and websites, the packaging is exciting, with music and graphics reminiscent of any major Western news network. The website also offers links to Lion & Sun, the "magazine of the Iranian resistance",¹⁰⁸ as well as Iran Liberation, a publication of the NCRI foreign affairs committee. As with the INTV broadcast, these MeK publications are well-packaged and laid-out, however it must be said that in the end, they do come off as pure propaganda, since they all extol the virtues of the MeK and the Iranian resistance while condemning virtually all aspects of the regime in Tehran. That being said, the issue of impartiality with regards to the content is almost a non-issue, as the website and various other media accessed through www.ncr-iran.org serves its purpose completely, which is to inform those outside Iran of the MeK and its mission, in a manner that is enticing appealing and wholly complimentary to their organization. The website must also be credited with increasing the transparency of the MeK. There are various links that describe the structure and procedures of the NCRI, as well as the group's position on a wide variety of issues, from women's rights, the role of religion in the state, democracy in

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

Iran, and the autonomy of Kurdistan, to name a few. Despite the understandable lack of impartiality and heavy bias towards the MeK in its content, the group's website is an extremely useful and clever tool for the MeK in their struggle against the Iranian government.

2.4 Assessment of MeK's Political Marketing Techniques

As can be seen in this chapter, the MeK employs a wide array of strategies, tactics, and resources in order to attract support. From lobbying, to books, to websites, and the many other ways in which the group draws attention to itself and seeks support, the MeK exhibits many of the features that Clifford Bob outlines in The Marketing of Rebellion. If we break down Bob's methodology in his section entitled *Movement Strategies for Attracting NGO Support*,¹⁰⁹ we can see that the MeK employs many of the tactics described by Bob. In terms of *targeted lobbying*, the MeK has obviously placed a major emphasis on this aspect of their political marketing. They have also adopted many other lobbying-related activities outlined by Bob, such as stationing representatives in strategically important cities such as New York, London, and Washington, establishing websites, attending international conferences, as well as concentrating on personal as opposed to indirect lobbying. As we have seen, this lobbying has taken the form primarily of political lobbying of politicians both in the United States and Europe, as well as in other Western nations. Their focus has undoubtedly been on elected officials, and not, as Bob puts it,

¹⁰⁹ Clifford Bob, 22.

“on NGOs with real political clout.”¹¹⁰ This can perhaps be explained by the damaging relationship that the MeK has had with some major NGOs in the past few years. There could exist deep suspicion and apprehension within the MeK towards NGOs based on the damaging reports produced by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. Furthermore, since it is the MeK’s contention (based on Mohaddessin’s book, Enemies of the Ayatollahs) that AI and HRW based their reports on falsified information provided by Iranian intelligence, it is unlikely that they would view those NGOs as impartial and fair in their reporting, and thus the MeK would bypass these NGOs and instead lobby foreign governments and politicians directly.

With respect to media use, the MeK again follows Bob’s prescriptions as to the benefits of this strategy, and, consequently, also fell prey to the pitfalls that Bob warned of with respect to engaging the international media.

Although recently they have benefited from increased media scrutiny over Iran’s nuclear program and their role as a whistleblower, this increased media attention has caused some international press to take a closer look at the group, and consequently criticize the MeK over various aspects of their organisation, as can be seen in Elizabeth Rubin’s exposé for *The New York Times*. Despite some media outlets’ praise of the MeK and their efforts at ending Iran’s theocratic system of government imposed by the ruling mullahs, it must be said that far more stories on the group produced by Western media seem to raise doubts about the soundness of pursuing a policy of rapprochement to the MeK by their respective governments. In fact, if one

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 23.

looks at Clifford Bob's sub-section on *Matching NGO Expectations*¹¹¹, the MeK on the surface seems to fulfil most if not all of the criteria that Bob references in terms of 'framing' to match an NGO's expectations.

As Bob states in The Marketing of Rebellion, "Whether an insurgency raises awareness through direct lobbying or media promotion, support is not assured."¹¹² Instead, Bob feels that support is more likely to be forthcoming if the insurgent group fulfils five attributes that providers of support look for. These are: substantive goals, customary tactics, ethical precepts, cultural attitudes, and organisational needs. A summary of what each of these attributes refers to, according to Bob, is found in chapter one (pages 12-14). The following is a list of MeK attributes that appear to match those outlined by Bob:

Substantive Matching / Goals:

- MeK places themselves and the Iranian regime in stark contrast by emphasising the ascendance of women in the *Mojahedin* as opposed to the mullah's misogynistic policies.
- Particularly since the election of President Ahmadinejad in June 2005, the MeK has criticized his controversial speeches and contrasted those with the more placid demeanour of Maryam Rajavi.
- As a result of the two examples above, the MeK has successfully framed their struggle as a 'good guy' versus 'bad guy', thus stripping their conflict of complexities that few in Western countries would understand.
- President Ahmadinejad's recent belligerent comments, particularly towards Israel, as well as the 'rogue' status conferred to Iran since President Bush's 'Axis of Evil' speech, and re-emphasized since the uncovering of Iran's nuclear program, has made the Iranian regime a useful and convenient opponent for the MeK.

¹¹¹ Clifford Bob, 26.

¹¹² Ibid.

Cultural Matching:

- Having been in existence since 1965, the MeK's organizational culture has evolved to the point where today they are a well-organised and well-structured insurgent group.
- Their command structure, diplomatic representatives, structural cohesiveness, and armed forces testify to the group's appealing organisational culture that will improve their chances at securing support from an NGO or government who shares these same attributes and seeks them out in a potential client.
- Well-established knowledge of political procedures in Western countries, particularly Western Europe and the United States.

Tactical Matching:

- MeK has established a wide-array of tactics for increasing their appeal, from providing intelligence to Western governments and NGOs on human rights issues in Iran, to exposing the Iranian regime's nuclear program.
- As such, they can appeal both to NGOs such as AI and HRW, who seek first-hand information on human rights abuses inside Iran (which is difficult to acquire), as well as to Western governments who seek political and military-related information on the Iranian state.

Ethical Matching:

- The MeK uses many of the prescribed "acceptable means in pursuit of their goals"¹¹³ as described by Bob, such as issuing press releases (as can be seen daily on www.ncr-iran.org), lobbying representatives and politicians, supporting candidates, and building consensus among potential supporters.
- Despite the MeK's violent past with respect to actions taken against the Iranian regime, the group portrays these actions as righteous acts against an oppressive regime that regularly imprisons and tortures members of the group.
- Despite this framing, the MeK's violent past undoubtedly poses problems for certain NGOs, and is part of the reason the United States has labelled the group a terrorist organisation.

Organisational Matching:

¹¹³ Clifford Bob, 35.

- The MeK presents an image of unity, and downplays any reports of dissent within the group.
- Their emphasis on gender equality works to their advantage, as it is an issue whose profile many Western governments and NGOs would like to be raised in the Middle East.
- The *Mojahedin* are certainly a cohesive group, dominated by the Rajavis, and managed by a professional staff well versed in organisational norms as found among NGOs and Western governments.
- Problems in this area include: difficulties in proving that they have a sufficient support base within Iran; difficulty in proving that they can be trusted as potential allies to Western governments and NGOs; and difficulty in proving that support of the MeK will not be fruitless and that the group will not harm the government's or NGO's overall image and reputation.

If then, the majority of Bob's attributes seem to be met by the MeK, what accounts for the group's inability to secure support from either Western governments or NGOs? This question will be examined in the following chapter, which will analyse both the movement characteristics of the MeK and the opponent characteristics of the Iranian regime.

Chapter three will focus on Bob's *structural factors affecting success of movement strategies*, which are essentially the characteristics of both the insurgent group and its opponent and how their respective characteristics govern whether the political marketing strategies of the insurgent group will be successful or not. By including this caveat in his research, Clifford Bob is showing that support is far from guaranteed even if the insurgent group runs a credible marketing campaign that closely follows his movement strategies as outlined and discussed in the previous chapter. The six movement characteristics – standing, contacts, knowledge, material resources, organizational resources, and leadership – can indeed prove to be more important than the political marketing campaign that a group chooses to adopt. Regardless of how successful a marketing campaign the insurgent group adopts, it will matter little if the group has, for example, weak leadership, few contacts, and a low international profile. It should be noted that certain analyses of the MeK's structural factors will involve events prior to the timeline focused on in this paper, mainly because certain events from the MeK's recent past (during the 1990s mostly) are important in examining such structural factors as leadership and material resources.

This chapter will also discuss the characteristics of the insurgent group's opponent, in this case the mullahs who run Iran's theocratic government. Certainly, an assessment of the Iranian regime's 'characteristics' could run many hundreds of pages, particularly now with the country being led (at least publicly) by its controversial president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and the

country's crucial role in shaping the Middle East region in the twenty first century. In fact, Iran's geo-strategic position and international economic importance make the state exceptionally pertinent to this study. As Bob states, "The media and many NGOs pay disproportionate attention to large, economically important, or strategically located states. Insurgents from these states...have a structural advantage in attracting media reporting."¹¹⁴ So as not to attempt an analysis of Iran that would go beyond the parameters of this paper, the Iranian regime will be studied according to Bob's two opponent characteristics – identity and reactions – and will be examined in the time period of 2001-2006 so as to focus the research more clearly.

3.1 Movement Characteristics of the MeK:

Standing: According to Bob's section on *Who Wins Support*¹¹⁵, an insurgent group's international standing plays a crucial role in whether or not the group will receive the support it seeks by NGOs and governments, as "standing provides insurgents with a platform on which to launch appeals."¹¹⁶ Bob further emphasizes the importance of standing when he adds, "high standing may attract support even if the insurgency's goals are poorly understood – as Tibetan flags on rusted bumpers attest."¹¹⁷ Based on this, what then is the international standing of the MeK? Certainly this question is highly debatable, and opinions on this will differ based on who is asked. For the purposes of this paper, we will look at the MeK's standing in the West, where this paper

¹¹⁴ Clifford Bob, 49.

¹¹⁵ Clifford Bob, 43-50.

¹¹⁶ Clifford Bob, 43.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

has focussed its attention to this point. To the average person, it is most likely the case that the MeK is not well known, as their public actions in the West have been limited to rallies and public speeches. It is certainly plausible that some of the MeK's public actions, most recently and notably the June 2003 self-immolation of several members of the group in front of French embassies in Europe in response to a French crackdown on the group and its leader Maryam Rajavi, have garnered sufficient attention to at least make the group recognizable to some Westerners. Beyond average citizens however, the standing of the MeK in the eyes of many Western countries is uncertain. True, many policy-makers in Western governments and NGOs will know the MeK as the largest and most recognizable Iranian opposition group, yet the reasons that the group is well known are less than flattering. Essentially, there are four main sources of standing and recognition for the MeK in the West. The first is their background as a Marxist-Islamist group who were bitterly opposed to the Shah and his American supporters and advisers. As was discussed earlier, this opposition eventually caused the *Mojahedin* to attack various Western companies as well as target American military personnel liaising with their Iranian counterparts.

The second reason is the group's involvement in the 1979 hostage crisis in Iran, where over-zealous students took control of the American embassy in Tehran and held their American captives for 444 days. Although it is uncertain whether MeK members were directly involved in the takeover, in a 1993 letter to U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher, Rep. Lee Hamilton wrote that "As shown in attached 1981 excerpts from the PMOI's own

newspaper...the group fully supported the takeover and opposed releasing our diplomats.”¹¹⁸ Although both this example and the former date back over twenty five years, they are nonetheless reasons as to the MeK’s notoriety among Western governments and NGOs, and these can only be seen as detrimental aspects of the group’s past which hinder their chances at gaining support. Further to these two sources of the MeK’s international standing is the group’s involvement with Saddam Hussein from the early 1980s until 2003. Various aspects of this relationship – from the resultant nickname of ‘hypocrites’ that the MeK earned from Iranians and their subsequent loss of popularity in Iran, to the MeK’s role as Hussein’s personal militia, to the suspicion felt towards the MeK in many Western countries due to the group being so closely associated with Hussein for such a long period of time – tend to damage the MeK’s international standing and thus diminish the chances of the group receiving support from Western governments and NGOs. More recently, and lastly, another source of recognition and standing for the MeK has been their recent attempts to provide intelligence to Western governments on Iran’s nuclear program. Certainly, this is a positive source of recognition, as their activities not only served their own interests, but also those of Western governments and of certain NGOs such as Greenpeace, who seeks “to end nuclear power, reprocessing, and waste dumping.”¹¹⁹ However, this positive action on the part of the MeK must be weighed against past sources of their international standing, and in the end it must be said that one positive deed cannot outweigh three negative ones, particularly given the nature of the first three examples listed in this section.

¹¹⁸ http://www.fas.org/irp/congress/1993_cr/h930929-terror-pmoi.htm Accessed June 1, 2006.

¹¹⁹ <http://www.greenpeace.org/international/campaigns/nuclear> Accessed June 1, 2006.

Along with its disclosure of Iran's nuclear program, another way in which the MeK has sought to improve its international standing has been through association with popular Iranians, or in other words through 'celebrity appeal'. This approach for increasing a group's standing has also been outlined by Clifford Bob, who notes, "Attracting a celebrity to one's cause – a Princess Diana or a Richard Gere - builds stature through reflected glory."¹²⁰ The MeK employed this strategy with some success in 1994, when they convinced the famous Iranian singer Marzieh to join the *Mojahedin*. This move was an impressive feat of political marketing by the MeK at the time, and was covered in the international press. The Associated Press covered the story and ran a photograph with the following caption: "Marzieh, once the grande dame of Iranian music during the Shah's reign, poses with Iranian resistance president-elect Maryam Rajavi at her residence in Auvers-sur-Oise, north of Paris. Marzieh, 69, vowed Tuesday never to return to the homeland she left three weeks ago until the hardline clerics who rule it are overthrown."¹²¹ In his memoirs which describes various MeK political marketing strategies, Masoud Banisadr also describes how the MeK wanted to present this bit of public relations good fortune, stating, "One of the other celebrities in our circle cleverly suggested that Marzieh announce her support for the organisation not in a meeting with Maryam but at a huge concert abroad, perhaps in Los Angeles, where her first concert after the overthrow of the Shah would probably attract tens of thousands of people."¹²² It must be added however that in Banisadr's opinion, the MeK's experience in attracting celebrities to

¹²⁰ Clifford Bob, 44.

¹²¹ Masoud Banisadr, 411.

¹²² Ibid.

their cause was a wasted effort. As he opines, "...the Mojahedin decided to monopolise all the celebrities associated with us. Our work with them was, in my view, a sorry tale in the end. Instead of getting them to introduce us to people as a democratic alternative to the Iranian regime, they were merely drafted as new 'members' of the NCR, like any others, good for nothing much except praising our leaders unreservedly."¹²³ Therefore, we can see that the MeK did enlist celebrities to increase their standing and stature, however Banisadr's views leave the impression that perhaps the MeK did not use this 'celebrity appeal' to its full potential, ideally that of enlisting new members into the MeK.

Contacts: Bob's second factor affecting the success of a movement's strategies in political marketing is a group's contacts, both in the political realm and with international NGOs. Contacts are very important to a movement's success for a number of reasons. They can provide a wide network of support to an insurgent group, be used as a fundraising apparatus in foreign countries, and lend a global perspective to a group's struggle. Clifford Bob also adds, "An active diaspora in a global city can also make a major difference, alerting NGOs and the media to events in the homeland and providing a base of operations for visiting lobbyists."¹²⁴ In terms of political support, we have seen in the previous chapter that the MeK can indeed claim wide support in many Western European countries, particularly among senators and parliamentarians in Britain and Belgium. For the most part, this political backing is in support of resolutions to have the MeK and NCRI

¹²³ Masoud Banisadr, 412.

¹²⁴ Clifford Bob, 44.

removed from European and American lists of known terrorist organizations. Documents such as the Belgian Senate's petition for the removal of the MeK from the EU's terror list¹²⁵, a statement signed by over 1300 British jurists called 'Iran: A Call for Justice'¹²⁶, as well as various letters by European Parliament members in support of the MeK's de-listing as a terrorist organization.¹²⁷ It should be noted however that the three previous examples come directly from the MeK's own website, and thus it is not surprising in the least that such petitions and letters have such a prominent place on the home page of their prime website. Critics of the MeK also contend that the MeK uses trickery when getting politicians to sign onto petitions supporting the group. As author and *Mojahedin* critic Michael Rubin writes, "The group has continued its petition drives. Congressional aides describe how the group sends pretty young women into the halls of Congress and various parliaments with innocuous petitions. Most lawmakers have little idea of the baggage the group carries."¹²⁸ Despite this assertion however, the bottom line for the MeK is that they have succeeded in drawing hundreds, if not thousands of politicians and lawmakers from the United States and Europe to support their group and its cause. Whether the signer of the petition understood what he or she was signing is beyond the point: petitions and letters of support allow the MeK to establish broader contacts and present an image of solidarity with prominent Western politicians, which can in fact in itself be considered as a form of political marketing.

¹²⁵ <http://www.ncr-iran.org/content/view/831/70/> Accessed June 6, 2006.

¹²⁶ <http://www.ncr-iran.org/content/view/612/1/> Accessed June 6, 2006.

¹²⁷ See home page at <http://www.ncr-iran.org/> for current letters of support.

¹²⁸ <http://www.meforum.org/article/888> Accessed June 6, 2006.

Beyond support from politicians and lawmakers in Western countries, the MeK has a large number of adherents and supporters in various countries around the world who work to achieve the group's aims. In terms of numbers, a report issued by the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) stated, "(the) MeK is believed to have some 10,000 members, one-third to one-half of whom are fighters. Experts say its activities have dropped off in recent years as its membership has dwindled."¹²⁹ Obtaining exact figures on the numbers of MeK supporters and members worldwide is very difficult, since many of its offshoot organizations and affiliated associations operate clandestinely or claim to represent other groups or interests not linked the MeK. This is mainly due to the MeK's designation as a terrorist organization, which prohibits it from operating and raising funds in the United States and Europe. A report issued to the Foreign Assets Control Office and published by the U.S. Treasury Department on August 15, 2003 outlines the various organizations that were known at the time of publication to be associated with the MeK, and it offers a glimpse into the scale of the organization in Western countries. The report lists 32 groups in Germany, 20 in England, 22 in the United States, 16 in Scandinavia, 14 in Switzerland, Italy, and France, 10 in Austria and the Netherlands, and 6 in Canada and Australia, for a total of 120 groups known to be MeK front-groups.¹³⁰ Although the report does not say the number of members or supporters associated with each individual group, this list certainly indicates that the MeK has a large number of contacts positioned in strategically important Western countries.

¹²⁹Council on Foreign Relations. <http://www.cfr.org/publication/9158/> Accessed June 7, 2006.

¹³⁰<http://www.iran-interlink.org/files/info/mojahedinaliases.htm> Accessed June 7, 2006.

However, perhaps more important than the MeK's contacts in Western countries are its contacts within Iran, which is an important issue relating to the group and its chances of achieving its goal of regime change in Iran. It is largely felt that without supporters based within Iran, the MeK will never achieve its strategic goals, simply because it now has been deprived of an opportunity to affect regime change from outside the country (since the loss of the group's benefactor – Saddam Hussein). Undoubtedly, the MeK has contacts inside Iran. Its exposure of Iran's nuclear program in 2003 attests to this point, as do a number of attacks against high-ranking officials in the Iranian armed forces and other government agencies in 1999 and 2000.¹³¹ However, maintaining operatives inside Iran as 'contacts' is far different than having an actual core of supporters within the country, something most analysts feel is highly unlikely for the MeK. As security consultant and former MeK member Massoud Khodabandeh described, "...the vast majority of Iranians are either ignorant or indifferent toward the exiled group."¹³² Thus, in terms of contacts, it can certainly be said that the MeK maintains many throughout the world, but it seems that their effectiveness is nullified by the lack of a MeK constituency within Iran itself.

Knowledge: As is described by Clifford Bob, knowledge in this instance refers to an insurgent group's understanding of the norms, identities, functions, and expertise of NGOs, as well as their familiarity with the procedural aspects of dealing with governments and NGOs most often based in Western countries. According to Bob, insurgent groups must be able to 'do

¹³¹ <http://www.iran-interlink.org/files/child%20pages/Timeline.htm> Accessed June 7, 2006.

¹³² Terrorism Monitor, Volume 3, Issue 2 (27 January, 2005) as seen on <http://www.turkishweekly.net/interview.php?id=45> Accessed June 8, 2006.

business' by the standards of Western governments and NGOs so as to facilitate easy interaction between both sides. As such, this will mean being able to communicate effectively in English or another major Western language such as French or German; having the ability to perform organizational tasks to the specifications and expectations of the government or NGO, such as writing proposals, press releases, and budget sheets; and understanding how to package these attributes and use them effectively for the group's cause.¹³³

In looking at the MeK, we can clearly see that they indeed exhibit many of these knowledge-related attributes, however as has been evidenced earlier in this paper, most of the MeK's efforts are aimed towards foreign governments rather than at NGOs. In terms of communication, it is evident that the MeK is able to operate its political marketing campaign in a variety of different Western languages. When one examines the NCRI's main website (www.ncr-iran.org), it can be viewed either in English, French, German, Italian, or Arabic, with each language-specific version containing its own unique content. Furthermore, the NCRI's English website offers INTV news, a brief news program updated daily offering information about the Iranian resistance's activities as well as stories that are critical of the Iranian regime. NCRI broadcasters with an impeccable command of the English language host these news broadcasts, and the stories are presented quickly yet thoroughly, not unlike news stories presented on CNN, Fox News or BBC.

¹³³ Summarized from Clifford Bob, 45.

In fact, 'knowledge', as it relates to the MeK's command of Western languages and understanding of Western media, can also apply to the MeK's presence within the Western media. In an article published by the Asia Times, author Mahan Abedin, editor of Terrorism Monitor (published by the Jamestown Foundation), shows that the MeK's former official representative in the United States, Alireza Jafarzadeh, is now one of Fox News' main Middle East analysts.¹³⁴ Abedin feels that there is little surprise that a former high-ranking MeK member would join a news organization such as Fox News, an outlet well known for its right-wing views. He opines in his article that with the ouster of Saddam Hussein and thus the loss of his support by the MeK, the group has sought support among neo-conservatives in the United States who would advocate forceful regime change in Iran rather than diplomacy or other conciliatory approaches towards the Iranian regime. As he writes, "This latest MeK initiative has all the trappings of the MeK's previous ambitious and failed programs and is unlikely to amount to anything in the long term. Its biggest success so far has been to mobilize neo-conservative support for the 'third' way (that of empowering the Iranian opposition)."¹³⁵ This strategy of the MeK of engaging the right-wing media in the United States is an example of the group's 'knowledge' since it displays their awareness of what constituency will be most amenable to their views towards the Iranian regime, and of engaging that constituency through a medium that is trusted and accepted by them.

¹³⁴ *Asia Times*, 29 June, 2005, as seen on http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/GF29Ak03.html Accessed June 8, 2006.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

In terms of the other aspects of 'knowledge' that Bob puts forth, there is little doubt that the groups displays the organizational capacity to formulate such things as the grant proposals and budget sheets that Bob speaks of. As described earlier, in the late 1980s and early 1990s the MeK presented a number of resolutions to the United Nations General Assembly with the aim of condemning the Iranian regime's record on human rights. As described by Masoud Banisadr, "The main sponsors of our resolution were known from the start; as usual they were Western European countries, plus the U.S., Canada and countries from other continents to spread the net as widely as possible."¹³⁶ This excerpt from Banisadr's memoirs not only displays the MeK's knowledge in drafting resolutions to be presented to the U.N. General Assembly, but also the knowledge of which countries to target for signatures, as well as the knowledge that a broad collection of signatures on a resolution bestows an aura of global support for the MeK's aims, rather than limiting support to Western European and North American states. It can be reasonably assumed by this example from over fifteen years ago that if the MeK had a grasp on the intricacies of drafting United Nations resolutions at that time, then their level of knowledge today (relating to procedural requirements and organizational needs) must be equally refined.

Monetary Resources: "Insurgents with large monetary resources also hold clear advantages in projecting their causes abroad."¹³⁷ Certainly, as with 'contacts', it is very difficult to obtain accurate figures on the MeK's financial

¹³⁶ Masoud Banisadr, 265.

¹³⁷ Clifford Bob, 45.

assets and level of support. Since the group was designated as a terrorist group by both the United States and the European Union, its finances have come under much closer scrutiny and the group has undoubtedly had a much harder time raising money for its operations. Although the MeK's designation as a terrorist group has hurt the group financially, without doubt the event that has had the greatest single impact on the group's finances has been the ouster of Saddam Hussein as Iraqi president in 2003. As the MeK's largest single benefactor, the loss of his support was a tremendous blow to the group, who counted on Saddam's deep pockets to finance the elaborate operations of the MeK, NLA, and NCRI both in Iraq at the group's main base of Camp Ashraf, as well as around the world. One question that arises out of this scenario is *how* Saddam afforded to finance the MeK when Iraq was under United Nations sanctions that restricted the country's sales of oil, its main export. In an October 17, 2004 article for *Newsweek*, authors Michael Isikoff and Mark Hosenball reported that the MeK was in fact a party in the U.N.-administered Oil-for-Food program¹³⁸, citing the Duelfer Report that investigated Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD), including sources of funding for Saddam's WMD, and alleged improprieties in the administration of the Oil-for-Food program. As Isikoff and Hosenball report,

"Duelfer's evidence linking the MEK to the burgeoning Oil-for-Food scandal comes from 13 secret lists that were maintained by Iraqi oil officials of favored recipients for vouchers for the sale of oil overseas. Duelfer's report says the Iraqi government maintained a rigorous high-level process for nominating

¹³⁸ The Oil-for-Food program was established on April 14, 1995 by U.N. resolution 986. It was intended to give Iraq the "opportunity to sell oil to finance the purchase of humanitarian goods, and various mandated United Nations activities concerning Iraq. The programme, as established by the Security Council, is intended to be a temporary measure to provide for the humanitarian needs of the Iraqi people, until the fulfilment by Iraq of the relevant Security Council resolutions, including notably resolution 687 (1991) of 3 April 1991." Source: <http://www.un.org/depts/oip/background/index.html> Accessed June 13, 2006.

foreign companies or individuals who were to be awarded the Oil-for-Food vouchers and that Saddam himself personally signed off on every name that was put (or struck off) the list. The Oil Allocation Recipient List published in Duelfer's report says that, among Saddam's many beneficiaries, was the MEK (spelled in the report as Mojahedie Khalq, based apparently on how it appeared in the Iraqi documents). The list indicates the MEK received a series of oil allocations totalling more than 38 million barrels over a four-year period prior to the U.S. invasion. That was large enough to theoretically enable the group to collect more than \$16 million in profits; it could receive those proceeds by doing little more than reselling Iraqi oil to middlemen (who could then resell it to real oil companies in Western countries like the United States). According to the list, people using the MEK's oil vouchers actually collected (or "lifted," in oil-industry jargon) around 27 million barrels of Iraqi oil during the four years before the U.S. invasion. By cashing in on the vouchers, the MEK could have generated profits of at least \$11.2 million, Duelfer's figures suggest. One U.S. official said the vouchers were most likely Saddam's way of rewarding the MEK for the support it provided his regime. The list also says that the MEK apparently used two British companies or business entities to handle the oil deals. Initial efforts to trace the companies named in the report have so far proved unsuccessful.¹³⁹

These findings were vehemently denied by an NCRI spokesman, who described the allegations as "part of a smear campaign by the [Iranian] mullah's intelligence agents."¹⁴⁰

Beyond this source of funding, an investigation conducted by the Australian government's Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Group attempted to investigate the finances of the MeK. In a report published June 16, 2003, it was found that "The MeK claims to be supported from both within Iran and overseas. Massoud Rajavi claimed in a 1994 interview that donations that year alone had amounted to US\$45 million. The MeK is also known to operate behind Iranian expatriate or refugee organisations to collect funds for the MeK. Seven Iranians were arrested in 2001 in the US after US\$400 000 was

¹³⁹ Michael Isikoff and Mark Hosenball, "Shades of Gray", *Newsweek*, 17 October, 2004, as seen on <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/6242223/site/newsweek/> Accessed June 13, 2006.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

found to have been transferred to a MeK front organisation in the United Arab Emirates, which the FBI claims was ultimately used to buy weapons.”¹⁴¹

These findings were echoed by a 2002 U.S. State Department report that noted, “Beyond receiving all of its military assistance, and most of its financial support, from the Iraqi regime, the MEK uses front organizations to solicit contributions from expatriate Iranian communities.”¹⁴² Today, it is very difficult to gauge the financial assets of the MeK, or what the group will do to compensate for the loss of Saddam Hussein’s financial support. What is clear however is that the group will be unable to maintain its worldwide operations without securing another source of direct financial support. If both the Australian and American governments’ reports are accurate, the end of Saddam Hussein’s support will leave the MeK simply with expatriate Iranians and front companies as sources of financial support, and it is highly unlikely that their combined support could equal that provided by Hussein, particularly given the uncertain level of support for the MeK among the Iranian expatriate community worldwide.

Organizational Resources: According to Clifford Bob, these will include such things as a movement’s coherence, unity, and leadership. As he writes, “Most basically, organizational resources permit movements to focus on externally directed mobilization rather than internal upkeep. Effective political spectacle requires a high level of coordination and planning – to pull protesters into the streets, guide their activism, and interpret it’s meaning to

¹⁴¹ Nigel Brew, “Behind the Mujahideen-e-Khalq (MeK)” *Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Group*, 16 June 2003 (research note no. 43 2002-03), as seen on <http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/rn/2002-03/03rn43.htm> Accessed June 13, 2006.

¹⁴² U.S. State Department, *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2002*, as seen on <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/20119.pdf> Accessed June 13, 2006.

outsiders.”¹⁴³ It can certainly be said that the MeK is well versed in ‘political spectacle’, as Bob puts it. Perhaps the most potent example of this ability to draw people into the streets in support of the cause occurred on June 20, 1981, when during an anti-clerical demonstration in Tehran, the MeK managed to rally Iranians from all over the country to protest against the anti-democratic tendencies of the mullahs allied under Ayatollah Khomeini’s leadership. Although estimates of the size of the demonstration vary between 200,000 people¹⁴⁴ and 500,000 people¹⁴⁵, what is certain is that the MeK has proven that it has in the past been able to rally hundreds of thousands of people to its cause. This fact, however, must be taken in context. The demonstration on June 20, 1981 is seen as the apex of the MeK’s support and popularity among Iranians, and was the group’s last major show of force in Iran prior to Rajavi and Abolhassan Banisadr’s exile that same year.

An excellent source of information on the MeK’s organizational resources is Memoirs of an Iranian Rebel, by former MeK member Masoud Banisadr. Since Masoud Banisadr was so intimately involved in the coordination and planning of the MeK’s political marketing both in the United States and Europe, his memoirs offer a rare glimpse into the inner workings of the organization. Banisadr first describes an organization with a clearly defined hierarchy, with various sections responsible for designated areas, and an internal military-type ranking system intended to facilitate a chain-of-command so that each member understands their position and responsibilities.

Rankings included ‘SF-1’ (foreign sympathisers-1), ‘OSH’ (council member of

¹⁴³ Clifford Bob, 46.

¹⁴⁴ Dilip Hiro, *The Iranian Labyrinth*, (New York: Nation Books, 2005), 135.

¹⁴⁵ Mohammad Mohaddessin, 58.

the organizational *nahad* unit), and 'HE' (member of the executive council), to name but a few of the many designations.¹⁴⁶ The purpose of these rankings, as Banisadr saw it, was to designate responsibilities and expectations, as well as to classify a MeK members' level of devotion to the cause.

In terms of 'political spectacle', Banisadr also offers some examples of well-organized incidents of protest against the Iranian regime. For example, in 1988 at the end of the Iran-Iraq war, a large number of MeK members were captured and executed by the Iranian regime after the unsuccessful Operation Forogh. As Banisadr recalls, "The number of executions rose inexorably, until they totalled around 12,000, according to Rajavi. He announced a new, unlimited hunger strike protest and urged Mojahedin everywhere to take part. The response was tremendous in Europe and America. Even those of us who had to work and could not demonstrate in the streets had to respect the hunger strike, so we did not eat anything for almost two weeks."¹⁴⁷

The MeK is in fact well known for their rallies in many cities around the world. Banisadr discussed a major rally in Los Angeles in 1994 whose description attests to the MeK's organizational resources. As he described,

"We were asked by Maryam to make that rally as glorious as possible without counting costs, because whatever we did was noble and worthwhile. In fact we managed to reduce costs immensely thanks to help in kind from new supporters. An Iranian floral artist did the flower arrangements for the whole area. A famous Iranian photographer was in charge of documenting the day, and an award-winning cinematographer did the filming. In addition to singers and musicians we hired a marching band to play the national anthem. The area was covered with Iranian flags, flowers, and sun-and-lion emblems (of

¹⁴⁶ Masoud Banisadr, 234.

¹⁴⁷ Masoud Banisadr, 300.

the MeK). Three huge balloons carried Iranian flags and huge portraits of Maryam, Rajavi and Mossadegh, and slogans were hung above the rally area. There were numerous food and souvenir vendors. On top of all this we had hired huge, expensive equipment to show a film of Maryam addressing expatriate Iranians in Paris.”¹⁴⁸

Banisadr also discusses how the MeK was adept at creating the semblance of a large crowd of supporters when in fact the MeK was having a difficult time attracting people to their rallies. He recalls how at a 1996 rally in the UK, the MeK was forced to tell people that instead of being a rally for the MeK, it was in fact “an international concert to demonstrate solidarity with oppressed women.”¹⁴⁹ He noted also that in order to enlarge the number of supporters in the crowd, the MeK invited local Arabs and Latin Americans, since their “appearance allowed us to pass them off as Iranians!”¹⁵⁰ Whether this is interpreted as trickery by a desperate political entity or clever political marketing, what is certain is that the MeK has displayed tremendous organizational resources. Regardless of the level of support that the MeK enjoys among Iranians today, it is clear that the group has the organizational capacity to mount large-scale demonstrations against the Iranian government, which is confirmed by recent video of a January 19, 2006 protest by the MeK in Washington D.C.¹⁵¹

Leadership: The final structural factor affecting the success of a movement’s strategies is leadership. Leadership is key, as Bob sees it, since the best known insurgent movements are headed by instantly recognizable leaders,

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 404.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 457.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Video originated from <http://www.mardomtv.com> and was seen on <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-7722530108816352835&q=mojahedin> Accessed June 14, 2006.

including “the Dalai Lama, Aung Saan Suu Kyi, Subcomandante Marcos, and Chico Mendes, to name only a few.”¹⁵² Charismatic and knowledgeable leaders will give a movement an advantage in many areas, from drawing in new adherents, to selling the insurgent group’s cause more effectively to foreign audiences. Most notably, Bob opines that “[Leaders] combine the knowledge, contacts, and resources that elevate movements to prominence. They have impressive communication skills, capable of firing culturally diverse audiences in diverse locales worldwide. They forge emotional bonds with distant backers, making it harder to sever ties in the future.”¹⁵³ With respect to the *Mojahedin-e-Khalq*, this is perhaps the key factor that has kept the group prominent since the Iranian revolution, and it is undoubtedly the leadership of the MeK that has bound them together for the past two decades.

There are many ways in which the leadership of the MeK can be analysed. Since the group encompasses both a diplomatic/political side, as well as a military side, the aspects of the Rajavis’ rule over the group is multi-faceted. Also, since it both Maryam and Masoud Rajavi who command and lead the MeK, the analysis is further complicated by the fact that the MeK has a dual leadership. Thus, the following section will first examine Masoud Rajavi’s leadership role in the MeK, and then examine Maryam Rajavi and her role in the organisation.

Perhaps the most important feature that Masoud Rajavi can boast about his leadership of the MeK is that he is truly one of the founding members of the

¹⁵² Clifford Bob, 46.

¹⁵³ Clifford Bob, 46-47.

group. He can correctly boast that he is a true revolutionary, having fought against the rule of both Shah Reza Pahlavi and Ayatollahs Khomeini and Khamenei. This has benefited Masoud Rajavi in two important ways: it has allowed him to maintain an unchallenged rule over the group thereby providing him the opportunity to direct the MeK's strategies in confronting the Iranian government; and also it has elevated Masoud Rajavi's stature in the organization to the point where dissent is unlikely to arise, and his commands are obeyed without question. However, with the benefit of hindsight, we can see that Masoud Rajavi has squandered much of the political capital he has gained in his forty years with the MeK, and this is an important factor in looking at why the MeK is considered barely on the fringes of Iranian political life today.

Despite the fact that Masoud Rajavi has displayed many of the features that many would agree makes a good political leader – a solid education, involvement in key political events, military experience and understanding, charisma, and the ability to inspire, to name but a few – his leadership of the MeK has been fraught with a series of poor decisions that has cost the MeK dearly in terms of support for the group within Iran. Ultimately, it is this fact that probably best explains the MeK's inability to achieve any real power in Iran. Masoud Rajavi's tenure as leader of the MeK can be characterized by a series of decisions seemingly made with short-term planning in mind, and with little thought of the potential outcomes of those decisions. For instance, when Rajavi made the critical decision to ally his group with the mullahs tied to Ayatollah Khomeini as a united front against the Shah during the 1979 Iranian

revolution, he did not see the potential that that temporary alliance could lead to a new dictatorship, one that would be as rigid and repressive, if not more so, than that of the Shah. Following the end of the revolution, Rajavi found himself on the outside looking in, with the MeK having been expelled from Iran, along with the newly elected President Abolhassan Banisadr. In order to cement his ties with Banisadr and solidify their newly formed NCRI, Rajavi chose to wed Banisadr's daughter. Although this was done more for strategic reasons rather than out of love, Masoud Banisadr recounts that "His marriage raised some eyebrows; Rajavi's martyred wife, a symbol of Iranian women's resistance, had been dead for less than a year and his colleagues were suffering in prison and dying in the streets."¹⁵⁴

By far Masoud Rajavi's most controversial decision as leader of the MeK was that to ally his group with the government of Saddam Hussein, cemented after a public meeting between Iraq's deputy prime minister Tariq Aziz and Rajavi in January 1983 in France.¹⁵⁵ This 'partnership', with Rajavi and the MeK undoubtedly being the junior partners, was all the clerical regime in Tehran needed to advance their campaign against the MeK. It is because of this partnership that the *Mojahedin-e-Khalq* were renamed the *Monafeqin-e-Khalq*, or 'hypocrites', by Iran's rulers. From Tehran's perspective, they could now continue with their destruction of the MeK while framing it not as political persecution but rather as defeating an enemy Iranian faction fighting against the Iranian state. Indeed, Rajavi thought that a temporary alliance with Saddam Hussein would provide his group with the means by which they could

¹⁵⁴ Masoud Banisadr, 182.

¹⁵⁵ Ervand Abrahamian, 248.

defeat Khomeini's newly established government. However this calculation is further evidence of Rajavi's short sightedness with respect to guiding the organization's political strategies. Not only did the alliance with Saddam Hussein cost the MeK dearly with respect to support within Iran, but it would also have the effect of tainting the image of the group in the eyes of Western governments and NGOs. Particular aspects of that relationship, such as the MeK's involvement in putting down Shia and Kurdish uprisings following the 1991 Gulf war, as well as the sheer notion of the MeK allying themselves to an enemy of the Iranian state (and by extension – the Iranian people whom the MeK sought support from) have made policy makers in the West hesitant to engage the group politically. In the end, it can certainly be said the reason that the MeK finds itself in the position it is in today, being confined to Camp Ashraf in Iraq, is because of the flawed strategies that Masoud Rajavi chose to implement for the MeK. It is also interesting to note that Masoud Rajavi has not been seen since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. This can also be seen as further evidence of Rajavi's failure as leader of the MeK, since it is reasonable to assume that the organization needs his leadership now more than ever, with some analysts predicting that the group could be on the verge of splintering off into smaller factions if their current status in Iraq remains unchanged.¹⁵⁶

Maryam Rajavi certainly represents the 'softer' side of the MeK, and image that was created for her through her marriage to Masoud Rajavi in 1985. If Masoud Rajavi is responsible for the MeK's tactical strategizing and planning,

¹⁵⁶Mahan Abedin, "Mojahedin-eKhalq: Saddam's Iranian Allies" *Terrorism Monitor*, Volume 1, Issue 8 (December 18, 2003) as seen on <http://www.jamestown.org> Accessed June 21, 2006.

Maryam is the one who must sell these strategies to potential backers in the West, regardless of their soundness. Certainly, as with Masoud Rajavi, Maryam displays many desirable attributes that one would look for in a leader. She is well educated, charismatic, inspirational, and a competent organizer. The fact that she is a woman also works very much to her favour, since the MeK can use this fact to promote their organization as progressive and in stark contrast to the male-dominated government in Tehran. This fact has also allowed Maryam Rajavi to extend her appeals to women's groups, such as at a 2006 Women's Day conference in Paris¹⁵⁷, rather than simply to pro-democracy Iranian groups. Despite her credentials and obvious appeal to members of the MeK, Maryam Rajavi's rule as president of the NCRI (she was elected by the NCRI as Iran's future president in August 1993) has been controversial since she was named as co-leader of the MeK in 1985.

The controversy surrounding Maryam Rajavi and her husband Masoud began with their marriage in 1985. Prior to their marriage, Maryam Ghajr-Ozdanlou had been the wife of Mehdi Abrischamchi, another co-founder of the MeK and Masoud Rajavi's closest friend. With the union of Maryam and Masoud, critics said that it was as though Masoud Rajavi had stolen his friend's wife "not because the revolution demanded it but to satisfy Rajavi's sexual desires."¹⁵⁸ Furthermore, as Masoud Banisadr recounts, "Those of a more political cast of mind argued that the leader needed to create a crisis to distract attention from his failing policies, including his defeat on various battlefronts, in cities and in Kurdistan; the loss of many supporters and

¹⁵⁷ <http://www.maryam-rajavi.com/content/view/330/61/> Accessed June 22, 2006.

¹⁵⁸ Masoud Banisadr, 226.

members, either through execution or imprisonment or because they had ceased to believe and to be active in the cause; and his failure to create a broad coalition.”¹⁵⁹ Although these are the views of the MeK’s detractors, some more recent scholars have echoed criticisms of the marriage. As author Ervand Abrahamian remarked in an interview with *The New York Times*, “Rajavi said he was emulating the Prophet Mohammad who had married his adopted son’s wife to show he could overcome conventional morality. It smacked of blasphemy.”¹⁶⁰

The elevation of Maryam Rajavi to co-leader of the MeK in 1985 after her marriage to Masoud also had the effect of amplifying the cult-like tendencies that the MeK was already beginning to exhibit at that time. The marriage between Masoud and Maryam signalled the beginning of the MeK’s ‘ideological revolution’, whereby members had to write self-critical reports, admit to vices and impure thoughts, and in general commit themselves wholly to the organization and to the Rajavis, above their families, friends, and loved ones. As Masoud Banisadr recounts in his memoirs, members would write to Maryam (who at this point was co-leader for less than a year) proclaiming such things as:

“I know only that you, Maryam, are my ideological symbol. I feel if I don’t write for you I will explode ... Let me burn myself in your holy fire!”¹⁶¹

“Let me, Maryam, sacrifice myself for you and Masoud! You are the symbol of a nation in chains.”¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Elizabeth Rubin, “The Cult of Rajavi”, *The New York Times*, 13 July, 2003 as seen on <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/07/13/magazine/13MUJAHADEEN.html> Accessed May 12, 2006.

¹⁶¹ Masoud Banisadr, 221.

"I swear to God that with all my existence I feel your path is the path of all messengers of God, from Abraham to Moses to Jesus the spirit of God ... you are breaking deadlocks ... I am sure that not only we but future generations will worship you for what you did."¹⁶³

As these lines suggest, members were looking to the Rajavis as having been sent from another realm to save the Iranian people from the injustices of the theocratic government headed by the mullahs. These cult-like characteristics and vows of eternal support for the Rajavis would ultimately manifest themselves in the self-immolation of MeK members following Maryam's arrest by French authorities in 2003. It can thus easily be said that the Rajavis enjoy unwavering support for the time being from members of the MeK. However, cult or not, and regardless of whatever support the Rajavis enjoy amongst their followers, the fact remains that the Rajavis have been unable to improve the situation for the MeK since their arrival in Iraq under Saddam Hussein's wing in 1986. This fact must be taken as a serious criticism of the Rajavi's rule, and ultimately any evaluation of the leadership of the MeK must put that fact first. Whether or not the Rajavis can successfully convince Western NGOs and governments to support their group and their struggle for political change in Iran will be the ultimate commentary on the effectiveness of their leadership. If the MeK can successfully emphasize the more desirable attributes of their leadership – a female (co) leader, fluent in Western languages, who is charismatic and a self-avowed champion of democracy – and de-emphasize the less desirable aspects, such as the Rajavis' image as

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

cult leaders, then the leadership of this group stands a better chance of receiving the international support that it seeks.

Identity and Reaction of Opponents: Bob's final factor that affects an insurgent group's political marketing strategies is the opponents of the group itself. *Who* the insurgent group is struggling against can determine much in the way of chances of success for the insurgent group, the level of international attention and sympathy that the group will (potentially) receive, and whether or not the media will deem the struggle worth reporting on. In Bob's words, "The media and many NGOs pay disproportionate attention to large, economically important, or strategically located states. Insurgents from these states ... have a structural advantage in attracting media reporting."¹⁶⁴ Bob also defines two areas where the opponent's actions towards the insurgent group can affect the level of support given to that group: its level of repression and its control over the reporting of that repression. Thus, a government that harshly represses an insurgent group may provide that group with the fodder it needs to attract support against that state, however this will occur only if the repression is documented and known of by other governments and NGOs. By this rationale, an insurgent group stands a better chance of gaining support the more harshly repressed it is by its opponent, providing that repression is known by outsiders. The following pages will examine this scenario as it relates to the Iranian government and its reaction towards the MeK.

¹⁶⁴ Clifford Bob, 49.

On the surface, it would seem that, based on Bob's description of an opponent's characteristics and how they relate to the insurgent group in question, the Iranian government is an excellent opponent for the MeK and should (again, based on Bob's description) benefit the MeK in terms of aiding it in seeking international support for its cause. This is the case for many reasons. To begin with, Iran is undoubtedly one of the most strategically placed states in the world, both geographically and economically. In terms of geography, Iran finds itself bordered by no less than seven states¹⁶⁵, and is less than 250 kilometres from Saudi Arabia, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain. Its oil and gas reserves and its proximity to the most of the world's largest oil producing nations augment Iran's geographic importance. Furthermore, Iran is by far the largest military power on the Persian Gulf, and its geographic position on the Strait of Hormuz, through which over 90% of the region's oil flows through, again amplifies Iran's geo-strategic position.¹⁶⁶

More recent political and military events have also increased Iran's importance internationally, particularly with respect to the United States and NATO member countries. Beyond containing vast reserves of oil, on which most Western economies are based, Iran sits between Iraq and Afghanistan where numerous U.S., British, Canadian, and other multinational troops are based fighting in conflicts begun following the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States. The fact that Iran separates hundreds of thousands of

¹⁶⁵ The seven states that border Iran are Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey, and Turkmenistan.

¹⁶⁶ U.S. Department of Energy statistics (September 2004), as seen on <http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/pgulf.html> Accessed June 28, 2006.

foreign troops fighting in those two states increases Iran's strategic importance tremendously. However, it is not simply these facts that make Iran a strategically important state, but also the nature of its government and its seeming hostility towards the West. Although the West has been at odds with the mullahs' regime in Tehran since they emerged as the new rulers of Iran following the 1979 Iranian revolution, it is particularly in the past year, since June 2005, that tensions between the two sides have been especially heightened. The impetus for this heightened tension, as mentioned earlier in this paper, was the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president of Iran as well as Iran's nuclear program. Although it is ultimately the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei who has the final say on matters of state, military affairs, and foreign policy, it is the rhetoric of President Ahmadinejad, particularly his unapologetic anti-Semitism, which has made many in the West uneasy about the future intentions of the state, particularly towards Israel. This fact has been made increasingly clearer with Iran's support to Hezbollah during the hostilities that have erupted between Israel and Hezbollah in the summer of 2006, particularly the increasingly sophisticated rockets and missiles that Iran is alleged to have transferred to Hezbollah and their vocal support of the group and its leader, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah.

Recent events in Iran, such as its avowed intention to develop a native nuclear energy program, the test firing of missiles capable of hitting Israel and U.S. military bases in the region, and its alleged funding of Hezbollah and

Shia militias in southern Iraq¹⁶⁷, has combined with the election of a hard-line president in Ahmadinejad to make Iran a central player in the region's security considerations. Put simply, Western states involved in military ventures in the Middle East, as well as Israel, are uncertain as to how much the rhetoric emanating from Tehran is simply defiant words intended to project a strong and confident Iran, and how likely they are to materialize into genuine action against the interests of coalition forces in the region. Thus, it is the combination of an economically and strategically important state with increasingly belligerent rhetoric that makes Iran a useful foe for the MeK by Clifford Bob's definition. Through their public speeches, websites, television news, books, and other media, the MeK has strategically placed themselves in stark contrast to the policies of the mullahs in Tehran by advocating equal rights for women, a more open, democratic society, regularized relations with the West, an end to Iran's nuclear program, a restoration of human rights in Iran, and an end to fundamentalist Islamic thought by Iran's government.¹⁶⁸

Emphasizing the differences between the clerical regime in Tehran and the MeK is a political marketing technique that the MeK has employed numerous times, principally so when dealing with Western governments. It is in this instance that having the Iranian regime as an opponent becomes particularly useful, as the MeK can emphasize those aspects of the regime that are most unpleasant to the West and remind the West of their opposition to them. In a

¹⁶⁷This accusation was levelled by U.S. General George Casey in a news briefing 22 June, 2006 <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2006/06/mil-060622-dod01.htm> Accessed June 28, 2006.

¹⁶⁸ Although elements of this platform can be found in a variety of media produced by the MeK, a summary on the group's position on these and other issues can be viewed on the group's main website: <http://www.ncr-iran.org/>
As well as on Maryam Rajavi's main website: <http://www.maryam-rajavi.com/>

letter to U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell dated February 4, 2003 (and subsequently re-conveyed to the foreign ministers of Britain, France, and Germany later that month), the NCRI's foreign affairs committee chairman, Mohammad Mohaddessin reminded the West that

"The presence of a part of the forces of the People's Mojahedin of Iran on Iraqi soil is only for the sake of the struggle against the religious, terrorist dictatorship ruling Iran ... The mullahs' regime has imposed the resistance against this religious, terrorist dictatorship on us and on our people since June 20, 1981. To this day, the clerical regime has executed more than 120,000 of the best sons and daughters of Iran. The UN General Assembly and the Human Rights Commission have condemned this regime in 49 separate resolutions for its violation of fundamental freedoms and the most rudimentary rights of the Iranian people. The Resistance has repeated time and again that our preference is not for the mullahs' regime to give way to free elections under United Nations supervision, rather than impose on the Iranian nation a struggle that has to be waged, in the words of President Bush, at the risk of 'intimidation and death'. The Iranian Mojahedin's struggle and war are directed only at the blood-thirsty mullahs ruling their country ... In the face of ludicrous lies by the mullahs' regime, whose weapons of mass destruction programmes and facilities, including secret nuclear sites, have been revealed by the Iranian Resistance on a number of occasions, we have always welcomed throughout the past decade UNSCOM's visit to all our sites at any time and continue the same attitude toward UNMOVIC. We consider such visits to be greatly advantageous to us, for they refute and further discredit mullahs' lies."¹⁶⁹

It is clear from this letter that the MeK emphasizes and attacks those aspects of their opponent that are most reprehensible to those whom they are courting for support, namely Western governments. By repeatedly referring to the Iranian government as a 'religious, terrorist dictatorship', the MeK is pandering to fears evoked in the West following the 9/11 attacks. This is combined with references to the clerical regime's human rights record and their secret nuclear program, two issues that are central to the West's concerns over Iran.

¹⁶⁹ Mohammad Mohaddessin, 131-132.

In addition to this, the MeK paints itself as a friend to the West, by quoting the President of the United States (and implicitly paying respect to him), emphasizing that their struggle is only against the Iranian regime (to assuage fears that the MeK could harbour an anti-Western streak as well), and stating that they welcome any and all UN-led weapons inspections (to show that they have nothing to hide and are not involved in the production or storage of WMDs).

In assessing the MeK's opponent's identity and reactions, we can see that despite the hardships that that MeK and other opposition groups have experienced under the rule of the mullahs, the MeK might have in fact benefited from the Iranian government's harsh repression of the group since 1981. By deliberately placing themselves in stark contrast to the clerical regime in Tehran, the MeK have presented themselves as rational alternatives to the status quo in Iran. The MeK continues this approach to this day with a regularity that borders on monotony, reporting on executions carried out by the regime, human rights abuses, and secretive nuclear activities. The group updates these stories daily on their website and presents them to the world for all to see in the hopes that they will eventually convince enough people in the right places that the injustices in Iran must stop and that they can be an acceptable and responsible alternative to the current government in Tehran. The MeK seeks to achieve this aim through simultaneous self-promotion and condemnation of the clerical regime, a feat that is undoubtedly made easier by the multitude of areas where the MeK can correctly vilify the Iranian regime for its record and practices. It would thus

appear that the MeK has found an advantage over a clearly more powerful regime bent on their destruction: the regime itself.

Conclusion and Evaluation of MeK's Political Marketing Approach

It must be said that evaluating the relative 'success' of the MeK's political marketing strategies is certainly a difficult task for a number of reasons, most notably because the term 'success' is highly subjective. In The Marketing of Rebellion, Clifford Bob employs an evaluation technique whereby an insurgent group's relative success in its political marketing is gauged by the 'breadth' and 'depth' of the support it receives. With 'breadth', Bob is referring to the number of NGOs that an insurgent group receives support from, however he notes that greater numbers in this respect does not necessarily mean greater support, since "a small number of major NGOs may be more effective than a large number of weak and obscure ones."¹⁷⁰ In terms of 'depth', Bob is referring to the amount of support a NGO provides to the insurgent group. As with 'breadth', 'depth' can also be misleading, as it is often difficult to evaluate the value of the different types of support given. Although the entire notion of 'success' is fraught with conceptual difficulties, Clifford Bob has devised a manner in which one can reach conclusions when assessing an insurgent group's use of political marketing. It remains to be seen whether this evaluation method is applicable to the *Mojahedin-e-Khalq*.

Immediately upon evaluating the MeK's political marketing techniques, an important fact becomes evident: the MeK seeks support from two main sources, Western governments and expatriate Iranian communities living in Western countries. We can clearly see that through its rallies,

¹⁷⁰ Clifford Bob, 10.

demonstrations, and propaganda campaigns, the MeK has sought the support of Iranians living outside the country. This is done for several important reasons: to attract a greater number of supporters, thereby increasing the size of the Iranian opposition under the MeK banner; to increase the coffers of the organization through contributions from supporters; and also to create the semblance of a large coalition of expatriate Iranians not simply supporting the MeK, but also actively opposing the current government in Tehran, something that aids the organization in its efforts in dealing with Western governments. The odds that Western governments and politicians will take the MeK serious and thus provide them with support will be significantly increased if the MeK could, in the twenty first century, sincerely claim to enjoy a similar level of support that it had at its height in 1981.

In terms of Western governments, it is clear that the MeK has made the strategic decision to seek support from these entities rather than from NGOs. The question that arises out of this fact is *why?* Certainly, the vast majority of the evidence indicates that not only does the MeK seek political and strategic support from Western governments, but also that it seems to ignore NGO support on the whole. There are very few references to the MeK courting NGOs for their support during the period of 2001-2006, or NGOs providing the MeK with any support during that time. The following pages will examine this trend and offer possible reasons as to why the MeK does not look to NGOs for support, and also why NGOs seem uninterested in offering support to the organization.

To begin, it must be noted that there are numerous Iranian NGOs operating in Iran in the twenty first century. According to the Hamyaran Iran NGO Resource Centre, there are over 20,000 NGOs and community-based organizations working in Iran today.¹⁷¹ Although many operate in the realms of environmental policy, scientific research, and demographics, there are still others that concentrate on such broad mandates as civil society and community building, and national development. The problem for the MeK is that, even if any of these NGOs based in Iran were willing to support the group, they would have to do so at tremendous personal risk, thus making the entire venture too risky to consider. The main reason for this (on the part of the Iranian NGO) is that the Iranian government registers all NGOs operating within the country, and it is highly reasonable to assume that the government monitors the activities of NGOs to varying degrees. Since, according to Hamyaran Iran NGO Resource Centre, the goal of the increase in the number of NGOs in Iran was “to perform as partners in development and further the actual implementation of relevant stipulations foreseen in the national development plans in order to promote such a partnership within the public sector”¹⁷², it is certain that the central government in Iran would not tolerate any NGO activity that ran counter to ‘national development plans’. Surely, supporting a group in open opposition to the current Iranian government would run counter to the notion of national development, and thus we can see that NGO support from within Iran is highly unlikely to materialize for the MeK.

¹⁷¹ http://www.hamyaran.org/projs_activs/ngo_community_building.htm Accessed July 6, 2006.

¹⁷² Ibid.

In terms of NGOs based in Western countries, we have seen evidence to suggest a deep-rooted suspicion held by the MeK towards Western-based NGOs, particularly Amnesty International (AI) and Human Rights Watch (HRW), the two largest such organizations. Although there is evidence to suggest that the MeK's attitude towards these NGOs has changed over the years (describing these NGOs as tools of Western governments in the 1980s, to having been infiltrated by MOIS agents in the 1990s), their view of these major international NGOs remains for the large part negative. The most recent appeal that the MeK had made to AI, as told by NCRI member Mohammad Mohaddessin, was in the form of a letter sent August 6, 1996. In this letter, Masoud Rajavi personally welcomed AI to inspect its bases so as to quash any rumours (purportedly spread by MOIS) of human rights abuses in MeK bases in Iraq. He also asked AI to assist the MeK in obtaining visas for members of the group who wanted to leave the organization at that time or at a future date.¹⁷³ As with the previous example, the intention of this request is most likely to counter reports that the MeK was displaying cult-like tendencies and were not allowing members to leave the organization. Although Mohaddessin does not inform the reader as to what AI's response was to this letter, it can be reasonably assumed that the MeK's request was denied, since, as the letter itself concluded, "regrettably, in the past 15 years, international human rights organizations have seldom helped us in such cases."¹⁷⁴ Thus, with no evidence to suggest that AI has offered any support to the MeK itself, and with HRW's 2005 report citing human rights abuses

¹⁷³ Mohammad Mohaddessin, 250-251.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 251.

within the organization¹⁷⁵, it becomes clear as to why the MeK would not seek support from these major international NGOs.

Another possible reason as to why the MeK has displayed little evidence in the way of courting NGO support is because of the generally self-righteous behaviour of the leadership of the MeK, and the subsequent reflection in their policies. As author Mahan Abedin describes, "The MeK bans any interaction with members of groups and organizations that are not under its influence."¹⁷⁶ The roots of this xenophobic view could be a suspicion that outsiders posing as Iranian exiles could in fact be Iranian agents intent on infiltrating the group, or that outside influences from disparate Iranian exile groups could dilute, or worse endanger the revolutionary ideology of the MeK. Furthermore, it is possible that the MeK's pseudo-partnership with the mullahs allied under Ayatollah Khomeini during the 1979 revolution permanently tarnished the idea that success can be achieved through collaboration with different groups intent on a similar outcome, in that case the ouster of Shah Reza Pahlavi. Whatever the reason for their self-righteous assessment of their role as Iranian revolutionaries, this would undoubtedly cause the MeK to view interaction with NGOs as a risky venture.

Yet another possibility as to why the MeK has not sought NGO support in recent years could be related to pride within the organization. Although this may at first seem far fetched since many analysts on Iranian affairs seem to

¹⁷⁵ Human Rights Watch, "No Exit: Human Rights Abuses Inside Mojahedin Khalq Camps" as seen on <http://hrw.org/backgrounder/mena/iran0505/> Accessed July 6, 2006.

¹⁷⁶ Mahan Abedin, "Faded Hopes for Iranian Exiles" as seen on http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/GF29Ak03.html Accessed July 6, 2006.

agree that the MeK is in a very difficult situation and that their chances of ever returning to Iran to form a government are slight, there still remains a strong sense of pride in the organization which could preclude them from seeking outside help. The source of this pride may stem from the past successes of the organization and their ability to remain relevant in Iranian politics more than a generation after their expulsion from Iran. From political assassinations in 1981 which killed over 70 high-ranking Iranian officials (including Iran's chief justice, president, and premier)¹⁷⁷, to Operation Eternal Light in 1988 which saw the NLA confront the Iranian army on Iranian soil, to their progressive view on the role of women in Islamic societies, to Operation Great Bahman in 2000 where they managed to coordinate attacks in 11 different countries against Iranian government officials and targets, the MeK has past successes on which they can look to. There are also structural factors for which the MeK could take pride in, such as their military wing, the NLA, and their political wing, the NCRI, both a testament to the size and depth of the MeK as a movement. Although the Iranian government would most likely scoff at these facts as irrelevant and incomparable to the might of the Iranian state, for the MeK their history, structure, and accomplishments are part of the *Mojahedin* culture and undoubtedly a source of pride for the group, something that is regularly emphasized by the MeK's leadership.

As perhaps a spin-off of the issue of pride, it is also perhaps the case that the MeK sees themselves as 'above' the help of NGOs. This is due to the fact that the MeK view themselves not as an insurgent group waging a guerrilla

¹⁷⁷ <http://library.nps.navy.mil/home/tgp/mek.htm> Accessed July 6, 2006.

war against a more powerful foe, but rather as the rightful rulers of Iran who will eventually return to take their place as leaders of the state. This may seem quite far-fetched to those who study Iranian politics, with the consensus in 2006 seeming to be that the mullah's regime is firmly entrenched in power and that the reformist discourse in Iran, perhaps at its height during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, has abated significantly with the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in June 2005. Despite this fact, the MeK see themselves more as a government-in-exile, who will one day return to lead the Iranian people to a brighter future. Evidence of this misplaced assessment can be clearly seen on Maryam Rajavi's own website, which describes her as the president-elect of Iran: "In August 1993, the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), the Iranian Resistance's parliament, elected Maryam Rajavi as Iran's future president for the transitional period following the mullahs' overthrow. Rajavi subsequently resigned from her other positions to focus on her new responsibility as the President-elect."¹⁷⁸

This misplaced sense of stateliness would also seemingly explain why the MeK seeks support almost entirely from Western governments and not from NGOs. Having Maryam Rajavi speak at the European parliament, consult with members of the House of Lords in Britain, and have U.S. senators and members of Congress declare support for the group and speak at their rallies lends the MeK an air of officialdom, whereas seeking support from NGOs may leave the impression of a group in need, weak and desperate. The MeK must maintain this (some would say) misplaced sense of superiority, lest they fall

¹⁷⁸<http://www.maryam-rajavi.com/content/view/34/59/1/0/> Accessed July 6, 2006.

from their perceived grace as future leaders of Iran, to the level of 'anonymous insurgent group', or worse yet, 'Islamic terrorist group'. After all, if Maryam Rajavi sees herself and her organization as a government-in-exile, then seeking support from sub-state actors such as NGOs would diminish this image to the point where it could seriously affect the morale and membership in the group.

For NGOs, there must be equally little incentive to engage the MeK and offer the group support, and in the period covered in this paper, there are many factors that would cause a NGO to be hesitant before engaging the leadership of the MeK with offers of support. As Clifford Bob summed up in his section on *organizational matching*, a NGO makes cost/benefit calculations with "cost...often measured in lost trust or reputation, benefits in fulfilment of goals or missions."¹⁷⁹ Therefore, a NGO will seek to support a 'winner', rather than an insurgent group that could cause them harm or embarrassment. Put simply, the MeK have far too many characteristics and issues that makes supporting them a risky venture, with any perceived benefits from support paling in comparison.

First and foremost, the MeK's designation as a terrorist group by the United States and European Union's governments makes it extremely difficult for a NGO to consider supporting them. Financing questions aside (which are a serious consideration in the twenty first century as many states seek to control the flow of dollars to known terrorist groups), the sheer notion of a respected

¹⁷⁹ Clifford Bob, 37.

organization such as HRW and AI supporting a group that has been labelled a terrorist organization would likely be far too much for the directors of those NGOs to seriously consider. The repercussions of such a relationship for the NGO would surely be increased scrutiny by governments and international intelligence agencies, a curtailing of their activities, and perhaps even criminal probes, things that would irreparably damage the reputation of NGOs. As an organization ideologically committed to armed struggle, the MeK is simply too controversial and perilous for most NGOs.

Beyond the MeK's terrorist designation however, there are many aspects of the group's past and present that make them a highly controversial insurgent group. Even if one ignores the activities of the MeK during the Iranian revolution (where they supported the occupation of the U.S. embassy in Tehran, attacked Western companies, and killed American citizens), their history during the 1980s and 1990s is well documented and often highly contentious. First and foremost, the MeK's nearly twenty-year involvement with Saddam Hussein had many reprehensible aspects to it that many NGOs would find unacceptable. Notwithstanding Saddam Hussein himself (or the Ba'ath Party of Iraq) who terrorized his people and the region for the better part of his rule, the aspects of the MeK's involvement with Saddam Hussein involve some of the worst crimes of the Ba'athist rulers of Iraq. The MeK is known to have been involved in the suppression of Kurdish and Shia uprisings following the 1991 Gulf War, and this seriously undermines the MeK's efforts to draw attention to human rights abuses in Iran. A NGO such as AI or HRW could not knowingly support a group who's past involves serious allegations of

human rights abuses in Iraq, lest they relinquish any semblance of legitimacy altogether.

Beyond the MeK's controversial alliance with Saddam Hussein, there are the issues surrounding the group's cult-like image, allegations of which vex the MeK to this day. Several issues surrounding this facet of the group negatively affect the chances that a NGO would offer the MeK support. To begin, the allegations that the MeK is a cult tie in directly to HRW's 2005 report on the MeK that described human rights abuses occurring in MeK bases. Author and former MeK member Masoud Banisadr described such abuse in his 2004 book Memoirs of an Iranian Rebel, where members of the group who could not achieve their own personal 'ideological revolution'¹⁸⁰ were criticized, abused, and subjected to psychological abuse at the hands of their *masouls*, or female ideological leaders.

Banisadr recalls some of the results of the 'ideological revolution' and how it affected many members, including himself: "Eventually Mehdi asked me to speak; but first, he said, 'I have a question. You asked in your report to be permitted to burn your self. May I ask why?'

I replied, 'Well, thanks to the "revolution", I have seen my filthy past and I hate it with all my being. I want to burn so I can be born again as fresh and as clean as a baby from Maryam."¹⁸¹ This is simply one of a multitude of examples of cult-like behaviour from the MeK contained in Banisadr's book.

¹⁸⁰ The MeK's 'ideological revolution' began with the Rajavi marriage in 1985. Following this, members were expected to start anew, divorcing their spouses, and writing self-critical reports on all aspects of their past. This was intended to create followers that were loyal to the organization above all else, including family and loved ones.

¹⁸¹ Masoud Banisadr, 231.

The ultimate expression of the MeK's cult-like tendencies was seen in Europe in June 2003 with the self-immolation of several MeK members after the arrest of Maryam Rajavi. Although those acts succeeded with their intended effect of forcing the French government to release Rajavi and other top MeK leaders from French jails, the additional result was a renewed belief that the MeK was becoming a cult. For NGOs conscious of theirs and others' images, the cult-like tendencies exhibited by the MeK combine with other important factors to make support of the MeK an unrealistic possibility.

Finally, beyond other considerations, and perhaps as the most important factor, NGOs will be unlikely to support the MeK because the group is unable to demonstrate that it has any credible support within Iran itself. A generation after the Iranian revolution, the MeK has been successfully eliminated for the most part from within Iran. Certainly, this is not to say that there are no MeK members or operatives active inside Iran. Indeed, the MeK's revelations in 2003 about Iran's secretive nuclear program are alleged to have come from just such sources. However, without a base of support among the Iranian populace, particularly among Iran's younger generation, the MeK will never return to Iran as the liberators that they see themselves as. Without a solid support base within Iran, NGO support to aid in a MeK return to Iran could be tantamount to a NGO aiding in regime change, something that defies the democratic ideals of many NGOs. Unfortunately for the MeK, miscalculations, particularly by Masoud Rajavi during the 1980s and 1990s, have hurt the organization irreparably to the point where today, after more than twenty-five

years, the MeK is still unable to shake their designation as *monafeqin*, or the hypocrites.

Thus, in returning to Clifford Bob's 'breadth' and 'depth' evaluation, we can see that in fact his evaluation must be applied simply to the verbal political support offered to the group by a number of Western politicians. With NGOs at best offering only condemnation of many of the practices of the Iranian regime, the MeK is left simply with its political supporters in the West, and this verbal support is not enough to improve the situation of the group today. Without a significant change in strategy, and perhaps changes to the group's leadership structure, the MeK will simply be unable to improve its situation relying simply on the support it receives today. Ultimately, the 'breadth' of the MeK's support comes from Western politicians, whereas the 'depth' of their support comes from the group's members and affiliated associations around the world. However, since these two sources of support are completely independent of each other, and with neither aiding the MeK in a measurable way in its struggle, it must be said that by Bob's evaluation, the MeK's political marketing must be seen as unsuccessful. It must be emphasized however that this is not to say that the MeK has implemented flawed political marketing strategies, but simply that the group has a highly controversial past and questionable leadership, as well as an uncertain future that will be determined more by regional powers than by the group itself. It would thus appear that many changes must occur within the MeK before its political marketing can generate positive results.

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