

XI

Popular Base

The State Department report alleges that the Mojahedin and Iranian Resistance lack popularity and a social base. While only the electorate can best gauge the popularity of a person or a political organization, the prevailing repression in Iran eliminates the possibility of a valid public opinion poll.

In a letter to Rep. Lee Hamilton in 1984, the State Department acknowledged that between 1979 and 1981, before the imposition of total repression and despite the many limitations on their activities, "The Mojahedin rallies attracted hundreds of thousands of people."¹ The Department also noted that the Mojahedin were the only "group with enough first-round votes to qualify candidates for the run-off. Rajavi and Khiabani seemed assured of winning..." In his book, *The Iranian Mojahedin*, Ervand Abrahamian writes: "The Mojahedin candidates won enough votes to frighten the IRP [Islamic Republic Party, closely tied to Khomeini]. They did so well in some constituencies... that the local authorities had to close down the voting polls on the very last day of the elections to prevent their victory... In the provinces as a whole, the Mojahedin collected as many as 906,480 votes, yet won no seats. The IRP, on the other hand, obtained no more than 1,617,422 votes, and yet won over half the ninety-six seats filled in the first round."² The strong showing was especially significant in light of the fact that "Khomeini threw the whole weight of his charisma behind the clergy," and publicly attacked the Mojahedin in his New Year's speech, coining the slogan "A *monafeq* [Mojahed] is more dangerous than a *kafer* [nonbeliever]."³

After the first round of the elections, the Mojahedin publicized numerous documents, revealing that in Tehran alone the ballot boxes

had been stuffed with half a million votes in favor of the ruling IRP candidates, some arriving at the electoral monitoring headquarters from one to 15 days after the vote. Yet even the rigged results showed that in Tehran, one in four voters had cast their ballots for Massoud Rajavi. In other cities, the announced figures should have given the Mojahedin a total of 35 seats (relative to the Islamic Republican Party), but Khomeini did not allow even one member of the Mojahedin to be elected to the *Majlis*. According to the officially declared figures, the 25 representatives from the ruling party elected in other cities had a total of 506,673 votes; Mr. Rajavi received 531,943 votes in Tehran. When the Mojahedin called for new elections in Tehran, Khomeini's Revolutionary Council appointed a sham commission to investigate the complaints.

Between the two election rounds in 1980, *Le Monde* wrote:

With his educational lectures and his youth (only 32 years old), Mr. Rajavi has a large following. His political rallies in the capital and other cities attract crowds of 100,000, 200,000 and sometimes 300,000 people. His fame is nothing new. In 1971, during his trial just before the magnificent 2,500 year celebrations at Persepolis, he and the other central committee members of the Mojahedin condemned the dictatorship and despotism of the monarchic regime with a deadly courage. He was sentenced to death, but an exceptional campaign on his behalf was undertaken worldwide. Amnesty International, different European human rights organizations, associations of jurists, French political figures such as Francois Mitterrand and President Georges Pompidou asked the shah for clemency. Six months later, the shah gave in and commuted his death sentence to life imprisonment. But until January 1979, two weeks before the regime's collapse, he underwent the most brutal forms of torture.⁴

Commenting on the rigged elections, *Le Monde* adds:

On the basis of documents, the Mojahedin repeatedly exposed the irregularities, pressures, rigging and brutalities that tainted the first round of elections. Some 2,500 of their supporters were injured, 50 seriously, in attacks by armed hezbollahi bands during election rallies. The elections were held in the shadow of the Islamic pasdaran's weaponry...

Mojahedin representatives who tried to complain at the polling stations, were thrown out, beaten and even arrested... As for the Mojahedin request that Tehran's election results be declared null and void, the Revolutionary Council has designated a commission to look into the matter and prepare a report in a month... Rajavi says that it would be "regrettable if the *Majlis*

did not reflect the popular will. We have played the democratic game fairly, because we consider ourselves as supporters of coexistence among different political tendencies... A monopolized parliament will only aggravate our differences and engulf our country in an ominous turmoil."⁵

During the presidential elections, Khomeini issued a fatwa, vetoing Rajavi's candidacy because he had boycotted the velayat-e faqih constitutional referendum. To prevent an outbreak of clashes, Mr. Rajavi withdrew, inspiring even Khomeini, according to his son, to praise his nobility and graciousness. *Le Monde* wrote in this regard:

... According to diverse estimates, had Imam Khomeini not vetoed his candidacy in the presidential election last January, Mr. Rajavi, would have gotten several million votes. He was, moreover, assured of the support of the religious and ethnic minorities - whose rights to equality and autonomy he defended - and a good part of the female vote, who seek emancipation, and the young, who totally reject the "reactionary clergy" ...⁶

When Rajavi subsequently ran in the parliamentary elections, all political parties and groups existing at the time, except the ruling party, endorsed his candidacy. During the second stage, his supporters included the nationalists, ethnic and religious minorities, the communists, large sections of the bazaar, and many writers, intellectuals and academics. Even Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan issued a statement calling on voters to endorse Massoud Rajavi, as the "representative of an enthusiastic segment of faithful youth."⁷

As the President Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr acknowledged, on the basis of an opinion poll taken by his office, Rajavi was the most popular candidate for the vice-presidency, with 38%. Other political figures, such as Mohammad Hossein Beheshti, the leader of the ruling party, were the choice of no more than 10% of those polled.

As for the Mojahedin's influence in the bazaar, considered the traditional base of support for the mullahs, sufficiently telling are the many businessmen whose names appear in the list of execution victims of the Khomeini regime. Khomeini retaliated harshly against the bazaar for its extensive financial and political backing of the Mojahedin. For example, the daily *Ettela'at* wrote in October 1981 that "15 major bazaar merchants were arrested in connection with the Mojahedin." Among those executed were Haj Hossein Tehrani Kia, Haj Atta Mahmoudian, Ali Asghar Zehtabchi, Ahmad Javaherian

and Hassan-Ali Safa'i, all highly respected in the Tehran bazaar. Hundreds more from the Tehran bazaar and other cities are on the list of the martyrs.

Thus, as long as peaceful political activity was a possibility, the Mojahedin were Iran's most popular political organization. It is important to recall that during this era, Khomeini was not yet recognized as the despicable figure he is today, nor had the Mojahedin yet paid so heavy a price to liberate their homeland, inspiring the trust of their people. Despite severe restrictions on their freedom of action, the Mojahedin's popular base grew at a rate alarming to the mullahs, as acknowledged by the Department of State and its sources.

The Department's unwillingness to acknowledge even those facts to which it previously subscribed is particularly unsettling. Instead, it avidly sets about proving its hollow hypothesis. The Mojahedin are unpopular, we are asked to believe, because the Resistance's forces are based in Iraq, and because the Mojahedin and NCR sought an end to Khomeini's war. An important point gets lost in the State Department's shuffle. The overwhelming majority of the Iranian people were opposed to Khomeini's belligerence during the Iran-Iraq conflict. After the withdrawal of Iraqi forces in June 1982, there was no justifiable reason for continuing hostilities. For this reason, from the outset, the public supported the Mojahedin and NCR's demand for peace and efforts to end the devastation. Mr. Rajavi's move to the Iran-Iraq frontier was also a welcome step. In addition to the thousands of patriotic youths who joined the Resistance forces, many army officers and soldiers also deserted Khomeini's ranks to join the National Liberation Army of Iran. In the ensuing battles against Khomeini's forces, more Iranian military personnel deserted *en masse* and cooperated with Resistance forces on the field. Soon the *pasdaran* were the only force that fought the Mojahedin.

The hypothesis is all the more feeble six years after Khomeini quaffed what he described as the "poisonous chalice of the ceasefire," and five years after he died. The regime's current leaders, including Khamenei and Rafsanjani, have acknowledged the astronomical cost of the unpatriotic war, and have persistently tried to expand their relations with Iraq, previously described as "the infidel."

If the Mojahedin's presence in Iraq were so discrediting, it is only common sense that the regime would play it up, and certainly not try to undermine it. On the contrary, Tehran has done everything

possible to have the Mojahedin ousted from Iraq and restrict their freedom of action. It is common knowledge that the mullahs' first formally announced demand on the government of Iraq, as well as the first condition they set on normalizing relations with that country, is the Mojahedin's expulsion. At the same time, the Mojahedin's presence in Iraq is way down the list of the regime's grievances against the organization in its propaganda barrages. The charge is really directed at an international audience to tarnish the image of the Resistance abroad. It is but one aspect of the regime's bid to manipulate the special regional, international, and domestic situation in Iraq to the Resistance's detriment. For its part, the Iraqi government has correctly stated that the Mojahedin are equally present in western countries.⁸

The NCR peace policy was vindicated when Khomeini at last succumbed to a cease-fire, after eight years of destruction and national debilitation. Support for the NCR rose dramatically. The regime's subsequent dealings with Iraq and attempts to improve ties further discredit the State Department's theory. At the same time, the proximity of the Resistance's forces to Iranian territory, enabling them to make a decisive move, is heartening for Iranians, which is why the regime has been telling its supporters for the past year that the Mojahedin no longer have a significant force in Iraq, that most have gone abroad and only 600 remain.

Certain circles within the State Department need to portray Khomeini's warmongering as acceptable, despite the Iranian people's inclinations, United Nations resolutions, and measures by international organizations and societies, so that they can conclude on that hollow basis that the Mojahedin lost their popularity due to their peace campaign and the presence of Mr. Rajavi and the Resistance's military arm along the Iran-Iraq frontier. According to a Reuters dispatch from Washington, however, the recent Scud missile attack and flare-up of hostilities between the Mojahedin and Iran's rulers "indicates that Tehran does not share that view."⁹ Beyond all this, since the arrival in Paris of Mrs. Maryam Rajavi, the Resistance's president-elect, the Mojahedin's popularity is no longer at issue.

A Test of Popularity

Assessing anybody's popularity under Khomeini's religious tyranny is no easy task. One reliable indicator is that in the last 14

years, over 100,000 people have been executed and a greater number imprisoned on political charges. The overwhelming majority were members or sympathizers of the Mojahedin. Despite this brutal suppression, there is no question that the Mojahedin are today Iran's principal opposition force, domestically and internationally. Kenneth Katzman of the Congressional Research Service writes: "Most observers acknowledge that PMOI is the most active and effective Iranian opposition group, and statements from Iranian officials suggest that they are genuinely concerned about the group's capability to fan domestic unrest."¹⁰

The regime's propaganda is also a telling sign. Despite the mullahs' efforts to establish that the Mojahedin are finished in Iran, everyday realities reveal that the organization has many supporters throughout the country. This has compelled the regime to acknowledge the Mojahedin's popularity, despite an official policy of not mentioning their name. In July 1994, officials announced that in one three-week period, the regime's news agency, IRNA, had published 300 anti-Mojahedin news reports and analyses. This number does not include the hundreds of articles and news reports Tehran's dailies publish domestically against the Mojahedin and Iranian Resistance.¹¹

The authors of the report have failed to explain how the regime's terrorism, bombardments, persistent mortar and Scud missile attacks on the Resistance's bases along the Iran-Iraq frontier are indicative of the Resistance's unpopularity. Why does the regime risk breaking international laws to get at a discredited force that is not a "viable alternative" in Iran? Rather than addressing any of these questions, the State Department grudgingly clings to a ridiculous reasoning, claiming that the regime's widespread propaganda against the Mojahedin is due to the organization's unpopularity.

Straight from the Horse's Mouth

A huge protest by 200,000 people erupted in the industrial city of Qazvin on August 3, 1994. The regime immediately identified the Mojahedin as the demonstration's organizers,¹² and the authorities and the media warned of the growing influence of Mojahedin sympathizers on events in Iran. Shortly thereafter, a similar demonstration rocked Qa'emsahr,¹³ northern Iran, in protest to the execution of a Mojahedin supporter.

In April 1992, the state-run newspaper *Ressalat* wrote that the

Mojahedin had organized the demonstration in Shiraz,¹⁴ which Agence France Presse described as the "largest demonstration of the last decade."¹⁵ In Spring 1992, Mashad (Iran's second largest city and home of the Holy Shrine of the eighth Shi'ite Imam) erupted. The public's rage was directed at government institutions. The city's mayor told the local press that the Mojahedin had participated in the protest in "an organized manner."¹⁶ A journalist for the British weekly *Economist* was among those detained and interrogated, for 10 hours. She wrote: "The questions concentrated on the People's Mujahideen... Before this incident it had made sense to be skeptical of the Mujahideen's claims that they were behind the disturbances in several Iranian cities in the past month. The army's sensitivity on the matter has now aroused a bit of doubt."¹⁷

In June 1992, Rafsanjani publicly reiterated the extensive presence of the opposition: "We do have enemies, both inside and outside the country... Our enemy is organized abroad, and the [two] are in contact with each other.. They are spread out in the society, they are everywhere."¹⁸

Most Iran observers note that Mojahedin members and sympathizers are the main targets of Iran's internal security forces. State Department officials are, of course, well aware of this, and have acknowledged it in their annual human rights reports. When such a resistance not only survives, but manages to expand, does that not indicate extensive popular support it?

If, as the State Department contends, all the above indicators are not sufficient to confirm a broad base of popular support for the Resistance, then we must logically conclude that the Iranian people support their oppressors, one of the world's most criminal regimes. Perhaps this is precisely the conclusion intended by the authors of the report. It has been implied, rather than stated, because of the regime's disrepute. If this is not the case, then we challenge the Department to substantiate its unfounded claims. How has it managed to poll the Iranian people for their views? The Department has a very poor record in reading events in Iran. Remember that as the shah lurched on the brink, American foreign policy confidently - and notoriously - concluded that there was no serious opposition to the monarch, and that he would not be overthrown.¹⁹ All this good news came from trusted friends in the shah's SAVAK.

The October 1993 announcement of Mrs. Rajavi's arrival in Paris

sent the mullahs into hysterics. Retaliatory acts included terrorist attacks on the French embassy and Air France office in Tehran.²⁰ Still another indication of popular support for the Resistance was the campaign in Iran of national solidarity with President-elect Maryam Rajavi, and simultaneous demonstrations in 16 cities of the world in July 1994. Hundreds of thousands of brochures were distributed throughout Iran in support of Mrs. Rajavi and the National Council of Resistance. Abroad, 50,000 Iranians rallied for Mrs. Rajavi in meetings and demonstrations. These gatherings of 20,000 Iranians in Bonn, 3,000 in Washington, 3,000 in Los Angeles, 5,000 in Stockholm, and 6,000 in The Hague (half the Iranians residing in The Netherlands) are realities that cannot be ignored.²¹ Following the announcement of the proposed campaign in Iran and abroad, the regime's Foreign Minister twice summoned the diplomatic corps in Iran to warn them against permitting NCR activities in their countries. In an official plea to France, Tehran demanded that the Resistance's July 21 solidarity concert in Paris be banned,²² and asked the U.K. to revoke its permit for the London march.²³ The regime also vehemently protested a dissident radio program in Britain, and has repeatedly urged the British government to ban the broadcast.²⁴ In September-October 1994, the Resistance again launched a major campaign in Iran, a week of solidarity with Iranian school children.²⁵

When all is said and done, if the State Department really believes the Mojahedin lack popular support, then it should provide an explanation of the above facts.

International Support

Since 1981, the Mojahedin and National Council of Resistance have ceaselessly endeavored to raise public awareness of the Khomeini regime's crimes against the Iranian people, and provided information to parliaments and international organizations. They have argued with conviction that the medieval regime in Iran should not be supported. Early on, Resistance activists in countries throughout the world established ties with members of parliament, political dignitaries, intellectuals, labor unions, state representatives, mayors, etc., to inform them of the regime's crimes and introduce the National Council of Resistance. Soon, North American and European politicians extended valuable support to the Council. Scores of parliamentarians and political dignitaries met with Mr. Rajavi in

Paris, declaring their support for the Iranian Resistance. Ervand Abrahamian refers to Mr. Rajavi's meetings and the Council's diplomatic activities, writing that the Mojahedin "sent delegates to international human rights associations; to special hearings of the United Nations; and to the annual meetings of such varied political organizations as the Socialist International, the British Labour Party, the British Liberal Party, the German Christian Democratic Party, the Italian Communist Party, the Italian Christian Democratic Party..."²⁶ Mr. Rajavi accepted some of the invitations, where he met with party leaders and government officials.

Mr. Abrahamian also notes the many announcements of support for the Iranian Resistance, writing: "One petition against the 'blood-thirsty medieval regime', circulated in Europe and the United States in mid-1983, got the endorsement of some 1,700 politicians, labour organizers and university professors, including Maxime Rodinson, Eric Hobsbawm, and Charles Tilly. Another petition, circulated in fifty-seven different countries in early 1986, obtained the signatures of over 5,000 public figures, including 3,500 parliamentary deputies, many of them in Britain, France, Italy, Sweden, Holland, West Germany, and India."²⁷ This last petition was in support of the National Council of Resistance's peace policy - the same policy the State Department report assailed as unpopular with Iranians because of their opposition to peace and their perception of the Mojahedin as linked to Iraq. The petition attested to the global awareness of Khomeini's warmongering and the Iranian people's support for peace.

Support for the National Council of Resistance has picked up pace in recent years. Over 1,500 parliamentarians supported the Council as the only democratic alternative to the Khomeini regime in a worldwide initiative in 1992. The parliamentarians stressed in their statement: "Nearly three years after Khomeini's death, the myth of moderation has come to an end. The spread of acts of protest in Iran and the overwhelming boycott of the regime's election farce upon the call by the Iranian Resistance, demands greater international attention and support for the democratic alternative, the National Council of Resistance."²⁸

A U.S. House of Representatives majority declared: "Experience has shown that this resistance's profound popular and religious roots within Iran's people are the best impediment to the Iranian regime's abuse of popular religious sentiments. Hence, this resistance is the

solution to the phenomenon of fanatic fundamentalism. We are convinced that support for the National Council of Resistance will contribute to the achievement of peace and stability for all the countries of the region."²⁹

In October 1992, sixty-two U.S. Senators announced in a joint statement:

Resolutions by the U.N. Human Rights Subcommittee and the European Parliament deplored the continuing increase in terrorist activities against dissidents abroad, including the failed plot in December 1991 to assassinate Mr. Massoud Rajavi, President of the National Council of Resistance of Iran.

On April 5, 1992, the Rafsanjani government, alarmed at the spread of popular protests, crossed international borders in violation of international law to bombard an opposition base in another bid to kill the opposition's leaders... We are convinced that the time has come for the free world to join together against the human rights abuses of the Iranian regime. Recently, a majority of the members of the U.S. House of Representatives, and 1,300 parliamentarians from 19 other countries issued statements condemning the violations of human rights in Iran and supporting the Iranian people's Resistance.³⁰

These distinguished members of Congress certainly were not duped into issuing their statements. The State Department can attest to the extremes to which some Irangate holdouts in the Department went to dissuade members of Congress from endorsing the initiatives. Obviously, their efforts failed, despite seven years of negative statements from the Department about the Mojahedin. That says a lot about the credibility of the allegations against the Iranian Resistance among U.S. lawmakers, who see the State Department's policy on the Mojahedin as "inappropriate."

In spite of the State Department claims, today the National Council of Resistance is widely recognized in the world as the only viable democratic alternative to the Khomeini regime in Iran. Council members regularly meet with European government officials recognizing the Iranian Resistance, for an exchange of views on recent developments in Iran. These exchanges have contributed to mutual understanding.³¹ Simultaneously, the Council is in touch with governments in the Middle East and with other Islamic countries, among whom it has found considerable understanding of the Khomeini regime's terrorist and fundamentalist nature and the Resistance's goals. In reviewing the Council's international backing,

the State Department has once again distorted the facts, by not mentioning this broad support, specifically of the Congressional majority, and alleging that the Mojahedin are only supported by Iraq. Documents pertaining to the matter have always been available to the State Department. Perhaps there is a design to this pretense of ignorance. How else to misrepresent a movement with long-standing credibility only a few streets away on Capitol Hill, and in European and Middle Eastern capitals? How else to consciously court the mullahs?

What's at Issue?

Finally, we come to the real issue: What is the State Department's problem with the Mojahedin? If the Resistance truly lacks popular support, is "not a viable alternative," is "a mere shell," is "shunned by most Iranians," has been discredited among politicians and the Tehran regime is "aware of [its] unpopularity," what possible threat can it pose to anyone?

So why do the mullahs so desperately seek its destruction, domestically and internationally? In a convoluted twist, the State Department claims that the regime conducts its barrage of anti-Mojahedin propaganda not because they are popular, but because they are unpopular, suggesting that this provides the regime with a means of discrediting its opponents. Even if we accept this theory for Iran, then how to explain the regime's hysterical obsession with the Mojahedin and NCR internationally? The Mojahedin and National Council of Resistance are always on the agenda in any diplomatic contact by the regime. They are blasted in every speech in international bodies, and in all written communications with these organizations. If we believe the State Department's report, the Mojahedin and Council have no support internationally, other than Iraq. So what is all the fuss about?

Many diplomats have privately admitted that it is unprecedented for a regime to carry on so much propaganda against its opposition. Many have said that even if they did not know the Mojahedin personally, they could have realized their credibility from the regime's behavior. Why else was U.S. rejection of the Mojahedin a major condition in the Irangate dealings? Political norms dictate that a government's response to a political issue be appropriate to the issue's significance.

U.S. policy contradicts itself by portraying the Mojahedin and National Council of Resistance as shunned by Iranians and without international support, while at the same time attacking the movement in a bid to aid the regime and prevent democratic change in Iran, all in one breath. Perhaps it is possible to sit in Foggy Bottom and denounce the Iranian Resistance's forces in Iran and at the Iran-Iraq frontier, brand the movement as discredited, hope that nobody will have access to first-hand information and *abracadabra*, the desired political goals will be attained. More likely, however, the Resistance's extensive activities, especially abroad, simply neutralize the Department's shenanigans, as the American people see the truth for themselves.

Even the State Department is compelled to admit, however inconsistently, that the Mojahedin have "offices in Europe, North America, the Middle East, and Australia..." It is quite perplexing how an organization can have offices throughout the world, hold demonstrations, enjoy the cooperation of popular artists and musicians, supply the necessary personnel, information, budget, etc. for these activities and still lack a popular base among Iranians. The truth is that not one other group exists with one-tenth or even one hundredth of these activities abroad. The Mojahedin and the National Council of Resistance have representative offices in at least 170 cities throughout the world. If it is possible to sustain so extensive an organization without popular support, then why can the monarchists, who have pillaged billions of dollars of our nation's wealth, not do the same? Some of these people even admit to being on the U.S. government's payroll and in direct or indirect contact with the State Department. Why can they not maintain offices in even seven cities? Why have they not staged even one demonstration in the past 10 years, whose participants numbered at least 10 percent of those at the Resistance's demonstrations? If they were capable of such activities, the State Department would probably have promoted them as viable political organizations. Doubtless, the Department understands the mechanisms far better than we, and its admission of the Resistance's extensive organization and activities abroad is perhaps intended to avoid further embarrassment.