

## War Story:

# Female-driven army on Iraq/Iran border gets bombed by the Bush Administration, snubbed by anti-war activists

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Lost in the debate over Iraq troop pullouts and the carnage of civilians in that country is the murky status of a little known army that has been confined to base ever since the United States invaded in 2003.

The soldiers represent an Iranian opposition group called the Mujahedeen Khalq, or MEK, which has battled the Islamic regime across the border for the past 27 years.

In what may be a first for modern warfare, about a third of the MEK's combatants, and some 70 percent of its commanders, are female. Those demographics are probably not so incredible when you consider that Iranian women have suffered the brunt of persecution under Sharia Law. That's the draconian penal code imposed on the nation in 1979 when Islamic fundamentalists took over in the chaotic aftermath of a national rebellion that deposed Shah Reza Pahlavi.

Even though the MEK helped overthrow Pahlavi, the group supports a return of secular government to Iran. As a political party, it opposed the adoption of the Islamic constitution, which led the Ayatollah Khomeini to outlaw its members from politics. The MEK says tens of thousands of its supporters were executed or imprisoned during the years that followed.



**Calm Between the Desert Storms.** British author of *The Olive Readers* Christine Aziz (right) met with members of the Iranian opposition army and their tanks in Iraq in 2004.

With several camps set up along the Iran/Iraq border, the opposition army's 300 tanks and experience battling Islamic militants could have been deployed to stop Al-Qaida and other foreign  *jihadists* from infiltrating Iraq after the American invasion.

Instead, the Pentagon authorized U.S. and British jets to bomb the main MEK compound outside of Baghdad, killing or injuring about 50 soldiers out of a force of 3,800.

The situation there has been touch and go ever since.

### Welcome to Camp Ashraf

In April of this year, CNN broadcast some exclusive footage of

Camp Ashraf, as the compound is known. Filmed sometime before the start of the second Gulf War in 2003, the video shows platoons of young women marching alongside their male counterparts in a large square, with a huge statue of a lion in the background.

The CNN segment then cuts to the desert to follow the tanks on field maneuvers. After that, we see female recruits performing routine maintenance on armored vehicles. They're dressed in khaki trousers and shirts, combat boots, and (being Muslims) matching Khaki headscarves.

Through an underground network operating within Iran, the MEK first reported the in-

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stallation of nuclear centrifuges in the country a few years ago. The International Atomic Energy Agency verified the claim during a surprise inspection, prompting the U.N. Security Council to adopt sanctions.

Before that, the MEK briefly grabbed headlines within the Islamic state when it attacked the heavily fortified headquarters of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, a special military wing controlled by the ayatollahs.

By early 2003, the opposition army had consolidated its personnel into its two largest camps in Ashraf City. Although it notified the Pentagon of the locations prior to the March 20th invasion, the air strikes proceeded, and sometime later, the Army's 4th Infantry arrived to negotiate a "ceasefire". The U.S. commanders on scene noted in their reports that MEK soldiers never fired a shot at any Coalition forces.

A year later, British author and journalist Christine Aziz visited the camp to interview the women soldiers there. Her article "Tank Girls: The Frontline Feminists", was subsequently published in *The Independent*, a British news journal.

Like the CNN video, the strange scenario that unfolded before Aziz's eyes seemed like something out of *Alice in Wonderland*.

"Ashraf is 14 square miles of impeccable tidiness," Aziz reported. "The first impression is of a holiday camp rather than a military base. Eucalyptus trees line long driveways, men and women tend gardens, and there's the smell of bread from the bakery."

The article continued: "Several weeks after the fall of Saddam, the U.S. General Ray Odierno of the 4th Infantry division entered Ashraf camp to negotiate the disarming of the NLA [National Liberation Army - the MEK's armed forces]. He found himself in a room lined with cream Regency furniture and Persian rugs, drinking coffee from white and gold china cups and eating homemade sweetmeats with a group of female army commanders considered to be terrorists by his government."

Michael Gordon of the *New York Times* related a similarly cordial meeting in June of 2003. "The Spartan Brigade's commander, Col. David Perkins, met with a woman who is one of the Iranian group's military commanders to

discuss arrangements for using the compound. The Iranians surprised the Americans by serving a chicken dinner. The resistance movement seemed prepared to accept the Americans, but made the point it was their compound and that they eventually expected to get it back."

### Terrorists or Bargaining Chips

Since the Iran-Contra scandal in the mid 1980s, successive American administrations have either shunned the MEK or acted to criminalize it as part of secret deals with the Islamic regime which later became public.

The U.S. State Department went so far as to declare the opposition group a "foreign terrorist organization" in 1997. Officials within the Clinton Administration said the designation was meant to reward Iran for electing a moderate, Mohammad Khatami, as president that year.

Yet Tehran had been implicated just the year before in directing and financing a group of Hezbollah fighters who bombed Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia. The attack killed 19 U.S. air men and injured 400.

It seemed an inauspicious time to let bygones be bygones.

In 1999, the geopolitics turned positively bizarre when the State Department designated a second Iranian opposition group as a terrorist organization. This time it was the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), a broad-based coalition of Iranian expatriate groups who formed an Iranian Parliament in exile in 1985. NCRI President Maryam Rajavi presides over a council of 530 members, not all of whom support the armed resistance at Camp Ashraf.

Mrs. Rajavi, who is married to



An MEK soldier services an armored vehicle at Camp Ashraf, Iraq.

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MEK leader Massoud Rajavi, says that in the event the MEK were to dislodge the Islamic dictatorship from Iran, she will serve a six-month interim term, followed by Democratic elections. Her husband, however, has not been seen since the U.S. invasion.

Questioned about the addition of the NCRI to the terrorist list, former Assistant Secretary of State Martin Indyk told *Reuters*, "The Iranian Government had brought this to our attention. We looked into it and saw that there were good reasons for designating the NCR[I] as an alias for the MEK."

The admission that a hostile foreign government long associated with terrorism itself was now shaping American policy prompted U.S. Congress people on both sides of the aisle to scratch their heads in amazement. Nearly 200 representatives have signed onto petitions asking for the terrorist designation of both the MEK and NCRI to be revoked.

However, it wasn't until American legal and human rights organizations that interact with the NCRI filed a lawsuit that a judge revoked its terror tag.

Secretary of State Colin Powell ignored that ruling two years later when he ordered the arrest of the group's representatives in Washington and Los Angeles, along with the freezing of its assets. While subsequent litigation reversed those actions, seven Iranian American fundraisers are currently in jail awaiting trial on charges stemming from the terrorist designation.

Across the Atlantic, the NCRI/MEK wasn't faring much better. Acting on a tip from the CIA, French President Jaques Chirac authorized a raid on the NCRI headquarters in Auvers-sur-Oise, a sleepy, upscale suburb north of Paris. Mrs. Rajavi, who has lived there for 18 years without



Photo: NCRI

President Maryam Rajavi of the National Council of Resistance for Iran (center) arriving at the Council of Europe in April of 2006.

incident, suddenly found herself shackled and led away along with 167 other Iranian dissidents. Among those detained, Mohammad Mohaddessin, the group's foreign affairs spokesman, described the raid afterwards as a gigantic publicity stunt aimed at helping French corporations get contracts in Iran.

There were enough police, he told the *Wall Street Journal*, "for a coup in an African country."

A search of the group's headquarters did not turn up any evidence to support the CIA's claim of imminent terrorist attacks in Europe or anywhere else, and a judge ordered Mrs. Rajavi released from jail. (The other detainees were freed shortly after the raid.)

At this point, American news organizations began investigating the phenomenon of a War on Terror turned on its head. The *Washington Post* reported in the summer of 2003 that Iranian officials had met regularly with representatives of the State Department in the lead-up to the Iraq war. According to the *Post*, "At one of the meetings, in early January, the United States signaled that it would target the Iraq-based camps of the Mujaheddin-e Khalq (MEK),

or People's Mujahhedin, a major group opposing the Iranian government." In return, it's alleged that Iran agreed to secure the border and turn over any Iraqi troops attempting to flee the jurisdiction.

Relations between Tehran and Washington cooled in 2004. After an 18-month review by the F.B.I. and other federal agencies found no links to terrorism among any MEK soldier living at Camp Ashraf, the U.S. Central Command announced that it would comply with a determination by the International Committee of the Red Cross that the MEK was a legitimate party to a civil war. The ICRC - and more recently, the U.N. High Commissioner on Refugees - has stipulated that the Geneva Conventions preclude the expulsion of the MEK from Iraq or its forcible repatriation back to Iran.

On hearing of the U.S. decision to protect the rebel base, Iran's former president Khatami (the moderate) ranted to reporters that the MEK were among "the biggest terrorists in the world..." and accused the United States of exercising a double standard in fighting terrorism.

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In fact, the Bush Administration now found itself caught in its own lie. While U.S. military personnel were regularly escorting an MEK contingent to Baghdad on supply runs, back in Los Angeles seven Iranian-Americans were facing up to ten years in prison for aiding and abetting a terrorist group.

Members of Congress again tried to intervene on the MEK's behalf. In 2005, California Congressman Brad Sherman co-signed a letter with Colorado Republican Tom Tancredo demanding that the State Department retract the terrorist designation. In the summer of 2006, a summit on Capitol Hill reiterated the call. Ironically, the bi-partisan lobbying effort seems only to have made matters worse for the MEK. Progressive political organizations, which normally support indigenous resistance movements worldwide, have remained surprisingly silent on the subject of Iran over the years.

Since the *Independent* ran Aziz's story in 2004, a steady drumbeat of blogs and articles have appeared, accusing the Iranian opposition of a "bloody track record" of terrorist activities, functioning as a "cult", and of carrying out a massacre against Kurdish people after the first Gulf War.

This last accusation originated in a State Department human rights report issued in 2001. Several NGOs who conducted subsequent inquiries were unable to substantiate the claim.

Even the American rights group Human Rights Watch joined the chorus of detractors in 2005, accusing the MEK of torturing its own soldiers. Yet the evidence was apparently based on little more than telephone testimony. One of the "credible witnesses" identified in the HRW report turned out to be a high-ranking Iranian intelligence operative posing as former

combatant at Camp Ashraf.

More recently, articles appearing online have tied the MEK to an alleged Pentagon plot to invade Iran for the purpose of "regime change". Citing the group's role in exposing Iran's nuclear centrifuges, the bloggers suggest the MEK is providing the WMD excuse that President Bush will use to justify an attack.

This past November, *The Wall Street Journal* asked the Pentagon's former third highest-ranking civilian official, Douglas Feith, about the possibility of a military collaboration between the United States and the MEK.

"The idea that we would use them against Iran is fantasy," Feith replied.

And yet the rumors persist. Journalist Seymour Hersh has published two articles in the *New Yorker*, claiming the Bush Administration has undertaken a "redirection" in its foreign policy and plans to go after Iran's government militarily.

The premise defies the reality of an ongoing relationship between the CIA and Iran's ayatollahs that dates back to 1953, when a coup deposed Iran's popular President Mohammed Mossadeq and returned the first Shah Reza Pahlavi to power.

Events surrounding the 1979 transfer of power to the Ayatollah Khomeini also point indirectly to western involvement. Bani Sadr, the first civilian president elected under the new Islamic regime,



White House photo: Eric Draper

**The next Khomeini?** In December, President Bush met with the Ayatollah Abdul-Aziz Al-Hakim, head of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, a group closely tied to Tehran.

said in his memoirs that Khomeini's constant diatribe against the west was more theatrical than heartfelt. While in exile during the 1970s, the imam first chose the pro-western Iraq, then Paris, to live while in exile, rather than an Islamic state like .

Following his return to Iran, Henry Kissinger and David Rockefeller urged then President Carter to admit the recently deposed shah into the United States for cancer treatment. That triggered the embassy hostage crisis and what came to be known as Carter's October Surprise, in which the President lost re-election due to the unresolved crisis.

Held for 444 days, the 52 hostages were released January 20, 1981, the day President Reagan took the oath of office. Several years of missile sales to Iran followed, spearheaded by Reagan's campaign manager turned CIA director Bill Casey. The secret missiles-for-hostages deal culminated in the Iran-Contra Scandal of 1987.

In 2005, two of the embassy hostages claimed unambiguously that Iran's newly elected president Mahmoud Adhmadenijad was the Islamic student leader who pre-

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sided over their captivity.

Although both men were U.S. military advisers at the time of their capture, the Pentagon, however, insisted this was a case of mistaken identity.

That Ahmadinejad has friends in such high places may explain his unwavering defiance about Iran's nuclear enrichment program despite the presence of nine U.S. warships now on station in the Persian Gulf. James Surowiecki, who writes on financial issues, has even alleged that all the war posturing has helped the Islamic regime.

Wall Street traders, Surowiecki says, up the price of oil to what's called the "risk premium" whenever it looks like Iran's oil might come off the market soon. With the second largest reserves in the world, the country has been picking up an extra \$20 million dollars day in crude oil revenues as a result of all the saber rattling in Washington.

In the last four months alone, the price of gas at the pump has gone up a dollar throughout the United States.

"The economic consequences of this are not trivial," Surowiecki writes in the February 19th issue of *The New Yorker*. "In the past few years, the inflated risk premium has given Iran tens of billions of dollars that it would otherwise not have had."

By contrast, Iraq endured more than a decade under a crippling economic embargo prior to the 2003 invasion.

Moreover, any U.S. attack against Iran would more likely serve to bolster the Islamic regime at a time of growing unrest. Those Iranians born after 1979 tend to reject Sharia Law and prefer closer ties to the West. although seldom reported by the western press, demonstrations organized by university students have become



**Iran's latest crackdown on women.** According to the BBC, the government has arrested hundreds for violating the Islamic dress code. The dragnet also affected foreigners and tourists.

increasingly commonplace.

To combat its loss of prestige, the regime ordered a "vice" crackdown in April, targetting young women who wear bright colors, show off their figures or display too much hair under their scarves. Under Islamic law, women may only wear somber colors and must cover themselves with a shawl or coat down to the knees.

According to the *BBC*, Iran's Ministry of Information arrested 33 women's rights activists ahead of their annual protest rally on

March 8th, International Women's Day. All were imprisoned in the notorious Evin Prison and charged with "acting against national security".

In May, reports surfaced that at least three Iranian Americans have been imprisoned in Iran, including Haleh Esfandiari, the 67-year-old director of the Middle East program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC. Esfandiari was visiting her 93-year-old mother when she was arrested and charged with plotting to overthrow the government.

**Iraq quagmire the result of bad judgment or by design?**

A year after the ceasefire went into effect at Camp Ashraf, the U.S. Army's 4th Infantry confiscated the MEK's tanks, 2,000 other vehicles and 10,000 small arms. The munitions cache was destroyed.

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**The Ties that Bind.** Lt. Col. Oliver North testifies to Congress about the Iran-Contra Affair in 1987. The U.S. sold missiles to the Islamic regime in exchange for freeing hostages kidnapped by Hezbollah. Money raised from the sales was laundered through Pakistan into London banks, then used to finance a campaign to destabilize Nicaragua. George H.W. Bush was vice-president at the time.

By this time the Pentagon had already disbanded the Iraqi national army. The U.S. Central Command issued a press release stating "The voluntary, peaceful resolution of this process by the MEK and the Coalition significantly contributes to the coalition's mission to establish a safe and secure environment for the people of Iraq."

Yet taken together, the two policy decisions may have functioned more as the Islamic militant equivalent of waving the green flag at Daytona.

According to the MEK, Tehran capitalized on Iraq's internal security vacuum and sent thousands of paid, covert operatives over the border to foment insurrection. Each team was assigned to a specific province, toting all the necessary accoutrements for waging *ji*had - bomb-making materials, weapons, American currency and firebrand clerics to stir up insurgency in local communities. Members of Iran's elite Quds force, which takes its orders directly from the Ayatollah Khomeini, took charge of the operation. Other Iranian militants entered Iraq under the guise of humanitar-

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"We, as Iraqis who value our independence, feel we must speak out as strongly as possible against this undeclared war by Iran on our people and quasi-occupation of Iraqi territories by Tehran through their surrogates."

- Sheikh Ali Al-Shammari, a Shiite tribal leader from southern Iraq, at an April 2005 press conference in Baghdad.

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ian relief administrators.

As early as May, 2003, U.S. military commanders knew it had a problem. "We have seen a rather steady increase in Iranian activity here, which is troubling," Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld casually explained at one press conference. "What you see at the most benign end of it is Iranian efforts to sort of repeat the formula which was used by Hizbollah in Lebanon. [They] send in people who are effectively guerrillas and have them get into the country and try to set up social services and decide that these social services are their ticket to popularity. And then they start to arm themselves and you wind up with a serious problem if you let it go too far."

However, not until August of 2006 did the Pentagon issue orders to round up the Iranian militants. Up to 500 men were detained at any one time, one news agency reported, but many of the men were released, citing their employment with Iranian humanitarian relief organizations.

In December, Coalition forces captured six members of the Quds Force Corps, including its top commander in Iraq, Mohsin Chizari. Tehran vehemently protested when it received word of their detention, insisting the men were government diplomats and that the United States had destroyed a new consulate office. In addition to freeing its nationals, the regime demanded compensation for the damaged building.

The MEK has issued a report documenting more than 31,000 Iranian Islamists, Iraqi militia members, clerics and Iraqi political officials who collect a regular paycheck from Tehran.

On April 11th, Major General William Caldwell said explosive devices capable of piercing armored vehicles (called EFPs) had

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. "The real importance of this army has been overlooked. In Iraq, many women were able to go to school and university, to work and to wear what they wanted. Now, they are being intimidated in the streets for not covering their bodies, or for just being outside their homes. Groups of men strongly influenced by Iranian fundamentalists, who are apparently supporting some political and religious groups in Iraq, are making their lives miserable."

- Anne Land, Danish human rights lawyer

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likewise been manufactured across the border.

In addition to the deaths of about 4,000 Coalition forces in Iraq, a staggering 655,000 civilians were killed between 2003 and 2006, (By comparison, 200,000 people have been reported killed in the genocide taking place in Darfur.) According to an investigation conducted by the Johns Hopkins University's Bloomberg School of Public Health. The United Nations says that 15 percent of Iraq's population of 26 million have gone into exile.

The *Daily Telegraph* of London has reported that the pending departure of the British army from Basra will almost certainly open up the floodgates for more violence in the south. The army said recently it had broken up several

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death squads operating in the area.

With so much circumstantial evidence to draw upon, most Americans still appear as confused as ever about who is doing what to whom in Iraq. Press coverage from the region generally attributes the unabated violence to a civil war involving Iranian-backed Shiite militias attacking Sunni "strongholds" backed by Saudi Arabia. However, U.S. military spokesmen admit that Iran has been arming both Sunnis and Shias.

There have also been few reports of gun battles actually taking place between the factions. Civilians, Iraqi police recruits, and Coalition forces represent the primary targets of bombings, kidnappings and other attacks. A spokeswoman for the MEK in Europe told the *Daily Telegraph* that by maintaining an atmosphere of chaos and slowly bleeding the occupation armies, Iran hopes to establish a sister Islamic state in Iraq.

The strategy appears to have worked. Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice announced recently that the United States will now "negotiate" with Tehran about the future of Iraq.

Late last year the Bush Administration welcomed to the White House the leader of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, the Ayatollah Abdul-Aziz Al-Hakim, as someone making a state visit. Rumors were abuzz that Aziz might eclipse both Prime Minister Nuri Kamel al-Maliki and the radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr as top dog in Iraq politics. However, in May, Hakim checked into hospital in Iran with lung cancer, causing Muqtada al-Sadr to come out of exile (in Iran) and make his first public speech in Iraq in four months.

Sadr called on Shias and Sun-

nis to stop fighting and unite in a nationalist vein, opposing the U.S. occupation. Curiously, he also demanded that the Bush Administration set a timetable for withdrawing troops, a move sure to embarrass the Congressional Democrats.

On the economic front, in September, Mariam Karouny of *Reuters* reported that Iran and Iraq had agreed to a plan in which Iraqi crude oil would be processed by Iranian refineries. The two nations also announced a joint venture to build new oil infrastructure projects inside Iraq.

Not surprisingly, the dismantling of Camp Ashraf also figures prominently at the top of both countries' to-do list.

Even though a petition signed by several million Iraqis in 2005 asked that the MEK be allowed to re-arm and engage the Islamic militants, the government wants the army to decamp.

"We gave this organization a six-month deadline to leave Iraq, and we informed the Red Cross," Iraq's national security minister Shirwan al-Wa'eli told CNN in early April. "Presumably, our friends the Americans will respect our decision and they will not stay on Iraqi land."

*Note: As this article was going to press, the U.S. military had withdrawn its police from Camp Ashraf and assigned a 150-man Bulgarian unit to guard the MEK combatants instead.*

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