**SPIEGEL ONLINE: The Cult-Like Group Fighting Iran**

Prisoners of Their Own Rebellion

Members of the Trump administration have been providing support to a political sect that aims to topple the Iranian regime in Tehran. Around 2,000 of its members live in a camp in Albania. Former members say it is subjecting followers to torture and psychological terror.

By Luisa Hommerich

**Former People's Mujahedin member Gholamreza Shekari**

On a country road in northwestern Albania, a rather odd collection of men and women living together in a camp are busy preparing themselves to topple the Iranian regime. Three times per week, many of them apparently practice slitting throats, breaking hands, jabbing out eyeballs with fingers and performing the so-called Glasgow Smile, which involves cutting cheeks from the corner of the mouth up toward the ear. That, at least, is the story told by a former member of the group.

The camp, roughly the size of 50 football fields and surrounded by high fences, is located just a 35-minute drive from the lively bars of downtown Tirana, but the people inside live in something of a time capsule. Former members of the group report that most of the 2,000 camp residents aren’t allowed to possess mobile phones, watches or calendars, though members of the organization that operates the camp deny those claims.

“My daughter is living somewhere in there,” says Mostafa Mohammadi, a 61-year-old Iranian man with a high forehead and deep eye sockets. Her name is Somayeh, a woman of 38. Her father, who lives in Canada, claims that she is being held in the camp against her will, which is why he spent several months in Albania last year. During a meeting there, he said: “I don’t have anything to do with politics. Please, I just want to see my daughter.”

Just like everyone in the camp, Somayeh Mohammadi is a member of the People’s Mujahedin, a once-militant Iranian opposition group that was listed by the United States. and Europe as a terrorist group until 2012. These days, however, several members of the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump are supporting the group, commonly known by the abbreviation MEK. Both the administration and the MEK, after all, want to see the end of the current regime in Iran — and now that the group has Washington’s backing, the Mujahedin apparently hopes that its time has finally come.

On the sidelines of the Middle East conference in Warsaw, which began on Wednesday, Israeli President Benjamin Netanyahu spoke of possible “war” with Iran. And at an MEK rally in Warsaw, Trump’s lawyer Rudy Giuliani called for regime change in Tehran.

For almost 30 years, several thousand members of the People’s Mujahedin lived in exile in Iraq, but in 2013, many of them moved to Albania. And since 2017, the majority of the group has lived in the isolated camp near Tirana.

**Growing Influence**

Ever since the group set up shop in Albania, however, more and more members have defected. Some tell stories of torture experienced in the camp and of group sessions in which members are required to open up about their sexual fantasies. Women are allegedly forced to wear headscarves. And all of it takes place in the name of a phantom leader named Masoud Rajavi, who hasn’t been seen since 2003. Indeed, it isn’t even clear if he is still alive; photos from the 1990s show a mustachioed man in a green uniform.

The residents of the camp are just one part of the movement, which is led by Maryam Rajavi, the wife of the vanished leader. The 65-year-old commutes between Albania and her office in Paris, from which she leads the group’s political arm, the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), which is active in both Europe and the U.S. NCRI is structured as a kind of interim government, ready to take over in Tehran as soon as the current regime is toppled and the group has offices in many capital cities, including one in Washington not far from the White House. In Berlin, NCRI has an office in the Wilmersdorf district, located just southwest of the city center. The movement in Germany has just a few hundred members, but it has several thousand members around the world.

**Maryam Rajavi is the acting leader of the People's Mujahedin. Her husband has not been seen since 2003.**

And they have proven to be adept lobbyists, having won over influential supporters in recent years. U.S. Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao, National Security Adviser John Bolton and Giuliani have all spoken at NCRI events and they all view the group as a viable alternative to the current regime in power in Tehran.

“The mullahs must go, the ayatollah must go, and they must be replaced by a democratic government, which Madam Rajavi represents,” Giuliani said at an annual NCRI rally in Paris in June 2018. And he suggested that such a regime change could come soon: “Next year, I want to have this convention in Tehran!” he said. Both Giuliani and Bolton have even visited the group in Albania, and last Monday, the 40th anniversary of the Iranian Revolution, the national security adviser issued a video message addressing Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, in which he said: “I don’t think you’ll have many more anniversaries to enjoy.”

But who are Trump’s allies inside the secretive camp? Two lion statues guard the large iron gate at the camp’s entrance and guards call out “No, no!” if anyone stops out front. Three men march out of the gate and refuse to answer any questions, promising that interview requests will be responded to the next day. But nobody ever calls.

DER SPIEGEL never received a response from the People’s Mujahedin or from the NCRI to any of its interview queries prior to the visit, neither from Tirana, Paris or Berlin. A lawyer representing the group likewise declined to discuss the case of Somayeh Mohammadi. Indeed, the group only responded when DER SPIEGEL sent an email outlining the accusations that had been made against it, with an NCRI spokesman in Berlin essentially denying everything. On its websites, the organization claims to stand for democracy, human rights and the strict separation of church and state in Iran. “We want a pluralist system, freedom of parties and assembly,” it says, for example, in an article entitled “Maryam Rajavi’s Ten Point Plan for Future Iran.”

The statements suggest that once the People’s Mujahedin take over power in Iran, everything will immediately improve. But reports from those who have experienced life in the camp do not reflect that message. Instead, they appear to be prisoners of their own rebellion.

**‘Lies, Manipulation and Fear’**

It is, of course, undeniable that the regime in Tehran and the People’s Mujahedin are engaged in a propaganda war and lies from both sides are to be expected. But DER SPIEGEL has spoken with 15 former camp residents, some of them for several hours — and their stories are largely consistent on the most important point: The organization is essentially a sect that is difficult to escape.

Gholamreza Shekari, a slender 50-year-old man with bony cheeks, says he spent 27 years as a member of the People’s Mujahedin, adding “the organization’s public face is liberal. Internally, though, it works by way of lies, manipulation and fear.”

Shekari fell into the group of fighters as a 20-year-old, as many others apparently did as well — through false promises. In 1988, during the confusion of the Iran-Iraq War, he fled across the Iraqi border, where he met members of the People’s Mujahedin. “They spoke of freedom and democracy for Iran,” Shekari says. “And then they promised me that they would arrange a visa for Europe for me.” He believed them.

Later, he says, they took his documents and told him that if he left the group, he would end up in an Iraqi torture prison. An organization spokesman rejects the claim as a “ridiculous and fictitious film scenario.”

“They told us lies to ensure our obedience,” says Shekari. “We were guarded and forced to break off contact with our families.” Claims that fighters were banned from maintaining contact with their families are “baseless lies,” says the organization.

Shekari says that he repeatedly asked when he would be allowed to leave. But that turned out to be a mistake: According to Human Rights Watch, the organization began torturing members who wanted to leave the group or who asked critical questions in the mid-1990s.

“They insulted me as a spy, beat my shins until they were bloody and put out burning cigarettes on my skin,” Shekari says. After a week, he says, his lower legs were completely black. He rolls up his jeans to reveal scars covering his legs.

Ultimately, he says, the leader Masoud Rajavi gathered all those who had been tortured. “He threatened that if we ever spoke about it, we would be handed over to the Iraqis, which would mean additional torture or death.”

**Group Denies Torture Claims**

When confronted with these accusations, the spokesman for the organization’s German chapter says that “neither in the 1990s, nor before or after, did the group keep its members prisoner or torture them.”

Despite everything, Shekari remained with the organization for another 23 years, which at best could be explained as being the result of brainwashing. Only in Albania did the others allow him to leave, in September 2016. Now, he lives in a sparsely furnished apartment in Tirana and receives financial support from the UN Refugee Agency. He doesn’t have much choice but to stay where he is because, as an Iranian, getting visas is difficult and there are many countries to which he is not allowed to travel.

After he left the group, he says he received the equivalent of 350 euros per month from the group for half a year “so that I would keep my mouth shut,” Shekari claims. “The organization claims that we are all agents so that nobody believes us,” he says. “But I’m not working for anyone.”

The People’s Mujahedin used to receive funding from the erstwhile Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, but these days, group supporters collect donations and can often be seen in the pedestrian zones of German cities, showing passersby photos of executions in Iran. They operate under the cover of organizations with names like the “Association for Future Hope” or “Aid Organization for Human Rights in Iran.” According to the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, Germany’s domestic intelligence agency, these and other groups are linked with the People’s Mujahedin. In a message written to DER SPIEGEL about the camp’s financing, the group wrote: “All costs are covered by supporters of the resistance both inside and outside of Iran.”

Security experts believe that the U.S., Saudi Arabia and Israel also provide the group with financial support, but there is no proof for that supposition. The organization writes: “We haven’t received even a single euro from any government.”

**An ‘Ideological Revolution’**

The transformation into a sect-like organization can be explained by history. After the overthrow of the shah, the militant group, still adamantly anti-American at the time, lost the ensuing power struggle and was persecuted by the religious regime under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini. The members fled to Iraq, from where they carried out terrorist attacks in Iran and fought against their own country in the Iran-Iraq War.

Fearing that the group might disintegrate, leader, Masoud Rajavi launched what he called an “ideological revolution” in 1985. He married the wife of a confidant and forced all others to get divorced, with children being sent abroad. Loyalties other than the one to the group’s leader were no longer to be tolerated — and that is when the personality cult surrounding Rajavi and his new wife Maryam began. Still today, many camp residents continue to wear the leader’s likeness on a chain around their necks.

The last time Masoud Rajavi was seen was in March 2003, shortly before the first American bombs began falling in Baghdad. But Maryam Rajavi continues speaking about her husband as though he were still alive. Not long after the beginning of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the Americans captured the People’s Mujahedin’s camp and disarmed the group. Soon, though, the organization began claiming it backed the U.S., even though it had been fighting on behalf of Saddam Hussein only a short time before.

The group’s disarming could have spelled the end, but hardliners like then-U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney wanted to use them as leverage against Iran. Already in 2002, the group had worked with the Israeli secret service Mossad in revealing that Iran had begun covertly enriching uranium.

In 2007, units of the People’s Mujahedin began to receive training at a U.S. military facility in the desert of Nevada — even though the group was still listed by Washington as a terrorist organization at the time. And now, the Trump administration has taken the position that the People’s Mujahedin has been demanding for years: a hardline stance toward Iran. And the group believes that it has played a role: When Trump abandoned the nuclear deal with Iran in May, the group’s commanders celebrated as though they had just won a great victory.

Their list of supporters is currently longer than it has ever been, including numerous U.S. Senators and members of the U.S. military and security apparatus. The former Saudi Arabian intelligence chief, Turki Bin Faisal al Saud, is also a proponent. In the European Parliament, a group called Friends of a Free Iran advocates on behalf of the People’s Mujahedin as does a multipartisan group in the German federal parliament, the Bundestag, called the German Solidarity Committee for a Free Iran.

**Rudy Giuliani – Former Mayor of New York City**

In October, Martin Patzelt, a parliamentarian with Chancellor Angela Merkel’s Christian Democratic Union (CDU), visited the camp in Albania together with former Bundestag President Rita Süssmuth, also of the CDU. Süssmuth raved about the “joie de vivre culture” among the People’s Mujahedin, adding that the Iranian secret service has repeatedly propagated “terrible things” about the group.

The People’s Mujahedin has often rejected all manner of accusations as propaganda from Tehran. And it has been an effective strategy, in part because Iran has brutally persecuted the group in the past and executed thousands of its followers.

**War Footing**

The depictions of those who have left the organization make it sound like the group is constantly on war footing. Eight residents sleep in each room and they have to get up between 4:30 and 5:00 a.m. In addition to combat training, they also take care of construction projects in the camp. The defectors also say that around a thousand members work in the so-called “computer division,” allegedly using fake accounts to post pro-organization propaganda on Twitter and Facebook. Others, say former members, use the messenger service Telegram to entice new Iranian recruits to join them in Albania.

The group’s spokesman counters that claims that the organization is running a troll factory are merely an “attempt to cover up fake accounts belonging to the Iranian regime.”

Former group members say that there are some 200 commanders in the camp and they sometimes read out a letter from their vanished leader, including sentences like: “Have no fear, victory is ours, we will be in Iran.”

The question as to why the Albanian government tolerates the Iranian group in their country is one that the Interior Ministry in Tirana is not willing to answer. But U.S. government documents make it clear why the People’s Mujahedin ended up in Albania in the first place.

After the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, the situation became increasingly dangerous for them. During her time in office, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton helped find a solution, together with the United Nations, and ultimately Albania agreed to accept a number of group members. In return, the U.S. donated $20 million to the UN Refugee Agency and pledged development aid to Albania.

Starting in 2013, group leaders began buying up more and more land and ultimately built the camp, including dozens of white containers and gray, two-story buildings. They house a large kitchen, a bakery, a music studio, a computer center and a dentistry practice — at least according to a propaganda video. On another one of the few videos from inside the camp, Somayeh Mohammadi can be seen, the woman whose father has been trying to free her for 21 years. In the clip, she is wearing a uniform with a headscarf and is being interviewed by two Albanian journalists. Her father, she says, is an agent of the Iranian regime and insists she wants to remain in the camp. “Here is a free country. If I want to go anywhere, I can go.”

The story that her father has to tell, one backed up with documents and video material, sounds quite different. Mohammadi himself was a long-time supporter of the organization and he collected donations for the group in Canada, where he has lived since 1994. When Somayeh was 17 years old, a woman from the organization offered her a “short trip” to the camp in Iraq.

**‘The Organization Gives Nothing’**

Somayeh never came back. The organization sent a cassette recording of Somayeh saying that she had decided to remain in the camp. Her father says that the organization lured him to places in various countries with the promise that he could see her, but instead used him in demonstrations. “The organization gives nothing without getting something in return,” Mohammadi says.

Mujahedin-e-Khalq,MEK,ASHRAF,Tirana, Maream rajavI,Masoud rajavi, Gholamreza Shekari, Trump, human rights, Cult