



Why Supporting the MEK is a Strategic Mistake for the U.S.

by Babak Shekarabi on March 4, 2025

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U.S. policy on Iran has failed by oscillating between military intervention and diplomatic engagement, neither of which promotes democracy. Supporting the MEK is counterproductive due to its history of terrorism and lack of legitimacy. Instead, the U.S. should back grassroots pro-democracy movements, as advocated by Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi, emphasizing non-violent resistance and a secular, democratic Iran. Rejecting past mistakes, Washington must empower the Iranian people rather than extremist factions to achieve lasting change and regional stability.

For decades, U.S. policy on Iran has been shaped by two dominant and equally flawed narratives. On one side, proponents of military intervention advocate for aggressive action, including regime change through force or covert operations. This camp has found an ally in the Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK), an exiled militant group that claims to be a viable alternative to the Islamic Republic in Iran. On the other side, advocates of diplomatic engagement, often influenced by [Iran's lobbying](#) efforts in Washington, support negotiations that have historically strengthened the regime rather than weakened it.

Lost between these two approaches is a third perspective—one that aligns more closely with long-term U.S. strategic interests and offers a realistic, cost-effective path toward a free Iran. This view, advocated by Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi, emphasizes supporting the Iranian people in their struggle to overthrow the regime without U.S. military intervention or backing a deeply unpopular group like the MEK.

As the U.S. re-evaluates its Middle East strategy, it is imperative to avoid past mistakes and recognize that supporting the MEK is not only counterproductive but also detrimental to both Iranian and American interests.

The MEK: A Flawed and Dangerous Ally

The MEK presents itself as an alternative to the Islamic Republic, but its history and organizational structure reveal why it is an unsuitable option for Iran's future.

A History of Terrorism and Betrayal

The MEK was responsible for the [assassination of American servicemen](#) in pre-revolutionary Iran and [played a role in the 1979 hostage crisis](#), during which revolutionaries loyal to Ayatollah Khomeini

attacked the U.S. embassy, taking 53 American citizens hostage for more than 400 days. Initially, the group supported Khomeini, but after a struggle for power, it turned against him and waged a violent insurgency against the Islamic Republic.

During the Iran-Iraq War, the [MEK collaborated with Saddam Hussein](#), fighting against Iranian forces—a betrayal that has left a lasting mark on the Iranian populace. This collaboration, which saw the group siding with an enemy responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iranian soldiers and civilians, has made the MEK one of the most reviled factions in Iran.

From Terrorist Organization to Washington Lobbyists

For years, the MEK was designated as a [terrorist organization by the U.S. State Department](#) due to its involvement in assassinations, bombings, and its cult-like organizational structure. However, in 2012, the Obama administration, under then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, delisted the MEK following an expensive and aggressive lobbying campaign. Since then, the group has gained support from American politicians, many of whom appear unaware of its extremist past and lack of legitimacy within Iran.

The MEK's sources of funding remain obscure, but substantial evidence suggests foreign backing from actors with vested geopolitical interests. This raises concerns about whether the MEK functions as an independent entity or as a proxy force.

The Cult-Like Structure of the MEK

Beyond its violent history, the MEK operates as an authoritarian and [cult-like organization](#), mirroring the very regime it claims to oppose. Reports from former members describe a highly controlled environment in which dissent is not tolerated, members are subjected to forced celibacy and ideological indoctrination, and leader Maryam Rajavi is venerated as a near-religious figure.

This extreme ideological rigidity and autocratic structure make it highly unlikely that the MEK could govern Iran democratically. Instead, supporting the MEK risks replacing one form of authoritarian rule with another, albeit under a different ideological guise.

Zero Support Inside Iran

Perhaps the most critical flaw in backing the MEK is its [complete lack of support](#) among the Iranian people. Decades of betrayal, extremist activities, and cult-like behavior have alienated Iranians across the political spectrum—even those who vehemently oppose the Islamic Republic. If the MEK were ever to assume power, it would face immediate domestic resistance, leading to instability, civil conflict, and the potential need for prolonged U.S. military intervention in the region.

By contrast, grassroots movements advocating for democracy—such as those inspired by Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi—enjoy far greater legitimacy. Unlike the MEK, which depends on foreign sponsorship, these movements reflect the genuine aspirations of the Iranian populace.

The Third Narrative

A Cost-Effective Strategy Aligned with U.S. Interests

Rather than supporting a former terrorist organization with no domestic legitimacy, the U.S. should empower the Iranian people in their pursuit of a democratic, secular government. This strategy would:

- Avoid direct U.S. military involvement while effectively weakening the Islamic Republic.
- Prevent another extremist regime from assuming power in Iran.

- Foster long-term stability in the Middle East, reducing the cycles of intervention and conflict.

Learning from Past Mistakes

The U.S. has made similar miscalculations in the past by supporting unpopular or extremist opposition groups in countries like Iraq and Afghanistan. These choices often resulted in prolonged instability, necessitating extended American military involvement at significant cost.

Iran, however, is distinct from Iraq and Afghanistan—its population is highly educated, globally connected, and capable of initiating change if provided with the right external support. The Iranian people do not seek a foreign-imposed solution like the MEK; rather, they desire international backing for their indigenous resistance.

The Role of Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi

Unlike the MEK, Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi enjoys widespread respect both [inside Iran](#) and internationally. His approach prioritizes:

- Non-violent civil resistance over armed struggle.
- A secular, democratic Iran rather than another ideological regime.
- International pressure against the Islamic Republic without necessitating American military intervention.

The Crown Prince has consistently stated that he does not seek personal power, recognizing instead that Iran's future must be determined by its people through democratic processes. His role is that of a unifying figure who can bridge political divides and guide the nation toward democracy. His commitment to free and fair elections ensures that Iran's political future will be decided by its citizens rather than by an externally imposed regime.

Conclusion

U.S. policymakers must reject the false choice between military intervention and engagement with the current Iranian regime. Supporting the MEK is a strategic error that would lead to further instability, increased conflict, and ultimately, the failure to achieve a free Iran.

Instead, embracing a third narrative—one that empowers the Iranian people rather than extremist factions—presents a viable, low-cost path toward lasting change.

Iran stands on the brink of another major uprising. The U.S. must act wisely by backing the right movement rather than repeating past mistakes that have perpetuated regional instability. Washington must cease relying on lobbyists and interventionists and instead support the true voice of the Iranian people.

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Babak Shekarabi, an economy graduate, has a broad understanding of Iranian politics, covering both domestic issues and international relations. His knowledge allows him to navigate and articulate the complexities of Iran's political landscape. Shekarabi's expertise bridges the gap between academic knowledge and practical political analysis, positioning him as a notable figure in discussions on Iran's political dynamics and its place on the global stage.