

From Honor to Deceit: Tehran's War on Truth

*The Iranian Regime's
Disinformation
Campaign Exposed*



Alliance for Public Awareness

From Honor to Deceit: Tehran’s War on Truth

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	5
I. Deceptive Ploys to Whitewash the Iranian Regime’s Use of Students in the Iran-Iraq War.....	8
II. Transfer of Children Abroad	26

III. Mujahedin Khalq and Child Soldiers	32
IV. Demonization Campaign against the PMOI	41
V. What the Witnesses Say?.....	55
- Ehsan Eqbal.....	55
- Saleh Abbaszadeh.....	59
- Ehsan Sharifi.....	63
VI. Conclusion	66



Introduction

A few years back, the remarkable saga of the transfer of children of the members of the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI/MEK) during the First Persian Gulf War in 1990 from Camp Ashraf in Iraq to Europe, the United States, and Canada emerged from the shadows. This migration, undertaken to shield the children from the devastating bombings of the war, was twisted into a propaganda weapon against the PMOI and the broader Iranian Resistance. The disinformation campaign, spearheaded by Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) along with several journalists and filmmakers, acting at the behest of the Iranian regime, aimed to malign the organization.

Since its inception in February 1979, the regime's effort to demonize the PMOI and the Iranian Resistance has been relentless. Over the years, the nature of these attacks has evolved, adapting to the changing dynamics of the resistance movement and the regime's own desperation to cling to power. Despite the shifts in tactics, the core message has remained constant: portray the PMOI and the Iranian Resistance as a threat more formidable and malign than the current regime, thus dissuading the Iranian people from considering regime change and, at the same time, convincing the international community of the fallacy that there exists no viable alternative to the status quo.

However, the past 7-8 years have witnessed pivotal developments that not only propelled the Iranian Resistance into a new chapter but also compelled the regime to recalibrate its strategy of demonization. Key among these developments were:

1. The relocation of the PMOI from Iraq to Europe, particularly Albania, in 2016, which signified a major logistical achievement and bolstered the Resistance's standing on the international stage.
2. The eruption of successive, nationwide uprisings since late 2017, underscored by the significant influence and organizational capabilities of the PMOI in galvanizing public dissent against the regime.

These milestones not only challenged the regime's narrative but also demonstrated the enduring resilience and adaptability of the Iranian Resistance, signaling a potent threat to the regime's grasp on power.

The regime's intensification of its disinformation campaign against the PMOI and the Iranian Resistance can also be attributed to the formation of Resistance Units within Iran and the significant involvement of the youth in the uprisings. The rising wave of young Iranians joining the ranks of the PMOI, inspired by the call for freedom and change, has evidently unnerved the regime, prompting it to resort to further fabrications and distortions about the MEK, particularly focusing on the narratives surrounding the children of MEK members, many of whom have now become advocates for freedom or are actively involved in the international arena to expose the regime's atrocities.

A notable instance of this propaganda effort was spearheaded in 2020 by Luisa Hommerich, a journalist with close ties to the MOIS, through her contributions to in the German publication *Die Zeit*. The result was an article, entitled, "Free at last," that was published on October 27, 2021.¹

At the same time, a film project about Camp Ashraf children was launched, which represents a targeted effort to leverage narratives surrounding individuals who, as children, were associated with the PMOI during their relocation from Iraq to Europe during the First Persian Gulf War. Decades later, these individuals, now in their 40s and purportedly connected to the MOIS, became central figures in a cinematic endeavor aimed at discrediting the PMOI and the broader Iranian Resistance.

The film was presented at the YouTube Festival in February and subsequently at the Tempo Festival in Gothenburg in March, with the intention of portraying the MEK and the Iranian Resistance unfavorably.

Alongside this cinematic endeavor, two books authored by two of the aforementioned individuals were released. These books, filled with inaccuracies, were designed to malign the PMOI and the Iranian Resistance. These actions are people. This approach highlights the regime's apprehension about the PMOI's capacity to galvanize societal support for a change in Iran, demonstrating the extensive measures the regime is willing to employ to maintain its grip on power.

Introduction

These narratives intersect to distort reality, attempting to portray the PMOI members as devoid of emotion, cruel, and dismissive of family values. This

messaging is propagated through a network of media outlets linked to the MOIS and the Revolutionary Guards. The aim is to convince the Iranian public that the negative portrayal of the MEK, which is rejected by the people, is also corroborated by foreign experts, witnesses, and sources outside the regime's influence.

For over forty years, the clerical regime has engaged in a campaign to demonize PMOI rationalizing the persecution and execution of its members and sympathizers within Iran, as well as orchestrating terrorist attacks against the Resistance and its international supporters. In response to the growing appeal of the PMOI among the youth, the expansion of Resistance Units, and increasing international support, the regime has intensified its efforts to vilify the PMOI both domestically and internationally, aiming to undermine its credibility and support base.

Alongside manipulating the narrative concerning the children of Camp Ashraf, the regime has initiated a so-called court proceeding against over 100 leaders and members of the resistance who have been living outside Iran for decades. These individuals have been branded as "*mohareb*" (enemies of God) and sentenced to death in absentia. The regime's officials have openly articulated their objectives with these trials: firstly, to convince the youth that they are unaware of the "crimes" committed by the PMOI and that they have been "deceived" by the organization; secondly, to construct a basis for exerting pressure on these individuals in Western countries, mirroring the objectives behind the distorted stories of the children; and thirdly, to set the stage for terrorist assault against the organization.

This hypocritical concern for the children of the PMOI by the regime and its affiliates starkly contrasts with their own track record of human rights abuses against children. Hundreds of teenagers, aged 12 to 18, were killed in the streets by the Revolutionary Guards during the 2022 uprising. Historically, during the Iran-Iraq war, about one million children were used as minesweepers in the minefields, leading to countless deaths. Additionally, the ongoing repression by the regime has forced hundreds of thousands of children to abandon their education for forced labor, including scavenging through garbage and undertaking other menial tasks, highlighting the regime's blatant disregard for the well-being and futures of its youngest citizens.

This booklet delves into the reality behind the narratives concerning the children of the PMOI, unveiling the extensive efforts by the religious dictatorship ruling Iran and its international operatives to distort the truth. It aims to shed light on the strategies, mechanisms, and operations employed by the regime in its campaign of demonization.

Through detailed examination and evidence, the booklet seeks to counteract the regime's propaganda by presenting factual accounts that reveal the true nature of the regime's actions and intentions. By doing so, it endeavors to inform the public, both within Iran and globally, about the regime's tactics of disinformation on one hand and the resilience of the PMOI and their families in the face of such adversity on the other hand.

Endnote:

1. "Iranian People's Mujahideen: Free at last," Die Zeit, October 27, 2021. Available at: <https://www.zeit.de/zeit-magazin/2021/44/amin-golmaryami-flucht-irak-volksmudschahedin-militaercamp-organisation>

Deceptive Ploys to Whitewash the Iranian Regime's Use of Students in the Iran-Iraq War

The Iranian regime, directly as well as through its proxies—aptly described as political surrogates¹ - tries to vilify the primary opposition Mujahedin-e Khalq (PMOI/MEK) by branding it as an organization that has violated children's rights when Operation Desert Storm erupted in early 1990s. During the 1991 Persian Gulf War in Iraq, the PMOI saved the lives of hundreds of its members' children by transferring them to outside Iraq. The multi-faceted and complex operation saved these children from constant bombardments and threats to their lives. The regime tries to portray the transfer of children out of Iraq as an example of the PMOI's lack of compassion. At the same time, it contradicts its own narratives by claiming that the MEK uses children in its struggle against the regime. Let's consider the approach of this regime, which

claims to be more nurturing than a mother to the children of PMOI, towards children in general.

Children’s Rights Under the Ruling Theocracy

In the clerical regime, children have no rights. In fact, the violation of children’s rights is practically institutionalized in its laws. These laws consider criminal punishment for boys to be 15 years and for girls to be 9 years old. Over the past four decades, the regime has imprisoned, tortured, raped, and executed thousands of Iranian children and adolescents aged 13 to 17 for political reasons, particularly for supporting the MEK. Additionally, hundreds of thousands of 12 to 17-year-old students were sent to the fronts during the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s as cannon fodder and “disposable soldiers” to clear minefields.

Under the rule of the clerical regime, a significant portion of Iranian children have become child laborers, street beggars, dumpster scavengers, drug addicts, forced into marriages, divorced, orphaned, neglected, malnourished, migrants, illiterate, suicidal, and more.

On June 25, 1981, the state-owned newspaper, Ettela’at, published a photo of very young girls who had been arrested, stating that the “Revolutionary Prosecutor’s Office” in Tehran was requesting their families to bring identification cards with photos and birth certificates including photos of their children, whose images had been published in the paper, to Evin Prison headquarters to claim the bodies of their children.



Cutting from the daily Ettela’at, with pictures of young A note accompanying this girls executed on June 25, 1981, without their identities article emphasized that the being established. The prosecutor’s office is calling on their families to

go to Evin Prison and identify them. names of individuals in the
_____ photos were unknown.

“The sharp increase in executions from June 1981 was accompanied by growing conflict between supporters of the ruling Islamic Republican Party and its opponents, including organizations such as the Mujahideen-e-Khalq. Most of those executed were members of organizations actively opposed to the authorities, including the PMOI, and the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI).

“In the second half of 1981 Amnesty International received many reports that children were being executed. In December 1981, two such reports were supported by documentary evidence which established the ages of Fariborz Khatibi, a 15-year-old boy, and Fatemeh Mesbah, a 13-year-old girl, both described as supporters of the Mujahideen. The position of the Iranian authorities on the execution of children varied. On 24 June a judge, Ayatollah Gilani, reportedly denied that children aged 13 and 14 were among those executed and said that: “None was less than 17. But anyhow, on the basis of Islam, a nine-year-old girl, is considered mature. So, there is no difference for us between a nine-year-old

girl and a 40-year-old man, and it does not prohibit us from issuing any kind of sentence” (The Guardian, London, 24 June 1981). On 20 September Assadollah Lajevardi, the Tehran Prosecutor-General, reportedly said: “Even if a 12-year-old is found participating in an armed demonstration, he will be shot. The age doesn’t matter” (The Times, London, 21 September 1981).²²

In 2022, Amnesty International said in a statement entitled ‘Iran is sentencing children and teenagers to death’: “Before they even reach adulthood, Iran is ending their lives. There are scores of young offenders on death row in Iran, and the authorities are continuing to sentence them to death.

“Girls as young as nine can be sentenced to execution; for boys it’s 15. At least 73 young offenders were executed between 2005 and 2015. And the authorities show no sign of stopping this horrific practice.

“We have the details of 49 people on Iran’s death row who were under 18 at the time of the crime they are alleged to have committed. The UN says there are at least 160 such people facing execution in the country. In fact, there are likely to be many more young offenders on Iranian death rows, as use of capital punishment in Iran is often shrouded in secrecy.”²³

During the 2022 uprising, the regime killed many children on the streets and pressured their families to remain silent about these crimes. On December 9, 2022, Amnesty International issued a statement regarding this matter, stating: “The Iranian authorities’ arbitrary arrest, intimidation and harassment of relatives of children, unlawfully gunned down or beaten to death by security forces in connection with protests, exposes their inconceivable cruelty and sinister attempt to cover up their crimes, said Amnesty International today.

“In updated research, Amnesty International has documented how the unlawful killings of children by Iran’s security forces continue unabated, detailing the names and details of at least 44 children and the heartless violence inflicted upon their families.

“The authorities have been killing children in a bid to crush the spirit of resistance among the country’s youth and retain their iron grip on power at any cost.

“Amnesty International’s research has shown that Iran’s security forces shot 34 of the identified child victims with live ammunition in the heart, head or other vital organs. At least four were killed by metal pellets unlawfully fired by the security forces at close range. Five other children, four girls and one boy, died from injuries consistent with fatal beatings, and one girl was killed after being struck on the head with a tear gas canister.

“The recorded child victims include 39 boys, aged between two and 17, and five girls, three of whom were 16 years old, one 17 years old, and one aged six.

“Children represent 14% of overall deaths of protesters and bystanders recorded by Amnesty International, which exceeds 300 since the protests erupted. Our investigations into killings by security forces continue and the number of those killed, including children, is believed to be higher.”⁴

The Iranian Resistance has published the identities and particulars of 750 individuals who were killed by the regime’s oppressive forces during the 2022 uprising, among whom several dozen was under the age of 18.

On March 8, 2024, the United Nations Independent International Factfinding Mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran (FFMI) published its report on investigations into the regime’s use of violence and killings committed during the uprising.⁵ The report indicates that the security forces of the Iranian regime used firearms, including assault rifles and shotguns, against demonstrators “in situations where there was no imminent threat of death or serious injury,” describing the use of lethal force as “unlawful” and killings as “extrajudicial executions.” According to the UN report, some detainees, including children, faced sexual violence such as rape, threats of sexual assault, forced nudity, groping, and electrocution to genitalia.⁶

In 2023, Amnesty International released a shocking report (entitled “They violently raped me”) exposing numerous instances of rape, sexual abuse, harassment, and threats of rape against both girls and boys, some as young as 12 years old, who had been detained during the 2022 uprising. Amnesty International’s Secretary-General Agnès Callamard said: “Our research exposes how intelligence and security agents in Iran used rape and other sexual violence

to torture, punish and inflict lasting physical and psychological damage on protesters, including children as young as 12.”⁷

Deployment of Children in War

The theocratic regime extensively dispatched children to the war fronts during the Iran-Iraq War, utilizing them as “disposable soldiers” to clear minefields. According to confessions from the highest authorities of the regime, approximately 440,000 students were sent to the fronts. A brief look at some of the facts and confessions of the officials and commanders of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) regarding the deployment of children in the Iran-Iraq War illustrates the dimensions of this human tragedy:

Mohsen Kazemi, commander of the IRGC Mohammad Rasoulollah base: “One-third of the combatants and one-fourth of the martyrs of the Sacred Defense [Iran-Iraq War] were students and those in the education system.”⁸

Amir Ali Hajizadeh, Commander of Aerospace Force of the IRGC, stated on July 11, 2023, during a televised interview on state-run TV that 20 percent of the casualties in the Iran-Iraq War were children. He added that student children were the “backbone” of the regime’s forces in the war with Iraq.

Colonel Mojtaba Jafari, Deputy of the Foundation for the Preservation of Sacred Defense Works: “In this war, 2,130,000 Basij forces participated... and 85,000 Basij forces and more than 33,000 students attained martyrdom.”⁹

Mirian, Chief of the Ground Operations Department of the IRGC: “We trusted our children, our youth. We managed the war with our 17-18-year-olds and 14-15-year-olds.”¹⁰

Ali Khamenei, Supreme Leader of the regime: “As reported to me, among the martyrs of Yazd, there are a thousand student martyrs; meaning, of these four thousand martyrs, a thousand of them are student martyrs. This is very important. The youngest martyr of the Sacred Defense is from Yazd; a child of twelve or thirteen years old. These are important; highlight them, show them - a thousand student martyrs - so that today’s student understands what great epic the previous generation accomplished in this period and at this age.”¹¹

The government website Asemouni, in reports titled “Introduction of Adolescent Martyrs of the Imposed War,” documented numerous cases of

children's participation and death in the Iran-Iraq War. Some of these facts are as follows:

- “President Khamenei signed a letter to him, saying, ‘Marhemat Aziz can be sent to the fronts without restrictions. Signed, Seyyed Ali Khamenei, President.’ His name was Marhemat Aziz. A 13-year-old boy from the village of ‘Chay Garmi,’ bearing the handwritten signature of the president at the time, went to the fronts. He fought for 3 years and was martyred on March 11, 1985, in the operations of Badr and Majnoon Island.”
- “His name was Ali Jarayeh. A 12-year-old boy from Sarab-Bagh in Abadan. He was in the first year of junior high school. He went to the front and joined the 505 Moharram Division, 11th Imam Amir al-Momenin Brigade. On March 21, 1984, during the ‘Al-Fajr 5’ operation in the Mehran operational area, he was hit by a shrapnel and attained martyrdom.”
- “Perhaps he was as tall as the weapon he was carrying. ‘Mohammad Hossein Zolfagari’... He went to the barracks to undergo military training. He was deployed to the front on October 14, 1981. ... He was a single gunman in the Ashura Brigade, who was martyred on January 17, 1982, at the age of only 12 due to shrapnel wounds.”
- “Heydar Shahidi opened his eyes to the world in September 1974. He was in the process of completing his junior high school when, after passing the June exams, he went to the front with 13 other students of his school, along with the 19th Fajr Division. In early 1986, upon the Imam’s order, he went to the fronts for the second time and was deployed to the Sharhani area (north of Fakkeh) with the Imam Mahdi Brigade of the 19th Division to carry out a harassing operation. He attained martyrdom as a result of direct enemy fire.”

Major General Yahya Rahim-Safavi, former commander of the IRGC and military advisor to Khamenei: “The Imam [Khomeini] was able to send about 2 million people to the battle fronts during the war, which does not include the forces obligated to be present at the front... One million students were at the fronts.”¹²

Colonel Mojatba Jafari, acting head of the documents of the so-called Secret Defense, said: “In this war, 2,130,000 Basij forces took part.... And 85,000 of them and more than 33,000 students were martyred.”¹³

According to official statistics from the Foundation of Martyrs of the regime, the Foundation for the Preservation of Sacred Defense Works, and other relevant institutions of the clerical regime, the number of those killed has been announced based on age, occupation, and the classification of death: “The number of martyrs under 14 years old: 7,054, student martyrs: 32,275, child martyrs: 2,906.”¹⁴

The state-run newspaper Ettela’at, on May 1, 1983, acknowledged the sending of children to minefields, and inadvertently confessed to this criminal act. The article reads: “... The children volunteered: 15-year-olds... 16-year-olds... 14-year-olds... happy and cheerful... they passed through the minefields like morning dew grass buds ready to open and bounce and blossom in the morning whispers, and they no longer saw with their eyes and heard with their ears, and moments later, the dust settled, there was nothing!... Except for pieces of flesh and bone scattered around the corners of the desert, each piece clinging to a rock... The bodies of young children, each tiny piece, scattered around the outskirts of the valley. ... Now, sometimes children would wrap themselves in blankets before crossing and stepping on mines so that the pieces... would not be scattered so much that they could not be collected and transferred to the back of the battlefield.” Mohammad Khatami, who was president of this regime for eight years, boasted of sending more than 40,000 children to the war fronts when he was Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance.

Employment of Afghan Children by the Regime in the Syrian War

In addition to the Iran-Iraq war, the regime extensively employed Afghan children in the Syrian war. On October 16, 2018, the U.S. Treasury Department blacklisted the IRGC Basij force and 22 related companies and financial institutions as “specially designated terrorists.”

Heather Nauert, then-Spokesperson for the U.S. State Department, announced that the U.S. Treasury Department has sanctioned the extensive

network supporting the Iranian regime's hateful acts of using children in war. The Iranian regime even uses children in war. This regime uses Afghan children in the Syrian war as "the first wave (of human) use that leads to high casualties."

Nikki Haley, the former U.S. envoy to the United Nations, said on October 18, 2018, in a UN Security Council session: "In addition to suppressing dissidents domestically, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps provides military training to Basij forces. The Revolutionary Guard Corps has recruited children and trained them for war in Syria and supported the oppressive Assad regime."

Truly, how can a director and producer, who is Iranian and speaks Persian, and claims to be concerned about children's rights, turn a blind eye to such atrocities and feign ignorance about the imaginary "child soldiers" sent by militants into the war scene? Which war? Which scene? Can this humanist director provide an address where someone has been wounded or martyred in that imaginary war?

These storytelling tactics are exactly the Persian version of the extravagances of the Khamenei regime, which laments the violations of rights by the governments and police of France, America, and other European countries!

If this mission is not aimed at whitewashing the killers of tens and hundreds of thousands of children, then what name does it bear?

Images Speak for Themselves

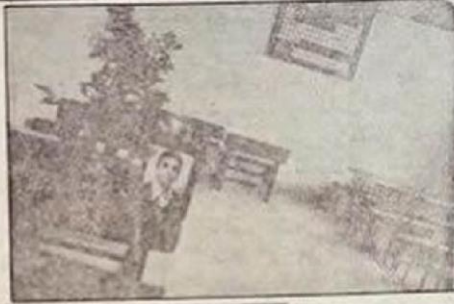
State-affiliated media outlets are filled with images of children on the war fronts, which themselves testify to the regime's inhumane actions. Some examples are provided in the following pages.

در این مدرسه دانش آموزان «شهادت» می آموزند

اطلاعات

پنجمین شماره ۱۲ اسفند ماه
۱۳۳۱ - شماره ۱۶۹۸

۴۰ شقایق شکفته خونین،
از باغ مدرسه تابوستان شهادت
دبیرستان
موسوی شهران



حماسه ۳۶ رزمنده شهید از دبیرستان «سلمان فارسی»

اطلاعات

ششمین شماره ۱۶ فروردین ماه
۱۳۳۲ - شماره ۱۶۹۹

اینجا خاستگاه
شهادت است
دبیرستان
سلمان فارسی
تهران



از این سنگر عشق، ۴۵ راهی خدا جو رخت سرخ شهادت پوشیدند

اطلاعات

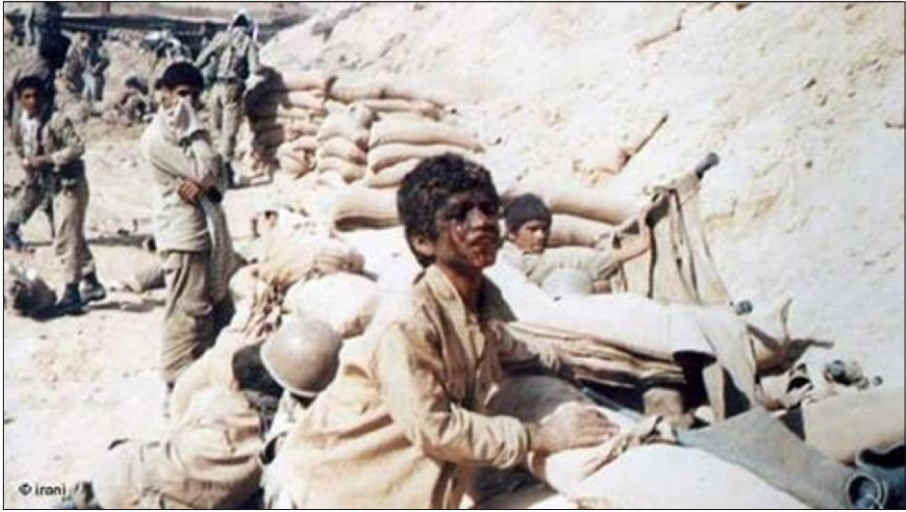
پنجمین شماره اردیبهشت ماه
۱۳۳۲ - شماره ۱۶۹۸

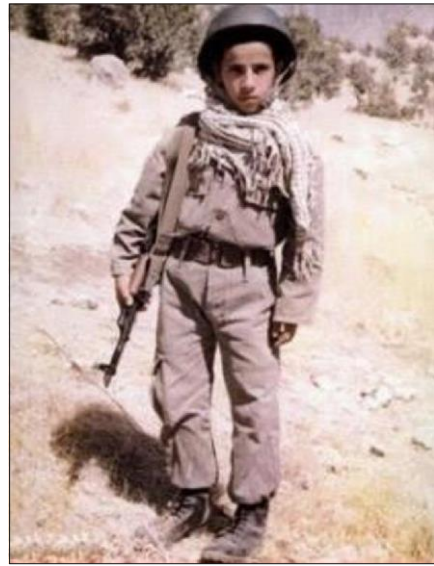
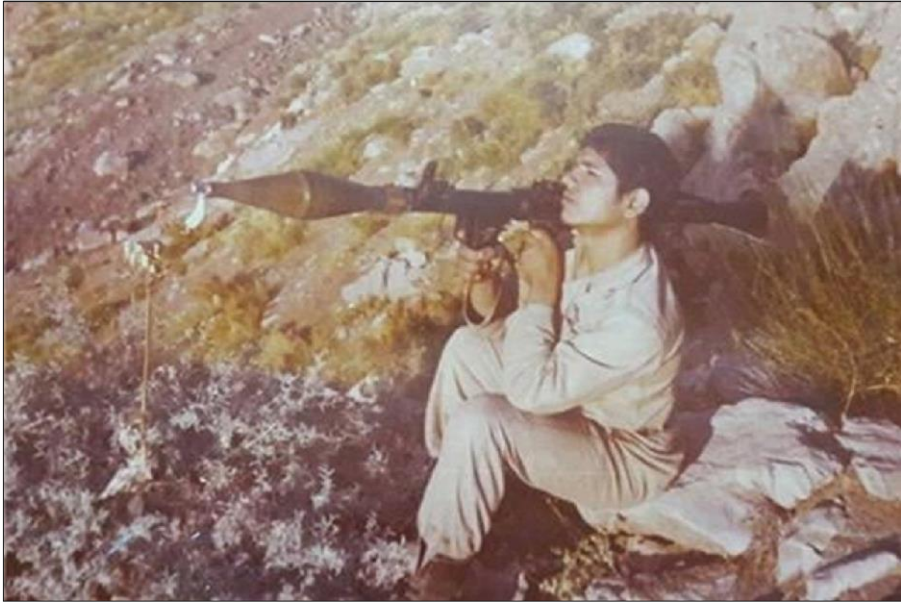
حماسه ۴۵ لاورد ریادل از
سنگر مدرسه تارز مگاه خون
دبیرستان
دکتر شریعتی
کرج



The daily Ettela'at reporting the dispatch of high school students to the war fronts in the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, and glorifying their deaths.

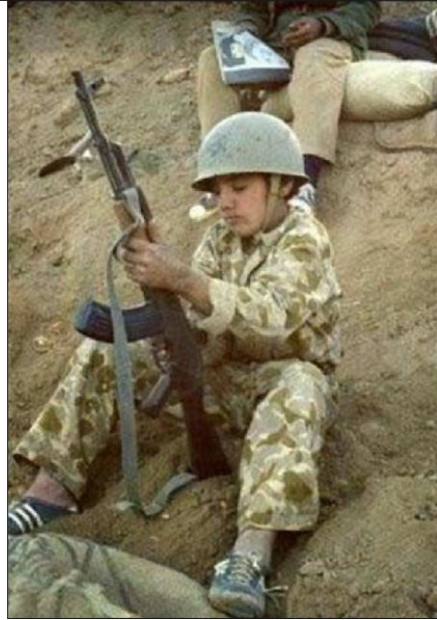












Deceptive Ploys

Endnotes:

1. The regime maintains a series of proxy quasi-military groups in the region, which advance its field objectives. Additionally, in Europe and the United States, it has individuals who further its interests under the guise of independent persons.
2. Amnesty International Report 1982, Amnesty International Publications. Available at: <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/poi10/0004/1982/en/>>
3. "Iran is sentencing children and teenagers to death," Amnesty International, August 16, 2022. Available at: <<https://www.amnesty.org.uk/iran-juvenile-offenders-death-row-execution>>
4. "Iran: Authorities covering up their crimes of child killings by coercing families into silence," Amnesty International, December 9, 2022. Available at: <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/12/iranauthorities-covering-up-their-crimes-of-child-killings-by-coercing-families-into-silence/>>
5. "Iran: Institutional discrimination against women and girls enabled human rights violations and crimes against humanity in the context of recent protests, UN Fact-Finding Mission says," United Nations Human Rights Council, March 8, 2024. Available at: <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/03/iran-institutional-discrimination-against-women-and-girls-enabled-human>>
6. Ibid, pages 5 and 9.
7. "Iran: Security forces used rape and other sexual violence to crush "Woman Life Freedom" uprising with impunity," Amnesty International, December 6, 2023. Available at: <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/12/iran-security-forces-used-rape-and-other-sexual-violence-to-crush-woman-life-freedomuprising-with-impunity>>
8. State-run Mashreq News, October 30, 2013 (In Farsi). Available at: <<https://mashreqnews.ir/news/259677/یک-چهارم-شهادی-دفاع-مقدس-فر-هنگی-و-دانش-آموز-بوده-اند>>
9. State-run IRNA, September 20, 2014 (In Farsi). Available at: <https://www.irna.ir/news/81318490/190>
10. State-run TV Channel 1, May 24, 2022.
11. Khamenei's official website, March 30, 2021.
12. December 1, 2013.
13. Iran's official News Agency, IRNA, September 20, 2014.
14. Khaneh Moshaver, website, October 2, 2015



Transfer of Children Abroad

Iraq's occupation of Kuwait in August 1990 and the ensuing Persian Gulf War on January 17, 1991, altered the geopolitics of the region. Even 34 years later, the world continues to grapple with its aftermath. Among those affected were millions of Iraqis as well as the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK), who faced the consequences and hazards of coalition forces' attacks on Iraq.

Despite the MEK's neutrality in the conflict, the imposition of comprehensive sanctions from August 1990, such as food shortages, disruption of many communication systems, severed flight connections between Baghdad and international destinations, scarcity of medical supplies, and the looming threat of war as coalition fleets amassed in the Persian Gulf, had a profound impact on the group. Around 900 children, ranging in age from a few months to 17 years, were particularly vulnerable under these conditions.

Following the onset of the crisis and escalating war threats, MEK members residing in Camp Ashraf and other camps along the Iran-Iraq border, including the mentioned children and their families, were compelled to adopt a bunker lifestyle. Managing the needs and safety of approximately 900 children, many of whom were infants or in kindergarten, proved exceptionally challenging and placed their lives at significant risk.

The situation for MEK members and their families in Iraq was doubly perilous due to the threat of intervention by the Iranian regime and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in the event of, and following, the conclusive defeat of the Iraqi military. Such intervention aimed primarily at eliminating the PMOI, who are viewed as the principal opposition to the Iranian regime. This concern materialized swiftly after the Iraqi army capitulated to American forces in March 1991, when the Revolutionary Guard deployed seven brigades and divisions into Iraq with the intent of targeting MEK members. During these incursions, Iraqi Kurdish groups also played a significant role. The assaults resulted in the deaths of numerous MEK affiliates, with at least two individuals

From Honor to Deceit: Tehran's War on Truth

being captured by these groups, handed over to the Revolutionary Guards, and subsequently executed, as reported by Agence France Presse.¹

The MEK members, dedicated to the freedom of the Iranian people, who had endured imprisonment, torture, and clashes with the Revolutionary Guards, were mentally prepared to face the hardships that came with their chosen path, ready to pay any price for their cause. However, the plight of the children, swept into the midst of the struggle not of their own volition but by circumstance, raised significant concern, particularly among their families.

Amidst the blockade and subsequent bombings, infrastructure breakdowns led to power outages and a collapse in the fuel system, severely limiting even basic necessities like hot water and the ability to cook. The detonations of half ton and one-ton bombs near PMOI camps sent shockwaves through the area, instilling terror in everyone, particularly the children, for whom the situation was unimaginably distressing. The children's capacity to endure such conditions was severely tested, with many facing the grim prospect of not surviving or suffering long-term psychological damage from the ordeal. These children, lacking even the basic resources available to an Iraqi child, were forced to live in the direst and most vulnerable conditions, fearing for their lives without having chosen this path for themselves.

As the threat of war intensified, an increasing number of parents within the PMOI community began pleading with the organization to safeguard their children's lives by finding a way to evacuate them from Iraq. Initially, some parents harbored hopes that war might be averted, but as bombings commenced, the demand for their children's relocation grew urgent. This request posed a multifaceted challenge for the PMOI, involving not only logistical hurdles but also legal, political, financial, and security complexities, necessitating a significant shift in the organization's priorities to address the situation.

In anticipation of the conflict, weeks before it erupted and when war appeared inevitable, the PMOI initiated efforts to evacuate the children. The task was daunting: many embassies in Baghdad had shut down or reduced operations, international flights were suspended, and the overall security situation in Iraq had deteriorated significantly even before the Kuwait crisis escalated. The organization reached out to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

(UNHCR) in Geneva and Amman for assistance in relocating the children from Iraq. However, the UNHCR, having withdrawn its presence from Baghdad due to the war conditions, was unable to offer support. The agency explained that its resources were fully committed to aiding tens of thousands of foreign nationals who had amassed at the Iraqi-Jordanian border, leaving no capacity to assist the MEK children. This refusal underscored the dire situation and the limited options available for the safe evacuation of the children amidst the chaos.

Securing the Jordanian government's approval, the MEK embarked on a precarious mission to transport the children to Jordan, despite the organization's limited resources and the high level of risk involved. The ultimate goal was to relocate the children from Jordan to the United States, Canada and Europe, where they had families. Time, however, was not on the MEK's side. Ideally, all the children should have been moved out of Iraq before the onset of the war, which was anticipated to begin in mid-January 1991, according to the timeline set by the US-led coalition. With the outbreak of war, the flight route from Baghdad to Amman—the sole aerial exit from Iraq—would be severed, and the overland journey to Jordan would become perilous due to the bombings. After hostilities commenced, the journey of approximately 585 kilometers from Baghdad or 650 kilometers from Ashraf to the Jordanian border had to be undertaken by car.

A number of children were successfully transferred to Jordan in the weeks preceding the war, while others were moved under highly risky conditions after the conflict had started. The stopover in Jordan was intended to be brief, as the MEK had committed to expedite the children's departure from Jordan.

Consequently, appeals were made to the families of these children in Europe and the United States, as well as to supporters of the MEK abroad, to welcome these children into their homes, providing them with care, education, and a new life. This effort required significant coordination and support from the international community to ensure the well-being and safety of the children affected by the crisis.

The relocation of children after the onset of the war posed exceptionally high risks. Coalition aircraft frequently targeted the Baghdad-Jordanian highway, a crucial passage, resulting in the daily bombing of this route and causing

substantial damage to roads and bridges. All rest stops along the way were either closed or destroyed by bombings. There were also instances where American planes targeted buses carrying Iraqi civilians, leading to numerous casualties. Given these dangers, the MEK meticulously evaluated the situation and concluded that utilizing minibuses and cars for the evacuation would be more challenging but ultimately safer. Managing this operation was a colossal, an extremely complex endeavor that required intricate planning and execution.

The convoy to the border included various groups led by professional and experienced drivers, accompanied by a number of MEK women who provided the necessary care for the children. To combat the severe cold of the desert climate, Iraqi oil heaters known as "Eshtar" were used inside the minibuses to keep the children warm. Additionally, with petrol stations along the route being non-operational or destroyed, the roofs of the minibuses were stocked with enough 20-liter fuel barrels to ensure they could make the journey without running out of gas. This meticulous planning underscored the organization's commitment to ensuring the safety and well-being of the children amidst the challenging circumstances of war.

Teams of drivers embarked from Baghdad at 5:45 a.m., navigating a perilous and extended route to the border. The desolate landscapes of Diyala province offered no signs of life, with the highway severely compromised by bombings and numerous bridges either collapsed or extensively damaged. This necessitated a cautious approach where children often had to disembark from the minibuses and walk on foot to cross bridges, allowing an unladen minibus to cross separately, due to the weakened structures being unable to support the weight of a fully occupied vehicle. After passing through Iraqi customs and checkpoints, the MEK members based in Jordan welcomed the children at the border, utilizing vehicles from Amman to complete the final leg of the journey. The spent 20-liter fuel barrels used along the route were exchanged for full ones sourced from Jordan, facilitating the return trip to Baghdad for the teams to organize the next group's evacuation.

This meticulously coordinated operation to Jordan was accomplished safely and successfully within the first few weeks of the war, without any casualties or harm to those involved. Upon arrival in Amman, the organization had arranged for temporary accommodation in hotels for the children, pending their onward

travel to the United States or Europe. Dedicated MEK members were tasked with overseeing the logistics and arrangements needed for their flights abroad. Consequently, during a period marked by heightened risks of war, bombings, and potential attacks by the Revolutionary Guards, approximately 900 children found new homes and opportunities for education with relatives or supporters of the Resistance in the United States, Canada, and Europe, ensuring their safety and continuing care in the face of adversity.

Years after their evacuation, some of these children, now adults, chose to return to their families and the MEK in Ashraf, adopting the organization's goals and aspirations as their guiding principles. Meanwhile, others remained in Europe and the United States, continuing their education and lives, while actively supporting the cause for a free Iran alongside the MEK supporters.

The MEK project to relocate the children from Iraq to Europe and the United States, stands out as an extraordinary undertaking, particularly when compared to historical efforts of relocating children during conflicts. For instance, during the Winter War in Finland, the country leveraged all available resources to assist in the relocation efforts, yet tragically, hundreds of children perished during their transfer. In contemporary times, according to UNICEF and the UNHCR, children constitute half of all refugees from the war in Ukraine, with over 1.1 million children having been relocated to Poland, and hundreds of thousands more to Romania, Moldova, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic. These massive relocation efforts typically involved the substantial resources of governments and international organizations.

In stark contrast, the MEK accomplished the daunting task of safely transporting all these children out of Iraq with extremely limited resources, without any support from governments or UN agencies, and through the organization's own exceptional measures of self-sacrifice. This achievement not only underscores the MEK's dedication to protecting its members and their families but also highlights the resilience and commitment of the organization to its cause under the most challenging circumstances.

Endnote:

1. The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) handed over Hassan Zolfaqari and Beshar Shabibi to the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) in Qasr-e Shirin, in Kermanshah Province. An official of the Talebani group,

Sadeq Hussein, formally announced the news of their extradition. Agence France Presse, dispatch from Tehran,

13 April 1991. Also, in his 13 November 1992 interim report to the U.N. General Assembly, p. 9, par. 24, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights wrote: "During the second half of April 1992, 45 people were allegedly executed in Tehran. Their bodies were taken to the Mesgarabad cemetery in south Tehran. The names of five of those executed were given as follows: ... Mr. Beshar Shabibi, who was handed over to the Iranian authorities by an Iraqi opposition group, the so-called Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)." Available at: [https:// digitallibrary.un.org/record/155983?ln=en&v=pdf](https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/155983?ln=en&v=pdf)

Mujahedin Khalq and Child Soldiers

Using the term "child soldiers" regarding the PMOI is an act of deception and propaganda, originating from the vilification efforts of the mullahs' regime. Within the Mujahedin organization or the National Liberation Army of Iran (NLA), participation has always been on a voluntary basis, from its inception to the present day, with no practices of conscription or soldier recruitment. In a resistance movement that has spanned over 44 years against the ruling religious fascism in Iran, engagement is predicated solely on individual volition and commitment, with endurance in the movement being impossible without personal conviction and willingness.

As such no individual under the age of 18 has been involved in military actions with the PMOI or NLA. The reference to children in Camp Ashraf, as depicted in the film in question, pertains to a period post the 2000s, during which time, the PMOI, conducted no military operations. Furthermore, those claiming that the PMOI has recruited children for military service in Ashraf should identify at least one, merely one, of those children who was supposedly harmed or killed in the purported operations of the organization.

Significantly, the individuals who chose to travel to Iraq and Ashraf came from democratic nations, fully cognizant of the circumstances they were entering. Many have articulated or documented their reasons for joining the resistance in Iraq, driven by dual motivations: the desire to reunite with family members and the aspiration to contribute to the resistance effort. For those younger than 18, the PMOI required written consent from their parents for participation.

One person, Amir Yaghmai,¹ has now claimed that he was a "child soldier." His mother was in Ashraf, Iraq, and his father lived in France. At his own request to go and live with his mother, and with his father's insistence and written

consent, he went to Iraq. Eyewitnesses report his father's repeated appeals to the Resistance officials in Paris in public meetings to transfer his son to Iraq.

After relocating to Iraq, he did not engage in any offensive or defensive military activities. His training was limited to an initial familiarization with weapons, a common practice at Camp Ashraf to equip individuals with self-defense capabilities in the event of an assault. However, the strenuous conditions at the camp eventually became unbearable for him, prompting his departure from Ashraf. He then sought refuge in Temporary Internment and Protection Facility (TIPF), a facility established by the Americans for individuals in similar situations. Subsequently, he returned to Sweden, where he established connections with operatives from the Ministry of Intelligence, including his uncle, who holds a prominent position in an organization associated with the Ministry called Nejat Society.

The narrative is more straightforward than it appears. Originating 25 years ago, the clerical regime's dire need to confront the PMOI has compelled it to engage in these fabrications in recent times.

The allegations in question were first introduced by the Research Center of the Ministry of Science² during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency, back in 2009, well before being publicized by these individuals. A purported research document spanning 15,000 words concerning the PMOI delved into issues such as "violating children's rights at Camp Ashraf," their "forced migration," and the use of children in military and terrorist operations. The release of this report was strategically timed with the handover of Camp Ashraf's security from American to Iraqi forces, effectively preparing the ground for the subsequent assaults by Iraqi forces. The first of these attacks occurred in July 2009, with at least six additional lethal assaults following thereafter.

Amid a multitude of baseless claims, the report contended: "The organization aimed to disrupt the emotional bonds between parents and children, resorting to a variety of schemes to relocate children to European nations. Such operations of forced migration bear resemblance to human trafficking. The ultimate goal was to indoctrinate and brainwash these children, ultimately reintegrating them as compliant soldiers within the cult." In a rather absurd claim, it also posited that international bodies "must intervene in a humanitarian

effort to rectify the dismal conditions faced by children in Camp Ashraf, Iraq, and also attend to the plight of other children abroad." Further, it stated, "The abuse of women and children, the coerced relocation of children from Iraq to Western countries, and the manipulation of these children's identities... are considered additional violations of human rights perpetrated by this cult."

Contradictory Reasoning

The Iranian regime and its political proxies criticize the PMOI for evacuating children from Iraq in 1991, interpreting it as an organizational decision or a lack of familial affection. Yet, these same critics accuse the organization of bringing minors under 18 from Europe to Iraq to serve as "child soldiers." The question then arises: if the PMOI's intention was to recruit children as soldiers, why would they send them abroad only to bring them back again?

The International Community and the "Child Soldiers"

Amid the controversy over the term "child soldier," it is notable that the recruitment standards of the PMOI and the NLA adhere to the cautious international benchmark of 18 years. This contrasts with countries like the United Kingdom, where the minimum age for army enlistment is 16. Deutsche Welle reported on March 31, 2024, that 10.6% of soldiers recruited into the German army in 2023 were under 18, an increase from 9.4% in 2022.³

Under the United Nations and UNICEF guidelines, boys and girls over 15 undergoing training at military academies do not fall under the definition of child soldiers. This distinction is made because the focus of military academies is on education and training rather than active armed conflict or support for such conflict. Furthermore, the United Nations' definition emphasizes "recruitment," suggesting that if a boy or girl over 15 joins a military academy voluntarily and with full awareness, it is not regarded as forced recruitment. Many countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom⁴, France, Germany, Belgium, and others, have hundreds of military schools where boys and girls over 15 study and receive basic military training. These military academies should not engage boys and girls over 15 in armed conflicts; doing so would classify them as "child soldiers" and violate international laws.

The age requirements for admission into the armed forces' staff at America's most renowned military academies, including the United States Military Academy at West Point⁵ —the most famous military academy in America—and other academies like the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis, the United States Air Force Academy, and the United States Coast Guard Academy, all accept applicants aged 17 to 23.

The age requirement of being 18 years old applies to the recruitment of armed forces personnel, but as previously mentioned, the acceptance age in some military academies is 15 years. Some of the well-known American military academies accepting applicants over 15 include The Citadel in Charleston, South Carolina; Virginia Military Institute⁶; Fork Union Military Academy; and Marion Military Institute in Alabama.

Youth participation in liberation movements

In modern history, there are many examples where teenagers under the age of 18 have entered the ranks of resistance against repression, foreign aggression, and colonial wars. These choices and struggles have been hailed in history as shining examples of a sense of responsibility, patriotism, courage, and sacrifice.

In the American War of Independence, 15-year-olds played a central role in the struggle for American independence, and some of the most famous heroes of the war are very young boys and girls. Sybil Ludington⁷, a 16-year-old girl, is one of the heroes of the Battle of Danbury in 1777.

In the French Revolution, the movement of young people, girls and boys over the age of 15 played a major role in the struggle and victory of the revolution, and in all stages of the struggle they were the main warriors of the revolution.

During the First Indochina War (1946-1954), the Viet Minh, a communist-led nationalist movement, fought against French colonial rule in Vietnam. There were instances when young volunteers joined the Viet Minh to fight French forces. Some children served as messengers, couriers or support roles, while others took part in combat in exceptional circumstances.

During the Algerian independence campaign, children and young people played various roles in the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) and other

resistance groups. Some joined covert networks to gather information, propaganda or carry out acts of sabotage. Others took part in armed clashes with French security forces, particularly in street demonstrations and demonstrations. There have been reports of 15- or 16-year-olds participating in armed resistance activities.

In Germany, teenagers' resistance against Nazi's was widespread. These teenagers, driven by self-esteem, commitment, a combative zeal, a warrior spirit, and a dissent against the status quo, became armed and formed an organization named "The Ehrenfeld Group"⁸ amidst oppressive and perilous conditions, engaging in armed conflict with the Nazis. Their operations included stealing weapons, explosives, and food supplies, hiding large quantities of arms, aiding fugitives, and distributing anti-Nazi propaganda. On October 1, 1944, during an armed clash with the Gestapo in a liberation operation of captured comrades, they managed to kill three Nazi security forces. By the autumn of 1944, their hideout was discovered, and by mid-1944, a total of 63 members, including 19 teenagers, were arrested and subjected to severe torture in Gestapo prisons. On November 10, 1944, the Gestapo executed 13 members of the group, six of whom were 16 years old⁹. Günther "Büb" Schwarz joined the Ehrenfeld Group with his brother at the age of 16.¹⁰

In appreciation of this group and its prominent figure, Bartholomäus (Bartel) Schink¹¹, the municipality of Cologne has named a street after him, where he spent his adolescence. The educational system recognizes "Bartel" as a symbol and benchmark of resistance among students in Cologne schools. To foster a spirit of solidarity and enhance courage among the youth, the "Bartholomäus Schink Prize" is awarded annually to outstanding students. This symbolic gesture by the educational system honors democratic upbringing and the ethics of resistance as a universal human value.

Another example of resistance was carried out by the group "The Edelweiss Pirates."¹² Despite their very limited resources, these "children" committed themselves to remarkable operations during their time. They distributed propaganda leaflets against the Nazi's, attacked and derailed cargo train wagons, and stole weapons to arm themselves. With access to explosives, they planned the bombing of the Gestapo headquarters in Cologne.

Jean Jülich¹³, who joined "The Edelweiss Pirates" at the age of thirteen, was responsible for preparing the detonators for the explosives placed at the Gestapo headquarters in Cologne, Germany. He was arrested multiple times and subjected to intense interrogations and brutal torture by the Gestapo but bravely resisted and gave nothing away. Jean Jülich remained a hero, enduring imprisonment by the Gestapo until the end of the war. In March 1945, severely weakened by physical exhaustion, illness, and extreme hunger, he was liberated from prison by Allied forces.

In 2011, members of "The Edelweiss Pirates" were awarded one of Germany's highest honors, the Federal Cross of Merit (Bundesverdienstkreuz), acknowledging their valor and resistance against the Nazi regime.

"I think one must learn a different way of living."

These words belong to Dieter Lenz, a 12-year-old who bravely opposed the Nazis. His father, Friedrich Lenz, a Protestant pastor, steered him away from the Hitler Youth, the regime's youth wing. Dieter carved out a new identity for himself early on, firmly distancing himself from the prevailing system and disavowing the ideology of the ruling party.

In Düsseldorf, a museum dedicated to the theme of "youth resistance" against Nazism serves to preserve the memory and legacy of this movement, promoting a culture of resistance and civic courage among young people. School groups from across Germany visit this museum to engage with ideals of patriotism, justice, and dissent. The "Memorial Museum of Youth Resistance against Hitler's Nazism" stands as a national monument and a symbol of pride within the German community, commemorating the valiant struggle of youths and children against Nazism, a number of whom took up arms in resistance.

With Nazi Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union during Operation Barbarossa in 1941, the Soviet Union mobilized a large portion of its population to resist the aggression. This included teenagers who sometimes served in various support roles such as anti-aircraft gunners, messengers, or guerrilla fighters behind German lines. The Soviet Union also formed youth military organizations like the Komsomol¹⁴ to train and indoctrinate young people for potential wartime roles.

In occupied territories across Europe, resistance movements often comprised individuals of all ages, including teenagers. While they were not always directly involved in combat, they played a crucial role in gathering intelligence, sabotaging, and conducting covert operations against Nazi occupiers. For instance, during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943, many Jewish teenagers joined the ranks of the Jewish resistance fighters, bravely standing against the Nazis' efforts to obliterate the ghetto.

During the Holocaust, the Jewish resistance in the Warsaw Ghetto orchestrated a valiant uprising against Nazi forces. The resistance fighters included teenagers who took up arms against the German soldiers. They fought for nearly a month, although the uprising was ultimately suppressed by the Nazis. Documented instances show that teenagers as young as 14 or 15 participated in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

In Eastern Europe, particularly in areas under Nazi occupation, guerrilla warfare was prevalent. Partisan groups, including those composed of teenagers and children, attacked German supply lines, ambushed enemy patrols, and carried out sabotage operations. These partisan units often operated independently or under the support of larger resistance movements.

In countries like Poland, Yugoslavia, and the Soviet Union, partisan groups were formed to resist the Nazi occupation. These groups often included young people actively participating in guerrilla warfare against German forces. Some teenagers and children directly engaged in ambush and sabotage operations. In partisan groups operating in countries like Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, there are reports of 13 or 14-year-olds joining the resistance.

In France, the French Resistance included people of all ages who fought against the Nazi occupation and collaborated with the Allied forces. There were instances of teenagers and even children participating in sabotage, espionage, and armed resistance. For example, the Maquis groups in rural France sometimes included young members who engaged in guerrilla warfare against German soldiers. Some of these groups were the Resistance network, the Maquis¹⁵ groups, youth groups including the Franc-Tireurs Partisans, the Resistance Students, the National Union of French Students, and more.

Conclusion

Amid the execution of thousands of young PMOI supporters in their teens by the Iranian regime, such allegations seek to undermine the legitimate resistance of the Iranian people and youth against a merciless regime. Branding young individuals—who, in full consciousness, forsook a life of comfort in the West to battle a brutal regime known for its atrocities against children—as merely an insult to these courageous youths and a disregard for human dignity. Accusing them of being "child soldiers" serves to malign the primary resistance force against the regime. In doing so, accusers effectively betray their own integrity and values, aligning themselves with the despotic and reprehensible clerics for the lowest of gains.

Endnotes:

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Demonization Campaign Against the PMOI

The deceitful propaganda machine of the Iranian regime against the PMOI and the Iranian Resistance regarding the transfer of children from Iraq to Europe and America and their return to Ashraf as “child soldiers” is one facet in the multifaceted of the campaign of demonization by the regime against this resistance. Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s Minister of Propaganda, once said, “If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it.” Since the first day of their rule, the regime’s Supreme Leaders Ruhollah Khomeini, Ali Khamenei, and other rulers of the regime have followed Goebbels’ mantra in relation to the PMOI. They have fabricated countless tales and stories, distorted facts, and vilified the organization – perceived as its largest existential threat - as some of the main pillars of maintaining the regime in power.

For over four decades, the PMOI has been one of the main subjects of demonization by the regime. After the anti-monarchical revolution in 1979 and in the semi-democratic atmosphere following the revolution, the PMOI quickly grew and attracted young generations and women in particular to their democratic cause. Khomeini, the Supreme Leader of the regime at the time, said on June 25, 1980, regarding the PMOI and their threat to the regime: “The enemy is not in America or in the Soviet Union, but it is here right under our nose in Tehran [the PMOI]!” Since then, the clerical regime has been seeking the physical destruction of the PMOI and has employed the most brutal methods, including imprisonment, torture, execution, and mass murder, to annihilate them. To date, over 100,000 members and supporters of the PMOI have been executed by this regime. In the summer of 1988 alone, more than 30,000 political prisoners, 90% of whom were supporters and members of the PMOI, were massacred solely for their allegiance to the organization.

Despite the regime’s ruthless suppression and the use of inhumane methods, due to the deep roots of the PMOI among the Iranian people, it could not

physically eradicate them. Therefore, in conjunction with suppression and committing genocide, the regime resorted to demonization against the PMOI, aiming to prevent the attraction of youths to the MEK domestically and painting a picture abroad that this regime has no alternative and the only organized opposition, the PMOI, is an “extremist fringe group” with no social base inside Iran. The regime’s propaganda went on to add that if the regime is overthrown, it will engulf the region and the world in crisis as there is no viable alternative.

The regime, by using various titles such as “mercenary,” “hypocrite,” “seditionist,” and dozens of other monikers, demonized the PMOI, and the slogan “Death to the Hypocrites” became the main slogan of the regime in Friday prayers and all religious and non-religious ceremonies. At the same time, a massive campaign of deception began in all organs and platforms of the regime against the PMOI, and various agencies were formed to this end, spending tens of millions of dollars in the process. This demonization campaign takes shape both domestically and internationally.

During the past 40 years, the regime has produced and disseminated tens of thousands of books, articles, thousands of exhibitions, hundreds of films and documentaries, as well as interviews to advance this demonization project. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) created a cyber army of tens of thousands, whose most important task has been to promote the demonization project against the PMOI. One of the main objectives of the clerical regime’s demonization against the PMOI has been to popularize the narrative that the PMOI is a “cult,” has no social base, and therefore, the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), of which the PMOI is the main and largest constituent, is not a viable alternative to this regime. In fact, the regime’s goal is to claim that there is no credible alternative, and the world is forced to engage with the status quo and the ruling regime.

A general overview of the statistics of materials produced and disseminated by the clerical regime against the PMOI indicates the lack of credibility of this narrative and the regime’s fear of widespread public support for the PMOI. In 2023 alone, the regime produced and broadcast over a hundred feature films, documentaries, short and long reports against the PMOI inside Iran. Up to the year 2020, the regime produced over 198 feature films, documentaries, and TV

series against the PMOI. One of these documentaries, titled “End of the End,” consists of 50 episodes and has been broadcast six times on various regime television networks. That is, only one documentary has been broadcast a total of 300 times on state-run TV. Another documentary titled “In the Name of the People” consisted of 28 episodes and has been broadcast and re-broadcast three times on various regime television networks. The number of films and documentaries includes 881 programs.²

Until 2020, the regime has published over 538 books against the PMOI³. In other words, over the course of 41 years, the regime has published an average of 13 books annually against the PMOI.

The Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) has created dozens of front associations under various names to vilify the PMOI. These include the Rescue (Nejat) Society⁴, the Habilian Foundation⁵, and dozens of other groups whose sole purpose is to demonize the PMOI. For example, the Rescue Society, which is just one of the MOIS associations, has branches in all provinces of Iran and continuously holds sessions and programs against the PMOI. A cursory look at the website of this association reveals the astonishing dimensions of demonization and dissemination of fake news against the PMOI. Up to 2020, over 25,331 articles against the PMOI were published on the website of this association alone⁶. That is, over the past 20 years, an average of 1,266 articles against the PMOI have been prepared and published annually by this one group.

As mentioned, the regime has also established a cyber army led by the terrorist IRGC, whose main task is demonization against the PMOI in cyberspace. According to Gholamreza Soleimani, the commander of the paramilitary Basij of the IRGC, more than 80,000 members of the Basij are active in cyberspace against the PMOI.

The state-run website Bahar News reported on July 5, 2021, that the group has organized 1,000 cyber units for the presence of “revolutionary youth” in cyberspace⁷. In the same year, the head of the cyberspace organization of the Basij announced the organization’s goal to utilize 80,000 Basijis for cyberspace.

The MOIS, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and many other institutions have also been assigned for activities outside Iran. Hiring some elements under the guise of “former members” of the PMOI, creating dozens of cover websites

masquerading as “opposition forces,” hiring a number of foreign journalists as “friendly journalists,” and infiltrating think tanks and foundations under the title of “Iran experts” are among the measures taken by the regime. The use of so-called former members of the PMOI is a well-known tactic employed by the MOIS to smear the PMOI and the NCRI. Intelligence services in Europe, including BfV in Germany and AIVD in the Netherlands, have addressed this issue in their annual reports.

The Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) in Germany has repeatedly reported on the activities of the regime’s intelligence services against the opposition over the past two decades. As far back as 2004, it wrote, “The VEVAK is particularly interested in People’s Mujahidin of Iran (Mujahedeen-e-Khalq, MEK) ... and in its political arm, the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI). For its spying activities, the Iranian intelligence service relies on a network of secret agents who are recruited from among the supporters of the organizations and groups under VEVAK surveillance. In most cases, recruitment pitches are made when target persons are on a visit to Iran. During such approaches, the service puts pressure on the targeted persons, e.g. by threatening them with reprisals on their relatives living in Iran. Persons who do not travel to Iran are contacted over the telephone from Iran.”⁸

BfV wrote in its 2017 annual report, “The MOIS is trying to spy on the opposition through infiltration, and also discrediting them via targeted propaganda. In addition, the MOIS plays an important role in conventional spying on political, military, economic and scientific fields. The main actor in activities against Germany remains the Ministry of Intelligence, usually abbreviated as MOIS. Its focus is especially on the MEK and its political arm, the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI).”⁹

The Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) wrote in its annual report for 2011 that Tehran’s efforts to weaken the MEK in the Netherlands continued relentlessly in 2011. This service wrote in its report, “Teheran’s efforts to undermine the opposition People’s Mojahedin Organisation of Iran (Mujahedin-e Khalq, MEK) in the Netherlands continued unabated in 2011. In a campaign coordinated and financed by the Iranian intelligence services, the media and a number of politicians and other public

servants were approached with a view to portraying the MEK in a highly negative light.” The Dutch security organization has found that the Iranian government has always been active in its fight against the MEK resistance movement, and it has been observed that the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence is directing a European network that is also active in the Netherlands. Members of this network are former members of the MEK who have been recruited by the Iranian intelligence service. Their duty is to negatively influence public opinion about the MEK through lobbying, publications, and anti-MEK gatherings. They also gather information about the MEK and their (potential) members for the Iranian intelligence ministry.”¹⁰ The regime’s apparatus of demonization abroad pursues several objectives. The first was to create a groundwork for assassinating opponents, followed by discrediting the PMOI and the NCRI and promoting the narrative that the PMOI and NCRI have no support inside Iran, thus the regime has no credible alternative.

The German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, the Dutch Security Service, and other countries have repeatedly reported on these actions in their annual reports. In total, hundreds of terrorist operations have been carried out by the regime against the PMOI in Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey, and Europe.

One of the most prominent terrorist actions of the regime in Europe was the terrorist plot in June 2018 to bomb the Free Iran World Summit, annual gathering of the Iranian Resistance in Paris, which was thwarted by Belgian, German, and French law enforcement. This operation was designed by Assadollah Assadi, an accredited diplomat of the regime, in addition to three accomplice terrorists. This terrorist-diplomat was sentenced to 20 years in prison, and his three accomplices were sentenced to 17 to 20 years in prison by a court in Antwerp, Belgium.

Another example concerns the regime’s plots in Albania. In March 2018, Albanian authorities prevented a terrorist plot to attack the PMOI’s Nowruz (New Year) celebration in Albania. According to a report by the European Strategic Intelligence and Security Center, “When it comes to such an operation, everything is decided in Tehran and controlled from there and that the Iranian intelligence use not only the human and material resources of its embassies but

also Iranian operatives planted in the country targeted or in other countries, and moreover it relies on local organized crime: One of these operatives [controlled by PEYMAN] is Alireza NAGHASHZADEH, Naghashzadeh was sent by PEYMAN to gather information in Albania on several separate visits as part of plans for an attack that was eventually halted.”¹¹

The recruitment of “friendly journalists” by the regime

Another action of the regime outside Iran was spending millions of dollars to recruit “friendly journalists” to write articles and reports against the PMOI under the guise of “foreign correspondent” and “impartial journalist,” demonizing the PMOI in reputable European and American media outlets.

On July 17, 2017, Ali Fallahian, a former Iranian intelligence minister, said in a television interview: “The Ministry of Intelligence needs cover for gathering information inside and outside the country. The Ministry of Intelligence does not send an intelligence officer, for example, to Germany, the United States, or Russia, to declare that I am from the Ministry of Intelligence, please provide me with your information. They do this under the cover of commercial or media professions.”¹²

On June 14, 2015, the Daily Beast published an article titled “Iran’s Spies Tried to Recruit Me” by Shane Harris. In this article, the author details how he was contacted by the Habilian Association, a front organization for the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence, and their attempt to recruit him to write articles and participate in a conference in Iran to benefit the regime. He writes in parts of this article:¹³

“On May 23, I was contacted via email by a representative of the “International Congress on 17,000 Iranian Terror Victims,” a self-professed nongovernmental organization that is busy planning its second annual conference, to be held in Tehran in August. My interlocutor invited me “to submit your creative and scientific paper and gain opportunity to take part in the conference.””

“In a series of subsequent emails, my contact explained that top papers chosen by the organizers would be published in a book and that “decision-making institutions will have access to it.” If I wanted to attend the conference,

“we will strive to facilitate it and provide you funded travel to Iran.” The organizer also offered, in principle, to pay me, but asked me to name my price first. (I didn’t.)”

“Throughout my exchange, the question of who, exactly, was organizing this event was difficult to nail down. While the conference has the support of high-level government officials and ministries, it’s nominally run by a group called the Habilia Association.”

“Habilia is a group featuring a few MEK defectors and run by the MOIS,’ the acronym for the Iranian intelligence service, Ali Alfoneh, a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a think tank in Washington, told me. “They have previously produced English language booklets (in print) but this is the most professional online English language material I have seen.” Another Iran analyst, who asked me not to identify him, said Habilia has recently sent him several well-designed and expensive-looking books, written in English, that he presumes were paid for by the Iranian government. (Iran’s Fars news agency also publishes a website in English, though the organization describes itself as independent of the government.)”

“Iran experts and former U.S. intelligence officials I talked to said it was difficult to know for sure what the Congress on the 17,000’s goal really is. I had initially suspected that maybe the conference invitation was an elaborate ruse to get me to travel to Iran, where intelligence officials would seek to recruit me. Two former U.S. intelligence officials told me that recruiting journalists, especially under the guise of some kind of conference or event, was an old trick straight out of the spy handbook, deployed by the Russians and even Mossad, the Israeli intelligence service.”

“But this conference’s strategy seemed more of a piece with a propaganda campaign that has already managed to enlist some very outspoken Americans willing to criticize their own government—however bizarre I may think those criticisms are.”

The arrest of Iranian operative posing as an expert with an unbiased stance in the U.S.

On January 19, 2021, the United States Department of Justice arrested Kaveh Afrasiabi, who for years, under the guise of a university professor and various

other covers, violated the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) by advocating the perspectives and positions of the Iranian regime through articles and media commentary. He also authored articles against the PMOI. Over the course of a decade, he received nearly \$265,000 from the official bank account of the Iranian regime's mission at the United Nations.

John C. Demers, Assistant Attorney General for National Security, stated: “For over a decade, Kaveh Afrasiabi pitched himself to Congress, journalists, and the American public as a neutral and objective expert on Iran. However, all the while, Afrasiabi was actually a secret employee of the Government of Iran and the Permanent Mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations (IMUN) who was being paid to spread their propaganda.”¹⁴

Kaveh Afrasiabi was granted clemency during the prisoner exchange between Iran and the United States on September 14, 2023.

Another “dissident writer and poet” arrested on charges of terrorist activity

Another example is Mehrdad Arefani.¹⁵ In February 2021, Arefani was sentenced to 17 years in prison by a Belgian court for his role in a bombing plot of the annual gathering of the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) in 2018. He had begun secretly cooperating with the regime back when he was imprisoned in Iran. He was later sent to Europe. He claimed to be a poet, human rights activist, and even an atheist to appear to distance himself from the regime. He even launched a campaign against Iranians traveling to Iran to gain credibility as a regime opponent. He claimed to be a political supporter of the MEK and had operated as a sleeper cell and an intelligence asset for the regime for nearly 18 years.

In a report to a Belgian court, the Belgian government's security apparatus wrote: “The Iranian Ministry of Intelligence continues to portray its opposition negatively and describes them as terrorists. The Ministry of Intelligence is particularly active in promoting anti-Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK, an Iranian opposition group) propaganda in the European Parliament.”

The “Child Soldier” project and demonization of the PMOI

Another subject of demonization by the regime against the PMOI over the years has been the issue of member children. The regime, which has engaged in child recruitment and sent one million children to the war fronts during the Iran-Iraq war and has killed tens of thousands of Iranian children in minefields as “disposable soldiers,” suddenly becomes the defender of PMOI children, whose parents it has tried so hard to murder.

Through perverse rhetoric, the regime’s propaganda machine portrays the transfer of children from war zones to Europe and the United States as an act of “breaking up families.” All of the regime’s propaganda apparatuses were mobilized in this demonization effort, producing thousands of articles, interviews, and films on the topic for years.

Years later, some of these children decided to return to their families in Iraq to join the resistance. Now, thirty years later, the regime, once again, remembers the PMOI children, launching the demonization project against the PMOI under the guise of helping “child soldiers.”

At the same time, the film “Ashraf Camp Children” was released, which was screened at a festival on YouTube in February 2024. The subject and accusations raised in the film were the same as those in the articles by Hommerich in *Die Zeit*.

This film, like Hommerich’s article, was strongly welcomed by the regime’s media and all coverage websites of the Ministry of Intelligence. The Nejat Association website, affiliated with the Ministry of Intelligence, published 44 articles on the film “Ashraf Camp Children” from February 3 to March 18, 2024, on average one article per day. Other Ministry of Intelligence websites also contributed to the reflection and publication of articles on this film.

The Nejat Association website wrote: “Today, if the leaders of the organization are against the disclosure of these facts, they know full well that these former members and these kidnapped child soldiers will bury the organization’s dirty reputation. Today, if the screening of this documentary in Sweden has stolen such a sleep from the eyes of the rulers that it keeps their brainwashed members in the freezing air of Utopia for hours, they should know that this is just the beginning. The leaders of the PMOI and the 104¹⁶ suppressive

members must await the court's verdict, Interpol's red notice, and return to Iran for retrial."¹⁷ **Who is Luisa Hommerich?**

Luisa Hommerich "studied" in Tehran in 2016 and 2017 and was also in Iran in January 2018. She participated in the "Path of Light" carnival alongside Basiji women, organized by the regime to commemorate the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, during which one million were killed, wounded, and disabled, and Basijis were sent to the war fronts. She also wrote an article on this matter for the regime.

Hommerich's first article against the PMOI, full of lies and accusations by the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence against the PMOI, was published in Der



Spiegel magazine¹⁸. A very interesting point about this article was that parts of it were published on the Ministry of Intelligence's coverage website, the Nejat Association, before it was published in Der Spiegel. In other words, the article she wrote for Der Spiegel was published on the Ministry of Intelligence's websites in Iran on November 24, 2018, before it was published by Der Spiegel on February 16, 2019.

In the article, she included the most outrageous lies of the Ministry of Intelligence against the PMOI, such as the claim that the PMOI practices “slitting throats in Ashraf 3” three times a week. On March 21, 2019, the Hamburg court ordered Der Spiegel to remove these claims from the article. Failure to do so would have resulted in a fine of 25,000 euros or six months’ imprisonment. Der Spiegel accepted the court’s ruling and removed the offensive sections of the article because they knew they would face even more serious challenges.

Hommerich’s sources for the Der Spiegel article were hired mercenaries of the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence, referred to as “former members” of the PMOI in Albania. One of these agents was Hadi Sani-Khani, who had collaborated with the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence in Albania for four years.

On February 14, 2021, Sani-Khani wrote an open letter to the Secretary General of the United Nations and exposed some of the activities of the MOIS in recruiting mercenaries for demonization against the PMOI¹⁹. He wrote that after being transferred to Albania from Iraq in September 2016, “two months later in November 2016, because I couldn’t continue the fight, I left the PMOI and went to the commissioner. Two weeks later, I went to the Iranian embassy in Tirana and for four years I was trapped into cooperation with the official intelligence officers in the embassy, such as ‘Fereydoun Zandi Aliabadi,’ and known intelligence mercenaries such as Ebrahim and Massoud Khodabandeh, Gholamreza Shokri, and Ehsan Bidi, and in the following years, I also worked with Hassan Heirani. They used me in conspiracies such as demonization, espionage, information gathering, and identifying targets for terrorist acts against the PMOI.”

Sani-Khani also revealed how the MOIS controls a network of these agents using titles such as “former members” of the PMOI. These individuals received 500 euros monthly from the embassy. Regarding how he got acquainted with Hommerich in Albania and her interviews with the mercenaries of the MOIS, Sani-Khani wrote: “In September 2018, we were informed by the embassy that a reporter from the German paper Der Spiegel is set to visit Albania and we were asked to be prepared to meet with the reporter for interviews. The reporter was a 30-year-old woman named Luisa Hommerich. I later found out that she

studied Islamic studies in Tehran university in 2016 and 2017 and had contacts with the paramilitary Basij members as well. Together with a group of other agents who had previously defected from the PMOI, we met the Der Spiegel reporter in a restaurant in Ramsa district in Zagozi square. Each of us then told her lies about the PMOI which we had been given in preparation of the meeting. I was in contact with this reporter for the next three months. Occasionally she asked me questions about the PMOI which I then raised with the embassy and provided her the response I received.”

Hommerich also has a long history of promoting the Iranian regime's propaganda. In her Twitter account, she says: “My liberal reformist friends in Tehran say that Tehran should not trust America. America's credibility is gone.” It is ironic, however, that Hommerich liberal reformist friends are the same criminals who held power in the 1990s and were among the leaders of murder and crime in the clerical regime.



A photo of Luisa Hommerich with Hassan Heyrani, the ringleader of the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence's network in Albania.

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What the Witnesses Say?

This chapter presents detailed witness statements from three individuals who were children residing in Camp Ashraf during the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Each account describes the series of events that precipitated their departure from Iraq, their experiences living in Europe, and their eventual decision to return to Iraq. These testimonies offer unique insights into the personal sacrifices and the profound sense of duty that propelled them to actively participate in efforts to liberate Iran from the oppressive rule of the mullahs. Through their stories, we come to realize how the Iranian regime, through its propaganda, has tried to manipulate perceptions to portray this grand humanitarian effort as unethical. This narrative shift highlights the regime's efforts to undermine and vilify those who oppose its rule.

Ehsan Eqbal

My name is Ehsan Eqbal, born on May 1, 1977, in Tehran. From a young age, due to my family's circumstances, I became acquainted with the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI/MEK). In 1997, while studying in Germany and proficient in four languages—German, French, English, and Persian—I made the decision to travel to Camp Ashraf in Iraq and join the National Liberation Army of Iran.

During my studies in France and Germany in the 1990s, I enjoyed all the typical privileges of a young person in Europe, and in later years, I lived independently. I had aspirations to further my education and envisioned a promising future for myself. However, being aware of the situation back home, particularly the hardships faced by the people and youths my age, I was deeply troubled by the stark contrast between my comfortable life in Europe and the oppressive dictatorship that burdened my compatriots.

Witnessing and hearing about the executions, stoning, and suffering of Iranians deeply disturbed me, and for a while, I tried to ignore this dissonance and shirk responsibility. As I grew older and my awareness increased, I realized I could no longer continue my normal life without addressing these issues. I felt an urgent need to act for my country, and I found it increasingly difficult to focus solely on my studies and personal pleasures.

Despite loving my life, having many cherished friends in both Germany and France, and making plans for my future in areas like education and music, by 1997 I reached a turning point. I extensively considered various options and paths. Ultimately, I concluded that I needed to join the only organization actively combating the oppressive regime in Iran: the PMOI and the National Liberation Army. I was aware that this decision entailed significant challenges, as I had been familiar since childhood with the difficult conditions the PMOI faced in Iraq.

Interestingly, I don't recall any PMOI officials or members ever asking me to join the organization and go to Ashraf. On the contrary, they often spoke of the hardships involved in the struggle. I had witnessed this firsthand in the mid-1990s when several of my friends were eager to join the organization. However, the organization encouraged them to continue their studies and contribute to the Resistance in other ways, emphasizing the importance of education alongside activism.

My parents were both in Iraq at the time, and my younger brother had decided to join the PMOI in mid-1997. His decision influenced me considerably. However, I was acutely aware that, despite having family members and some friends in the PMOI, my choice was a profoundly personal one with far-reaching implications for my future. It meant abandoning my education, my passion for music, and the life I had diligently built.

Moved by my deep love for my homeland and its people, I ultimately made this tough decision. I reached out to the leaders of the organization in Cologne, Germany, to communicate my resolve. Following this, I underwent a period of alignment with the organization's goals and values, culminating in a written commitment to join Ashraf based on my own free will and clear understanding of the inherent dangers. I was fully aware that life in Ashraf would be anything but ordinary.

The organization was candid about the risks involved, including potential terrorist attacks and aggression from the regime. It was emphasized that this path was only for those who were earnest in their commitment. In conversations with my friends who were making similar choices, it was clear to all of us: going to Ashraf was not about temporary engagement or tourism; it was about a serious, life-altering commitment to a cause we believed in deeply.

In essence, my friends and I chose to dedicate ourselves to an ideal: liberating our people from the grip of the clerical regime. Before departing Germany, I

met with Mr. Christophe Mertens, who wanted to ensure that my decision to go was made willingly. I affirmed my intention without any hesitation.

I was 20 years old when I arrived in Baghdad in November 1997, and soon after, I entered Ashraf. During the first 45 days, while undergoing initial military, political, and organizational training, I was transferred to one of Ashraf's reception centers. There, I underwent nearly two years of probationary and further training. In the years leading up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, I also received extensive education in political and philosophical subjects. After that period, I joined the PMOI combat units, where I continued to advance my military training. Before the Second Gulf War in 2003, I submitted several written requests to participate in operations; however, despite being over 20, none were approved. Throughout my time, I did not witness anyone under the age of 18 being allowed to participate in operations.

We were taught from the outset—and this was reaffirmed through experience—that joining the PMOI was a significant commitment, but leaving was a personal decision and not difficult. Even during my initial time at the entrance and later during the reception period, various individuals chose to leave the struggle, and such cases continued in all subsequent years, whether we were in Ashraf or Liberty. Particularly at critical times, such as the end of our probation period and notably before the war, the organization was especially attentive to ensure that despite previous decisions, not everyone was able or willing to continue on the path of struggle. Repeatedly over those years, we were individually and explicitly encouraged by the leadership to consider leaving the PMOI if we desired to pursue different paths in life. This policy of voluntary commitment continues, supported by signed commitment papers from those who choose to stay with the organization.

After the occupation of Iraq in 2003, the PMOI were concentrated in Ashraf where, in accordance with an agreement with the U.S. military, our weapons were consolidated. During this time, a university was established in Ashraf offering courses in various disciplines including languages, law, and technical subjects. For a period, I taught French there, later branching into journalism where I focused on news writing, among other skills, and spent several years producing images, gaining expertise in these areas.

From 1997 to 2013, I devoted a total of 16 years to living in Ashraf and other PMOI bases in Iraq, including Camp Liberty in Baghdad. Reflecting on the

journey I have undertaken, my greatest honor is having had the courage to risk everything—sacrificing my personal life and distancing myself from my family—to fight for the freedom of my people who remain under oppression. I am profoundly grateful to God for giving me the strength to make such choices. Today, I am proud to be a part of such an organization and movement, serving humbly as the least among its members and as a dedicated servant to the Iranian people.

Saleh Abbaszadeh

My name is Saleh Abbaszadeh, born in 1979 in Mashhad, Iran. I grew up in Camp Ashraf, Iraq, having moved there with my parents in 1986, and I attended the PMOI school on site. We had good educational facilities, but the onset of the Kuwait crisis in 1990 and the subsequent conditions of war drastically changed our lives. The environment of war and trench living left little opportunity for education and compromised our safety.

When the conflict escalated in 1991, I was just 11 years old. To escape the bombings, I, along with other children from Camp Ashraf, was sent to Germany via Jordan by the PMOI. There, I continued my education at the Georg Büchner Gymnasium in Cologne, where I developed interests in mathematics, physics, and informatics. By 1996, our school introduced a computer room and programming classes, which I eagerly joined.

However, despite my academic pursuits in Germany, I remained deeply connected to the plight of my homeland. I often pondered why, as an Iranian, I was compelled to study abroad and could not enjoy freedom in my own country. I held political asylum in Germany due to my sympathies with the PMOI and my active participation in their demonstrations and activities. I was well-acquainted with Maryam Rajavi's vision and found her aspirations for Iran's future compelling. Yet, at that time, I was not prepared to sacrifice my life for the cause.

At 18, when critical life decisions loomed before me, I found myself deeply engrossed in debates with friends about the course of our lives. I dove into the biographies of influential figures ranging from Winston Churchill and Charles Dickens to John F. Kennedy, Gandhi, and Che Guevara. My interest in history, sparked in school, led me to explore further, delving into books about the German resistance to the Nazis, the French Revolution, and the Soviet Revolution. This exploration led me to a realization: history is shaped by two types of people—those who influence events and those who are merely influenced by them. The challenges faced by the former are undoubtedly greater.

Pondering this, I concluded that if I had only one life to live, I wanted to be among those who shaped history. This became a central theme in discussions

with my friends. At this juncture, I was determined not to simply tread the path laid out by my parents without question; it was crucial for me to forge my own way. One option was to pursue education and a career in science, yet I grappled with how I would justify to future generations my inaction during a time when I could have contributed to my country's freedom.

The shadow of dictatorship loomed large over my homeland, and it became clear that what my people and the future of my country needed most was liberation from this tyranny. I began to evaluate various Iranian groups and their contributions to the cause of freedom. Regrettably, I found that most were limited to passive activities like seminars or setting up book tables at one corner of the city. This left me disillusioned and searching for a more active way to impact the course of my country's history. But the PMOI, with its Liberation Army stationed along Iran's borders, presented a practical and realistic approach to challenging the dictatorship. This approach was not only feasible but accessible, and though there was room for me to contribute, I was acutely aware that it would be a path fraught with significant sacrifices. I had discussions with individuals who discouraged me from pursuing this route, warning me about the hardships and the potential setbacks if I chose to return, emphasizing that I might fall far behind where I currently was.

Understanding the gravity of this decision and its potential to shape the rest of my life, I delved into the writings of the PMOI. I learned that many young people before me had faced similar decisions, choosing to sacrifice their comfortable lives to take up arms against the regime. I was inspired by a documentary I saw on a foreign television channel about a young woman who had been studying informatics in Canada but decided to join the National Liberation Army and was content with her choice.

Moreover, I found the PMOI to be comprised of progressive individuals who provided intelligent justifications for their actions. For instance, despite the U.S. government's unfavorable view of the PMOI, labeling them as a terrorist organization, I scrutinized the State Department's accusations against the PMOI and found the organization's responses to be quite persuasive.

After thorough research and contemplation, I decided to join the struggle to overthrow the mullahs and enlisted in the National Liberation Army. When I

approached PMOI officials with my request, they were initially reluctant and conducted several meetings with me to ensure I fully understood the implications of my decision and the harsh realities of the life I was choosing. They informed me that Iraq was under economic sanctions and that living conditions were challenging.

My journey to Iraq in the autumn of 1997 was entirely legal and conducted using my passport. Upon arriving, I had a heartfelt reunion with my mother, whom I hadn't seen in years, and a few days later, I also met my sister. This reunion underscored the personal dimensions of my decision, as it not only marked a new chapter in my life's mission but also reconnected me with my family under extraordinary circumstances.

In the Liberation Army, I initially arrived at a training station where I joined other young individuals, some from inside Iran and others from European or American countries, all converging at this same location. During my two-year training period at this headquarters, I received not only the military training necessary for a combatant but also became deeply acquainted with the PMOI's ideology and values through various educational courses. We were encouraged to freely ask questions, raise points, and engage in collective discussions.

I must confess that the human relationships within the PMOI were instrumental in affirming my belief that I had chosen the correct path. Throughout our training, none of us participated in any military operations. Post-training, upon transferring to the Liberation Army combat units, it was a strict rule that no one under the age of 18 participated in offensive military missions.

In the combat units, I was responsible for a BMP1 armored personnel carrier, readying ourselves for the operation to overthrow the regime. I was 22 years old during the second Gulf War when Iraq was invaded by the United States. At that time, we faced coalition aerial bombardments, and after the war, we handed over our weapons to the American forces as part of an agreement.

Post-war, there were no more weapons in Ashraf. Many of my friends pursued university degrees at Ashraf University, where professors taught law, foreign languages, electrical engineering, computer science, agriculture, medicine, and more. Initially, I began studying medicine but soon shifted my

focus to video production, learning skills in filming, editing, and scriptwriting, which became my primary engagement.

Despite being unarmed, we remained a significant threat to the religious dictatorship ruling Iran. In all the ensuing years, the regime never ceased its efforts to annihilate us or discourage us from continuing our struggle. It orchestrated numerous attacks through its mercenaries in Iraq, tragically resulting in the deaths of many of my friends between 2009 and 2016. In 2016, I was relocated to Albania, now residing in Ashraf 3. Yet, even with our departure from Iraq, the regime's attempts to destroy or malign us have not abated.

For me, choosing to engage in this struggle is the proudest decision of my life. It has set me on a path dedicated to achieving the freedom and independence of my people, a commitment I intend to uphold for the rest of my life.

Ehsan Sharifi

I was born August 12, 1981, a member of the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI/MEK). On September 10, 1998, a month after I turned 17, I left Germany to Iraq to serve for the liberation of my homeland Iran. My father (Asghar Sharifi) was Deputy Minister of Culture during the interim government of Bazargan and could have held senior positions in that system, but he left the government and joined the PMOI to fight for the liberation of his homeland.

My whole family were either members or sympathizers of the PMOI and I had a relative familiarity with this organization. In 1990, after the start of the First Gulf War, my parents sent me and my sister (Maryam) to Europe via Jordan. I studied in the Netherlands for 4.5 years and 3.5 years in Germany. In Cologne, I attended the Rodenkirchener Gymnasium, a respected high school where after earning Abitur I could go to university. I was interested in photography and bought a semi-professional camera (Canon EOS 500) and I felt like I was inspired. Inspired by a friend who was 10 years older than me, I became interested in psychology and studied in this area. I thought I would become a journalist and travel all over the world.

In the spring of 1998, I had signed up for a local magazine to gain experience in photography. But I changed my mind about my future. Prior to that, because I visited the PMOI's offices and was in contact with my family, Iran was always important to me. I didn't want to lead a boring life of getting married, work to get paid and grow old like billions of other people, and eventually one day when I am old and sitting on a park bench feeding pigeons, I look back, and I ask myself the important question of how your destiny affected this world, my answer would be "in no way." These thoughts may be viewed as ambitious or selfish. But I thought I am too special to want a normal life for myself.

During the summer, when all my friends were dreaming about vacation places, I was thinking about creating my life's destiny. Because of my association with the PMOI, I trusted them. I saw that everyone in the PMOI office in Germany felt safe. No one fights with each other, people don't steal, and they don't even mock each other for their appearances or perceived deficiencies. I knew they had abandoned personal life for a more important political purpose.

I had been asking about joining them a year prior and I knew that the conditions for joining the PMOI were very difficult.

Finally, in the summer of 1998, I told myself that for a while I could go to the PMOI in Iraq and experience it closely. What did I have to lose? Other than the normal world that I could always get back to? But if I made the wrong decision about my life and went down like a conformist, I couldn't go back because I would age.

It is worth mentioning that none of my family members encouraged me to join the PMOI. I had a mother, a father, two aunts, an uncle and several distant relatives. They were all happy to see me and congratulated me on my joining. But my uncle said to me at the very first meeting, "Do you know that if I were your parents, I would not allow you to enter the PMOI?" I found out that because I wanted to join, and I was under 18, my application had been sent to my parents, and after they had signed up in writing, the PMOI accepted to allow me to go to Iraq. When I asked my uncle why he had this point of view, he said it is because I wanted you to grow up and appreciate the choice you made.

In Iraq, we were transferred to Camp Ashraf. Over 18 months, I was at Center 19, a special unit for people 95% of whom were men who had joined the PMOI from European countries and the United States and Canada. The first six months were a period of assimilation for us to get to know the living conditions in Iraq, and the organization would make sure that people were comprehensively prepared and informed about the realities. The officials of this section of the PMOI and the combatants were very experienced, and I experienced something in the process of training there, which was contrary to all movies about a typical military. Since all the PMOI fighters had voluntarily entered the army, there was never any physical punishment or humiliation. We treated each other with respect and no one had a lock on their lockers. Everybody trusted each other. New commanders and rank-and-file ate together at the same table, and even the oldest commanders lacked military rank or special privileges. Of course, in military training, there was much talk of discipline. In the training sessions that dealt with weapons and armor, there were military orders and rules. But the way it was implemented was not insulting or humiliating. In all my time in Iraq, we were not involved in any offensive operations. In 2003, during the invasion of

Iraq, we lived outside our camps for a long time. Although we had announced our neutrality in the conflict, many of our bases were bombed.

The PMOI members spent a lot of time talking to each other, debating, and reaching unified decisions. For every decision, all members of the community had to be involved and no one was ignored. Even more senior individuals felt obligated to criticize themselves in front of new members because all the principles and motives of this army were riding on the elements of volunteerism and the high motivation of the warriors, and everything was different. Even the punishment was the opposite of a conventional army. For example, I was once denied night posts for a week because I made a mistake and carried a loaded magazine in the back of a truck carrying people. I laughed at this “good punishment” and found it strange. But when I walked past my other friends every night who had to post more because of my negligence (i.e., creating a potential safety incident), I was embarrassed and just realized why in the PMOI everything was different compared to a conventional army.

When I joined the PMOI, I wanted to test the PMOI for a while. But after joining I realized that it was me who was being tested. In this different world, thousands of people from different backgrounds, from different classes, ethnicities, nationalities, occupations, and genders, voluntarily gathered to risk their lives for the people of Iran who they did not even know personally. Unlike all over the world, there was no competition or self-interest, but it was all about sacrifice for others.

I saw many PMOI professors, doctors, engineers, and others with high academic degrees, but they all worked for the freedom of Iran with high motivation. I entered the PMOI with individual motives but remained there with political and social motives.

But this spiritual paradise didn't last long, and historical events like September 11, 2001, destroyed my dreams and aspirations. I was less than 22 years old and I had already experienced the second major international war in my lifetime. After the invasion of Iraq, the PMOI was bombed due to covert dealings between the US government and the Iranian regime. Everything seemed to be over and the wish for freedom and prosperity for the Iranian people had become history. But the PMOI was not surrendering.

Within a few months of handing over their weapons, members of the Iranian Resistance in Western countries engaged in political activities to protect the residents of Ashraf, and we did not sit idly in Ashraf either. In the summer of 2003, the University of Iran was established in Camp Ashraf, and I, like thousands of other members, enrolled in scientific courses. I studied industrial engineering and obtained an industrial diploma. The professors who came to Ashraf from Baghdad University taught us based on curriculum and books from the universities of that country.

Since I did not work hard at school in Germany to master English, French, and Spanish, in Ashraf and later at Camp Liberty and in Albania, I began to address my shortcomings as I had gained a greater understanding of life and necessities of the struggle. I learned computer science, English and other specialized expertise. I also studied sociology, psychology, and philosophy, and now after nearly a quarter of a century I feel proud of what I have achieved in the PMOI. Every night at Camp Liberty, to which we were relocated in 2012, I worried about rockets and wondered if I would see the next day. All these years, I have experienced the failure of the United Nations and major powers to abide by their treaties and agreements. But at the same time, I saw thousands of people with willpower alongside me who were trying to give a happy life to millions of young Iranians. They sacrifice themselves for people who they have not seen and do not know. Now I'm a grown man with thousands of sweet and bitter experiences. I have lost hundreds of friends, but I have won millions of hearts.

Conclusion

The transfer of the children of the members of the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran during the first Persian Gulf War at the end of 1990 and the beginning of 1991, to protect them from the devastating bombings, stands as a historical honor for the organization. Even in the most perilous conditions of war, the organization did not shirk its humanitarian

responsibilities. Despite the political, financial, organizational costs, and security risks, it did not turn away from this duty. Moreover, those who returned to Ashraf years later as young women and men all had either their father, mother, or both in Ashraf. Regardless of any political motivations or struggles, which are highly respectable, they prioritized reuniting with their families.

The PMOI's project, undertaken at the parents' request, to transport children from Iraq to Europe and the United States, stands out as an extraordinary undertaking, particularly when compared to historical efforts to relocate children during conflicts. The PMOI carried out the daunting task of safely transporting all these children out of Iraq with very limited resources, without any support from governments or United Nations agencies, relying solely on the organization's exceptional actions.

It is not surprising that the Iranian regime seeks to distort this humanitarian effort. It is entirely expected that hired filmmakers or freelancers in Tehran produce films and write articles and books against the PMOI to discredit the organization, which is the most organized opposition and, according to regime officials, an existential threat to the mullahs' rule. However, it is disheartening when a few individuals in the West, under the guise of journalists, filmmakers, and intellectuals, align with the Iranian regime's propaganda, displaying a pitiful moral decline, professional dishonor, and political self-interest.

Consider a recent example:

On May 7, 2024, an agent of the Ministry of Information and Security (MOIS) named Safa'oddin Tabarian, posing as an expert, testified in absentia in a court on the trial of 104 PMOI members, most of whom have been refugees in Europe for decades. He claimed:

“It was March 1, 1992, an area in Baghdad called Amiriyah was being bombarded. About 400 people, mostly children and women, had taken refuge here, it was a big parking. The organization used this as an excuse and said we are in danger. About 900 children were separated from their parents and sent to Europe. It is not clear what the fate of these children is now. This is no less than terror or bombing. These crimes have taken place, and there is really no information about the fate of these 900 people.”¹

Six days later, Sara Moin, a Swedish-Iranian filmmaker of the children of Camp Ashraf, told BBC Persian television, “The issue of the children sent from Camp Ashraf to Europe and North America has been discussed within the

Iranian diaspora for years, but the details were never clear. I have seen these children in Sweden since I was young and always questioned what happened to them. I worked as a radio producer on documentaries for years, and later decided to make this documentary. From a very young age, almost since I was a child, I saw these children running away in Sweden, and I was always questioned about the children who were sent to Sweden without guardians, what was their fate, what happened to them. I thought that maybe an investigative report should be done about this story, and later I decided to make this documentary.”

Recruiting foreign agents to demonize the PMOI is well-known to most non-Iranian politicians, and numerous reports have been written in this regard. For example, a 2005 research report by a delegation from the European Parliament to Ashraf, prepared after detailed research and interviews with many Ashraf residents, states that none of the accusations against the PMOI are true. This report, published by Armatan France, is available in English, French, and Swedish. Similarly, Martin Patzelt, a former German Federal Parliament member, documented this in his research paper.

The Qatar Gate scandal in the European Parliament revealed that a senior employee of the socialist party, Elmar Mammadov, was pushing the Iranian regime's agenda, leading to his expulsion. The regime's intensified misinformation campaign against the PMOI in recent years can be attributed to the formation of

Resistance Units inside Iran and the significant participation of young people in uprisings. The growing wave of young Iranians joining the PMOI, inspired by the call for freedom and change, has clearly unnerved the regime, forcing it to resort to more lies and distortions about the PMOI.

These desperate efforts by the regime to counter the expanding resistance in Iran highlight the special role of the PMOI, with its organized network inside Iran and the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) as a democratic alternative. In reality, it is the regime itself that is one of the biggest persecutors and murderers of children in the world. Children's rights are non-existent under the regime, and violations are institutionalized in its laws, which set criminal penalties for boys at 15 and girls at 9 years old. During the Iran-Iraq war, the regime widely sent children to the war fronts, using them as "disposable soldiers" to clear minefields. Regime officials have admitted to sending a million children to the war with Iraq.

At that time, Khomeini issued a fatwa saying that parents' permission is not required to send children to the war front. The regime's use of the term "child soldiers" about the PMOI is a deceptive and propaganda act. Joining the PMOI has always been voluntary, from its beginning until today, without any form of military service or recruitment. In this way, no person under the age of 18 has participated in military operations with the PMOI or the National Liberation Army of Iran.

The Iranian regime and its political proxy groups criticize the PMOI for transferring children from Iraq in 1991 and interpret it as an organizational decision or a lack of family affection. They also accuse the organization of bringing people under the age of 18 from Europe to Iraq to serve as "child soldiers." Then this question is raised: If the PMOI planned to recruit children as soldiers, why would they send them abroad to bring them back again?

In the midst of the execution of thousands of youth supporters of the PMOI by the Iranian regime, such accusations seek to weaken the legitimate resistance of the people and youth of Iran against a ruthless regime. Naming young people who knowingly left a comfortable life in the West to fight against a brutal regime

known for its cruelty to children is an insult to these brave young people and a disregard for human dignity.

An example of the regime's "compassion" for children can be seen below. 13-year-old Fatemeh Mesbah along with her parents and several brothers and sisters were killed by this regime and the regime officially announced her execution. You can see her birth certificate below. She was born in May 1968 and was executed in August 1981.

Endnote:

1. Safa'oddin Tabarian, Mizan, the Judiciary's News Agency, May 8, 2024. Available at: <https://www.mizanonline.ir/fa/news/4772043/>

