

Iranian Women at Risk in Iraq: 1325 and the Long Road to Non-Violence

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PREFACE

Carole R. Fontaine, *VP, Women United Against Fundamentalism (L'Intégrisme) and for Equality (WAFE)*

This report explores the role of UNSCR 1325 in establishing a constructive, threat-free atmosphere among Iranian political exiles, the women of the PMOI, living in Ashraf, Iraq since 1986. Due to a campaign of relentless disinformation by Tehran, this legitimate opposition group opposing theocratic dictatorship was declared to be terrorists and became military targets during the invasion of Iraq by the United States and coalition forces in 2003. Their bases were bombed based on false intelligence from Tehran, and subsequently, the citizens of Camp were disarmed by Multi-National Forces in Iraq who established a military base there (Camp Grizzly) in 2003. After thorough investigation of all of the members of the group, the US Military concluded that no member had ever been involved in any act of terrorism, and the US government and United Nations granted all members of the PMOI full legal guarantees of safety as Protected Persons under the Fourth Geneva Convention. The right to full protections for the dignity and rights of women—a key value in UNSCR 1325—was spelled out to the members of the Camp by US Military leadership. Since the PMOI had made gender a critical component of their platform for democratic elections in Iran by blending critical feminist theory with a progressive version of Islam, women had been deliberately groomed and promoted, taking high positions of leadership in every aspect of the group's life and mission. Before transfer to Iraqi sovereignty in 2009, these women—formerly combatants in a national movement—turned to their legacy of non-violent, political origins to formulate a new way of reaching out world-wide: to their sisters inside Iran, to women in Iraq newly threatened with a lessening of their rights for religious reasons, and to women throughout the world. This was only possible in the presence of the guarantees and monitoring provided by UNSCR

1325. This is a story of their new role as peacemakers and political change agents, and is told through the voices of the women members, and their supporters from women's NGO's.

THE ORIGIN OF THE MOVEMENT

Jila Kazerounian, President, Women's Forum against Fundamentalism in Iran

The People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI) was established in 1965 by three university students. Their ideology is based on a progressive interpretation of Islam. The Mojahedin believe in the establishment of a secular republic and have never propagated an ideological government. Formed in opposition to the Shah's tyranny and despotic government, the organization originally attracted young educated men and women who were searching for a venue to replace the dictatorial government ruling their country.

In the early 1970's, the Shah's secret police performed a major crack down on the Mojahedin and other opposition groups. As a result, almost all of the leadership of the organization, including its founders, was executed. The majority of its members were imprisoned and they were left with little organizational structure.

In the 1960's to the early 1970's women mainly played a support role in the PMOI. With all of the restrictions and taboos imposed on them by society, women had been prevented from joining in full time and active participation in the opposition organizations. One of the first women who joined the Mojahedin was Fatemeh Amini. She was a graduate of Mashhad University and joined the movement in 1970. Fatemeh became a main contact of the Mojahedin network and the imprisoned leaders of the organization. She was eventually arrested and imprisoned in the notorious Evin prison, where she was extensively tortured for a confession by the Shah's SAVAK and became paralyzed as a result. She later died under torture.¹

In 1971 and 1972, following the arrest and execution of PMOI members, some of the mothers, sisters and women sympathizers organized demonstrations in different cities in Iran. The early restrictive cultural situation yielded to full scale participation of women in all aspects of political life within the PMOI. The organization, in an effort to implement 'positive discrimination' after the implementation of misogynist policies of the mullahs

against women, trained women to increase their capabilities to take leadership roles. This was a deliberate statement against the propaganda about women's inferiority that was being issued by the regime in Tehran.

One of the most prominent women in the movement was Ashraf Rabi'i (Rajavi). She was a Physics student at Sharif University when she joined the organization in 1970. Ashraf traveled to different cities and set up Mojahedin networks. Her first husband was arrested and executed by the Shah's regime but she cleverly escaped arrest many times. Ashraf was finally arrested in Qasvin and taken to Evin prison where she underwent severe torture. Her nose was broken and her eardrum permanently damaged. She remained in prison until February of 1979, when she was freed just before the revolution when the prisons were taken over by the people.² She eventually was killed by the fundamentalist regime's forces in an attack in February of 1981. The revolutionary guards took her two year old son hostage. He was shown on National TV that night held by "the butcher of Evin Prison", Lajevardi. Eventually, Ashraf's sacrifice for democracy gave her name to the PMOI's main refugee base just over the border in the Diyala province of Iraq.

In 1979, Monarchy was eventually brought down in Iran after 2500 years. Millions of Iranian people demonstrated in the streets, filled with the intention of bringing democracy and freedom to their homeland. Soon after the fall of the Shah, these hopes were shattered and this time a fundamentalist religious dictatorship was established based on absolute rule of religious jurisprudence (*Velayat-e Faqih*).

Misogyny is a pillar of Islamic fundamentalist ideology in Iran, and the first and foremost victims of Khomeini's dictatorship were women. Women are considered to be second-class citizens who must be submissive to their male counterparts, and violence against women is institutionalized within the laws of the ruling regime in Iran. Less than a month after the revolution, Khomeini ordered the observance of dress code for Iranian women. The Mojahedin was one of the first organizations to oppose the mandatory dress code. On March 11, 1979, the PMOI issued a statement that said: "Any use of force to impose any sort of veil or dress code on the women of this country...is irrational and unacceptable. Our

revolution cannot accept any second thoughts on or denial of Iranian women's complete judicial, legal, political and social rights."

In his final report on January 2, 1992, to the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, Reynaldo Galindo Pohl, the Special Representative on the situation of human rights in Iran wrote: "...the Prosecutor General, Abolfazl Musavi Tabrizi, said that 'anyone who rejects the principle of the *hijab* (dress code) is an apostate and the punishment for an apostate under Islamic law is death.'"²

As stated in Beijing, at the Fourth World Conference on Women, this is in direct contradiction of international Human Rights law: "violence against women is an obstacle to the achievement of objectives of equality, development and peace. Violence against women both violates and impairs or nullifies the enjoyment by women of their universal human rights and fundamental freedoms."⁴

As the attack by the regime's forces on the limitation of peoples' freedoms expanded, the Mojahedin started on their journey to a non-violent struggle in defense of human rights and women's rights. Their ideology and progressive positions attracted millions of people, young and old. Tens of thousands usually gathered to listen to the PMOI leader Massoud Rajavi's teachings and speeches. At the same time, Khomeini's regime started a severe crack down on anyone advocating freedom and democracy. They especially feared the Mojahedin and their attractive goals for genuine democracy. The price paid by Iranian women was obviously much higher: They were attacked by reactionary thugs, beaten, insulted and arrested, whether they were Mojahedin or not.

Though they were constantly attacked, their basic rights violated and suppressed, the Mojahedin refrained from any violent resistance against the regime and its suppressive forces. During these early years, they published their newspaper, distributed their literature and arranged peaceful gatherings and speeches. They also tried to take part in the political system and run for office. All of their efforts were violently undermined by the government.

On 27 April 1981, Mojahedin women organized a big demonstration, 150,000 people strong, in Tehran to oppose the increasing brutalities and crack down on freedoms. This demonstration was their first full scale protest against the regime.

On 20 June of that same year, the Mojahedin organized another big protest against the clerical regime in Tehran. More than 500,000 people attended the peaceful demonstration. Khomeini issued an edict to stop the protestors who were emerging on the streets, headed toward the Parliament. The revolutionary guards and Basij militia attacked the demonstration with weapons. Anyone arrested in that demonstration was imprisoned and later executed.

Time Magazine published an article on 6 July 1981, titled: 'Iran: Terror in the Name of God'. The article offered a glimpse into the horror of what happened in the days following the protest.

"Their crime was that they had demonstrated against the dismissal of Banisadr from his post as President of the nation. The Islamic judge who sentenced them—Ayatullah Mohammadi Gilani—did not even know who they were. The twelve girls, the oldest 18, the others under 16, refused to identify themselves in court. When Gilani asked their names, each in turn replied, 'Mujahed' (Crusader). To the question 'Child of?' each replied, 'The people of Iran.' Gilani solved the problem of identifying the girls by having them photographed. Then he consigned them to the firing squad. Islamic guards led the dozen girls to the courtyard of Evin Prison in Tehran. The oldest was clad in a flowing black chador, the traditional Muslim veil. The others wore dark head scarves. As the guards began to blindfold them, the girls started chanting, 'Death to fascism! Death to Khomeini!'

In answer, the guards and prison attendants watching the spectacle began their own chant of 'Allahu Akbar!' (God is great). Then the rifles roared.

Three days later, the clergy-controlled newspaper *Ettela'at* printed the girls' pictures with a terse message asking the parents to call for the bodies.

The parents should bring, the paper said, 'birth certificates bearing their [the girls'] pictures.' At a press conference Gilani defended the trials and executions of the girls.

'By the Islamic canon,' he said, 'a nine-year-old girl is mature. So there is no difference for us between a nine-year-old girl and a 40-year-old man.'"⁵

Women political prisoners have been special victims of the misogynist regime of the mullahs. The most inhumane and savage tortures have been applied to the women who have stood up to their tyranny. One method of torture was the shooting of a single bullet into a woman's womb and letting her bleed to death. Hundreds of pregnant women were executed in this way, such as: Azar Reza'i, Masoumeh Qajar-azodanloo, Zahra Nozari, Parvin Mostofi, Nayyereh Khosravi, etc. According to a religious decree, virgin women are raped in the prisons the night before their execution. The reasoning is that if they die virgin, they will end up in heaven! Stoning to death is also another savage punishment for the so called allegation of adultery. Women are buried up to their necks so that they cannot escape and exposed to this extremely hideous action, which also brutalizes onlookers and participants, hence creating further social repression.

In a 3 February 1984 TV sermon, Khomeini stated: "Killing is a form of mercy because it rectifies the person. Sometimes a person cannot be reformed unless he is cut up and burnt....you must kill, burn and lock up those in opposition."⁶

After the attacks on the peaceful demonstration of the unarmed civilians and the outrageous escalation of arrests and execution, the regime basically had closed all the peaceful avenues of expression and protest. Anyone who dared to even express the slightest hint of dissent was arrested, tortured and executed. Khomeini started a relentless reign of terror which continues to this day.

At that point, the Mojahedin had exhausted all of the peaceful and legal options and had completely refrained from violent retaliation. The 20 June 1981 demonstration marked an historic turning point. Following that, the PMOI was left with two options: Either surrender to the Islamic Fundamentalist forces and forget about democracy and freedom in their homeland, or resist the tyrannical rule and terror of the regime. They chose the second option.

Women, as the primary victims of this unjust violence stood up and defended themselves, and took responsibility within their organized resistance movement.

This move is not without precedent in the history of the struggle for Human Rights. As stated in the preamble to the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

"Whereas it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law."⁷

The International Committee of the Red Cross's commentary on Article 3 of the First Geneva Convention refers to discussions at the Diplomatic Conference of Geneva to ratify the Conventions in 1949: "It sometimes happens in a civil war that those who are regarded as rebels are in actual fact patriots struggling for the independence and dignity of their country... *It was not possible to talk of 'terrorism', 'anarchy', or 'disorders' in the case of rebels who complied with humanitarian principles.*"⁸

The Catholic Church, which in general opposes the use of violence, has also recognized this right to resist. A document, 'Instruction *Libertatis conscientia* on Christian Freedom and Liberation,' made public by the Vatican in 1986, states: "Armed struggle is the last resort to end blatant and prolonged oppression which has seriously violated the fundamental rights of individuals and has dangerously damaged the general interests of a country."⁹

THE EXODUS TO IRAQ: WHEN PEACEFUL PROTEST FAILS

In 1984, the Mojahedin relocated to Iraq and set up bases near the border with Iran. This happened following the expulsion of their leader Massoud Rajavi from France – a token of good will by the French to appease the Iranian regime. Desire for Iranian oil deals was the critical impulse for this act. Iraq was the only country that accepted Mojahedin refugees.

The PMOI's armed struggle was never aimed at civilians of any nations; they always targeted the suppressive organs of the regime and those who were directly involved in torture and execution of the innocent people.¹⁰ However, in 1997, after the so-called 'moderate', Mohammad Khatami became the President in Iran, the PMOI was placed on the

United States' Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTO) list by the Clinton Administration. A senior Clinton administration official told the *Los Angeles Times* at the time that "The inclusion of the People's Mujahedin was intended as a goodwill gesture to Tehran and its newly elected president, Mohammed Khatami." In the wake of the United States' pronouncement, Great Britain and the European Union followed suit and placed the PMOI on *their* designated terrorist lists to appease the Mullah's regime in Iran. Instead of encouraging any moderation within the regime, the policy of appeasement of the Western governments brought the most reactionary and fundamentalist forces to power.¹¹

Though their armed resistance was entirely justified (and only adopted when all other means of resistance became impossible), in 2001 the PMOI put down their arms and began another round of political campaigns.

In March 2003, the United States attacked Iraq in search of terrorists connected to the planning of September 11, 2001 attacks. PMOI bases were also bombed at the behest of the Iranian regime, and in 2003, the MNF-I signed a formal treaty of disarmament and agreed officially to protect members of the PMOI under the Fourth Geneva Convention.

VOICES FROM THE DESERT

Esmat Kargar Zadeh, President, Secretariat of PMOI, In Charge of Women's Outreach

Ashraf: City of Solidarity, supported by millions of Iraqis

The transformation from barren desert in 1986 to a self-contained, full-functioning town known to Iraqis as "*Medina Ashraf*" ("City of Refuge") during war and occupation since 2003 is a testimony to its residents' passionate commitment to Human Rights and democratic change.

Change in Iraq's sovereignty in 2003 brought new and widespread changes in the political and social relations between the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI) and Iraq's society. The Iranian regime, frustrated due to the failure of bombings against PMOI bases, began hostile measures against the Mojahedin residence in Iraq. In reaction, the people of

Diyala Province immediately protested, announcing their support for the PMOI, with Baghdad and other provinces following.

The people of Iraq have named Ashraf the "City of Solidarity", and its visitors consisted of men and women, Shiites and Sunnis, Christians and other religious minorities, Arabs, Kurds, Turks, and Turkemans, tribal sheikhs and doctors and specialists, university professors and students, writers, artists, athletes and other social sectors of Iraq. Among all of these, what catches one's eye the most is the vast presence of Iraqi women in Ashraf as a one-of-a-kind exception.

Blockade and pressures imposed on Ashraf

The religious-terrorist fascism ruling Iran has converted Iraq to its frontline of battle against the international community and its first launchpad to establishing a religious empire in the region. Due to the fact that Iraqis describe Ashraf as the strongest barrier against the Iranian regime in Iraq, the mullahs have concentrated their pressures and conspiracies against Ashraf. The clerical regime is using every means possible to annihilate the camp, undertaking all measures to pressurize and execute any form of conspiracy. These initiatives include an all-out ban on logistics, terrorist attacks, vast political propaganda, and even the misuse of family relations against their own loved ones in Ashraf. These measures go as far as pressuring, torturing and issuing death sentences to Ashraf residents' family members living inside Iran under the clerical regime's rule.

From the first day of its existence, due to its fear of the effects of freedom and democracy within Iran, the mullahs' regime has resorted to suppressing the Iranian people, especially women. By waging war and supporting international terrorism, the clerical regime has announced the establishment of an authoritarian empire under the name of Islam as its main objective. However, due to the existence of a popular and organized opposition, the mullahs are being rapidly isolated in Iran's society. Today, over 90% of the Iranian population is calling for a regime change. Women—especially those supporting the Iranian Resistance—have played an active role face-to-face against the Iranian regime from its very beginning, facing extreme tortures and assaults on female dignity. In such an atmosphere, Iranian women who stand in opposition to these acts of violence play the most engaged

role in the resistance against this anti-humane and misogynous regime. This reality has lead to the membership of many Iranian women in the nationwide resistance movement, joining the Iranian Resistance at its main base in Iraq. Currently, one thousand women members of the PMOI are present in Camp Ashraf, many of them former prisoners in Iran. Many have been educated in the United States and Europe. Today, the lives and dignity of these women are threatened by the Iranian regime's proxies in Iraq.

The Iranian regime, seeing the Iranian Resistance as its main threat, has always been in the pursuit of striking the PMOI at any opportunity, and since 2003 has resorted to every possible means to force Ashraf to succumb. During that same time Iraqis have turned out to support the residents of Ashraf. Also, the support of 5 million and 200 thousand Iraqis in 2006, and 300 thousand Shiites in southern Iraq in 2007 shaped a strong social movement in solidarity with the Iranian Resistance, and 700 thousand Iraqi women signed a declaration announcing their support for the PMOI, establishing an organized resistance of Iraqi women against the Iranian regime's meddling in their country.

Before the 2003 US-led war against Iraq, the Iranian Resistance had announced its neutrality. Yet the Iranian regime, through arranged conspiracies and propaganda against the Iranian Resistance, prepared the grounds for Coalition Forces' attacks on the PMOI. To fully accomplish this ominous goal, the Iranian regime simultaneously prepared measures for military strikes and psychological warfare against the Iranian Resistance.

As a result, with the beginning of the US-led invasion of Iraq, although the PMOI had not even fired one bullet, all of the PMOI bases were bombarded by Coalition Forces. In these attacks dozens of PMOI members, including 4 women, were martyred and many others were injured. On 15 April 2003, a local ceasefire agreement was signed between US and National Liberation Army of Iran (NLA) forces, agreeing that the PMOI and the NLA would be stationed in self controlled locations with their weapons. On 10 May 2003, the PMOI and NLA were disarmed by US forces and the PMOI handed over all their weapons to them, leading to the restriction of all PMOI members to Camp Ashraf. In exchange, the US forces guaranteed the protection of Camp Ashraf. Following these events, during a 16-month period, all Camp Ashraf residents were screened one by one by nine US agencies. Ultimately, the US government recognized the status of Camp Ashraf residents as

'protected persons' under the Fourth Geneva Convention. Subsequently, each Camp Ashraf resident signed an agreement in July 2004 with a US forces delegate, condemning "violence" and "participation in or support of terrorism" and also emphasized that "they have handed over all weapons and military equipment under their control". This agreement also specifies that that person, until the determination stage of "choices of proper status" for each individual, "will stay in Ashraf under the protection of MNF-I forces". Unfortunately, since the end of 2008, the US has not lived up to its share of the bilateral agreement to guarantee the protection of Ashraf resident in accordance with US obligations under International laws.

Throughout the past seven years, the PMOI have always had a close relationship with the people of Iraq. Women and children, especially, from cities throughout Iraq visited Ashraf and its residents. During this period the women of Ashraf have had close cooperation with Iraqi women and their organizations. They have organized and held many joint gatherings and meetings aiming to raise the awareness of the Iraqi women regarding their rights and to seek solutions for their problems. Between 2003-09, the women of Ashraf organized and hosted over 40 meetings with Iraqi women's groups (NGO's) on a variety of peace-making and solidarity topics, with between 100-500 women in attendance at each event. This good work was terminated when Ashraf was transferred to Iraqi control.

SECURITY TRANSITION TO IRAQI FORCES: 1325 Missing in Action

On 28 December 2008, the US embassy in Baghdad issued a statement announcing that "the responsibility for security of Camp Ashraf and its residents will be turned over from coalition forces to the government of Iraq on 1 January 2009".

It was as a result of this agreement that on 20 February 2009 "Camp Ashraf witnessed a full-fledged handover of responsibility to Iraqi forces". From that point on, the responsibility for the treatment of Camp Ashraf residents has been in the hands of the Iraqi government. According to a press release from the US Embassy in Baghdad dated 28 December 2008, the Iraqi government has guaranteed that its treatment of the residents of Camp Ashraf will be pursuant to not only Iraqi law, but also International laws.

Cooperation of Camp Ashraf residents

Over a period of one year (from August 2008 to 28 July 2009), the residents of Camp Ashraf, giving respect to Iraq's sovereignty, and considering international warnings, including one from the International Committee of Jurists, engaged and negotiated with Iraqi officials, showing incredible flexibility. The residents of Camp Ashraf have fully cooperated with the Iraqi forces and even provided facilities for them. It is important to note that, since women hold leadership positions, they were partner to these proceedings.

Iraqi forces' attack on Ashraf

In a meeting with the President of Iraq on 8 February 2008, Khamenei—the Supreme Leader of the mullahs' regime—emphasized a bilateral agreement that had been made between the Iranian regime and the Iraqi government regarding the expulsion of the PMOI from Iraq. Unfortunately, the result of the security transition and the response to all of the PMOI's cooperation was the attack and killing of Camp Ashraf residents by the hands of Iraqi forces on 28 and 29 July 2009 under the pretext of establishing a police station in the camp and enforcing Iraqi sovereignty. As a result, 11 unarmed and innocent residents of Camp Ashraf were killed, 500 injured, 1,000 beaten and 36 Ashraf residents were taken hostage for 72 days. Additionally, over 2.5 million dollars' worth of damage was brought to the Camp.

During these attacks, the women of Ashraf were threatened numerous times with murder and rape by the Iraqi offensive forces, in testimony recorded elsewhere.¹² The vicious behavior of the Iraqi forces on 28 and 29 July is evidence to the perilous status of the women in Ashraf. Their complaints have invalidated all assurances given by US officials that safety would be guaranteed. Without SCR 1325 in operation under the Iraqi takeover, women now fear for all aspects of their safety. The "protection of women" outlined by US General William Brandenburg of MNF-I is no longer in operation, causing local peace-making efforts to be severely curtailed.

US officials announced several times that, before the security turnover, they had received written assurances from the Iraqi government about the treatment of Camp Ashraf residents "humanely and according to Iraq's international commitments ..."

US officials also emphasized that "the US will try its utmost to guarantee that the Iraqi government will live up to the assurances it has given us on the treatment of Camp Ashraf residents ..." These assurances have been blatantly disregarded.

"Displacement": A new conspiracy to attack and kill Ashraf residents

The relocation of Ashraf residents is yet another conspiracy plotted by the Iraqi government following the release of the Ashraf hostages. On 19 October 2009, an Iraqi government delegate officially announced to Camp Ashraf representatives, that all residents of the camp must be transferred to Samava (south of Iraq near the Saudi Arabia border) by 15 December 2009. The Iraqi delegate underlined that if the residents of Ashraf did not give in to this transfer, the events of 28 and 29 July would be repeated. To this day, international organizations have emphasized that with reference to the universally accepted principle of non-refoulement, residents of Camp Ashraf should not be displaced, expelled or repatriated and, in violation of the International Humanitarian Law (IHL), should not be relocated inside Iraq.

Current restrictions on Ashraf

Events of the last year have proved that not only is the Iraqi government not respecting international commitments and conventions but it also has no respect for its own laws and legal system. In this period we have witnessed pressures and restrictions forced by the Iraqi government upon the residents of the Camp, and Ashraf has actually turned into a prison. Restrictions have taken the form of preventing the entrance of different goods and basic necessities into the camp, preventing the entrance of lawyers and family members of Ashraf residents or even American and European human rights organizations aiming to monitor the situation in the camp. Additionally, the illegal siege on Ashraf has had serious physical and psychological effects on the residents, particularly the women.

On 7 October 2005, Major General William Brandenburg, deputy commander of the MNF-I, in a letter emphasized the rights of the residents of Camp Ashraf under the Fourth Geneva Convention which regards the status of foreign civilians in times of war in an occupied land. He stated: "The residents of Camp Ashraf have the right to protection from danger,

violence, coercion, and intimidation, and to special protection for the dignity and rights of women".

Due to the all-out siege being imposed on Ashraf, the treatment of patients there deteriorates by the day. Of the 1,000 women in Ashraf, at least 541 are in need of medical care and specialist examinations. They have not had a medical checkup for months. Approximately 90 women have serious cases and among those, 7 are urgent medical patients. Unfortunately, due to the restrictions imposed by the Iraqi Interior Ministry's so-called 'Closing down Ashraf Committee', the Camp has a serious lack of medical services and also medical specialists, including those to perform the necessary surgeries, causing the patients to not receive the medical treatment they need. For example: For nearly four months a women's medical specialist was not allowed to come to Ashraf while 50 patients were in dire need, 20 of whom required urgent examination and treatment. Over half of the women in Ashraf are in need of medical treatment by doctors in female medical specialties.

As stated in UN Security Council Resolution 1325, to fully implement by International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and Human Rights laws which protect the rights of women and girls during and after a conflict situation, we ask the international community and UN bodies:

- to emphasize on the status of residents of Ashraf as 'protected persons' under the terms of the Fourth Geneva Convention or International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and/or International Human Rights Law.
- Necessary action must be taken for UN forces to take over the responsibility of the protection of Ashraf residents.
- to call on the US government for its forces to continue their presence in the camp until security is taken over by the UN, and to guarantee the protection of the residents from attacks, violence and forcible displacement inside Iraq.

WHEN WOMEN DISARM: EMPOWERED OUTREACH UNDER SCR 1325

Carole R. Fontaine

The work of the women of Ashraf during the implementation of the values and spirit of 1325 during MNF-I control of the refugee camp focused heavily on resourcing women in their network within Iran, and their attempts to partner with the women of Iraq, now facing the imposition of theocratic Islamic law known as *Shari'a* and its lessening of the rights guaranteed to women by international law. Programs revolved around establishing a basic female solidarity through study together, presentations by various speakers, and commonly held religious and secular celebrations. Women's rights and different ways of interpreting patriarchal religions—especially and particularly Islam—were key issues raised with Iraqi women's NGO's. On a broader scale, the leadership at Camp Ashraf was key in providing a safe, neutral meeting place where Iraqis of different ethnicities and denominations could come together to work on national issues in a context free of violence. Eyewitnesses note that the 'message' of the presence of strong, feminist, observant Islamic women at Ashraf was not lost on male Muslims visiting on various missions, and Iraqi women in such delegations were visibly empowered by the Ashrafi example with respect to their own participation in discussions with men. The so-called 'Sunni Awakening' was mothered into existence by the women of Ashraf when the guidelines of 1325 were observed under UN observation and with US protections. Since the transfer of sovereignty to the Iraqi government, such meetings have ceased and violence in Iraq is on the upsurge.

Beyond the boundaries of the current occupation in Iraq and brutal dictatorship in Iran, the women of the PMOI have worked through education and outreach to make their voices heard in the West. The women often quote an Iranian proverb, "A clear conscience needs no defense", when speaking of their 'terrorist' label. "We have nothing to hide", they say; "Let the world come and see and know us, and learn who we are." The era of 1325 at Ashraf has allowed some of this to happen. Partnering with their political 'sister' organization, the National Council of Resistance in Iran whose President-Elect is Mrs. Maryam Rajavi, a former leader in Ashraf, the period from 2003-09 saw a flourishing of a world-wide network of support for these women and their cause. Committees of support were founded in a host of European Union countries and other world regions; websites telling the Ashraf story sprang up on the Internet, and in print medium. In 2004 in Geneva, *WAFE*, *International Federation of Women United Against Fundamentalism (L'Intégrisme)* and for

Equality was launched at a meeting of European women parliamentarians, professors, Human Rights activists and religious professionals. Thanks to delegates nominated by women at Ashraf or current PMOI members visiting at NCR-I headquarters in Auvers-sur-Oise, France, women from Europe, Africa and the Americas were able to hear directly at WAFE meetings the reports from delegates from Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, India, Palestine, Indonesia and elsewhere about the conditions for women in regions where fundamentalist Islam is at war with other more moderate or progressive movements within the religion. Art exhibits on Human Rights abuses inside Iran by Iranian women artists, as well as raw video footage of abuse provided by the PMOI from inside Iran, brought home to women globally the dire consequences of being born woman when misogyny is a key component of a religious government's self-described 'war on immorality'. As of 2009, a second group, *WWAFE, Women World-wide Advancing Freedom and Equality*, was born; its focus is the role of female empowerment in areas outside of Islamic theocracies and their satellites. In 2010, *WAFE*, which focuses primarily on Iran and West Asia, adopted the following Mission Statement (soon to be published on a newly launched website):

Mission Statement

1. We, women and men members of *WAFE (International Federation of Women United against Fundamentalism and for Equality)* work to oppose Fundamentalism (religious extremism or in French, l'Intégrisme) wherever it occurs, together with the persecution of women and denial of women's full and equal human rights, upon which Fundamentalism depends.
2. We are appalled by the current treatment of women in many fundamentalist regimes. We see as unworthy of 21st century civilization the view that fifty percent of humankind is inferior simply by virtue of her or his gender.
3. We believe that gender equality is essential to human development and that all discrimination and violence against women is profoundly destructive of human potential and of family and community life.
4. We consequently seek to oppose all regimes which deny to any person the full benefits, challenges, rights and responsibilities of citizenship, and to eradicate all those laws, customs, traditions and rituals which prevent women from contributing fully to all aspects of life.
5. We strongly support the 1948 United Nations Declaration of Universal Human Rights and the many international declarations and conventions which have followed, which

all affirm that women's human rights are consistent with and inalienable from all human rights.

6. We seek to promote societies free from all forms of gender discrimination in which women and men alike can enjoy self-fulfillment, whilst accepting the responsibilities and concern for others which must accompany such privileges.
7. We seek to promote societies in which every individual has the opportunity to realise her or his potential, constrained only by the limits imposed by respect for the freedom of others.
8. We seek to develop worldwide links with women and men, communities and organizations who share our mission of empowering women and to work with them to oppose the tide of Fundamentalism which threatens many parts of the world today.
9. We are willing to work with other organizations sharing consistent vision and mission.
10. We conduct WAFE activities with transparency in accordance with the above tenets and in conformity with our Constitution. Amended June 27, 2010.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

It cannot be emphasized enough that without the protections of 1325, no peace-making overtures or programs of solidarity between refugees and people of the host nation and beyond could even be imagined, much less implemented, in a war zone or occupation setting. Where women are used to and proud of being able to defend themselves and their country, one cannot expect that they will docilely present themselves to become victims of rape, torture and harassment when disarmed. Only in the presence of a clear statement of rights and the special needs of women in such conflict situations, as well as monitoring by those in charge, can women be expected to participate in what can seem like blatant dis-empowerment. The women of Ashraf have weathered this transition successfully, and converted a situation of dire possibilities into one of blooming support and education. They deserve to live free of the threat of rape by Iraqi and Iranian forces, or refoulement to a hostile home country that has imprisoned many of them previously. We see what can happen when 1325 is in place; we fear what may happen now that it is not.

The problems posed for Islam world wide by violent, well-funded extremists who claim to be the arbiters of the 'true' form of their religion are problems that will confront every Muslim in the coming century. Women living under the strictest and most misogynist

interpretations of theocratic rule invariably suffer: the rise of honor killings of women under the rule of Hamas, funded by Iranian money, in Gaza, and the conditions for women governed by Hezbollah in Lebanon, also funded by Iran, are object lessons for Muslim women everywhere, and non-Muslim women besides. There is more than one fundamentalist religion in the world, and they all share a goal of inscribing the supremacy of Man in their laws and society, even if they are not explicit about it in their public statements. The activities and growth of the women of Ashraf teach all their sisters that Resistance is NOT Futile. We would see them survive their current situation and return to their work with their Iraqi sisters in confronting the advance of fundamentalist extremism.

Along with the Pentagon and various European courts and lawmaking bodies, the authors of this report find no evidence that the PMOI are anything other than what they claim to be: a legitimate opposition movement with a long-term history and impact. They are certainly *not* terrorists as various legal bodies have concluded in their binding determinations and rulings over the past few years. It is ludicrous to continue to claim that they are: these women in head-scarves are not our enemy! The United States has no other course, should it obey international law and honor the outcomes of its own internal investigations, than to remove the PMOI from the List of Proscribed Organizations. As a voice in the Middle East which blends democratic values and processes with a progressive brand of Islam, they are invaluable allies to those seeking peace in the region, and a beacon of hope to those within Iran who made their presence so strongly felt during and subsequent to the fraudulent General Elections of 2008. The PMOI's presence on the Proscribed Organizations List in the US is now a minority position among lawmakers world-wide. US House of Representatives Resolution 1431 from the US Congress agrees with majority rulings that the PMOI are not terrorists and makes the recommendation that the PMOI be removed from the List.¹³

Apart from any questions of proscription by one national state, we reaffirm that the women and men of Camp Ashraf are Protected Persons under the Fourth Geneva Convention according to the US and UN officials, and that any repatriation of them to Iran constitutes a direct violation of that convention and exposes them to imprisonment, torture and death.

Likewise, resettlement within Iraq raises special issues of safety and gender issues for the women of Camp Ashraf,

Our recommendation: honor the obligations of 1325 as US troop withdrawal commences by transferring Camp Ashraf to UN control and monitoring.¹⁴

¹ The Foreign Affairs Committee of the National Council of Resistance of Iran. 1995. *Women, Islam and Equality*. Available at: http://www.iran-e-azad.org/english/book_on_women.html [accessed 27 July 2010].

² Ibid.

³ Pohl, R. United Nations Document Reference E/CN.4/1992/34. 1992. *Report on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran by the Special Representative of the Commission on Human Rights, Mr. Reynaldo Galindo Pohl*. 48th Session of the UNCHR Commission on Human Rights: Report on the Forty-Eighth Session (27 January-6 March 1992).

⁴ United Nations Document A/CONF.177/20/Rev.1. 1996. *Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing (4-15 September 1995)*. Available at: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/pdf/Bcljng%20full%20report%20E.pdf> [accessed 27 July 2010].

⁵ Blake, P. 1981. 'Iran: Terror in the Name of God'. *TIME Magazine*, Monday, 6 July. Available at: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,922597,00.html> [accessed 27 July 2010].

⁶ Khomeini. Feb. 3, 1984, TV sermon later published in the government newspaper, *Ettela'at*.

⁷ UN General Assembly, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 10 December 1948, 217 A (III). Available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3ae6b3712c.html> [accessed 15 August 2010] Preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, approved by the General Assembly, December 10, 1948.

⁸ International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), *Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War (Third Geneva Convention)*, 12 August 1949, 75 UNTS 135, [p.32] 2. Available at: <http://www.icrc.org/IHL.NSF/1a13044f3bbb5b8ec12563fb0066f226/466097d7a301f8c4c12563cd00424e2b!OpenDocument> [accessed 27 July 2010].

⁹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. 1986. *Instruction Libertatis conscientia on Christian Freedom and Liberation*, 22 March, 1986: AAS 79 (1987).

¹⁰ Mohaddessin, M. 2004. *Enemies of the Ayatollahs: The Iranian Opposition's War on Islamic Fundamentalism*. New York: Zed Books.

¹¹ Kempster, N. 1997. 'U.S. Designates 30 Groups as Terrorists'. *Los Angeles Times*, October 9, 1997.

¹² Fontaine, C., J. Kazerounian and E. Kargar Zadeh, 'Falling Through the Gaps of SCR/1325: The Plight of Iranian Political Refugees in Iraq'. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*. Under review July 2010.

¹³ H.RES.1431,IH. 2010. United States 111th Congress 2d Session 10 June. Authors: R. Filner, S. Jackson Lee, D. Rohrabacher.

¹⁴ The authors would like to thank Jennifer Shaw, General Secretary of the *Interreligious Committee in Support of Protected Persons in Ashraf, Iraq*, for her help with the editing, formatting and coordination of submissions by authors of this manuscript.

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August 2010] Preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, approved by the General Assembly, December 10, 1948.

In defense of the residents of Camp Ashraf, I need to make a preamble about zealotry. In my answers below, I sound somewhat critical of the MeK's dedication and absolute focus on their mission, but I need to explain up front. Their actions and personality, when described sound a lot like zealotry. Yes, they are zealots, but for a very good reason. I have yet to meet a member of the MeK who does not have a personal story of tragedy caused by the current Mullah Regime. They include the murder of a brother, the hanging of a sibling, the stoning of a mother, unwarranted incarceration and torture to name but a few. If those personal experiences don't create a psyche for zealotry, I don't know what does. They are good people thrust by events into a unique situation. They may be zealots, but they are not terrorists. *Dave Phillips, 22 August 2012*

When did you first learn of the MeK?

During the buildup to the invasion of Iraq, my S2 Officer (Intelligence) provided reports on each of the significant groups in Iraq; Republican Guards, Iraqi Army, Police and a little known brigade sized organization of Iranians called the MeK. He gave me a synopsis on the group and a determination that they may fight on the side of the Iraqis. My S2 added, don't worry about this group. We'll have little to do with them. (Ha, I should have had chills run up my spine)

Given your expectations from what you had heard/learned, did you find the label terrorist to be warranted?

When I first rolled through the gates of Camp Ashraf in 2003, I had already been to the MeK Camp at Hillah, Fallujah and downtown Baghdad. Camp Ashraf closely resembles the Camp just east of Fallujah, but is much more remote. My impression of the MeK was irrelevant, because I was told they were terrorists by the State Department and that was good enough for me. I was happy to poke the terrorists in the eye in retribution for 911. It didn't matter that they had nothing to do with 911, but the label of being a terrorist group was good enough for me. I mentally equated the MeK with the Iranian Hostage Crisis back in 1979-80. I was a young lieutenant though and we were going to war with Iran. I kept looking at the female MeK members and saw the images of the Iranian women, hajeb covered, inside of the US Embassy trying to piece back together the shredded documents. I was not a friend of the MeK and if they would have given me an excuse, we would have gone kinetic.

Overtime, after having my staff do additional research, I was beginning to question the terrorist designation. The FBI, CIA, DIA and other three letter agencies were not finding anyone they determined to be of interest. I was incredulous. I had over 3000 terrorists detained without any due process other than a directive from DoS, yet there were none who warranted a second look by our federal agencies. All of the three letter agencies packed up and departed by June of 2004 and left my unit holding the bag. My staff lawyer was concerned that we were in violation of international law by keeping the MeK detained indefinitely without any due process.

The more I researched, the greater my belief that these people should be our allies, not our terrorists. I continued to hear the same rhetoric about their terrorist acts, but none could stand up to scrutiny.

By summer 2004, I was ready to just open the gates of Camp Ashraf and let them leave. Unfortunately, the DoS blocked every initiative to ease the detention.

Bottom line; they may be terrorists in the eyes of the current Iranian government, but I would better label them as Iranian freedom fighters.

I am not discounting that this group, not these specific individuals, may have harmed Americans during the Shah years in Iran, but most at Ashraf were either too young or weren't even born in pre-1979.

What are your strongest impressions on the MeK as a group? Individuals?

They are dedicated to a fault, which makes them susceptible to outside attack. They are their own enemy because of their inflexibility. Take the MeK emblem for example. I went around and around with them that the red hammer/sickle/anvil emblem wouldn't play well in the post-Soviet world. They just smiled and repeated that they liked their emblem. They didn't look at the bigger picture of marketing and public relations.

They are a group think organization that act like the science fiction race in the Star Trek Next Generation series; 'The Borg.' Sorry to use such a pop culture comparison, but it really fits them best. They are a collective and operate as such. They rarely talk one on one and almost always have either a minder or partner listening to every word. I tried repeatedly to get my point of contact to discuss items of interest other than overthrowing the Mullah's of Iran. He was the only individual ever to spend time alone with me. Occasionally I could break through the thick layer of rhetoric and get him to reflect on his past. I learned that he liked tootsie roll candy and liked to go boating. Of course I slipped him a bag of tootsie rolls, but he never mentioned them. I also learned that his wife was also in the camp, but he hadn't seen her in three years. This also leads to the cult-like perception by outsiders. Maybe so, but they are not your Branch Davidians of Waco, Texas. The uninformed, inexperienced or closed minded people would easily paint the organization as a cult, but I see them as much different. They are something much deeper than a simple cult. They are an organization where the individual is secondary to the cause. They have given up everything in order to further the goals of the organization. Unfortunately, this type of mentality, coupled with so many years without little outside contact (for the majority of the 3000+) has in many ways impaired their free thought. Even if they do succeed in overthrowing the regime in Iran, they are probably not suited for governing. They wouldn't like me saying this, but it is my belief. They can definitely rally support and even a major uprising, but their total focused approach will hardly endear them to the masses in Iran. I see them as viable in bringing about regime change, but their inflexibility and lack of free and creative thought will prevent them from governing in post-Mullah Iran.

As individuals??? There are no individuals in Camp Ashraf. They gave up being individuals years ago. Cult like? NO, but disturbingly different from western social norms.

****There is one other issue which I don't want to put in writing. Anti-MeK individuals could and would use it against them. The uniformed would definitely believe they are a crazed cult; even though it is that identification label that couldn't be further from the truth. No, this is not the marriage issue. It is something much more dark (at least in my mind). If you would like to discuss this issue, let's do so over the phone. Just let me know.*

Could you share a story or two of an encounter that really stood out in your mind?

Two quick stories that stand out;

When I first arrived at Camp Ashraf, my intelligence officers informed me that they believed that they identified Commander Zohreh, the leader of the National Liberal Army. When we arrived at the Martyrs Museum, my intel officer whispered and pointed out several older women. They were MeK members standing off to the side. He stated that the one was believed to be Commander Zohrah. I walked past the greeting group and right up to the group of women and faced the one believed to be Commander Zohreh. I introduced myself by stating to the effect, "Commander Zohreh, I'm Colonel Phillips, Commander of the 89th Military Police Brigade." Her response was very quietly spoken, yet without talking her eyes off of mine. "You know me?" I said, "Yes, You're Commander Zohreh, I recognize you." She retorted, "How did you know me, there are few photos of me and we've never met." I replied, "I agree, there are few photos of you." I added as a mild compliment, "You're like a ghost, but we found you." She got a tight lipped knowing smile and replied, "Am I a good ghost or bad ghost." Something in her eyes said, don't mess with me. I'll gut you and watch you bleed if it serves my purpose. I knew right at that point this mission was going to be a lot more than I anticipated. Wow, was that premonition correct.

The second story involves my scariest incident in Iraq and it wasn't fighting the insurgents. It was the second and third order of effect when we raided the female barracks in search of people being held against their will and torture. Our intelligence kept picking up what I now believe was rumor and rhetoric by the Anti-MeK groups. They stated that a certain remote female billets was holding people against their will and torturing them. We were conducting an operation and sealed off the area and then swept in unannounced. The young women went fanatical, screaming and surrounded me and my personal security NCO. There must have been 100-150 women 'terrorists' surrounding me. My Soldiers were trained to shoot in this type of situation, but thank goodness they held fire. My close in personal security NCO is also trained to place himself between danger and me, but we were surrounded. Fahima Arvany, a senior MeK leader came pushing up to me and spit in my face. My NCO said he never came so close to shooting someone at point blank range. I raised my hand to stop him and slowly took off my glasses and wiped the spittle from my face. I don't recall what I said, but whatever she was yelling wasn't very nice. Over the next few minutes the situation was a standoff. Finally, Commander Zohreh showed up and basically quieted the situation.

This was the most scared I ever was during years of combat in Iraq. The scenario is now taught at the US Army Military Police School as a training vignette in the protective services course.

Regardless to say, we didn't find anyone held against their will or any indication of torture.

There is a silver lining to this situation. I can now state without doubt and under oath that I searched all areas day and night, without notice and never found signs of torture or people held against their will. I've used this example several times when briefing Congress.

How have you changed because of your encounters with members/the group of the MeK?

This is interesting. It isn't only the MeK that changed me, but the entire post 911 experience. I believed we always held the high ground as a nation, yet the patriotism of post 911 blinded us to many of the situations where we came off of the high ground. We squandered so much world support as the lone world super power by the Iraq debacle. Afghanistan...yes! Iraq no. It could have waited. Saddam may have been hell on wheels with his own population and rattled a lot of sabers, but for the most part remained confined to his own country. Also, he kept Iran in check. Now where are we? Better or worse off with the regime change in Iraq?

As for the MeK, I felt lied to by my own State Department and used as a repression force against all of my person values and beliefs. I was in charge of keeping people detained in a desert outpost under the threat of death at the hands of my Soldiers. No due process, no care or concern...just blind obedience to orders. To this day it causes me to lose sleep when we turned off the MeK radio station which broadcast into Iran. My Farsi speakers listened to the station continuously and determined that it was much like a "Voice of America" format. Yet, the State Department insisted that we shut it down, because the MeK were sending secret messages. I now believe they lied to me.

I used to believe what I heard from my government with everything being in black and white. I now know that things are various shades of gray. If the State Department labeled some group as terrorist...that was good enough for me. Now I know better.

Do I feel threatened and at risk for supporting the delisting of the MeK. YES, by the Iranian government, Islamic extremists and segments of my own government. Even some of my own family and so called friends have alienated me for "SUPPORTING TERRORISTS." Regardless, if they even know anything about the issue.

What would you like to say to readers of these stories of the MeK? What message do you have for your own people (however defined) in particular?

If you want to understand the MeK, look to revolutionary France and the overthrow of the Bourbons. To the rest of the world, France looked like a pariah, yet espoused freedom and

democracy. Once the revolution began, it took turns that couldn't be controlled, yet the end result affects our western world today in positive terms.

My message to 'my own people' (defined as those of western philosophies) is simple; consider what we currently have in Iran...what could be worse? A government which espouses destruction of western values and society, the total annihilation of Israel and the absolute suppression of women...or a group made of men and women who espouse democracy, freedom and a nuclear free Iran. Even if this group did do some harsh things in the past (which is debatable), didn't our own revolution have its hard core members who did some harsh things to the British and the loyalists? Yes, I can and do make the comparison.

The Mullahs of Iran vs. the MeK... I vote for the MeK!

Freshdi Dashti The only four individuals whose name comes close are those listed below;

713	EBDF2001	Dashti, Arshad
714	9BED618D	Dashti, Shahram
729	079BE364	Dehdashti, Esmat
Xxx	EBDF2001	Dashti, Arshad (Claimed Pakistani Citizenship. Repatriated to Pakistan in late 2004 or early 2005)

Only Arshad Dashti had anything derogatory and it was minor.

Zohreh Shfaei The spelling is slightly different, but I believe this is who you are referring too

1681	0BCC4D16	Kamiab Sharify, Zohreh
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This young woman is very dedicated and determined. I checked my notes and 'believe' she is the young woman who told me in no uncertain terms that she was denied the right to be born in her own country. Regardless, if it was her, this comment struck me hard. It demonstrated that most of these people will never be able to integrate back into normal society. I guess after 10 years in captivity, most of us would be somewhat socially impaired. Interestingly, the comment was made to me back in early 2004. I can only imagine what the past 8 years have done to her psyche.

Homya Wassehan I cannot find anyone with a name that is close enough to cross reference. There are only three members with a last name that begins with "W"

"We Saw Justice in Them":
Interview of Mahin Saremi,
Iranian Women's Activist, Political Prisoner and Torture Survivor
by Carole R. Fontaine

In a small apartment in a 'bedroom' community of Paris, three Muslim women of middle years and older have laid a spread with typical Persian hospitality, waiting for guests from the United States to visit. Dried apricots, lakum, sweetly scented teas, fresh fruit (with the obligatory small cucumbers that so delight the people of Iran), pistachios, and other dainties are laid out, waiting on the coffee table, though it is unlikely that their conversation can be sweetened by mere foodstuffs. Mrs. M, the resident, looks lovingly at the glass cabinet where she has proudly displayed her five dead children, members of the People's Mujahedin of Iran (the 'notorious' PMOI, or in Persian, MeK), all tortured and martyred by the murderous regime in Tehran. Extremist Shi'ite mullahs have terrorized a whole people for over thirty years, since the uprising against Shah Pahlevi was hijacked by the opportunist Ayatollah Khomeini. His government continues to interfere and threaten the region in their quest to head a worldwide Caliphate that will rule the broken West, as well as wipe Israel from the modern map. Into this mess, a group of Christian women Human Rights activists, interested in how to make common cause with the brave women of the Arab Spring of 2011, determine to meet with any Muslim women who feel free enough to share their experiences of repression, torture and the heavy price of dissent.

After the loss of her last child, Mrs. M simply packed a small overnight bag in her home in Tehran and began to walk to the border of Pakistan, unheeding of any personal danger. After all, after losing five brave children and a husband, what more could the mullahs do to her? After her long journey – eventually accomplished – she was able, with the help of the PMOI stationed in their base camp Ashraf City on the Iraqi side of the border with Iran, to make her way to France. There, in the small community of Auvers-sur-Oise, live the members of the National Council of Résistance in Iran (NCRI), a political support group that lobbies for the survival of the PMOI under the Shi'ite puppet government of al-Maliki, the Iraqi sell-out who speaks Arabic with a Farsi accent. The fate of those in Ashraf City is the constant subject of prayer and action for the families who have lost children and family members in the struggle for a free Iran. The old women remember the Shah well, but what is experienced now by their people is a thousand times worse, they say--and who is to blame them?

In 2009, the hollow men of the Iraqi government, working hand in hand with Tehran and at their directives, determine to expel and extradite the PMOI members back to Iran, where they await torture and execution. Both the United States and the United Nations are implicated in the fate of the PMOI: the US invasion of Iraq first bombed, then exculpated all of the residents of Ashraf City, who had been dubbed terrorists by Iran and given that status under the Clinton Administration as a 'gesture of good will' to Iran, in return for a conspicuous lack of reform in the area of Human Rights abuses under supposed moderate Khatami. During a thorough investigation by the Pentagon, ranking US officials in Iraq, and in cooperation with the CIA, not one act of terrorism could be found to have been committed by any of the dissidents in Ashraf. Subsequently, the US granted all the residents US Identity Cards with Protected Person status under the Fourth Article of the Geneva Convention, which protects civilian groups. The United Nations commissioners for Refugees and Human Rights agreed with this designation, considering it necessary in order to protect these long-time opponents of the extremist fanatics

who run Iran. The Pentagon, the European Union, the generals, and even the Vatican all urge the US Department of State to remove the label of terrorism from this long-suffering group so they may obtain visas and get to safety outside Iraq, but to no avail. In order to maintain the fiction that the puppets in Baghdad have 'stood up' in their own freely (sic!) elected government, such that US troops might 'stand down' and leave their debacle in the desert to the locals, all promises to protect Ashraf City are abandoned. Obama, elected with such high hopes, and given a Nobel Peace Prize for simply *not* being George W. Bush, does nothing--Guantanamo remains open and humming with business; troops are moved to Afghanistan, the grave of Empires (even capitalist ones); and Ashraf sits waiting for its death. CIA informants quietly consider the residents of Ashraf 'toast', because both State Department and 'the Company' have been infiltrated and lobbied by agents of the Mullahs in Tehran. "Our government is in the hands of the enemy", one 'consultant' tells me privately. Still, the agency hopes to keep the contacts with the PMOI network inside Iran open and operating, in order to bring out nuclear intelligence long after US and international indifference allow Ashraf to perish. Amnesty International lists the residents of Ashraf City on their 'endangered species' list of civilians in Iraq; the Black Caucus of the US House of Representatives propose a bill to de-proscribe the PMOI, but nothing happens. As US presidential elections approach, Republican politicians scent blood in the water with respect to Obama's record on foreign policy and defense of Israel--a sore spot and no longer a winning campaign issue after the successful assassination of Osama bin Laden. They join the retired Generals in speaking on behalf of Ashraf, but the State Department won't budge and Obama and Clinton - Hillary this time - won't act. Iran teases, Obama appeases. Ashraf is besieged, denied heating oil, food, medicine and all outside contact; then attacks ensue, and many die. All the families and Human Rights agencies wait in increasing dismay for the next slaughter in the desert...

Mrs. M. despairs of the situation and not without reason. Her apartment mate, Mrs. K, is also a survivor who has a story to tell, but today a third woman - recently surfaced in France while under a death sentence in Iran - is present. She is Mahin Saremi, recently escaped from the notorious Evin prison in Tehran where she was incarcerated for activism on behalf of a democratic Iran. She is the widow of world-famous political prisoner Ali Saremi, who suffered 24 years of prison under both the Shah and the mullahs, only to be executed suddenly at the age of 63 on the 28th of December 2010. He was a beloved, gentle man, a scholar of Human Rights abuses perpetrated by the government in Tehran in 1988 when 30,000 political prisoners were executed (is this Mousavi's pogrom of 10,000/month?).

Clearly, remembering and caring are offenses punishable by death under Iran's smug theocracy.

Mahin, Ali's wife, is a seasoned veteran prisoner herself. She was tortured and placed in solitary confinement in 1983, 2005 and 2007, only to be arrested once more in January 2011 as she stood outside protesting her husband's sudden execution. With the help of the political underground that thrives throughout Iran, she was smuggled out of the country and kindly consented to be interviewed when she reappeared in Paris and Auvers-sur-Oise, the headquarters of the NCRI, in June 2011. This is her story; her words appear in italics, the interviewer's comments are in regular font in this interview.

"We saw justice in them."

"My husband was imprisoned by the Shah. He was the only breadwinner for our family, yet we were proud that, like all caring Iranians, he took to the street to protest the brutal reign of Shah Pahlavi. In fact, we all protested together like most families. In the early protests, it was almost a festive atmosphere, like a great family picnic or neighborhood gathering, but then came our Bloody Sunday (Black Friday, September 1978?). I can still remember my horror as my two youngest children and Ali came home covered in blood and shuddering. "They're killing us all," Ali told me."

"I was 24 in 1974 when Ali was imprisoned. I had 4 children, ranging from ages 2 to 10, and I was all alone to provide for them as well as use any extra money to secure small benefits for Ali in prison. I had no education, and no profession. I cannot describe how hopeless I felt. Yet, during all these hardships, Ali was my strength and he encouraged me. We were proud of Ali as a family; we felt no shame. We were not angry at God; in fact, it was a time when I felt as though I became closer to God. I doubled the amount of time I fasted and prayed. My prayers were not just for Ali, but for all prisoners everywhere, and the people of Iran, who themselves were prisoners of a terrible government."

"Eventually, I became proficient in dressmaking, earning whatever money I could. As always, Ali encouraged me not to spend money on him or legal proceedings to free him, but to save it all for educating our children. I am proud to say all 4 of my children graduated from university and they did it all on what this woman (she says, with a gesture to her heart) was able to provide for them all by herself."

I asked Mahin whether or not women had experienced the Shah's reign as a time of particular oppression of women.

"No," she said, "we did not join the protests as women, per se, but rather for our country. We are Iranians. We love our country and only wanted to see an end to the continuous violence we had all been experiencing. Women were as eager as anyone for the revolution that came in 1979 but, to our cruel surprise, the mullahs' revolution only took women backwards. We only wanted better lives for our children and our families in a free society; this, however, was a desire too dangerous for the mullahs' perverted version of Islam to bear."

Inevitably, Mahin and Ali's passion for a democratic Iran led them to be convicted as enemies of Islam and the revolution, just as they had been judged enemies of the Shah. This is an irony shared by many current political prisoners in Iran over the past 32 years, even up to today. As a way of fighting back, the Saremi family became supporters of the PMOI, or MeK – the Mujahedin e Kalq – long before the world knew the word "mujahedin" as enemies of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan or perpetrators of terrorism around the world. The professors, scholars, doctors and engineers of Iran, as well as people from every province and profession, proudly name themselves as mujahedin, people struggling fiercely to liberate their country from a revolution gone astray. How ironic that the name of progressive, democratic Muslims has been usurped by the exact opposite meaning.

I asked Mahin about what drew her to the MeK when she and her family had already suffered so

much while protesting against the Shah. "Why the mujahedin?" I asked her. Did they appeal to her as women's liberators or for some other reason? I asked her why she wore a headscarf, knowing that such practices had been pedaled in the West as a sure sign of women's oppression. She smiled as she replied, but also showed some consternation at the questions.

"Headscarf? That is no issue. As a Muslim woman, I want to worship God according to my own tradition, so I choose to wear a head covering. Just like you choose (she gestured to the Christian cross hanging around my neck), I want to practice my tradition as a woman of faith, but no one tells me to do this. This is what I choose."

"We did not come to the MeK as women, looking for salvation for women. We came to them out of our passion for freedom. We came to them as Iranians who love their country. We saw justice in them, the justice the revolution had sought, but then had hijacked. It was in them, and not just in their words. We saw in their deeds, their teachings, their example, their prisoners, all the gifts that the false revolution had withheld from us. The PMOI are the only realistic hope for my people's freedom, I truly believe this in my heart."

At talk of the transition from Shah to Ayatollah, Mrs. M burst into the conversation with a fury of outrage. She had a history to narrate, too, of how cruel the deception had been. She shook with anger as she told us:

"My dear son had been executed by the Shah, and everyone knew of him, and what had happened. Soon after the Revolution, men came to take me to meet Khomeini. "We are giving you a gift tonight," they told me as we went along. "This is because of the loss of your son!" they offered, as though they had a special treat in store for me from the new leader. They took me to a place where I saw two uniformed soldiers of the Shah, handcuffed together, bleeding and battered from beatings. They executed them right there before my eyes! No trial, no proceedings, no appeals! And this they presented to me as a particular delight, as though that was what my son had died for! It was then I could see where the so-called "revolution" was going--it was to be no better than what the Shah had done, and now we know it even became much worse."

Knowing that Mahin had spent long years in Iran's equivalent of the Bastille, Evin prison, in Tehran, I asked her if there were any stories from her days in prison that she wanted to share outside Iran.

"Stories!" she exploded with indignation, "These are not stories; these are our reality! I was at one time with seventy young women, all prisoners, in a ten-foot by ten-foot cell. Each day, some were taken out and tortured, and we could hear the screams and never knew when they would become our screams. One time, trying to break me, the guards took me to see a cellmate lying on the bed of torture, hanging from the ceiling by her legs, hemorrhaging blood down her body so that she drank it as she hung. Eventually, of course, she died."

"But even this only made me more dedicated to the cause of the PMOI. Even after Ali's death, which only happened because he and I went to visit our son - a member of the MeK - residing in Camp Ashraf in Iraq..."

I asked Mahin if she had a message for the women of the world outside Iran, especially after the bloody repression of dissent and protest after the fraudulent elections of 2009, when the hopeful youngsters of the Green Party, along with the 'Angel of Tehran', Neda Agha-Soltani, were shot down in the street before the eyes of the world on social media sites. She did indeed have a message:

"Tell them!", she begged. "tell them they are killing our children! Our sons, our daughters are being run over with tanks in the streets, they are being disappeared for no reason! People must know how we suffer! While Ashraf is at risk and the MeK is on the terrorist list, without cause, this endangers people inside Iran, as well as those in Ashraf City. The Iranian people long to be free and to change their situation. Ashraf is their beacon of hope, their city of freedom! This is all so unfair! People should know: our children are dying and no one will help us."

"In the 2009 elections, we heard many promises to women as a group, which shows how sensitive the issue of women's right is. Our girls who hoped for change began to wear green caps and bandannas, the sign of the Green Reform party (the mullahs' supporters wore red). But after the elections, the soldiers, police and thugs began to beat any girl who was wearing green, just for wearing a simple color that spoke of hope! They would drag them down the street for all to see, until their clothes were torn away, and they were exposed. There was crushing disappointment for all who had hoped that change could take place. There is still hope, of course, but not in reform. The mullahs will never permit it; our young ones know that now."

"What is happening in Ashraf (the siege, deadly attacks, mortar shellings, and threats of extradition) is so unfair, and it wounds the whole of Iran. It is the minions of Tehran who plot and carry out these assaults, taking a city that was built, brick by brick, by Iranians longing for freedom. It is not fair! The world must do something to account for the blood of our young!"

"The world needs to know what is happening inside Iran, and understand the role our Mujahedin play for a whole people's enduring hope and daily resistance. I speak to you now, not as a woman, but as a human being! Freedom is the basis and realization of all human dignity. We must have that first, then all else will follow. Yes, the women in all the neighborhoods of Iran resist, but Ashraf keeps the light of freedom alive for them in the dark that is their daily life."

You must tell them! Please, save Ashraf! Save our children and our hope!"

And we are telling you, in Mahin's words, now.
We hope you can hear us; we hope you will act.

Daughters of Allah: In Their Own Words

(interviews from March 11, 2012, Auvers-sur-Oise)

Grateful thanks to our translator, Nasrin Saifi, who works at the University of California Berkeley, and whose cousin lives in Ashraf.

Fareshteh Dashti, 45 years old

Born in Abadan in SW of Iran (near Iraq)

I started to know the MeK when I was just 11 years old. My family was my parents, 4 sisters and one brother, and my paternal aunt who lived with us. After I was 11, we moved to Tehran. This was 1976-77, under the Shah. My older brother and sister were involved in the MeK in their university environment, and that is how the whole family came to know of them.

My father was an accountant in the cultural ministry, and then in a private firm; my mother was a home maker. Both of them were very open minded – well-educated and open to society. They used to pray and would fast and wear the headscarf during Ramadan, but they did not do so regularly. My sisters, when they went to university and started being with the MeK, they chose to wear the headscarf.

My sister Layla (sp?) Dashti is in Ashraf right now. My second sister, Nasilah, and she usually studied together and went to university. When my brother, Houd got into university, he was just 15 years old. My sister Falibah/Farideh (sp??) got her diploma, but she didn't really finish because of the revolution. All of them were politically active and had to leave the country.

What made you decide to become part of the MeK?

I read a book about the first MeK martyr, Mehti Rezai(?), who was 19. He came from a large family, and almost all of them were executed. He was so strong in defending himself in court, they were afraid of him. Rather than speak out for himself, he spoke out about society and the problems that were happening.

I already had the background in the MeK, and I read forbidden books. A couple of things caught my attention: 1) they were truthful to their belief, not trying to fool you into joining. 2) Their leadership under Massoud Rajavi. They were all as one body, all on one level. No hierarchy. All of them worked together as a group.

I was active with the MeK in student bodies in 1978, and then the Revolution happened. At that age, I chose to be a mujahed. The MeK had different locations during that time. At that time the students didn't have a specific title in the organization. They had a name for all of the students, "militia", "little fighter".

My sisters Layla and Nasilah were active in the MeK in Ahvaz?(sounded like Atwas); and Falibah, Houd and I were active in Tehran. Right after 1980, the MeK had a newspaper that they used to sell and that talked about the group, but Khomeini had already labeled them an enemy even though they didn't do anything. He started this before Velayat e Faqih. The mujahedin believe in true Islam. Khomeini knew this and that was why he wanted them gone. In six months, the MeK supporters' numbers became thousands, and when Khomeini saw that, this was when he began to attack them. Rajavi had classes during that open time, teaching about the universe, philosophy, and other things. Khomeini's people would see them leave the classes and would beat them. This drew the comparison between the MeK Islam and Khomeini's brand of Islam.

After Khomeini came to power and made the chador mandatory, the women had a demonstration, and we went with them and stood with them. We were very surprised with Khomeini. Islam doesn't dictate how you cover yourself.

In 1981, there was a 500,000 person demonstration. It was the most peaceful demonstration that they had had. Before that, I was selling the MeK newspaper and they beat me and put me in prison. After beating and harassing me for a week, they let me go.

One of my cousins, Ramin Dashti, was executed in the 500,000 person demonstration. During the demonstration, I was hit with chains so I could hardly see. As we waited at the clinic, Ramin was killed and didn't come back. The next day, we went to identify Ramin. I wore the chador. There were so many families there looking for their sons and daughters. There were 3 or 4 volumes there of pictures of those who had been killed – they had taken pictures from night to morning of all of the children. The doctor there told us that they had just taken all of the bodies away and buried them. I wondered "how am I going to go home and tell my uncle his son is dead?" From that moment on, his mother's depression began. Reza, Ramin's brother, was a supporter also, and in 1981 the regime's agents killed him.

A week before this, during a peaceful demonstration, my sister Falibah (2 years older), they stabbed her in the back from behind with a machete. It pierced her in the back through to her heart. She had bled so much, and they took her to the hospital. Two other MeK members were doctors and they were able to keep her there in the hospital. She had a suction on her heart to keep her alive.

After this happened, and because of how they began arresting MeK members, we couldn't stay. I was 15 years old. We had to hide in family members' houses in order not to be arrested. Khomeini had already started executing prisoners. This was Nov./Dec. 1981. There were no cell phones or easy access to telephones. We were "underground", from one house to another, and so the connection between us and the MeK was broken because we were underground.

My other sisters had gotten married to MeK members. My brother had gotten a job in Shiraz. He was 21 and had been married about 40 days when they killed him. They also killed his wife Maryam.

At the same time Houd got killed by the regime, Layla and her husband, with help from the family, left Iran and joined the MeK in Kurdistan Iran. Faribah and I were in Tehran and hiding, and we didn't have any place to go but went from house to house of family and friends. We didn't have anyone. At our house, they would sometimes have meetings and the MeK newspapers were there. One of the times, we came home and the regime accidentally found out and arrested us. They arrested Falibah in 1982 but didn't execute her until 1988, among the 30,000 that were executed.

My sister Nasilah and her husband (Hani Azalu?) and one-month old baby were arrested in 1982. She was in prison for 8 years. Her husband was a doctor, and had been a political prisoner even at the Shah's time. Their two children, Hamid and Houd, stayed with my mother. Even with the one-month old baby, they would take my mother to the Evin prison and torture my sister because they wanted to find me and Falibah.

My nephew Houd and my sister (?which one?) went in 1996 to Iraq to see Layla. As soon as they got back, the regime found out and arrested them. They both got 3 years in prison.

Can you speak about how your experience has brought you to remain an active member of the MeK. Many would blame the MeK for all of this that was brought to your family.

I could see for myself what is happening in my society, and I could see that the MeK had given everything. When you know you have such a leadership and know what they can do for people, that's why you go on. When I see that the regime has taken away those rights, the freedom to speak, to think, to be...and then I see these educated, intelligent people who have joined for the same cause to fight for those rights.

We hear a lot from the mullahs that the families of MeK are ashamed that they are doing this, that they are begging them to stop. What would you say back?

I know who my family is. Some of our distant family members, they might have been scared of what we do, because Khomeini might go after them. Recently, I had a conversation with those family, and they said that they were defending us. My mom, who was tortured and pressured so much herself, says that they are ashamed that they cannot help us.

Do you have a message you would like to give to the women of the West?

I believe that all of the women together have to unite and understand the pain of people, and never give up. Like Saba said, 'we are standing until the end'. We who are fighting here in the West and also with you, we can continue.