



# IRAN UPRISING 2022

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# Disinformation

**International Committee in Search of Justice (ISJ)**

**December 2022**

**About ISJ:**

**International Committee In Search of Justice (ISJ)** was initially formed in 2008 as an informal group of EU parliamentarians to seek justice for the Iranian democratic opposition. In 2014 it was registered as a non-profit NGO in Brussels expanding its membership beyond elected parliamentarians to former officials and other dignitaries with an interest to promote human rights, freedom, democracy, peace and stability.



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## Executive Summary

Revolution is afoot in Iran. Protesters have burned the ancestral home of Ruhollah Khomeini, the religious dictatorship's founder. They have chanted "Death to Khamenei", "Death to the oppressor, be it the Shah or the Leader", and "Freedom, Freedom, Freedom", whilst raging about decades of injustices against women, a future robbed from the young generation, egregious human rights violations, and lack of civil, economic, and political liberties for all under this regime.

The uprising that began on September 16 portends hope for Iranians who have long suffered under the heel of the current Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, and his hardcore loyalists and apologists in the ruling establishment. Everyone senses "this time is different." A banner recently hung on a major highway in Tehran read, "We are no longer afraid, we will fight," epitomizing this shift in the balance of power between a desperate regime and an emboldened population.

And as to prove their point, demonstrators have come out into the streets every day and night now for 75 days, to face down a brutal and merciless Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Basij militia and State Security Forces that have been exhorted to use maximum force and violence to put down the uprising. But the regime's enforcers, such as IRGC commander in chief, Hossein Salami, who "ordered" the protesters to stay home a month ago, have admitted to the regime's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) that security forces are exhausted and fraying, and that they have done all they could to turn the tide but to no avail.

As the protests have continued despite brutal suppression, gradually more and more governments, lawmakers, and human rights advocates have been denouncing the regime's brutal crackdown and, at the same time, lauding the audacity and defiance of the Iranian people, reflected in statements of support and speeches in meetings and conferences in Europe, the United States and Canada.

As the regime inches closer to meeting its inevitable fate and it becomes more vital for the Iranian diaspora to focus their attention to call on the international community to take effective measures to support the protesters in Iran, we have witnessed a strange and dubious campaign orchestrated over the past few weeks against the most active Iranian opposition movement over the past forty years, namely the coalition of National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) and People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI/MEK). Among the Iranian diaspora, much like any other community or society, there are different opinions. However, in the midst of the uprising in Iran, with youth and especially women risking their lives, turning differences of opinion into smear campaigns against the organized opposition is counterproductive and dubious. This paper is an attempt to address this vitally important issue, given experience that the Iranian regime has been engaged in massive disinformation campaigns to tarnish the image of the opposition, both within parliaments and among political dignitaries as well as in social media through its cyber army.

These smear campaigns have targeted the NCRI and the MEK because the regime fears them the most.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to address the substance and the sources of these ad hominem attacks, which denigrate the organized opposition's historical and critical role in the decades-long struggle against the regime, and to lay out details and instances of the regime's manipulation and pressure campaigns against honorable Western politicians and dignitaries who have lent their support to the Iranian Resistance and the MEK since a long time ago.

These misrepresented and warped attacks, emanating directly or indirectly from allegations sourced to the Iranian regime, only serve the purpose of muddying the waters for the regime and throwing it a lifeline at a defining moment for the Iranian people. To this end, it is important to keep a sharp focus on this regime's egregious record of abuses and crimes and to support the Iranian people and resistance in their right to abolish it and to institute a democratic republic in their country.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on internal reports from within the regime that the MEK has received, judicial officials of the Iranian regime have stated that upwards of 60% of the nearly 30,000 detainees in the current uprising are affiliated or sympathetic to the MEK and their indictments have been filed on this basis.

## The Uprising

The staying power of the nationwide uprising that began on September 16, 2022, has shaken the foundation of Iran's ruling theocratic dictatorship. The protests were sparked by the murder in custody of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish woman at the hands of the Iranian regime's morality police. The eruption of the nationwide protests is rooted in over 40 years of suppression and the struggle of the Iranian people, during which some 120,000 were executed for their political views, coupled with deteriorating economic conditions and human rights abuses.

Women have been prime victims of the misogynist regime ruling the country, denied of their most rudimentary rights for far too long. Not only have tens of thousands been imprisoned, tortured, and executed, but women in general have been socially and politically subjugated simply because of their gender.

The unique feature of the current uprising is that people from all strata of society and in every part of the country, from north to south and from Baluchistan to Kurdistan and Tehran, are united in their demands to overthrow the regime. The protests, initially led by women and youth, have been bolstered and supported by huge portions of Iranian society in one way or another.

The young generation that is spearheading the uprising was denied knowledge of previous sacrifices for the cause of freedom, including the truth about the massacre of 30,000 political prisoners in 1988 who refused to submit to the regime and remained steadfast in their support for the MEK opposition. But over the past several years, they have learned a new culture of defiance from Resistance Units organized and expanded by the MEK while connecting with the history of the struggle for freedom. At the same time, the regime tried to distort and deny the truth about its crimes from these youth by leveraging pervasive censorship and massive propaganda and disinformation, but in the end failed to bury the truth.

Despite a heavy crackdown, encompassing the killing of at least 660 protesters to date, including more than 60 juveniles, the arrest of at least 30,000 others languishing in horrific circumstances in prisons, and death sentences for several protestors, the clerical regime has failed to extinguish the protests. The unrest, now in its third month, has spread to 277 cities and shows no signs of abating.



## The Reaction

As the uprising in Iran rages, the coalition NCRI and its member organizations, including the MEK, in addition to participating in and directing the uprising inside Iran, has engaged with legislators on an international scale to provide up to date information on the uprising, the human rights toll that the regime's repression has caused, the underlying factors, and the trajectory of events unfolding in the country. The NCRI and MEK have historically been the most organized and persistent presence in national legislatures of Western democracies (in the US, Canada, UK, Australia, and member states of the EU and the European Parliament). They have actively and energetically engaged in valuable dialogue and hearings to raise awareness about the regime's crimes, to stress the necessity for Western action to support the movement for democracy in Iran, and to organize legislative actions to this aim.

Maryam Rajavi, the President-elect of the NCRI, has addressed meetings including with foreign affairs committees in several European countries as well as in the European Parliament and Council of Europe. She has also addressed committees and subcommittees in the US and Canada. NCRI representatives in Europe and the US have regularly been invited to address meetings in national Parliaments, the European Parliament and in the US Congress. For this reason, members of national Parliaments in Europe and the European Parliament have for many years been the target of an orchestrated disinformation campaign to demonize and silence the NCRI and the MEK.

It is natural that the regime, who is the focus of NCRI campaigns, tries to prevent and undermine these actions through various means at its disposal, both directly and indirectly. This is something to which Tehran has committed enormous resources in funding, personnel, planning and has organized various agencies that attend to its public enemy number one daily. Such actions are referenced in the following sections of this document.

A very clear example of Iranian regime meddling in democratic processes to prevent NCRI campaigns was in June 2006, when the Iranian regime threatened the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Javier Solana, that if Maryam Rajavi's visit to the European Parliament to meet with the EPP-ED Group of the parliament went through, it would scuttle negotiations surrounding the nuclear deal at that time.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Stevenson, Struan. *Self-Sacrifice: Life with the Iranian Mojahedin*. Edinburgh: Birlinn Limited, 2015. Paperback. P 46. "At the bureau meeting in June 2006, controversy raged. I made a strong case for inviting Mrs. Rajavi, based the fact that she was leading a democratic opposition movement who could replace tyranny and the threat of nuclear war with respect for human rights, the rights of women, an end to torture and the death penalty and the eradication of nuclear weapons; my initiative was fiercely opposed by Othmar Karas from Austria. Indeed, while I was addressing the meeting, Othmar's mobile phone began to ring, and he rather noisily took the call. The blood seemed to drain from his face. 'That was my Chancellor – Wolfgang Schussel. He has just received a call from Javier Solana [the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs] who is in Tehran trying to negotiate a nuclear pact with the Mullahs. They have heard that we are thinking about inviting Mrs. Rajavi to the European Parliament and have demanded that we do no such thing, otherwise

It may be surprising to uninitiated and foreign observers of the Iranian political scene abroad to see campaigners and groups, seemingly unaffiliated to the regime, criticize campaigning and support for the uprising of the Iranian people by the NCRI or MEK.

Such criticisms recently emerged after a cross-party panel of distinguished Canadian lawmakers gathered in solidarity with the Iranian people's nationwide uprising on November 22, 2022. The Canadian lawmakers came under cyber-attacks on Twitter and other social media platforms for hosting the event with the NCRI that included the participation of Maryam Rajavi, President-elect of the NCRI. The line of attack is basically a rehash of previously debunked regime disinformation, albeit coming from a new voice that chooses to ignore the message and attack the messenger. This choice is not by coincidence if you notice that the messenger is the Iranian regime's public enemy number one and its most steadfast and organized opposition.

Why would someone who claims to oppose the Iranian regime and support the aim of its overthrow for democracy in Iran, willfully rise to attack the legislative campaigns of the NCRI and to question invitations and hearings convened by parliamentarians to hear about the situation in Iran from the Iranian Resistance? What purpose does such an attack serve? Is there political envy and ambition at play? What commonality exists between the so-called criticism and the regime's talking points against the NCRI and MEK?

Obviously, anyone can campaign to convene such dialogues or hearings and to bring information and support the uprising, democracy, and human rights in Iran. But why do some special interests focus on delegitimizing the most ardent opponent of the Iranian regime, which has sacrificed enormously for the cause of freedom in Iran, even if one disagrees with it? It would be prudent to ask who the main beneficiary of such an attack is.

It is a historical fact as discussed earlier that the Iranian Resistance has for over 40 years led one of the most wide-ranging and organized campaigns in Western legislatures to bring the Iranian regime to account for its gross violations of the Iranian people's fundamental rights, including for its denial of political, economic, and civil rights for Iranians. A long list of declarations, joint letters, statements, bills, acts, hearings, papers, and other actions span the four decades since these activities formed.

But as the Iranian regime faces a broadening and escalating revolution in Iran by all accounts and as the MEK Resistance Units in the country spread a culture of defiance and revolution among the youth and women, and as the NCRI and MEK with their supporters abroad up the ante against the regime in various national and international forums, we are faced with two not so disconnected reactions.

On the one hand, the regime engages in complex plots to demonize and discredit the messenger, and on the other hand, other seemingly unaffiliated parties join in attacking the messenger regardless of the message.

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they will pull out of the nuclear talks!' News of our intended invitation to Mrs. Rajavi had clearly leaked, and it had not taken long for the Iranian embassy in Brussels to pick it up and transmit it to Tehran, causing a major flap. Hans-Gert Poettering said that we should adjourn any decision on the invitation until each of us had time to discuss it with our respective political delegations, and if necessary, with our party leaders."

It could be said that during the past two months, as the regime has lost all international standing, and as public opinion has solidly sided with the ongoing uprising, its past direct attempts to demonize the messenger have morphed into its cyber army supporting seemingly unaffiliated parties raising grievances about the organized opposition to the regime. The result is the same though and it is not lost on any observer that any attempts to attack, denigrate, delegitimize, and demonize the organized opposition based on threadbare talking points first used by the regime, serve the regime and should be seen as throwing it a lifeline in its final days.

## The Gambit

Desperate to regain its footing, the regime has engaged in a two-pronged gambit to combat the uprising and the Iranian Resistance movement.

**The first is to engage in a cognitive campaign to distort reality**, disseminate alternative and fake perceptions of facts and history and to impose the dominant and state-sanctioned narrative. The second and obviously essential part of this gambit is a demonization campaign against the main opposition MEK and the NCRI.

The regime has particularly focused on “uprising phobia” by promoting and insinuating that if the regime is overthrown through a mass movement, Iran will turn out to be like Syria or Libya. "Civil war," "segmentation of Iran," and "jeopardization of Iran's territorial integrity" are code words used to both discourage new protests and to legitimize the suppression of ongoing ones. The regime portrays its suppression of protests as protecting Iran's territorial integrity against "foreign plots," in a bit to justify its killing of children and its gross violations of international human rights norms.

Clearly, Iran's history and social development stand in stark contrast to Libya or Syria, where religious and ethnic differences at times dominate political developments. In Iran, the ongoing nationwide protests encompass all class, gender, ethnic, and religious sectors of society. They are wholly united around the slogans of “Death to Khamenei” (overthrow) in almost every protest, and “Death to the oppressor, be it is the Shah or the Leader” in more than 100 protests across the country and in universities (charting a path forward to a democratic republic). It is a unified struggle to fundamentally change Iran by establishing a democratic, pluralist republic based on the separation of religion and state. The regime's propaganda, therefore, simply has no basis in reality. In fact, it is an attempt to contradict and erase the basic realities developing in Iran. One of the slogans chanted in the streets is “from Zahedan to Tehran, I sacrifice my live for Iran,” which speaks for itself.

Iranians suffer from suppression of women and youth, economic corruption and deprivation, and other legitimate grievances often voiced in previous protests as well. However, in this current round of protests, their main and undeterred demand has been the regime's downfall in its entirety because there is a deep-seated understanding that nothing will change so long as this regime remains in power.

**The second part of the regime's strategy** in dealing with the uprising is to undermine the opposition through demonization campaigns aimed at pushing the narrative that no viable organized opposition or democratic alternative exists. In attacking the political alternative for Iran and the MEK, the regime's line is to push an irrational phobia about a seemingly uncertain future worsened by a lack of feasible alternatives.

The regime hones different and sophisticated tactics through psychological operations techniques deployed by its intelligence, propaganda and other agencies that includes recruiting opposition deserters, and deploying various agents under the guise of journalists, experts, and human rights or women's rights activists to push this narrative. The agents pursue an 80/20 policy by criticizing

the regime 80% of the time and attacking the MEK 20% to look credible. Here are just a few examples:

On January 19, 2021, the US Department of Justice arrested<sup>3</sup> a Kaveh Afrasiabi,<sup>4</sup> who for many years, and in violation of the US Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), had been espousing the views and positions of the Iranian regime in various articles, appearances and opinion pieces under the guise of an academic. He also authored articles against the MEK. He is now in prison in the US. According to the US Justice Department, he had received approximately \$265,000 from the official bank account of the Iranian regime's mission in the United Nations over a decade.

On November 4, 2019, Tehran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) used a fake twitter account claiming to represent Alexis Kohler, Secretary-General of the office of French President Emmanuel Macron in Elysée. The tweet said that Kohler "has announced that the People's Mojahedin (PMOI/MEK) will soon be driven out of France." A day later, the Elysée denied this statement, adding that the said Twitter account did not belong to Alexis Kohler.

In July 2017, in an interview with a state-affiliated TV station, former Iran regime's Intelligence Minister Ali Fallahian, boasted<sup>5</sup>: "It is obvious that we don't send an agent to Germany or America and for example say, ok, I am an agent of the intelligence ministry. ... Obviously, he would work under the cover of business or other jobs including reporters. You know, many of our reporters are actually ministry agents."

According to a Federal Research Division, US Library of Congress report, in December 2012<sup>6</sup>: "From 1990–93, [the Iranian regime's Ministry of Intelligence and Security] MOIS recruited former members of Mojahedin-e-Khalq (MEK)—also known as the People's Mujahedin of Iran (PMOI) or MKO— in Europe and used them to launch a disinformation campaign against MEK. The Iranian government and its intelligence apparatus consider MEK the most serious dissident organization with regard to the Revolution."<sup>7</sup>

Another example is Mehrdad Arefani. Sentenced by a Belgian court to a 17-year imprisonment term in February 2021 for his role in the attempted bombing of the NCRI annual gathering in 2018, Arefani started to cooperate with the regime while in prison in Iran. He was later sent to Europe. He claimed to be a poet, a human rights activist and even an atheist to ostensibly distance himself from the regime. He even launched a campaign against Iranians visiting Iran to gain credibility as

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<sup>3</sup> Political Scientist Author Charged With Acting As An Unregistered Agent Of The Iranian Government | OPA | Department of Justice

<sup>4</sup> United States Department of Justice: Political Scientist Author Charged With Acting As An Unregistered Agent Of The Iranian Government, January 19, 2021, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/political-scientist-author-charged-acting-unregistered-agent-iranian-government>

<sup>5</sup><https://twitter.com/Ashrafi4ever/status/1097574573195911168?s=20&t=BdPXZ3sIvHI03LnTYFDFUA>

<sup>6</sup> "Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security: A Profile," A Report Prepared by the Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, under an Interagency Agreement with the Combating Terrorism Technical Support Office's Irregular Warfare Support Program, December 2012.

<https://irp.fas.org/world/iran/mois-loc.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, pp: 1, 27.

an opponent of the regime. He claimed to be a political sympathizer of the MEK and acted as a sleeper cell and an intelligence asset for the regime for nearly 18 years.

In a report to a Belgian tribunal, the Belgian State Security wrote: "The MOIS continues to portray the opposition in a negative light and describes them as terrorists. The MOIS is particularly active in the field of anti-MEK (Mujahedin-e Khalq, Iranian opposition group) propaganda in the European Parliament."

While it cannot be said that every single MEK detractor has direct or indirect links to the Iranian regime's intelligence services, there is significant credible evidence and historical data that prove without a shadow of a doubt that the sources of anti-MEK allegations can be traced back to the MOIS.

## The MEK

Ever since the inception of the religious dictatorship in Iran four decades ago, the MEK have unequivocally and relentlessly campaigned to overthrow the regime and pave the way for a democratic republic, as elaborated in the platform of the NCRI and the Ten-Point-Plan for Future Iran.<sup>8</sup> While many in the Iranian political landscape, unable or unwilling to pay the heavy price of a resolute position, have either succumbed to the regime, espoused illusory reforms or at most called for civil disobedience in the face of a fascist regime with no mercy, it was the MEK, the largest Iranian political organization, that called for "overthrow", to the extent that they became the face of Iran's political alternative to the current regime.

With tens of thousands of young Iranians joining the movement in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution, the MEK exposed the true face of Khomeini and his regime politically. When all vestiges of freedom were snuffed out in June 1981, they set out on a historic resistance that has continued to this day. Paying a heavy price in the lives of tens of thousands of their members and supporters, they exposed the Iranian regime to the people of Iran at every turn and asked the world to condemn and hold it to account while campaigning for the regime's overthrow by the Iranian people themselves.

They exposed the regime's massacres and human rights violations, its warmongering during the Iran-Iraq war even after Iraq had withdrawn to international borders, its egregious use of child soldiers to clear minefields in the war, its serial murders of Iranian intellectuals, its innumerable and lethal plots and terrorist campaigns against dissidents inside Iran and abroad, its dangerous pursuit of nuclear weapons, its spread of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism in the region and the world, its fake reformists and Western-fooling ploys and its fundamental weakness and deep instability.

The current uprising in Iran and the brave young women and men who are adamantly demanding the overthrow of the regime, represent a continuation of the same history of decades of sacrifice for democracy that the MEK has led.

In recent years, the organization and direction of thousands of Resistance Units in all of Iran's 31 provinces and its major cities, has spread the revolutionary spirit that is rocking the regime to its core today.

In his speeches, Khamenei referred to the MEK as the operational drivers of the two uprisings of 2017 and 2019.

To understand the role and influence of the MEK and how it threatens the regime, one need look no further than the huge amount of propaganda that the regime produces and circulates against them inside and outside Iran. The cognitive warfare that the regime launched decades ago in the form of widespread demonization campaigns and psychological warfare aimed at the MEK

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<sup>8</sup> Rajavi, Maryam. "Plan for future Iran in 10 points." Maryam-rajavi. <https://www.maryam-rajavi.com/en/viewpoints/plan-for-future-of-iran/>.

surpasses even the repression, execution, and torture that it has physically directed at them. Printing nearly a thousand book titles, production of hundreds of hours of movies and television series, numerous "exhibitions" in every Iranian city, university and mosque and the propagation of a Westernized version of this disinformation using a large network of "friendly journalists" especially in Western countries, using civic, diplomatic, political, and economic backchannels, are all hallmarks of this campaign.

On June 24, 2022, Kazem Gharibabadi, the International Deputy of the Iranian regime's Judiciary, said in this regard: "There is no meeting with ambassadors of European countries or delegations of European countries in which we do not bring up the issue of the Hypocrites [MEK]."

During the past years, with the efforts of the MEK and their supporters, legislative representatives of the people of the US, Canada, Europe, and Arab countries have repeatedly condemned the crimes committed by the mullahs' regime with an absolute majority and emphasized the right of the Iranian people to resist against the regime.

More than 4,000 members of the parliaments of 41 countries in the world, including the majority in 30 legislative assemblies of different countries such as France, Italy, Belgium, Holland, England, Switzerland, San Marino, Luxembourg, Jordan, Morocco, and Bahrain, among others, as well as the European Parliament and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the mayors of 7,100 cities in France, Italy and Belgium have condemned the ruling regime in Iran and supported the resistance of the Iranian people.

In Canada, Resistance supporters have been active for several decades and many members of Canadian Parliament, political figures and former Canadian officials have participated in MEK and NCRI gatherings and supported the Iranian Resistance.

The MEK and NCRI have organized hundreds of gatherings in different countries and scores of parliamentary meetings, sometimes in houses of parliament directly, over the past decades. Since 2004, huge annual meetings of the Iranian Resistance have been held in Paris (until 2018, before the Covid-19 pandemic) with the participation of tens of thousands of Iranians and hundreds of political and parliamentary figures from different countries of the world. Every year, the regime has tried to preempt these meetings by using diplomatic pressure, terrorist threats, and other tactics. Having failed politically, the regime decided to bomb the 2018 World Summit of the Iranian Resistance in Paris, which would have resulted in a massacre had it not been foiled at the last minute. The failed terrorist plot led to the trial, conviction, and sentencing of an Iranian regime official diplomat, Assadollah Assadi, to 20 years in prison in Belgian courts.

The Iranian Resistance was the first political movement to inform the United Nations and world public opinion of the massacre of 30,000 political prisoners in 1988, and since then, it has made all efforts to bring those responsible, including the highest authorities of the regime, to trial.

This remarkable history and tradition of fighting against the regime, which the MEK have spearheaded and paid a heavy price for, their active presence in the current uprising as a driving force and main guarantor for its continuation and successful culmination, their unique role outside of Iran in exposing the regime's crimes over four decades and their promotion of the value of people's resistance against the regime, has accorded them an unmatched position in the uprising to overthrow this regime.



It is difficult to imagine such a definitive and uncompromising uprising against the entirety of the current regime, without this history and the role played by the MEK. Rather, without this crucial factor in Iran's political scene, the uprising would not have reached its current well-developed stage, would not achieve the desired result, and would not be guaranteed ultimate success.

The establishment of a serious coalition of opposition forces since forty years ago in the form of the NCRI and maintaining it through thick and thin, as well as its readiness to cooperate with all Iranian personalities and forces that adhere to the three basic principles of fighting against this regime (1- Overthrow of this regime in its entirety, 2- Rejection of any dictatorship and establishment of a republic, 3- Separation of religion and the state), provides a solid basis for anyone who truly wants to end the suffering of the Iranian people by overthrowing the ruling regime and establishing a democratic Iran, to respond positively to the invitation to come together and form an alliance for the above goals despite any differences of opinion.

## The Targets

Demonizing the MEK/PMOI and the NCRI, as the regime's main alternative, has been a priority of a collection of regime entities. This includes state TV and radio, the film industry, hundreds of newspapers, weekly and monthly magazines, hundreds of websites in various languages on the internet, numerous state-sanctioned NGOs, loosely affiliated front organizations in countries with a high concentration of the Iranian diaspora and thousands of books, among many others.

In parallel fashion, hundreds of thousands of social media accounts are managed by the regime's cyber army that is active in influencing public opinion by attacking the opposition while criticizing Tehran to appear credible. This provides the cover of not being described as a pro-Iran voice while undermining the opposition.

The Iranian regime also allocates a massive budget to make hundreds of movies against the MEK. From the summer of 2015 to the summer of 2016 alone, the mullahs' propaganda apparatus produced 332 movies, documentaries, and TV series against the MEK, with each TV series consisting of numerous episodes. This trend has continued ever since. On November 26, 2022, state TV aired a ten-minute report and interview describing a new "documentary" with the title "From Tehran to Tirana" produced against the MEK and scheduled to be broadcast soon.

The Ministry of Intelligence (MOIS) also manages dozens of different websites in various languages specifically focused on spreading lies about the MEK.

The purpose of all this disinformation and fake news against the MEK and NCRI is to tarnish the image of the democratic opposition, sow doubt, divert attention from the regime's own egregious human rights violations to its opponents, thus concluding that a viable democratic alternative does not exist. In realpolitik terms, this would provide justification for the appeasement camp in international politics to compromise with the mullahs in power.

Following the NCRI annual online summit in July 2020, attended by hundreds of political dignitaries from around the world, a huge disinformation campaign was carried out on the internet. Several months later, an independent cybersecurity firm, Treadstone 71, issued a report entitled, "Iranian Influence Operations,"<sup>9</sup> revealing that the regime's Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) and Basij cyber teams had led this campaign. Many of those accounts, pretending to be dissidents or regime critics, were in fact operating from Iran and were IRGC fake accounts.

The report further added that those accounts, "most with high followership, portrayed themselves as 'monarchist,' 'reformist,' or 'regime change advocates' on various social media platforms. A significant feature of these accounts is young women's personas disguising themselves while attracting and luring unsuspecting users for messaging expansion and potential collaboration... The IRGC used a core team of proxy accounts, likely Basiji cyber teams, to trigger the messaging

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<sup>9</sup> 2020. "Treadstone 71 Releases Intelligence Advisory on Iranian Influence Operations - The Cyber Shafarat - Treadstone 71." Cybershafarat. December 10, 2020. <https://cybershafarat.com/2020/12/10/treadstone-71-releases-intelligence-advisory-on-iranian-influence-operations/>.

and lead the campaign. They developed accounts with large followership, usually using female personas that present themselves as critics of the government, but more critical of the MEK.”

In Iran, the regime has banned all major social media platforms. While the regime and its operatives claimed to be Iranians opposing the MEK and Mrs. Rajavi, Treadstone 71 underlined: “Nearly 50% of accounts used in the campaign were low-follower, newly created, or dormant accounts, indicating that the campaign likely used bots to propagate the messaging along with zombie accounts.”

On March 29, 2022, Ruhollah Mo’men Nasab, a former head of the Culture Ministry’s Digital Media Center, admitted,<sup>10</sup> “We created new accounts on Twitter, using the persona of other Twitter influencers who were mainly counter-revolutionary activists. Ours just differed in a single character and was quite like the real one. We used the same picture and same name, but everything was fake. Once created, we started our activities. It was a psychological operation and people were in “fire at will” mode. Once one of these accounts tweeted something, others that were supposedly its friends were retweeting the content. Eventually, the real friends of that very influencer ended up reposting the tweets of the fake account.”

There are hundreds of reports and witness accounts by Western politicians and personalities who the regime’s covert agents have approached, sent letters to and made telephone calls under the guise of opposition activists, experts, journalists and ordinary Iranians who have parroted the regime’s narrative about the MEK, trying to convince them that they should not support the MEK. The following are just a few sample cases in the past years:

### **Letter of British MP Steve McCabe to his colleagues in the House of Commons, March 14, 2011:**

*You might be contacted by people purporting to be ordinary Iranians living in the UK and warning you not to support the PMOI. They might also suggest that you should meet Anne Singleton or Masoud Khodabandeh to hear further arguments against supporting the opposition. I’m afraid this is a standard ploy of MOIS (Iran’s Ministry of Intelligence and Security) and the individuals they mention are actually their agents. You might also receive a barrage of emails and phone calls as well as an expensive booklet produced by the Iranian Embassy.*

*I’ve experienced this situation before as have a number of other members who have, over the years, supported the British Parliamentary Committee for Iran Freedom. I’ve found that a firm response usually persuades them that they won’t succeed in intimidating me or inhibiting my right to preform my parliamentary duties.<sup>11</sup>*

### **The late Lord Corbett, UK House of Lords, January 28, 2008:**

*Iran’s democratic coalition opposition, the National Council of Resistance of Iran, and its largest member organisation, the PMOI, have been at the forefront of exposing the regime’s crimes at home, terrorism and nuclear programmes. It is therefore no surprise that the regime has attempted to destroy the Resistance*

<sup>10</sup> [https://twitter.com/iran\\_policy/status/1508774815599153152?s=20&t=L9kLxJgczkL2Ljucy-q5Ow](https://twitter.com/iran_policy/status/1508774815599153152?s=20&t=L9kLxJgczkL2Ljucy-q5Ow)

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.ncr-iran.org/en/news/iran-resistance/demonizing-mek/how-irans-regime-puts-pressure-on-international-supporters-of-the-iranian-resistance/>

*through torture, mass executions, bombings and assassinations. The regime's Ministry of Intelligence concentrates its efforts on an elaborate, sophisticated and well-financed operation to tarnish the image of the Resistance at home and abroad.*

*Whenever an MP or Peer expresses support for the goals of the Resistance, they are bombarded with misinformation about it, either by the Iranian Embassy in London or front organisations and individuals who pose as disaffected former members of the PMOI. Some pose as NGOs, including Nejat Society, Peyvand and Aawa Association.*<sup>12</sup>

### **The late Lord Corbett, UK House of Lords, September 16, 2008:**

*I wrote some time ago about the activities of the Iranian regime's Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) in the United Kingdom and thought you would like to know of the latest instance of attempts at misinformation against the Resistance. Recently, the regime sent agents to the UK under the cover of a group called "Habilian". Its members - who pose as disaffected former members of the PMOI now working within a NGO - have sought to contact MPs during the parliamentary recess to tarnish the image of the Resistance. There are several other groups working as part of the MOIS including the Nejat Society, Peyvand and Aawa Association. The regime also uses numerous websites to spread misinformation against the PMOI...*<sup>13</sup>

### **Lord Alton, Member of the UK House of Lords, witness statement to the Proscribed Organizations Appeal Commission:**

*I am aware, through personal experience and the experience of many former colleagues in Parliament that whenever a Member of Parliament expresses support for the goals of freedom and a secular democracy for Iran, as espoused by the NCRI and PMOI, they are immediately bombarded with misinformation about Iran's main opposition from a variety of sources. Sometimes MPs and Peers are contacted directly by the Iranian Embassy in London, which tries to convince Parliamentarians that they have misunderstood the Iranian regime and been deceived about the true nature of the NCRI and PMOI.*

*On other occasions, disaffected former members of the PMOI who have been recruited by the Iranian regime to spread misinformation against the PMOI approach Parliamentarians. Lord Avebury, who has extensively researched and written about the Iranian regime's misinformation campaigns against the PMOI said about these individuals in his book 'Iran: State of Terror'...*<sup>14</sup>

### **Paulo Casaca, former member of the European Parliament, November 19, 2006:**

*I have come across, as you might have been, with a well-orchestrated propaganda and disinformation campaign by the Iranian regime primarily aimed at tarnishing the image of the main Iranian resistance*

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.ncr-iran.org/en/news/iran-resistance/demonizing-mek/how-irans-regime-puts-pressure-on-international-supporters-of-the-iranian-resistance/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.ncr-iran.org/en/news/iran-resistance/demonizing-mek/how-irans-regime-puts-pressure-on-international-supporters-of-the-iranian-resistance/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.ncr-iran.org/en/news/iran-resistance/demonizing-mek/how-irans-regime-puts-pressure-on-international-supporters-of-the-iranian-resistance/>

*movement, the National Council of Resistance of Iran and its affiliated organizations, such as the People's Mojahedin (PMOI).*

*This campaign inevitably reminds me of what Hitler's propaganda minister, Josef Goebbels, said once, "Tell a lie that is big enough and repeat it often enough and the whole world will believe it."*

*Once my efforts on behalf of the resistance movement became public, I began to receive dozens of dubious letters from unknown individuals who claimed to be opposed to the regime, but also criticized the Mojahedin. It did not work. The next stage was somehow more sophisticated. This time it was not the Iranian regime or unknown individuals, but people who claimed to be former members of the organization, whose aim was, to put it bluntly, justifying the crimes committed by the terrorist regime ruling Iran.<sup>15</sup>*

### **Adam Ereli, former US Ambassador to Bahrain, July 2020:**

*The MEK has done a great deal for the people of Iran and for the world. But perhaps the greatest testimony to your effectiveness is the fact that the Iranian regime hates you so much and will stop at nothing to destroy you. And to me, that says—that speaks volumes. It says that they consider you a threat and, frankly, whatever's bad for the Iranian regime is good for the rest of the world.*

*Now, the MEK and your efforts have been instrumental in exposing this conspiracy of terror by the government of Tehran over many, many years. And you've had, I think, some very important successes in disrupting the Iranian regime's terrorist activities. And that's why, again, not only have they tried to destroy you in Iran, but they've also tried to discredit and demonize you outside of Iran. They have funded information campaigns against you. They have tried to convince journalists, governments, think tanks, that the MEK is an outlaw organization, that it doesn't represent Iranians, that it has no following inside Iran. Well, again, the fact that they're saying this indicates to me that the opposite is true. Otherwise, they wouldn't be spending all this money and effort to present a false narrative.<sup>16</sup>*

### **Ingrid Betancourt, former Senator and presidential candidate of Colombia, July 2020:**

*In the anti-regime protests in January this year (2020), people were chanting, "Down with dictators, be it the Shah or the Supreme Leader." It could seem odd for outsiders to see Iranians bringing back today from the ashes of history the name of the Shah, simultaneously with the name of the leader of the today's dictatorship. Surprisingly, more than a historical parallel, they are referring to an ongoing alliance...*

*The objective alliance between theocrats and monarchists is also visible in another particular issue, in the way they both attack the Iranian democratic forces. Those that are uniting all protestors inside Iran and gathering international support outside its borders, those are for both of them the real enemy, namely the NCRI and especially the MEK, have been their common targets because they can see how people in Iran are recognizing their leadership as a unifying organized force to defeat the regime and open finally the way to democracy. For years, the mullahs' regime has campaigned to portray the MEK as a terrorist organization and it has failed. They all have failed. Every single time when their accusations have been brought to a court*

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.ncr-iran.org/en/news/iran-resistance/demonizing-mek/how-irans-regime-puts-pressure-on-international-supporters-of-the-iranian-resistance/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.ncr-iran.org/en/news/iran-resistance/iran-regimes-incessant-demonizing-of-mek-and-ncri-shows-their-effectiveness-amb-adam-ereli/>

*of justice, an independent judge has made a point of honor, be it the States, in Britain, in Europe, to clean the name of the Iranian resistance and of its leaders from all the dirt the regime tried to pile up against them.*<sup>17</sup>

### **Ingrid Betancourt, July 6, 2019:**

*The mullahs kill physically, but they also kill morally through defamation. We know the people we stand with. These are the people who are fighting with the criminals. Don't get it wrong. You can't change the truth by writing articles.*<sup>18</sup>

### **Ingrid Betancourt, July 29, 2019:**

*First, shame, shame on those who were either fed or paid by the mullahs, by the Ministry of Intelligence of Iran to spread lies about who we are here and who you are here in Ashraf 3 and demonize the MEK*

*And the truth is, that the reason why the regime is spreading those lies, it's because the regime is desperate. We know that. Because they fear the Iranian resistance and they fear you, Maryam. They fear you for what you represent and what you are. You are the unbreakable resistance after 40 years of fighting here we are, stronger than ever. You are the beacon of hope. You are the rose in the desert, as you all Ashrafians are. And you are the voice of change. And you are the phoenix rising from the ashes with the Maryam Rajavi and Massoud, for peace in Iran, in the region, and as a guarantee of peace in the world.*<sup>19</sup>

### **Ambassador Lincoln Bloomfield, former US Assistant Secretary of State for Political and Military Affairs, July 19, 2020:**

*Why do they keep repeating these allegations, these falsehoods? My conclusion is the same, no matter what the regime does the reason is the same. Why are they seeking to discredit the NCRI and the MEK? Why did they rush to defend Bashar Assad's regime in 2011 against the Syrian people? Why did they enter a long negotiation with Europe and the United States and the P5+1 to try to talk about nuclear weapons? To keep the U.S. and Europe from acting against the regime. The reason is always the same, the same reason, to keep a weak, illegitimate regime in power.*<sup>20</sup>

### **Struan Stevenson, former MEP from Scotland, February 1, 2021:**

*When the FBI arrested Kaveh Lotfolah Afrasiabi<sup>21</sup>, a prominent political scientist and self-styled expert on Iran, it should have sent shockwaves through Western media circles.*

*Afrasiabi had spent the past 13 years proclaiming the virtues of the Islamic Republic to U.S. lawmakers and media outlets. He was a skilled and trusted lobbyist, at least until the FBI uncovered the fact that he had been paid more than \$265,000 through Iran's Permanent Mission to the United Nations in New York, in flagrant breach of the Foreign Agents Registration Act. A press release from the U.S. Justice Department set out the charges now faced by Afrasiabi for "conspiring to act as an unregistered agent of the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran."*

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.ncr-iran.org/en/news/iran-resistance/iran-the-alliance-of-the-clerical-regime-and-monarchists-against-the-pro-democracy-movement/>

<sup>18</sup> LIVE COVERAGE: Huge March in Berlin for Regime Change in Iran - NCRI (ncr-iran.org)

<sup>19</sup> Ingrid Betancourt Speech In MEK Free Iran Rally In Albania - Iran FreedomIran Freedom

<sup>20</sup> Lincoln Bloomfield's remarks on Day 2 of the Free Iran Global Summit – July 19, 2020

<sup>21</sup> Iranian Lobbyist's Arrest Should Lead To Broader Efforts To Counter Iran's Covert Influence - NCRI (ncr-iran.org)



*John C. Demers, assistant attorney general for national security, said: "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, who was being paid to spread their propaganda.*

*The revelation that an Iranian agent was embedded in the heart of the U.S. democratic process certainly came as no surprise to representatives of the National Council of Resistance of Iran and the Mojahedin e-Khalq (PMOI/MEK), the main opposition movement to the theocratic fascist regime in Iran. The NCRI and MEK have long been the target of a campaign of misinformation and demonization by Tehran.*

*Attacks on the NCRI and MEK in the United States and EU media usually contain blatantly false allegations that can be traced back directly to the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security. Quite frequently, such attacks can be found to have been conveyed through a familiar handful of pro-Iran lobbyists and supposed academics whose work is all but indistinguishable from Afrasiabi, who faces up to 10 years jail in America.<sup>22</sup>*

### **Amnesty International report, September 4, 2009:**

*Caspian Makan, the fiancé of Neda Agha Soltan, a young woman killed in the recent protests in Iran, has been held in detention since 26 June, after he made a statement linking her murder to the pro-government Basij militia. Currently held in Evin Prison in Tehran, Caspian Makan is reported to have told his family that if he signs a "confession" saying that the People's Mojahedeen Organization of Iran (PMOI), a political body banned in Iran since 1981, killed her, then he may be released. Amnesty International said it fears he may be forced to sign such a "confession" under torture or other ill-treatment, given the pattern of human rights violations in Iran following the election. The organization said that he may be a prisoner of conscience, held for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression.<sup>23</sup>*

### **Canada's Toronto SUN newspaper, July 5, 2010**

*John Thompson, who heads up the Mackenzie Institute, a security minded think-tank, says China isn't alone in trying to gain influence.*

*Thompson, who is often called on by media outlets to offer up analysis, says he was offered \$80,000 by a man tied to Iran's mission in Canada.*

*"They wanted me to publish a piece on the Mujahedin-e khalq," he said. "Iran is trying to get other countries to label it as a terrorist cult." Thompson says he turned down the offer.<sup>24</sup>*

### **Associated Press, June 23, 2021**

*American authorities seized a range of Iran's state-linked news website domains they accused of spreading disinformation, the U.S. Justice Department said Tuesday, a move that appeared to be a far-reaching crackdown on Iranian media amid heightened tensions between the two countries...*

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<sup>22</sup> Iranian arrested by FBI was wolf in sheep's clothing - UPI.com

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/news/neda-gha-soltan-murder-witness-risk-torture-tehran-prison-20090904>

<sup>24</sup> Toronto Sun, July 5, 2020. Available at

<http://web.archive.org/web/20100708150317/https://torontosun.com/news/canada/2010/07/05/14616126.html>

*Last October, the Department of Justice announced the takedown of nearly 100 websites linked to Iran's powerful Revolutionary Guard. The U.S. said the sites, operating under the guise of genuine news outlets, were waging a "global disinformation campaign" to influence U.S. policy and push Iranian propaganda around the world.<sup>25</sup>*

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<sup>25</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/iran-middle-east-03e651ff86918c871d9e1baaa5e30e37>



# APPENDICES

## Appendix A

### Microsoft Security Threat Intelligence Report Excerpts regarding attacks on MEK<sup>26</sup>

Shortly after the destructive cyberattacks against the Albanian government in mid-July, the Microsoft Detection and Response Team (DART) was engaged by the Albanian government to lead an investigation into the attacks.

The messaging, timing, and target selection of the cyberattacks bolstered our confidence that the attackers were acting on behalf of the Iranian government. The messaging and target selection indicate Tehran likely used the attacks as retaliation for cyberattacks Iran perceives were carried out by Israel and the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK), an Iranian dissident group largely based in Albania that seeks to overthrow the Islamic Republic of Iran.

#### Messaging

The attacker's logo is an eagle preying on the symbol of the hacking group 'Predatory Sparrow' inside the Star of David (Figure 4). This signals the attack on Albania was retaliation for Predatory Sparrow's operations against Iran, which Tehran perceives involved Israel. Predatory Sparrow has claimed responsibility for several high-profile and highly sophisticated cyberattacks against Iran state-linked entities since July 2021. This included a cyberattack that disrupted television programming of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) with images saluting MEK leaders in late January. Predatory Sparrow forewarned about the attack hours ahead of time and claimed they supported and paid for it, indicating others were involved. Iranian officials blamed this cyberattack on the MEK and additionally blamed the MEK and Israel for a cyberattack that used the same images and messaging against the Tehran municipality in June.

The message in the ransom image indicates that the MEK, a long-standing adversary of the Iranian regime, was the primary target behind their attack on the Albanian government. The ransom image, like several posts by Homeland Justice, the group overtly pushing messages and leaking data linked to the attack, asked "why should our taxes be spent on terrorists of Durrës." This is a reference to the MEK, who Tehran considers terrorists, who have a large refugee camp in Durrës County in Albania.

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<sup>26</sup> Full report: <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/security/blog/2022/09/08/microsoft-investigates-iranian-attacks-against-the-albanian-government/#:~:text=Microsoft%20assessed%20with%20moderate%20confidence,three%20unique%20clusters%20of%20activity.>

The messaging linked to the attack closely mirrored the messaging used in cyberattacks against Iran, a common tactic of Iranian foreign policy suggesting an intent to signal the attack as a form of retaliation. The level of detail mirrored in the messaging also reduces the likelihood that the attack was a false flag operation by a country other than Iran.

The contact numbers listed in the ransom image (Figure 4), for example, were linked to multiple senior Albanian leaders, mirroring the cyberattacks on Iran's railways and fueling pumps, which included a contact phone number belonging to the Iranian Supreme Leader's Office.

The messages in the information operations also emphasized targeting of corrupt government politicians and their support for terrorists and an interest in not harming the Albanian people (Figure 5). Similarly, the attack on Iranian steel companies claimed to target the steel factories for their connections to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) while avoiding harm to Iranians. Another cyberattack on an Iranian airline in late 2021, which was claimed by Hooshyaran-e Vatan (meaning "Observants of the Fatherland" in Farsi), emphasized Tehran's corruption and misappropriation of money on IRGC activities abroad.

### Timing

The cyberattack on July 15 occurred weeks after a string of cyberattacks on Iran, one week ahead of the MEK-sponsored Free Iran World Summit and aligned with other Iranian policy moves against the MEK, further bolstering the likelihood of Iranian involvement. On July 16, the day after the cyberattack, Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement designating current and former American politicians for supporting the MEK. The Free Iran World Summit, which the Iranian regime actively opposes, was canceled this year following warnings of possible terrorist threats to the Summit on July 21. A few days after the planned Free Iran World Summit, Iranian official press issued an editorial calling for military action against the MEK in Albania. This string of events suggests there may have been a whole-of-government Iranian effort to counter the MEK from Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to intelligence agencies, to official press outlets.

### Target selection

Some of the Albanian organizations targeted in the destructive attack were the equivalent organizations and government agencies in Iran that experienced prior cyberattacks with MEK-related messaging. This suggests the Iranian government chose those targets to signal the cyberattacks as a form of direct and proportional retaliation, a common tactic of the regime.

### Parallel information operations and amplification

Before and after the Homeland Justice messaging campaign was launched, social media persona accounts and a group of real-life Iranian and Albanian nationals known for their pro-Iran, anti-MEK views, promoted the campaign's general talking points and amplified the leaks published by the Homeland Justice accounts online. The parallel promotion of the Homeland Justice campaign and its central themes by these entities in the online space—before and after the cyberattack—suggests a broad-based information operation aimed at amplifying the impact of the attack.

Ahead of the cyberattack, on June 6, Ebrahim Khodabandeh, a disaffected former MEK member posted an open letter addressed to Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama warning of the consequences of escalating tensions with Iran. Invoking "[h]acking of Tehran municipal systems" and "gas stations," Khodabandeh claimed that the MEK was the source of "sabotaging acts against the

interests of the Iranian people [sic]" and argued that these constituted "the hostile work of your government" and has caused "obvious enmity with the Iranian nation [sic]."

Four days later, on June 10, Khodabandeh and the Nejat Society, an anti-MEK NGO that he heads, hosted a group of Albanian nationals in Iran. The group included members of another anti-MEK organization called the Association for the Support of Iranians Living in Albania (ASILA)—Gjergji Thanasi, Dashmir Mersuli, and Vladimir Veis. Given the highly political nature of ASILA's work on issues related to a group that Tehran considers a terrorist organization (the MEK), it is highly possible that this visit was conducted with sanction from the state. Upon their return from Iran, on July 12, Nejat Society said Albanian police raided their offices and detained some ASILA members. While Nejat Society said this raid was a result of "false and baseless accusations," according to local media the raid stemmed from possible connections to Iranian intelligence services.

In the wake of the cyberattack, on July 23, Thanasi and Olsi Jazexhi, another Albanian national who frequently appears on Iran's state-sponsored media outlet PressTV espousing anti-MEK positions, penned a second open letter addressed to then-Albanian President Ilir Meta, also published on Nejat Society's website. This letter echoed Homeland Justice's central claim—namely that Albania's continuing to host the MEK constituted a danger to the Albanian people. Jazexhi and Thanasi called on Meta to convene Albania's National Security Council to "consider whether Albania has entered into a cyber and military conflict with the Islamic Republic of Iran."

In May 2021, at around the same time that Iranian actors began their intrusion into Albanian government victim systems, accounts for two anti-MEK social media personas, which do not appear to correspond to real people, were created on both Facebook and Twitter. The accounts largely post anti-MEK content and engage with the social media accounts of some of the individuals detailed above. These two accounts along with a third, older account, were among the first to promote posts from Homeland Justice accounts on Twitter, and all three dramatically increased the rate of anti-MEK posts after the mid-July 2022 cyberattack became public.

There exists some additional evidence that the role of these personas extended beyond mere social media amplification and into content production. One of the personas which repeatedly posted Homeland Justice content had previously written for the now-defunct IRGC-linked American Herald Tribune and other fringe news sites, often in negative terms about the MEK. A second persona account, meanwhile, may have attempted to contact at least one Albanian newspaper ahead of the hack-and-leak, requesting "cooperation", and the ability to publish with the outlet.

The parallel promotion of the Homeland Justice campaign and its central themes by these individuals and personas online both before and after the cyberattack adds a compelling human dimension to the broader Homeland Justice influence effort. While there were no observed direct relationships between the threat actors responsible for the destructive attack and these messaging actors, their actions raise questions worthy of further examination.

## Appendix B

### Why and How Tehran's Propaganda Machine Puts Focus on MEK Amidst Iran's Revolution

#### Excerpts of in-depth investigative analysis on the NCRI-FAC website<sup>27</sup>:

For more than 50 days, relentless protests have rattled the crisis-driven rule of the clerical regime in Iran. As in all preceding uprisings, this time again, public demands for lesser profound grievances, have again turned into calls for regime change.

The people have shown themselves unwilling to rest until those at the top of the regime are brought down. Toward that end, they have defied a nonstop, brutal crackdown that has left hundreds of protesters dead, thousands wounded and tens of thousands arrested or disappeared. This crackdown has been reinforced, to little effect, by a series of state-organized rallies, dozens of ultimatums by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and law enforcement officials and five public addresses by the regime's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

Khamenei is now faced with an existential dilemma. His regime cannot back down even an inch in the face of the people's demands without further raising their expectations and starting down a path that leads to its own collapse. Many times, Khamenei has made clear that *change in behavior* for his regime leads to *regime change*. On the other hand, there is something that has kept him back thus far from ordering a full-fledged, "fire-at-will" style crackdown like in the 1980s or the November 2019 uprising.

Perhaps it is because the regime's Commander-in-Chief realizes that the latter will radicalize the movement and that his corrupt and shattered security apparatus will not survive the sole outstanding option for the people: an armed struggle.

As publicly stated, the regime's response has consistently involved "identifying the leaders of the riots," "targeted arrests," and propaganda against those the regime deems the masterminds of insecurity. The following report aims to show why and how Tehran's propaganda apparatus primarily targets the Mujahedin-e-Khalq Organization.

#### Insight

The Iranian regime's disinformation campaign against the organized opposition group is nothing new. Were the MEK as "despised" as Tehran and some political pundits in the West claim it to be,

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<sup>27</sup> Full report: <https://www.ncr-iran.org/en/news/iran-resistance/demonizing-mek/why-and-how-tehrans-propaganda-machine-puts-focus-on-mek-amidst-irans-revolution/>

then the extent of the recent media campaign against the MEK would make no sense. But in the context of the escalating rage of the current uprising, that campaign says as much about the opposition as it does about the regime.

Raymond Tanter, a former United States National Security Staff under President Ronald Reagan, conducted thorough research on Iranian state media and disclosed in his book “Appeasing The Ayatollahs And Suppressing Democracy” that in confronting different Iranian opposition groups, Tehran is targeting the Mujahedin-e-Khalq Organization (MEK/ PMOI) many times more than all other opposition groups and individuals combined. Nevertheless, some “Iran experts” in the West argue that “due to the violent record and the malign nature of the MEK, the regime is merely using them as a deterrent,” a boogeyman if you will, to scare off domestic dissent as well as international support. But a more nuanced undertaking, as well as shedding light on the magnitude of the regime’s disinformation activities, can lay this argument to rest and help the political spectator to see beyond the smoke and mirrors.

The due diligence covers news reports, documentary pieces, and TV broadcast programs from official media sources in Iran. The data have been assessed from September 16, the day Mahsa Amini was announced dead after being arrested by the morality police, marking the first day of the uprising. It does not cover any previous practices of the regime’s propaganda apparatus.

A large number of resources (money/time/personnel) allocated, particularly the diverse contexts of narratives, to this topic in its media reveals that the Iranian regime is struggling with something more significant than an imaginary enemy. Instead, the war of narratives is focused on an uphill battle with a real foe, which is gaining traction as the uprising grows more radical and eliminates all of the regime’s deception methods.

### Assessment:

The research has established the following conclusion:

The research indicates that the ruling clerics have developed a delicate and complex deceit system to counterfeit the MEK. Dealing with a multicultural society, the Iranian regime has been using dozens of different and sometimes contradicting narratives to influence the people’s mindset away from the organization.

The word *Mujahedin* is originally a Quranic term for ‘*those who sacrifice their lives for the sake of God and the oppressed*. But the clerical regime officially calls the MEK ‘hypocrites’ to convince the more traditional and religious strata, especially Shiites, that members only faking their faith. Meanwhile, the regime can’t help but claim the MEK are dogmatic, hijab-wearing extremists to mislead the more urban, secular-oriented, or even the non-Muslim communities. The regime has also produced other ethnic-oriented narratives like stories about killing Kurds, Arabs, or even Christian priests.

Even though these lies were uncovered and exposed by former regime officials as part of a campaign against the MEK by the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), this has not prevented state media from repeating and elaborating upon the falsehoods again and again.

The Iranian regime’s vast intelligence community has a primary department to counter the MEK, called the Nafaq Division, which is run by the MOIS. Nafaq or Monafeq is the Quranic expression for hypocrisy, a libel that the regime’s former Supreme Leader Khomeini used to marginalize the organization and forestall its rising popularity in Iran.

As the internet has rendered the regime's censorship futile, more Iranians have come to learn about the roots of their misery, and dissent has been growing by the day. Consequently, the regime's current Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, called for a new initiative, the Jihad of Explanation, as a means to deal with the flow of free information that vividly impacts Iranian society. Brandishing the opposition's revelations as propaganda, Khamenei declared that the *war on narratives* requires ammunition and resources.

The Iranian regime has also officially acknowledged having deployed tens of thousands of fake social media accounts to disguise as dissident groups or individuals while trashing the organized resistance and trying to delegitimize those who truly advocate regime change.

As the MOIS understood that its defamation campaign against the MEK, no matter how smart or intricate, would reveal the significance of the organization's popularity inside the country, it made sure to attach the organized resistance to foreign powers, other dissident groups, or even ISIS.

The facts and accounts displayed below are reflective of how the Iranian regime intends to fight this war of narratives against what it considers its main threat.