

In Ink and Blood

A thesis on the politics of labeling the ideology of the Mujahedin-e Khalq during the pre-revolutionary years in Iran.



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Introduction

“The Secretary of State has decided, consistent with the law, to revoke the designation of the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK) and its aliases as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) under the Immigration and Nationality Act and to delist the MEK as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist under Executive Order 13224.”¹

With these words the government of the United States of America removed the terrorist label from the Mujahidin-e-Khalq, the organization officially known as the Sazeman-e Mujahidin-e Khalq and in English often referred to as the People's Mujahidin Organization of Iran, on September 28 2012 after it imposed the terrorist label on the Mujahedin-e Khalq in 1997. This decision was preceded by the decision of the European Union to delist the Mujahedin-e Khalq on its terrorist list in 2009². Between 1997 and 2009/2012 respectively the Mujahedin-e Khalq was thus officially and legally regarded as a terrorist organization by both the government of the USA and the EU. However, this 'label' of terrorism was not adopted universally. For example in the year leading up to the delisting of the Mujahedin-e Khalq by the government of the USA, the leading American newspaper the *New York Times* not once referred to the Mujahedin-e Khalq as a terrorist group, but described them rather as '*Iranian dissidents*³', '*Iranian opposition group*⁴', '*Iranian cult*⁵' and '*Obscure Iranian Exile Group*⁶'. On the contrary, in the same period the leading Iranian newspaper the *Teheran Times* referred to the Mujahedin-e Khalq as '*anti-Iranian group*⁷', and '*terrorist Group*⁸'.

This variety of labels used to refer to the same concept, namely the Mujahedin-e Khalq, brings up the familiar saying: 'One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter'. This saying is amplifying of the theoretical approach I will take on the Mujahedin-e Khalq in this thesis. According to Michael Bhatia the framework of the politics of naming is based on a simple principle: "To name is to identify an object, remove it from the unknown, and then assign to it a set of characteristics, motives, values and behaviors"⁹. Thus when the *New York Times* refers to

1 Delisting of the Mujahedin-e Khalq, PRN 2012/1558.

2 The Guardian, 26 January 26 2009.

3 New York Times, 21 September 2012.

4 New York Times, 29 February 2012.

5 New York Times, 13 August 2011.

6 New York Times, 26 November 2011.

7 Teheran Times, 24 September 2012.

8 Teheran Times, 25 June 2012.

9 Micheal Bhatia, 'Fighting Words: Naming terrorists, bandits, rebels and other violent actors', *Third World Quarterly* vol.26., no.1 (2005),8.

the Mujahedin-e Khalq as an Iranian opposition group, it not just addresses the organization with this definition, it also defines all aspects of this organization in this way to their public. In the same manner the *Teheran Times* defines all aspects, thus both their motives and values as well their behavior, of the Mujahedin-e Khalq as anti-Iranian by labeling the organization as such.

But this is just the beginning principle of the framework of this theory, which is called the politics of labeling for a reason. Having explained the labeling side, it is time to address the politics side of this theory. As seen by the aforementioned examples labels can be very determinative of the perception of that on which they are applied. According to Julie Peteet labels placed upon groups can “reverberate with, uphold or contest power”¹⁰. Therefore it is a powerful tool that has the interest of many parties in the political sphere. Brian Michael Jenkins argues that “some governments are prone to label as terrorism all violent acts committed by their political opponents”,¹¹ while Gus Martin argues that “terrorists attempt to cast themselves as freedom fighters, soldiers and martyrs”¹². Even though both sides can use the politics of labeling, the powerbases of these sides are usually unequal and those with the greatest powerbase, in most cases the state, can dictate the vocabulary.¹³ According to H. C. Greisman this inequity can lead to an occurrence he coined reification, when people perceive the labels they are given or have taken on as natural instead of created by a man-made process¹⁴. When reification takes place “people become their roles and [...] they cannot escape from the hardened facticity that entraps them”¹⁵.

When it comes to the politics of labeling in the case of the Mujahedin-e Khalq it is important to realize that the internationally recognized organization that is the Mujahedin-e Khalq today, is vastly different from the mostly underground organization in its early years, at least in terms of ideology and their powerbase. Furthermore the Mujahedin-e Khalq has existed for almost fifty years since 1965, making it a topic that in its entirety is too broad for my research due to the limits of this thesis in terms of length. I have therefore chosen to focus my thesis on the Mujahedin-e Khalq in the pre-revolutionary period in Iran, from its establishment in 1965 until 1975. In order to provide some necessary understanding of both the Mujahedin-e Khalq and the context of Iranian politics and society in this time, I will briefly discuss the highlights of the political history of Iran in the twentieth century. The purpose of this thesis is to research the politics of

¹⁰ Julie Peteet, ‘words as interventions: naming in the Palestine- Israel conflict’ *Third World Quarterly* vol. 26, no. 1 (2005), 154.

¹¹ Brian Michael Jenkins, ‘The study of terrorism: definitional problems’, the *Rand paper series*, (1980), 1.

¹² Gus Martin, *Understanding Terrorism: Challenges, Perspectives, and Issues* (Los Angeles 2013), 44.

¹³ Bhatia ‘Fighting Words: Naming terrorists, bandits, rebels and other violent actors’, 9.

¹⁴ H. Greisman, ‘Social meanings of terrorism; reification, violence and social control’, *Crime, Law and Social Change*, vol.1, no.3, (1977), 304.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*,304.

labeling in the case of the Mujahedin-e Khalq during the pre-revolutionary time by using the abovementioned theoretical framework of the politics of labeling. I will research to what degree the ideology of the Mujahedin-e Khalq corresponds either with the politics of labeling used by the Mujahedin. By using this theory from the social sciences on the early formative years of the Mujahedin-e Khalq I intent to give a new perspective on the perception of the Mujahedin-e Khalq in this period and to so contribute on this issue. A number of researchers have written on the Mujahedin-e Khalq, and I have used these books in my thesis on their different areas of expertise.

Ervand Abrahamian's famous groundwork on the Mujahedin-e Khalq is used throughout this thesis. I have used Nikki Keddie and Mary Hegland's works on the interpretation of the role of shiism in the ideology of the revolution, which the Mujahedin-e Khalq used as well. I have used the expertise of both Houchang Chehabi and Maziar Behrooz on the opposition parties in Iran and I have used the work of Ali Rahnama as well as the work of Ziba Mir-Hosseini and Richard Tapper on Ali Shariati. I have used the French work of Kazem Radjavi on the ideology of the Mujahedin-e Khalq. Due to the fact that the Mujahedin-e Khalq transitioned much throughout the years, I have found that most works that focus on their earlier years are older, albeit not dated in my opinion.

A hindrance I encountered in my research is the lack of primary sources I have been able to use. The problem with primary sources on the Mujahedin-e Khalq is that most of these are written in Persian, which I do not understand, and translated sources in this period are scarcely available, since the Mujahedin-e Khalq were an underground movement during these years. For this reason I have been forced draw upon quotations of these primary sources in the secondary literature, mainly on Abrahamian's work.

In the first chapter I will introduce the Mujahedin-e Khalq and its foundations, as well as the context of the Iranian political situation. In the second chapter I will focus on the ideology of the Mujahedin-e Khalq and their inspirations, with an emphasis on the role of the martyrdom. In the third chapter I will research the politics of labeling used by the Mujahedin-e Khalq. By doing so I will research my main question: To what degree does the ideology of the Mujahedin-e Khalq correspond with their use of the politics of labeling? I will answer this question in my conclusion.

Chapter 1 - The foundations of the Mujahedin-e Khalq

The context of the political climate in pre-revolutionary Iran

In order to begin this research on the Mujahedin-e Khalq it is important to understand the context of the political situation in pre-revolutionary Iran. It can be argued that the “modern Iran” started at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when after a period of organized social protest the shah of the long ruling Qajar dynasty was forced by a newly formed constitutional movement to permit the establishment of a parliament and sign a new constitution, the Fundamental Law in 1907.¹⁶ This is known as the constitutional revolution and the constitution drafted at the end of this revolution was effective until after the revolution of 1979 when the Islamic Republic introduced the Sharia¹⁷. After a new shah took office and abolished parliament in a Russian backed coup in 1908, the constitutional movement marched on Teheran to attack the new regime and in 1909 the shah was replaced by his eleven-year-old son Ahmed Shah. The parliament was reestablished and the effective rule of Iran in this period was under the influences of the foreign rulers of Great Britain and Russia, who during World War I invaded the country, further weakening Ahmed Shah's rule.

In another coup in 1921 army commander Reza Khan took power, crowning himself as Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1926¹⁸. Unlike his predecessor, Reza Shah focused on building up a strictly centralized state, based on a strong military, a vast bureaucracy and his family's assets.¹⁹ While under the less centralized rule of Ahmed Shah there was a “lively independent press”²⁰, the constitutional monarchy under Reza Shah was strict and his policies alienated the religious masses, such as his controversial decision to ban the veil for women.²¹ In 1941 Reza Shah was forced to abdicate his rule after the Soviet Union and Great Britain invaded the country during World War II and suspected him of having pro-American sympathies²². He was succeeded by his son Mohammad Reza Shah, who would be the last shah of Iran. In his first years of rule Mohammad Reza Shah accepted the parliament which included a number of opposition groups, most importantly the communist Tudeh party and Mohammad Mosadeq's National Front of Iran.²³

16 Ziba Mir-Hosseini and Richard Tapper, *Islam and Democracy in Iran: Eshkevari and the Quest for reform* (London 2006), 11.

17 Ibidem, 13.

18 Ervand Abrahamian, *Radical Islam: The Iranian Mojehedin* (London 1989), 11.

19 Ibidem, 12.

20 Ziba Mir-Hosseini and Richard Tapper, *Islam and Democracy in Iran*, 13.

21 Nikki R. Keddie, ed. *Religion and politics in Iran: Shiism from Quietism to Revolution*, Westford 1983, 10.

22 Ziba Mir-Hosseini and Richard Tapper, *Islam and Democracy in Iran*, 12.

23 Mir-Hosseini and Richard Tapper, *Islam and Democracy in Iran: Eshkevari and the Quest for reform*, 13.

Mosadeq became prime minister in 1951 and was shortly ousted from this position the following year by the shah, but after mass protests the shah reinstated him and went shortly into exile²⁴. However, in a CIA backed coup Mohammad Reza Shah regained his position and although the parliament was retained, in effect the shah became an autocratic ruler.²⁵ With this new powerbase the shah was able to introduce what he called the 'White revolution', a set of laws on land reforms and the extension of women's voting²⁶. These reforms proved to be unpopular within religious clergy and a number of ayatollahs, amongst which the popular Khomeini, rose up against the shah and mass protests followed²⁷. The shah retaliated by imprisoning many of the members of the opposition parties, forcing the rest of them underground²⁸. It was in this political context that the Mujahedin-e Khalq was founded.

The establishment of the Mujahedin-e Khalq

The establishment of the Mujahedin-e Khalq took place in 1965, but its foundations are found four years earlier in another opposition party, the Liberation Movement of Iran. This movement was founded by Mehdi Bazargan in may 1961 and was active for 2 years before in 1963 the government of the Shah closed down most opposition parties as a result of the unrest following the uprisings in June.²⁹ Because a number of members of the Liberation movement, including most of its leaders, were incarcerated in this period, the party became virtually non-active and its space was taken up by younger members with different views.³⁰ These younger members were frustrated by the defeat of the leadership and blamed them for being naive, unprofessional and too centered around the personalities of their leaders, as well as "lacking ideology and knowledge of armed struggle".³¹ This last point is significant, because the Mujahedin-e Khalq would later state on various occasions that this moment, even though the liberation movement was nearly defeated, was a turning point for them. They interpreted this moment as such because it triggered the realization that armed struggle was necessary in order to win against the regime of the shah.³² At first the Mujahedin-e Khalq was a well structured, yet small group, consisting of a

24 H. Chehabi, *Iranian Politics and Religious Modernism: The Liberation Movement of Iran under the Shah and Khomeini* (London 1990), 10.

25 Ibidem,10.

26 Abrahamian, *Radical Islam: The Iranian Mojehedin*, 20.

27 Ibidem, 20

28 Maziar Behrooz, *Rebels with a cause: The Failure of the left in Iran*,35.

29 Ervand Abrahamian, *Radical Islam: The Iranian Mojehedin* ,83.

30 Ibidem, 85

31 Chehabi, *Iranian Politics and Religious Modernism*:,213.

32 Abrahamian, *Radical Islam: The Iranian Mojehedin*: 86.

core of three former members of the aforementioned Liberation Movement of Iran³³, These were Mohammad Hanifnezhad, Said Mohsen and Ali-Asghar Badi'zadegan who all had studied at Teheran university and had done their military service.³⁴ They formed the core of their organization with trusted friends from university, including Ahmad Reza'i, who would later become one of the most important men in the Mujahedin-e Khan due to being their first martyr³⁵. In this period the Mujahedin-e Khalq was mainly focused on its ideology, having a structure based on a central committee and a adjoining ideological group³⁶ At first this group was still mainly concentrated in Teheran, but from 1968 on the Mujahedin-e Khalq further expanded into different cities with a new structure based on horizontal small cells of mujahedin and they focused more on their publications³⁷.

However, as the Mujahedin-e Khalq grew in numbers, there were also setbacks. The first came in late 1971 when the Mujahedin-e Khalq was destabilized severely by the arrests of 69 members of the organization by the security forces (SAVAK) of the shah, amongst them were several leaders.³⁸ These leaders had kept in contact with the liberation Movement of Iran but due their arrests these ties weakened, although some of the movement's members financially supported the MEK up until the late seventies.³⁹ After the wave of arrests mass trials followed and the remaining Mujahedin-e Khalq had to regroup, but also gained followers due to the publicity surrounding the trials and the arrested members who were in prison remained active.⁴⁰ They became more of a clandestine movement, uniting a broad range of the opposition.⁴¹ Their following was not only found in the higher classes, there was support in the working class as well, mostly in the Yakshirabad neighborhood in Teheran.⁴²

The second setback came in 1975, when the Mujahedin-e Khalq split up into two different Mujahedin parties, a newly Marxist mujahedin, commonly known as the Peykar, and the remaining Muslim mujahedin, continuing to be known as Mujahedin-e Khalq.⁴³ This split is known as 'The Great Schism' and happened after the organization published 'The Manifesto', which

33 Chehabi, *Iranian Politics and Religious Modernism* ,211.

34 Ervand Abrahamian, *Radical Islam: The Iranian Mojehedin*: 87.

35 Chehabi, *Iranian Politics and Religious Modernism*, 212.

36 Abrahamian, *Radical Islam: The Iranian Mojehedin* 126.

37 Ibidem, 127.

38 Behrooz, *Rebels with a cause: The Failure of the left in Iran* 71.

39 Chehabi, *Iranian Politics and Religious Modernism*, 213.

40 Abrahamian, *Radical Islam: The Iranian Mojehedin*: 139.

41 Nikki R. Keddie and Eric Hooglund (ed.), 'The Iranian revolution and the Islamic Republic: Proceedings of a conference', *Middle East Institute*, May 21-22 (1982), 119.

42 Ibidem, 118.

43 Behrooz, *Rebels with a cause: The Failure of the left in Iran*,71.

placed more importance on Marxism than on the Islam.⁴⁴ After this publication the Muslim Mujahidin distanced itself from the Manifesto, but as chapter 3 will illustrate, it had been discredited by this Schism.⁴⁵

The tactics of the Mujahedin-e Khalq

The Mujahedin-e Khalq became infamous for their violent actions against the regime of the Shah. In fact, after the first years of focus on the ideology the Mujahedin-e Khalq had been prepared for armed struggle since 1968, when several members went to Palestine to attend guerilla camps to master the skills of guerilla fighting.⁴⁶ But it was not until 1971 that the Mujahedin-e Khalq actually used violence, in the year that celebrated 2500 years of monarchy in Iran, as a symbolic way to further protest against the shah.⁴⁷ The Mujahedin-e Khalq chose symbolic days for their attacks, such as the anniversaries of the 1972 mass trials in April and May and the anniversary of the 1963 protests.⁴⁸ Other symbolic days on which the Mujahedin-e Khalq attacked were state visits made by US president Richard Nixon, US secretary of State Henry Kissinger and King Hussein of Jordan⁴⁹. During their early years the Mujahedin-e Khalq fought against the police in urban guerilla style battles on the street using firearms, which made up about a quarter of their attacks⁵⁰.

But their biggest strength was their bombings, which made up almost half of their attacks⁵¹. Although the Mujahedin-e Khalq did not claim all of their attacks they are generally believed to have been responsible for them.⁵² Their bombings were directed against a number of targets, with the most attacks on military and government targets⁵³. Symbolic targets included American companies like Pepsi Cola and General Motors, and the embassy of Jordan and the mausoleum of Reza Shah.⁵⁴ A number of these bombings were committed by suicide bombers, or martyrs as the Mujahedin-e Khalq called them, the first of which was Ahmad Reza'i, who performed a suicide attack on February 1st 1972.⁵⁵ The peak of the pre-revolutionary violence of the Mujahedin-e Khalq was between 1973 and 1975⁵⁶. This violence however, also took a heavy

44 Abrahamian, *Radical Islam: The Iranian Mojehedin*, 145.

45 Behrooz, *Rebels with a cause: The Failure of the left in Iran*, 72.

46 Ali Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopian: A political biography of Ali Shari'ati*, (London 1998), 262.

47 Chehabi, *Iranian Politics and Religious Modernism*, 212.

48 Abrahamian, *Radical Islam: The Iranian Mojehedin*, 141.

49 Ibidem, 142.

50 Global Terrorism Database, see appendix figure 4.

51 Global Terrorism Database, see appendix figure 3.

52 Mir-Hosseini and Richard Tapper, *Islam and Democracy in Iran*, 16.

53 Global Terrorism Database, see appendix figure 2.

54 Abrahamian, *Radical Islam: The Iranian Mojehedin*, 140/141.

55 Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopian*, 277.

56 Global Terrorism Database, see appendix figure 1.

toll on the Mujahedin-e Khalq and during these peak years 32 members lost their lives, while several others were imprisoned.⁵⁷

The oppression to the Mujahedin-e Khalq

Due to their armed struggle in the public eye, the Mujahidin-e Khalq received a great amount of attention. According to Cole and Keddie “the mujahedin were seen as the most serious threat to the regime because of their large numbers, good organization, and ability to carry out assassinations”.⁵⁸ This statement is in line with the policy of the shah to arrest members of the Mujahedin-e Khalq or those associated with them on the bases of them being involved in terrorism⁵⁹. Oppressed by the shah, the Mujahedin-e Khalq realized they needed to work together with the other opposition figures, including Khomeini who they were openly supportive of in the pre-revolutionary period.⁶⁰ In the struggle against the regime of the Shah, a number of opposition groups worked together because they struggled for the united goal of ending the Pahlavi monarchy. However, although during these pre-revolutionary years these groups would work together, according to Mir-Hosseini and Tapper their ideas about the future of Iran had always been divided, with some parties favoring an Islamic republic, while others preferred a socialist state or a popular democracy.⁶¹ The ideological position of the Mujahedin-e Khalq in this political arena will be discussed in the next chapter.

57 Abrahamian, *Radical Islam: The Iranian Mojehedin*: 142

58 Cole, Juan R.I. and Nikki R. Keddie (ed.), *Shiism and Social Protest*, (New York 1986), 24.

59 Rahnama, *An Islamic Utopian*,277.

60 Nikki R. Keddie and Eric Hooglund (ed.), ‘The Iranian revolution and the Islamic Republic,108.

61 Mir-Hosseini and Tapper 2006: 15

Chapter 2 - The ideology of the Mujahedin-e Khalq

The three pillars of the ideology of the Mujahedin-e Khalq

In the previous chapter I touched briefly on the process of the Mujahedin-e Khalq forming its ideology in the founding years. As I mentioned, the Mujahedin-e Khalq had a designated Ideological team established for this purpose. For years this team had studied works on other revolutions, guerilla warfare, Islam and the history of Iran, especially the revolution of 1905.⁶² Another point that I brought up was the determination for violence from the start of the organization, one of the reasons why the founding members of the Mujahedin-e Khalq split up from the Liberation Movement of Iran. This believe in armed struggle can be seen as the first pillar of the ideology of the Mujahedin-e Khalq. In the pamphlet 'Armed struggle is a historical necessity' they explained their vision by stating that they had "realized that one cannot fight tanks and artillery with bare hands" and thus their answer to the tanks and artillery had been "Armed Struggle"⁶³.

The second pillar of the ideology of the Mujahedin-e Khalq is a controversial issue, namely the combination of Marxist principles combined with Shi'ite Islam. Due to the aforementioned works the ideological team had studied and the influence of western ideas the Mujahedin-e khalq 'borrowed' elements of Marxism for their own ideology. They believed that "true Islam was compatible with the theories of social evolution, historical determinism and the class struggle".⁶⁴ The Mujahedin-e Khalq used a scientific approach to the Quran and found a meaning different from the traditional interpretation. To them the Quran and other scriptures "are not static and dogmatic commands, but rather guides and inspiration for dynamic change and revolutionary action."⁶⁵ By using this approach they argued that Marxists elements were part of the true meaning of Islam, because Allah's creation had started a process that the Mujahedin-e Khalq referred to as 'historical determinism', and followed the pattern of Marxist theory on class struggles⁶⁶. To the Mujahedin-e Khalq this interpretation of the Quran was the true meaning of the Islam and "to separate the class struggle from Islam is to betray Islam"⁶⁷.

The third and final pillar of the ideology of the Mujahedin-e Khalq is closely linked to the first and second pillars, because it combines the belief in violence and the historical determination theory. In their most famous work 'Hussein's movement', named after Imam Hussein, the

⁶² Abrahamian, *Radical Islam: The Iranian Mojehedin*,88.

⁶³ Ibidem, 86.

⁶⁴ Ibidem, 92.

⁶⁵ Ibidem, 95.

⁶⁶ Ibidem, 93.

⁶⁷ Ibidem, 93.

Mujahedin-e Khalq presented their revolutionary interpretation of the true nature of Islam as the combination of the self determination and class struggle as part of the Islam with their own determination to violence as a solution. According to Abrahamian they believed that all humans “had a sacred duty to fight oppression; that self-sacrifice and martyrdom were necessary to obtain justice and eventual liberation.”⁶⁸ In this work they reinterpreted classical meanings of a number of terms used in the Quran to give them a more revolutionary meaning⁶⁹, including the word *Mujahedin*, which will be discussed in the third chapter. Another term the Mujahedin-e Khalq revived was the term *shahid*, which is used in the Quran to refer to the ancient holy martyrs, but would become a vital part of the ideology of the Mujahedin-e Khalq.⁷⁰

The concept of Martyrdom and Imam Hussein

To understand the importance of martyrdom not only in the ideology of the Mujahedin-e Khalq, but also in Shi’ite Islam in general, an introduction to the story of the prophet Muhammad and his succeeding is necessary. After the prophet died in 632, it was unclear who would be his rightful successor to lead the community of the Muslim people, the *Ummah*. The Sunni Muslims believe that the caliphs are his rightful heirs, while the Shi’ite Muslims believe that Imam Ali, Muhammad’s brother-in-law, and his decedents are those deserving this title.⁷¹ The Shi’ite followers believe their interpretation of Islam is less worldly than their Sunni counterparts, but the caliphs were in the possession of power while the followers of Ali were exiled.⁷² In 680 Imam Ali’s son imam Hussein led a rebellion against the powerful caliph Yazid, who defeated him in a brutal fight, but in the eyes of the Shi’ite Muslims imam Hussein died a martyr, fighting for a just cause until the end.⁷³ His sister Zainab was the witness of these events and took on the crucial role of spreading Imam Hussein’s deeds.⁷⁴ Michael Axworthy sums up this view as “the victory of the oppressors over the righteous, of the strong over the weak, of the corrupt over the pious”.⁷⁵

The Mujahedin-e Khalq identified with Imam Hussein, but also brought a new dimension to this concept of martyrdom that had long been an important part of the Iranian identity and had been “encouraged by the authorities as a means of uniting the populace, submerging internal

⁶⁸ Ibidem, 94.

⁶⁹ Ibidem, 96.

⁷⁰ Ibidem, 96.

⁷¹ Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A history of the Islamic Republic* (New York 2013), 18.

⁷² Ibidem, 18.

⁷³ Ibidem, 19.

⁷⁴ Mary Hegland, ‘Two Images of Husain: Accommodation and Revolution in an Iranian Village’ in N. Keddie (ed.) *Religion and politics in Iran: Shi’ism from Quietism to Revolution* (Westford 1983), 229.

⁷⁵ Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran*, 19.

differences and rechanneling otherwise potentially destabilizing political demands.”⁷⁶ It is interesting how a concept that has been intertwined for centuries in a society can still be as revolutionary as this concept was. In my opinion this process is best explained by Mary Hegland. According to Hegland there are two interpretations of the concept of martyrdom and the role of imam Hussein in this process. Firstly there is the concept of what Hegland describes as ‘Imam Hussein as the Intercessor.’⁷⁷ This concept of Imam Hussein has been present in Iran and other Shi’ite communities for an extensive period and it is based on the notion that through his heroic death imam Hussein was granted a special place between Allah and the people and in this position he is capable of judgment and forgiving sins⁷⁸. In order to please imam Hussein, and thus Allah, Shi’ites would cry and beg to him in hopes that their wishes would be granted, which can be seen as taking on a passive role, rather than the self-determination that is part of revolutionary Islam and in line with the ideology of the Mujahedin-e Khalq.⁷⁹

The second concept of Imam Hussein is more in line with the revolutionary interpretation of Islam. This concept Hegland describes as ‘Imam Hussein as the example’.⁸⁰ This concept draws heavier on the personal traits of Imam Hussein and the reasons behind his martyrdom, which brings believers closer to Imam Hussein, making him more relatable to them.⁸¹ He is still above the believers, but in contrast to the first concept his martyrdom is relatable because it is reflected upon the existence of his followers. This gives them a stronger participating position, which is in accordance with the revolutionary nature of Islam.⁸² The events of 680 were compared to the current fate the believers face, and like Imam Hussein, they became aware of their power to rise and their responsibility to defend their faith.⁸³ This concept of Imam Hussein’s martyrdom “transformed the Shi’a masses’ perception of their religion, and, for many, caused a revival of their Islamic heritage and identity.”⁸⁴ Members of the Mujahedin-e Khalq also made use of this concept, as is evident in the fact that during the 1972 mass trials they compared their task to that of Imam Hussein”.⁸⁵ According to Hegland however, the spread of this second concept in favor of the first concept should also be accredited to another person, because it was “Popularized in large part by the teachings of Dr. Ali Shariati, the ideology of self-reliance and resistance to unjust authority,

⁷⁶ Randall D. Law, *Terrorism: A History* (Cambridge 2009).289.

⁷⁷ Hegland, ‘Two Images of Husain: Accommodation and Revolution in an Iranian Village’ 220.

⁷⁸ Ibidem, 221.

⁷⁹ Ibidem, 222.

⁸⁰ Ibidem, 225.

⁸¹ Ibidem, 226.

⁸² Ibidem, 227.

⁸³ Ibidem, 227.

⁸⁴ Ibidem, 235.

⁸⁵ Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopian* ,277.

gained credence”⁸⁶.

The influence of Dr. Ali Shariati

Dr. Ali Shariati was born in Iran in 1933 and studied at the university of Teheran and the Sorbonne university of Paris, where he came in contact with Western influences that he brought back with him to Iran where he began to teach at Masshad University.⁸⁷ When the tension in Iran became greater Shariati moved to Teheran in 1967, where the opposition movements were mostly centered.⁸⁸ He began lecturing at the Husseiniyeh Ershad, which was a stronghold of various opposition movements, but was arrested in 1972.⁸⁹ In 1975 Shariati was released from prison, under great pressure from the French government, but soon after he died of natural causes in 1977. In the years between 1965 and 1972 Shariati’s lectures soon became popular and even though there is no evidence that Shariati personally knew members of the Mujahedin-e Khalq prior to 1971, but it is possible that members attended Shariati's lectures, since they did frequent Husseiniyeh Ershad.⁹⁰

It is also assumed that Shariati’s lectures, in which he referred to the Mujahedin-e Khalq on different occasions, led to the recruitment of new members for the Mujahedin-e Khalq⁹¹. According to Rahnema “Shariati's ideology guided, stirred and mobilized the intellectuals, while the Mujahidin produced intellectual warriors.”⁹² While Shariati personally never assumed the role of martyr, he was very open about his appreciation of those who did. A month after the martyr style suicide of Mujahedin-e Khalq member Ahmad Reza’i, Shariati held a speech entitled ‘Martyrdom’, in which he was careful not to name Reza, but he did restate that “those who do not have the courage to choose ‘martyrdom’, will in turn be chosen by death”.⁹³ According to Rahnema ‘Martyrdom’ symbolizes the radicalization of Shariati⁹⁴ and his conviction that “Those martyred are doing the work of Hussein”.⁹⁵

⁸⁶ Hegland, ‘Two Images of Husain: Accommodation and Revolution in an Iranian Village’,225.

⁸⁷ Kamran Matin, ‘The Alchemist of Revolution: Ali Shariati’s political Thought in international context’, *Spectrum Journal of Global Studies*, vol. 6, no.1 (2014), 9.

⁸⁸ Ibidem,9.

⁸⁹ Ibidem,9.

⁹⁰ Chehabi 1990: 213.

⁹¹ Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopian* ,320.

⁹² Ibidem, 310.

⁹³ Ibidem, 279.

⁹⁴ Ibidem, 307.

⁹⁵ Hegland, ‘Two Images of Husain: Accommodation and Revolution in an Iranian Village’,229.

The criticism on the ideology of the Mujahedin-e Khalq

Although the ideology of the Mujahedin-e Khalq appealed to the masses, there were also those who opposed their ideology. According to Nikki Keddie a problem of the ideology of the Mujahedin-e Khalq is that they give a “forced interpretations of Islam”, because they reinterpreted the traditional understanding of the pillars of Shi’ism, as is illustrated in the first part of this chapter.⁹⁶ Another point of criticism is that the ideology of the Mujahedin-e Khalq is almost entirely focused on their understanding of the religious values, while most ‘normal Iranians’ were more concerned with the socioeconomic issues.⁹⁷ While the Mujahedin-e Khalq in their first three years had worked on their ideology and had an ideological team to do so, they had not analyzed in depth the problems that had caused the situation Iran faced.⁹⁸ According to Gus Martin this mentality is exemplary of freedom fighters or armed oppositions who “have no concrete plan for what kind of society will be built upon the rubble of the old one – their goal is simply to destroy an inherently evil system, to them anything is better than the existing order”.⁹⁹ This formed another criticism on the ideology of the Mujahedin-e Khalq. While violence was used during the revolution, in the pre-revolutionary times the amount of violence the Mujahedin-e Khalq used as early as 1972, deterred other parties to publically support them. Ayatollah Khomeini for example, who was in exile in the city of Najaf in Iraq, exchanged ideas with the Mujahedin-e Khalq on several occasions, but was reserved about both their interpretation of Islam and its determination of use of violence.¹⁰⁰ How both the ideology of the Mujahedin-e Khalq and this criticism are depicted in the labels used on the Mujahedin-e Khalq will be debated in the next chapter.

96 Keddie and Hooglund ‘The Iranian revolution and the Islamic Republic’,96.

97 Ibidem, 97.

98 Behrooz, *Rebels with a cause: The Failure of the left in Iran*,72.

99 Martin, ‘The Alchemist of Revolution’, 43.

100 Behrooz, *Rebels with a cause: The Failure of the left in Iran*,70.

Chapter 3 - The politics of naming the Mujahedin-e Khalq

The theoretical framework of the politics of labeling

The basics of the principles of the theoretical framework are explained in the introduction of this thesis, however of course in practice, this process is more difficult and it can be argued that a label used to describe something can never be correct, because it can never “encompass all aspects and facets of that identified” by the label.¹⁰¹ For example, the ideology of the Mujahedin-e Khalq is comprised of a number of elements, as is illustrated in chapter 2. To label the Mujahedin-e Khalq as either ‘Marxist’ or ‘violent’, because these elements are found within its ideology, is to disregard of all other elements of its ideology in order to place emphasis on a specific element that will be seen as amplifying of the whole ideology, while in fact it is only a component. Furthermore these labels that are placed on ideology are more than just this, it comes with “a surrounding set of associations, natures, motives and intents”¹⁰². For example the label of terrorist in this time is often associated with Muslims and anti-Western motives, and while an organization that is labeled as terrorist may not identify with these association, the label still is associated with these. Peteet summarized this by stating that “words are extraordinarily important for the way they embody ideological significance and circulate moral attributes”.¹⁰³

Even though the politics of labeling have their shortcomings and difficulties, the use of this theory can be helpful in order to understand the complicated nature of movements, such as the Mujahedin-e Khalq, underneath the labels that are imposed on it. According to Bhatia “the relationship between the actual nature of a movement and the name applied, particularly in terms of the attempt to identify the essence or true nature of a movement¹⁰⁴” is what the theory of the politics of labeling is analyzing. With this understanding of the research possibilities, it is time to add another aspect to this framework, namely the role of power. Not all parties are equal in terms of their (political) power and legitimacy, especially in this case because the Mujahedin-e Khalq was an underground movement, while the shah was an autocratic ruler. The theory of the policy of labeling can be applied to this inequity¹⁰⁵. However, there is a difference between the use of the policy of labeling by a powerful actor and the use of it by a less strong actor.

It can be stated that “those who name the world have the privilege of highlighting their own experiences—and thereby identify what they consider important”¹⁰⁶. Thus the powerful actors

¹⁰¹ Bhatia ‘Fighting Words: Naming terrorists, bandits, rebels and other violent actors’,9.

¹⁰² Ibidem, 9.

¹⁰³ Peteet, ‘words as interventions: naming in the Palestine- Israel conflict’,154.

¹⁰⁴ Bhatia ‘Fighting Words: Naming terrorists, bandits, rebels and other violent actors’,8.

¹⁰⁵ Greisman, ‘Social meanings of terrorism; reification, violence and social control’,303.

¹⁰⁶ Ibidem, 9.

have the legitimacy to name. However, this does not mean that others do not have any legitimacy to name. Although it was thought that “groups that have a marginal status are denied the vocabulary to define (and express) their own experiences”¹⁰⁷, even these groups have found ways to do so. According to Bhatia these groups have found ways ‘to be heard’, even if their stage is smaller than that of their more powerful counterparts.¹⁰⁸ The politics of labeling are especially important to these organizations because they “fulfill two primary functions: to recruit supporters by propagating a discourse of belonging and opposition; and to justify action”.¹⁰⁹ The Mujahedin-e Khalq also found their ‘voice’ to broadcast on several stages and used this to appeal to the mass, as will be demonstrated in the next part of this chapter.

The politics of self-labeling of the Mujahedin-e Khalq

Perhaps the most telling label used by the Mujahedin-e Khalq is the name of the organization in itself. It does not only tell how they wished to be perceived, but also how they combined their aforementioned ideology with their both their self-image and their public image. Mujahedin-e Khalq is a Persian name, but in contrast to parties such as the Liberation Movement of Iran, it is a concept that can not be translated well into other cultures because it uses something fundamentally non-Western: the concept of the mujahedin. *Mujahedin* literally means : “Those who engage in Jihad”, or “those who struggle”¹¹⁰. Because of this link to Islam, *Mujahedin* is traditionally a term used by those who are 'Holy warriors', as a means of verifying themselves by their religion.¹¹¹ There had also been an earlier *Mujahedin* movement during the constitutional revolution and by using a similar name the Mujahedin-e Khalq could link itself to their struggle.¹¹² The Mujahedin-e Khalq, by using their scientific approach to the Quran had reinterpreted the label of mujahedin into a label more appropriate for their own struggle, that of revolutionary hero.¹¹³ The word *Khalq* was also politicized by the organization. In Persian *Mardom* and *Khalq* both mean ‘the people’, but during the pre-revolutionary period the term *Khalq*, which the Mujahedin-e Khalq used in their works to refer to the *Ummah*, was used specifically to address the Mujahedin-e Khalq.¹¹⁴

The label *Jihad* traditionally has a twofold concept of both the great *jihad* and the lesser

¹⁰⁷ Bhatia ‘Fighting Words: Naming terrorists, bandits, rebels and other violent actors’ 9

¹⁰⁸ Ibidem, 11.

¹⁰⁹ Ibidem, 12.

¹¹⁰ Law, *Terrorism: A History*, 295.

¹¹¹ Ibidem, 295.

¹¹² Abrahamian, *Radical Islam: The Iranian Mojehedin*, 129.

¹¹³ Ibidem, 96.

¹¹⁴ Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopian*, 326.

jihad, respectively the struggle within a person striving for the right and the struggle to protect the right thing (the Islam) against perceived aggressors.¹¹⁵ In this classical interpretation of this concept those who engage in *jihad*, the *mujahedin*, will be martyrs if they die in the process.¹¹⁶ The Mujahedin-e Khalq have used the label *jihad* to describe the liberation struggle they had to fight against the regime of the shah.¹¹⁷ By doing so they linked their struggle for liberation of the regime of the shah to the holy struggle that every Muslim understands. The role of violence and the policy of labeling of this concept will be discussed in the next part of this chapter.

The politics of labeling and the emphasis on the struggle

In his theory on the politics of labeling James Der Derian is focused on the role of violent actors and came up with a concept of what he refers to as ‘mytho terrorism’, short for mythological terrorism¹¹⁸. As the name suggest this type of terrorism is performed to appeal to a higher good¹¹⁹. In the case of the Mujahedin-e Khalq violence was targeted against the regime of the Shah, which the organization deemed as unjust and oppressive, as was illustrated in the previous chapter. Furthermore the concept of mytho terrorism constructs “an imagined collectivity, looking backwards to a supposed Golden Age, or predicting a future paradise”¹²⁰. If this principle of looking backwards to the Golden Age is applied to the pre-revolutionary time, the Shah and his regime can be interpreted as representing a concept labeled *Jahiliyyah*, originally a term used for the pre-Islamic era in the Middle East, but used by a number of scholars, such as Ibn Taymiyya, Rashid Rida and Sayyid Qutb to describe the acquisition of western values, or the lack of traditional Islamic values in Islamic Society.¹²¹ By using this concept of the policy of labeling, it can be interpreted that the fall of the regime of the Shah, which was what the Mujahedin-e Khalq fought for, could symbolize the end of the pre-Islamic era. Another example of the application of this concept to the situation in pre-revolutionary Iran is the labeling of the Shah as Yazid, the caliph who wrongfully ruled over the *ummah*, while Imam Ali, who the Mujahedin-e Khalq related to, fought him¹²². By using these labels and placing emphasis on the past, the Mujahedin-e Khalq could relate to the masses, who were familiar with the events of 680.

The next principle of the concept of mytho terrorism is that it “undermines a political order

115 Martin, *Understanding Terrorism*,163.

116 Ibidem, 163.

117 Abrahamian, *Radical Islam: The Iranian Mojehedin* ,96.

118 James Der Derian, ‘Imaging terror: logos, pathos and ethos’, *Third World Quarterly* vol.26, no.1 (2005), 31

119 Ibidem 31

120 Ibidem 31

121 Law, *Terrorism: A History* 283.

122 Abrahamian, *Radical Islam: The Iranian Mojehedin* ,23.

through asymmetrical violence but is unable to generate public legitimacy for any earthly alternatives. It relies on a perpetual struggle, a jihad¹²³. This principle is in accordance to the criticism on the Mujahedin-e Khalq was discussed in chapter two. As was discussed earlier in this chapter, through the use of the politics of labeling an organization can not only create a sense of belonging versus opposition, but it could also use it to justify action.¹²⁴ The Mujahedin-e Khalq viewed the regime of the shah as “corrupt, exploitative and dictatorial”¹²⁵ and warranted their violence through this use of labeling. Greisman argues that this construction of labeling can change the way that the "spectators of terrorist acts are encouraged to identify with perpetrators or victims as the situation warrants. This identification with the perpetrator effectively removes the terrorist meaning”¹²⁶ Thus through the use of labeling the Mujahedin-e Khalq could portray themselves as fighting a righteous fight in which terroristic violence would be viewed as justified and even as part of a necessary struggle by the public. Martin argues that this kind of labeling is used often by those using terrorism, because they “attempt to cast themselves as freedom fighters, soldiers and martyrs. If successful, their image will be that of a vanguard movement representing the just aspirations of oppressed people.”¹²⁷

The politics of labeling and the suppression of aspects

In chapter 2 it was illustrated that the ideology of the Mujahedin-e Khalq was built upon three main pillars. The first pillar, the determination to violence, has been discussed in the first part of this chapter. The second pillar of the ideology of the Mujahedin-e Khalq is the merge of Marxists values and Islamic values. To the Mujahedin-e Khalq their interpretation of the Islam was the true meaning of Islam, but the use of Marxism was controversial, especially after the great Schism. Although there was a distinguished difference between the Peykar and the Mujahedin-e Khalq after the split both in ideology and tactics, the fact that the Peykar had originated from the same base meant that its ideology and especially the emphasis on Marxism rather than Islam as a solution, were also harmful to the Mujahedin-e Khalq, whose ideology of 'pure Islam' was compromised, at least to the public eye.¹²⁸ The Shah made use of the politics of labeling after the Schism to discredit the Mujahedin-e Khalq by referring to them as “Islamic Marxist”, which they

¹²³ Der Derian, 'Imaging terror: logos, pathos and ethos', 31.

¹²⁴ Bhatia 'Fighting Words: Naming terrorists, bandits, rebels and other violent actors' ,12.

¹²⁵ Abrahamian, *Radical Islam: The Iranian Mojehedin* ,133.

¹²⁶ Greisman, 'Social meanings of terrorism; reification, violence and social control' 303.

¹²⁷ Martin, *Understanding Terrorism* ,44.

¹²⁸ Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopian*, 340.

were not.¹²⁹ Another label the Shah placed on the Mujahedin-e Khalq was that of “Marxist conspiracy.”¹³⁰ It is important to understand that the Marxist elements the Mujahedin-e Khalq had used in their ideology were used to support traditional Islamic values, as they stated: “we say ‘no’ to Marxist philosophy, especially to atheism. But we say ‘yes’ to Marxist social thought.”¹³¹

The Mujahedin-e Khalq never labeled themselves as Marxists, or as Abrahamian summarizes it: “The Mujahidin has in fact never once used the terms socialist, communist, Marxist or Eshteraki to describe itself”.¹³² The main reason that the Mujahedin-e Khalq refrained from using this label is the same reason that the Shah did use this label on the Mujahedin-e Khalq, namely that it had the potential to alienate potential new followers.¹³³ According to Abrahamian Marxism in Iran was perceived as a Western concept that was immoral¹³⁴.

¹²⁹ Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopian*, 340.

¹³⁰ Abrahamian, *Radical Islam: The Iranian Mojehedin*, 2.

¹³¹ *Ibidem*, 92.

¹³² *Ibidem*, 2.

¹³³ *Ibidem*, 101.

¹³⁴ *Ibidem*, 101.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have researched the Mujahedin-e Khalq during the pre-revolutionary period in Iran. As proposed in the introduction to this thesis I have build up this thesis by using a certain sequence of chapters and subchapters. In the first chapter I have looked into the foundations of the Mujahedin-e Khalq, by researching the political context, the process of the establishment of the mujahedin-e Khalq, the actions that the Mujahedin-e Khalq implemented and the oppression to the Mujahedin-e Khalq. In the second chapter I have looked into the ideology of the Mujahedin-e Khalq. In order to do so I researched the three main ideological pillars of the Mujahedin-e Khalq, I conceptualized the principle of martyrdom and the symbolic significance of Imam Hussein to the Mujahedin-e Khalq, I studied the influence of Dr. Ali Shariati on the Mujahedin-e Khalq and finally I researched the criticism the Mujahedin-e Khalq received on their ideology. In the third chapter I looked into to the politics of labeling and applied these to the Mujahedin-e Khalq. I did so by first introducing the theory of the politics of labeling and then researching the practice of self-labeling of the Mujahedin-e Khalq. After I had done so I researched the reasons why the mujahedin-e Khalq places emphasis on one aspect of their ideology, namely the struggle. And finally I researched why the Mujahedin-e Khalq suppresses one aspect of their ideology, namely the Marxist influence. I have done so to now answer my main question: To what degree does the ideology of the Mujahedin-e Khalq correspond with their use of the politics of labeling?

In the first chapter of this thesis I came to the conclusion that the political context of pre-revolutionary Iran has been of great significance to the establishment of the Mujahedin-e Khalq. The Mujahedin-e Khalq was established on the principle that armed struggle was necessary in order to fight the regime of the shah. The events of 1963 were especially important to the establishment of the Mujahedin-e Khalq, even as the mass trials of 1972. In the second chapter of this thesis I came to the conclusion that the ideology of the Mujahedin-e Khalq is build upon three pillars, namely the use of violence, the Marxist-Islamic interpretation of Islam and the third pillars which combines these first two pillars: the determination to fight for justice. This final pillar is symbolized by the modern interpretation of Martyrdom, which is modeled after the story of Imam Hussein. In this interpretation of martyrdom the believer has the duty to fight for what is right and will be rewarded for this. Martyrdom is a vital component of the ideology of the Mujahedin-e Khalq. The ideology of the Mujahedin-e Khalq is based on the aforementioned pillars, but criticism on this ideology is that it is too forced and complicates the understanding of Islam, because it requires a analytical view on the texts. Finally in the third chapter of this thesis I came to the

conclusion that when the theory of the politics of labeling is applied to the ideology of the Mujahedin-e Khalq the ideology of the Mujahedin-e Khalq corresponds to the labels that are used on most issues. However, the Mujahedin-e Khalq uses the politics of labeling to place significance on one pillar of their ideology over the other, namely the third pillar. While on the other hand the Mujahedin-e Khalq suppresses the second pillar of their ideology. By researching this, I will now answer the main question: To what degree does the ideology of the Mujahedin-e Khalq correspond with their use of the politics of labeling?

The ideology corresponds with their use of the politics of labeling to an extent. While the labeling used by the Mujahedin-e Khalq does apply to their ideology, on the part of their ideology which appeals most to their potential followers significance is placed, while on the part of their ideology which appeals least to their potential followers, namely the merge of Marxism with Islam, is suppressed in their policy of labeling. It is not surprising that the Mujahedin-e Khalq would use their policy of labeling in such a way of course, but further research on this issue could help explain into greater detail the reasons and considerations behind this decision.

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Appendix

Figure 1: Incidents of violence by the Mujahedin-e Khalq over time

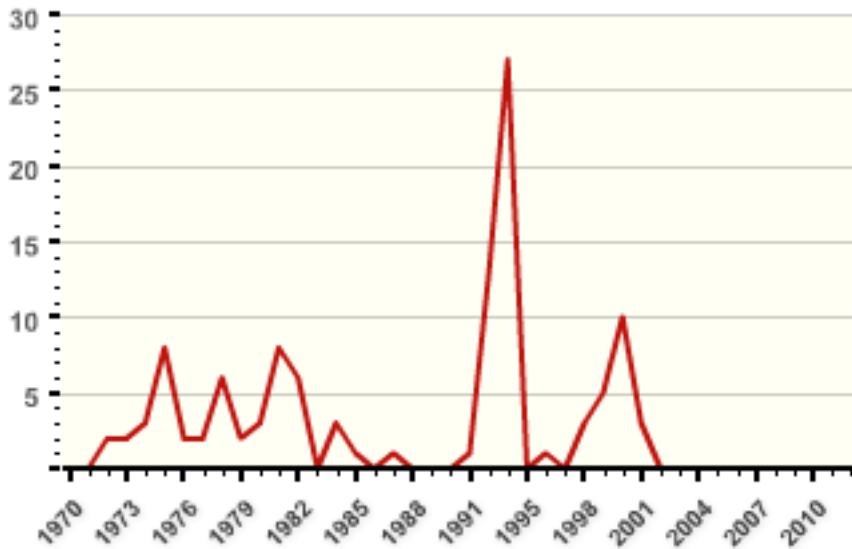


Figure 2: Type of target attacked by the Mujahedin-e Khalq

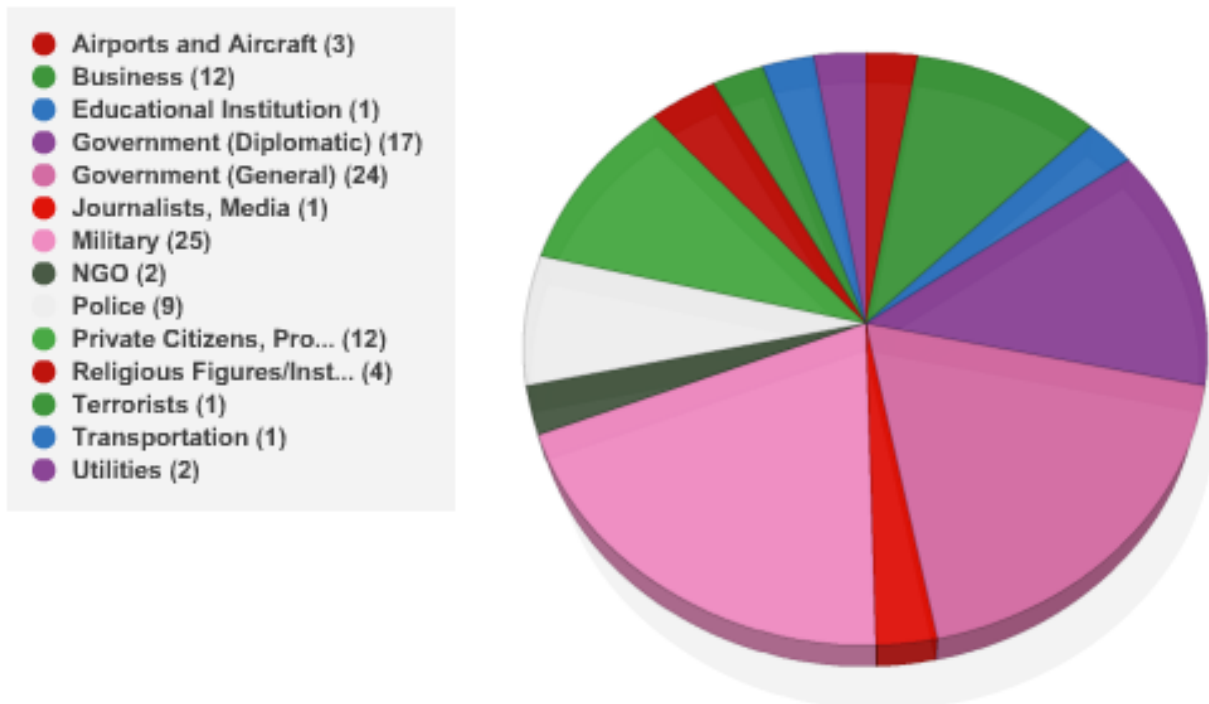


Figure 3: Type of attack performed by the Mujahedin-e Khalq

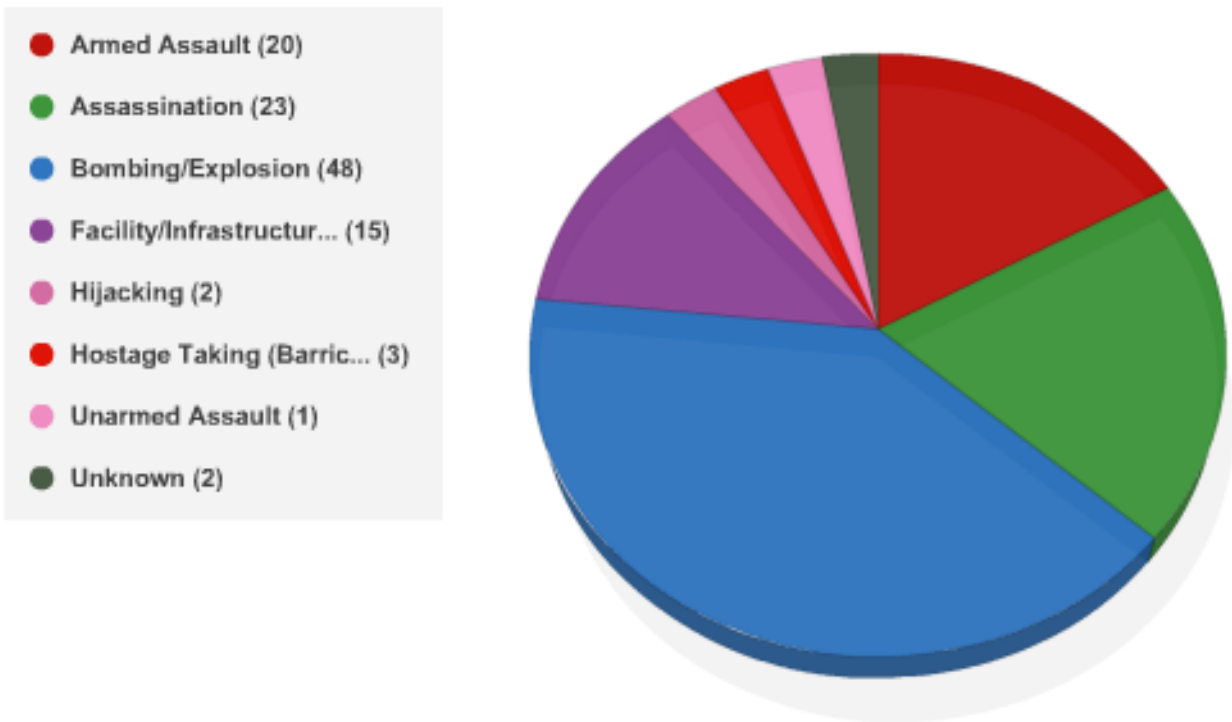


Figure 4: Type of weapon used by the Mujahedin-e Khalq

