

Ideology And the Politics of Convenience: Why Has an Exiled Iranian Islamic Socialist Cult Become Popular Among Western Elites?

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This article by Tirza Shorr for the [Jerusalem Center for Security and Foreign Affairs](#) is worth reading

Summary

With Iran's theocratic regime at the tipping point—economic collapse, mass protests, communication shutdowns, and murderous repression—global discourse now focuses on day-after scenarios and potential successors to the mullahs. Though most Iranians, both within Iran and in the Iranian diaspora, appear to support exiled Iranian Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi, anti-monarchists have persisted in their campaigns



Maryam Rajavi. (Apa Iceurope/Flickr/CC BY 2.0)

against him online and off. In Los Angeles on January 11, 2026, for example, a man drove a moving truck with anti-monarchy stickers into a demonstrating crowd. Some observers associated the stickers' slogans with the Islamo-socialist Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK, or, sometimes, MKO) faction. MEK has

for decades persisted in its sophisticated advocacy efforts to promote itself as a viable democratic alternative should the Iranian regime fall. Within the scope of those influence operations, MEK has aggressively courted and financially

compensated prominent American and European political figures for their support.

What makes MEK's Western connections especially strange is that MEK is not a conventional Iranian opposition group. MEK, based in a guarded compound in Albania, has become a bizarre cult of Islamic socialism, an apparently odd synthesis of Marxist radicalism with Shiite Twelver Islam. Islamic socialism should not be confused with the political marriage of convenience called the Red-Green Alliance, between Marxists and Islamists, which has resulted in everything from the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran to radical "Free Palestine" protests on American campuses in the aftermath of Hamas's October 7, 2023, massacre. Islamic socialism is a political hybrid that was born in the Russian communist revolutionary era and whose Leninist influence could be found in the Islamism of Said Qutb, the ideologue of the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood, or in the novel Shiite works of Iranian intellectual Ali Shariati, the ideologue of the Iranian Islamic revolution.

The intersection of socialism and Islamism is not just theoretical. Figures such as former Women's March head and Muslim activist Linda Sarsour, the leader of anti-Israel campus and street agitators Nerdeen Kiswani, or the proudly Muslim and Democratic Socialist Mayor of New York, Zohran Mamdani, all demonstrate the reach and "praxis" – practice – of this theoretical hybrid. For the people of Iran, though, Islamic socialism may turn out to be a nightmare scenario, not just a political experiment by New York hipsters. Why has the MEK received support from Westerners, and are they really a threat to Iran?

Conclusion

If and when the Iranian regime comes to an end, Western policymakers must consider not only the past's coalitional, operational collaborations with MEK, but more importantly,

must assess the likely consequences of supporting them in the future. Khomeini's Islamic revolution proves that when leftism allies with Islamism, the latter tends to predominate, resulting in jihadism and internal repression in the net total.

Rubin writes that he "once asked a senior American official about why he [accepted honoraria](#) from the Mujahedin-e-Khalq, or the MKO, given the group's [cultlike nature](#) and its lack of popularity inside [Iran](#). His response: Even if the group lied about its support, they said the right things about democracy and regime change, and so he saw no harm in collecting the cash. The regime's fall, he said, would be a moment of truth: Either the MKO would prove itself right, or its political Ponzi scheme would collapse."

In the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the Marxist armed struggle and militant nationalism of the PLO, PFLP, and DFLP expressed themselves in terrorism. Eventually, though, terrorism became the tool of the Islamist Hamas, becoming the most popular movement in Gaza, Judea, and Samaria. Like MEK, Hamas learned to use the language of "justice" in its 2017 charter appendix, calibrated its language for international consumption, justifying terrorism as "defensive jihad" after October 7. These Muslim Brotherhood tactics have been perfected by Qatar and are distributed by its media empire.

These movements, along with Iran's current theological and authoritarian regime, all demonstrate that values and ideology, not diplomatic presentation or propaganda, is the best predictor of behavior. The MEK's fusion of Islamic socialism may prove to be a toxic hybrid of two ideological movements that have produced catastrophic, repressive authoritarian outcomes everywhere implemented. One dissident interviewed by the Intercept commented that when viewing American politicians depict the MEK as "freedom fighters," he was reminded of how the West unintentionally and indirectly enabled the creation of al Qaeda and ISIS. Another dissident

said his lesson to the West regarding MEK would be: “The enemy of my enemy is not my friend – he is my worst nightmare.” If the West is to be involved in Iran’s future transition, it must act as a responsible custodian rather than an enabler of yet another ideologically-powered disaster.

Read it all [here](#).

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