Ideological Proximity and Armed Group Competition: The Case of the Iranian Mojahedin

Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar

How does ideology affect relations between armed groups within a state? While existing research has underscored how ideological proximity can foster alliances among armed groups, this article posits that ideological proximity can also breed hostility among them. When organizations share foundational narratives, they gain access to each other's ideational resources, which can, in turn, pose challenges to these groups' cohesion and leadership status. These challenges manifest in the form of questioning the sincerity and authenticity of each other's beliefs, thereby threatening the group's survival, sometimes overshadowing the risks posed by their shared ideologically distant adversaries. Focusing on Iran's Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization (MKO), this article highlights its evolution as one of the first armed groups to transform Islam into a potent ideology before transitioning to Marxism and later reverting to Islamism. It examines how the organization's ideological proximity with other Islamist and Marxist actors led to conflict and outbidding violence instead of cooperation. Drawing upon a trove of the MKO's secret documents, this article reveals how a significant portion of the rhetoric and actions of armed groups is directed at outperforming their ideologically similar rivals, rather than confronting ideologically distant adversaries.

Conflict scholars remain divided over the role of ideology in political violence. Some social scientists reject or simply ignore ideology as a predictor of rebel behavior (Fearon and Laitin 2003; Kalyvas 2006). Ideological shifts abound, unconnected to violent groups' decisions, and serve as post hoc justifications for strategic choices (Christia 2012). Such findings are, however, at odds with an expanding body of knowledge that shows how ideological norms and institutions define organizational structures (Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood 2014); regulate patterns and levels of violence and repression (Thaler 2012; Scharpf 2018; Henne and Klocek 2019); shape (counter) insurgency strategy and threat perception (Staniland 2015); predict who defects (Oppenheim et al. 2015), carries out suicide attacks (Bloom 2007), or denounces violence (Goodwin 2007); and determine with whom armed groups form alliances (Gade, Hafez, and Gabbay 2019b; Balcells, Chen, and Pischedda 2022; Blair et al. 2022).

This article examines how ideology affects relations between armed political actors within a state.[1] While previous research has highlighted how ideological proximity can foster cooperation among armed groups, I posit that ideological similarity can also breed inter-rebel conflict. This conflict ranges from low-intensity rivalry to high-intensity infighting, culminating in rhetorical and physical outbidding competition for market share. New organizations, vulnerable due to their "liability of newness" (Stinchcombe 1965), are particularly driven to outcompete ideologically similar groups to compensate for their lower legitimacy. When organizations share foundational narratives, they gain access to each other's ideational and material resources. This access, in turn, can pose challenges to these groups' respective cohesion and leadership status. These challenges often manifest in the form of questioning the sincerity and authenticity of each other's beliefs, thereby presenting an immediate threat to the group's survival, sometimes overshadowing the risks posed by their shared ideologically distant adversaries. Consequently, a significant portion of the rhetoric and actions of rising groups is oriented towards outperforming their ideologically similar rivals, rather than confronting ideologically distant adversaries.

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To understand the relations between ideology and conflict, I use the understudied yet rich case of Iran's Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization (MKO),[2] one of the first militant groups that transformed Islam into an ideological force in the 1960s. I trace its formation as an Islamist group, subsequent conversion to Marxism, and return to Islamism between 1965 and 1981, and explore how these ideational transformations shaped its relations with other actors within Iran. Drawing upon a treasure trove of the MKO's secret documents, audio tapes of its underground ideological debates, and other recently released pamphlets and publications by the group as well as its rivals, this article reveals how ideological proximity with other actors brought the MKO into fierce competition with them. During its initial Islamist phase, the MKO collaborated with armed Marxist groups against the state, yet simultaneously competed with both quietist orthodox and militant Islamist clergy. However, once the organization embraced Marxist-Leninism in 1975, its relations with Marxist groups became antagonistic. Despite public calls for unity, it engaged in competition with other Marxist organizations to become the only vanguard of armed struggle, monopolizing ideational and material resources. Similarly, the MKO's reversion to Islamism in 1979 escalated tensions with the clergy and threatened its monopoly over the interpretation of Islam, as the two were competing to capture and control the state during the revolutionary phase. This rivalry ultimately culminated in an armed conflict, while the Marxist groups, by contrast, faced relatively less hostility from the Islamist clergy. In each phase, intra-ideological competition emerged as a more immediate threat to armed groups than inter-ideological antagonisms, driving them to engage in rhetorical and physical outbidding actions to assert ideological sincerity and authenticity.

Understanding the linkage between ideological proximity and conflict can offer theoretical and policy implications for decision-makers responding to violent groups. Ignoring intra-ideological rivalries can lead to misreading violent actors' ideological proclamations as either irrelevant to their behavior or as a determinant of it. Policy responses often suffer from overreactions, inadvertently reinforcing the rhetoric of groups that primarily seek to outbid fellow rebels rather than confront shared adversaries. Examining threats from competing actors, especially those with similar ideologies, sheds light on the various, often hidden, audiences to whom these ideological messages are directed at a given time. This inductive study aims to uncover the mechanisms through which ideological proximity can result in conflict, while also laying the groundwork for future research to explore the conditions under which it fosters competition or cooperation.

Ideological Proximity and Conflict

Ideology is a set of abstract ideas that includes "an enunciation of the grievances or challenges that the group confronts, the identification of objectives on behalf of that group (political change—or defense against its threat), and a (perhaps vaguely defined) program of action" (Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood 2014, 215).[3] Ideology can manifest itself as a set of rigid and nuanced doctrines, rituals, or everyday social practices among individuals and groups (Revkin and Wood 2021; Hassner 2016; Parkinson 2021; Schubiger and Zelina 2017; Tilly 2003). It functions through doctrines, beliefs, emotions, institutions, and socialization. It increases the efficiency of an organization's leadership to achieve consensus on critical matters, strengthens principal-agent ties, and reduces collective action and commitment problems (Walter 2017).

Ideational signals are particularly critical for actors in repressive and low-information environments (Blaydes 2018). Ideas can generate focal points around which rebels, allies, and sympathizers coordinate their actions, consequently reducing uncertainty and helping actors navigate through terra incognita. Ideological affinities not only guide individual and collective decision-making but also may influence the formation and durability of alliances among groups. Some scholars have argued that ideological proximity is epiphenomenal to the relations among competing groups (Christia 2012; Seymour 2014). Material interests drive group behavior, while ideology and other "immutable perceived cleavages"(Christia 2012, 25) serve as a post hoc justification since they "do have psychological and emotional import for the rank and file —hence the reason elites constantly invoke them" (Christia 2012, 7). However, recently others have posited that actors with similar ideological outlooks are more likely to cooperate with each other than with those who hold opposing worldviews (Gade et al. 2019a; Staniland 2021; Balcells, Chen, and Pischedda 2022; Blair et al. 2022). These scholars maintain that ideological proximity yields militant cooperation since these groups share similar values, preferences, and ideal orders (Gade et al. 2019a). These shared factors delineate in-group and out-group dynamics, thereby enhancing the likelihood of alliances. Blair et al. (2022) demonstrate that the presence of common ideological authorities, enforcement networks, and mutual confidence among co-ideologues increases the probability and durability of cooperation, particularly among religious groups. Conversely, "irreconcilable ideological divides" engender uncertainty and distrust among competing groups, threatening their survival (Hafez 2020, 605). Consequently, "groups that are seen as ideologically opposed will be likely to find themselves locked in total warfare" (Staniland 2021, 12). Interestingly, both camps see religion and identity as fixed, but they arrive at opposite conclusions. Christia argues that since ideology and

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identity "stay relatively fixed," they cannot independently explain the constant alliance changes among warring parties (Christia 2012, 8). Hence, they are epiphenomenal to alliance formation, which is driven by the need to balance power among violent groups. Gade et al. refer to the immutability of ideology in the short term too, only to reject the endogeneity argument: "This [endogeneity] objection assumes that militant groups arise as ideological blank slates, contrary to the fact that the founders of such groups often have strong ideological orientations from the outset" (2019b, 331-332). Despite their differences, both sides view ideological agenda as distinct from strategic calculation. For one, normative commitment to ideational cleavages is an afterthought, if not irrelevant, to strategic interests and alliance formation. For the other, it is the driving force behind, and constitutive of, interests. However, political actors often ally with ideological adversaries against those who share similar ideational templates. Just as states assess internal vulnerabilities to other states and their ideologies (Haas 2022), armed groups evaluate whether their rivals' identities and ideologies might internally weaken them. If they do, these groups may resort to violent actions, often justifying their behavior by declaring their rivals not as coreligionists but as heretics (Hafez 2020). However, I argue that such statements, often echoed by scholars and presented as dispositional arguments, invert the logic. Armed groups with shared ideological constituencies tend to aspire to monopolize leadership and resources, thereby portraying each other as ideologically deviant, distant, or dogmatic. Heresy, in this context, is in the eyes of the beholder and thus endogenous to political competition (Huang 2020). Regardless of the labels these actors publicly affix to one another, they often share similar ideological foundations under banners such as Marxism, nationalism, or Islam. These ideologies should not be understood in isolation, but as a product of interactions within a broader space of armed groups (Bakke, Cunningham, and Seymour 2012). They are continuously negotiated and reshaped through social interactions and must therefore be examined in the context of relational processes (Tilly 2003, 2005).

Ideational factors can function both as a unifying force that binds groups together and as a potential source of division that drives them apart. Pischedda (2018, 2021) observes that co-ethnic groups are particularly prone to infighting as they seek to inherit their rivals' social networks, recruits, and material support. But can the same logic apply to co-ideologues? Comparing co-ideologues with co-ethnics, Balcells, Chen, and Pischedda (2022) argue that groups with similar ideological constituencies are more likely to form deep alliances. They contend that because ideological identities are generally less visible and less sticky compared to ethnic identities, there are limited prospects for capturing the social resource base of a vanquished competitor, thus reducing the incentives for infighting among co-ideologues. Farrell (2020) demonstrates that transnational groups sharing a similar ideology frequently engage in outbidding to compete for market share. I argue that ideological proximity among groups within the same territory, can also intensify competition for resources. As the next section will show, this proximity can lead to outbidding to exhibit greater ideological sincerity and authenticity compared to their brethren.

Sincerity and Authenticity

Co-ideologues possess the means to challenge one another through two avenues: questioning sincerity and questioning authenticity. Sincerity, in this context, pertains to the genuine belief and unwavering commitment of individuals or groups to a particular ideology or cause. It implies that those engaged in the conflict genuinely hold the beliefs they proclaim, and their actions consistently align with these professed convictions. In the realm of violent conflict, what matters is how external observers perceive the sincerity of the statements, actions, and motivations of those involved, irrespective of whether these actors are genuinely sincere (Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood 2014, 222) or not (Thaler 2022) in their beliefs and commitments. Authenticity, on the other hand, deals with the truthfulness of an actor's representation of its ideology. It places significant emphasis on how external observers assess whether the actor's statements and actions are in harmony with the established tenets and principles of the given ideology. In essence, authenticity scrutinizes whether the actor's expressions of ideology faithfully adhere to the canonical teachings and beliefs associated with that ideology. It is important to distinguish ideological authenticity from ideological credibility. While ideological credibility refers to demonstrating the effectiveness of an ideational framework as a fighting tool, ideological authenticity concerns the "correctness" of an ideological interpretation, rather than the ideology itself. Ideologically distant groups, such as Marxists and Islamists, often challenge each other's ideological credibility as a whole, whereas ideologically similar groups engage in a more focused and intense competition over the authenticity of their respective interpretations of their shared ideology.

Co-ideologues, by virtue of their shared knowledge and authority, are uniquely positioned to cast doubt on the sincere commitment of their counterparts, often highlighting instances of hypocrisy within rival organizations. Additionally, they question each other's interpretations of their shared ideology, branding opposing groups as heretical. These challenges can have profound consequences, undermining a group's ability to coordinate effectively with its members (Davenport 2015; della Porta 2013) and jeopardizing its private benefits such as cohesion, resources, influence, power, and leadership (Bakke, Cunningham, and Seymour 2012; Olzak 2022; Krause 2013). As a result, ideologies can assume a disruptive role

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within competing organizations that share analogous ideational foundations, acting as gateways that grant rivals access to each other's inner workings. This dynamic can be likened to a signal-jamming effect, inducing confusion within and undermining the resolve and coordination among members of rival organizations. A competing discourse from Group A has the potential to discredit the ideological sincerity and authenticity of Group B, consequently undermining its intended effectiveness. This disruption can extend to various aspects, including impeding the flow of new recruits, disrupting financial channels, and eroding members' discipline and dedication. Disillusioned members may become more inclined to align with new rivals who are perceived as more ideologically sincere and authentic. The ability of a group to expose its rival's hypocrisy and heresy can render the latter vulnerable to dissolution.

Endorsement and Performance Outbidding

To safeguard their reputation and protect themselves against accusations of insincerity and inauthenticity, armed groups rely on endorsement and performance. Endorsement refers to the approval of a group's sincerity and authenticity by relevant authorities. Social psychologists have long stressed the importance of source credibility for the persuasion process (Hovland and Weiss 1951). Simply adopting an ideological position does not automatically generate popular support; a recipient is unlikely to embrace a cause unless the provider is perceived as possessing authority, expertise, and sincerity. Through their social networks with ideological authorities, armed groups compete for validation of their genuine commitment to the ideological cause as well as their adherence to the "correct" reading of that ideology. They present their ideological interpretations and political objectives, seeking statements and proclamations that can demonstrate endorsement of their sincerity and authenticity. Alternatively, these groups may use coercion to silence those who could denounce them as heretical or hypocritical.

It is not surprising, therefore, that one of the initial actions of emerging religious armed groups often involves targeting senior clerical opponents. For instance, Nigeria's Boko Haram began its operations by assassinating traditional clerics to silence orthodox religious institutions and prevent a mainstream challenge to its fringe ideology (Thurston 2015). Similarly, Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini created the Special Court of the Clergy independent from the state and in parallel with the judiciary to prosecute quietist religious authorities who opposed his theological views on clerical rule (Künkler 2013). Through endorsement—whether genuine or coerced—and rhetorical competition, armed groups gain legitimacy, which in turn facilitates the recruitment of followers and the acquisition of material resources, thereby expanding their influence in a competitive environment. The more similar the ideologies of competing armed groups, the more identical their pool of ideological authorities, and thus the more intensely they compete to secure endorsement.

Armed groups also engage in performance outbidding, undertaking costly operations to exhibit their normative commitment and the effectiveness of their ideology. Particularly, new organizations are motivated to compete intensely as they seek to carve out political space for their activism. The "liability of newness" (Stinchcombe 1965), referring to their low levels of legitimacy in comparison to more established organizations, compels these startups to adopt social mechanisms aimed at legitimizing their actions. As Blaydes and Linzer (2012, 226) argue, "when opposing politicians share similar stances on salient issues, heated competition can lead to more extreme rhetoric as politicians attempt to ideologically 'outbid' their opponents." This need to establish credibility often drives violent groups to engage in both rhetorical and physical outbidding against ideologically similar rivals, prioritizing inter-rebel competition over external confrontation with distant adversaries. Their sincerity is evidenced by their willingness to make sacrifices that may appear contrary to their immediate interests. A powerful way they demonstrate this commitment is by showcasing their martyrs—individuals who have sacrificed their lives for the cause. When armed groups carry out daring violent operations, they seek to portray their commitment to their ideology as more genuine than that of their rivals. Beyond demonstrating ideological sincerity, these spectacular acts of violence can also signal ideological coherence and effectiveness, thereby reinforcing authenticity (or credibility, in the case of ideologically distant groups). Conversely, failed or comparatively inferior performance can reduce a group's "ideological appeal" (Nussio and Ugarriza 2021, 174), which in turn can negatively impact popular support and recruitment—both essential for the group's self-preservation (Crenshaw 1985; Cronin 2006).

Scholars have long recognized that outbidding through violence is crucial for maintaining internal cohesion and attracting recruits (Crenshaw 1985; Bloom 2005; Kydd and Walter 2006; Conrad and Greene 2015; Nemeth 2014; Farrell 2020). The more intensely groups compete, the more likely they are to resort to violent actions to outbid their rivals, thereby projecting ideological appeal and preserving internal cohesion (Crenshaw 1985). Given their ideological proximity, splinter groups are particularly prone to using violence to undermine their rivals. In summary, the imperative of survival—an organization's most immediate objective—can position ideologically similar groups at odds with one another, driving them to engage in outbidding operations. While scholars typically view outbidding as a tactical move by violent actors to increase recruitment, this article introduces an ideational

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step that more effectively explains the outbidding process's underlying mechanism. It connects the actors' use of violence to their broader goal of maximizing market share by creating a jamming effect and driving fragmentation through demonstrating ideological sincerity and authenticity (or credibility, in the case of ideologically distant groups).

The argument that ideological proximity can lead to infighting, competition over resources, and leadership struggles among armed actors has two key observable implications. First, ideologically proximate armed groups should claim and actively demonstrate or behave as if they prioritize their ideological commitments over material interests. This commitment is especially evident in the early stages of their emergence, as groups demonstrate a willingness to incur significant costs—such as risking lives, losing resources, or making sacrifices—to uphold their ideology and pursue a higher cause. These groups are also likely to engage in intense ideological debates and seek endorsements from authoritative figures within their ideological community to assert their authenticity. Concurrently, they would accuse their rivals of hypocrisy, exposing them as prioritizing political ambitions and strategic interests over their purported ideology. By doing so, they aim to protect their ideological territory and material interests from what they perceive as ideological competitors. Outbidding plays a critical role in this process, where these groups engage in extreme actions or operations to demonstrate their superior commitment to the shared ideology, thereby undermining their rivals and capturing a larger share of ideological and material resources. Second, despite or rather because of their shared ideological framework, co-ideologues should exhibit distrust toward one another. Rather than fostering cooperation through resource-sharing or mutual recruitment, these groups are expected to safeguard their own ranks and resources, while seeking to attract members and resources of rivals. This territoriality stems from fears that others might exploit their shared ideology to siphon off members or resources, thereby weakening their own standing. The fear of defection or infiltration by ideologically similar rivals would drive these groups to use accusations of hypocrisy and heresy as a means to discredit one another and to protect their internal cohesion. The reliance on ideological debates and negotiations, with frequent references to hypocrisy and heresy, serves to solidify their position, protect leadership status, and undermine rivals who pose a threat to their resources and legitimacy.

Research Design

I adopt a within-case analysis to examine the relationship between ideological proximity and inter-rebel conflict. Case studies are uniquely equipped to shed light on how actors arrive at certain decisions (Gerring 2006; Yom 2015). Leveraging variation across a sequence of events in a single unit, we can unearth the linkage between political imperatives and ideology (Jacobs 2015). However, there remains the possibility of omitted and confounding variables. Actors often mask their rivalries by overstressing normative commitment. By taking these statements at face value, scholars risk overlooking the strategic calculations behind normative commitments, resulting in a truncated causal chain. To be sure, it is nearly impossible to find actors who are both aware of and willing to acknowledge the "real" strategic calculations behind their actions (Gonzalez-Ocantos and LaPorte 2019). To unearth these "undocumented steps," (Gonzalez-Ocantos and LaPorte 2019), we need to be cautious when adopting sequential analysis to examine a decision-making trajectory. As Jacobs notes, temporal orderings can be misleading since actors strategically "make choices *in anticipation* of other actors' reactions" (Jacobs 2015, 62, emphasis original). In other words, "temporally prior events and political behavior can be endogenous to subsequent (expected) outcomes" (Jacobs 2015, 62-63). What both scholars and actors often label as "an ideological cause" could in fact be part of a strategic move on the part of the actors to generate the desired outcome. Therefore, we should contextualize the data-generating process to account for the unobservable decisions actors may have made in anticipating a particular outcome (Morrison 2016).

To achieve a more accurate understanding of the underlying political context, we need to go beyond rebel groups' self-serving normative statements and systematically study their internal deliberations. We should also broaden the context and scrutinize their rivals' analyses of them, even though they too can be biased. While delving into the ideological debates within armed groups, it is crucial not to take their self-descriptions or portrayals of their rivals as absolute truths, viewing them instead as valuable data points (Tabaar et al. 2023). Through cross-examinations and studying the interactions among competing groups, we can identify alternative motivations.

Given the challenges of data collection from contemporary rebel groups (Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015; Lyall 2015), older cases are more analytically advantageous since they generate fewer security concerns and may offer more detailed information about strategic calculations, ideological trajectories, and performance assessments. Surviving members of such organizations often reveal precious data and analyses about their activism. However, not all rebel groups are equally prolific in this regard. Members of leftist organizations are known to be intellectuals with a penchant for writing. As young university students, they often produce vast ideological, political, military, and personal records. Many of these notes are further enriched by the ever-growing memoirs and reflections that surviving members generated after "retirement."

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I examine Iran's Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization (MKO), a violent anti-Shah leftist-Islamist rebel group that emerged in the 1960s, and its interplay with both the clergy and the Marxist rebels. By turning religion into an actionable political ideology, the MKO became what the historian Ervand Abrahamian calls "the first Iranian organization to develop systematically a modern revolutionary interpretation of Islam" (Abrahamian 1989, 1). The MKO later converted to Marxism before returning to Islamism after the 1979 revolution. By treating ideology as an exogenous factor in alliance formation, one might expect that the MKO's Islamist ideology and subsequent Marxist transformation would have aligned the organization more closely with the clergy and the Marxist-Leninist Fadaiyan-e Khalq Organization (FKO),[4] respectively. Drawing on primary and archival sources, this article elucidates the material and leadership threats that the orthodox and Islamist clergy perceived from the MKO. The MKO sought endorsement from religious authorities to shield itself from accusations of hypocrisy and heresy by the religious establishment and engaged in violent operations to signal its ideological sincerity and authenticity. As an emerging Islamist armed group, the MKO's operations were also designed to demonstrate the effectiveness of its ideology as a combat tool to rival Marxist groups and their potential recruits. Similarly, although the Islamist MKO and Marxist FKO had a history of collaboration and joint operations despite their ideological differences, the MKO's shift to Marxism altered this dynamic, threatening the FKO's resources and its status as a vanguard organization. By studying public statements and internal notes, including audio tapes and transcripts of secret meetings between the two organizations' leaders, I show how ideational affinity severed their collaboration. They questioned each other's ideological sincerity and authenticity which prompted outbidding operations against the state and U.S. personnel in Iran. With the 1979 Iranian revolution and the ascendance of the Islamist clerics, a new leadership took over the MKO and reclaimed its religious credentials. However, just as the MKO's Marxist conversion deepened its fissure with the Marxist FKO, its Islamist turn posed a threat to Khomeini's quest to take over the state during the revolutionary phase (1979–1981). The MKO's return to Islamism aimed to penetrate and capture the new government in Tehran. Its competition with Khomeini over claims to Islamism, coupled with mutual accusations of hypocrisy and heresy, eventually turned bloody. Ironically, but consistent with this study's expectations, Khomeini and his newly established Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) showed more tolerance toward communist groups than the Islamist MKO. I use primary sources from both the MKO and its Islamist rivals to illustrate each side's assessment of the disruptive effect the MKO's religious ideology had on the new regime and its base.

This study's scope is limited to the MKO's pre-exile phase, spanning from the mid-1960s until 1981, during which the organization underwent significant ideological developments and conversions, and before its Islamist rivals consolidated control over the post-revolutionary state.[5] Although Khomeini emerged as the leader of the revolution in 1979, he initially pledged to return to his seminary in the holy city of Qom and allow religious nationalist technocrats to govern the Islamic Republic. However, in the subsequent power struggle among Islamists, nationalists, and Marxists following the monarch's removal, Khomeini's faction ultimately took control of the state, with him at its helm in Tehran.

The empirical evidence for this article draws from a wide array of internal and secret publications by the MKO, other Marxist and Islamist groups, memoirs, interviews, and primary Persian documents sourced from different archives and digitized collections worldwide. Despite the significant role that the organization has played in Iranian politics, with few exceptions that appeared decades ago, there is almost no academic work in general, let alone in conflict studies, that has systematically and objectively studied the MKO relying on these old and recently released documents.

The Islamist Phase (1965–1975)

The MKO emerged in the early 1960s as an offshoot of the nonviolent nationalist opposition, the Liberation Movement of Iran. Inspired by the armed revolutionary rebels from China to Cuba to Algeria, the MKO was one of several clandestine radical university student circles that mushroomed in Iran against the U.S.-backed Shah. Before its insurrection, the group started by charting an ideological roadmap. Given their strong religious convictions, network, and social base, the MKO founders did not wish to adopt Marxism. They regarded Islam as a powerful, mobilizing force deeply intertwined with society. As with many liberation movements during the Cold War era, they engaged with various ideologies, particularly Marxism (MKO 1979a, 135). However, their central aim was to uncover the "essence" of Islam. This initiated a six-year phase of ideological construction, laying the foundation for the creation of a cohesive rebel group, later known as the Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization.

Ideological Proximity to the Clergy

The MKO's Islamist ideology positioned the organization in close proximity to Iran's religious establishment, thereby threatening the clerics' societal status and diverting their resources and followers. Despite his secular appearance, the Shah maintained cooperation with the traditional clerical establishment, as he was committed to protecting the world's only Shi'a state from its Sunni and communist neighbors. Similarly, with the exception of

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militant clerics like Khomeini, most senior Shi'a clerics preferred to remain apolitical, partly due to their suspicion of his philosophical and political views and partly out of fear that the Shah's collapse could worsen their situation, as traditional monarchies in the Middle East were often replaced by left-leaning, anti-religious republics (Roy 1999, 203; Moin 2009; Tabaar, 2018). These reciprocal relations with the state, however, gradually strained the clerics' ties with certain constituencies in society. Many urban religious citizens criticized the established religious authorities for their quietism and sympathized with the MKO's anti-Shah ideology. Some clerics privately acknowledged the MKO's appealing and progressive interpretation of Islam (Meisami 2019, 72-73). According to one MKO member, while the clerics were preoccupied with resolving irrelevant hypothetical jurisprudential cases —such as whether a man who had sex with another man could marry his sister—the MKO was preparing for political struggle and promoting justice by studying philosophical texts that the clerics had not even heard of (Meisami 2001, 340-341). According to a former seminarian who later became a senior MKO member, the organization gained support among clerics, particularly those who challenged the Shah (Didar Ashena 2013). However, this admiration was not universal. Orthodox religious authorities questioned the authenticity of the MKO's religious ideology, arguing that the fusion of Islam with Marxism would inevitably lead Muslim activists toward Marxism ("Revayat-e Mesbah Yazdi" 2014).

The MKO recognized that the clerics' hostility could undermine its perceived religious commitment and authenticity, thus affecting its recruitment efforts and resources. Consequently, the group sought at least veiled support from respected religious authorities. "All we expect [them] to say is, 'I know them.' There is not even a need for endorsement," MKO members acknowledged, understanding that openly backing a violent organization could be risky for these figures (Meisami 2001, 335). To gain legitimacy, they presented their ideological writings —derived from reading and discussing 3,000 books—to well-reputed religious figures. Among them was Mehdi Bazargan, whose non-violent, non-revolutionary opposition group, the Liberation Movement of Iran, had originally attracted the MKO founders before they left to establish the armed group. Bazargan, seeing them as his intellectual offspring, praised the MKO's ideological work, saying, "You were my students, now you are my teacher" (Meisami 2001, 334).

The MKO also sought the support of potentially sympathetic clerics, including Khomeini, who was an anti-Shah activist in exile in Iraq at the time. In 1970, MKO representatives approached Khomeini to secure his endorsement for an Islamist-led armed struggle. Despite the backing of the group by Khomeini's own confidantes, he declined, stating that he "[did] not believe in armed struggle" because neither the people nor the clerics were ready to rise up ("Mosahebeh ba Rofagha" 1980, 10). The MKO cited violent movements in Algeria, Palestine, Cuba, China, and Vietnam to demonstrate the feasibility of starting an armed uprising with limited popular support. To emphasize their religious roots, they presented Khomeini with a copy of their book *Imam Hossein*, which offered a revolutionary interpretation of the Battle of Karbala (680 AD) and criticized the quietist religious establishment throughout history. After several meetings and reading the book, Khomeini shared the MKO's resentment toward the orthodox religious establishment but cautioned against publicly highlighting its collaboration with the state, warning that the organization could be declared heretical (Haghshenas 2020, 362-369). Years later, after coming to power, Khomeini claimed that the MKO representatives had gone to Iraq to deceive him, but he quickly realized that they were using Islam instrumentally. He noted that the MKO members made more references to sacred texts than even he, as a cleric, would ("Didar-e Imam va Rouhani" 2016). Khomeini was likely concerned that the MKO's anti-clerical Islamist ideology could undermine not only the quietist clerics but the clergy as a whole, including himself. He understood that it could draw religious activists away from his nascent movement, and he was determined to monopolize the anti-Shah Islamist ideology. Indeed, the MKO's ideology appealed to some of his own protégés, including Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Iran's future president ("Revayat-e Hojjat ol-Eslam Doaee" 2022). Frustrated by the popularity of Marxist militants and the perceived inadequacy of Islam, these young seminarians viewed the MKO as a credible contender in the armed struggle. To Khomeini's dismay, some of these seminarians formed limited ideological, financial, and logistical collaborations with the organization. Nonetheless, Khomeini and the orthodox clerics were careful not to publicly denounce the MKO, particularly after it began its daring operations and gained popularity among urban religious circles and seminaries (Haghshenas 2020, 368). They largely remained quiet.

In contrast to the clergy, the communist groups did not view the MKO as an immediate threat to their organizational interests. In secret internal publications in prison, a Marxist-Leninist FKO guerilla leader stated that he did not worry about the competition because the FKO had an upper hand given its ideological edge ("Roshanfekran-e Terrorist" 2015, 206; Jazani n.d.). He believed that the MKO's Islamism would attract suboptimal religious sympathizers and recruits. Without perceiving the MKO as a threat to its organizational interests and market share, the FKO embraced the group as a potential ally in the collective struggle against the Shah, welcoming joint operations. Both organizations anticipated that the other would ultimately convert upon recognizing the limitations of its own ideology and

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the credibility and effectiveness of the competing ideology on the battlefield (Jazani n.d., 33-34; MKO 1979b, 42-45; MKO 1979a, 33-34).

Performance Outbidding

As its ideological construction progressed, the MKO came under internal pressure to move to the operation phase. Despite the consensus on the centrality of ideology to the organization, some members impatiently argued that it should move to the practical phase before a competing group appropriated the torch of armed struggle in Iran (Meisami 2001, 293-295, 381). Indeed, in the midst of this dispute over the balance between theory and praxis, the FKO entered the scene. On February 8, 1971, a few rebels attacked a gendarmerie station in the Siahkal village near the Caspian Sea. The Siahkal operation did not become the spark that the FKO had initially expected to set a popular movement in motion. The masses remained passive and, in fact, locals reportedly collaborated with security forces to find the rebels in the snowy, mountainous forests. Nevertheless, the daring operation against a formidable state lent the FKO and its executed members legendary status as the vanguards of the armed struggle in Iran.[6] This generated anxiety within the MKO whose members were already frustrated with the lengthy process of ideological work (Meisami 2001, 381; Rastgoo 2011, 18). The leadership came under pressure from the rank and file to carry out a "major act." Many MKO members complained: "We talk about action, but they [the FKO] acted before us" (Meisami 2001, 381). Disgruntled members could not help but quickly attribute this setback to the inadequacy of Islam compared to Marxism (Meisami 2001, 381). Some proposed to throw a few Molotov cocktails at government buildings in order to not fall too far behind the FKO in the armed struggle. In response, the MKO decided to prepare for the operation phase quickly by shortening the two-year ideological military training and merging its main books into one (Meisami 2001, 399-400). Now it needed a spectacular performance to showcase its ideological credibility and announce the arrival of another vanguard in the armed struggle.

On the eve of the Shah's celebration of the 2,500-year anniversary of the Persian Empire in October 1971, the MKO chose to attack Tehran's power plants in order to trigger a widespread outage in the country and cause international embarrassment for the regime. The operation also included kidnapping members of the royal family. Leaders of 69 states, including 20 kings and 16 presidents, were attending the event held in Persepolis, the ancient capital of the Persian empire in the south of Iran. However, the rush to carry out the attack blinded the MKO's leadership to the critical fact that Iran's security environment had drastically changed after the Siahkal operation (MKO 1979b, 47, 72-73). The U.S.-backed regime poured massive resources into improving the security apparatus to prevent similar attacks. The security forces soon discovered and foiled the plot, raided the organization's cells, and arrested the entire leadership and about 150 (close to 90%) of its members (Rastgoo 2011, 18-19, 22).

With this major blow to the organization, an internal conflict over the effectiveness of its Islamist ideology soon emerged. Unlike the FKO, the MKO failed to carry out any operations, as its members were arrested before they could fire a single shot (Haghshenas 2020, 408). The MKO Islamist rebels experienced a resurgence in their inferiority complex towards the Marxist groups, and as a result, many, including those in prison, reportedly became less religiously observant (Meisami 2003, 318). In their debates in prison while awaiting their trials, some members stated that there was an ideological flaw in the organization that prevented discipline, coordination, and strict security provisions. Reversing the principal-agent problem, others argued that their rigid ideology was so all-encompassing that it undermined the agency and creativity of individual members at crucial moments (Meisami 2001, 400-401).

Despite the internal uncertainty about the credibility of the MKO's ideology, the leadership agreed on the vitality of its ideological foundation for the organization's survival beyond the founding members. Knowing that expressing loyalty to the organization's violent ideology could increase the likelihood of the death penalty, the MKO's leadership saved the "ideological defense" for itself and instructed lower members to simply make a legal defense and serve prison terms instead (Hamneshin-e Bahar 2017; Haghshenas 2020, 306.). The organization anticipated that by paying the ultimate price for dedication to its ideology, it would reveal its genuine commitment to a sacred cause, which would resonate with society's ideals of justice and attract potential recruits and sympathizers. Once released, lower-ranking members could rebuild the organization, relying on its ideological foundation and rising popularity.

Meanwhile, MKO members and supporters outside of prison began a massive campaign to pressure the state to commute their sentences. Influential clerics largely remained silent due to the MKO's ideological threat to the religious establishment's ties with both the state and society. Two MKO representatives met with Khomeini, who was still in exile in Iraq, to acquire his endorsement for the organization and prevent the imminent executions of its leaders. As a high-ranking and dissident religious authority, Khomeini's endorsement could have raised the cost of executing MKO members. Despite receiving letters from Khomeini's trusted circles urging him to express his support for the MKO, he refused to back the organization ("Didar-e Imam va Rouhani" 2016). Notwithstanding disagreements with his apolitical peers in seminaries over opposing the Shah, he too viewed the MKO's Islamism as

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a threat to the clerical establishment as a whole as well as his own political movement.

Most MKO leaders were executed in 1971, but their martyrdom instantly turned them into legendary symbols of resistance against the state for decades to come. Despite this decapitation, the MKO not only survived but grew exponentially, with its recruitment doubling within 18 months—outpacing the growth achieved in the previous years (MKO 1976, 46). Alongside individual supporters, smaller armed religious organizations allied with the MKO, perceiving it as a more promising avenue (Haghshenas 2020, 325). The MKO undermined the legitimacy of the quietist, apolitical clergy, portraying them as irrelevant to society due to their focus on otherworldly affairs, while demonstrating that an authentic reading of Islam must prioritize justice and resistance against oppression. Urban-based religious citizens and low-ranking militant clerics were pleased to see that, for the first time, a Muslim group had emerged as a credible armed rebel organization, side by side with the Marxists, against the monarchy. To the dismay of senior clerics, the MKO's wealthy sympathizers, particularly among the bazaaris, sent their religious taxes either directly or through young militant seminarians to the organization (Naderi 2007, 641). The MKO received enough cash to help its Marxist FKO rival (*Sazman-e Mojahedin-e Khalq* 2005, 212). While the MKO remained Islamist, neither organization posed a serious threat to the other's cohesion, resources, and influence. With the increasing prominence of the MKO, Khomeini could not afford to remain silent. The militant clergy, including his own protégés, were now both consuming and propagating the MKO's ideological and political analyses ("Mosahebeh ba Rouhani and Haghshenas" 2011). Failing to endorse an organization that was at the forefront of resisting the Shah, filling his prisons, and enduring executions and torture could lead many to question Khomeini's sincerity and diminish his support base. Under pressure from his allies and followers, Khomeini could not remain quiet. He allowed his religious taxes to be allocated to the families affected, possibly recognizing that many of his followers were inclined to contribute to the MKO regardless. Ultimately, Khomeini came close to publicly endorsing the MKO's heroism but refrained due to concerns about rumors of ideological shifts within the organization. Rafsanjani advised him to maintain a stance of "neither endorsement nor denouncement" ("Revayat-e Lotfollah Meisami" 2019).

The Marxist Phase (1975–1979)

Despite the MKO's rising position as a credible armed group among discontented religious citizens, it had to reckon with internally perceived ideological deficiencies in the aftermath of the 1971 raid. The new leadership began an assessment of its performance and ideological orientation. It became doubtful of its ideology's capacity to capture changing social dynamics, fight the regime, and cultivate discipline among members (MKO 1973, 65). According to its internal analysis, the FKO started four years after the MKO, yet it organized its political core and military cells before the MKO. Within two years, the FKO went from its first circles to its first military operations. In contrast, after six years of theoretical work, the MKO was still dealing with a lack of discipline among its cadre (MKO 1973, 52). The MKO's new leadership concluded that the organization suffered from the theoretical and practical "weaknesses" of Islamic ideology and began its Marxist conversion (MKO 1973, 53). Simultaneously, many rank-and-file members had reached the conclusion that Islam was an inadequate political ideology compared to Marxism (Haghshenas 2020, 382-384). Some had quietly converted to Marxism (Haghshenas 2020, 396). After two years of internal debates, assessments, and preparations, half of the organization's members adopted Marxism, while the remaining members who resisted this ideological shift were purged. (MKO 1979a, 52-54, 233-234). The MKO announced its adoption of Marxism in the summer of 1975 by issuing a long statement upon which a red star replaced the Koranic verse on the MKO logo. The organization stated that the conversion was the result of ten years of underground political activism, four years of armed struggle, and two years of ideological evolutionary struggle (MKO 1976, 3). It claimed that it prioritized truth over convenience by forsaking its Islamist ideology in favor of Marxism. By incurring significant cost, including the loss of its religious support base and financial backers, the organization could demonstrate its sincere commitment to Marxism. This commitment was particularly crucial as the MKO found itself in competition with the FKO for the same financial resources, shared recruitment pool, and leadership. As a purged MKO leader told his team, the newly Marxist MKO aimed to compete with, and eventually dissolve, the FKO (MKO 1979a, 60).

With the adoption of Marxism, the MKO needed to demonstrate the impact of its ideological transformation in practice. To exhibit improved performance as an outcome of a more effective ideology, the MKO carried out a series of high-profile assassination campaigns against Iranian and American military officers. It was only after these assassinations that the organization felt confident enough to overcome its initial hesitation and remove the Koranic verse from its logo in all publications (MKO 1979a, 239). Converted members referred to the operations, claiming that the organization had become more efficient. However, the purged Islamist members argued that the assassinations were not strategic at all since they did not serve the organization's interests. Rather, they brought the MKO into a new, unwanted level of conflict with the

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state at a time when the organization was unprepared (Hamneshin-e Bahar 2016). The operations had less of a political and military goal than an ideological message. Showing the effectiveness of its ideological shift in action would help the Marxist leadership overcome the challenges from purged religious actors. Furthermore, these assassinations had another audience. It wished to claim that while the FKO became Marxist through books, the MKO's conversion was a natural organizational evolution through praxis, and thus more authentic and effective than other self-proclaimed Marxist groups (Hamneshin-e Bahar 2016).

Ideological Debate for Unification

Once the purge neared completion and the new operations gained momentum, the MKO entered into dialogue with the FKO for a united front. The adherence of the two vanguards of armed struggle to the same Marxist-Leninist ideology should have naturally compelled them to collaborate and possibly merge, as the scholarly literature predicts. However, the MKO's Marxist turn heightened tensions with the FKO, which had urged the MKO not to convert but instead invited its Marxist members to simply join the FKO (Nejati 2016). The MKO's conversion posed a direct threat to the FKO's vanguard status and resources. If the MKO established that it had better operational performance and a more authentic Marxist ideology, it could undermine the FKO's leadership in armed struggle, potentially drawing away its members, and sympathizers.

In the fall of 1975, two legendary leaders, the MKO's Taghi Shahram and the FKO's Hamid Ashraf, along with their deputies, held a secret meeting at a remote house near Tehran. Although the meeting took place in the same room, a curtain separated the two sides to protect their identities. This debate, along with subsequent ideological discussions between the two organizations, was recorded on audio tapes, which permeated both groups through internal discussions. These tapes were only made publicly available nearly four decades later by surviving comrades in exile.[7] The FKO had welcomed the arrival of the Islamist MKO as an anti-Shah rebel group. The two organizations even shared intelligence and collaborated in operations against the state and U.S. personnel in Iran. The MKO's sophisticated radio interception system had often informed the FKO of imminent security raids against its cells (Shahsavandi 2022a). However, their leaders were now meeting not as Marxist-Leninist versus Islamist groups, but as two ideologically identical entities. As the following interactions show, both sides were deeply suspicious of each other's intentions, despite their common ideological prism. From the outset, the FKO's Ashraf challenged the sincerity and authenticity of the MKO's ideological conversion. He rejected the MKO's claim that Marxism prevailed over religion in the organization as a whole by stressing that 50% of its members were still religious before the purge (*Matn-e Kamel-e* 2014, 14). He stated that, given its petite bourgeoisie base, the MKO could not genuinely convert to Marxism, but instead aimed to protect its class interests. Referring to the MKO's initial hesitation in removing the Koranic verse from the organization's logo, the FKO's leader insisted that the MKO was unwilling to truly reveal its Marxist conversion, for it would negatively affect its petite bourgeoisie "resources" (*Matn-e Kamel-e* 2014, 14, 22). Additionally, he underscored that the MKO's class base hindered not just its evolution, but its operations as well. Ashraf pointed to the MKO's attacks against modern supermarkets and banks as examples of its "social psychology," in that they targeted the bourgeoisie to serve the petite bourgeoisie (*Matn-e Kamel-e* 2014, 70). This was a reference to the bazaaris' anger over the Shah's modernizing of financial and economic megaprojects that harmed traditional merchants. Ashraf said that "it never even crossed our minds to bomb the Omran Bank," because the proletariat would not have felt the benefit of such an attack (*Matn-e Kamel-e* 2014, 69).

In response, the MKO's Shahram argued that although the leadership had converted, its rank and file needed preparation before the official announcement. That required the conversion to be gradual and discreet. The FKO pointed out that even after the public conversion, the MKO still could not genuinely reveal its communist ideology when recruiting. Shahram responded, "Communism is a scientific issue," and "we cannot tell a worker from the outset and at once that there is no God. S/he is a sympathizer who [still] needs to go through a transition" (*Matn-e Kamel-e* 2014, 45). All of this pointed to the MKO's opportunistic use of Marxism instead of a sincere ideological transformation, according to the FKO. While traditional religious circles had accused the MKO of being a Marxist organization in disguise to undermine its religious authenticity, the FKO now expressed concerns, or so it claimed, that the MKO was concealing its religious core behind a Marxist facade.

Surprised by the FKO's insistence that the MKO's renunciation of Islam was disingenuous, the latter's leader referred to numerous criticisms of Islam in the MKO's statements in the run-up to and after the conversion. Highlighting these "attacks" on Islam, he questioned how a religious base could possibly provide resources to the newly Marxist MKO. (*Matn-e Kamel-e* 2014, 39-40). Shahram's claims suggest that the MKO's statements and actions in the conversion phase were at least partly aimed at showing sincerity to the competing FKO. Shahram accused the FKO of fearing the rise of a powerful co-ideologue and, consequently, of withholding Marxist books from the MKO during its formative years (*Matn-e Kamel-e* 2014, 55). He sarcastically asked why the FKO had a more favorable view of the MKO when it was

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Islamist than when it was Marxist: "Until yesterday, weren't we representing them [the religious petite bourgeoisie class]!? Weren't you endorsing us as such? Why were you endorsing us?" (*Matn-e Kamel-e* 2014, 41). To the FKO, a more appropriate move for the MKO's Marxist converts would have been either to split as a new organization or join the FKO. But Shahram said he and his faction initially considered a Marxist split, however, they eventually concluded that they wanted to prove that the organization as a whole, in practice, and through a natural and bottom-up revolutionary act, inevitably became Marxist (*Matn-e Kamel-e* 2014, 13, 41). He assured Ashraf that the MKO never intended to deceive the FKO by claiming to be a Marxist organization while in reality remaining a hybrid one to tap into a wider pool of resources (*Matn-e Kamel-e* 2014, 209). He bragged about the MKO's success in attracting new Marxist members and pledged that if they united, the MKO would prioritize the collective "[Marxist armed struggle] movement's interests" over its own organizational interests (*Matn-e Kamel-e* 2014, 347). As their debates became more tense, both leaders claimed credit for various operations against the state and the U.S. military advisors in Iran. Both sides accused each other of downplaying the other's role in these operations in their public statements (*Matn-e Kamel-e* 2014, 36-37, 77-81).

After nine months of negotiations, the two groups could only agree to publish two theoretical journal issues. Even then each organization could only review the articles submitted by its own members and had to fully accept the submissions of the other group (MKO 1977, 24-29). Neither side was prepared to lose control over its interpretation of Marxism and leadership claims. After these meetings, both the MKO and the FKO maintained communication through publications or letters, relying on theoretical Marxist-Leninist writings to argue for or against unity. The FKO contended that neither the armed struggle, nor the class struggle in Iran had reached a level that warranted unity among revolutionary Marxist forces in the absence of a communist party. In response, the MKO, while citing Marxist literature and even the writings of FKO leaders, sarcastically translated its rival's ideological argument in the following:

> We [the FKO] started the armed struggle and will lead it single-handedly ourselves and grow through it. Anyone who claims to be our equal, will be humbled in the course of the armed struggle and forfeit their leadership claims … . Those who want to unite with us and accept our leadership … have to go, unite, mobilize the class that they represent and then wait for our order to give them a spot at the forefront … . Therefore, the unity among the Marxist-Leninist forces hinges on a critical condition: first accepting the armed struggle, and then acknowledging the FKO's leadership … . We will strip other groups of their Marxist-Leninist label (MKO 1977, 181-184).

The MKO thus accused the FKO of claiming monopoly over the initiation and leadership of the armed struggle and conditioning unity to the absolute submission of other groups to its authority (MKO 1977, 182).

As the organizations' ideological tensions rose, their collaborations and intelligence sharing declined. Meanwhile, state repression intensified, demonstrating unprecedented effectiveness in dismantling armed group cells. On June 29, 1976, FKO's Ashraf died in a street battle with security agents after the MKO's Shahram had reportedly refused to tip him off by sharing information gathered through his radio interceptions (Shahsavandi 2022a). In the coming months, the state disrupted the network of both organizations. Many of their leaders and members were killed, captured, or went underground. Others, such as the MKO's Shahram, escaped abroad.

The MKO's conversion to Marxism proved detrimental to its collaboration with the FKO. While Shahram reportedly justified halting intelligence sharing by accusing the FKO of mishandling the provided equipment, it is believed that his true motive was to exploit the escalating state crackdown, which he anticipated would further weaken the FKO and hasten its absorption into the MKO. In response to his directive to cease material support to the FKO, some MKO members wryly noted how the "petit bourgeois" organization—a nod to its earlier Islamist phase—had once collaborated with the proletarian FKO but no longer did so now that it had itself become a proletarian organization (Shahsavandi 2022b). In a letter to the FKO, apparently written after Ashraf's death at the hands of security forces, the MKO once again advocated for debates on unification. The letter acknowledged concerns about how the escalating security environment might affect negotiations: one group might hesitate to participate due to a weaker position, while the other could opportunistically "dictate" terms (MKO 1977, 42). Given that the FKO suffered more severely—losing its leadership cadre, while the MKO lost lower-ranking members, as the letter states—it is plausible that Shahram believed he held the upper hand and could position himself as the sole Marxist vanguard. This interpretation is further supported by the condescending tone of many MKO communications with the FKO during this period (Naderi 2007, 798).

The Second Islamist Phase (1979–1981)

In 1978, the MKO faced an ideological challenge as it grappled with the rise of an "Islamic" revolution, despite its earlier denunciation of religion as a political force. As the revolution, under the guidance of Khomeini, gained momentum, the MKO's leadership—already weakened by the preceding regime—departed from the organization to establish the Marxist-Leninist group Peykar. Meanwhile, a new faction, emerging from imprisonment, reasserted control over the MKO and declared a doctrinal shift back to Islamism. Led by Masoud Rajavi, one of the

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founders of the MKO, the organization promptly repudiated its previous Marxist orientation and donned the mantle of Islamism again. This new iteration of the MKO eradicated overt Marxist elements within the organization and embarked on a process of ideological realignment in response to the evolving Khomeini-led Islamist environment. The Islamic revolution should have generated a fertile ground for unity among Islamist actors. However, just as the Marxist MKO was a challenge to the FKO, the Islamist MKO reemerged as a rival to Khomeini's Islamist aspirations. Instead of fostering unity, Islamism fueled adversarial relations, ultimately resulting in an armed conflict between the MKO and the Islamist clergy.

With the Shah's removal and the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, the extent of clerical control over the state remained uncertain (Tabaar 2018). Khomeini, upon returning to Iran from exile, initially retreated to his seminary in Qom, thus precluding direct clerical dominance over state affairs. As the spiritual leader of the revolution, he appointed an interim government of lay religious nationalists from the Liberation Movement, with Mehdi Bazargan, a former mentor to the MKO's founders, as the interim prime minister. Intense political competition among Islamist, nationalist, and Marxist factions erupted. From the outset, Bazargan struggled to manage not only the FKO and the MKO but also the IRGC, which he accused of "rebel[ling]" against the government (Bazargan 2014b, 135). The interim government perceived the IRGC, aligned with the Revolutionary Council and controlled by Khomeini, as the armed faction of the Islamist clergy, with some government representatives even refusing to attend meetings involving IRGC members (Bazargan 2014b, 359). The IRGC, MKO, and FKO were all seen by the interim government as armed groups fighting to capture the weak state. Thanks to their looting of military bases, these groups, particularly the MKO and the FKO became heavily armed. Threatening to resign, Bazargan publicly criticized both Islamist and leftist groups for their interference, declaring they "have made it impossible for the government to operate,"[8] as they competed to monopolize state power (Bazargan 2014a, 480). Repeatedly, Bazargan appealed to the MKO and the IRGC, to cease their hostilities and attacks on his government. Characterizing them as siblings sharing a common intellectual and religious lineage, he urged reconciliation to focus on combating Marxist groups, emphasizing, "You have no choice but to return to … Islam (your common goal and ideal)" (Bazargan 2014a, 481-482).

The rivalry among these groups was exacerbated by overlapping ideas, resource pools, and constituencies. Emphasizing its religious and anti-imperialist credentials, the MKO swiftly gained traction among students and youth on university campuses. The MKO's ideology, appealing to younger, more left-leaning members of Khomeini's base, sowed ideological confusion by questioning the clergy's sincerity and the Islamic Republic's authenticity ("Parvandeh Vijeh" 2019). The MKO's heroic legacy of opposing the Shah, its celebrated martyrs, and its anti-imperialist stance contrasted sharply with the clerics' quietism or their connections with the Shah and his American allies. Although it refrained from directly attacking Khomeini's charismatic leadership, the MKO challenged the revolutionary regime and its ideological authenticity by claiming it was neither genuinely revolutionary nor truly Islamic. Referring to the "Islamization" of the Iranian polity, the MKO accused the regime of using Islam to justify repression and contradicting the Koranic views on tolerance (MKO 1980, 71; "Nemoud va Mahiat" 1979; "Gerd-e Ham-aee-ye Shokoohmand-e" 1980). To highlight the clerics' hypocrisy, the MKO contrasted their post-revolutionary wealth with the austere lifestyle of the Shi'a imams, emphasizing the latter's dedication to the poor and oppressed (MKO 1980, 94-101). The Islamist clergy, including those who had previously supported the MKO, soon concluded that the main and final challenge to its rising power would emanate from the MKO (Rastgoo 2011, 45).

The ideological confrontation between the MKO and Khomeini was not unidirectional. During the revolutionary period, some MKO members and sympathizers, perceiving Khomeini and his movement as more credible, defected and aligned with him. These defectors played a significant role in founding the Islamic Republican Party (IRP), the IRGC, and other revolutionary institutions aimed at countering the rivals, including the MKO ("Revayat-e Yek Enshe'ab" 2021). Notably, the Islamic Revolutionary Mojahedin Organization was established by former MKO members and sympathizers with the explicit purpose of countering the MKO's substantial ideological and organizational influence ("Mohsen Armin Bazjoo Bood?" 2017; "Revayat-e Arab Sorkhi" 2017; "Amaliat-e Mersad" 2024). The MKO expressed concern over the Islamic Revolutionary Mojahedin's appropriation of the term "Mojahed," interpreting it as an attempt to create confusion among revolutionary factions. Given its familiarity with the MKO, the Islamic Revolutionary Mojahedin emerged as a crucial entity in the ideological and operational struggle against the MKO ("Barkhord-e Houshmandaneh-ye Sepah" 2020). Members of the Islamic Revolutionary Mojahedin, occupying senior positions in revolutionary organizations, led efforts to penetrate MKO cells, interrogate its members, and engage in ideological debates to expose the MKO's perceived ideological deviations and hypocrisies ("Mohsen Armin Bazjoo Bood?" 2017).

In a bid to challenge Khomeini's authority, the MKO sought endorsement from the clergy, including Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleqani, a popular cleric with a long history of political activism and association with the organization.

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Symbolically, the organization even offered the "command and supervision of its entire military force" to Taleqani as a move to counterbalance Khomeini and his IRGC (MKO 1980, 113-114). Taleqani backed the MKO and resisted Khomeini's pressure for its disarmament as long as other militias, including the IRGC, remained armed. Taleqani's endorsement of the MKO lent authenticity to its religious ideology and shielded the organization from accusations of heresy. Knowing the MKO's calculations, Khomeini was careful not to antagonize Taleqani. However, he was increasingly concerned that the MKO's religious and political narratives were chipping away at his legitimacy, one story at a time.

To further undermine the Islamic Republic's ideological credentials, the MKO asserted that the United States had engineered the transition to the new political order and was now collaborating with the new regime. The MKO warned that Iran could turn into another pro-U.S. Islamic Republic of Pakistan or a Saudi-style Islamic government; despite the title "Islam," it would become a U.S. lackey. By contrast, the MKO portrayed itself as staunchly anti-American by claiming credit in the assassination of U.S. military advisors in Iran before the revolution ("Mahiat-e Ravabet-e Fe'li-ye Iran va Amrika" 1979, 1-2). These allegations, amplified by Marxist groups, undermined the legitimacy and cohesion of both the Islamist clergy and the interim government. Various leftist groups organized anti-American demonstrations to cut Washington's remaining ties with the Islamic Republic. The MKO claimed credit for organizing the first nationwide anti-American rally after the revolution, when the U.S. Senate criticized Iran's human rights violations ("Mosahebeh Baradar-e Mojahed Masoud Rajavi" 1981, 13). In response, Khomeini adopted his rivals' anti-American rhetoric, despite his earlier secret messages with and reconciliatory tone toward the United States during the transition to the Islamic Republic (Tabaar 2017).[9] This outbidding confrontation with the leftists led to the Islamists' occupation of the U.S. embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979. Contrary to conventional understanding, a growing body of scholarly literature and public debate suggests that the embassy takeover was not primarily motivated by hatred towards the United States. Instead, it was a calculated performance aimed at undermining the anti-American ideology of the leftists and the MKO (e.g., Tabaar 2017; "Eshghal-e Sefarat-e Amrika" 2016; Limbert 2017). Challenging the sincerity of these groups' anti-American stance, Khomeini's supporters carried photos of blindfolded American hostages with a quote from him: "Others talk. We Act." (Tabaar 2017, 691).

Consequently, after losing a significant ideational source of power, the Marxist groups fragmented, with the FKO splitting and its Majority faction bandwagoning with Khomeini. But the MKO remained cohesive. While anti-Americanism constituted the Marxists' primary identity, it was only one aspect of the MKO's multilayered ideology. The MKO's religious ideology continued to pose a threat to the clerics' reign. Nevertheless, the MKO moved to seize U.S. consulates in other cities to reclaim its anti-American credentials. It reportedly tried, and succeeded, in occupying the U.S. consulates in Isfahan and Tabriz the day after the embassy takeover in Tehran. But the next day, the IRGC raided the consulates and violently pushed them out. The MKO remained the Islamist clerics' primary target. As a pro-regime cleric and military judge stated, "It is true that America is the main enemy, but the MKO is more dangerous" ("Mosahebeh Baradar-e Mojahed Masoud Rajavi" 1981, 15).

Following the Hostage Crisis, the interim government resigned, and the Islamist clergy began to consolidate control over the state. A clerical-dominated constitutional assembly elevated Khomeini to the Jurist Guardian, officially head of state. Khomeini, now en route to Tehran, issued a fatwa barring the MKO leader—who had abstained from the 1979 referendum establishing the Islamic Republic—from running for the presidency. Despite this, the MKO allied with the newly elected president, Abolhassan Banisadr, a religious nationalist, against the militant clergy. When the MKO's participation in the parliamentary elections highlighted its broad popularity, Khomeini ensured through a two-stage electoral engineering process that the MKO had no representation in the Majles.

After appropriating the anti-American torch and deepening his control over the state, Khomeini was in a stronger position to confront the MKO. Interestingly, he began showing more tolerance for the now ideologically subdued Marxists, including the FKO Majority, than for the MKO. The former was invited to ideological debates on television, while the latter was brutally repressed. Taleqani's sudden death in 1979 removed a major obstacle for a bloody crackdown on the MKO. Questioning their religiosity, Khomeini now labeled the MKO members as the "Hypocrites," a term that subsequently adopted by the state and the media to describe the group. He went as far as declaring them "worse than infidels," explicitly recognizing the turmoil and disarray that their religious ideology sowed within both society and the new regime. He accused them of attempting to "destroy us with the Koran itself" (Khomeini 1980, 466). In response, the MKO contended that the true hypocrites were the Khomeinists, who "steal the name, title, and martyrs of others while making claims to Islam, revolution, and struggle" (MKO 1980, 118). Soon, the MKO's paper, *Mojahed*, was shut down, and anyone associated with the organization was beaten, arrested, or executed. As the number of executions surged to fifty, the MKO issued a stark warning of imminent "fire and blood" across the country ("Mosahebeh Baradar-e Mojahed Masoud Rajavi" 1981, 14). In response, Khomeini escalated the situation by threatening that failure to

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disarm would lead to direct confrontation. With the removal of Banisadr, the militant clergy took over the executive branch of the government too, prompting the MKO to seek further endorsement from religious authorities ("Hemayat-e Shakhsiat-ha-ye Mokhtalef" 1981). The support of lesser-known clerics only underscored the MKO's desperation, eliciting ridicule even from communist factions that were now aligning with Khomeini ("Hezb-e Tudeh Ayatollah 'Alemi," 1981).

By June 1981, the MKO leadership concluded that Khomeini was intent on eliminating the organization, presenting it with two options: surrender or engage in armed resistance. On June 20, 1981, the MKO's call for an armed struggle against the regime brought half a million of its supporters to the streets. This confrontation claimed the lives of thousands of its members, including the children of senior officials in the following months and years. In turn, the MKO demonstrated how deeply it had penetrated the highest echelon of the regime by assassinating its most senior officials including, allegedly, the top leaders of the IRP, as well as the new president Mohammad Ali Rajaie, himself a former MKO member, in 1981.[10]

With these spectacular decapitation operations, the MKO's strategy to show resolve, undermine the regime's cohesion, and spark a mass movement backfired. Khomeini used the new martyrs to shore up his ideological narrative and to liquidate the MKO. Together with the deposed President Banisadr, the organization's leadership went underground and resurfaced in France. The MKO then sided with Saddam Hussein in his war against Iran and remained his ally until the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, when the organization put down its weapons and moved to Albania in a U.S.-brokered deal. Back in Tehran, Ali Khamenei became president in 1981 which sealed the clerical control over the entire state until today.

Alternative Explanations

Alternative explanations for the MKO's adversarial relations during the three phases center on ideological differences and balance of power among competing groups. In both the first and third Islamist phases, one theory suggests that the MKO's interpretation of Islam, marked by its anti-clericalism and Marxist tendencies, led to conflict with Khomeini (e.g., *Sazman-e Mojahedin-e Khalq*, 2006). The MKO rejected the traditional role of the clergy in Iranian society and politics, advocating a "progressive" ideology that the Shi'a clergy deemed deviant. Khomeini's mistrust was further fueled by the MKO's Marxist tendencies, fearing that the organization might radicalize youth toward communism. This stance precluded any potential alliance with the MKO.

While it is plausible that Khomeini genuinely viewed the MKO as hypocritical and heretical, ideological differences alone cannot explain the conflict. Khomeini had ideological disagreements with various groups, yet he managed to ally with many during his political career. For instance, he cooperated with Marxist factions while contending with the Islamist MKO and quietist clergy who challenged his leadership. Strong evidence suggests he might have tolerated the MKO if the organization had pledged loyalty to him. The militant clergy warned MKO's leaders to follow the path of defected members and align with Khomeini, or they would be eliminated. However, the MKO responded by asserting that Khomeini's rise was facilitated by their sacrifices against the Shah (Harvard Iranian Oral History Project 1984, 21).

Similarly, the inability of the FKO and the MKO to unite has been attributed to their divergent interpretations of Marxism, influenced by figures like Che Guevara and Mao, leading to different ideological trajectories (Abrahamian 1980, 12). However, this explanation too assumes rigid ideological positions, overlooking the fluidity of ideas and alliances. A closer examination shows that their ideological stances and alliances were subject to change. Both the MKO and FKO shared hostility towards the Soviet-backed Tudeh Party, which opposed armed struggle and criticized other Iranian Marxist groups for heretical Marxist-Leninist interpretations. After the revolution, the FKO split, with its majority faction aligning with the Tudeh Party to support Khomeini. Interestingly, the Islamist MKO also engaged in covert cooperation with the Soviet Union until its agent was caught transferring classified documents to Moscow during the revolutionary upheaval.[11] These shifting alliances suggest that ideological positions among Marxist groups were more fluid than static.

Finally, if power balance were the primary driving force in inter-rebel conflict, with ideology playing only a post-facto justificatory role, the MKO should have cooperated with both the militant clergy and the FKO against the vastly more powerful monarch. Instead, it competed with the clergy and, after its Marxist conversion, ended joint operations and ceased intelligence sharing with the FKO, despite increasing state repression against both organizations. Similarly, after the revolution, when the MKO reversed to Islamism, the organization should have bandwagoned, as the FKO did, with the far more powerful Khomeini-led Islamist clergy and the IRGC after 1979, rather than engaging in a fatal armed struggle against them to capture the weak state.

Conclusion

A well-established body of scholarly literature discusses the role of ideological proximity in alliance formation, with some arguing that it is irrelevant while others suggest it facilitates such alliances. This article aimed to contribute to this debate by showing that ideological proximity can be

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relevant to but obstructive of cooperation among armed groups. Organizations that share common ideational underpinnings may find themselves entangled in a complex web of resource-sharing, internal cohesion erosion, and competitive struggles for leadership. The need to establish ideological sincerity and authenticity can push new groups toward outbidding competition, often culminating in the deployment of violent measures as a means of validation. This study examines how ideological proximity can lead to conflict. Future research can further explore this argument through more extensive qualitative and quantitative analyses, assessing the conditions under which ideological proximity fosters either conflict or cooperation.

The findings of this paper have broader implications for the theoretical literature on ideology and political violence. While scholars differ on the role of ideology, they generally treat it as a fixed variable. For example, Blair et al. assert that "consistent with nearly all existing and cutting-edge work in this area, our coding of ideology is time-invariant" (2022, 169). This prevailing view suggests that while actors may adjust their ideological positions to align with immediate interests, they cannot alter their ideology without risking a loss of credibility. However, this study showed how the MKO actors exercised considerable agency in modifying their ideological stances within the parameters of each ideology in each phase, all while maintaining an appearance of consistency to preserve credibility. Importantly, these changes often occur subtly and are evident through practices and social interactions (Parkinson 2021; Tilly 2003, 2005) rather than through formal doctrinal shifts (as in the case of the MKO), driven by the uncertainties of their environment (Chandra 2012; Tabaar 2018; Huang 2020; Tabaar and Yildirim 2020). This flexibility, further bolstered by endorsement and performance outbidding, allows actors to navigate ideological complexities and avoid accusations of hypocrisy or heresy. These interactions, often overlooked by studies focused on official doctrines, underline the importance of examining how ideologies are developed, presented, and negotiated—both internally and with external allies, adversaries, and, indeed, ideologically-proximate rivals. Ideology is fluid and multidimensional, capable of acquiring diverse properties that link groups with common roots to others from different ideological traditions (Huang and Tabaar 2021). For example, an anti-American Islamist ideology may align more closely with Marxist-Leninism than with traditional, quietist interpretations of Islam. Ideologies evolve as they seek to access new resources and form new alliances. Islamism, once anti-Soviet, became anti-American post-revolution in Iran, while Afghan Islamist Mujahideen were U.S. allies in the fight against the USSR. Scholars must move beyond static, time-invariant snapshots to uncover subtle ideological shifts and capture their fluid manifestations in practice. This interactive and relational approach is crucial for understanding the dynamics of cooperation and conflict among political actors.

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Notes

1 In this article, I use the terms political actors, rebels, and armed groups interchangeably, as is typical in conflict literature.
2 The Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization (MKO), also known as the MEK or the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI), refers to the same group. In this article, I use MKO as the acronym.
3 Also see Gerring (1997) and Leader Maynard (2019).
4 The Fadaiyan-e Khalq Organization (FKO), also known as the Iranian People's Fedai Guerrillas or the Organization of Iranian People's Fedai Guerrillas (OIPFG), refers to the same group.
5 It is important to note that the MKO's political and ideological shifts continued in exile. Its surviving members fled to Europe and then to Iraq to fight alongside Saddam Hussein's army against Iran throughout the 1980s. After the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, the organization put down its weapons, forfeited its earlier anti-Americanism, and forged cooperation with the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia against the Islamists in Tehran. It has gone from assassinating Americans in the streets of Tehran to lobbying in the halls of U.S. Congress (Harb 2019). Forty years since the revolution, the MKO remains a thorn in the Islamic Republic's side and has attracted some of the most senior U.S. officials, including former Vice President Mike Pence, to its base in Albania (Semini, 2022).
6 For more, see, Rahnema 2021.
7 To access the actual audio files, see Andisheh va Peykar. Gofto Goo-ha-ye Darooni Beyne Do Sazman-e Cherik ha-ye Fadaie Khalq-e Iran va Mojahedin Khalq-e Iran, Frankfurt: Archiv-e Sazaman-e Peykar dar Rah-e Tabagheh Kargar, [originally conducted in 1975], 2014, (http://www.peykarandeesh.org/PeykarArchive/Mojahedin-ML/mojahed_fadaii.html).
8 Youssef M. Ibrahim, 1979, "Iranians Decide to Purge and Phase Out Vigilantes," *New York Times*, April 26 (https://www.nytimes.com/1979/04/26/archives/

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iranians-decide-to-purge-and-phase-out-vigilantes-seen-as-victory.html?searchResultPosition=2).

9 Kambiz Fattahi, 2016, "Two Weeks in January: America's Secret Engagement with Khomeini," *BBC News*, June 3 (https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-36431160).

10 The MKO has denied involvement in the bombings of the IRP headquarters and the prime minister's office; however, it is widely believed to have been responsible.

11 See "Ebrahim Yazdi: Saʿdati ra Baqi-mande-ha-ye SAVAK Lo Dadand," 2015, Tarikh-e Irani, September 26, http://tarikhirani.ir/fa/news/7948/%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%87%DB%8C%D9%85-%DB%8C%D8%B2%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D8%B3%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%AA%DB%8C-%D8%B1%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%82%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF%D9%87-%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%88%D8%A7%DA%A9-%D9%84%D9%88-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%86%D8%AF.

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