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# Unmasking Perspectives: The People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran and Their Depiction of the 2022-2023 Mahsa Amini Protests

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**Unmasking Perspectives: The People's Mojahedin Organization of  
Iran and Their Depiction of the 2022-2023 Mahsa Amini Protests**

**MA Thesis**

**International Relations: Global Conflict in the Modern Era**

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### **1.1: Brief history and contextualization**

The Mojahedin-e-Khalq Organization, also known as the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI), is an exiled Iranian opposition group founded in 1965. Initially emerging as an Islamic Marxist movement, the PMOI opposed the autocratic rule of Mohammad Reza Shah in Iran (Cohen 2013, 941). Over time, it evolved into a guerrilla organization that played a significant role in the 1979 Islamic Revolution of Iran (Piazza 1994, 12-14). However, the PMOI's trajectory took a drastic turn post-revolution when it openly confronted Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic government in 1981 (Cohen 2018, 1003). This confrontation resulted in widespread arrests and executions, pushing the PMOI's leadership, notably Massoud Rajavi, into exile. Rajavi sought refuge in France before the PMOI relocated to Iraq in 1986 and found refuge under Saddam Hussein's protection (Dorraj 2006, 103). During the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), the PMOI controversially joined Iraqi forces against Iran. Despite the challenges and criticisms it faced, the PMOI continued its campaign against the Islamic Republic of Iran from Iraq. Following the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, the new Iraqi government made several attempts to expel the PMOI from its territory (BBC Monitoring 2023).

In 2013, the PMOI found a new base of operations and relocated to Albania, after persistent efforts by the post-Saddam Hussein Iraqi government to remove the organization from its soil. In recent years, the group has faced ongoing scrutiny in predominantly Western countries, being characterized as a cult-like organization (Ibid.). The United States and the European Union designated the PMOI as a terrorist organization in 1997 and 2002, respectively. However, in subsequent years, both entities delisted the PMOI, reflecting a nuanced perspective on its activities and objectives (Brew 2014). The PMOI remains active from Albania where it still opposes the Iranian government.

The current political landscape of Iran provides new challenges and opportunities for the PMOI, as Iran is experiencing civil unrest due to protests that emerged following the death of Mahsa Amini in police custody on 13 September 2022. The protests, which began on 16 September 2022 and continued into 2023, were sparked by her arrest for violating Iran's mandatory hijab law. Eyewitnesses reported severe beating by Guidance Patrol officers, which the Iranian authorities denied (Uygur 2022, 12). Amini subsequently died three days later, prompting protests across Iran. The government responded to the protests with measures such as widespread internet blackouts, restrictions on social media, tear gas, and

gunfire. The government's response led to the deaths of approximately 500 individuals, including 67 minors, and more than 15,000 arrests (Khatam 2023, 299).

Amidst the current political turmoil in Iran, the response in Western countries to these developments has been notable. The Iranian diaspora, encompassing diverse political affiliations, including progressive, ethnic, and monarchist groups, has actively participated in demonstrations within Western nations (Sammy 2023). The PMOI has also publicly criticized the Iranian government, stating that “the protests continue in every city and corner of Iran, and protesters are calling for the overthrow of the Iranian regime, a goal that the MEK (Mojahedin-e Khalq) and NCRI (National Council of Resistance of Iran) have been striving for since 1981 (People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran, 2022).” This statement published by the PMOI suggests that there is significant unrest and opposition to the Iranian government within the country and that the PMOI sees itself as a key player in these efforts. It additionally suggests that the PMOI perceives, whether accurately or not, that the objectives it pursues align with the actions of the protestors in Iran. The Mahsa Amini protests appear to offer the PMOI an opportunity to (re)establish itself as a significant opposition group against the Iranian government.

In light of the PMOI's active role in drawing attention to these protests, this thesis will present a comprehensive exploration of the depiction of the Mahsa Amini protests within the discourse of the PMOI. The central research question that guides this research is: How does the PMOI's discourse depict the 2022-2023 Mahsa Amini protests? Through an analysis of linguistic patterns and themes in the PMOI's narrative, this thesis aims to decipher the underlying motives, framing strategies, and power dynamics that shape their representation of this critical event. By shedding light on the PMOI's discourse, a deeper understanding of their perspectives and agendas can be obtained.

## **1.2: Academic & societal relevance**

Academic relevance behind researching the PMOI and their depiction of the Mahsa Amini protests is marked by the aim of better understanding political discourse strategies and propaganda techniques, as researchers such as Ronen A. Cohen have labeled the information disseminated by the PMOI as propaganda (Cohen 2018, 1000). Propaganda refers to the strategic dissemination of selective, biased information to promote a specific viewpoint to an audience, with the overarching goal of achieving a certain political objective (Walton 1997, 394). According to scholar Douglas Walton, “the aim of propaganda is to get the respondent to act, to adopt a certain course of action, or to go along with, and assist in a particular policy

(Ibid).” Cohen argues that spreading propaganda is the PMOI’s main tool within their active opposition of the Iranian government (Cohen 2018, 1000). Hence, studying the PMOI’s discourse on the Mahsa Amini protests can contribute to research on propaganda dissemination. It allows for an examination of how narratives are constructed, disseminated, and amplified, which is crucial in today’s globalized world where information dissemination plays a vital role in shaping public perceptions. Furthermore, it is important to highlight the scarcity of academic research on the PMOI, and how analyzing their representation of the Mahsa Amini protests helps increase our knowledge of this political organization. Such an examination facilitates a deeper understanding of their perspective. This understanding, in turn, paves the way for a clearer comprehension of the current objectives and ideologies that the PMOI is presently advancing.

Beyond the academic realm, this analysis holds substantial societal significance due to its implications for policy making, particularly in the context of international relations and counterterrorism efforts. The PMOI, an Iranian opposition group, has a complex history and as stated before, has been designated as a terrorist organization by various entities, including the United States and the European Union (Brew 2014). Both entities also decided to delist the PMOI from its terrorist organizations lists, signifying the evolving perceptions and understanding of this organization (Ibid.). This change in designation, coupled with the PMOI’s location in Albania, poses significant policy challenges for Western countries. Research on the PMOI can shed light on the reasons behind such decisions and their potential consequences for regional and global security. Policymakers must consider the implications of engaging with or opposing this organization, and the outcomes of their decisions can influence not only international relations but also the safety and well-being of the PMOI members, as well as the broader European and Iranian communities. The PMOI has been at the forefront of opposition to the Iranian government for decades and has engaged in various political activities, including lobbying, advocacy, and information campaigns (Cohen 2013, 941). Understanding the PMOI’s objectives and methods is essential for crafting effective foreign policies and counterterrorism strategies.

### **1.3: Methodology**

This thesis investigates how the PMOI depicts the 2022-2023 Mahsa Amini protests through critical-political discourse analysis. This is a valuable methodology for examining how the PMOI represents the Mahsa Amini protests as it focuses on the language, symbols, and social constructs employed by the PMOI in their narratives concerning the protests, aiming to

uncover the ideologies, power dynamics, and underlying motivations that shape their representation (Neumann 2008, 63). Political Discourse Analysis (PDA) centers on the reproduction of political power, power abuse, or domination through political discourse, encompassing various forms of resistance or counter-power (Van Dijk 1997, 11). PDA thus serves as a valuable tool for understanding how the PMOI utilizes discourse to reinforce its ideological and political power. This involves analyzing the language and narratives employed by the PMOI to establish authority and dominance within its structure and interactions with members and external entities.

The data that is analyzed through a discourse analysis includes written, spoken, and visual materials produced by the PMOI regarding the Mahsa Amini protests. These include news articles published on their website, a video of a speech given by their leader Maryam Rajavi, and social media posts. The diverse array of sources ensures a comprehensive understanding of how the PMOI constructs its narrative. Analyzing the collected data involves closely examining the linguistic and structural aspects of the PMOI's discourse. This analysis dissects the language used, the framing of events, rhetorical devices, and the overall narrative structure. Identifying keywords, metaphors, and recurrent themes is essential in comprehending the PMOI's stance and emphasis on specific aspects of the Mahsa Amini protests. Hence, the analysis presented in this thesis will examine the linguistic elements (e.g., vocabulary, syntax, semantics) and patterns (e.g., repetition, rhetorical devices) in the discourse, highlighting recurring themes, topics, or concepts that emerge across the text (Van Dijk 1983, 23). The examination of linguistic elements and patterns is relevant for analyzing how the PMOI's discourse depicts the Mahsa Amini protests as it provides insights into the organization's framing strategies, emphasis on specific themes, and overall narrative construction. Additionally, this analysis is essential for understanding the role of propaganda in shaping public perceptions of the protests by identifying persuasive linguistic elements and strategies employed by the PMOI.

Moreover, it is crucial to note that understanding the context in which the discourse is produced is crucial. Context serves as a lens through which language and discourse are understood (Van Dijk 1983, 22). It helps bridge the gap between the words used and the intended meaning, contributing to more accurate and insightful discourse analysis. This includes considering the historical, political, and social backdrop of the protests as well as the PMOI's historical relationship with the Iranian government. It is thus vital to analyze how external factors influence the PMOI's representation and how their discourse aligns with or challenges prevailing sociopolitical narratives. A critical interpretation of the findings of the

discourse analysis includes an examination of how the discourse relates to the PMOI's objectives, ideological stance, agenda, and how they utilize the Mahsa Amini protests to advance their narrative.

It is however important to note the limitations of applying discourse analysis as methodology. Discourse analysis often involves a limited sample of texts or conversations due to time and resource constraints. Hence, this may not capture the full range of diversity within the discourse, affecting the validity of conclusions. Furthermore, the choice of discourse data is crucial, and it's possible to introduce bias by selecting certain texts or conversations over others. This can impact the representativeness and generalizability of the findings (Gill 2000, 186-187). To address this, adopting a systematic and transparent approach in the selection of discourse data becomes imperative to mitigate potential biases. As stated before, considering representativeness and the aim of capturing a diverse range of perspectives within the discourse, this thesis will analyze written, spoken, and visual material. The selection of sources for this discourse analysis adhered to a purposeful and thematic sampling strategy, focusing on texts and conversations that extensively discussed the Mahsa Amini protests. Despite the inherent challenges, discourse analysis remains a valuable tool for analyzing media content, facilitating a critical examination of how language constructs narratives. In the context of the 2022-2023 Mahsa Amini protests, it offers a unique lens to comprehend how the PMOI depicts this complex socio-political phenomenon.



## Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter delves into the analytical framework of discourse analysis applied to the case of the PMOI and the 2022-2023 Mahsa Amini protests. The primary objective of this literature review is to define critical concepts and theories within discourse analysis, while also examining the existing literature that analyzes the PMOI's discourse. Furthermore, this chapter aims to understand how political discourse shapes narratives by drawing parallels with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) as an illustrative example. This literature review underscores the importance of discourse analysis in understanding the strategies of political organizations such as the PMOI.

### **2.1: Discourse Analysis**

Discourse analysis examines language and communication to uncover linguistic patterns and themes. It enables the deconstruction of narratives, revealing underlying meanings, and understanding how language reflects and constructs social reality (Fairclough 2013, 9). In order to fully comprehend discourse analysis, a clear definition of the term discourse must be established. A key actor within the expanding and refining of the concept of discourse was Michel Foucault. Foucault utilized the term discourse to describe a socially constructed system bound by historical context that generates knowledge and meaning (Foucault and Sheridan-Smith 1972, 135-140). Expanding on Foucault's framework, another influential scholar, Norman Fairclough, contributed significantly to the field of discourse analysis. Fairclough, a proponent of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), views discourse as a complex interplay of language, power, and social practices. In CDA, the focus is on understanding how language both reflects and perpetuates social inequalities and power relations. Discourse, in this context, is not simply a neutral medium of communication but a site where power struggles and social dynamics are enacted and reproduced. CDA, therefore, involves examining language use in texts to uncover hidden ideologies, power relations, and social norms (Fairclough 2013, 9). It seeks to reveal how language contributes to the construction and maintenance of social hierarchies, and how it can be a tool for both resistance and domination. As CDA involves a critical examination of language structures, choices, and discursive strategies, it is particularly valuable for examining the PMOI's discourse, revealing underlying meanings, and identifying rhetorical devices or framing techniques used to convey specific messages about the protests.

This thesis will additionally draw on the works of another scholar in the field of discourse, namely Teun A. van Dijk. Van Dijk's elucidation of discourse, presented in accessible terms, resonates effectively with the objectives and context of this research, as he has presented comprehensive insights into political discourse. PDA is a type of discourse analysis that focuses on the reproduction of political power, power abuse or domination through political discourse, including the various forms of resistance or counter-power against such forms of discursive dominance (Van Dijk 1997, 11). PDA can assist in understanding how the PMOI, as a political organization, utilizes discourse to reinforce its ideological and political power. This includes analyzing the language and narratives they use to establish authority and dominance within their structure and in interactions with their members and external actors. Furthermore, PDA serves as a valuable methodological approach for deconstructing propaganda embedded within the discourse of the PMOI. According to van Dijk, propaganda is part of the wider field of politics and is a discursive-political process. It is a type of discourse that aims to influence public opinion and attitudes towards a particular issue or group (Van Dijk 1997, 22). Furthermore, van Dijk has argued that "political discourse is eminently ideological (Van Dijk 2003, 208)." This assertion underscores the inseparable relationship between language used in political contexts and the ideologies that underpin it.

PDA thus involves closely examining political discourse and is a critical study. Aligning with contemporary approaches in CDA, this implies that critical-political discourse analysis primarily focuses on the perpetuation of political power, instances of power abuse or domination through political discourse, and the diverse forms of resistance (Van Dijk 1997, 11). This analytical framework enables a close examination of the political discourse employed by the PMOI in relation to the Mahsa Amini protests. With PDA, one can explore power dynamics within the discourse, assessing how the PMOI establishes and utilizes its authority and whether there are signs of power abuse or dominance in its communication. The critical aspect of PDA becomes particularly relevant when investigating whether the PMOI's discourse perpetuates certain power structures and how it addresses dissent or opposition, showcasing elements of resistance or counter-power. Furthermore, PDA allows an examination of whether the PMOI's discourse attempts to dominate the narrative surrounding the Mahsa Amini protests and how it may influence public perceptions through language. PDA can thus assist in identifying recurring themes, narratives, and key terms that are central to the PMOI's ideological stance.

## **2.2: The People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran's discourse**

The PMOI, founded in the 1960s, is a prominent Iranian opposition group that emerged as a response to the authoritarian rule of the Shah of Iran (Cohen 2013, 941). Throughout its history, the PMOI has been involved in armed struggle, political activism, and opposition to the Iranian government (Cohen 2013, 942). Over the years, the PMOI has employed various strategies to reach its goals, including armed resistance, political activism, and information dissemination (Ibid.). It is crucial to understand what existing literature has stated about the discourse and narratives created by the PMOI, as it sets the context for the analysis of their depiction of the Mahsa Amini protests. By reviewing existing literature that discusses the PMOI's discourse, this chapter aims to gain insight into the typical narratives as well as linguistic patterns and themes that are used by the PMOI in various contexts. This understanding is crucial for interpreting how they depict and discuss the Mahsa Amini protests and helps establish a baseline for expectations and potential patterns in their communication style. It is however crucial to note that, as stated before, there is a lack of academic research on the PMOI.

The PMOI has undergone significant ideological shifts and strategic changes throughout its history. As stated in the introduction, the PMOI originally emerged as an Islamic Marxist movement opposing the rule of Mohammad Reza Shah, and evolved into a key player in the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran (Ibid.). However, its trajectory changed dramatically in 1981 when it openly opposed Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic government, leading to confrontations and subsequent exile. The PMOI's relocation to Iraq under Saddam Hussein's protection and its controversial alignment with Iraqi forces during the Iran-Iraq War indicate a willingness to forge alliances even if it meant siding with a former adversary (Dorraj 2006, 103). Despite facing criticism for its choices, the PMOI persisted in its anti-Iran campaign from Iraq. The attempts by the new Iraqi government to expel the PMOI further underscore the complex and often contentious nature of the group's relationship with the countries and governments it has been associated with (BBC Monitoring 2023).

In recent years, the organization has presented itself as a political force advocating for human rights, democracy, and the removal of the current Iranian government. These goals have become evident in the dissemination of information by the PMOI across diverse online media, including platforms such as X and Facebook. Scholars Marchant, Sabeti, Bowen, Kelly and Jones have posited that the PMOI has been employing such platforms as a means to spread information regarding their objectives, encompassing ideals related to democracy, human rights, and the opposition of the Iranian government (Marchant et al. 2016, 32-33). As

an illustration, the leader of the PMOI, Maryam Rajavi, stated in a post on the online platform X that “the Iranian people are determined to turn this dark page of their history and build a future based on freedom and democracy (Rajavi 2016).” This quote underscores the notion that the PMOI is presenting itself as an organization that is committed to transforming the current political landscape in Iran in a democratic manner.

Furthermore, the majority of X users supporting the PMOI primarily engage with fellow PMOI supporters and are not heavily involved within the larger network of Twitter users, and thus information can easily disseminate within the followership of the PMOI (Marchant et al. 2016, 32-33). Ideals regarding human rights are spread through influential PMOI users as they often engage with the International Human Rights community by using targeted tweets or relevant hashtags (Ibid.). Maryam Rajavi engages extensively with human rights organizations, leading her account to be associated with the Human Rights and Exiled Opposition cluster (Marchant et al. 2016, 33). These actions demonstrate the PMOI’s attempt to portray itself as a human rights advocacy organization, often sharing posts about human rights-focused events.

The notion that the goals of the PMOI currently center around human rights and democracy has additionally been put forward in Western media. As per illustration, the Guardian, a British newspaper, has published an article stating that the PMOI, a once-militant Iranian revolutionary group, has transformed from an anti-American and anti-Western organization into one that espouses democracy, human rights, and secularism (Merat 2018). The news article describes how despite exile from Iran and association with Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, the PMOI rebranded itself, gained favor with the US and EU, and was removed from the US and UK terrorist lists. It additionally states how today, the PMOI seeks to portray itself as a pro-American, democratic government-in-waiting, and it has garnered support from politicians such as John Bolton, Mike Pompeo, and Rudy Giuliani, who aim to use the group to irritate and isolate Iran (Ibid.). According to this news article, the PMOI’s capacity to overthrow the Iranian government is questioned, yet it remains part of a broader strategy to pressure Iran.

Hence, the discourse of the PMOI has evolved over the years. Originally, the PMOI had a militant and revolutionary stance, advocating for armed struggle and seeking to topple the Iranian government (Cohen 2013, 942). However, as their circumstances changed and they faced challenges, the PMOI shifted their discourse. In recent times, their focus has shifted towards democracy, human rights, but still including the overthrow of the Iranian government (Marchant et al. 2016, 32-33). This transformation reflects how their current

discourse emphasizes democratic principles and human rights in their quest for regime change in Iran. Overall, the PMOI's history reflects a dynamic and adaptable discourse shaped by changing circumstances and alliances. The shift from a militant and revolutionary stance to one that emphasizes democratic principles and human rights suggests a pragmatic approach to achieving their objectives. This adaptability can be seen as a response to challenges faced by the PMOI over the years, indicating a willingness to adjust their narrative and strategies to navigate complex political landscapes. From a broader perspective, this evolution in discourse also highlights the PMOI's recognition of the international community's values, particularly those related to democracy and human rights. By aligning their discourse with these principles, the PMOI may seek to garner support and legitimacy on the global stage, potentially influencing foreign governments and public opinion in their favor.

### **2.3: Drawing parallels with the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK)**

In the landscape of political activism and movements, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) emerges as an organization that shares intriguing parallels with the PMOI. The PKK is a Kurdish militant and political organization that aims to promote Kurdish rights and autonomy, particularly in Turkey. Both the PMOI and the PKK have faced recognition and condemnation by various governments and international organizations for its methods and goals. They have also both employed armed resistance and propaganda to advance their causes. Furthermore, both organizations rely on exile and diaspora networks, with the PKK often based in northern Iraq and the PMOI transitioning from Iraq to Albania. These shared characteristics define their struggle for political change. This literature review will present scholarly literature that has analyzed the discourse of the PKK and draw parallels with the PMOI. Examining the scholarly application of discourse analysis in the context of the PKK can provide valuable insights into the strategies employed by political organizations to achieve their objectives. By drawing parallels with a similar organization, this section aims to elucidate the methodological approach for comprehending the discourse employed by the PMOI.

One journal article entitled *The Paradox of Legitimacy: Resilience, Successes, and the Multiple Identities of the Kurdistan Workers' Party in Turkey*, written by Eric W. Schoon, explores the paradox of legitimacy and the multiple identities of the PKK in Turkey. The author collected data on the political and social history of the broader Kurdish movement, the

history of the PKK's actions and sources of support, and the discourses employed by the group over time (Schoon 2015, 271). The author constructed a history of the group's activities from its official formation in 1978 through March 2013. According to the article, the central themes that characterized the discourse of the PKK were the pursuit of Kurdish independence and the promotion of a communist revolution (Schoon 2015, 276). The organization advocates for Kurds in Turkey leading a people's revolution, which formed the basis for much of the PKK's early support, as Kurdish activists were drawn to the group's commitment to revolution as a means for achieving a separate Kurdistan. The author highlights a shift in the PKK's discourse towards pursuing peace as the path towards democratic reform, reframing the group's use of violence as reactive and their goals as peaceful (Schoon 2015, 274). Similarly, the PMOI has undergone a comparable evolution, moving away from a revolutionary stance to a commitment to achieving change through democratic means.

The article additionally notes that the discourse employed by political organizations can shift over time, and that this can have important implications for its legitimacy and resilience. The discursive history of the PKK shows that the shifts in the dominant group identities corresponded with shifting conditions in the international political climate. According to the author, the ability to adapt to changing circumstances and to frame its goals and actions in a way that resonated with its supporters and potential supporters helped the PKK to maintain its legitimacy and resilience over time (Schoon 2015, 281). In the case of the PKK, there was a shift in the organization's discourse towards pursuing peace and democratic reform, reframing the group's use of violence as reactive and their goals as peaceful (Schoon 2015, 274). This shift in discourse helped to create new expectations for the PKK's behavior, and may have contributed to its continued resilience in the face of significant challenges. Drawing parallels with the PMOI, one can discern a shared trajectory, where both the PKK and the PMOI have demonstrated the strategic importance of adapting discourse over time. This evolution, from emphasizing revolutionary methods to embracing democratic avenues, not only impacts the groups' legitimacy and resilience but also underscores their dynamic responses to changing circumstances and international political climates.

Another article that has analyzed the PKK's discourse, written by Islam Sargi, entitled *Convince me you exist. An analysis of The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) court files*, delves into the legal cases of three prominent figures within the Kurdish movement and the historical discourse that unfolded during their trials. Employing discourse analysis, the study

reveals how both the Turkish state and the PKK utilized history to substantiate or challenge the existence of Kurds, the Kurdish language, and Kurdistan (Sargi 2021, 248). Recognizing the value of discourse analysis, which evaluates the meaning, purposes, and conceptualization of any given topic, the aim of this author was to thoroughly demonstrate the subtexts of the discussions. Overall, the study applies discourse analysis to evaluate how and in which context the defendants used history in their debate. The discourse of the defendants, three prominent members of the PKK, was centered around the idea of Kurdish identity and the struggle for Kurdish rights. They used history as a means of building political memory and challenging the state's official discourse, which denied the existence of the Kurds as an ethnic-linguistic community (Sargi 2021, 255). This research thus highlights the strategic deployment of historical narratives within political discourse and the consequential impact on the collective identity of its supporters. Furthermore, it underscores the deliberate effort to foster a group identity. By building political memory, narratives that help people identify with a specific culture, community, or organization are constructed. The PMOI may similarly employ historical narratives to shape its identity and advance its objectives. The PMOI can emphasize historical instances of persecution and suppression by the Iranian government to build a narrative of victimhood and justify its resistance. By highlighting past injustices, the PMOI can aim to garner sympathy and support from both domestic and international audiences.

The articles that have explored the discourse of the PKK provide valuable insights that can be applied to the examination of the PMOI's discourse concerning the Mahsa Amini protests. Firstly, the article by Schoon highlights the importance of the ability to adapt to changing circumstances. As seen in the case of the PKK, shifts in discourse that resonated with its supporters and potential supporters helped the PKK to maintain its legitimacy and resilience over time (Schoon 2015, 281). This experience can serve as a valuable reference point for understanding how the PMOI frames its discourse, especially in response to events such as the Mahsa Amini protests. One could explore how the organization's narrative may have evolved and the impact of such changes on its objectives. The article written by Sargi, which delves into the legal cases of PKK members and their use of history in discourse, is another instructive example. This research underscores how history is employed as a tool in political discourse (Sargi 2021, 248). When applied to the case of the PMOI, a similar approach can help understand how the PMOI's discourse shapes the group identity of its supporters and how it seeks to create a sense of belonging among those who sympathize with its cause. This can involve studying the historical narratives and cultural references used in

the PMOI's discourse to unite its followers. This could further help uncover how historical narratives shape the organization's responses to the Mahsa Amini protests and how it influences the perception of its objectives. Overall, these articles serve as valuable methodological references for understanding the PMOI's communication strategies and responses to significant events in Iran.



## **Chapter 3: Historical and Political Context of the PMOI**

The history of Iran in the 20th and 21st century is marked by a series of significant events, political structures, and transformations that have shaped the context in which the PMOI operates. This chapter aims to provide a comprehensive historical overview of Iran during this period, emphasizing the key events that have influenced the dynamics and activities of the PMOI.

### **3.1: The Reign of the Shahs**

As stated before, the PMOI is a political organization that has its roots in the opposition to the former monarch or “Shah” of Iran, Reza Pahlavi, who ruled Iran from 1941 until 1979 (Cohen 2013, 941). The PMOI was founded in the 1960s and played a significant role in the revolution that overthrew the Shah. Therefore, this chapter will initiate the historical overview of Iran’s political landscape during the period of the Shahs, also known as the Pahlavi dynasty. Before the first Pahlavi rule, Iran experienced a period of “administrative chaos” in the aftermath of World War I and the Constitutional Revolution that resulted in the establishment of an Iranian parliament (Ghods 1991, 35). This “administrative chaos” was also rooted in the fragmentation of Iran’s independence and sovereignty as Russian and British troops occupied parts of the country, violating Iran’s autonomy and declared neutrality (Ibid.). Regional governments and movements in the provinces began assuming the administrative roles that had previously been the exclusive domain of Tehran (Ibid.). Hence, there was a collective desire for a centralized government and a growing dissatisfaction with the then-ruling Qajar dynasty. This dissatisfaction combined with nationalism assisted Reza Shah in his rise to power (Ibid.).

Reza Shah Pahlavi was a colonel who rose through the ranks of the Iranian military and became a key figure in the coup that overthrew the Qajar dynasty in 1925. After the coup, Reza Shah rose to power and established a centralized government (Ghods 1991, 43). He also implemented a series of reforms aimed at modernizing Iran and promoting national unity, including the adoption of Western-style schools and the promotion of Persian as the national language (Zirinsky 1992, 648). His rule thus brought about significant changes in Iran’s political and social structures. Reza Shah abdicated the throne in favor of his son, Mohammad Reza Shah, in 1941. After World War II, he embarked on a program of modernization and development known as the “White Revolution,” which included land reforms and industrialization (Ansari 2001, 2). His reign saw close ties with Western powers,

particularly the United States, and significant foreign influence in Iran (Cottam 1980, 125-126).

It is further vital to note that the regimes of Reza Shah and Mohammad Reza Pahlavi have been described as authoritarian and have led to the suppression of human rights through a range of methods, with the Shahs' governments gaining notoriety for employing torture, unjust detentions, and summary executions (Cottam 1980, 121). Hence, the two Shahs of Iran faced criticism for their authoritarian rule, perceived disregard for human rights, and their close ties with Western powers, which some saw as compromising Iran's sovereignty (Cottam 1980, 125). These criticisms ultimately played a role in the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which led to the overthrow of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi and the establishment of the Islamic Republic under the leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

The reign of the Shahs had a significant influence on how the PMOI was established and how its ideology, particularly regarding human rights, was shaped. According to scholar Ronen A. Cohen, the PMOI originated with the aim of opposing the Shah and specifically his 'White Revolution (Cohen 2013, 941).' Comprised mainly of middle-class students, the PMOI sought to overthrow the monarchy through any means necessary (Ibid.). In the late 1960s and 1970s, the group focused on developing ideological views related to social and religious issues, rather than human rights. The Shah's oppressive regime and frequent human rights violations in the 1970s led to a growing awareness of human rights among the Iranian people. In the late 1970s, during President Carter's term, a new human rights trend emerged. Carter's stance on human rights influenced opposition groups, such as the PMOI, to adopt human rights slogans without necessarily integrating them into their political ideology. This shift allowed the PMOI and similar groups to leverage international attention and support, particularly when confronting the Shah's regime, as Carter restrained the Shah's actions against opposition groups (Ibid.). Consequently, the PMOI began advocating for human rights without explicitly incorporating them into their political manifesto.

### **3.2: The 1979 Islamic Revolution**

The year 1979 marked a turning point in the history of Iran, as a profound transformation of the nation's political structure occurred through the Islamic Revolution. This revolution, led by the influential figure of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, shook the foundations of the existing order. Khomeini, a charismatic and influential Shia cleric, became the spiritual and political leader of the revolution (Arjomand 2009, 132). He had spent many years in exile, primarily in Najaf, Iraq, where he criticized the Shah's regime and promoted the idea of an

Islamic government (Corboz 2015, 221). In early 1978, a series of protests and demonstrations criticizing the Shah's regime gained momentum throughout the year and ultimately led to the overthrow of the Shah. An Islamic Republic was established and religious clerics ascended, playing a central role in shaping the new government (Arjomand 2009, 136). Ayatollah Khomeini emerged as the Supreme Leader, while a theocratic system was put in place, blending Islamic principles with governance. Politically, the revolution marked the end of the Pahlavi dynasty, which had been characterized by authoritarian rule and close alignment with Western powers, particularly the United States (Cottam 1980, 125).

One significant consequence of the revolution was the implementation of Islamic law and the consolidation of power by clerics in Iran. The new government sought to uphold the principles of Islamic governance, with religious authorities exercising considerable influence over all aspects of public life (Arjomand 1986, 403). The legal system was overhauled to align with Islamic jurisprudence, resulting in changes to family law, criminal law, and the judicial system. This included stricter adherence to Islamic moral codes, which affected daily life for Iranians. The new government's emphasis on Islamic principles specifically targeted stricter enforcement of gender segregation in public spaces and conservative dress codes. Women were required to wear the hijab and dress modestly in accordance with Islamic traditions. Gender segregation was enforced in many public places, including schools, universities, and workplaces, affecting the social dynamics and interactions between men and women.

The PMOI, which had been critical of the Pahlavi monarchy, initially lent its support to the revolutionary movement, sharing the common goal of ending monarchical rule. Scholar Ronen A. Cohen has argued that the Islamic Revolution of 1979, led by Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers, utilized opposition groups such as the PMOI to achieve its goal of overthrowing the Shah's monarchy (Cohen 2013, 941). However, after 18 months of seeking a role in the new political landscape, the PMOI realized that Khomeini and the Revolutionary Council had no intention of allowing them or other opposition groups to participate in the leadership of the new regime. Along with other expelled groups, the PMOI concluded that their only option, given their exclusion from political involvement, was to resort to armed opposition against the new regime (Cohen 2013, 942).

In response to persecution by the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), the PMOI, which had moved to France in 1981, began using human rights issues as a propaganda tool. Particularly focusing on executions in the late 1980s, the PMOI organized international protests against the persecution of its members and the violation of Iranian citizens' human rights (Ibid.).

During a session of the European Parliament in 1989, PMOI leader Massoud Rajavi dispatched a list of 1,107 executed members and supporters of the PMOI to the UN Secretary-General, Javier Pérez de Cuéllar (Cohen 2013, 947). In his communication, Rajavi detailed the atrocities committed by Khomeini's regime against its citizens. He drew parallels between Khomeini's rule and that of Hitler, citing characteristics such as cruelty and genocide, including the use of gas for mass killings, the existence of mass graves, public executions, and the burial of victims while still alive (Ibid.). Overall, one can argue that the PMOI's evolution was shaped by its exclusion from the political process after the Islamic Revolution, leading it to employ armed resistance and human rights advocacy against the new regime.

### **3.3: The Iran-Iraq war**

One of the defining events of the 20th century for Iran was the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). The conflict, initiated by Iraq's then-leader, Saddam Hussein, brought tremendous challenges to Iran. The roots of the conflict can be traced to historical animosities and disputes over territory and water rights, particularly the Shatt al-Arab waterway, that had long been sources of friction (Amin 1982, 193). Iraq also contested Iran's control over the oil-rich province of Khuzestan (Ibid.). The war was additionally rooted in ideological differences. The ideological dimension was heightened by the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution, which established the IRI under the leadership of Shiite Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. This development alarmed Saddam Hussein, who was a Sunni Muslim. He feared that the revolution in Iran, with its Shiite Islamic character, could inspire Shiite Muslims in Iraq and threaten his regime (Amin 1982, 211). Saddam Hussein's Iraq launched a full-scale invasion of Iran on September 22, 1980. The initial target was Iran's oil-rich province of Khuzestan (Ibid.). The war endured for eight years, marked by extensive loss of life and significant destruction.

The conflict was characterized by trench warfare, the use of chemical weapons, and large-scale human wave attacks. Both sides suffered heavy casualties, with millions of people killed or injured. The war took a significant economic toll, with severe damage to infrastructure and economies in both countries. The international community became involved in the war, with various nations supporting one side or the other. The United States and Western countries provided aid to Iraq, while Iran received support from countries such as Syria and Libya. This international involvement added a geopolitical dimension to the war, with the U.S. and the Soviet Union engaged in diplomatic efforts.

The emphasis on human rights intensified when the organization relocated to Iraq in 1986. In Iraq, the PMOI settled along the Iraqi-Iranian border and actively participated in the conflict against Iranian military forces. However, this move to fight against their own nation led to widespread denunciation from the Iranian people, viewing it as a betrayal and collaboration with Saddam Hussein, their perceived enemy. The PMOI lost credibility and was met with hatred and disgust among the Iranian populace (Cohen 2013, 942). While Iran was fighting with Iraq, the IRI engaged in an internal struggle against those opposing the Velayat-e Faqih (rule of the jurisprudent) ideal. In 1986, the PMOI's leader, Massoud Rajavi, accused the Republic of killing 50,000 oppositionists, using various torture techniques against prisoners. Rajavi claimed that 90% of those executed were PMOI members and supporters, with the Republic holding 140,000 political prisoners (Ibid.). In response, the PMOI's Iranian cells carried out military activities against the Republic's perceived oppressors, targeting executioners and torture agents. The PMOI aimed to instill fear and avenge the deaths of their comrades in this phase of the struggle against the Republic (Ibid.).

It is further important to note that the PMOI operated from Camp Ashraf in Iraq, near the border with Iran. The camp served as their headquarters and was the location where they surrendered to US forces after the invasion of Iraq in 2003. They were disarmed and confined in Camp Ashraf (Thorp 2009, 1). The Iraqi government, which took control of the camp in 2009, intended to close it and expel all PMOI personnel from Iraqi territory. Reports from individuals who left the camp voluntarily highlight concerns about "brainwashing," forced indoctrination, and harsh treatment by the PMOI for those wishing to depart (Ibid.). These reports raise questions about the internal practices of the organization. Human Rights Watch has also interviewed former PMOI members about supposed human rights abuses in Camp Ashraf. The reported abuses encompass "prolonged incommunicado and solitary confinement," with three distinct types of detention facilities identified: guesthouses for those leaving the organization in which they were isolated or detained, "small pre-fabricated trailer rooms" for solitary confinement as punishment, and secret prisons primarily used for political dissidents (Human Rights Watch 2005). Former members testified to reduced food rations, beatings, verbal abuse, threats of execution, and intimidation (Ibid.).

Hence, the Iran-Iraq War created a complex geopolitical environment in the region, and the PMOI faced a pivotal moment when it relocated to Iraq in 1986. However, this move led to widespread denunciation within Iran, with many perceiving it as a betrayal (Cohen 2013, 942). Furthermore, the PMOI accused the IRI of killing oppositionists and engaging in widespread human rights abuses. This accusation triggered military activities by the PMOI's

Iranian cells against perceived oppressors within the IRI (Ibid.). This indicates a willingness to engage in armed opposition against the Iranian government, suggesting a militant aspect to the organization's activities. The PMOI operated from Camp Ashraf in Iraq during and after the war, which is a place that received increased attention due to reports and testimonies from individuals who left Camp Ashraf. Allegations included "brainwashing," forced indoctrination, and harsh treatment for those wishing to leave the organization (Human Rights Watch 2005). The denunciation of the PMOI's move to Iraq and the allegations surrounding Camp Ashraf contributed to a negative public image. This could impact the organization's ability to garner support and legitimacy, both within Iran and internationally.

### **3.4: Post-War Iran**

In the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war the PMOI also continued its activities from abroad, particularly in Europe. As the PMOI experienced a decline in credibility within Iran as a result of siding with Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war, it sought to restore its reputation by emphasizing human rights concerns in its international discourse (Cohen 2013, 943). This involved addressing the global community and the Iranian government regarding the alleged human rights violations taking place within Iran. In essence, the PMOI attempted to regain influence and support by focusing on the human rights narrative on the international stage, aiming to draw attention to perceived injustices within the country. It sought to garner international support, particularly in Western countries. The PMOI consistently accused the IRI of human rights violations, successfully bringing the issue to the attention of international bodies such as the United Nations, European Union, European Parliament, the American Congress, and Senate, as well as various Western governments (Cohen 2013, 952).

Scholar Fred Halliday, in his article on human rights in the Islamic Middle East, asserts that groups, victimized by regimes invoking Islam for legitimacy, often employ universalistic language to contest the legitimacy of such repressive regimes (Halliday 1995, 156). As per illustration, he notes that the PMOI has adapted Quranic quotations into secular terms (Ibid.). This ties into scholar Ronen A. Cohen's argument, which states that the PMOI has strategically used the human rights discourse to garner political support for its objective of overthrowing and replacing the IRI regime (Cohen 2013, 953). Building on Halliday's article, Cohen claims that three key elements in this approach are evident: first, the PMOI engaged in the international discourse on human rights; second, the human rights argument, particularly from the PMOI's perspective, was heavily influenced by Western ideas and terminology; third, the use of the human rights issue served as a tool to criticize the Iranian

government and expose its perceived cruelty to the global community (Ibid.). Additionally, this strategy was utilized to exert pressure on the IRI to diminish or cease human rights violations and, simultaneously, to push international bodies to impose diplomatic and economic sanctions on Iran (Ibid.). The human rights issue thus served as a dual tool, to criticize the Iranian government for perceived cruelty and to exert pressure on the IRI to curtail violations while urging international bodies to impose diplomatic and economic sanctions on Iran.

The PMOI continues to try to persuade international bodies to impose sanctions as Iran's contemporary political landscape is characterized by a wave of civil unrest and protests, which were ignited following the detention of Mahsa Amini on September 13, 2022. Mahsa Amini's arrest, stemming from alleged violations of Iran's mandatory hijab law while she was visiting Tehran from Saqqez, led to her being severely beaten by the Guidance Patrol officers, an incident denied by Iranian authorities. Amini subsequently collapsed, was hospitalized, and passed away three days later. In response, protests began in Saqqez, spreading to other cities in Iranian Kurdistan and throughout the country. The government reacted with measures such as widespread internet blackouts, nationwide restrictions on social media usage, as well as the use of tear gas and gunfire (Khatam 2023, 299). The protests in response to her death are still ongoing, with fluctuating intensity.

## **Chapter 4: Analyzing the PMOI's discourse on the Mahsa Amini protests**

This chapter presents a discourse analysis of the PMOI's portrayal of the 2022-2023 Mahsa Amini protests. Discourse analysis provides a lens to examine the language, symbols, and societal constructs utilized by the PMOI in narrating the protests, unveiling the ideologies, power dynamics, and motivations shaping their representation. The data under examination spans written, spoken, and visual materials produced by the PMOI about the Mahsa Amini protests, encompassing news articles published on their website, a video of a speech given by their leader Maryam Rajavi, and social media posts. This diversity of written, spoken, and visual elements ensures a comprehensive understanding of the PMOI's narrative construction. Identifying keywords, metaphors, and recurring themes is pivotal for deciphering the PMOI's stance and focal points in their depiction of the Mahsa Amini protests.

### **4.1: The PMOI's website**

The PMOI's website serves as a platform for conveying the organization's perspective on political events, human rights issues, and the socio-political landscape in Iran. The PMOI utilizes its website to share news, statements, and analyses that align with its ideological stance. With a focus on advocating for political change and human rights in Iran, the PMOI's website often features narratives emphasizing the organization's commitment to democracy, gender equality, and the protection of individual freedoms. Users can find a range of content, mostly reports on events within Iran. Two articles focusing on the Mahsa Amini protests were selected.

One article posted on the PMOI's website presents a detailed narrative of Mahsa Amini's arrest, beating, and subsequent death, along with the reactions and protests that followed. The article strongly condemns the actions of the Iranian government, particularly the Guidance Patrol, and calls for the disbandment of the Patrol (People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran 2022). It employs highly emotive language to convey a narrative of shock and condemnation surrounding the tragic incident involving Mahsa Amini. The use of terms such as "barbaric crime", "tyranny" and vivid descriptions of Amini's brutal treatment aims to elicit strong emotional reactions from readers, creating a sense of outrage and urgency. The article also includes an image of Mahsa Amini in the hospital bed. She appears unconscious, intubated, and has multiple intravenous lines. The visual portrayal of Mahsa



Amini in a vulnerable state, unconscious, and connected to medical equipment aims to evoke strong emotional responses from the audience. The image likely intends to elicit empathy and sympathy for her situation.

One prominent theme in this article is the focus on women's rights and the alleged oppression faced by Iranian women under the guidance of the regime. By portraying Mahsa Amini as a victim of the "misogynistic Guidance Patrol" and emphasizing the brutality faced by a young woman, the article seeks to draw attention to broader issues of gender-based violence and discrimination within the Iranian context. One can argue that this focus on women's suffering is intended to garner sympathy and support for the cause against the perceived oppressive regime. The article strategically juxtaposes the actions of the Iranian government, particularly the Guidance Patrol and security forces, as morally reprehensible ("evil and misogynous regime") against the resilience and resistance of Iranian women. The use of terms such as "courageous women" and "resistant and resilient" creates a clear dichotomy between the perceived virtues of the female population and the alleged oppressive forces they are up against. The characterization of the Iranian government's actions as an "evil and misogynous regime" intensifies the negative portrayal, positioning the regime as morally reprehensible. This framing is likely intended to mobilize readers emotionally and morally against the perceived oppressors. The rest of the article shows videos of protests occurring across Iran, highlighting and repeating anti-regime slogans that protestors are saying, such as "Death to Khamenei!", "Death to the oppressor!", "Death to the dictator!", and "Khamenei is a murderer & his rule is unjustified!" The repetition of anti-regime slogans in the article serves to emphasize the strength and unity of the dissenting voices. The use of exclamation marks adds a rhetorical intensity to the slogans, portraying a sense of urgency or strong sentiment.

Another article on their website, titled "Iranians across Europe and NY condemn Mahsa Amini's killing by mullahs' regime," describes rallies held by "freedom-loving Iranians and supporters of the Iranian opposition People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI/MEK)" in various cities across Europe, New York, and Toronto (People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran 2022). The use of the term "freedom-loving Iranians" positions the participants and supporters of the PMOI as individuals who value freedom. This choice of language seeks to associate the organization with a positive and desirable quality, framing it as a champion of freedom. This framing additionally suggests that the PMOI positions itself as not just an isolated group but as a representative or spokesperson for a broader category of Iranians. Furthermore, referring to the PMOI as the "Iranian opposition People's Mojahedin

Organization of Iran (PMOI/MEK)” establishes its legitimacy as an opposition group, reinforcing its role as a dissenting force.

The main focus of the rallies discussed in this article is also the condemnation of the killing of Mahsa Amini. The rallies additionally express opposition to Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and call for the denial of his visa for the upcoming United Nations General Assembly. Several key themes and rhetorical strategies are employed in the text. One theme is the denunciation of the regime’s actions. The use of phrases such as “regime’s so-called ‘morality police’” and “mullahs’ regime” reflects a negative portrayal of the Iranian government. The article additionally accuses the Iranian regime of supporting global terrorism, reflecting a broader narrative against the regime’s international behavior. The article juxtaposes this regime against the protests who are referred to as “freedom-loving Iranians.” By using the term “freedom-loving,” Rajavi appeals to individuals who share a common desire for freedom and democracy. This identification strategy aims to unite those who yearn for political change in Iran under a common banner.

The article additionally showcases pictures of protests, signs that demonstrators hold and the slogans that they chant. The demonstrators chant slogans against Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and President Ebrahim Raisi, calling for their downfall. The use of phrases such as “Death to Khamenei and Raisi” expresses strong opposition to the leadership. The chanting of “Death to Khamenei and Rais” is a strong and emotive expression of opposition towards the Supreme Leader and the President. These slogans are often repeated in the article. The article additionally mentions how demonstrators express support for “Iranian Resistance Leader Massoud Rajavi and NCRI President-elect Maryam Rajavi,” thus aligning the demonstrators with the PMOI. Furthermore, the text highlights the support for the PMOI’s expanding network of “Resistance Units” within Iran, indicating a focus on internal opposition and resistance against the regime. However, there is selective absence of references to alternative slogans, such as those advocating for the return of the Shah, which indicates a deliberate emphasis on specific narratives (Iran International 2023). This observation suggests a strategic decision in shaping the discourse surrounding the protests.

Both articles share a common theme of denouncing the Iranian government. The first article employs a more personal and emotionally charged narrative, emphasizing the predicaments of an individual (Mahsa Amini) to draw attention to broader human rights issues, especially women’s rights. The primary focus is on the emotional impact of Mahsa Amini’s tragic incident. The use of highly emotive language and the inclusion of a poignant image aim to evoke strong emotions, creating a personal connection with the victim. The

narrative centers around the individual, emphasizing the human cost of perceived oppression. The thematic framing in the first article revolves around women's rights and gender-based violence. Mahsa Amini is portrayed as a symbol of the broader struggles faced by Iranian women. The narrative seeks to garner support for the cause against gender-based oppression, aligning the organization with the promotion of women's rights. The second article focuses on external rallies and demonstrations, emphasizing the widespread opposition to the regime across different locations. It underscores the intensity of this opposition through repeated anti-regime slogans and calls for the downfall of leaders. While emotions are still present, the emphasis is on the collective expression of opposition through widespread demonstrations. Anti-regime slogans and calls for the downfall of leaders are used to amplify the intensity of the collective sentiment. The thematic framing in this article focuses on external opposition and resistance against the regime. The focus is on denouncing the regime's actions, particularly in the context of Mahsa Amini's killing, and calling for the downfall of leadership. The emphasis is on a unified, collective opposition to the perceived oppressive regime. However, by omitting other slogans or viewpoints, those driving the narrative can effectively control the messaging and steer public perception towards particular themes or objectives. This selective focus underscores the intricacies of narrative construction within protest movements and highlights the role of media and discourse in shaping collective understanding and interpretation of events.

One can thus argue that the PMOI strategically employs emotive language, visual elements, and thematic framing to construct a narrative that condemns the Iranian regime, particularly in the context of Mahsa Amini's incident. The organization leverages these narratives to garner sympathy, support for women's rights, and mobilize opposition against the perceived oppressive regime, both internally and externally. The discourse reflects a multifaceted strategy that combines emotional appeal with political messaging to shape perceptions and influence public opinion. The PMOI strategically juxtaposes the actions of the Iranian government, as morally reprehensible ("evil and misogynous regime") against the "freedom-loving Iranians" and the "resilient and resistant" Iranian women. It aims to garner support by framing the struggle as one between oppressive forces and those fighting for freedom and justice. This dichotomy helps the PMOI in mobilizing sympathizers and allies who identify with the values of democracy, human rights, and freedom. Additionally, by portraying the Iranian government in starkly negative terms, the PMOI seeks to delegitimize the regime both at home and abroad, further legitimizing its own oppositional stance and presenting itself as the rightful alternative to the existing government. Ultimately, this

strategic juxtaposition serves to shape public perception, reinforce the PMOI's ideological narrative, and mobilize support for its cause.

#### **4.2: Maryam Rajavi's speech**

This thesis will additionally analyze a speech given by Maryam Rajavi, the leader of the PMOI, to Iranian demonstrators in Brussels (Rajavi 2023). This speech was selected as it is dedicated to reflecting on the anniversary of the start of the Mahsa Amini protests. It addresses a range of themes including sacrifice, resistance, the current state of the Iranian regime, and the ongoing struggle for freedom. Maryam Rajavi's message aims to inspire and unify supporters, projecting a narrative of continuous defiance against the perceived oppressive regime and outlining a vision for the future triumph of the democratic revolution in Iran.

The speech begins with Maryam Rajavi addressing "freedom-loving compatriots" and "ardent supporters of the Iranian Resistance." She initiates the speech by invoking the name of freedom and dedicating her words to those who sacrificed for this cause. Rajavi acknowledges the brave individuals who participated in the uprising, highlighting the courage of women, the resilience of prisoners, and the commitment of Resistance Units. The opening sets a tone of reverence for those who have fought against the Iranian government, framing the speech as a tribute to their efforts and a call to continue the struggle for freedom. Rajavi consistently uses negative terms to describe the Iranian regime, including "palaces of tyranny", "suppression of the clerics", "Khamenei and his ruthless IRGC", and "bloodthirsty figures like Ebrahim Raisi (the current president of Iran)." This language positions the regime as an oppressive force and reinforces the need for resistance.

In her speech, Rajavi additionally uses powerful and emotive language such as the "750 heroic martyrs" and the "bloody Friday in Zahedan." Rajavi refers to "those 750 heroic martyrs" who presumably lost their lives in the context of the uprising, describing them as "the brave prisoners who, in the dungeons of Lakan and Evin, saw their wards set ablaze in the regime's plot yet still resisted." The number 750 and the term "heroic martyrs" evoke a sense of sacrifice and heroism, suggesting a significant and tragic loss of life in the pursuit of freedom. The prisoners' resistance symbolizes unwavering determination and courage even in the face of extreme adversity. The setting of dungeons reinforces the notion of the harsh conditions under which this resistance occurs. The term "bloody Friday in Zahedan" refers to the violent crackdown on protestors that occurred on September 30, 2022. This symbolizes the brutality of the regime's response to dissent and opposition, emphasizing the sacrifices

made by those who stood against it. These symbols create a vivid and emotional narrative, reinforcing the notion of sacrifice and resistance. Emotional language is prevalent, emphasizing bravery, sacrifice, and the resilience of the Iranian people. The mention of innocent children affected by violence and the valiant members of the Resistance Units contributes to an emotional appeal aimed at mobilizing sentiments.

Furthermore, Maryam Rajavi employs strategies of identification and solidarity by consistently addressing and acknowledging various groups within the Iranian population. This approach serves to create a sense of shared identity and unity among different segments of society, aligning them with the goals and aspirations of the PMOI. The speech repeatedly addresses various groups, including freedom-loving Iranians, supporters of the Iranian Resistance, women, prisoners, and demonstrators. The speech is directed at “women who have courageously led the fight against the Khomeini and Khamenei regimes,” “the resilient prisoners who endure torture and harassment without forsaking their principles,” “the Resistance Units, who illuminate the path and guide the uprising,” and “the ardent supporters of the Iranian Resistance.” One could argue that this consistent addressing of different groups creates a narrative of inclusivity and shared purpose. It aims to unite a diverse range of individuals under the umbrella of the PMOI’s cause, fostering a sense of collective identity and solidarity in the face of the common struggle against the Iranian regime.

At the end, the speech looks toward the future, anticipating another uprising. Rajavi indicates that “Khamenei and his ruthless IRGC are well aware that another uprising is looming, yet they are powerless to prevent it.” She mentions how “the same factors and motivations that created the uprising of 2022-2023 are at work with even greater intensity.” Rajavi thus suggests that the underlying factors and motivations behind the previous uprising are not only persisting but are intensifying. This foreshadows a potential escalation of societal discontent and opposition to the regime, creating an atmosphere conducive to another uprising. The speech strategically frames the PMOI as a leading force against the regime, highlighting its role in guiding the uprising and presenting the resistance as “the architect of uprising.” The mention of Massoud Rajavi and how he has “opened the path for a democratic revolution and laid the foundation for its victory” and the emphasis on the democratic revolution positions the PMOI as a credible alternative. Rajavi concludes with a clear call to action, stating that the democratic revolution of the people of Iran will triumph. This rallying cry serves to motivate and energize the audience, emphasizing the organization’s confidence in the eventual success of its cause.

A video of Maryam Rajavi giving this speech was posted on her YouTube account. The video shows protesters in Brussels holding Iranian flags and posters with pictures of Maryam Rajavi (Rajavi 2023). The presence of Iranian flags and posters featuring pictures of Maryam Rajavi symbolizes solidarity, allegiance, and identification with the PMOI's leadership. The flags represent a collective identity tied to the Iranian nation, while the posters elevate Maryam Rajavi as a central figure in the movement. On the street where the protesters are is a large screen on which there is a video of Maryam Rajavi giving the speech. The video emphasizes the visual presence of Maryam Rajavi on the large screen, highlighting her role as a key leader and symbol of the movement. This visual reinforcement contributes to the construction of her charismatic authority within the discourse. It amplifies her message and creates a shared experience for the protesters, reinforcing a sense of unity and common purpose. The video ends zooming out of the screen and focusing on a sign that says "notre choix es Maryam Rajavi," meaning our choice is Maryam Rajavi. The sign explicitly states the protesters' allegiance. The use of the word "choix" (choice) suggests a deliberate and voluntary decision, framing support for Maryam Rajavi as a conscious and purposeful commitment.

Hence, the speech underscores the themes of resistance and sacrifice, particularly through powerful symbols such as the "750 heroic martyrs" and the reference to the "bloody Friday in Zahedan." These symbols create a vivid and emotional narrative, reinforcing the notion of sacrifice and resilience in the face of oppression. The overarching theme is the continuous struggle for freedom against what is portrayed as an oppressive regime. The negative language used to describe the Iranian government, terms such as "palaces of tyranny" and "bloodthirsty figures," serves to intensify the perceived need for ongoing resistance. The choice of language is critical in framing the discourse. Negative and emotive terms are consistently employed to depict the Iranian regime, portraying it as an oppressive force. This language is intended to evoke strong emotional reactions, fostering a sense of urgency and moral outrage among the audience. By anticipating another uprising and suggesting that the motivations behind the previous uprising are intensifying, the speech projects a sense of inevitability. This foreshadowing creates an atmosphere conducive to further mobilization and resistance, positioning the PMOI as a leading force in guiding future uprisings.

### **4.3: Social media platform X**

The PMOI has emerged as a prominent and active presence on social media platform X, leveraging the digital landscape to disseminate information about the Mahsa Amini protests. With a consistent focus on sharing updates from these demonstrations, the PMOI utilizes its platform to shed light on the ongoing dissent against the Iranian regime. This section will delve into three posts that showcase the PMOI's strategic use of social media, examining how they frame the Mahsa Amini protests, emphasize key messages, and engage their audience. Through a detailed examination of these posts, the discursive strategies employed by the PMOI to shape the narrative surrounding the protests and their broader implications can be explored.

On X, the PMOI often posts about the Mahsa Amini protests. This series of social media posts by the PMOI on platform X presents a discourse that is consistent in its framing of the Mahsa Amini protests (People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran 2023). All posts include the date written out. The use of specific dates, such as September 16, October 1, and October 5, constructs a temporal narrative that links the events and emphasizes their continuity. Each post specifies the location of the protests (Tehran, Kermanshah, Sanandaj), providing a geographical context. This geographical framing suggests a widespread and ongoing dissent against the regime across different regions of Iran. The mention of locals in Ekbatan district, Kermanshah, and Sanandaj emphasizes the grassroots nature of the protests. This framing suggests that the dissent is not confined to specific demographics but represents a collective voice of Iranians across different regions.

Furthermore, all posts include a statement of what the protesters chanted. The consistent highlighting of such anti-regime slogans such as "Death to the dictator!" and "Down with Khamenei the murderer!" in multiple posts serves to create a thematic continuity. Repetition of these slogans reinforces a unified message across various protests, emphasizing a shared sentiment against the Iranian leadership. The inclusion of slogans specifically targeting figures such as Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, and using strong language such as "murderer" indicates a focused effort to delegitimize and criticize key figures in the Iranian government. This can be a part of the PMOI's broader strategy to discredit the leadership and sway public opinion against them. The absence of mentions of other slogans, for example of protesters calling for the return of the Shah, suggests a selective narrative focus (Iran International 2023). This strategic silence may serve to downplay or ignore dissenting voices within the protests that do not align with the PMOI's primary anti-regime narrative. This draws attention to the selective nature of the narrative being presented

and implies that the narrative being constructed is intentionally focused on specific themes or perspectives while excluding others.

The posts additionally all include a video of the protesters. The inclusion of visual elements, particularly videos, within these posts adds a compelling layer to the discourse surrounding the Mahsa Amini protests. Visual content possesses a unique ability to provide a direct and vivid portrayal of the events, offering viewers a first-hand glimpse into the protests and the sentiments expressed by the participants. This visual component serves as tangible evidence, potentially exerting a profound impact on how the audience interprets and engages with the information presented.

It is significant to note that Mahsa Amini is consistently mentioned in the posts, linking the protests directly to her tragic death. This connection serves to memorialize Mahsa Amini and associates the protests with a specific cause, contributing to a narrative of resistance against perceived injustice. The use of hashtags such as #IranProtests, #IranProtests2022, #IranRevolution, and #مهسا\_امینی (Mahsa Amini in Persian) serves both as organizational tools and discursive elements. They categorize the content within broader narratives of protest and revolution. The choice of phrases such as “Down with Khamenei the murderer!” characterizes the regime in negative terms, portraying it as oppressive and responsible for Mahsa Amini’s death. This characterization contributes to a broader discourse of resistance against an alleged tyrannical authority.

Hence, in crafting their narrative surrounding the Mahsa Amini protests, the PMOI strategically weaves together various elements to reinforce a compelling and consistent message. Through the deliberate use of specific dates and locations, the PMOI constructs a temporal and geographical continuity, emphasizing the ongoing nature of dissent against the Iranian regime across diverse regions. The grassroots nature of the protests is highlighted by mentioning locals in specific districts, conveying a sense of collective Iranian voice transcending demographic boundaries. The organization employs visual content, particularly videos, to add a vivid and impactful layer to the narrative, providing viewers with a first-hand look into the protests and the emotions of the participants. The consistent use of anti-regime slogans in multiple posts creates thematic continuity, reinforcing a unified message against the Iranian leadership and contributing to the portrayal of a broad-based movement. Selective narrative focus, notably the absence of dissenting voices, and the strategic use of hashtags serve to categorize the content within broader narratives of protest and revolution. By memorializing Mahsa Amini and associating the protests with her tragic death, the PMOI aims to shape a narrative that positions the demonstrations as part of a larger, principled



resistance against perceived injustice, ultimately framing it as aligning with the organization's objectives and framing the protests as integral to a broader movement challenging the Iranian regime.

#### **4.4: Empirical results & analysis**

Based on the discourse analysis of the PMOI regarding the Mahsa Amini protests, the organization strategically employs language, visual elements, and thematic framing to construct a narrative condemning the Iranian regime. The discourse focuses on emotional appeal, emphasizing human rights violations, particularly in the context of women's rights. The PMOI utilizes highly emotive language, vivid descriptions, and visual elements to evoke strong emotional reactions, aiming to garner sympathy and support for its cause.

In the analysis of the PMOI's website content, the organization employs a multifaceted strategy. One article emphasizes an individual narrative, portraying Mahsa Amini as a symbol of broader struggles faced by Iranian women. This narrative seeks to mobilize support for women's rights and portrays the Iranian government as morally reprehensible. Another article shifts the focus to external rallies, highlighting widespread opposition to the regime and employing negative terms to denounce the Iranian government's actions. Maryam Rajavi's speech further contributes to the discourse, emphasizing themes of resistance and sacrifice. Rajavi uses powerful and emotive language, symbolic references to sacrifices, and strategies of identification to unify different segments of society under the PMOI's cause. The speech anticipates another uprising, projecting confidence in the eventual triumph of the democratic revolution in Iran. On social media platform X, the PMOI consistently frames the Mahsa Amini protests as part of an ongoing and widespread movement against the Iranian regime. Specific dates, locations, slogans, and visual elements are employed to establish a narrative emphasizing continuity, unity, and resistance against perceived injustices. The use of hashtags and anti-regime slogans reinforces a unified message across various protests, contributing to a broader discourse of opposition and resistance.

In the discourse analysis of the PMOI regarding the Mahsa Amini protests, Teun A. van Dijk's framework of PDA sheds light on the organization's strategic use of language, visual elements, and thematic framing to reinforce its ideological and political power (Van Dijk 1997, 11). Van Dijk's emphasis on the reproduction of political power through discourse aligns with the PMOI's approach. The organization strategically employs language to construct a narrative that condemns the Iranian regime, focusing on emotional appeal and

human rights violations, particularly in the realm of women's rights. The use of highly emotive language, vivid descriptions, and visual elements serves the purpose of influencing public opinion and garnering support for its cause, in line with van Dijk's characterization of propaganda as a discursive-political process (Van Dijk 1997, 22). The discourse analysis thus indicates that the PMOI strategically uses language, visual elements, and thematic framing to construct a narrative that condemns the Iranian regime, emphasizing human rights violations, women's rights, and the collective struggle for freedom. The organization leverages emotional appeal and symbolic references to shape perceptions, mobilize support, and influence public opinion. The discourse analysis, viewed through the lens of van Dijk's PDA, unveils the PMOI's systematic and strategic use of language and visual elements to reinforce its ideological and political power. The analysis underscores how the PMOI employs discourse to shape perceptions, mobilize support, and influence public opinion, in accordance with the objectives of PDA.

The PMOI's unique approach lies in its ability to blend emotional appeal, relying on strong visual elements and emotive language, with political messaging, creating a narrative that reinforces its ideological and political power. By centering the discourse around Mahsa Amini's tragic incident and juxtaposing it against the Iranian government that is described in highly negative terms, for example portraying it as a consequence of the "misogynistic Guidance Patrol," the organization directs attention to broader issues of gender-based violence and discrimination in Iran. This targeted narrative serves a dual purpose: it not only garners sympathy for Amini's plight but also positions the PMOI as a champion of women's rights, contributing to a broader cause against perceived gender-based oppression. Furthermore, the PMOI positions itself as a central figure in the opposition movement both internally and externally. The PMOI carefully constructs narratives around the Mahsa Amini protests to emphasize its role as a champion of human rights, particularly women's rights. By highlighting emotional stories and portraying itself as a defender against perceived injustices perpetrated by the Iranian regime, the PMOI seeks to garner sympathy and support, thus solidifying its position as a leader in the opposition movement. By consistently referring to the protests as actions by "freedom-loving Iranians" and "supporters of the Iranian opposition," the organization associates itself with positive qualities and reinforces its legitimacy as a dissenting force. The strategic use of hashtags and slogans serves to categorize the content within broader narratives of protest and revolution, aligning the Mahsa Amini protests with the PMOI's long-standing objectives. This deliberate effort to shape the

narrative positions the PMOI as a leader, unifier, and representative of the opposition movement against the Iranian regime.

## Conclusion

The discourse analysis of the PMOI regarding the 2022-2023 Mahsa Amini protests unveils a multifaceted narrative that strategically blends emotional appeal, political messaging, and visual elements. The complex nature of this discourse reflects the PMOI's adept use of language to reinforce its ideological and political power. This conclusion synthesizes the key findings from the analysis, underscores the evolving nature of the PMOI's discourse over time, explores the academic and societal relevance of the research, and explains how the PMOI utilizes the Mahsa Amini protests to position itself as a leader in the Iranian opposition movement.

Examining the PMOI's historical discourse provides valuable insights into the organization's adaptive strategies. Originally maintaining a militant and revolutionary stance, advocating armed struggle for regime change, the PMOI has undergone a transformation in recent times. The focus has shifted towards democratic principles and human rights, though the objective of overthrowing the Iranian government persists (Cohen 2013, 941). This evolution reflects the PMOI's pragmatism and adaptability in navigating changing circumstances and alliances. Aligning their discourse with international values, particularly those related to democracy and human rights, indicates a strategic recognition of global norms and a pursuit of legitimacy on the international stage (Merat 2018).

The backdrop of the Mahsa Amini protests serves as a critical lens through which the PMOI shapes its discourse. The events following Mahsa Amini's death in police custody triggered widespread civil unrest, exposing the vulnerabilities and challenges faced by the Iranian government (Khatam 2023, 299). By centering the discourse on Mahsa Amini's tragic incident and positioning itself as a champion of women's rights, the PMOI successfully directs attention to broader issues of gender-based violence, contributing to a larger cause against perceived oppression. Through emotive language and vivid descriptions, the PMOI emphasizes human rights violations, particularly focusing on women's rights, to evoke sympathy and support. Across social media platforms, the PMOI consistently frames the protests as part of a broader movement against the regime, using specific details and hashtags to emphasize continuity and resistance. The strategic use of hashtags, slogans, and positive associations in describing protesters aligns the PMOI with broader narratives of freedom and opposition and aims to unite a diverse range of individuals under the umbrella of the PMOI's cause. Van Dijk's PDA illuminates the PMOI's strategic use of language and visual elements to reinforce its ideological and political power, aligning with the objectives of propaganda as

a discursive-political process (Van Dijk 1997, 11). The PMOI strategically frames its messaging to align with broader narratives of democracy, human rights, and freedom, thereby appealing to a wide audience both within Iran and globally. By consistently positioning itself as a defender of these universal values and framing the Iranian regime as an oppressor, the PMOI reinforces its legitimacy as a leading force in the opposition movement against the Iranian government.

The findings of this discourse analysis have significant implications for both academia and policymaking. Academically, it offers insights into the evolving strategies of opposition groups, particularly in how they shape discourse to influence public opinion and international perceptions. Understanding these tactics enhances scholarly understanding of political communication and propaganda in contemporary contexts. Understanding the PMOI's discourse aids in deciphering the strategies employed by opposition groups in shaping public opinion and influencing global perceptions. Furthermore, the analysis has broader geopolitical ramifications, particularly in the context of international relations and counterterrorism efforts. As the PMOI operates from a complex history and has undergone changes in its designation, policymakers must consider the implications of engaging with or opposing this organization. From a policymaking perspective, the findings highlight the necessity for policymakers to critically evaluate information disseminated by political actors such as the PMOI, recognizing the strategic manipulation of language and imagery to achieve specific political objectives. Policymakers must navigate these nuances to formulate informed foreign policies and counterterrorism strategies that consider the complexities of opposition groups like the PMOI, their objectives, and their evolving discourse strategies.

In the quest to answer the research question, "How does the PMOI's discourse depict the 2022-2023 Mahsa Amini protests?", this discourse analysis has unveiled intricate layers of the organization's narrative construction. The PMOI strategically deploys emotive language, visual elements, and thematic framing to position itself as a champion of human rights, particularly women's rights, while emphasizing a collective struggle for freedom against the Iranian regime. The careful examination of linguistic patterns, framing strategies, and power dynamics within the PMOI's discourse provides valuable insights. It becomes apparent that the PMOI, amidst the tumultuous events in Iran, seizes the moment to assert its role as a significant opposition force. This analysis, guided by PDA, demonstrates how the PMOI employs discourse as a tool to reinforce its ideological and political power. Thus, the research answers the central question: the PMOI's discourse on the Mahsa Amini protests strategically positions itself as a leading force in the opposition movement, capitalizing on the

opportunity presented by the protests to (re)establish itself as a key player in the broader opposition movement against the Iranian government.

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