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The Conflict in Iraq;

COLUMN ONE; Tending an Oasis of Uprising; Exiled Iranians, fenced in by the U.S. Army in Iraq, harbor a dream of overthrowing Tehran. In the meantime, their yards need watering.

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DATELINE: CAMP ASHRAF, Iraq

Residents of this sprawling commune an hour north of Baghdad pride themselves on their self-sufficiency. They bake their own bread, purify their own water, even make their own carbonated cola.

They spend their days tending to their gardens, sprucing up their living quarters and listening to performances of John Lennon's "Imagine." And they conduct military drills while they wait for their chance to overthrow the Iranian government.

"This is heaven," Abdel Reza "Joe" Jowkar said, gesturing around a landscaped park complete with artificial waterfall.

"I'm close to the [Iranian] border, I'm ready. I'm a warrior, ready to do battle," said Jowkar, an Iranian-born 57-year-old who attended Cal Poly Pomona in the 1970s. "I'm having fun with my friends and looking to the future."

This is Camp Ashraf, home to the Mujahedin Khalq: the people's holy warriors.

The MEK, as the group is known, is one of the stranger byproducts in the U.S.-led invasion to oust Saddam Hussein. When American forces overthrew Hussein's regime, they inherited this 4,000-strong group of Iranian dissidents that the dictator allowed to set up shop here in the mid-1980s.

With enough firepower for a mechanized brigade and an emphasis on self-reliance, celibacy, feminism and fervor, the MEK was a kind of Shaker army of the Iraqi flatlands. The Americans took away their weapons, threw a fence around Camp Ashraf and placed them in "protective custody."

Two years later, nobody -- not even the members -- seems quite sure what to do with the MEK, a U.S.-designated terrorist group. Many members say they want to stay put and continue the fight, even without weapons. But the future Iraqi government, sure to be stocked with pro-Iranian leaders, may want to kick them out.

Going home isn't an option. Allied with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in the 1979 Iranian revolution, the MEK soon fell out with the Islamists and went into hiding, hounded by Iranian intelligence officials. The U.S. branded it a terrorist organization in

the 1990s, in effect shutting down the group's thriving American lobbying and fund-raising machine and complicating any efforts to find a third-country home.

Now its members are in political limbo, orphans of modern Middle Eastern geopolitics.

To detractors and former members, the MEK is a dangerous, deeply paranoid cult guilty of imprisoning and brainwashing new recruits. To camp residents and their supporters, including some members of the U.S. Congress, it's the best hope for regime change in Iran and a misunderstood natural ally of the Bush administration.

"The odds are against us more than ever," said Hossein Madani, an MEK spokesman. "Of course we would welcome any cooperation with any democratic state, including the U.S."

Last week, MEK officials allowed a pair of journalists to visit Camp Ashraf, the first such visit by Western reporters since shortly after the Iraq war. The visit left the impression that if there is a definable line between commune and cult, the MEK might just be straddling it.

Starting with 14 square miles of arid land given them by Hussein, MEK members have built a bustling, idyllic sprawl of self-contained mini-villages with barracks-style living quarters, dining halls, recreational facilities and carefully maintained gardens.

Named for the first wife of MEK leader Massoud Rajavi, Camp Ashraf has its own swimming pool, library, monument to fallen comrades and a museum where visitors can view gruesome videos of Iranian regime brutality -- including accused criminals having their hands cut off by a specially designed machine and alleged adulterers being buried up to the waist and slowly stoned to death.

The sense of being on the front lines in the fight against an evil foe fuels an obsessive level of commitment that MEK cadres and leaders say is vital to their cause.

After the 1991 Persian Gulf War, when residents sent their children to live in Europe and North America, it was decided that Camp Ashraf was no place for distracting emotional entanglements.

Rajavi and his second wife, Maryam, now based in Paris, instituted a mandatory celibacy rule for Ashraf residents. Husbands and wives divorced each other in the name of the struggle; some couples have lived in the same camp for nearly 15 years now with no semblance of a normal marital life.

It was an extreme measure, members say, but necessary.

"Can you fight for 25 years if you have a family? No one has paid the price for freedom the way we have," female cadre Zahra Kohneshiri said.

"I knew that coming here, I could not give my heart to someone else," said Suroor Soleimanian, 24, a child of MEK members.

Almost 20 years of isolation, an overarching revolutionary cause and a persistent sense of siege have bred a discernible hive mentality at Camp Ashraf.

MEK cadres wear olive green uniforms, with matching, identically tied head scarves for the women. In talking, certain phrases and themes pop up again and again -- suggesting a high level of political indoctrination.

Tehran is the "mullah regime," and the movement fighting the Iranian government has suffered "120,000 martyrs." The more than 400 people who have defected from the group in recent years are "quitters" who were too weak or selfish to "pay the price." Explaining why they chose to come to Camp Ashraf, most offer some variation on the theme of feeling guilty living abroad in comfortable exile while their people suffered back home.

Pictures of Maryam and Massoud Rajavi are everywhere in the camp, and members refer to Maryam's sayings and ideas in a manner that evokes Maoist China. Camp leaders acknowledge that regular Shiite Muslim religious observance is basically mandatory.

Direct contact with the outside world, including families, is rare. Phone calls, letters and e-mails are all routed through the central leadership.

Although the cult charge clearly rankles, MEK members also seem insulated from much of the criticism directed their way by a sort of circular logic.

Any accusations, negative articles or outside criticism are dismissed as the product of an Iranian campaign to discredit and undermine them. The complaints of some defectors that they were tricked into coming to the camp and then held against their will are the lies of those trying to get into the good graces of the Iranian intelligence services.

At the same time, the people here seem genuinely happy, committed and at ease with each other. Meals are spiced up by musical performances from MEK members.

Cadres take obvious pride in the upkeep and care of their self-contained "units," as the villages are known. Each gender-segregated unit contains several hundred residents, and the units are spread widely apart on the camp grounds.

The residents of Unit 8 have created their own park, with cobblestone paths, patches of gardens growing cabbage and other vegetables, an artificial lake with a handmade statue of a leaping dolphin and a huge chess set with 2-foot-high wooden pieces.

Unit subcommander Fereidoon Salimi, an 18-year Ashraf veteran, says maintaining the homey atmosphere has become a higher priority in the last two years, with their movements restricted and their weapons confiscated.

"We could go out and enjoy nature before," Salimi said. "Instead of giving in to the circumstances, we adapt. We bring the outside world here."

Whatever their idiosyncrasies, MEK members also project a progressive streak and political ethos unusual in the world, much less the Middle East. They're ardent feminists. Women make up 30% of the fighters but hold an outsized number of political and military leadership positions. Women fight on the front lines, and female tank crews and commanders were common back when they still had tanks.

The all-male Unit 8 is led by a woman, Jila Deiham, a matronly former chemical engineer whose husband was executed in Iran for MEK activities and who lives in separate quarters on the unit grounds along with other female officers.

She theorized that the courage and persistence needed for an Iranian woman to break free of both a repressive government and a male-dominated culture bred particularly strong and brave female cadres.

"For a woman to take part in the struggle, she has to overcome more obstacles," Deiham said.

Some of the members of her unit say they had a hard time accepting orders from a woman when they first joined the MEK, but all say they now see it as a point of pride.

Mohammed Malik, a 21-year-old musician and composer, called female leadership "the masterpiece of our accomplishments."

Far from the noise, traffic jams and ambient daily dread of Baghdad, Ashraf feels like a quiet rural retreat. MEK leaders, however, accuse U.S. forces of unnecessarily turning it into a prison.

Under the disarmament agreement signed with the U.S. Army in 2003, the Americans took responsibility for the MEK's protection and security. That means severely restricting residents' movements.

A senior U.S. military commander in Baghdad said the modified house arrest was for the MEK's own good.

In addition to the threat of attack or ambush from Iranian government agents -- the camp is less than an hour from the border -- there's a serious possibility of attack from Iraqis, given the MEK's checkered reputation in their host country.

Even now, many Iraqis speak of the MEK with dread and suspicion. Under Hussein, the group, also known as the People's Mujahedin of Iran, was an off-limits and dangerous topic.

"If I met anyone from the PMOI, the next day someone from the intelligence services would grab me," said local journalist Daoud Janabi, an MEK supporter.

It's also accepted among many Iraqis that Hussein deployed MEK tanks to brutally suppress post-Gulf War uprisings in the Kurdish north and Shiite Muslim south.

MEK officials dismiss the charge as Iranian government propaganda, and produce letters of support from prominent Kurdish politicians. But their reputation as Hussein's henchmen lingers.

"There are some people here who would love to take a shot at them," the U.S. commander said.

While expressing their appreciation for the concerns of the Army, MEK members are beginning to chafe under the restrictions. They are permitted to make regular trips to Baghdad, escorted by Humvees, to buy supplies or have medical checkups. But most residents haven't been outside the camp in two years.

"Before the war, we used to go out shopping, go on outings to Baghdad and make visits to the holy shrines," said Faeza Saadat Mohammadi, a young second-generation cadre who speaks cockney English.

Mohammadi was sent by her parents to live in Europe as the Gulf War loomed. But around 1999, she and many others started returning, forming a new youth movement that promises to carry on the fight for years.

They may be the last generation raised to be MEK true believers, given the celibacy rules.

When discussing where the next generation of committed fighters is supposed to come from, the group's cosmopolitan, multilingual political leaders merely smile and say that the brutality and repression of the Iranian regime will ensure a steady stream of new recruits.

Earlier this week, the entire camp mobilized for a raucous celebration of Red Wednesday, a pre-Islamic holiday that precedes the Iranian New Year.

Smiling, chattering cadres gathered at makeshift bazaar stalls munching sweets, vegetable and meat pies and grilled liver. Some had traded their uniforms for outlandish get-ups, including a Native American chief, a mock Iranian television news crew in monster masks, and the impish, red-clad Haji Firuz, the holiday's Santa-like mascot.

In a field next to the bazaar, dozens of bonfires burned in a huge horseshoe and a line of laughing men linked arms and leaped over the flames in a symbolic cleansing of the past year's sorrows and worries.

The holiday is frowned upon by the Iranian theocracy as non-Islamic, adding a defiant dimension to the celebrations. Snowman-sized effigies of Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, former President Hashemi Rafsanjani and President Mohammad Khatami were set ablaze.

The men danced in a circle, chanting: "Freedom! Freedom! The hope of all Iranians!"

It had the feel of a militaristic adult summer camp, time to blow off steam and forget their tenuous status.

The next day, they would be back to training and waiting and trying to keep themselves sharp, hoping the political winds will blow in their favor.

The incoming Iraqi government, stocked with Shiite leaders who spent years in exile in Iran, is almost certain to be unfriendly to the MEK.

Leaders of the group are already mobilizing local support to fend off possible attempts to expel them.

Just under 300 "quitters" have recently been repatriated to Iran under a general amnesty offered by Tehran to all but the top leaders, but those remaining in Camp Ashraf show no interest in returning as long as the mullahs are in power.

On some days, the memory of MEK tank columns charging more than 100 miles into Iranian territory, as they did in the waning days of the Iran-Iraq war, must seem like a distant dream.

Even if the MEK can get off the U.S. terrorist list and back in the good graces of the international community, few can imagine a scenario in which it will ever be allowed to rearm. Its tanks have already been given to the new Iraqi army.

For some, just staying where they are and keeping the faith are necessary acts of defiance.

"We have to try. We feel we're keeping the hopes of a nation alive," Salimi said. "When we lost our weapons, it was very hard, but we didn't lose hope. Weapons are not the most important aspect. What's important is the cause itself."

Times staff writer Tyler Marshall in Washington and special correspondent Nahid Siamdoust in Tehran contributed to this report.