

Refugee Review Tribunal

AUSTRALIA

RRT RESEARCH RESPONSE

Research Response Number: IRN30494
Country: Iran
Date: 5 September 2006

Keywords: Iran – MKO – MKO sympathisers

This response was prepared by the Country Research Section of the Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RRT within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

Questions

1. What has happened to the MKO in Iran since 16 June 2005?
2. In particular, what is the situation of anyone considered to have pro-MKO sympathies?
3. Anything else you feel might be relevant.

RESPONSE

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In Iran the *Mojahedin-e Khalq* Organisation (MKO or MeK) is commonly known by the epithet *Monafeqin* or hypocrites; in other sources, the group is alternatively known as the People's Mujaheddin, the People's Warriors, and the People's Mujahideen of Iran, and the People's Moujahedin Organisation of Iran. Since June 2005, references to the group have increased in the Iranian and international press. The information is organised under the following headings: the government amnesty; suspected MKO activities in Iran since June 2005; recent treatment of MKO members; imputed political opinion; and the MKO and international relations. Brief background information on the group is also provided as a prelude to this information.

Background information

The MKO originated as a left-wing movement in 1965 in opposition to the Shah. It had participated in the Islamic Revolution, but in the wake of that revolution fell out with the new regime. The MKO finally broke with the regime in 1981 whereupon it began to conduct

“attacks on official Iranian targets”. The MKO was driven underground and eventually into exile. In 1986, after its offices in France were closed, it “shifted its main base to Iraq where it was sheltered by Saddam [Hussein’s] regime”. From its new base in Iraq, the MKO continued to launch attacks against Iran; but its activities against Iran were reported to have declined “following the end of the Iran-Iraq war and Khomeini’s death, on June 4, 1989” (‘Iran’, in Banks, A.S., Muller, T.C., & Overstreet, W.R. 2006, *Political Handbook of the World: 2005-2006*, CQ Press, Washington, p. 541 – Attachment 1; ‘Iran’, in Szajkowski, B. (ed) 2004, *Revolutionary and Dissident Movements of the World*, 4th edition, John Harper Publishing, London, pp. 192-193 – Attachment 2; UK Home Office 2005, *Iran Assessment*, October – Attachment 3; Rubin, M. 2006, ‘Iran: Monsters of the left: The Mujahedin al-Khalq’, *Front Page Magazine*, 13 January – Attachment 4; ‘Iran risk: Security risk’ 2006, *The Economist Intelligence Unit*, 7 July – Attachment 5).

According to information on the MKO provided in Banks, Muller and Overstreet’s *Political Handbook of the World: 2005-2006*:

The group lost its primary sponsor after the fall of Saddam Hussein and was briefly bombarded by US forces. The MKO agreed to a cease-fire and was later disarmed and confined to designated camps under US guard. Some 4,000 MKO members remain under US military supervision or “detention” at Camp Ashraf in Iraq and, after a lengthy review by the US State Department [which has proscribed the group as a terrorist organisation] and FBI, none have been charged as suspected terrorists (‘Iran’, in Banks, A.S., Muller, T.C., & Overstreet, W.R. 2006, *Political Handbook of the World: 2005-2006*, CQ Press, Washington, p. 541 – Attachment 1).

Most sources agree that support for the MKO has declined considerably in Iran. The extract on the group appearing in *Revolutionary and Dissident Movements of the World* goes so far as to state that “[t]he organization has no evident continuing base of support” in the country (‘Iran’, in Szajkowski, B. (ed) 2004, *Revolutionary and Dissident Movements of the World*, 4th edition, John Harper Publishing, London, p. 193 – Attachment 2; UK Home Office 2005, *Iran Assessment*, October – Attachment 3; ‘Khodabandeh, M. 2005, ‘The Disintegration of Mojahedin-e Khalq in Post-Saddam Iraq’, *Terrorism Monitor*, The James Town Foundation website, Volume 3, Issue 2, 27 January http://www.jamestown.org/publications_details.php?volume_id=411&issue_id=3213&article_id=2369165 – Accessed 25 August 2006 – Attachment 6).

There are also credible reports that the MKO in Iraq is plagued by disaffection and a rising tide of dissent. According to M. Khodabandeh of the James Town Foundation:

...the officially repatriated members constitute only a tiny number of MKO members that have returned to Iran since May 2003. According to reliable sources, more than 300 members have fled Ashraf and returned to Iran in the past 19 months. In almost all cases these members surrendered to the Iranian customs authorities on the Iran-Iraq border, who subsequently handed them over to the Ministry of Intelligence. The former members were transferred to Tehran and debriefed for two days by Iranian intelligence officers in specially designed reception centers in the Marmar and Esteghlal Hotels, before being released to their families.

But more interesting than this has been the information given by returning members about conditions in the Ashraf camp in Diyala. While U.S. forces control the camp perimeter, they have allowed the MKO to maintain its internal command structure, leaving the members under conditions of psychological coercion. It is widely believed that around 1,000 disaffected MKO members approached the U.S. army and requested to be separated from the

organization, and are now apparently being held in a separate part of the camp. [3] These developments seem to suggest that the longer the MKO remain ensconced in Ashraf, the more likely it is that the organization disintegrates in the face of overwhelming internal and external pressures ('Khodabandeh, M. 2005, 'The Disintegration of Mojahedin-e Khalq in Post-Saddam Iraq', *Terrorism Monitor*, The James Town Foundation website, Volume 3, Issue 2, 27 January

http://www.jamestown.org/publications_details.php?volume_id=411&issue_id=3213&article_id=2369165 – Accessed 25 August 2006 – Attachment 6).

In 2005, Human Rights Watch also reported that the MKO in Iraq was torturing dissident members of the group who "criticised or sought to leave the organisation" ('Rights watchdog accuses exiled Iranian group of torture' 2005, *Agence France Press*, 19 May – Attachment 7). Its report, based on testimonials, *No Exit: Human Rights Abuses Inside the Mojahedin Khalq Camps*, provides the following information:

Former MKO members interviewed for this report cite the following reasons for their decision to leave the organization: military failure of the MKO to dislodge the Iranian government during the July 1988 military operation, forced mass divorces instituted as part of the "ideological revolution" and their persecution and torture by the MKO operatives during "security clearances" in 1994-1995...

Human rights abuses carried out by MKO leaders against dissident members ranged from prolonged incommunicado and solitary confinement to beatings, verbal and psychological abuse, coerced confessions, threats of execution, and torture that in two cases led to death (Human Rights Watch 2005, *No Exit: Human Rights Abuses Inside the Mojahedin Khalq Camps*, Human Rights Watch website, May

<http://hrw.org/backgrounder/mena/iran0505/iran0505.pdf> – Accessed 4 September – Attachment 8).

The government amnesty

Since 2003, media reports on the MKO frequently mention the return of MKO members to Iran under a general amnesty. The amnesty was first announced by the Iranian government at the end of 2003, with the proviso that Iran was only ready to accept former MKO fighters who were in Iraq and "regretted" their past acts and not members of the leadership. By early 2005, there were reports that up to three hundred "disaffected" or "repentant" members of the MKO had voluntarily returned to Iran, many under a scheme involving the International Committee of the Red Cross; and it would appear from reports that none have been subject to adverse treatment. It may be noted, however, that Iran termed the returning MKO members as "defectors", and that at least one aim of the return amnesty appears to have been to counter claims made by the MKO that MKO returnees face "certain death or imprisonment" in Iran. In this regard, caution should also be exercised with regard to unconfirmed claims made by Iranian officials that up to seven hundred MKO members have defected and returned to Iran. (UK Home Office 2005, *Iran Assessment*, October – Attachment 3; Peterson, S. 2005, 'Anti-Iran militants return home', *Christian Science Monitor* online edition, 22 March

<http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0322/p06s01-wome.html> – Accessed 25 August 2006 – Attachment 9; 'Iran: Tehran claims exile opposition members are returning' 2005, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Newslines*, Volume 9, Number 132, Part 3, 15 July – Attachment 10; 'Khodabandeh, M. 2005, 'The Disintegration of Mojahedin-e Khalq in Post-Saddam Iraq', *Terrorism Monitor*, The James Town Foundation website, Volume 3, Issue 2, 27 January

[_id=2369165](#) – Accessed 25 August 2006 – Attachment 6; ‘600 Ex-MKO member back home’ 2005, *Iran Daily* online edition, 3 October <http://www.iran-daily.com/1384/2391/html/index.htm> – Accessed 25 August 2006 – Attachment 11; ‘Tehran claims exiled opposition members are returning’ 2005, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Report*, Volume 8, Number 28, 19 July <http://www.rferl.org/reports/aspfiles/printonly.asp?po=y> – Accessed 25 August 2006 – Attachment 12; The Danish Immigration Service 2005, *On Certain Crimes and Punishments in Ira: Report from Fact-Finding Mission to Teheran and Ankara 22 January – 29 January*, April <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/openssl.pdf?tbl=RSDCOI&id=4476d5534#search=%22%22On%20Certain%20Crimes%20and%20Punishments%20in%20Iran%22%22> – Accessed 25 August 2006 – Attachment 13).

The return of MKO members to Iran may be considered with the conditions of that return. It is “understood”, for instance, “that repatriated members should not take part in political activity”. Furthermore, as reported by the *Christian Science Monitor*, “there were warnings, too, for families that signed a form stating that they received their son ‘safe and sound,’ and were now ‘responsible for him’” (‘Khodabandeh, M. 2005, ‘The Disintegration of Mojahedin-e Khalq in Post-Saddam Iraq’, *Terrorism Monitor*, The James Town Foundation website, Volume 3, Issue 2, 27 January http://www.jamestown.org/publications_details.php?volume_id=411&issue_id=3213&article_id=2369165 – Accessed 25 August 2006 – Attachment 6; Peterson, S. 2005, ‘Anti-Iran militants return home’, *Christian Science Monitor* online edition, 22 March <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0322/p06s01-wome.html> – Accessed 25 August 2006 – Attachment 9).

Iranian news reports that the return of MKO members indicates that the opposition movement is “on the threshold of full collapse”, and that most members wish to leave the movement. These sources also allege that the “ring leaders” of the MKO “are trying to prevent...desertion” by imprisoning “dissidents” (‘Iran press: Daily says MKO members returning to Iran from Iraq’ 2006, *BBC Monitoring*, sourced from *Mardom-Salari* website, 21 January – Attachment 14; ‘Iranian news agency reports personnel changes in opposition group’ 2005, *BBC Monitoring*, sourced from *Mehre* news agency, 14 September – Attachment 15; ‘MKO desertion on the rise, dissidents kept in Iraqi Ashraf base – Iranian agency’ 2005, *BBC Monitoring*, sourced from *Mehr* news agency, 10 August – Attachment 16).

Suspected MKO activities in Iran since June 2005

The MKO has been named by Iranian officials, among other suspect groups, in connection with a string of bombings and protests in Iran since June 2005. In mid-June 2005, bomb blasts in Ahvaz, Tehran, and Zaheda, were attributed by some Iranian officials to the MKO. Later, in October, a spokesperson for Iran’s judiciary also indicated that the “main defendants” in the Ahvaz city blasts included family members of the organisation. The MKO itself “denied responsibility for the attacks”. But reports by *Stratfor* suggest that the attribution might not be unlikely, given that MKO networks “could still be in tact” (‘8 killed in Ahwaz and Tehran blasts’ 2005, Unrepresented Nations and People Organisation, 10 June – Attachment 17; ‘Bombings rock Iran ahead of election; At least nine people are killed in two cities. Government buildings are the main targets’ 2005, *Los Angeles Times*, 13 June – Attachment 18; ‘The Iran bombings and the Mujahideen a-Khalq’ 2005, *Stratfor* online

edition, 13 June <http://www.stratfor.com/products/premium/print.php?storyId=249914> – Accessed 30 August 2006 – Attachment 19; ‘Iran bombings: A Jihadist play for news US-Iran tensions?’ 2005, *Stratfor* online edition, 13 June <http://www.stratfor.com/products/premium/print.php?storyId=249927> – Accessed 30 August 2006 – Attachment 20; ‘New group kidnaps Iranian security agent’ 2005, *Stratfor* online edition, 20 June <http://www.stratfor.com/products/premium/print.php?storyId=250316> – Accessed 30 August 2006 – Attachment 21; ‘Iran press: Judiciary spokesperson on IEA resolution, security issues’ 2005, *BBC Monitoring*, sourced from *Mardom-Salari* website, 6 October – Attachment 22).

Iranian reports from 2005 and 2006 also indicate the MKO was blamed, either directly or indirectly, for orchestrating student protests at the University of Tehran and elsewhere (‘Iran hard-line paper blames student demo on opposition’ 2005, *Iran Focus*, 29 November – Attachment 23; ‘Iran prosecutes student who took part in Tehran Uni. demo’ 2005, *Iran Focus*, 1 December – Attachment 24; ‘The student movement in Iran (21-28 May 2006): Roundup of protests’ 2006, *BBC Monitoring*, 29 May – Attachment 25; ‘Iran group calls for release of students’ 2005, *Iranian Labour News Agency*, 25 July – Attachment 26).

In other unconfirmed reports, the MKO is suspected of having launched several unidentified attacks in Khuzestan and Sistan-Baluchistan and killed several Iranian officials. In an opinion piece on the *Aljazeera* website, former UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter opines that the CIA has used the MKO “to carry out remote bombings in Iran”. Similar accusations are made by official sources in Iran (‘Buckley, D. 2006, ‘Iraq plans to remove Pentagon’s proxy force’, *OpEdNews.Com* website, 8 August http://www.opednews.com/articles/genera_devlin_b_060808_iraq_plans_to_remove.htm - Accessed 23 August 2006 – Attachment 27; ‘Ritter, S. 2005, ‘US war with Iran has already begun’, *Aljazeera* website, 23 June <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/7896BBD4-28AB-48BA-A949-2096A02F864D.htm> - Accessed 5 September 2006 – Attachment 28; ‘Iran Majlis committee to address security issues of western provinces – agency’ 2006, *BBC Monitoring*, sourced from *Fars News Agency* website, 23 August – Attachment 29).

Recent Treatment of MKO members

Recent reports indicate that the Iranian authorities have imposed and carried out death sentences on MKO members. These report date from February 2006, when news that Hojjat Zamani, a condemned MKO member, had been executed. Zamani was “forcibly returned to Iran from Turkey in 2003 and sentenced to death in 2004” for his “involvement in a bomb explosion in Tehran in 1988 which killed 3 people”. Death decrees were later announced on other MKO members, including Valiollah Feiz-Mahdavi; Valiollah’s sentence was later commuted to life imprisonment. Human Rights Watch refers to Valiollah as an MKO “sympathizer”. In September it was reported that he “went on a hunger strike to protest his prison conditions” (‘Iran: Worrying trend in use of death penalty’ 2006, *Amnesty International* website, 27 February <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engmde130202006> - Accessed 4 September 2006 – Attachment 30; ‘Iran: Political prisoner at risk of execution’ 2006, *Human Rights Watch* website, 16 March http://hrw.org/english/docs/2006/03/15/iran12998_txt.htm - Accessed 4 September 2006 – Attachment 31; ‘The price of freedom: human rights abuse in Iran intensifies’ 2006, *Global Politician*, 23 May – Attachment 32; ‘Iran: New wave of executions raises concerns’ 2006, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* website, 2 March http://www.rferl.org/features/features_Article.aspx?m=03&y=2006&id=F1D0955C-C340-

[42E2-9F49-CC5929665055](http://www.rferl.org/features/features_Article.aspx?m=02&y=2006&id=F0B9FBAF-C756-4464-B70C-CEAE546841B3) – Accessed 25 August 2006 – Attachment 33; ‘Execution of Iranian opposition figure reported’ 2006, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* website, 17 February http://www.rferl.org/features/features_Article.aspx?m=02&y=2006&id=F0B9FBAF-C756-4464-B70C-CEAE546841B3 – Accessed 25 August 2006 – Attachment 34; Esfandiari, G. ‘Iran: Growing concern over fate of political prisoner’, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* website, 4 September <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/09/9D005607-B8A4-4530-A65C-E65577762C87.html> – Accessed 5 September 2006 – Attachment 35).

According to Amnesty International’s report of the recent development:

Executions in Iran continue at an alarming rate. Amnesty International recorded 94 executions in 2005, although the true figure is likely to be much higher. So far in 2006, it has recorded as many as 28 executions. Most of the victims were sentenced for crimes such as murder but one of those recently executed was a political prisoner, Hojjat Zamani, a member of the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI) [MKO], who was forcibly returned to Iran from Turkey in 2003 and sentenced to death in 2004 after conviction of involvement in a bomb explosion in Tehran in 1988 which killed 3 people (...). He was taken from his cell in Gohar Dasht prison and executed on 7 February 2006, though his execution was officially confirmed by Iranian officials only on 21 February.

Hojjat Zamani's execution has fuelled fears that other political prisoners may be at risk of imminent execution. According to unconfirmed reports that have been circulating since early February, a number of political and other prisoners who are under sentence of death have been told by prison officials that they would be executed if Iran should be referred to the UN Security Council over the resumption of its nuclear programme (which Iran claims is intended solely for the peaceful production of nuclear energy). These are said to have included other members of the PMOI, which is an illegal organization in Iran. The National Council of Resistance of Iran, of which the PMOI is a member, was the source of evidence in 2002 revealing Iran's nuclear programme to the outside world.

Among those feared to be at risk are Sa'id Masouri (...), a PMOI member who has been held in solitary confinement in Section 209 of Evin Prison since late 2004; Khaled Hardani, Farhang Pour Mansouri and Shahram Pour Mansouri (...), all three of whom were involved in hijacking a plane in 2001 when Shahram Pour Mansouri was aged only 17; Gholamhossein Kalbi and Valiollah Feyz Mahdavi, both PMOI members, and Alireza Karami Khairabadi ('Iran: Worrying trend in use of death penalty' 2006, Amnesty International website, 27 February <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engmde130202006> – Accessed 4 September 2006 – Attachment 30).

Imputed Political Opinion

In the past “known or suspected members” of the MKO were known to have “faced either execution or long term prison terms if caught in Iran” (UK Home Office 2005, *Iran Assessment*, October – Attachment 3). Little current information was found on this topic.

In June 2005, a member of pro-democracy Iran Freedom Movement was “beaten up and wounded” by a group of thirty people in Ahvaz. Media reports indicate that the group had been “shouting slogans such as ‘death to *Monafiqin* [hypocrites]’” shortly before (‘Pressure groups beat up Iranian dissident supporter of Mo’in’ 2005, *BBC Monitoring*, sourced from *Iranian Labour News Agency*, 12 June – Attachment 36).

In July 2005, an Iranian news agency reported that an organisation known as the Office for Fostering Unity had “issued a statement regarding the continued detention of...students who participated in a protest rally in support of [dissident journalist Akbar] Ganji”. As reported:

The statement has asked for the unconditional release of those arrested and called on the Judiciary to explain the reason behind the delay in their release.

The statement, which was referring to the protest rally held by OFU members in front of Tehran University two weeks ago in support of Ganji and in protest against the violation of his rights, added: According to our reports, Amir Kabir University student Samad Mashkuri and Azad University student Hasan Asadi-Zeydabadi are still in custody.

The statement says: We have heard of a scenario called “forced confession” in which one of those arrested will be the main victim. Based on this scenario, a builder was paid 10,000 tomans [approximately 10 dollars] to carry a poster of the leaders of the Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization [MKO]. But, the person who paid the builder, has not been identified yet.

The statement went on to say: This issue has been an interesting project for certain groups to pressure Hasan Asadi-Zeydabadi to confess that he was carrying the pictures of [MKO leaders] Maryam and Mas'ud Rajavi. This is while many students who were witnesses to the scene, can remember how other people were vigilant and stopped this ill-informed builder from carrying on with what he was doing.

The OFU concluded by saying that it would do its best to support the arrested students ('Iranian group calls for release of students' 2005, Iranian Labour News Agency, 25 July – Attachment 26).

The MKO and International Relations.

Iran's renewed interest in the MKO is best understood in the context of international relations since the fall of Saddam Hussein. The interest emanates from the “obscure status” of the MKO in Iraq as well as Iranian fears that the organisation is closely tied with US forces. High ranking Iranian officials allege, in fact, that the MKO is already “alongside” US and British forces ('Guards commander on readiness to repulse foreign attacks' 2006, *BBC Monitoring*, sourced from *E'Temad* website, 29 April – Attachment 37; 'Iranian Al-Alam TV's 'Iraq Today' programme 1410 gmt, 13 Aug 06' 2006, *BBC Monitoring*, sourced from *Al-Alam TV*, 13 August – Attachment 38; Samii, A. W. 2005, 'The nearest and dearest enemy: Iran after the Iraq war', *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Volume 9, Number 3, September – Attachment 39).

These concerns were no doubt enlivened by reports that the MKO had exposed Iran's clandestine nuclear program; and news of “an open debate in Washington as to whether the MKO could be used as part of some future campaign to destabilise the Iranian regime”. According to reports, the MKO has, despite its terrorist status in the US, also garnered the support of the “Pentagon, the White House, influential foreign policy groups, and several members of Congress”; and many have urged that the group be taken off the US Department of State's list of proscribed terrorist groups ('Report on 19 October Majlis session' 2005, *BBC Monitoring*, 25 October – Attachment 40; 'Iran risk: Security risk' 2006, *Economist Intelligence Unit*, 7 July – Attachment 5; 'Buckley, D. 2006, 'Iraq plans to remove Pentagon's proxy force', OpEdNews.Com website, 8 August http://www.opednews.com/articles/genera_devlin_b_060808_iraq_plans_to_remove.htm -

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In recent months, Iran has also focused attention on the status of the MKO, which remains proscribed by the US, UK and EU as a terrorist organisation. Iran raised particular concerns over the French government's decision to lift a travel ban on seventeen MKO members in June 2006. In the following month, the secretary of Iran's National Security Council was reported to have cancelled his trip to Brussels and his meeting with EU officials after learning that the European Parliament had extended an invitation to the MKO's second in command. ('Daily warns West considering supporting MKO to pressure Iran' 2006, *BBC Monitoring*, sourced from *Resalat*, 9 July – Attachment 44; 'Iran's UN Ambassador writes to Anna on MKO' 2006, IranMania News website, 3 August <http://www.iranmania.com/News/ArticleView/Default.asp?NewsCode=44796&NewsKind=Curent%20Affairs> – Accessed 23 August 2006 – Attachment 45)

In establishing relations with the fledgling Iraqi state, Iran has reportedly secured a recent agreement that Iraq would expel the MKO from the country. The agreement follows an earlier agreement with Iraq's Interim Governing Council, which also announced that it would expel "several thousand members" of the MKO at the end of 2003 ('Iraq to expel People's Mujahidin' 2003, *Aljazeera* website, 10 December <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/11F22E87-3DF2-4A66-9B57-B54ABB6F76FA.htm> - Accessed 4 September 2006 – Attachment 46; Buckley, D. 2006, 'Iraq plans to remove Pentagon's proxy force', OpEdNews.Com website, 8 August http://www.opednews.com/articles/genera_devlin_b_060808_iraq_plans_to_remove.htm – Accessed 23 August 2006 – Attachment 27; 'Iran, Iraq emphasize expansion of ties' 2006, Mehr News website, 13 August <http://www.mehrnews.ir/en/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=366315> – Accessed 23 August 2006 – Attachment 47).

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Christian Science Monitor <http://www.csmonitor.com/>

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty <http://www.rferl.org/>

OpEdNews.Com website <http://www.opednews.com/>

Iran-Press-Service website <http://www.iran-press-service.com/>

Search Engines

Google search engine <http://www.google.com.au/>

Online Subscription Services

Stratfor <http://www.stratfor.com/>

Databases:

FACTIVA (news database)

BACIS (DIMA Country Information database)

REFINFO (IRBDC (Canada) Country Information database)

ISYS (RRT Country Research database, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, US Department of State Reports)

RRT Library Catalogue

List of Attachments

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18. 'Bombings rock Iran ahead of election; At least nine people are killed in two cities. Government buildings are the main targets' 2005, *Los Angeles Times*, 13 June. (FACTIVA)
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