

Iran Interlink

Third Report from Baghdad



**Camp Ashraf
and the Mojahedin-e Khalq
April 2011**

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Introduction

Iran-Interlink representative Anne Singleton travelled to Iraq mid April at the invitation of the Baghdad based human rights NGO Baladiyah Foundation, officials of the Government of Iraq and other NGOs involved in the Camp Ashraf problem. The Baladiyah Foundation, headed by Mrs Ahlam al-Maliki, provides humanitarian assistance to a wide range of deprived sectors of Iraqi society arising directly from the invasion and occupation of Iraq by allied forces in 2003. Baladiyah Foundation is concerned by the humanitarian crisis at Camp Ashraf caused by the group's leaders who are refusing to allow access to human rights organisations to verify the wellbeing of all of the camp's residents.

Anne Singleton, a leading expert on the Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK) terrorist cult, was invited to speak at al-Mostanserieh University in Baghdad on the problems of removing the group from Iraq. She also participated in a one hour live discussion on Al-Masar television presented by Dr Qeis al-Atwani on the topic 'people want Monafeqin Khalq terrorists out of Iraq'. (The term Monafeqin is a religious term meaning hypocrites and is the preferred name among Muslims for the Iranian Mojahedin-e Khalq cult.)

Anne visited Camp Ashraf shortly after the events of April 8 and had the opportunity to speak with Iraqi military representatives and observers stationed at the camp perimeter. She toured the outside of the camp to see where a third of the land has been reclaimed.

Background

When Iraq's current democratically elected parliament opened on 14 June 2010 it was known that the Iraqi government would continue to work toward the removal of the MEK from Iraq. It was known that the MEK would spill blood to resist this outcome. It was therefore a game of wait and see until a bloody confrontation erupted.

Although the election marked the beginning of a slow death for the MEK organisation in Iraq, eight years since it was captured and disarmed, the MEK in its current situation in Camp Ashraf is a spent force. The average age and both mental and physical health of the residents as well as their social and educational abilities indicate that it cannot function as a mass opposition force. Some individuals of course will be found who remain loyal to the Rajavis and who will continue to work for them in the future, but most of the residents are in need of help rather than being able to help others.

By the time the Government of Iraq (GOI) took charge of the camp in January 2009, the MEK had become used to imposing its own will on the conditions related to its survival and would not willingly relinquish an iota of this control. The MEK had in effect maintained, after the fall of Saddam Hussein, a de facto illegal territorial exclave run by non-Iraqis; a state within a state. Under the Iraqi constitution it is impossible to allow such a foreign terrorist group to remain in Iraq.

Since 2003 in particular there has been a history of cynical political exploitation of the residents of Camp Ashraf by multifarious elements. The people who reside in Camp Ashraf are being treated as pawns by every party which has an interest in the camp and the Mojahedin-e Khalq brand. Clearly, in

order to be effective in resolving the future of Camp Ashraf in a peaceful and humanitarian way, it will be necessary to put aside the interests of these political players and to look beyond the military and security aspect and to deal with the residents of the camp as individuals. More than that, they must be dealt with as the victims of a destructive cult.

The imperative which now drives resolution of this issue is the legitimate demand of the Government of Iraq that the MEK leave the country before the end of 2011. How this is to be achieved is the essential difficulty. Putting aside the MEK's victim propaganda it is clear that in fact the MEK is the problem, not the government of Iraq *per se*. So, the first question is how can all the parties concerned work together to remove the MEK from Iraq as the Iraqi government and indeed the Iraqi constitution requires?

As a helpful starting point, Western governments and agencies could certainly support the Government of Iraq position and provide positive practical interventions rather than indulging in political sniping from the sidelines.

The Rule of Law

One important aspect of the UNAMI mandate is that assistance was to be given to the new Iraqi government to bring the whole country under the Rule of Law. In this respect, the situation at Camp Ashraf should certainly have been a priority since the MEK leaders are known worldwide not to obey any law except their own. The minimum requirement that UNAMI should have demanded of the MEK from the start of its mandate in Iraq was that the group obey Iraqi law.

To reinforce its position the GOI recently began to release some of its intelligence information, gathered over the previous seven years, on MEK involvement in insurgency activity. Evidence was made available that Al Qaeda in Iraq had met with MEK leaders and helped fund the MEK in exchange for logistical support for Al Qaeda activities in Iraq. Evidence was also made available concerning MEK attempts to influence the outcome of the elections of March 2010.

Families at the camp – acting as a humanitarian pressure group

The two violent clashes which took place between Iraqi security forces and MEK loyalists in July 2009 and April 2011, in which several MEK were killed, were assured widespread attention in the West by intensive MEK lobbying. But since 2009 the most significant development at the camp has been the establishment of the permanent presence of families of Camp Ashraf residents as a humanitarian pressure group. In February 2010 a large group of families had travelled from Iran to find their relatives. The MEK not only denied them contact with their loved ones but attacked them as 'agents of the Iranian Intelligence Ministry sent to spy on them and destroy the camp'. The families ignored these insults and continued to make their requests. The MEK grouped at the gates of the camp to swear and throw stones at them. In disbelief, the families travelled to Baghdad where they met Iraqi officials responsible for Camp Ashraf and solicited their help. This was the first time that Iraqi officials had been directly approached by families for help. At this point some of the families went home as they had not planned to stay for so long and their other commitments or health issues

forced them to return. But other families decided that they would stay and would not leave until the situation had been resolved for them to meet their relatives. They began to ask around what could be done. They questioned who was really in charge of Camp Ashraf and why so little was being done to reach those inside. A few Iraqi human rights organisations and personalities agreed to help the families along with Sahar Family Foundation in Iraq. They called themselves the Committee to Support the Families at Camp Ashraf.

The families returned to Camp Ashraf and persuaded the Iraqi army to provide basic accommodation (containers) and allow them to set up a permanent picket.

The families began by approaching the camp gate and shouting messages for their loved ones. The MEK leaders responded by staging angry demonstrations with members shouting insults and swearing at the families. Rajavi thought they would give up and go away after only a short time.

Instead, the MEK inside the camp began to respond to the families, making surreptitious signals and encouraging them to go on with their messages. The MEK leaders then emptied the front of the camp where they were using several buildings, taking residents further inside the camp to a distance where the voices of the families could not be heard and they could not see one another. The families began using hand-held loud-speakers. This tit for tat behaviour escalated as the MEK began counter measures – banging bin-lids and metal cooking pots to drown out the families' voices. The MEK mounted audio equipment on the back of a vehicle and stationed it in front of the families. They loudly broadcast anthems and songs in an attempt to drown out the families' voices.

The families in turn brought their own loudspeakers and broadcast the sound of laughter of a two year old child – something the MEK had not heard for many years. The response of the MEK who were still in sight was astounding, they smiled and nodded and again made surreptitious signals to encourage the continuation of the families' actions.

Both the families and the MEK brought larger loud-speakers. The standoff escalated. By the end of the autumn, the families had spread their protests to all the other gates of Camp Ashraf on the perimeter and established their loud-speakers and banners and pickets all around the camp. The MEK was forced to retreat into the centre of the camp. In desperation the MEK installed American-made noise parasite equipment to block the sound, broadcasting audio interference at the families. The MEK were unaware at that time that reporters were present and the exposure of this illegal action which has a detrimental health effect forced them to quickly remove the equipment. (It has since been reinstated.) But the evidence of American support for the MEK was clear for all to see as reporters questioned how the MEK had taken receipt of such equipment beyond the camp checkpoints and indeed who had supplied it.

Throughout 2010 and up to the current time the families of residents in Camp Ashraf have played a crucial role in determining the future of the camp. Their presence has forced the MEK leadership to adopt more and more defensive positions, to retreat further and further into the depths of the camp. Rajavi introduced a special force to systematically patrol the perimeter fence and use catapults and slingshots to aim metal missiles to deter anyone from approaching the fence.

It is interesting therefore to examine why this should be so and why these families present such a problem for the cult.

Families as an existential threat to the MEK

The fundamental question is 'what is the rationale which explains Rajavi's refusal to allow the residents of Camp Ashraf to have contact with their families?' This is not a recent phenomenon. It has been a cult rule for thirty years that all contacts with families, including family relations inside the cult, are strictly controlled by the cult. Only in cases where there has been potential for financial gain, further recruitment of family members and/or cooperation in MEK activities is anyone allowed to make contact with their family wherever they are in the world. These contacts are ordered and rehearsed and monitored to ensure that they keep to the purpose and do not slip into any personal, emotional level.

Any family which does not have any use for the cult is an enemy of the cult. The cult member is indoctrinated to believe that their families are agents of the Iranian regime and their aim is to prevent the member from pursuing their sacred and ideological aim of struggle against the clerical dictatorship ruling Iran. In this way, Rajavi inculcates an artificial phobic reaction of fear and loathing in cult members against their own families. This means that any encounter with a family member will trigger an automatic reaction in the cult member to reject and hurt their family.

But this effect is only partially effective and relies on both the constant reinforcement of the phobic fear as well as preventing any actual meeting with or phone contact or even written contact with the families. (This is why the cult members are instructed to reject further family contact through the Red Cross Tracing Service. The Red Cross ensure that they deliver the first contact directly to the family member and do not allow the MEK leaders to deliver the contact on their behalf because they know they would not reach the recipient. However, the MEK instructs such recipients to inform the Red Cross to pass the message to their family not to contact them again.)

The reason why Rajavi tries so hard to prevent these contacts is that it is known that in cult members generally (except perhaps in the case of persons born into cults) the deep seated emotional ties to the person's original family can, given a very small opportunity, override the messages of the cult leader. In the case of the MEK cult in which members are not allowed to form families inside the cult, they live in a very black and white emotional landscape; either love Rajavi or you are his enemy. But there exists in each member the suppressed memory of former emotional relationships. These will, of course, be triggered by contact (by letter, telephone or in person) with a family member. Even contact with other people's families can trigger this emotional memory. A small and fleeting contact can override the indoctrination and plunge the cult member into a spiral of confusion and doubt about their exclusive relation to the leader.

As a result of this contact many cult members simply 'snap out of it' and are then able to begin the long and painful process of recovering from cult indoctrination. The problem for members of the Rajavi cult who are resident in Camp Ashraf is that they cannot physically leave. Otherwise they would be what is known in cult jargon as a 'walk out'; put simply a person who walks away from the cult. The residents who have managed to escape the confines of Camp Ashraf are in effect 'walk outs'. The conditions of their escapes are significant. Their escapes have been fraught with danger and difficulty. Firstly they know there is no TIPF to take refuge in. They will be on their own and they are aware that Camp Ashraf is far away from any place to get help and they have no money or ID and are instantly identifiable as Iranian and from the MEK. In addition, the MEK leaders have convinced them that the Iraqis will kill them if they leave and hand themselves over. (The people

inside Camp Ashraf have had no uncensored news of the outside world for over two decades. They have no idea of the real situation pertaining in Iraq.) But by taking the steps to leave the physical confines of the camp they have also left the cult. It usually does not take long once freed from the psychological pressure imposed by the cult leaders until they regain their critical thinking and their emotional responses.

Such escapees from Rajavi's cult report that the vast majority of residents in Camp Ashraf would like to leave but have no way of getting out. They are not willing members of Rajavi's MEK nor are they indoctrinated members of his cult. They are hostages.

It is the presence of the families and these 'walk outs' which Rajavi fears more than anything else because it signals the inevitable dissolution of his organisation. The families of the residents inside Camp Ashraf are the true existential threat to the MEK.

With this in mind it is clear that the permanent presence of the families at the camp gates will play a major role in the efforts to ensure that external agencies are able to enter the camp and make serious efforts to relocate and rehabilitate the people inside.

MEK denies medical treatment to residents

One of the issues over which the MEK invented a false human rights crisis for Western consumption after the Iraqis took over the camp was access to medical treatment.

As more and more members succumbed to serious and life-threatening illnesses the MEK leader was faced with a problem. If he allowed the member to be transferred to a suitable Iraqi hospital for specialist treatment the member would be outside the jurisdiction of the cult. Rajavi knows that members who are not subjected to ongoing indoctrination, especially at a moment in their lives when they are more vulnerable to 'changing their minds', will after even a short time begin to question and doubt the path of their lives and that as this critical thinking returns this will more than likely allow them to slip away from the cult and regain their lives.

For this reason the MEK insisted that any sick person must be accompanied by at least one other loyal cult member. These minders were to be sent as a kind of mobile indoctrinator.

As well as the security concerns of allowing MEK outside the camp, the Iraqis knew full well why the MEK wanted to send these minders and refused. They argued that there are many Farsi speaking Iraqi medical staff working in Iraq's hospitals who would be available for translation in a medical environment. The MEK of course lobbied Western parliaments on the grounds that the Iraqis were refusing them medical treatment when in fact this was not the case. The MEK were trying to dictate unreasonable terms. In this way they denied many Camp Ashraf residents from accessing treatment. Several have died as a result who could have been saved.

In March 2010, MEK leaders had denied a delegation from the Iraqi Ministry of Human Rights access to the inhabitants of the camp. Surprisingly, given the unusually inflated degree of interest in Camp Ashraf among members of the European Parliament, other national European parliaments, and

human rights bodies like Amnesty International, this denial did give rise to protest or parliamentary questions; concerns were not raised over what may be going on inside the camp.

Over the autumn of 2010 the Iraqis were aware that three people had died as a result of not receiving early medical attention because the MEK refused them access to proper medical care. One more person was murdered by hanging (the MEK explained this as a suicide in protest at the families coming to visit them). After further enquiries, the campaign group Iran-Interlink was made privy to information that the cult leader was now prepared to kill or force the terminally sick people to commit suicide in order to put the blame on the Iraqi authorities.

Iraqi demonstrations and police activity at the camp

Throughout 2010-11 peaceful demonstrations by Iraqis demanding the MEK's removal from Iraq and in support of the demand of the families to see their relatives took place on a frequent basis. The MEK response was invariably to initiate violent resistance – hurling rocks and other missiles at demonstrators - and to attempt to incite a violent response in the external groups whoever they may be. But while Iraqi media gave widespread coverage to these events, Western media did not find it interesting or newsworthy that local Iraqi citizens despise the MEK, nor that their peaceful demonstrations outside the camp were met with violence by the MEK. It is unsurprising then that Western politicians could be fooled into believing that the situation at the camp was a simple case of the Iraqi authorities violating the human rights of the residents.

In the autumn of 2010 Iraqi police received information about criminal activities taking place inside Camp Ashraf. When the police arrived at the camp to investigate, the MEK leaders refused to allow them access and started fighting with them using batons and knives to prevent the security officers from discharging their functions. At the same time some MEK loyalists were seen to be deliberately injuring themselves only later to accuse the Iraqi police of using heavy handed tactics.

Events of April 8 2011

Since January 2009 the GOI had attempted, in vain, to bring the residents of Camp Ashraf in line with Iraqi and international law. One of the issues which arose during this period was that of land ownership. Camp Ashraf had been built on land illegally confiscated by Saddam Hussein from local tribes and farmers on which he built his own military base Khalis garrison. He later gifted the camp to Massoud Rajavi, who renamed it Camp Ashraf, to use as a base for his fighters. In addition, over the years the MEK also unlawfully expanded its camp to occupy farmland to the north of the camp.

Since 2005 the Iraqi Judiciary had worked hard to adjudicate on such land disputes all over the country and in the case of the land occupied by Camp Ashraf, at least some of the original owners were able to provide documentary proof that they were the rightful owners. This made it imperative on the GOI to return this land to them.

The GOI tasked the military to take action to reclaim a 20 km square portion of this land (the total land mass of Camp Ashraf was 51 km sq.). The area to be taken lay to the north of the camp from where a road identified as Road 100 (the main boulevard of the camp) runs east to west.

There were conflicting reports as to what happened next. Iran-Interlink enquired of various official and non-official sources, including non governmental observers at the camp who witnessed the activities.

On April 3, the Fifth Division in Diyala replaced the Ninth Division which had been protecting Camp Ashraf. At the same time the MEK leaders were informed and served with legal notices to say that the Iraqi military would shortly be reclaiming the swathe of land situated to the north of Road 100 in order to restore it to its rightful owners. Although the MEK appeared to agree to this at the time, they immediately began a public relations campaign in the West to claim that the Iraqi military had invaded Camp Ashraf. "The forces of Iraq's Fifth Division invaded Camp Ashraf with columns of armoured vehicles, occupying areas inside the camp, since midnight on Saturday," claimed an MEK public relations statement.

Brigadier Tarek Azzawi, chief of military operations at the camp explained to an AFP reporter, *"It's a replacement of forces, not a new deployment."*

"The Fifth Division in Diyala has replaced the Ninth Division that protects Ashraf, and we have not advanced even one metre," he said. *"There were no clashes,"* he added.

An MEK spokesman reported that 40 to 50 uniformed US troops arrived at Camp Ashraf on April 2 and departed on the afternoon of April 7.

Speaking several weeks after the events, a US military spokesman, Colonel Barry Johnson said in an interview with the Miami Herald that the American soldiers had been sent to Camp Ashraf to *"assist a new Iraqi army unit that was rotating into the area to replace another unit. When they left April 7, "there were no major concerns about the capability of the new Iraqi Army unit to assume the mission,"* he said". The Colonel told the newspaper, *"The US units were not aware of any impending Iraqi operation at the camp."*

On April 8, having served legal notice, Iraqi military personnel arrived at the camp with bulldozers and other heavy vehicles in order to break through the barbed wire perimeter fence which had been reinforced by the MEK. They would then break through the three metre high earth banks - which the MEK had erected to prevent escapes and to prevent anyone seeing into the camp. The MEK of course had been forewarned of this operation and as such had been given the opportunity to move whatever they had from the area into the remaining section of the camp – a further thirty square kilometres.

As the Iraqis approached the camp perimeter and began to dismantle it, two MEK came forward and set themselves on fire in front of the Iraqi soldiers. Inside the camp, a crowd had been assembled whose task was to shout slogans and make as much noise as possible, taunting the Iraqis with insults and threats.

From behind the earthworks MEK specially trained and organised forces erupted and began to throw metal missiles and to catapult smaller ones at the soldiers as they began their task of breaking down

the fence. Other offensive weaponry wielded by the unarmed MEK involved included clubs and knives. Molotov cocktails were used to set fire to the Iraqi military buildings and vehicles at the compound nearby. The MEK were wearing different coloured protective headgear and were coordinated to operate in various locations using an assortment of weapons. According to a former member who had recently escaped the camp, this type of offensive 'resistance' activity had been planned and practiced by the MEK for years in advance.

The MEK activity was intended to prevent the military from doing their work. However, the military had been ordered to complete this task and did not have orders to retreat from the scene. One commander explained that they had given legal notice of their intention several days previously which as far as they were concerned had been accepted and they had not therefore anticipated this reaction. An order was given to shoot at the legs of the protestors in order to regain control of the scene. Several individuals were shot during this activity. Some of the soldiers drove military diggers at the crowd to try to disperse them. Several MEK were crushed under these vehicles. During this incident tens of Iraqi soldiers were also injured, some seriously and had to be evacuated from the scene.

At the end of the operation, the Iraqi military had taken the land and driven the MEK back into the remainder of the camp. Over the next two days, they established a new fence along the perimeter just north of Road 100. The MEK moved residents out of the buildings close to the new perimeter fence and re-housed them out of sight and earshot of activities outside the camp.

Aftermath of the April 8 operation

As usual because of the absence of official third party observers on the ground during the event, there has been little independent verification about what really happened at the camp. In the following days, the United Nations announced that 34 MEK died during the incident. The MEK verified this figure – subsequently increased to 35. Investigators for the United Nations said that most of the dead were shot, though an unspecified number were crushed to death when Iraqi troops and armoured personnel carriers moved into the camp. According to the ICRC representative in Baghdad, some of the injured MEK were taken to hospital in Baquba. Six were arrested and taken to Khalis police station where they were visited by the ICRC. The MEK, as before, produced their own films of the event which were distributed and broadcast with no critical qualification (for example, that this was the view of only one side of those involved in the incident). Calls came from all quarters for an independent enquiry. The GOI remained tight lipped about the event, preferring to launch its own investigation before answering external enquiries.

One eyewitness – a former member who was a bystander at the scene - said that only two people (a brother and sister) from the higher ranks were injured. They were shot in their legs, which appeared to be self-inflicted; that is, they deliberately shot themselves. All the other victims among the dead and injured came from the lower ranks. According to Iraqi officials some individuals were killed by the MEK as they tried to run away from the camp during the violence. Some were killed as they were forced to rush the Iraqi posts throwing petrol bombs and pre-fabricated missiles.

The bodies of most of the victims – the ones who did not die in hospital in Baquba - were kept inside the camp by the MEK and neither their families nor any Iraqi agencies were given access to them. Iraqi coroners were not able to carry out post mortem examinations on the bodies to determine the actual cause of death. On April 10 the MEK invited an American team comprising civilian and military personnel into the camp to perform forensic examinations on 28 of the victims and interview some of the wounded. The Americans transferred some of the injured to their facilities for medical treatment. The Iraqi authorities were not involved in or consulted about any of these activities. This was a private agreement between the MEK and the US military. (Unofficial observers stationed at the camp perimeter report that the US military runs daily helicopter sorties over the camp, and they believe make regular landings inside the camp out of sight of the Iraqi military.)

A deplorable state of affairs reigned over the fate of the dead as the MEK now prepared to play their political games using the bodies as bargaining tools.

Since the MEK's cemetery now lay in the part of land which had been reclaimed by the Iraqis it was assumed that the dead would be buried according to normal Muslim practice within a short time inside the camp. Rajavi, the MEK leader, pronounced through his interlocutors that the MEK would only bury the dead in their own cemetery and only on condition that the land which had been seized be given back to them and that the Iraqis did not conduct further investigations. This was a demand the Iraqi government found impossible to even consider as it would contravene its own laws. In any case, after a cursory search of the reclaimed land, some unmarked graves had been found in the MEK cemetery which needed investigation. As well as this, caches of arms and ammunition had already been discovered in the cemetery and in other locations.

The Iraqi authorities were petitioned by relatives of the dead, some of whom were among the families who had been encamped outside the camp for the past fourteen months. In response to appeals by these families for humanitarian consideration, the Iraqis agreed to allow the MEK to bury the bodies in the original MEK cemetery. But the issue of returning the land was not open to negotiation.

In turn the MEK rejected this concession because the Iraqi government had stipulated that fewer than 200 MEK members attend the burials. This is because both the government and the MEK knew that the MEK was using this (having large numbers attend the funerals) as an excuse to occupy the land and then refuse to leave. They would thereby create yet another incident in which they could shed more blood and divert attention from the real problem which is that they have been holding hostage thousands of people without any contact with the outside world.

The MEK demanded that their supporters in the European Parliament, Struan Stevenson and Alejo Vidal Quadras as well as their supporters in the British House of Lords, Lord Corbett and others, be brought to Iraq for the funerals. The idea was that they would be taken inside the MEK controlled part of Camp Ashraf without any Iraqi oversight and the funerals would take place as a publicity stunt for the MEK.

The Iraqi authorities again reiterated that the funerals could take place in the MEK cemetery with no more than 200 MEK present. If any foreign visitor should attend they would also be required to abide by Iraqi law which meant that they would not be allowed to enter Camp Ashraf without an Iraqi security escort.

Typically the MEK and its supporters in these Western parliaments depicted a false picture of the crisis over the dead bodies. The MEK published photographs of elderly Iranian women in Paris holding pictures of the dead people with the headlines 'Iraqi army bars burials'. None of the women in the pictures was a relative of the dead people. It was a propaganda move. The message given was that it was Iraqis who would not allow the funerals. This was simply not the case. The MEK used the bodies as bargaining tools, issuing impossible demands to drag the issue out as long as possible. They had no concern for the real families of the victims or the rotting bodies in the camp. The MEK's aim was to maintain their image as victims of Iraqi cruelty. It was also to detract attention from the allegations that at least some of the dead were killed by the MEK themselves as had happened in the clashes in July 2009. The standoff also detracted from demands by the families for independent agencies to enter the camp and rescue their loved ones. More than anything, MEK loyalists would parade the ordinary camp residents past the bodies and use them as evidence to reinforce the cult message that the Iraqis would kill them if they tried to leave.

Several of the families of the victims lodged official complaints with the Iraqi Judiciary and demanded the forcible return of their loved ones to them. As the next of kin, they argued, they had priority rights over the bodies of their relatives. To date no bodies have been returned to the next of kin.

(Interestingly, the MEK's advocates in Western parliaments have now moved on from the issues of the lost land and the MEK's refusal to bury the dead, and are again concerned with the presence of the families at the camp perimeter.)

Investigations

The Iraqi military immediately began a process of critically examining its own response to this violent incident in order to develop and implement any changes needed as a result. No doubt the security agencies from any one of the European countries which had recently experienced violent riots in their own capital cities over the recent economic crisis would have been happy to share with the Iraqis the findings and recommendations of their own enquiries had they been consulted. Regarding the incident as extremely regrettable, the Iraqis were however, confident of their ability to conduct their own enquiry.

With violence erupting in various countries in the Middle East and North Africa, the events at Camp Ashraf would not normally have elicited much interest in the West. But, the MEK's backers in Europe, wary of Iraq's increasing economic and social ties with Iran, took this opportunity to launch a political attack on the Iraqi government. They inflated the importance of Camp Ashraf to the level of an international crisis. Their tactics involved what amounted to political bullying and their accusations were at times ludicrous (American circuit speakers sat on MEK organised press conference panels and with straight faces referred to the event as a "massacre" or even "genocide"). The result was that various parties which found it in their own interests to condemn the Iraqi government, including some human rights organisations, and others who were simply too lazy to investigate the issue further, were vociferous in their demands that the Iraqi army be investigated.

But, the issue was not that simple or straightforward. The incident had not been one sided. More sophisticated people, while condemning the killings, began to look more deeply into the event and, taking into account the nature, the history and the behaviour of the other party to this incident, came up with a different view. Twelve members of the European Parliament from five political groups addressed a letter to their colleagues pointing out that, *“The group has developed a very strong lobby in the European Parliament over the last couple of years claiming to be the only serious Iranian opposition group”*. The letter continued:

“While the main responsibility for the incident seems to be with the Iraqi security forces, they have so far only acknowledged responsibility for the death of three inmates. We therefore fully support the call of the High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay for an independent investigation into the incident.

“This unacceptable blood shed should not, however, distract us from an objective and level headed analysis of the track record of the PMOI [MEK]. We urge all members to seriously consider the history, actions and behaviour of the PMOI before signing any declarations or letters of support in favour of this group in the future. Their method is very simple: they mobilise MEPs justified outrage at the nuclear issue, the human rights violations and the very character of the Iranian regime, but instrumentalised [sic] such opinion for a different purpose – the political legitimisation [sic] of the Mujahedin organisation itself.

“Surprisingly, the allegations of massive human rights violations inside the Mujahedin organisation are never [the] subject of debate. According to overwhelming evidence the former militant group has turned into a repressive sect far removed from the respectable image the representatives of this group display when visiting the European Parliament. The human rights violations the leaders are committing against the group’s members are amply documented, starting with Human Rights Watch (HRW) and many witness reports of ex-members who were able to flee (including testimonies in the European Parliament).”

The letter went some way to viewing the incident objectively.

Right minded observers acknowledged that this was an internal issue for the Government of Iraq to deal with, and in any case, an investigation would need to look at the conduct of the Iraqi military and riot police in a countrywide context rather than being generalised from one isolated incident.

Above all it was acknowledged that the role of the Iraqi military remained indispensable for both protecting the individuals inside the camp from danger and preventing the leaders from launching attacks on outsiders who need to enter the camp to perform the various duties needed to deal with the camp’s residents. This is a role which they took over from the Americans. They did not invent the role nor did they change its character.

A unique dimension

The MEK control of Camp Ashraf and over the lives of the residents being held hostage there does not, however, present a normal situation. This is a unique situation with its own dynamics and it will require a radically different approach to find a peaceful and effective resolution to the problem.

The phenomenon which is being dealt with here is that of a dangerous, destructive cult rather than a political or military group. The basic problem from the start was that neither the American army nor the Iraqi army was prepared in any sense to deal with this type of group. In 2003 the US army was met by *“leaders who were fluent in English and who took pains to establish ties with the United States by claiming – falsely, as it turned out – that a large portion of the group had advanced degrees from American universities and family members resident in the United States”*. (RAND, August 2009) Because the army was not informed about or able to deal with a violent cult, they were persuaded on the ground by the deceptive and manipulative methods of the MEK leaders. Instead of demanding the surrender of an enemy target, they entered without authority into a cease-fire situation instead. Basically they were duped by the MEK, which continued to call the shots right up to 2009.

In the same way, the Iraqi army was unprepared and unqualified to deal with the cult inspired behaviour of the MEK. In this case, the MEK knew they would never be able to persuade the Iraqis to allow them to remain in Iraq. Instead of schmoozing them, they maintained at best a hostile intransigence, and when it suited them they did what they could to provoke a violent reaction. Faced with what was suicidal violence, the Iraqi army did not have the knowledge or experience to take the sophisticated decisions needed to control the group.

Experts in the MEK and in cult behaviour are clear that it is not the role of the army or the police to deal with this group. Lessons should be taken from the 1993 standoff at the Waco ranch when police ignored the advice of cult experts and the confrontation ended in the mass deaths of the ranch residents.

Key Difficulties

At this stage there are two main impediments to moving forward on this issue.

One is the deliberate smokescreen of obfuscation, lies and deception created by the MEK itself in relation to the camp in order to distract from the central issue. This is accompanied by complete intransigence in terms of accepting any alteration to the situation of the residents of Camp Ashraf. From the time of Iran-Interlink’s last report in August 2009 negotiations with the MEK leaders have yielded no progress whatsoever. Clearly this is not a way forward.

The other difficulty is that no external body has independent access to the interior of the camp to either investigate or help in the camp. This is a vital point. The MEK will currently only allow access into the camp to agencies – including its own political supporters - which accept MEK oversight and control over whom they meet and where they visit. This is not a tenable situation from which to investigate allegations of human rights abuses and false imprisonment of residents.

It is this second difficulty which must become the focus for action. Only when investigative missions are able to get inside the camp, and gain free access to all its residents without interference by the MEK leaders, will the first impediment be swept aside allowing all relevant agencies to deal with the facts on the ground rather than grappling with propaganda and political pressure.

The problem is how to break the deadlock with the MEK on one side refusing to even admit anyone into the camp, and Iraq and external bodies on the other side trying to find a peaceful and effective way to remove the residents of Camp Ashraf.

The key difficulty attending any approach is that the MEK loyalists will continue to resist and try to provoke violence in order to prevent any interference in the internal affairs of the camp.

In this respect, one particular issue which overrides all others (political, social, humanitarian) in dealing with the MEK is what can be referred to as the fear factor. This is what makes external agencies afraid to interfere in any meaningful way. Put simply, the MEK has threatened the mass suicide of the residents should anybody interfere in the internal affairs of the camp. This is a real threat and cannot be treated lightly – European capitals witnessed a handful of public MEK self-immolations in July 2003 which killed two and permanently disabled and disfigured the others. But it is necessary to assess how realistic this threat is and work out how to avoid such a potential outcome. It is clear from the MEK reaction to Iraqi soldiers that MEK loyalists are prepared to launch suicidal violence to repel such interference. It is not clear however how many of the other residents might be involved. An understanding of this fear factor and how it artificially influences approaches to the MEK is integral to finding an effective solution.

Finding a baseline from which to move forward

While various external bodies, prompted by MEK lobbying, have called for an independent investigation into the events of April 8, this will not move the issue forward or help the Iraqi government to deal with the problem – the hidden agenda here is to focus blame on the Iraqi authorities and obfuscate on the realities inside Camp Ashraf.

But there are facts which, when taken into consideration, will form a baseline from which a plan can be developed. Indeed, perhaps the most useful way to approach this problem for everyone involved is to start with the desired outcome – the MEK as a foreign terrorist group leave Iraq. From this point it is possible to identify the steps needed to achieve this goal.

An initial approach would be to first identify what exactly is meant by the Mojahedin-e Khalq organisation as it exists at Camp Ashraf. For the GOI the MEK represents the last remnants of the former Saddam regime which in addition to being culpable for horrific crimes against the Iraqi people over twenty years, is still being used to interfere in the internal affairs of the country. The Iraqis have every reason to demand the removal of every last vestige of the MEK from Iraq.

For Western observers however, the issue is slightly more complex. Duplicitous and misleading MEK lobbying in the West, in particular concerning the current existential threat to the continuation of Camp Ashraf, has led to a completely false view of the problem.

The fundamental error of external bodies is that they have accepted at face value that the MEK as an entity has a voice. It does not. That everyone in the camp speaks with the same voice. They do not. And, that this MEK voice represents the interests of all the residents of the camp. It does not. When American agencies ‘encourage’ the GOI to negotiate with the MEK over this issue they completely

miss the point – because it is a cult, negotiations with anyone from the MEK will only ever represent the interests of one person, the cult leader Massoud Rajavi.

In the recent violence of April 8, 2011, eye witnesses have said that up to 200 members took part. That is, 3200 members have not been directly involved. Does this mean that Rajavi has been unable to coerce them into defending him? Is it the case that 3200 people therefore are unwilling to support Rajavi? How many of the residents of Camp Ashraf are willing and able to continue as members of a terrorist group or as members of a mind control cult?

The honest answer is that nobody really knows what is happening inside Camp Ashraf.

The only reliable information we have are the testimonies of the handful of residents who have recently escaped and who can tell us about current conditions in the camp. Interestingly, aside from some new details, their stories tally in the fundamental essentials with the testimonies of thousands of former MEK members who have spoken out over the years to expose severe human rights abuses and violations inside the organisation which affect every single member, even at the highest leadership level.

The consistent theme of all the testimonies given by those who have left the MEK is that the leader does not represent their interests. The individuals remaining in the camp are not there of their own free will and are subject to daily psychological and physical coercion to force them to remain there.

As irksome as this may be for the GOI therefore, it is not possible to advocate for the wholesale removal of the MEK from Iraq as a group. They must not be treated as possessions. This is called slavery and every concerned human rights group should be alert to this situation and take an active role in preventing the wholesale transfer of slaves to another location where they will remain under the ownership or hegemony of one man, Massoud Rajavi.

Recommended steps for progressing removal of the camp's residents

The first step toward resolving this issue is for all the agencies involved - UNAMI, UNHCR, and others – to gain free and unfettered access to every resident of the camp. This will allow them to conduct an investigation into the actual conditions of their captivity and to ascertain any specific individual needs which they may have, whether medical or otherwise. This may or may not be achieved through negotiation with the MEK leaders as they are currently engaged. Certainly, external agencies will need to be clear, concise and uncompromising in their demand that the MEK leaders give full access to the whole of the camp.

The proper framework for such an investigation is to acknowledge that the MEK leaders will not be truthful about the situation inside the camp and cannot be relied upon to represent the interests of the residents. Above all it must be acknowledged that the MEK leaders do not have authority over the residents except that gained through fear and coercion and the leaders have not been elected or appointed by the residents to represent them. Indeed, the MEK leaders have a vested interest in hiding many of the aspects of the situation inside Camp Ashraf including the lack of basic human rights, keeping people prisoner and disallowing contact with the outside world.

In this context a leap of faith is required to depart from all previous methods of confrontation and containment. Untested an approach it may be, but it will be essential for all the agencies involved to take the advice of cult experts, particularly experts on the MEK. The MEK has an armoury of defensive tactics with which to prevent such interference. The obvious one is to meet all attempts to enter the camp with violent, suicidal resistance. But the MEK system is also supremely manipulative as the American army discovered in 2003. Certainly both MEK cult experts and recently escaped residents will be needed to identify loyal cult leaders and activists. These experts will also be able to identify and challenge the MEK's manipulative techniques which would otherwise be effective in deceiving less experienced agencies – no matter how well meaning.

The agencies involved must also take into account the experience and demands of the families of current residents. It is these people who can speak on behalf of the interests and needs of the 3400 individuals living there and not yield to the false and distracting concepts of either protecting the 'rights' of an artificial entity (the MEK) or submitting to the arbitrary dictates of its leader.

Once external agencies have been able to enter Camp Ashraf, the first major task will be to separate loyal MEK leaders from the rest of the residents. Then it will be possible to establish from among the remaining residents which are loyal to the MEK leader Massoud Rajavi and separate these from the residents who want to dissociate from the group. There will also be several people who are subject to arrest because they are under investigation by the Iraqi Judiciary for crimes against humanity and war crimes committed in Iraq.

Naturally at this stage it is reasonable to ask, 'once the individuals are separated into various types and separated from one another – presumably in the same camp - what then is to be done with them?'

The simple answer would be that they must all be given access to full information about their current situation which will enable them to make informed decisions about their individual futures. That means facilitating contact with the outside world through telephone, radio, television, print media and the internet.

Individual residents should then be granted a reasonable period of time to recover from the pressure of the leaders and the effects of indoctrination before being asked to determine their next steps. After which a realistic and reasonable set of alternative possibilities should be put before them. For those who dissociate from the MEK these options might include: remaining at the camp or in Iraq as a refugee; voluntary repatriation to Iran with the help of the ICRC, Iraqi human rights ministry and Iranian embassy officials; transfer to a third country as a political refugee.

But the cult experts will suggest an additional dimension; perhaps more difficult to understand and implement but ultimately the most effective way to rescue the victims of this destructive cult. This dimension is to introduce into the cult environment – the physical, mental and emotional environment of the cult member – exactly those elements which the cult leader has taken extreme pains to deny them. In the case of the MEK, in addition to access to external information as mentioned above, the restoration of normal emotional relations will have a profound effect on these individuals.

It is not by random chance that Massoud Rajavi's reaction has revealed that the greatest enemy of the MEK cult is not the Iraqi army or the Iranian regime or even shifting political fortunes and contingencies. As described above, the presence of families of cult members immediately outside the perimeter fence presents the greatest existential threat to the continuation of his control over the residents. MEK cult members are forbidden to be in relationship with anybody except Massoud Rajavi. They are forced through psychological coercion to worship him – though the real emotion is fear of course. The experience of countless former members has shown that when genuinely loving alternative relationships are available to them – particularly the unconditional love of a parent and other close family members - the cult victim very quickly snaps out of their cult mentality and begins to regain his/her critical faculties and the ability to begin the process of recovery and reintegration into normal society.

External agencies which have a genuine concern for the individual residents of Camp Ashraf would be advised to examine this advice and integrate it into any rescue package they devise to resolve the crisis at the camp.



Anne Singleton addressing delegates at al-Mostanserieh University in Baghdad April 2011

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