

ParsBrief

Number 64
February 2012

1. Iranian exiles move to new Iraq camp
2. UN certifies that new camp for Iranian exiles meets international standards
3. 750 Mojahedin Khalq members ask to return to Iran
4. Israel teams with terror group to kill Iran's nuclear scientists, U.S. officials tell NBC News
5. Mitt Romney, Strangely Unfamiliar With the MEK
6. Mujahedin-e Khalq in the new List of Terrorist Organizations



Iranian exiles move to new Iraq camp

AFP - February 18, 2012

Several hundred Iranian exiles were travelling to a UN-approved site near Baghdad on Saturday after leaving Camp Ashraf, where Iranian opposition members have been based for decades.

The move is part of a December 25 deal between the UN and Iraq, which was reached after extensive talks, under which around 3,400 Iranians opposed to the regime in Tehran will be moved to a new location called Camp Liberty, as part of a process that aims to see them resettled outside Iraq.

Three hundred and ninety seven exiles departed in 18 buses beginning about 1:30 am on Saturday (2230 GMT on Friday), escorted by Iraqi security forces, Behzad Saffari, the legal adviser for residents of the camp, told AFP by telephone.

The departing exiles and their belongings were searched prior to their departure in a lengthy process that began around 2:00 pm (1100 GMT) on Friday, and continued until 1:15 am on Saturday (2215 GMT on Friday), said Saffari, who was travelling with the group to Camp Liberty, near Baghdad airport.

Iraq had previously aimed to close Camp Ashraf in Diyala province, which now-executed dictator Saddam Hussein allowed the People's Mujahedeen Organisation of Iran (PMOI) to set up during his 1980-88 war with Iran, by the end of the year.

But Iraqi premier Nuri al-Maliki said on December 21 that his government had agreed to extend the deadline to April, and signed the deal with the UN on moving the exiles a few days later.

The National Council of Resistance of Iran, an umbrella group that includes the PMOI, has complained about the conditions at Camp Liberty, and called for Iraqi police to be withdrawn from the camp before additional exiles move there.

The left-wing PMOI was founded in 1960s to oppose the shah of Iran, but took up arms against Iran's new clerical rulers after the Islamic revolution in 1979. It said in 2001 that it had renounced violence.

Spokesman Shahriar Kia has said that the PMOI is "seeking a democratic change in Iran." The US State Department has blacklisted the PMOI as a terrorist organisation since 1997, and says that members of the group carried out a large number of attacks over several decades against Iranian targets, and also against Americans.

The PMOI strongly opposes the terrorist designation and is seeking to have it lifted in the United States as it has been in Europe.

In a May 2005 report, Human Rights Watch cited former PMOI members as having "reported abuses ranging from detention and persecution of ordinary members wishing to leave the organization, to lengthy solitary confinements, severe beatings, and torture of dissident members."

An October 2005 US diplomatic cable from Baghdad released by whistleblower website Wikileaks discussed the cases of two people of Iranian origin who had lived in Germany, saying that after they arrived at Camp Ashraf in 1999, their travel documents were confiscated and they were told they could not leave.

The cable said that a claim by one of the two "that Ashraf residents found planning to depart were punished and threatened with death is corroborated by numerous former residents."

Camp Ashraf was disarmed following the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and came under US military protection, but American forces handed over security responsibilities for the site to the Baghdad authorities in January 2009.

Iraqi security forces raided Camp Ashraf in late July 2009, leading to clashes in which 11 residents of the camp were said to have been killed and several hundred wounded.

Camp Ashraf has been back in the spotlight since a controversial April 2011 raid by Iraqi security forces left at least 34 people dead and scores injured.

UN certifies that new camp for Iranian exiles meets international standards

UN News Centre, February 01 2012

United Nations refugee and human rights officials said today that they have confirmed that the infrastructure and facilities at a new camp in Iraq for residents of the settlement

formerly known as Camp Ashraf meet international standards, as stipulated in last month's agreement on voluntary relocation between the UN and the Iraqi Government.

The UN and the Iraqi Government on 25 December signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the voluntary relocation of several thousand Iranian exiles living in Camp New Iraq, previously known as Camp Ashraf, in the north-eastern part of the country.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the human rights office of the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) said arrangements for the relocation of Camp New Iraq residents to the new Camp Liberty are progressing after it was confirmed that the facilities and the infrastructure had met international humanitarian standards.

"I am grateful to the UNHCR and the human rights team for their expertise," said Martin Kobler, the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Iraq. "This brings us a step further in ensuring that proper conditions are in place for voluntary relocation of Camp New Iraq residents."

UN monitors are ready to start round-the-clock human rights monitoring during the transport of residents from Camp New Iraq, as well as on their arrival at Camp Liberty, currently built to accommodate 5,500 people. UNHCR is also ready to start refugee status determination as soon as residents start arriving in the new camp, according to a press release issued by UNAMI.

The Iraqi Government will organize the modalities of transporting people from Camp New Iraq to Camp Liberty and other relevant issues with the residents. The UN stands ready to facilitate those efforts if requested, Mr. Kobler said.

"It is important that [the] MoU is implemented in letter and spirit," he added, noting that the agreement "stands only for a peaceful solution and a voluntary relocation of Camp New Iraq residents."

"The United Nations' consistent position is that a violent outcome is unacceptable. The MoU paves the way for UNHCR to conduct the verification and refugee status determination (RSD) processes, which is a necessary first step to resettle the residents in other countries and enjoy their freedom and liberty," he said.

"Member States have a crucial role in helping to resolve the situation of Camp New Iraq residents and I do urge them again to accept residents in their countries. This is a critical contribution to the humanitarian solution we are all seeking," Mr. Kobler added.

Situated in the eastern Iraqi province of Diyala, Camp New Iraq camp houses several thousand members of a group known as the People's Mojahedeen of Iran.

750 Mojahedin Khalq members ask to return to Iran

Press TV, Baghdad, January 22 2012

Iranian Ambassador to Iraq Hassan Danaifar says nearly 750 members of the terrorist Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization (MKO) have expressed readiness to return to Iran.

Danaifar had earlier announced that Iran had pardoned all the residents of the Camp Ashraf except for less than 100 individuals who have criminal records.

The Iranian ambassador said on Sunday that Iran would not grant amnesty to the ringleaders of the terrorist group, adding that “those whose hands are not stained with the blood of Iranian citizens will be pardoned.”

Danaifar noted that during UN envoy's visit to Camp Ashraf, the majority of the group expressed willingness to return to Iran in Iraq; however, the MKO leaders do not allow them to leave the camp and they have “somehow taken those members as hostages.”

The MKO, which has carried out numerous acts of terror and violence against Iranian civilians and government officials, fled to Iraq in 1986, where it enjoyed the support of Iraq's executed dictator Saddam Hussein and set up the camp in Diyala Province, near the Iranian border.

The terrorist group is also known to have collaborated with Saddam in the bloody repression of the 1991 Shia Muslims in southern Iraq and the massacre of Iraqi Kurds in the country's north.

Iran has repeatedly called on the Iraqi government to expel the group, but the US has blocked the expulsion by mounting pressure on the Iraqi government.

Israel teams with terror group to kill Iran's nuclear scientists, U.S. officials tell NBC News

Richard Engel and Robert Windrem NBC News – February 13, 2012

Excerpts from NBC report on Israel-MKO connection:

Updated: 11:14 a.m. ET -- Deadly attacks on Iranian nuclear scientists are being carried out by an Iranian dissident group that is financed, trained and armed by Israel's secret service, U.S. officials tell NBC News, confirming charges leveled by Iran's leaders.

ROCK CENTER EXCLUSIVE The group, the People's Mujahedin of Iran, has long been designated as a terrorist group by the United States, accused of killing American servicemen and contractors in the 1970s and supporting the takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran before breaking with the Iranian mullahs in 1980.

The attacks, which have killed five Iranian nuclear scientists since 2007 and may have destroyed a missile research and development site, have been carried out in dramatic fashion, with motorcycle-borne assailants often attaching small magnetic bombs to the exterior of the victims' cars.

U.S. officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the Obama administration is aware of the assassination campaign but has no direct involvement.

The Iranians have no doubt who is responsible – Israel and the People's Mujahedin of Iran, known by various acronyms, including MEK, MKO and PMOI

Mohammad Javad Larijani, a senior aide to Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, describes what Iranian leaders believe is a close relationship between Israel's secret service, the Mossad, and the People's Mujahedin of Iran, or MEK, which is considered a terrorist organization by the United States.

"The relation is very intricate and close," said Mohammad Javad Larijani, a senior aide to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, speaking of the MEK and Israel. "They (Israelis) are paying ... the Mujahedin. Some of their (MEK) agents ... (are) providing Israel with information. And they recruit and also manage logistical support."

Moreover, he said, the Mossad, the Israeli secret service, is training MEK members in Israel on the use of motorcycles and small bombs. In one case, he said, Mossad agents built a replica of the home of an Iranian nuclear scientist so that the assassins could familiarize themselves with the layout prior to the attack.

Much of what the Iranian government knows of the attacks and the links between Israel and MEK comes from interrogation of an assassin who failed to carry out an attack in late 2010 and the materials found on him, Larijani said.

The U.S.-educated Larijani, whose two younger brothers run the legislative and judicial branches of the Iranian government, said the Israelis' rationale is simple. "Israel does not have direct access to our society. Mujahedin, being Iranian and being part of Iranian society, they have ... a good number of ... places to get into the touch with people. So I think they are working hand-to-hand very close. And we do have very concrete documents."

Two senior U.S. officials confirmed for NBC News the MEK's role in the assassinations, with one senior official saying, "All your inclinations are correct." A third official would not

confirm or deny the relationship, saying only, "It hasn't been clearly confirmed yet." All the officials denied any U.S. involvement in the assassinations.

As it has in the past, Israel's Foreign Ministry declined comment. Said a spokesman, "As long as we can't see all the evidence being claimed by NBC, the Foreign Ministry won't react to every gossip and report being published worldwide."

For its part, the MEK pointed to a statement calling the allegations "absolutely false."

...

"This is an Israeli plot. A dirty plot," Larijani added angrily. He also claimed the assassinations are not having an effect on the program and have only made scientists more resolute in carrying out their mission.

Not so, said Ronen Bergman, an Israeli commentator and author of "Israel's Secret War with Iran" and an upcoming book tentatively titled, "Mossad and the Art of Assassination."

Israel has long used assassination against its enemies, "hoping that by taking out individuals, they can alter, change the course of history," says Ronen Bergman, an Israeli commentator and author of "Israel's Secret War with Iran" and an upcoming book tentatively titled "Mossad and the Art of Assassination."

Bergman said the attacks have three purposes, the most obvious being the removal of high-ranking scientists and their knowledge. The others: forcing Iran to increase security for its scientists and facilities and to spur "white defections."

He explained the latter this way: "Scientists leaving the project, afraid that they are going to be next on the assassination list, and say, 'We don't want this. Indeed, we get good money, we are promoted, we are honored by everybody, but we might get killed. It isn't worth it. Maybe we should go back to teach ... in a university.'"

There are unconfirmed reports in the Israeli press and elsewhere that Israel and the MEK were involved in a Nov. 12 explosion that destroyed the Iranian missile research and development site at Bin Kaneh, 30 miles outside Tehran. Among those killed was Maj. Gen. Hassan Moghaddam, director of missile development for the Revolutionary Guard, and a dozen other researchers. So important was Moghaddam that Ayatollah Khamenei attended his funeral.

Unlike the assassinations, Iran claims the missile site explosion was an accident; the MEK, meanwhile, trumpeted it but denied any involvement.

Indeed, there may be other covert operations carried out either by Israel acting alone or in concert with others, according to Bergman.

"Two labs caught fire," said Bergman, enumerating the attacks. "Scientists got blown up or disappeared. A missile base and the R&D base of the Revolutionary Guard exploded

some time ago, with the director of the R&D division of the Revolutionary Guard being killed along with ... his soldiers.”

Bergman added, “So, a long series of ... something that was termed by an Israeli (Cabinet) minister ... as ‘mysterious mishaps’ happening and reappearing to the project. Then the Iranians claim, ‘This is Israeli Mossad trying to sabotage our attempts to be a nuclear superpower.’”

Dr. Uzi Rabi, director of the Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University, said the supposed accidents could all be part of “psychological warfare” conducted against Iran. “It seems logical. It makes sense,” he said of possible MEK involvement, “and it’s been done before.”

...

For the United States, the alleged role of the MEK is particularly troublesome. In 1997, the State Department designated it a terrorist group, justifying it with an unclassified 40-page summary of the organization’s activities going back more than 25 years. The paper, sent to Congress in 1998, was written by Wendy Sherman, now undersecretary of state for political affairs and then an aide to Secretary of State Madeleine Albright.

The report, which was obtained by NBC News, was unsparing in its assessment. “The Mujahedin (MEK) collaborated with Ayatollah Khomeini to overthrow the former shah of Iran,” it said. “As part of that struggle, they assassinated at least six American citizens, supported the takeover of the U.S. embassy, and opposed the release of the American hostages.” In each case, the paper noted, “Bombs were the Mujahedin’s weapon of choice, which they frequently employed against American targets.”

“In the post-revolutionary political chaos, however, the Mujahedin lost political power to Iran’s Islamic clergy. They then applied their dedication to armed struggle and the use of propaganda against the new Iranian government, launching a violent and polemical cycle of attack and reprisal.”

U.S. officials have said publicly that the information contained in the report was limited to unclassified material, but that it also drew on classified material in making its determination to add the MEK to the U.S. list of terrorist organizations

...

The State Department report describes the Rajavis as “fundamentally undemocratic” and “not a viable alternative to the current government of Iran.”

One reason for that is the MEK’s close relationship with Saddam Hussein, as demonstrated by this 1986 video showing the late Iraqi dictator meeting with Massoud Rajavi. Saddam recruited the MEK in much the same way the Israelis allegedly have,

using them to fight Iranian forces during the Iran-Iraq War, a role they took on proudly. So proudly, they invited NBC News to one of their military camps outside Baghdad in 1993.

... "Rajavi, who heads the Mojahedin's political and military wings, has fostered a cult of personality around himself."

The U.S. suspicion of the MEK doesn't end there. Law enforcement officials have told NBC News that in 1994, the MEK made a pact with terrorist Ramzi Yousef a year after he masterminded the first attack on the World Trade Center in New York City. According to the officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity, Yousef built an 11-pound bomb that MEK agents placed inside one of Shia Islam's greatest shrines in Mashad, Iran, on June 20, 1994. At least 26 people, mostly women and children, were killed and 200 wounded in the attack.

That connection between Yousef, nephew of 9-11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammad, and the MEK was first reported in a book, "The New Jackals," by Simon Reeve. NBC News confirmed that Yousef told U.S. law enforcement that he had worked with the MEK on the bombing.

In recent years, the MEK has said it has renounced violence, but Iranian officials say that is not true, that killings of Iranians continue. Still, through some deft lobbying, the group has been able to get the United Kingdom and the European Union to remove it from their lists of terrorist groups.

The alleged involvement of the MEK in the assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists provides the U.S. with a cloak of deniability regarding the clandestine killings. Because the U.S. has designated the MEK as a terrorist organization, neither military nor intelligence units of the U.S. government, can work with them. "We cannot deal with them," said one senior U.S. official. "We would not deal with them because of the designation."

...

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton immediately denied any connection to the killings. "I want to categorically deny any United States involvement in any kind of act of violence inside Iran," Clinton told reporters on the day of the attack.

But at least two GOP presidential candidates have no problem with the targeting of nuclear scientists. In a November debate, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich endorsed "taking out their scientists," and former Pennsylvania Sen. Rick Santorum called it, "a wonderful thing."

The MEK's opposition to the Iranian government also has recently earned it both plaudits and support from an odd mix of political bedfellows.

A group of former Cabinet-level officials have joined together to support the MEK's removal from the official U.S. Foreign Terrorist Organization list, even taking out a full-page ad last year in the New York Times calling for the removal of the MEK from the U.S. terrorist list. Former Vermont Gov. Howard Dean, former U.S. Attorney General Michael Mukasey, former U.N. Ambassador John Bolton; former Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge, former FBI Director Louis Freeh and former Rep. Patrick Kennedy were among those whose signatures were on the ad.

...

U.S. politicians also have been pushing the U.S. government to protect the 3,400 MEK members and their families at Camp Ashraf in Iraq, about 35 miles north of Baghdad. With the departure of U.S. troops, the MEK feared that Iraqi forces, with encouragement from Iran, would attack the camp, leading to a bloodbath. At the last minute, however, agreement was brokered with the United Nations that would permit the MEK members' departure for resettlement in unspecified democratic countries. As of this week, there's been little movement on the planned resettlement.

The Iranians see what's happening as terrorism and hypocrisy by the United States. They have forwarded documents and other evidence to the United Nations – and directly to the United States, they say.

"I think this is very cynical plan. This is unacceptable," said Larijani. "This is a bad trend in the world. Unprecedented. We should kill scientists ... to block a scientific program? I mean this is disaster!"

Daniel Byman, a professor in the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University and also a senior fellow with the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, said that if the accounts of the Israeli-MEK assassinations are accurate, the operation borders on terrorism.

"In theory, states cannot be terrorist, but if they hire locals to do assassinations, that would be state sponsorship," said Byman, author of the recent book, "A High Price: The Triumphs and Failures of Israeli Counterterrorism." "You could argue that they took action not to terrorize the public, the purpose of terrorism, but only the nuclear community. An argument could also be made that degrading the program means that you don't have to take military action and thus, this is a lower level of violence and that really these are military targets, where normally terrorist targets are civilians."

But ultimately, Byman said, there is a "spectrum of responsibility" and that Israel is ultimately responsible.

...

Richard Engel is NBC News' chief foreign correspondent; Robert Windrem is a senior investigative producer.

Mitt Romney, Strangely Unfamiliar With the MEK

Motherjones.Com – January 5,2012

During Mitt Romney's last month's lackluster debate performance with a town hall in New Hampshire, an audience member asked the potential Republican nominee if he supported efforts by prominent political leaders in Washington to remove the Mujahedin-e-Khalq, an Iranian dissident terrorist group, from the State Department's list of designated terrorist organizations.

Romney responded: "I have not heard of the MEK, so I can't possibly tell you whether I support the MEK. I'll take a look at the issue."

If Romney has truly never heard of the MEK, he won't have to go far to learn more-his own special advisor on foreign policy, Mitchell Reiss, is a leading advocate for the group. In the past, the MEK directed bombing campaigns in Iran, but the group was de-listed from the European Union's list of terrorist organizations in 2009 and would like America to do the same.

Reiss, the president of Washington College, issued a call last spring for removal of the MEK from the terrorist list, saying: "Time is running out, lives are at stake. For the United States this is a case where American interests of opposing the regime in Tehran are entirely consistent with American values of freedom and democracy."

In October, Reiss spoke at a policy briefing on the MEK. In fact, Reiss attended an MEK event just this past weekend.

The issue is hardly under the radar. Andrew Card, John Bolton, Rudolph Guliani, and Tom Ridge have all advocated for the MEK's removal from the State Department's list of terrorist organizations. Democrats like Bill Richardson, Patrick Kennedy, and Wesley Clark, have issued similar pleas.

For more, read MoJo's coverage of the American PR firm that works on MEK's behalf; Salon's Justin Elliott has frequently reported on the issue as well.

Mujahedin-e Khalq in the new List of Terrorist Organizations

U.S. Department of State, February 07 2012

Foreign Terrorist Organizations

Bureau of Counterterrorism

January 27, 2012

Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) are foreign organizations that are designated by the Secretary of State in accordance with section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), as amended. FTO designations play a critical role in our fight against terrorism and are an effective means of curtailing support for terrorist activities and pressuring groups to get out of the terrorism business...

Mujahedin Khalq remains on the list of Designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations for 16th consecutive year as its name is stated as the 28th entry of the list:

28. Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization (MEK)