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U.N. chief appeals for countries to take MKO members

Reuters, December 01, 2012

U.N. chief Ban Ki-moon appealed on Thursday for countries to consider resettling several thousand Iranian dissidents living in Iraq who were recently moved to a former U.S. military base in Baghdad from a camp where they lived for decades.

In a report to the Security Council, Ban said 3,112 members of the People's Mujahideen Organization of Iran have been transferred to Camp Hurriya, leaving about 100 still at Camp Ashraf - also know as Camp New Iraq - to help close it down.

Ashraf residents agreed in February to move to the new camp, where the United Nations intends to process them for refugee status in other countries, but they have complained that the conditions at the new base are poor and that they have not been permitted to bring many of their personal belongings.

The group is no longer welcome in Iraq under the Shi'ite Muslim-led government that came to power after U.S.-led forces invaded and toppled Saddam in 2003. Clashes between Ashraf residents and Iraqi security forces last year killed 34 people.

Ban said so far only 31 people had been accepted by other countries and that it was now a matter of urgency that they be offered resettlement opportunities in other countries.

"Without the strong commitment of member states to accept former residents of Camp New Iraq, no sustainable solution can be achieved," Ban said in the report. "I appeal to member states to offer resettlement opportunities to residents with international protection needs as soon as possible."

In September the U.S. State Department removed the dissident group from its official list of terrorist organizations but underscored serious concerns about the group which is seeking to recast itself as an Iranian opposition force.

The group calls for the overthrow of Iran's clerical leaders and fought alongside Saddam's forces in the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. It also led a guerrilla campaign against the U.S.-backed Shah of Iran in the 1970s, including attacks on U.S. targets.

The group surrendered weapons to U.S. forces after the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the fate of Ashraf's residents has been in question since Iraqi authorities took over the camp from U.S. forces in 2009 under a bilateral security pact.

Intl. reporters visit Camp Ashraf for the first time

Tehran Times, November 28, 2012

Reporters from Iran and a number of other countries visited Iraq's Camp Ashraf for the first time on Tuesday.

Members of the terrorist Mojahedin Khalq Organization (MKO) used to live in the camp, but an agreement reached between the United Nations and the Iraqi government in December 2011 called for their relocation to Camp Liberty (Hurriya), a former U.S. military base near Baghdad.

About 3100 members of the group have so far been relocated to Camp Liberty, but 80 have not left the camp yet.

During Tuesday's visit, the reporters were briefed on the process of the evacuation of MKO members, who will finally be expelled from Iraq.

The MKO started its activities as a terrorist group based in Iraq in the early 1980s. In addition to the assassination of hundreds of Iranian officials and citizens, the group cooperated with Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime in its repression of the Iraqi people.

On September 28, the U.S. State Department formally removed the MKO from its official list of terrorist organizations, a move which prompted angry response from Iran.

The U.S. made the decision under the claim that the group has renounced violence.

Former US Official: I wish MEK Died out in 1980's

PressTV - November 07, 2012

Former deputy director of the US State Department's Middle East Intelligence Office believes the U.S. scratched off Mujahedin-e Khalq organization from the FTO list to pressure Iran over its nuclear program.

"The MEK has a rather unsavory history of opposing the release of the US hostages in January 1981, terrorism in Iran, a long period when much of it was a mercenary brigade in Saddam's Army, and, of course, its cult-like and bizarre internal politics that have involved some insider human rights violations," Wayne White told Habilian.

“That's why, if someone wants to place the list game with it, it probably should be on the list, not off of it,” he added.

Asked if MEK poses a threat to U.S. national security, White said, “they are intensely pesky, have tons of (typically naive) supporters, and if they chose to act against the US they have assets.”

“Since plenty of silly Americans comprise their only major source of support (and probably funding), I doubt they would want to bite the hands that feed them,” Wayne White, now a scholar at the Middle East Institute of Columbia institute, further added.

He finally said, “I personally just wish they had died out by the late 1980's after their defeat in Iran & were barely a memory.”

The next pro-MEK lobbying effort is about to begin

The American Conservative, Daniel Larison, 03 October 2012

The completely false claim that the MEK represents the legitimate Iranian opposition was one of the principal reasons many of these advocates gave for removing the group from the list of foreign terrorist organizations .

No one could have ever seen this coming:

Members of Congress and supporters of the People's Mujahedin of Iran (MEK) are to press the Obama administration to recognise it as the “legitimate opposition” to the Iranian government after the group is removed from the US list of banned terrorist organisations in the coming days.

Of course, this has been what many of the MEK's American advocates have been calling for all along. The completely false claim that the MEK represents the legitimate Iranian opposition was one of the principal reasons many of these advocates gave for removing the group from the list of foreign terrorist organizations. It's absurd that any informed person could seriously believe an Islamo-Marxist totalitarian cult represents a legitimate, much less democratic, alternative to the current Iranian regime. This is the falsehood that many of the group's advocates promote.

The reinvention of the MEK as a “democratic” political organization just demonstrates how meaningless that label can be. It's a reminder of how willing some Iran hawks are to work with any group, no matter how disreputable, if it shares their hostility to the Iranian government. Anyone who supports aligning the U.S. with this group is admitting that he isn't interested in a more democratic Iran or the success of the Iranian opposition. Now that the group will be removed from the list, the supporters it has cultivated in Congress and elsewhere will be able to agitate on its behalf much more freely, and its lobbying

efforts will presumably increase. The coordinated campaign to remove the MEK from the FTO list was a disgrace, and the sequel promises to be even more obnoxious.

Q&A: what is the MEK and why did the US call it a terrorist organisation?

guardian.co.uk, Chris McGreal in Washington, September 21, 2012

The MEK cut a 'swath of terror' in the Middle East, but leaders have worked hard to convince the west they are peaceful now

Why did the US designate the MEK a terrorist organisation in 1997?

The MEK's supporters say it was banned as a move by the Clinton administration to appease the Iranian government. The US state department, which decides which groups to include on the list of designated terrorist organisations, points to a long and bloody history.

The MEK ran a bombing campaign inside Iran against the Shah's regime the 1970s. The targets were sometimes American, including the US information office, Pepsi Cola, PanAm and General Motors. The group routinely denounced Zionism and "racist Israel", and called for "death to America".

A state department report in 1992 identified the MEK as responsible for the killing of six Americans in Iran during the 1970s. They included three military officers and three men working for Rockwell International, a conglomerate specialising in aerospace including weapons, who were murdered in retaliation for the arrest of MEK members over the killings of the US military officers.

The MEK was an enthusiastic supporter of the seizure of the US embassy in Tehran following the Iranian revolution. It called the eventual release of the American hostages a "surrender".

After falling out with Iran's new rulers, led by Ayatollah Khomeini, the MEK launched a bomb campaign against the Islamic government. In 1981, it attacked the headquarters of the Islamic Republic Party, killing 74 senior officials including the party leader and 27 members of parliament. A few months later it bombed a meeting of Iran's national security council, killing Iran's president and the prime minister.

The state department described the MEK as cutting a "swath of terror" across the country in the following years and of "violent attacks in Iran that victimise civilians".

"Since 1981 the [MEK] have claimed responsibility for murdering thousands of Iranians they describe as agents of the regime," the report said.

The bombings continued into the 1990s including one at [Ayatollah]Khomeini's tomb and against oil refineries.

Who supported the MEK?

After the MEK leadership fell out with the Islamic regime it fled first to Paris. France expelled the MEK leader, Masud Rajavi, in 1986. The group then ran into the arms of Iran's enemy, the Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein. Iraq helped arm the MEK's thousands of fighters with artillery, guns and tanks and housed them in three camps near Baghdad and along the border with Iran. Baghdad also supplied money.

The MEK's armed wing, the National Liberation Army (NLA), conducted raids into Iran during the last stages of the Iran-Iraq war. It also became a tool of Saddam Hussein's campaign of internal oppression.

"The NLA's last major offensive reportedly was conducted against Iraqi Kurds in 1991 when it joined Saddam Hussein's brutal repression of the Kurdish rebellion," the state department report said.

The last major act of violence committed by the MEK in the west was in 1992 when it stormed Iranian diplomatic missions in the US, Britain, Canada, Germany, France and Switzerland. The assault was in response to an Iranian air force bombing raid on an MEK base in Iraq.

Wouldn't the killing of Americans, calls for the destruction of Israel and supporting Saddam Hussein be enough to scare off any American politician from ever supporting the MEK?

The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 changed everything for the MEK. Its fighters at Camp Ashraf, near the Iranian border, and other sites near Baghdad were disarmed by the Americans. The MEK leadership moved swiftly to distance itself from Saddam Hussein, emphasising its opposition to the Islamic government in Tehran and casting its supporters as selfless and long suffering supporters of freedom and democracy. From then on the MEK reinvented itself in American eyes.

Until the 1990s it was known as the People's Holy Warriors of Iran, but that's not the kind of name to win support in the west these days so it tweaked the name.

Two decades ago, the state department identified the MEK as running what it called "a determined lobbying effort among western parliamentarians".

"To conduct its propaganda campaign the group has established offices through western Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia and the Middle East," it said. "Through such efforts, the (MEK) attempt to transform western opprobrium for the government of Iran into expressions of support for themselves".

The MEK leadership has played on opposition to the present Iranian leadership, which is in part bound up with concerns among US politicians over Tehran's nuclear programme and fears for Israel's security, to bury its past by portraying itself as a democratic and popular alternative to the Islamic regime.

"Exploiting western opprobrium of the behaviour of the current government of Iran, the (MEK) posit themselves as the alternative. To achieve that goal, they claim they have the support of a majority of Iranians. This claim is much disputed by academics and other specialists on Iran, who assert that in fact the MEK have little support among Iranians," it said.

The state department report quotes an American journalist as saying of the MEK: "They hope to transform their public image in America from terrorists to freedom fighters".

It appears to have been largely successful in that. Few of the MEK's American backers appear to know the detail of its past, particularly the scale of its killing and the depth of its hostility to the US and Israel. Instead it described as a loyal and useful ally. Supporters say that it was the MEK that first provided the US with information about Iran's nuclear programme.

Has the MEK changed?

It has certainly abandoned violence, at least for now. But that is in part because it was forcibly disarmed by the US army in Iraq. It also recognises that since 9/11, bombing attacks by a mostly Muslim organisation are not likely to win it friends in the west.

In exile, the MEK leadership established the National Council of Resistance which has evolved into what the group calls a parliament in exile.

But the MEK is far from democratic. It is autocratically run by a husband and wife, Masud and Maryam Rajavi, who the state department say have "fostered a cult of personality".

In its 1992 report on the MEK, the state department said the group's leadership "never practices democracy within their organisation".

"Many Iranians who have dealt with MEK members assert that the [MEK] suppress dissent, often with force, and do not tolerate different viewpoints. The [MEK's] credibility is also undermined by the fact that they deny or distort sections of their history, such as the use of violence or opposition to Zionism. It is difficult to accept at face value promises of future conduct when an organisation fails to acknowledge its past," the report said.

So what is the likelihood of the MEK being unbanned?

As part of their campaign, the MEK's supporters have won a federal court order requiring the state department to make a decision on whether the group should remain on the designated terrorist list by October 1.

Some pro-MEK activists have interpreted that as a foregone conclusion that the state department will have to delist the organisation. They have been bolstered by its unbanning in Europe.

The MEK's well financed and organised lobbying campaign has placed enormous pressure on the state department to delist the group. But the state department has warned the MEK that its status will in part be decided over whether it obeys a demand to leave its main camp in Iraq. Its refusal, so far, to move remaining supporters from Camp Ashraf – where it used to train its paramilitary fighters – to a former US military base near Baghdad is said by the state department to be a significant obstacle to delisting the group.

The MEK has moved 2,000 of the 3,200 people who were living in Camp Ashraf but refuses to shift the rest. The MEK has portrayed the issue as a humanitarian one to its sympathisers in Washington, saying that all that remains in Camp Ashraf are families and that conditions in the Baghdad camp are inadequate. They say it is effectively a prison – even going so far as to call it a concentration camp – and alleged they will be vulnerable to violence from the Iraqi government and forces.

Some US officials say that those refusing to leave shows that the MEK has not really abandoned its past.

Iranian terrorist group now freedom fighters, in U.S. eyes

Vancouver Sun, Jonathan Manthorpe, October 3, 2012

Hillary Clinton announces anti-Tehran group People's Mujahedeen of Iran is no longer on State Department's list of terror organizations

In Washington, it seems, the difference between a terrorist and a freedom fighter is a multimillion-dollar public relations campaign.

Last week, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced that the anti-Tehran group People's Mujahedeen of Iran (MEK) will no longer be designated a terrorist group after having been placed on the American list 15 years ago for killing U.S. servicemen.

The administration's change of heart comes after the MEK said it renounced violence in 2003 and recently got the backing of a U.S. Federal Court, which said it has seen no evidence the group is still involved in terrorist activities.

But Clinton's decision, in part a response to the court's finding, also comes after a multimillion-dollar campaign on behalf of MEK that has seen a long list of former senior officials and current members of Congress paid lavish fees to make speeches or appearances at MEK functions promoting an end to its terrorist status.

Among those who have been paid to speak on behalf of the MEK's cause are former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani, former U.S. attorney-general Michael Mukasey, former White House chief of staff Andrew Card, and former U.S. home-land security chief Tom Ridge.

Among those from the U.S. military who have put in appearances are former chair-man of the Joint Chiefs Peter Pace, former Supreme Allied Commander in Europe Wesley Clark, and President Barack Obama's former national security adviser James Jones.

Former Central Intelligence Agency chiefs James Woolsey, Porter Goss and Michael Hayden have also been paid to speak on MEK platforms.

This, along with unresolved questions about whether MEK has indeed renounced violence - and if so, how recently? - raises the spectre that the Obama administration may be so keen to back Iranian groups opposed to the Tehran regime of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei that it is not looking too carefully at their credentials or records.

Still fresh in Washington memories is the part Ahmed Chalabi played in feeding false or distorted information about his Iraqi homeland to the receptive audience within the administration of President George W. Bush. As the United States found out after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, there weren't any weapons of mass destruction, and the invading troops were not welcomed as liberators.

It seems unlikely that the Obama administration would fall for the same kind of blarney from the somewhat sinister husband-and-wife team of Massoud and Maryam Rajavi, who, if several U.S. government reports are to be believed, run MEK as a personality cult complete with brainwashing, brutal internal discipline, and the indoctrination of children.

If Obama is not about to be stampeded into war with Iran by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu - with the aim of stopping the Tehran regime acquiring the ability to make nuclear weapons - he is unlikely to be impressed by the Rajavis.

Indeed, the history and record of the MEK is so tainted that taking it off the list of terrorist groups will likely do the reputation of the Obama administration no good among the mainstream reformist movement in Iran.

MEK was founded in 1965 by a group of university students as a Marxist Muslim opposition to the Shah of Iran.

Its first terrorist attacks were in 1971, and MEK made special targets of Americans, who were instrumental in keeping the Shah in power.

In 1973, U.S. army Col. Louis Lee Hawkins was shot and killed outside his home in Tehran. In 1975, two U.S. air force officers were killed in an attack on their car. And in 1976, three employees of Rockwell International were also shot and killed.

MEK joined enthusiastically in the 1979 revolution that ousted the Shah and brought the Islamic Republic to power. The group actively supported the takeover of the U.S. embassy after the coup and the keeping of American diplomats as hostages.

But MEK quickly fell out with the new leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, and killed several of his senior officials in bomb attacks.

In 1986, MEK moved its headquarters to Iraq, where it came under the patronage of Saddam Hussein, fighting for him in his war against Iran and playing a lead role in his murderous campaigns against the Iraqi Kurds.

About 3,000 of the remaining MEK members in Iraq are now in a former American camp outside Baghdad awaiting placement in third countries.

MEK's attempts to rehabilitate its image started in 2002, when it says it gave the U.S. and its allies the first information about Iran's nuclear development program.

However, New Yorker magazine journalist Seymour Hersh says that the then-head of the United Nations' nuclear watch-dog, the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohamed ElBaradei, told him that the information about Iran's nuclear program came from the Israeli government and was only channelled through MEK. Much of the evidence of MEK's continued involvement in violence is circumstantial at best, but one persistent story is that the group's operatives are working for the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad inside Iran.

In particular, there are many claims that the five Iranian nuclear scientists assassinated since 2007 and the destruction of a missile research centre were operations conducted by MEK for Mossad.