

ParsBrief

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Thirty residents of Camp Hurriya departed Iraq for Albania

US State Department, June 3, 2013

Press Statement

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Washington, DC

June 3, 2013

On May 31, thirty residents of Camp Hurriya departed Iraq for permanent relocation in Albania. The United States commends the Government of Albania's generous offer to accept up to 210 former Camp Hurriya residents. This marks the second in a series of planned moves to relocate Camp Hurriya residents to Albania. Albania continues to be a strong partner of the United States in contributing to peace and stability in Iraq.

The United States also reiterates its call to the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK) to cooperate fully with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) process to relocate Camp Hurriya residents outside of Iraq as expeditiously as possible. The permanent relocation of residents is essential to ensure the safety and security of residents, especially following the February 9 terrorist attack that took eight lives.

The MEK leadership has the responsibility to facilitate the full and immediate participation of residents in interview and counseling processes required by the UNHCR. Residents of Camp Hurriya are entitled to unimpeded and private access to UN human rights monitors. The MEK leadership has an obligation to ensure residents are able to engage openly and freely with UN human rights monitors, UNHCR personnel and UNAMI representatives.

The United States reaffirms its strong support for the work of UNHCR, the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), and especially the tireless work of UNAMI Special Representative of the Secretary General Martin Kobler, to assist and resettle Camp Hurriya residents.

The safety and security of Camp Hurriya residents remain an utmost concern. Security requirements to protect residents must be fulfilled in accordance with the December 25, 2011 Memorandum of Understanding between the United Nations and the Government of Iraq.

Le Figaro: the anti-Iranian People's Mujahedin Fight in Syria

Georges Malbrunot, Figaro Blog, May 30, 2013

Two members of the Iranian opposition group, People's Mujahedin Organization were found dead a month ago in the Idlib region in Western Syria, reported a European MEP in contact with anti Bashar Al-Assad rebels.

They fought alongside insurgents seeking the overthrow of the Syrian regime backed by Iran. Considered by France as a terrorist organization, the People's Mujahedin have a base in Iraq and their headquarters in Parisian suburb. Western and Arab intelligence services would use them against Iranian interests and the allies of Tehran such as Syria.

Far from Iran election, former guerrillas lobby Washington

Reuters, Susan Cornwell (Editing by Alistair Bell and Jackie Frank)/Fri Jun 14, 2013

WASHINGTON - For decades, an Iranian dissident group has seemed to be on the wrong side of history. Suppressed by both the Shah of Iran and then the ayatollahs who deposed him in 1979, its supporters have faced prison, death and exile, and were shunned in the United States as members of a cult-like terrorist organization.

The Mujahadin-e-Khalq (MEK) former guerrilla movement began to shake off its painful past last year when the State Department took it off the official U.S. list of terrorist organizations. The European Union made a similar decision in 2009 after a prolonged court battle.

But as Iran elects a new president on Friday, the MEK has no discernible role in politics at home, where it is mistrusted - even by government critics - for having been allied with Iraq's Saddam Hussein during the 1980s Iran-Iraq war.

Yet Iran's clerical rulers remain obsessed with a perceived threat from the group, frequently warning Western governments against any giving the MEK shelter or support, diplomats say.

Unable to operate openly in Iran, the MEK is instead waging some of its battles in Washington. It opened an attractive new office in April just a five-minute walk from the White House.

Long active as an advocacy group in the United States and Europe, the MEK is now formalizing its campaign to pressure the Obama administration to maintain a hard line - including in multilateral nuclear talks - with the Islamic Republic, which it hopes will one day crumble.

Now that it is no longer on the U.S. blacklist, the MEK can hire registered lobbyists and raise funds on its own, rather than rely on wealthy Iranian-American sympathizers.

Democratic former Senator Robert Torricelli signed up as a lobbyist earlier this year for the National Council of Resistance of Iran, the Paris-based political arm of the MEK.

"They (the MEK) deserve to have a voice in Washington, to be heard, and to (show) what the Iranian people are actually looking for in the future of Iran: a non-nuclear Iran, a government that is based on democratic values," said Soona Samsami, the U.S. representative of the NCRI.

Once one of Capitol Hill's biggest fund raisers, Torricelli pulled out of the race for a second Senate term in 2002 amid an ethics scandal.

His lobby registration form says he will be "meeting with U.S. government and congressional officials, and advising on general strategy".

Other notable backers of the MEK include former Pennsylvania governor Ed Rendell and ex-CIA director James Woolsey.

A TOUGH SELL

Even though it has renounced violence, the MEK is a tough sell in the United States, which for many years has blamed it for the killing of six Americans in Iran in the 1970s.

A 2009 study by the RAND Corporation think tank depicted the MEK as a cult-like movement run with military-style discipline, gender separation and "near-religious devotion" to its Paris-based leaders - a description the MEK denies.

"I can't believe the U.S. government is going to be particularly excited about working with them ... because in the U.S. government, I would hope there would be people who would understand that this is not where the political future of Iran lies," said Patrick Clawson, director of research at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Some U.S. policymakers are mistrustful of Middle East exile groups following Washington's reliance on Iraqi expatriates who pushed America toward war in Iraq in 2003.

Calls from MEK representatives for "regime change" in Iran remind some of Ahmad Chalabi and his Iraqi National Congress, which helped convince the administration of former President George W. Bush that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction.

"They'll deny it, but I think it's pretty simple: their goal is to keep pushing the politics in America to lead to an invasion, some kind of major unsettlement of Iran, that they can sweep into as a new government," said Jeremiah Goulka, author of the RAND study.

Some in the U.S. government also share that suspicion - but the MEK resents comparisons to Iraqi exiles of 10 years ago.

"We've never been in favor of a war. We've never tried to push things towards that direction," said Alireza Jafarzadeh, the deputy U.S. representative of the NCRI. The MEK is "not the U.S. creature that Chalabi was," he said.

Attempts to make over the MEK's image have been boosted by a report from a former senior State Department official who questions whether the group really committed the killings of six Americans in Iran in the 1970s that are often blamed on it.

The killings, during a guerrilla campaign against the U.S.-backed Shah, were actually the work of a faction that later broke away from MEK, said Lincoln Bloomfield, whose report has just been published as a book by the University of Baltimore.

"Not a single person you could name in the MEK had any knowledge of it or had anything to do with it," he said.

The study grew out of a 2011 memo Bloomfield wrote as a consultant for a law firm that lobbied to remove MEK from the terrorism list on behalf of the Iranian-American Community of Northern California. The author said he had no financial interest in the book, and proceeds are going to the university.

The MEK still has some 3,000 members in Iraq, many of whom were invited by Saddam in the 1980s. The group fell out of favor after his 2003 downfall and current Iraqi officials have applied pressure for them to leave.

After clashes with Iraqi security forces in 2011 in which 34 people were killed, the residents were moved last year as part of a plan in which the United Nations intends to process them for refugee status in other countries.

But progress has been slow, and their temporary home at a former U.S. military compound in Baghdad known as Camp Liberty came under fire in February when eight people were killed in a rocket attack by unknown assailants.

U.S. officials have tentatively identified a handful of Camp Liberty residents who may be allowed to move to the United States. But they would be expected to renounce their membership in MEK, the officials told Reuters.

Forty-four residents of the camp have left over the last month for Albania, which has offered to take up to 210 of them.

How Fast Can Someone Be ‘Radicalized’?

hereandnow.wbur.org, May 01, 2013

The FBI released this image early Friday, April 19, 2013, showing “Suspect 1” in the white cap and “Suspect 2” in the black cap, walking through the crowd in Boston on Monday, April 15, 2013, before the explosions at the Boston Marathon. (FBI/AP)

Of the many questions that have yet to be answered in the marathon bombing investigation, the toughest question may be: Why?

News reports indicate Tamerlan Tsarnaev, 26, exerted a lot of influence on his 19-year-old brother Dzhokhar Tsarnaev.

Investigators say Tamerlan did frequent jihadi websites, but Dzhokhar’s friends say he was not a Muslim radical.

“... very intelligent, educated people from good families can be recruited and indoctrinated into something totally against their values system.”

—Steve Hassan Steven Hassan is a mental health counselor and author of “Freedom of Mind: Helping Loved Ones Leave Controlling People, Cults, and Beliefs.”

In the 1970s, Hassan was drawn into Sun Myung Moon’s Unification Church, and now helps people break away from cults.

His personal experience, he said, could shed some light on what might have happened in the case of the Tsarnaev brothers.

“For me, I was recruited when I was 19 years old, and it took two weeks for me to drop out of my college, quit my job, donate my bank account and believe the messiah was on the Earth. It took me, I’d say, another year before I was willing to die or kill on command. But I can tell you in 36 years as a therapist, very intelligent, educated people from good families can be recruited and indoctrinated into something totally against their values system.”

And “loners” aren’t the only ones susceptible to recruitment, Hassan said.

“I was an extra-honors student and popular and was not interested in joining a group,” he said. “My girlfriend dumped me and three attractive women flirted, and then it was history.”

Hassan says there are ways to help prevent recruitment to cults or extremist groups. “Masoud Banisadr, a former Iranian MEK [Mojahedin-e-Khalq] cult member came up with this idea – he said after a civil trial, there should be a sharia trial. An Islamic cleric should come in and basically try the person and say, ‘You’re going to hell, because the Koran explicitly states you should not harm women, children, elderly,’” Hassan said. “And I’d like to see ex-jihadists come and give lectures on campuses, at mosques and such. I’d like to see more people taught about how social influence works.”

Serious concerns over heightened level of violence in Iraq – UN Envoy tells European Parliament

unami.unmissions.org, May 30, 2013

Baghdad,– On 29 May, the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for Iraq (SRSG), Mr. Martin Kobler, briefed the Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Parliament (AFET) on the current developments in Iraq.

In his exchange of views with the parliamentarians, Mr. Kobler expressed serious concerns over the heightened level of violence in Iraq and the danger that the country falls back into sectarian strife, if decisive action is not taken by its political leaders. “The country stands at a crossroads,” the UN Envoy said, calling for a stronger EU role in dealing with the developments unfolding in the country, and for increased interaction with the Iraqi Council of Representatives.

Mr. Kobler also briefed AFET on UNAMI’s efforts to resettle the former residents of Camp Ashraf to third countries. He deplored the lack of cooperation of the residents and of their leadership with the UNHCR and UN monitors, and urged them to accept concrete resettlement offers. Stressing that “resettlement to safe countries is the only durable option”, he called again on European Union member states to accept former Camp Ashraf residents into their countries.

U.S. plans to move Iranian exile group out of Iraq hit snag

Los Angeles Times, By Paul Richter, May 24, 2013

Mujahedin Khalq leaders are resisting the transfer of the Marxist-Islamist group's members to other countries. But Iraq's government tires of protecting them.

The State Department's decade-long effort to find a new home for a controversial Iranian opposition group has ground to a near halt only days after the announcement that the exiles had begun moving from Iraq to permanent homes in Europe.

Fourteen members of the Mujahedin Khalq militant group, or MEK, were flown from the outskirts of Baghdad to Albania on May 15, in what was expected to be the first step in the departure of 3,100 members of the group that has long opposed the government of clerics in Tehran and is also at odds with the government of Iraq.

But a State Department official told Congress on Wednesday that the group's leadership was not cooperating in the departures, despite the risks to the members' lives in Iraq.

Beth Jones, acting assistant secretary of state for Near East Affairs, told a House foreign Affairs subcommittee Wednesday that although U.S. officials have worked hard to persuade the group's leadership to cooperate in the departures, "very few have been allowed to move." She appealed for cooperation.

The Marxist-Islamist group, described by some critics as a cult, moved from Iran to Iraq in the early 1980s, and fought with Saddam Hussein against Iran's Islamist government during the Iran-Iraq war. The current Iraqi government views the group with suspicion, and U.S. and United Nations officials have been trying to resettle them abroad since 2003.

But though the group's leadership signed an agreement with the U.N. and Iraq last year to abandon their longtime base, Camp Ashraf, in Diyali province, the leadership seems reluctant to move the group's members from Iraq. They apparently prefer to remain and continue their effort to overthrow the Iranian government, diplomats say.

The group's leadership, based in Paris, is apparently refusing to allow their tightly controlled subordinates to cooperate with the U.N. screening required before resettlement can be arranged.

After refusing for years to leave Camp Ashraf, most of the residents began leaving in September for a temporary base. About 100 members, determined not to give up their fight and convinced that world powers have betrayed them, remain.

American and U.N. officials believe the group needs to leave Iraq as soon as possible because of hostility from several Iraqi groups and the limited patience of the Iraqi government, which is protecting it.

In February, eight group members were killed in a rocket attack on the temporary base, which is called Camp Hurriyah. There has been speculation that the attackers were Shiite militants with Iranian backing.

Mujahedin Khalq leaders say they don't want the group resettled in small numbers in many countries, but instead moved as a single group to new homes in the United States or Europe.

Only about 200 people were slated to go to Albania. U.S. and U.N. officials say that because of lingering concern about the tendencies of a militant group that was on the U.S. list of terrorist groups from 1997 to 2012, no country will take all of them.

The group, which also calls itself the National Council of Resistance of Iran, didn't respond to messages left with its office in Washington.