

ParsBrief

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AP Interview: UN Iraq rep urges exile cooperation

By ADAM SCHRECK, Associated Press, Jun 26, 2013

The United Nations envoy to Iraq said Wednesday that residents of an Iranian dissident camp are denied freedom of movement by the exile group, and that efforts to relocate them outside Iraq are being stymied in part by lack of cooperation from the residents themselves.

Martin Kobler made the comments in an interview with The Associated Press in Baghdad as he prepares to leave the country at the end of his term. The U.N. has been involved in relocating members of the Mujahedeen-e-Khalq dissident group to a camp on the outskirts of the Iraqi capital while it works to resettle them abroad.

The MEK is the militant wing of a Paris-based Iranian opposition movement known as the National Council of Resistance of Iran that opposes Iran's clerical regime and has carried out assassinations and bombings there. They fear persecution if sent back to Iran.

About 3,100 MEK members live in Camp Liberty, a former U.S. military base near Baghdad airport. The Iraqi government wants the group's members out of the country. So do Iranian-backed Shiite militants, who have claimed responsibility for deadly rocket strikes on the camp.

Kobler acknowledged that a major problem in resettling camp residents is a shortage of countries willing to accept them. He repeated his call for U.N. member states, including the U.S., to do more.

"We do not have enough recipient countries. ... There is also reluctance from the side of the Liberty residents to cooperate with the UNHCR," he said, referring to the U.N. refugee agency.

Albania has agreed to take 210 camp residents, but only 71 have made the move so far. Germany has also offered to take 100 residents.

Kobler also cited concerns about what he called "human rights abuses inside Camp Liberty done by the MEK themselves."

Residents are not free to move between different sections of the camp without approval, and some are denied Internet and mobile phone access by MEK officials, he said. Medical treatment outside is also often blocked by the group, he alleged.

"There are, of course, MEK residents who probably would like to disassociate themselves from the MEK," he said. "Everybody who wants to go out of the camp ... should have the chance to do so."

The NCRI, the MEK's affiliated Paris-based group, has repeatedly criticized Kobler. He retains the backing of U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, and was recently appointed the U.N. envoy and head of the U.N. peacekeeping mission in Congo.

NCRI spokesman Shahin Gobadi dismissed Kobler's comments as baseless and intended to "cover up the failure to provide minimum security provisions" at the camp.

"The only purpose they serve is they set the stage for more attacks," he said, insisting that residents cooperate with the U.N. Gobadi also charged that "Kobler has never been an impartial person and does not represent the values of the U.N."

Iraq gave foreign diplomats as well as journalists from AP and Iraq's state-run TV a rare glimpse of the camp in September. Diplomats on the tour described conditions as acceptable.

The MEK fought alongside Saddam Hussein's forces in the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war, and several thousand of its members were given sanctuary at a facility known as Camp Ashraf near the Iranian border. The MEK renounced violence in 2001 and was removed from the U.S. terrorism list last year.

Iraq's Shiite-led government, which has close ties to Iran, considers the MEK a terrorist group. Iraqi security forces launched two deadly raids since 2009 on Camp Ashraf, and in 2012 most residents were moved to Camp Liberty, which is meant to be a temporary way station.

Ali al-Moussawi, a spokesman for Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, said Baghdad also has concerns that MEK leaders are preventing residents from leaving.

"There is intimidation being practiced by some MEK leaders against their fellow people," al-Moussawi said. "Some MEK members are willing to leave the country, but they are being threatened by a minority preventing them."

The exiles say their new home is unsafe, and they want to return to Camp Ashraf. Several residents were killed in a Feb. 9 rocket strike on the camp, and two others died in a similar attack this month. In another development Wednesday, Iraqi electoral officials said the Kurdish-backed al-Taakhi list won the largest single bloc of seats in provincial elections in

the restive northern province of Ninevah. It claimed 11 of 39 provincial council seats up for grabs.

Ninevah borders Iraq's largely autonomous Kurdish region and has a sizable Kurdish minority. Many of the remaining seats went to Arab parties, with Iraqi parliament speaker Osama al-Nujaifi's Sunni Arab-backed United bloc coming in second, with eight seats.

Residents in Ninevah and neighboring Anbar province voted last week in local elections that were delayed due to security concerns.

Also Wednesday, Iraqi authorities said two policemen were killed in a bomb blast in the Ninevah provincial capital Mosul. Four others died in an explosion in a small cafe in Baghdad's Dora neighborhood, They spoke on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to release the information to journalists.

Associated Press writer Qassim Abdul-Zahra contributed reporting.

Iraq: UN envoy welcomes relocation of dozens of Iranian exiles to Albania

UN.org , 22 June, 2013

The top United Nations official in Iraq today welcomed the relocation to Albania of 27 residents from an exile camp near western Baghdad.

"A total of 71 men and women now have safely arrived in Albania and have benefited from the Government of Albania's offer to accept 210 of the Camp's residents," said the UN Special Representative for the Secretary-General and head of the UN Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI), Martin Kobler.

Some 3,000 residents, most of them members of a group known as the People's Mojahedeen of Iran, are temporarily housed in a transit facility called Camp Liberty – also know as Camp Hurriya – while the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) carries out a process to determine their refugee status.

Mr. Kobler said in addition to Albania, Germany has offered to relocate some 100 residents. The departure of the group from Iraq is in accordance with the memorandum of understanding of 25 December 2011, which foresees the relocation of the residents to third countries.

"I once again thank both countries' governments for their generosity and call on other Member States to receive residents as well," the UN envoy said.

The relocation comes just days after two people were reportedly killed and dozens injured in a mortar attack to the camp.

“Last week’s tragic events have once again shown how important it is to relocate the residents to third countries as quickly as possible,” Mr. Kobler noted.

The camp had previously been attacked in February while most of the residents were sleeping. The attack resulted in six deaths and various injuries.

The Shameless Pro-MEK Lobbying Continues

By Daniel Larison , The American Conservative, July16,2013

Just because the MEK is no longer listed as a terrorist organization by the U.S., that doesn’t mean that the shameless shilling and lying on their behalf has stopped. Here is Hugh Shelton:

For years, freedom-loving people around the world worked together under the courageous leadership of Mrs. Maryam Rajavi, using every tool at their disposal, to get the wrongful designation of the Iranian opposition group, the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK) as a terrorist group removed.

Finally, the “good guys” won, empowering the most powerful group outside Iran in favor of disposing of the current Iranian leadership and providing the freedom-loving people of Iran a chance for democracy.

When the MEK was originally designated as a terrorist organization, that wasn’t wrongful. It was an acknowledgment that the group had employed and continued to employ terrorist tactics to pursue their political goals. The current pro-MEK line is that the group has renounced those tactics, which is debatable, but it’s the purest revisionism to say that the group never deserved to be labeled as a terrorist group. Given that the MEK is a totalitarian cult, it is crazy to think that their leaders have anything in common with “freedom-loving people.” In the extremely unlikely and horrifying event that the MEK obtained real power, they would not preside over anything resembling a democratic government, but would establish their own deranged brand of authoritarianism. If not because they are being paid to say it, why would otherwise sane and intelligent people repeat such obvious propaganda again and again?

I don’t accept it, but I understand the warped logic that says that Americans should support the MEK because it hates the current Iranian government. But even obsessive Iran hawks have to recognize that siding with a group reviled in Iran for its role in the Iran-Iraq war is doomed to fail, and every high-profile American that praises and lobbies on behalf of this group is another propaganda victory for the Iranian government. How better to confirm the

Iranian government's most self-serving claims about the U.S. than to have so many former U.S. officials and politicians romanticize the MEK into a group of democratic freedom fighters?

Bob Filner now claims he was fooled by fake MEK charity in U.S.

Trent Seibert, U-T San Diego, August 01, 2013

San Diego Mayor Bob Filner said Wednesday that he will pay out of his own pocket the nearly \$10,000 it cost for his trip to France last month.

Filner's announcement came one day after U-T Watchdog reported that the IRS had no record of the organization Filner said paid his tab of being a U.S. tax-exempt nonprofit.

Filner said his \$9,839 in travel costs to Paris were covered by the Organization of Iranian-American Communities, a group Filner initially claimed was a charity organized under Internal Revenue Code section 501(c)(3).

"I have become aware that the OIAC's representations regarding its non-profit status were inaccurate," Filner said in a news release late Wednesday. "For this reason, I will reimburse OIAC for all amounts it paid for my travel and expenses in its international conference in Paris, France, above the \$440 gift limit."

Filner filed a similar statement on a mid-year disclosure of gifts, filed Wednesday on the day it was due.

The tax status is important because, under city and state law, officials such as Filner are prohibited from receiving gifts totaling more than \$440 in a calendar year from most sources. Nonprofits are allowed to exceed that limit if facilitating the official's appearance or speech at an event — such as the Iranian resistance rally Filner participated in.

Filner's trip to France has been controversial since he returned in late June.

The U-T revealed on July 16 that two top aides to Filner increased their city charge-card limits to \$30,000 each in advance of Filner's trip.

Councilman Kevin Faulconer sent a series of questions to interim Chief Financial Officer Greg Bych in response to that story, in large part because of the cost to the taxpayers for the trip.

Filner later released some details of the trip's funding, including the cost of his travel covered by the outside group and the cost of his security detail's travel, covered by taxpayers — \$21,244. Filner has said that his fiancée, Bronwyn Ingram, paid her own way. The two have since broken up, and Ingram has not returned messages seeking confirmation that she paid her own way.

Filner's spokeswoman did not respond to calls for comment seeking more information about Filner repaying the Iranian-American organization.

Faulconer, chairman of the city's audit committee, said Filner's actions in reimbursing the group for the trip confirm a suspicion Faulconer had — that the gift was illegal.

"As Chairman of the City's Audit Committee, I've continued to ask questions about Mayor Filner's junket because the story doesn't add up," Faulconer said. "Nothing makes sense about a San Diego Mayor taking this trip to France. I'm going to continue to investigate to determine if other rules meant to protect taxpayers were broken."

Felipe Monroig, president of the San Diego County Taxpayers Association, also said Filner's action was inadequate.

"Mayor Filner has announced that he'll cover the roughly \$9,000 cost of his recent trip to Paris," Monroig said. "Yet, there remains a much larger cost for his security detail that taxpayers are still on the hook for. Since it's clear the Mayor's trip to Paris was little more than a vacation, the Taxpayers Association calls on him to do the right thing and reimburse the full cost, which was upwards of \$30,000."

Filner has previously accepted travel from groups that are part of the National Council of Resistance of Iran. He went to Paris in June 2011 as a member of Congress. He also took a similar trip in June 2007, federal records show.

His 2011 trip cost \$6,589 and was paid for by Colorado's Iranian American Community, a group tied to the Mujahedeen-e-Khalq or MEK, the militant — and largest — arm of the National Council of Resistance of Iran.

The 2007 trip to France, also paid for by Colorado's Iranian American Community, cost \$7,949. The plane ticket in that case was business class.

Filner is not alone in accepting travel from the Iranian groups. Others who have gone include former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani and former Rep. Patrick Kennedy of Rhode Island.

In large part, the trips were part of a lobbying campaign to remove the MEK from the U.S. State Department's foreign terrorist organizations list. In a speech to the group, Filner compared their plight to the U.S. civil rights movement.

"This will happen," Filner said in a speech to the group in 2011. "This will happen. The laws, the facts, are on our side."

The de-listing effort succeeded last year.

Why Is There Bipartisan Support for the MEK? Because Politicians Like Getting Paid

Greg Scoblete, realclearworld, June 25, 2013

Benny Avni hails the bi-partisan support for the Iranian cult group MEK and their cries for regime change in Iran:

Want to see US bipartisanship on Iran? Go to Paris and attend a rally led by Maryam Rajavi, the charismatic head of the best-organized anti-regime group of Iranian exiles.

Where else can you hear former lefty congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee calling Rajavi “my sister” and soon after listen to righty Rudy Giuliani saying she’s the best alternative to “that killer,” Iran’s President-elect Hassan Rouhani? Where else can a one-time Democratic presidential candidate, Bill Richardson, be on the same foreign-policy page as a Republican wannabe, Newt Gingrich? Or a former Obama adviser, dovish retired Gen. George Jones, support the same cause as Bushie hawks like former UN Ambassador John Bolton and former Attorney General Michael Mukasey?

Gee, what would unite Washington's political class around a cause? Maybe, I don't know, money? Let's see:

Scores of former senior officials have been paid up to \$40,000 to make speeches in support of the MEK's delisting. Those who have received money include the former chairman of the US joint chiefs of staff, General Hugh Shelton; ex-FBI director Louis Freeh; and Michael Mukasey, who as attorney general oversaw the prosecution of terrorism cases.

The former Pennsylvania governor, Ed Rendell, has accepted more than \$150,000 in speaking fees at events in support of the MEK's unbanning. Clarence Page, a columnist for the Chicago Tribune, was paid \$20,000 to speak at the rally. Part of the money has been paid through speakers bureaus on the US east coast.

Others accepted only travel costs, although in some cases that involved expensive trips to Europe.

In June, Newt Gingrich, the former speaker of the US House of Representatives and Republican presidential candidate, flew to Paris to address a pro-MEK rally and meet its co-leader, Maryam Rajavi. He was criticised for bowing to her.

That was last June, but Gingrich evidently re-upped for 2013. And good for him, the economy's tough and everyone needs to make a living. But reading Avni's piece, you'd never know of these lavish funding efforts. (You can read more about them here.)

Avni ends his piece with this eye-opener:

Even if detractors are right that the group's support in Iran is much less significant than in DC, Rajavi may have a key role to play. Mostly, she can help convince Americans that the best future for relations with Iranians — and for the Mideast — is regime-change in Tehran. If she succeeds, her habit of collecting fans among former US pols would end up being a worthy cause indeed.

Right. One of the reasons relations between the U.S. and Iran have been contentious is because the U.S. took it upon itself to change the Iranian regime once before. There are certainly many people in Iran who would like to see the current system fall or be systemically reformed -- but the people rejoicing in the streets after the election of Rouhani are unlikely to cheer efforts to install an MEK cultist as a temporary president of Iran.

For a more serious appraisal of the MEK you can read this RAND study on the group.

MEK Stirs Pot in Iran Despite Improved Negotiation Outlook After Rohani's Election

Jim White, emptywheel.net, July 11, 2013

In a remarkably welcome surprise, moderate cleric Hassan Rohani won last month's presidential election in Iran and did so with a large enough margin to avoid a runoff. In the immediate aftermath of the election, there was hope that the heated rhetoric on both sides of the dispute over Iran's nuclear technology would calm a bit:

Though thousands of jubilant Iranians poured onto the streets in celebration of the victory, the outcome will not soon transform Iran's tense relations with the West, resolve the row over its nuclear program or lessen its support of Syria's president in the civil war there – matters of national security that remain the domain of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

But the president runs the economy and wields broad influence in decision-making in other spheres. Rohani's resounding mandate could provide latitude for a diplomatic thaw with the West and more social freedoms at home after eight years of belligerence and repression under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who was legally barred from seeking a third consecutive term.

"This victory is a victory of wisdom, a victory of moderation, a victory of growth and awareness and a victory of commitment over extremism and ill-temper," Rohani told state television, promising to work for all Iranians, including the hardline so-called "Principlists" whom he defeated at the poll.

Alas, those who favor violence over negotiation don't intend to sit idly while moderation has a chance of breaking out. Today, we have a new "revelation" brought to us in a Reuters article:

An exiled opposition group said on Thursday it had obtained information about a secret underground nuclear site under construction in Iran, without specifying what kind of atomic activity it believed would be carried out there.

/snip/

The NCRI said the site was inside a complex of tunnels beneath mountains 10 km (6 miles) east of the town of Damavand, itself about 50 km northeast of Tehran. Construction of the first phase began in 2006 and was recently completed, it said.

The group released satellite photographs of what it said was the site. But the images did not appear to constitute hard evidence to support the assertion that it was a planned nuclear facility.

The Reuters article identifies NCRI as the National Council of Resistance of Iran and in addition to identifying them as "exiled dissidents" also mentions affiliation with the "People's Mujahideen Organisation of Iran (PMOI)" without noting that the more commonly used acronym for the latter group is MEK. That would be the same MEK that was only de-listed by the US Department of State as a terrorist organization last year. Promptly after de-listing, the group moved to register as lobbyists:

An Iranian group that was listed as a terrorist organization until last year has formally registered to lobby the Obama administration.

The National Council of Resistance of Iran told the Justice Department that it plans to "educate" the public and the U.S. government about the need to pursue an Iran policy "based on respect for human rights, non-proliferation, and promotion of democracy." The council is an umbrella group of five Iranian opposition groups, the largest of which is the delisted terror group Mujahedin-e-Khalq, or MEK.

/snip/

The State Department closed the council's Washington office in 2002, calling it a front group for the MEK. Since then, the group has earned the good graces of U.S. conservatives by drawing international attention to Iran's clandestine uranium enrichment facility in Natanz.

That bit about NCRI exposing the Natanz facility? Even though it also is cited in today's Reuters article, there is good reason to believe that MEK came into the information through a leak to them rather than their own intelligence-gathering:

As I understand the sequence of events, the United States—knowing full well that Iran had a clandestine centrifuge program—watched Iran dig two MASSIVE HOLES near Natanz (see the big picture), then ratted the Iranians out to the IAEA. About the same time, someone leaked that information to an Iranian dissident group, the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), which then released the second-hand dope in a press conference where they got the details wrong.

Lewis goes on to cite convincing evidence in that article at Arms Control Wonk. That sequence of events, though, in which US intelligence made the discovery, briefed IAEA and then someone leaked the intelligence to the MEK is a sequence for which we have seen multiple variants over the years since.

I have posted many times on the network of “diplomats” in Vienna who leak either to George Jahn of AP or Fredrik Dahl of Reuters (Dahl wrote today’s Reuters article). Most of those leaks over the past few years have been couched in a way to put Iran in the worst possible light. Late in May, Jahn appears to have had an epiphany and finally pointed out that he likely was being fed slanted information.

Time will soon tell us whether there is indeed a new secret Iranian nuclear facility or if, as happens when NCRI produces its own “intelligence”, this is just another load of bunk. If NCRI’s satellite photos only appear on David Albright’s site (he has not yet posted them), then this is likely just another disinformation campaign by MEK. Real intelligence of a new site would very likely leak to a much wider array than just the credulous transcription crowd, especially given the tendency of John Brennan and Barack Obama to leak anything that puts them in a more flattering light or stronger bargaining position. My gut leans more toward this being more chaff thrown up by MEK because Iran has known that they have been under the most intense scrutiny ever under the Obama administration and that construction of a secret facility would inevitably be detected by US intelligence, just as Natanz was.

Postscript: Yes, I have used NCRI and MEK interchangeably in the text, as I find them to be functionally indistinguishable.

Michael Rubin: Yes, Mujahedin al-Khalq Is a Dishonest Cult

Michael Rubin, Commentary Magazine, July7,2013

Michael Rubin writer of the famous article “Monsters of the Left “wrote an article on commentary magazine titled ” Yes, Mujahedin al-Khalq Is a Dishonest Cult “in which he

declared the deep opposition of Iranian people against the Mujahedin-e Khalq and the group's lack of credibility among their own nation whatever their political views may be.

Bellow is an excerpt of the Article:

"... Iranians are politically engaged—even if not within the system—and did not hesitate to talk. Many spoke of their desire for alternatives. Some asked about the son of the late shah, living in exile in the United States. Others would speak more theoretically about a desire for a republic or other alternative. The only thing on which Iranians agreed was their dislike of the Mujahedin al-Khalq Organization (MKO). Several years ago, I wrote a piece outlining their history and ideological evolution. Long story short, the group's involvement in terrorism that killed not only regime officials but ordinary Iranian citizens, as well as their willingness to accept aid and shelter from Saddam Hussein's Iraq in the years after Iraq's invasion of Iran, delegitimized the group in the face of the public they claim to represent.

The Clinton administration designated the MKO to be a terrorist group, but after years of lobbying—and buying support by paying huge honoraria to a bipartisan array of senior officials—the MKO was delisted in 2012. No longer being considered a terrorist group does not make the MKO democratic, however, as anyone who has ever studied their internal workings can attest. It is against this backdrop that this diary, written by a Kyrgyz student recruited to attend an MKO rally in Paris, is so interesting. It seems that the MKO leaders must now not only pay speakers to sing their praises at their rallies, but also the audience members. The MKO is not only a creepy cult, and willing to say anything to buy support regardless of the group's record, but an empty shell as well. Let us hope that one day their remaining congressional supporters will recognize that if they truly want to bring change to Iran's odious regime, they would best reach out to the Iranian people and not associate with groups which repel them.

How to pack a Mujahadeen-e-Khalq rally: spend thousands on Western politicians, less on (non-Iranian) students

Michael Petrou, Mcleans, June 28, 2013

The number of Canadian parliamentarians accepting sponsored junkets from the political arm of the Mujahadeen-e-Khalq, which Canada until recently considered a terrorist organization, has fallen off of late.

Last year, according to the list of sponsored travel presented to the House of Commons in March, only Liberal MP Judy Sgro took a paid-for trip to France to "attend a global human

rights event” hosted by the “Iran Democratic Association,” which appears to be the latest name the Mujahedeen-e-Khalq’s political wing has given itself in Canada. Globally it is known as the National Council of Resistance of Iran.

These events happen every year and centre around a big rally involving thousands of supporters and robust praise for the NCRI’s “president-elect” Maryam Rajavi.

Sgro valued the travel, accommodation, and gifts provided by the NCRI at more than \$2,000.

This year’s rally just concluded in Paris. We won’t know for a while yet whether any Canadian MPs attended. We do, however, have a glimpse into who some of the supposed NCRI supporters are.

Alina Alymkulova is a Kyrgyz — not Iranian — student studying in Prague. As she tells Radio Free Europe, she saw an online ad promising a weekend to Paris, complete with accommodation in a four-star hotel, for only 35 euros.

“I wrote to the trip organizer and discovered there was a catch, but it didn’t bother me,” she says. “The organizer explained that I would have to take part in a rally in Paris for a few hours, chant a few slogans in Persian, and wave flags. Although I don’t speak any Persian and don’t know much about Iranian affairs, I decided to go to Paris.”

Alymkulova wasn’t the only one. The buses that left Prague were full of Russians, Ukrainians, Czechs, and Asians. Some drank alcohol and chanted for beer. A Russian woman said she was going to meet handsome Frenchmen. A German she met in Paris thought the rally was for changes in Iraq, not Iran.

Eventually, after staying in a dump of a hotel 60 kilometres from Paris, Alymkulova was bused to the rally near Charles de Gaulle Airport.

“We were given papers explaining where to go and what to do. Cameras were not allowed. As we exited the bus, I resigned myself to the idea that running away was not an option — people were guarding the area.”

Inside the venue, Alymkulova was given coupons for a drink and sandwich. There were headphones on her seat translating the speeches, but she wasn’t interested in listening and left to look for the exit door.

“We arrived back in Prague. I was feeling down, and even the souvenirs I bought in Paris could not cheer me up. In thinking about the whole experience, a saying comes to mind: ‘Only a mousetrap has free cheese.’”

Here’s hoping Sgro’s trip was more enjoyable.