

# ParsBrief

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### Britain may admit 17 Liberty residents with no links to terrorism

UK Parliament, October 29 2013

Menzies Campbell (North East Fife, Liberal Democrat)

To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department pursuant to the answer of 10 June 2013, Official Report, column 84W, on Iraq: Iran, what the current immigration status is of the 52 residents of Camp Ashraf and Camp Liberty who are seeking resettlement in the UK.

Mark Harper (Forest of Dean, Conservative)

None of the 52 residents of Camp Ashraf and Camp Liberty who were previously settled in the UK have any current immigration status here. We have agreed to consider, exceptionally, their re-admission as refugees, subject to a UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) assessment of each individual to ensure that none have been complicit in acts of terrorism or other activities incompatible with refugee status. Thus far, UNHCR have submitted 17 assessments to the Home Office. No decisions have yet been reached.

### U.S. Pledges Support to UN Trust Fund for Resettlement of Camp Hurriya Residents

US State Department, October 24, 2013

Press Statement

Marie Harf

Deputy Department Spokesperson, Office of the Spokesperson

Washington, DC

October 24, 2013

The United States welcomes the establishment of the United Nations Trust Fund to support the resettlement of individuals currently residing at Camp Hurriya in Iraq. We are pleased to announce that the United States plans to provide \$1 million to the UN Trust Fund. The Administration will continue to work with the U.S. Congress regarding these

funds. The United States hopes other countries will also support this important humanitarian effort.

We share the conviction that relocation is the only lasting means of guaranteeing the safety and well-being of those residing at Camp Hurriya. Achieving this goal has become an ever more urgent humanitarian imperative in the aftermath of deadly attacks on Camp Hurriya in February and June of this year, and the horrific attack on individuals at Camp Ashraf in September. We also continue to support the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in their efforts to resettle the residents of Camp Hurriya outside of Iraq.

The United States is actively engaged in working with the international community to move the UNHCR-led relocation process forward. To that end, the Department of State recently appointed Jonathan Winer as Senior Advisor for Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK) Resettlement, to oversee our efforts towards resettling the residents of Camp Hurriya to safe, permanent and secure locations outside of Iraq as soon as possible.

### MEK Makes Desperate New Iran Nuclear Accusation, Reuters Yawns

by Jim White, emptywheel.net, October 10, 2013

With the world anticipating real progress at the next round of P5+1 talks set to start next week in Geneva, the MEK is getting desperate. Because they appear to only want a violent regime change in Iran, talk of actual diplomacy is their worst nightmare. Today, Reuters reports on the latest wild accusation tossed out by the MEK using the “umbrella” organization of the National Council of Resistance of Iran:

An exiled Iranian opposition group said on Thursday it had information about what it said was a center for nuclear weaponisation research in Tehran that the government was moving to avoid detection ahead of negotiations with world powers.

Reuters clearly was unmoved by the accusation, as they immediately pointed out that NCRI is biased and politically motivated. However, even in pointing out the bias of NCRI, Reuters perpetuates a myth that has been disproven:

The dissident National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) exposed Iran’s uranium enrichment facility at Natanz and a heavy water facility at Arak in 2002. But analysts say it has a chequered track record and a clear political agenda.

Uhm, yes. Having your major group spend decades on the list of terrorist organizations (before eventually buying their way off the list and registering as a lobbying group) would indeed qualify as “a chequered track record”. But Reuters insists on repeating the falsehood that the NCRI and MEK were responsible for exposing the underground enrichment site at Natanz. That myth has been thoroughly debunked by Jeffrey Lewis:

The debate about whether Iran has constructed a clandestine centrifuge program drives me nuts.

You mean other than the one we already found?

And by we, I mean the United States—or at least its intelligence community. 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 multiple independent sources to confirm that the intelligence community, not the NCRI, was responsible for discovering the Natanz facility. [It is also instructive to note the role ISIS played in the charade of promoting NCRI responsibility.]

Aside from that major error on attribution of the discovery of Natanz, Reuters was so unmoved by the newest ploy from NCRI that they didn't even rewrite today's article very much from the last wild NCRI accusation in July (the link here is to CBC carrying the Reuters story):

But analysts say it has a mixed track record and a clear political agenda.

But in that July story, Reuters went further in linking that accusation to a desire to derail diplomacy:

The latest allegation comes less than a month after the election of a relative moderate, Hassan Rouhani, as Iran's new president raised hopes for a resolution of the nuclear dispute with the West, and might be timed to discredit such optimism.

Yes, the MEK clearly sees diplomacy as the real enemy. That article also rehashed the abject failure of an accusation NCRI and MEK made in 2010:

In 2010, when the group said it had evidence of another new nuclear facility, west of the capital Tehran, U.S. officials said they had known about the site for years and had no reason to believe it was nuclear.

It would appear that NCRI and MEK need to step up their acts. They have reached a level of incompetence that is barely worthy of rewriting the standard dismissal that Reuters keeps on file.

#### German authorities protest over MKO relocation in Koln

Nejat Society, October 02, 2013

German media reported of an order issued to relocate a number of members of the Mujahedin Khalq Organization from Iraqi Camp Liberty to Germany. The United Nation representatives and German government agreed to transfer 97 resident of Camp Liberty.

German newspaper, Kolner Stadt –Anzeiger published in Cologne reported that German government has ordered the city officials to receive 77 people of the refugees.

The 97 Liberty residents are among those who have already had refuge files in Germany. They had been sent to Iraq by the group during Saddam's regime, according to the German daily.

The report adds that the city officials including Mr. Guido Kahlen the director of Cologne city council seriously protested the decision. They consider the presence of those people with records of military, terrorist and cult-like activities as a risk security of Koln citizens.

Based on the agreement signed by Iraqi government and the UN, members of the MKO who are currently residing in Camp Liberty near Baghdad, are supposed to be received by third countries as refugees. So far Albania has agreed on the relocation of 210 members of the group. About 80 of these residents have been already transferred to Albania.

## Spy nabbed in Israel MKO agent: Ex-MKO member

Press TV, October 23, 2013

A former member of the terrorist Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization (MKO) says a man arrested in Israel on charges of spying for Iran has been a long serving member of the anti-Iranian group.

Ali Mansouri, a dual Iranian-Belgian national, was detained on September 11 by Israel's internal security service, Shin Bet, allegedly for taking notes on the security screenings at Israel's international airport and photographing the US Embassy in Tel Aviv, according to the Israeli security agency.

The former MKO member, however, said Mansouri was a close member of the MKO for at least 30 years and has been working as a go-between for the terrorist group and Israel's spy agency Mossad.

He added that Mansouri, who lived in Turkey between 1980 and 1998, travelled to Iran regularly posing as a businessman to gather information for Mossad and MKO leaders.

It was no secret to us even in those days that he was working as an agent between MKO and Mossad and that is why he travelled personally to Israel a few times, the source said.

The amateur nature of the photos taken by Mansouri and the timing of the arrest have raised speculations that the arrest was politically motivated.

The Israeli regime announced the arrest in late September as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu left for the US to persuade US President Barack Obama that stepped-up sanctions, not diplomacy, is the way to deal with Iran over its nuclear energy program.

The visit came after a trip by an Iranian delegation to the US headed by President Hassan Rouhani, and his UN General Assembly address that many in the West hailed as a first step to a possible resolution to the nuclear standoff.

The MKO fled to Iraq in the 1980s, where it enjoyed the support of former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein and set up Camp Ashraf in the eastern province of Diyala, near the Iranian border.

The group also cooperated with Saddam in the massacres of Iraqi Kurds and in suppressing the 1991 uprisings in southern Iraq.

The MKO is listed as a terrorist organization by much of the international community and has committed numerous terrorist acts against Iranians and Iraqis.

## 5 Enemies of Diplomacy Hell-Bent On Sabotaging Peace Between America and Iran

By Alex Kane, Alternet, September 25, 2013

Will the new Iranian president's diplomatic opening survive the onslaught from detractors like Israel, Saudi Arabia and members of the U.S. Congress?

The new Iranian leader's diplomatic moves have brought hope to those searching for an end to hostility between Iran and the U.S. In the days leading up to the annual gathering of

world leaders in New York, Iranian president Hassan Rouhani proclaimed to NBC News that Iran would not seek nuclear weapons under any circumstances and penned a Washington Post op-ed in which he declared, "I'm committed to fulfilling my promises to my people, including my pledge to engage in constructive interaction with the world."

It was all part of Rouhani's effort to pave the way for a potential new chapter in U.S.-Iranian relations. After decades of mistrust sowed by a U.S.-backed coup in 1953 and the taking of American hostages in the aftermath of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Rouhani seemed to be trying to forge a different course. The new Iranian president's United Nations speech continued the diplomatic opening, declaring that Iran was open to negotiations aimed at resolving "reasonable concerns" about Iran's nuclear energy program. Rouhani's UN talk came hours after President Barack Obama signaled an American willingness to engage in talks with Iran, though it's far from a sure thing that meetings could bear fruit.

The details of a potential deal are fairly well-known. It would involve Western recognition of Iran's right to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes in return for an Iranian willingness to allow more inspections of its nuclear program, ending work on a water reactor that could produce a key element of a nuclear weapon and capping the levels of uranium enrichment. Iranian concession would be met with sanctions relief.

But will the diplomatic opening survive the onslaught of a wide array of detractors? That's the big question.

On September 24, the day of Rouhani's and Obama's speeches, a large crowd of detractors virulently opposed to a thaw in U.S.-Iranian relations demonstrated outside the United Nations. Organized by the political branch of the Iranian expatriate group Mojahedin-e-Khalq (MEK), thousands of Iranian-Americans gathered to denounce Rouhani and any chance of diplomacy. Also at the rally were non-Iranian Americans that were bused in from around the country, their tickets, food and lodging all paid for by MEK. "Some of the people don't have a clue what it was all about," one man from Michigan at the rally told AlterNet.

Waving trademark red, green and white MEK flags and chanting for the downfall of the Iranian regime, MEK supporters listened to former U.S. officials on the group's payroll fall over themselves for the most hyperbolic statements about Iran's new leader.

Former Democratic senator Robert Toricelli thundered, "there is no compromising with evil....Do not meet with terrorists." Former chair of the Republican National Committee Michael Steele said, "do not shake hands with Rouhani," a reference to the possibility that Obama would do just that with Rouhani (the handshake or meeting never materialized). The hawkish former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, John Bolton, told the crowd it would be "repugnant" for Obama to meet with Rouhani and that now was the time for "increasing" punishing sanctions on Iran which have wreaked havoc on their economy and led to medicine shortages. But it fell to former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani to take the cake for the most ridiculous statement of the day when he tried to link Rouhani to a 1994 bombing of a Jewish center in Argentina.

"Rouhani...was certainly aware of it, certainly involved. Their blood is on their hands, and just wishing people 'Happy Rosh Hashanah' doesn't wipe away the blood of these Jewish martyrs from Iran's hand or Rouhani," said Giuliani. But while the Iranian government has been linked to the attack, the Argentine prosecutor on the case told the Times of Israel in June that Rouhani "did not participate" in the meeting that approved the bombing.

MEK and its supporters are hardly the only political force that wants to stop U.S.-Iranian negotiations over the nuclear program. Here are five others.

### 1. Israel

America's number-one ally in the Middle East is the leading player in the drive to scuttle diplomacy between the U.S. and Iran. Israel has been hyping the Iranian threat in part "to distract attention from Israel's occupation of Palestine," as the Palestine Center's Yousef Munayyer put it last year. The Jewish state has warned of the danger of an Iranian nuclear bomb since the early 1990s, when then Foreign Minister Shimon Peres said that "Iran is the greatest threat and greatest problem in the Middle East because it seeks the nuclear option while holding a highly dangerous stance of extreme religious militancy."

The warnings haven't let up. Iran has declared that it does not seek nuclear weapons and both U.S. and Israeli intelligence have stated Iran does not possess a nuclear weapon and has not made a decision to pursue them. That's not enough for Israel. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's "red line" on Iran is the country achieving "nuclear weapons capability," a hazy term meaning the country has the technical ability to produce a weapon if it decided to do so. Some experts say Iran has already reached nuclear weapons capability.

Another reason why Israel is wary over diplomacy with Iran is that it could lead to recognition of Iran as a major regional player and thus pose a more potent challenge to Israeli regional hegemony.

Predictably, Israel reacted negatively to Rouhani's United Nations speech. In an indication of just how distasteful they feel about the prospect of speaking to Iran, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that "Iran thinks that soothing words and token actions will enable it continue on its path to the bomb. Like North Korea before it, Iran will try to remove sanctions by offering cosmetic concessions while preserving its ability to rapidly build a nuclear weapon at a time of its choosing." Netanyahu also claimed that Israel "would welcome a genuine diplomatic solution," but his demands amount to a complete Iranian cave-in, something that is not going to happen.

Israeli officials at the UN went so far as to boycott Rouhani's speech.

### 2. The U.S.-Based Israel Lobby

Taking their cues from Israel, pro-Israel groups in the U.S. are also demanding the impossible from Iran, and in effect, trying to scuttle real diplomacy. The Israel lobby's number-one group, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, launched a broadside against Rouhani in a memo released before the General Assembly opened.

The memo urges the West to keep the "military option"—a strike on Iran—on the table and increase sanctions so talks would be more effective. But Iran has bristled at the military option and wants sanctions reduced in exchange for Iranian concessions, making AIPAC's asks a surefire way to close the possibility of a deal. "The international community should only consider sanctions relief if Iran complies with United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions that require suspending its nuclear activities," the AIPAC memo states, indicating that only full Iranian capitulation on its nuclear program would suffice.

The Emergency Committee for Israel, a neoconservative group run by Bill Kristol, is also dismissive of Rouhani. It set up a website dedicated to showing that Rouhani “is no moderate” and that he is a “career terrorist.”

### 3. U.S. Congress

Congress works hand in hand with the Israel lobby, and both Democrats and Republicans have wasted no time blasting Rouhani. A letter sent from senators Charles Schumer (D-NY) and John McCain to President Obama echoed AIPAC’s memo. “We respectfully urge that any diplomatic outreach to Iran re-emphasizes that the United States will not allow Iran to acquire a nuclear weapons capability and that any relief from crippling economic sanctions on Iran will only be provided if Iran takes meaningful and verifiable actions to halt its nuclear activities,” the hawkish senators wrote.

But no deal can come by demanding that Iran “halt its nuclear activities.” Iran sees enrichment of uranium as a key part of its identity as an independent state able to deter enemies like Israel.

Democrats like Eliot Engel in the House had a similar message. According to Al-Monitor, Engel, chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, responded to Rouhani’s UN speech by saying that the Iranian leader missed an opportunity... to set a new constructive tone demonstrating Iranian seriousness in addressing its nuclear program. Far from engaging in a ‘charm offensive,’ he repeated too many of the same old talking points blaming the United States and our allies for all of the world’s ills.”

The dismissive statements directed toward Rouhani were no surprise. In the immediate aftermath of Rouhani’s election—a time that sparked hope for a diplomatic resolution over Iran’s nuclear energy program—the House passed a new sanctions bill aimed at slashing Iran’s oil exports, a key source of income for the Islamic Republic. Other sanctions passed into law by the U.S. Congress have led to Iran’s economy suffering, with inflation and medicine shortages increasing.

### 4. MEK and Supporters

The September 24 rally held by Mojahedin-e-Khalq outside the UN was only the latest salvo in its effort to pressure the U.S. to do more to help overthrow the Iranian regime. It’s been lobbying and enlisting U.S. officials to do just that for years now. It positions itself as a sort of “government in exile,” a movement ready to take the reins of power in Iran once the regime is overthrown. But MEK is widely detested within Iran.

MEK participated in the revolution that brought down the U.S.-backed Shah in 1979. But soon after the ayatollahs of Iran took over, they turned on MEK and an armed crackdown began. The Islamic Republic drove Mojahedin-e-Khalq and other left-wing forces underground. Mojahedin-e-Khalq responded by bombing Iranian government facilities and killing members of the Iranian military. The violent Iranian group has been characterized as a “cult.” Its violence landed them on the State Department list of terrorist organizations.

It was eventually driven out of Iran, and Mojahedin-e-Khalq went on to back Saddam Hussein’s government while Iraq waged a brutal war with Iran.

Fast-forward to the past decade, when a high-profile lobbying campaign was waged by Mojahedin-e-Khalq and former U.S. officials to get the group off the U.S. terror list. MEK, which was trained by the U.S. military in 2005 and reportedly colluded with Israel to

assassinate Iranian nuclear scientists, paid millions of dollars in speaking fees to former U.S. officials to speak on its behalf. The lobbying campaign bore fruit in 2012 when the State Department took MEK off its terrorist list.

MEK is still at it, as the September 24 rally showed. Its supporters at the rally called for a halt to the drive for diplomacy with Rouhani and the overthrow of the government.

#### 5. Gulf Arab States

Israel is the foreign country everyone talks about as fearing a diplomatic deal with Iran and the easing of pressure on the country. But Gulf Arab states equally fear Iran and want the pressure to be kept up—putting those Arab states in league with Israel, a country disliked by much of their populations.

Countries like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain are bent on curbing Iranian influence in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia and Iran have been locked in a battle for regional power in the Middle East ever since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. The geopolitical battle stems from Iran's oil production, which puts them in competition with Saudi Arabia, as well as both countries' attempts to place friendly political forces in power in other nations. Those attempts have led to proxy battles being fought in Lebanon, Bahrain and now Syria.

As a major oil exporter to the U.S., Saudi Arabia is likely to be skeptical of a grand U.S.-Iran bargain. But Rouhani has also pledged to improve Saudi-Iran ties, so it's possible a thawing in relations between the two countries could result from the new Iranian leader's election.

Just who has been killing Iran's nuclear scientists?

Patrick Cockburn, Independent, September 25, 2013

World View: The timing of the latest shot in a covert war invites questions about the role of proxies

What to make of the latest alleged assassination in Iran of a senior officer in the Revolutionary Guards just as Iran and the US move towards negotiations? Is it a last-minute attempt by Israel or the Iranian dissident group the Mojahedin-e-Khalq (MEK) to sabotage talks – or at least to show that they are still players in the decades-long struggle between the government in Tehran and its many antagonists?

The first account on an Iranian website stated that Mojtaba Ahmadi, the head of Iranian cyber warfare, had been found shot in the head outside Tehran. The Revolutionary Guards issued a statement denying that he had been assassinated, but admitted there had been a "horrific incident" which it was investigating. The killing appeared to be the latest in a string of killings, since 2007, in which five Iranians associated with the country's nuclear programme have been murdered in professional attacks. Men on motorcycles operating on the basis of good intelligence have stuck magnetically attachable bombs to their victims' cars.

The timing of Ahmadi's assassination looks suspicious, coming a few days after the Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani, addressed the General Assembly of the United Nations and later spoke to President Barack Obama by telephone. Not everybody on either side is happy: the head of the Revolutionary Guards, Mohammed Ali Jafari, even stated openly that, while he agreed with Rouhani's UN speech, "he should have turned down a

telephone conversation until after the American government had shown its sincerity towards Iran".

Jafari may be worried that Washington believes it has Iran on the run because of the devastating impact of economic sanctions.

An obvious motive for carrying out such assassinations is to demonstrate that the enemies of the Iranian government have a long reach and can identify and kill top specialists in modern warfare, notably but not exclusively those involved in the Iranian nuclear programme. This is in keeping with the plot of so many spy movies in which a single irreplaceable scientist is targeted for assassination by the forces of good or evil. In reality, such uniquely capable scientists, even where they exist, are extremely well-guarded and seldom drive their own cars. It is unlikely that any of those killed are the Iranian equivalent of J Robert Oppenheimer, the mastermind behind America's successful effort to build an atomic bomb.

Who is doing the killings? A well-sourced and convincing investigation last year by NBC News in the US concluded that "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". It cites two senior Obama administration officials as confirming that the MEK is responsible for the killings but denying any US involvement.

Richard Engel and Robert Windrem of NBC quote Mohammad Javad Larijani, a senior aide to Iran's spiritual leader Ali Khamenei, as asserting that Israel's secret service, Mossad, trained MEK members. He claimed that in one case it built a replica of a nuclear scientist's house so that the killers would be familiar with it. His information largely came from the interrogation of a would-be assassin detained in Iran in 2010. Larijani said that Mossad worked through the MEK because "Israel does not have direct access to our society. [The MEK], being Iranian and being part of Iranian society, they have ... a good number of places... to get into touch with people."

The MEK categorically denies any involvement with Israel but Israeli commentators have confirmed the MEK-Israeli connection.

The MEK is a strange, highly disciplined, cult-like organisation which began as a militant opponent of the Shah, inspired by an ideology that is a mixture of Marxism and Islam. After Ayatollah Khomeini came to power in 1979, the MEK fought a ferocious war against his clerical regime, basing itself in Iraq with support from Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war.

During the Kurdish uprising in 1991, the Kurds blamed the MEK for blocking their advance against Saddam's forces at a crucial moment. After the fall of Saddam, the MEK established shadowy connections with the US occupation authorities, often through American contractors who had previously worked for Washington and still had their security clearances, according to Iraqi officials. This allowed the US to deny it was working with a group designated as "terrorist" by its own State Department in 1997 (though that designation was lifted last year).

Nevertheless, the investigative journalist Seymour Hersh says that, even while it was listed as a foreign terror group, MEK members received training from the Joint Special Operations Command in Nevada. During the confrontation between Tehran and Washington over Iran's nuclear programme, the MEK was attractive to US intelligence agencies because it already had committed adherents on the ground in Iran.

The US and Iran have been conducting a covert war against each other since the fall of the Shah, though its intensity goes up and down. During the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), the CIA had a station in Baghdad that fed satellite surveillance photographs of Iranian frontline positions to Saddam.

The conflict escalated again during the US occupation of Iraq (although Iran had quietly welcomed the toppling of its arch enemy in Baghdad). At the same time, Iran made every effort to ensure that it, and not America, became the predominant foreign power in post-Saddam Iraq. Pin-prick attacks by the two sides were highly visible from 2003 to about 2008, but less evident during this time was a degree of co-operation, since both sides wanted to stabilise a Shia-Kurdish government. Likewise today, neither country has an interest in seeing a reinvigorated al-Qa'ida establish itself in the Sunni heartlands of western Iraq and eastern Syria.

The problem with the US-Iranian proxy war is that neither side quite controls their own proxies to the degree the other side imagines. It is all very well working through surrogates to retain deniability, but these have their own interests and may, in addition, be incompetent, corrupt or simply crazed.

The MEK is not the only player in this murky and violent world. There are others such as PJAK – the Iranian Kurdish franchise of the Turkish Kurd PKK group – which is based in the southern Qandil mountains and has its militants inside Iran. Meanwhile, in Pakistani Baluchistan, there are militant Sunni groups eager for money and support from foreign intelligence services.

Some of these groups, whatever their origin, end up as guns for hire and have so many tactical alliances they must have difficulty remembering what they are fighting for.

How feasible is a US-Iranian détente? Prospects are a lot better than they have been for a long time given that US and Iranian interests in Syria are not so diametrically opposed as they were six months ago. The Sunni offensive that seemed to carry all before it in 2011 and 2012 has stalled, at least for now. But Iran does not want to give the impression that it is caving in under sanctions and Israel will want to retain its veto over any future US-Iran deal.

So, whatever the truth about the death of Mojtaba Ahmadi, the covert war between Iran and its enemies is a long way from ending.

### Meet The Weird, Super-Connected Group That's Mucking Up U.S. Talks With Iraq

Yochi Dreazen, Foreign Policy, October 31, 2013

When Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki begins a three day official visit to Washington today, he'll face predictable questions about Iran, Syria, and Iraq's own political instability and soaring violence. Top lawmakers, however, will press him on a very different issue: the recent killings of dozens of members of a former terrorist group that the Iraqi government had promised — and failed — to protect.

The Mujahedeen-e Khalq, or MEK, is the most powerful lobby you've never heard of, and probably the most unusual. It has used a combination of political savvy and seemingly bottomless pools of money to persuade many prominent lawmakers and former officials

from the Bush and Obama administrations that it has broad support within Iran and could help turn the country into a democracy. Along the way, it's gone from being as seen as a group responsible for the deaths of at least six Americans to one that is a vital partner in the effort to overthrow Iran's theocratic regime.

MEK supporters like New Jersey Democrat Bob Menendez, the powerful chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, say they want to punish the Maliki government for an attack on an MEK compound called Camp Ashraf last month that left that killed at least 50 of its members. During an October 3rd hearing, Menendez told Wendy Sherman, the number three official at the State Department, that he would suspend U.S. weapons sales to Iraq until more was done to protect the MEK members at the base.

Vice President Biden discussed the MEK issue when he spoke with Maliki Wednesday morning, according to a senior administration official. The official said Baghdad wanted the MEK to leave Iraq, but said the U.S. government had no credible information that the Iraqi government was involved in the September attack on Camp Ashraf. Still, the official said that Washington worried that the group's roughly 2,900 members would be in danger until they could be moved to new homes in other countries. The problem, he said, was that Albania and Germany were the only nations that have so far been willing to take in even small numbers of MEK followers.

Menendez aides say the senator, for his part, plans to specifically raise the Iraqi government's treatment of the MEK members, along with his concern that Baghdad is allowing Iran to use its airspace to fly weapons and fighters to Syria, when he sits down with Maliki later Wednesday.

"It is unacceptable to lose one more life when American commanders gave these individuals a written guarantee toward their safety and it sends a message to others in the world that when we say that we are going to do that and we do not, that they should not trust us," he said at the time. "I doubt very much that we are going to see any approval of any weapons sales to Iraq until we get this situation in a place in which people's lives are saved."

The MEK has also enlisted prominent retired officials to tout its cause in public speeches and private meetings at the State Department and on Capitol Hill. Its long list of supporters includes former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, former Attorney General Mike Mukasey, former Pennsylvania Governor Ed Rendell, retired Marine General Jim Jones, Obama's first national security advisor, and retired Army General Hugh Shelton, a former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

MEK advocates like Rendell receive up to \$30,000 per speech, which means many have been paid hundreds of thousands of dollars by the group. Rendell, in an interview, said he genuinely believed in the group's cause and wasn't in it for the money. He said that he and MEK advocates like Jones and former FBI Director Louis Freeh have spent hundreds of hours personally lobbying the State Department and members of Congress on behalf of the group and had done so pro bono. Rendell said he bills \$1,000 per hour as a lawyer, which meant that had foregone significant amounts of money to aid the group.

"The U.S. had promised to guarantee their safety and then just stood aside when they were massacred, gangster style," he said in the interview. "It's disgusting."

Rendell helped draft a letter to Obama last week that demanded U.S. assistance for the MEK members still stuck at Camp Ashraf. In the letter, obtained by FP, MEK's advocates

said the killings at Camp Ashraf was a “premeditated mass murder planned at the highest level and executed by Iraqi forces and agents, using equipment and training provided by U.S. forces.”

“We urge you to allow all of the Camp Liberty residents to be evacuated immediately from Iraq, using United States forces, and brought to safety in a United States Government supported facility,” the letter read. Until that happened, the group argued, the Obama administration should “suspend any aid or sale of arms to Iraq.”

For the moment, that’s not a step the White House is prepared to take. Bernadette Meehan, a spokesperson for the National Security Council, said the administration was “deeply concerned” about the safety of the MEK members at Camp Ashraf and consistently pressed the the Iraqi government to do as much as possible to protect them. Still, she said that delaying weapons sales to Iraq could do more harm than good.

“U.S. security assistance, and foreign military sales in particular, are tools that we use for building and shaping Iraq’s defense capabilities and integrating Iraqi security forces with our security forces and regional partners,” Meehan said. “Withholding security assistance may well serve to decrease our influence in Baghdad, our ability to seed relationships, and provide leverage for strategic competitors who will fill the vacuum and could conceivably damage our long-term interests.”

Administration officials said the president would discuss a range of regional and security issues with Maliki when the Iraqi leader visits the White House Friday but declined to say whether the president planned to specifically raise the MEK issue.

Either way, the MEK’s prominent role in the U.S.-Iraqi relationship represents a remarkable turnaround for a group that was once held responsible for a string of bombings and assassinations inside Iran that killed at least six Americans, including the deputy chief of the U.S. military mission to Iran and a senior Texaco executive. It was also linked to the takeover of the U.S. embassy in Tehran. In 1997, the State Department designated the group a “foreign terrorist organization,” a move that imposed strict financial sanctions against the MEK. The MEK’s current leadership has long denied any involvement in the killings or the seizure of the embassy.

The group’s relationship with Washington improved dramatically after the U.S. invasion of Iraq. The MEK group gave up its weapons and formed a warm relationship with senior American commanders, who gave the group formal promises of protection. Last month, however, masked gunmen with military-quality weapons swept into an MEK compound outside Baghdad, killed roughly 50 of its members and abducted seven others. Grisly videos released by the MEK showed the corpses of men who were shot in the head with their hands tied behind their backs. The group’s supporters here at home immediately accused Maliki’s government of orchestrating the attack, something Baghdad denies, and called for it to be sanctioned in response.

The MEK’s power in Washington surprises many experts on the group, who describe it as a cult that exerts tremendous power over the daily lives of its followers.

Jeremiah Goulka, a former RAND researcher who has made repeated visits to Camp Ashraf, said MEK leaders physical cut their members off from the outside world, limit their access to outside newspapers or TV stations, and enforce gender segregation and celibacy. He said the MEK required its followers to attend regular sessions where they were forced to admit whether they had sexual thoughts. Those that admitted to them were

publicly humiliated, while those that denied having them were derided as liars and criticized anyway.

“That’s the definition of how a cult works,” he said.

Karim Sadjadpour, an Iran expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said the group had little support back home because ordinary Iranians were nationalists troubled by both the MEK’s vaguely socialist ideology and its past relationship with Saddam Hussein, which funded the group’s operations for decades. Many outside experts believe the MEK is still drawing from the pools of money it received from the former Iraqi leader.

“What keeps them in the news are their deep pockets,” Sadjadpour said. “Once those deep pockets run out they’re basically going to be rendered irrelevant.”