

Iran Interlink
Special Report from Baghdad

Camp Ashraf
and the Mojahedin-e Khalq

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Introduction – What is the problem with Camp Ashraf?

The Mojahedin-e Khalq (MKO) came into existence in 1965 to conduct armed opposition against the Shah of Iran. Among those killed during its first armed campaign the group were 6 American contractors in Iran. Most of its members were imprisoned during the 1970s. After the Shah was ousted in 1979, the MKO prisoners were released and after initially supporting the revolution for two years, then began to challenge Ayatollah Khomeini for more power. This led to exile first in France and subsequently in Iraq. Saddam Hussein gave financial, military and logistical support to the group and used it during his war with Iran and then to suppress Kurdish and Shiite uprisings in March 1991, thereby guaranteeing his grip on power.

First welcomed in the early 1980s by western governments for its opposition to the revolutionary government of Iran, the MKO's violent and mercenary behaviour, which led to thousands of civilian deaths in Iran during its terrorist campaigns, led to its proscription as a terrorist entity. Following a report commissioned by the US State Department in 1994 the group was added to the US terror list in 1997. The UK proscribed the group in 2000, the EU in 2002, and Canada in 2005. In May 2005 Human Rights Watch published a report titled 'No Exit' detailing human rights abuses carried out by the organization against its own members. The incarceration of dissenters in Abu Ghraib prison was made possible by the full integration of the MKO in Saddam Hussein's security apparatus; well before 1991 the MKO had become Saddam's private army.

In anticipation of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Massoud Rajavi told MKO combatants they would launch an all-out attack on Iran. An operation announced as 'the black phase'. Instead, he escaped into hiding and in April 2003 agreed a ceasefire with US Special Forces. By June, Rajavi submitted to the US demand that his fighters completely disarm. All MKO members in Iraq were corralled into Camp Ashraf and have remained there since that time as prisoners under the protection of US military police aided by a Bulgarian unit.

The MKO remain at risk of revenge attacks by Iraqis. In spite of this threat, Massoud Rajavi has insisted that the active MKO members remain in uniform in Camp Ashraf and has resisted all humanitarian efforts to help them move or even to have members with residence rights in western countries brought to safety. Rajavi's perverse insistence that the MKO be treated only as a whole entity and not as individuals and the fact that, ostensibly, the group presented no trouble, discouraged the American army from disturbing the status quo. American soldiers continue to protect a group which its own State Department has proscribed as a foreign terrorist entity, but which some in the west regard as a possible bargaining chip against Iran.

Currently, according to US figures, there are around 3,360 active MKO members remaining at Camp Ashraf in Iraq's Diyali province. There are now 109 people in the Temporary International Protection Facility (TIPF) adjacent to Camp Ashraf who have left the MKO and are seeking refugee status and removal to third countries. Over 100 were turned out of TIPF in December 2007 and have met with an uncertain situation described later in this report. The US-led MNF also says 380 former MKO have accepted voluntary repatriation and have been helped by the ICRC and Iraqi Ministry of Human Rights to return to their families in Iran.

Now however, after five years, the Iraqi Government is insistent that the MKO be removed in totality from Iraqi territory. In spite of claims by the MKO in western circles that it has renounced violence, Iraq's Ministry of Defence says there is no doubt the group is involved in ongoing violence in the country. A solution to deal with the group has become more urgent.

The legal status of the MKO combatants in Camp Ashraf is somewhat unclear. In 2004 the American army granted the MKO 'protected persons' status under the Fourth Geneva Convention.

According to a report by Robert Karniol, Defence Writer of the Straits Times, on February 4, the UN Fourth Convention Article 133 states that "'internment shall cease as soon as possible after the close of hostilities'."

"The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) maintains that the Iraq war ended with the transfer of sovereignty to the country's interim government in June 2004, with the fighting since then characterised as 'an internal conflict internationalised by the presence of multilateral forces'."

"Neither the active MEK members nor the former MEK refugees are being detained," said Major Danielson [MNF spokesman]. 'The Ashraf refugee camp refugees have every right to depart and travel in Iraq using an Iraqi-issued laissez-passer. They can also repatriate to Iran if they desire, or they may stay in the camp.'"

However, it is not only Massoud Rajavi's insistence that his combatants wait in Camp Ashraf to be re-armed which blocks moves to deal with them. Since every major western country has proscribed the MKO as a terrorist group, it is virtually impossible to find a safe haven for the group outside Iraq.

The Straits Times report continues, *"They are definitely in a legal limbo. No one wants them," said Mr Said Boumedouha, a researcher at Amnesty International in London.*"

"The US State Department's 2007 report said the MKO maintains "the capacity and will to commit terrorist acts in Europe, the Middle East, the United States, Canada and beyond."

"The report notes the MKO's "cult-like characteristics," such that "new members are indoctrinated in MEK ideology and revisionist Iranian history [and] required to ... participate in weekly 'ideological cleansings.'" "Children are separated from their parents, it adds, and Mrs. Rajavi "has established a 'cult of personality.'"

"According to Said Boumedouha of Amnesty International, 'Our position is that they shouldn't be returned to Iran due to the fear of torture and the death penalty. And they shouldn't be handed over to Iraq for the same reason. Their immediate future looks bleak.'"

However, events in Iraq are unfolding which make it imperative for western countries to address this issue.

Why the MKO must leave Iraq

In December 2007 unconfirmed reports arose indicating uncertainty over the future of Camp Ashraf. It is understood that the original owner on whose land the camp is sited, who fled Iraq under Saddam Hussein, has returned to Iraq with title deeds and has now achieved a court order demanding that his land, part of which was illegally gifted to the MKO by the former Iraqi dictator to build their military base, be evacuated and returned to him in its entirety.

Although this has not been confirmed, subsequent events appear to verify this news. In December US military police began removing people from the Temporary International Protection Facility. Visitors to the camp were also told by military police that the TIPF would be closing in six months' time.

In January 2008 officials of the Iraqi Government invited Massoud Khodabandeh of Iran-Interlink to a series of meetings in Baghdad where the issue of how to deal with foreign terrorist groups in Iraq was being addressed by various agencies.

As a result of these meetings Mr Khodabandeh has reported that the Iraqi Government is united and determined in its demand that the MKO be removed in its entirety from Iraqi territory. In this respect, no differentiation is made between active or former members of the group. The Iraqi Government regards the MKO as a terrorist entity which is still attached to the Ba'athist remnants of Saddam Hussein's regime. Requests to the Americans since 2004 to remove the group have not produced any result. The government is now taking the matter into its own hands and will deal with the group on its own terms.

Major Danielson has said that 'they [the MKO] are not charged with criminal offences', however this situation has now changed. The Iraqi Government has passed the case of the MKO to the Judiciary which is pursuing legal action against the whole group. Three separate judges have already issued arrest warrants against three leading members in Camp Ashraf. As the sovereign government of the country it is expected that American forces will comply with its legal rulings in relation to the MKO.

Mr Khodabandeh said, 'In each of the meetings I attended, I put to the Iraqis a proposal which I believe is the only realistic and humanitarian way forward for the people trapped in Camp Ashraf, and this was universally welcomed. It is time now for all security and humanitarian agencies in Iraq to stop prevaricating, to work together and to adopt a realistic plan in order to act on this situation and resolve it to the advantage of all parties.'

This report seeks to describe the situation and offer what can be the only possible workable solution which will assure a safe and secure future for the people in Camp Ashraf.

What is Camp Ashraf

Camp Ashraf is situated northeast of the Iraqi town of Khalis in Diyali province, 60 kilometers north of Baghdad and about 20 kilometers west of the border with Iran.

Along with at least six other sites in Iraq, Camp Ashraf was given to the MKO as a headquarters and training site by Saddam Hussein. From this base, the Iraqi military equipped the MKO with tanks, artillery and armored personnel carriers. Since 1983, the group has conducted operations against Iran during the Iran-Iraq War and later conducted operations against Iraqi Kurds during the 1991 uprising against Saddam. Before 2003 it was the base from which terrorist operations against Iran and inside Iraq have been planned and directed.

Named after Ashraf Rabiee a leading political prisoner under the Shah, the camp's vital function since 1986 has been as the main ideological training base for both members and supporters of the Iranian Mojahedin-e Khalq Organisation (MKO). The base is still used for the MKO's military and ideological training.

Following the March 2003 invasion of Iraq the base came under bombardment by American forces. After some initial resistance, with fifty fatalities on the MKO side, all MKO personnel were rounded up and corralled in Camp Ashraf. Over 3800 members were recorded. The MKO leader, Massoud Rajavi fled and went into hiding as American Special Forces attacked. He now issues his directives to the MKO members in Iraq and in western countries from a secret hideaway. In the months leading up to the invasion, a few hundred MKO members had been hastily transferred to Europe where they remain today. Among them was Massoud Rajavi's lieutenant, Maryam Rajavi, who was arrested in France in June 2003 and is awaiting trial on terrorism related charges. Maryam Rajavi provides the MKO's acceptable western front. She heads Rajavi's deception campaigns in western political and media circles.

At present, within the boundaries of Camp Ashraf is Forward Operating Base Grizzly (formerly FOB Spartan, FOB Red Lion and FOB Barbarian). The FOB is where the Coalition forces reside. The Bulgarian Army is currently running the Temporary International Presence Facility, where refugees who defect from the PMOI are held.

Inside Camp Ashraf itself the MKO leadership continues to maintain control through its harsh cult methodology which denies all the members their basic human rights. The group retains its military structure with uniformed members undergoing both military and ideological training regimes.

Organisationally the chief characteristics of the Mojahedin-e Khalq organisation are that:

- it uses psychological coercion and manipulation to recruit, indoctrinate and retain its members
- it forms an elitist totalitarian society
- its leader is self-appointed, autocratic, messianic, not accountable and has charisma
- it believes 'the end justifies the means' in order to solicit funds, recruit people, deceive potential supporters and to achieve political power
- its wealth does not benefit either the members or society

Even though he is in hiding, Massoud Rajavi continues as the sole decision maker for the group. He continues to espouse the use of violence to achieve his political aims. The MKO's stated aim is to overthrow the Iranian regime in its entirety (that is removal of the system of Velayat Faghi) and replace it with Rajavi's system of government with him as the country's leader.

MKO personnel are indoctrinated at Camp Ashraf in the group's ideology which involves submitting to the total, lifelong leadership of Massoud Rajavi. The MKO accept no other legal or moral law than that determined by Massoud Rajavi, and they submit without question to his dictates. According to Rajavi's ideology he demands total obedience, members must forswear marriage and children, they must be willing to die or kill on demand. Under these conditions the only reasonable deduction which can be made is that anyone who has been indoctrinated in Camp Ashraf is owned by Massoud Rajavi. He has devised the term 'living martyrs' to describe the relationship of members to him. It means that members have effectively handed their 'life' to Rajavi to use and dispose of as he will.

The absolute value of Camp Ashraf to Massoud Rajavi is its guaranteed isolation. Members in the camp have no contact with the outside world. The camp is an essential element in controlling the behaviour and beliefs of the members. For this reason Rajavi has resisted any and all efforts to have the MKO re-located on any grounds, whether security or humanitarian. Individuals who have residence rights in western countries were instructed by Rajavi to refuse help and to demand that the group be treated as a whole entity and not as individual members. The continued wearing of military uniform reinforces this group identity.

Although the MKO combatants in Camp Ashraf enjoy some of the highest living standards in Iraq, the health, morale and wellbeing of camp residents has deteriorated progressively over the past five years. People who left the camp via TIPF have reported rape, fighting, murder and suspicious suicides taking place as residents struggle with the severe restrictions imposed by the MKO leaders. The head of Military Intelligence of Bulgaria was quoted by Fars News as saying that during 2007 the Bulgarian unit has had to deal with fourteen serious clashes in Camp Ashraf, describing them as "due to the unrest of the detainees over the years" while stressing that there was no threat to the Bulgarian soldiers.

The residents in Camp Ashraf were severely demoralized from the beginning of their capture when their leader Massoud Rajavi abandoned them and went into hiding instead of ordering the all-out attack on Iran which he had promised them. The sheer cowardice of this act has had irreversible effects on the group.

If we argue that in general terms terrorism needs both 'form' and 'content' together in order to come into being, then in this case, Camp Ashraf represents the form, or container, for Rajavi's group. The content is his ideology of hatred and violence. If the form is removed, then no matter what is in the minds of the individuals, they will not go on to perform terrorism. It is like taking the gun from their hands.

What is happening at TIPF

When the MKO combatants were forcibly disarmed and confined to Camp Ashraf by US Special Forces in 2003 they were subsequently interviewed by FBI and military interrogators. Fingerprints and DNA samples were taken and ID cards were issued. During the course of these interviews several individuals expressed their wish to leave the MKO. The US army was obliged to establish a Temporary International Presence Facility (TIPF) alongside Camp Ashraf to house anyone who wanted to leave the MKO.

Both the residents of Camp Ashraf and the TIPF are guarded to protect them from revenge attacks by Kurdish and other Iraqis whose knowledge of the MKO is as part of Saddam Hussein's repressive apparatus. Inside Camp Ashraf itself the MKO leadership continues to maintain control. The methodology of this control includes strict gender segregation, obligatory daily 'cleansing' reports and submitting to a micro-managed lifestyle including the denial of any external information. This state of affairs is what American and Bulgarian soldiers have been protecting for almost five years.

Over these five years several hundred people have left Camp Ashraf to take refuge with the Americans. As its tight grip on the members came under threat with each defection, the MKO response was to frighten its members with tales of rape and abuse by US soldiers if they ended up in TIPF.

The group has sent infiltrators into TIPF to try to control the atmosphere (aimed at discouraging people from going back to Iran) and also to direct US military police behaviour toward the group. In addition, conditions in TIPF until very recently were very basic with tents and US army rations for both soldiers and those who left the MKO. Camp Ashraf provides a standard of living which is excellent in comparison with air conditioned buildings, plentiful good food, plumbed bathrooms and a range of leisure facilities.

The refusal of the US army to make conditions outside Camp Ashraf better than conditions inside the MKO run camp has led to accusations that the intention has been to give leverage to the MKO leaders to keep people in the terrorist organisation. Indeed, the MKO has created its own 'Exit' unit to house around 200 people inside Camp Ashraf. These are people who have left the MKO but who, due to MKO pressure, are too afraid to go to TIPF and so remain under MKO hegemony.

Under the terms of protected persons status of the Fourth Geneva Convention detainees are not to be forcibly deported or repatriated. However, the US military reports that from TIPF, 380 have accepted voluntary repatriation and have been helped by Iraq's Ministry of Human Rights and the International Committee of the Red Cross to be reunited with their families.

Some 208 former members, who remained in TIPF because they did not wish to go to Iran, asked for UN refugee status and transfer to third countries. However, with the huge demand on the UN and aid agencies to deal with massive internal displacement and Iraqi refugees, nothing has been accomplished to find places for them.

TIPF to close in six months

In January 2008, a senior Iraqi official appeared on Alaraghieh television explaining that the original owner of the land on which Camp Ashraf has been constructed has been granted permission by an Iraqi court to re-possess his land – land which had originally been illegally confiscated by Saddam Hussein and gifted to the MKO. The owner has been told that his land will be returned to him in six months. This will mean that both the TIPF and the whole of Camp Ashraf must be evacuated of personnel – whether American, Bulgarian or Iranian – within the next six months.

This news shed light on events which began in December 2007 when US Military Police began a process of emptying TIPF. Visitors to the camp say they were told by American soldiers that TIPF would be closing in six months' time. They were told that the TIPF might possibly be moved to Mosel in Kurdistan, but this did not happen.

According to those who left TIPF in December, US military police told them they were free to leave and in fact could not stay as the camp was being dismantled. One group refused to leave at all and are still in the TIPF. The others were taken at intervals in small groups of up to five to a roadside some short distance away. They were filmed to prove they were alive and healthy and then left to make their own way. They were given American issued 'laissez-passer' which they were told would facilitate their exit from Iraq. However these papers did not allow anyone to travel south toward Baghdad and they were forced to move north. Those who arrived in Arbil managed to get some papers from the Kurdish regional government which allowed them to remain in the city. But these papers were taken away by local police after a short time. They now have no papers except American issued ID cards.

The Iraqi Ministry of National Security said it does not recognize the papers given to the former TIPF residents, and that if found outside the camp, they would be arrested and imprisoned for belonging to a foreign terrorist group.

Scott Peterson of the Christian Science Magazine who has been following the MKO's situation reported on February 11, *"About 100 tried to leave Iraq, some of them carrying US military letters for travel to Turkey. Documents of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees show that at one point in their saga nearly two weeks ago, 19 were turned back to Iraq by Turkey, dozens were picked up in Kurdish northern Iraq and some forced to return to the dangers of central Iraq, and 26 were missing."*

Other reports state that one man was shot and wounded by border police and is now in hospital in Arbil the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan. Amnesty International said it was alerted to six individuals in prison in Turkey. They were not returned to Iraq.

There are now 109 remaining in TIPF.

Humanitarian intervention

During his trip to Iraq, Massoud Khodabandeh intervened with Iraqi Government officials with a rescue plan for these people. After talks with Iraq's Ministry of Human Rights, officials agreed to set up an NGO which would provide accommodation and food for those Iranians who had left the MKO but who, since the Americans were closing TIPF, did not have anywhere to go. The organisation – named Sahar Family Foundation – quickly set up a network of places to which the former TIPF people could go, including Baghdad and Arbil.

Mr Khodabandeh then visited the TIPF near Khales in Diyali province to inform the remaining people that he would provide safe passage from the camp to a place where they could stay until it was possible to send them to another country. Three people immediately accepted this offer of help. More have since followed. But this is an interim measure designed to rescue those removed from TIPF and who reject MKO membership. It does not of course address the main issue which is to find a place of safety for all the residents of Camp Ashraf.

Concerned observers have pointed out the error in the logistics of closing TIPF before the problem of relocating people from Camp Ashraf has been resolved. TIPF represented the only way individuals could escape the clutches of the MKO hierarchy. It is only fair to allow people somewhere to escape to rather than be treated as Massoud Rajavi's chattels.

It is intended that the newly created NGO Sahar Family Foundation will replace the function of TIPF in providing a safety net for those who want to leave the MKO. Once they are safe they can then be helped either to go home to their families or to find a third country in which to take refuge.

Consultation meetings

On January 31, 2008 Massoud Khodabandeh attended a Symposium at the Centre for International and Inter-governmental Studies of the University of Baghdad.

The Symposium, a round table discussion centred on the issue of terrorism in Iraq and possible solutions to this problem, was divided into 3 parts:

- the general threat posed by terrorist groups and the ways they operate in Iraq
- foreign terrorist organisations in Iraq
- the creation of terrorist organisations in Iraq and the global supporters of these terrorist groups

Participants of the Symposium included Dr. Aziz Jabar Shayal, Dr. Samir Alshweely and Dr. Rasheed Saleh, professors of Political Studies from the University of Baghdad. Several governmental and non-governmental representatives from a wide range of ministries and NGOs, including representatives from Iraq's Ministries of Defence, Human Rights and Security participated.

Massoud Khodabandeh, who is also a researcher with the Centre de Recherches sur le Terrorisme depuis le 11 septembre 2001 (Paris), and who was in Baghdad for meetings concerning the fate of the remaining individuals following dismantlement of Camp Ashraf which houses the disarmed Iranian terrorist organisation Mojahedin Khalq Organisation, was invited to participate in the discussion.

Prominent among the participants was Mr. Bassam Alhassani, advisor to Prime Minister Noori Al Maleki.

The Symposium ended with a full report on the issues discussed and Dr. Aziz Jabar Shayal delivered the concluding resolution in which one paragraph emphasized the necessity for the dismantlement and deportation of the foreign terrorist Mojahedin Khalq organisation and encouragement and facilitation by the government and others to help the remaining individuals find a safe palace outside Iraq and return to normal life.

The Symposium was covered by media representatives who reported from the meeting room.

Alaraghieh television, Iraq's main TV network, reported the Symposium and broadcast a brief interview with Massoud Khodabandeh.

In the interview, Massoud Khodabandeh emphasised above all the right of the Iraqi people to enjoy security and have justice served against the perpetrators of violent acts in their country, in particular the criminal heads of the terrorist Mojahedin-e Khalq organisation which was involved in the massacre of the Kurdish and Shiite uprisings against Saddam Hussein in March 1991. Mr Khodabandeh said that in his belief and according to the studies of the Centre de Recherches sur le Terrorisme, the phenomenon of terrorism cannot have a single solution and needs inter governmental cooperation as well as the involvement of NGOs to protect the human rights of those who have been inveigled by terrorist leaders onto this path, and to give them a second chance of integration back into their societies.

Thanking the organisers of the Symposium Mr Khodabandeh emphasised the cult culture of terrorist organisations and the methods they use to brainwash their followers. He also gave examples of foreign support by some influential groups and parties who facilitate the flow of finance for terrorism. Not the least the relationship between the remainders of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, London, Washington and other countries with the Mojahedin Khalq Organisation, and the way this relationship is becoming clear in the escalation of violence in Diyali province.

The Symposium lasted for over two hours. Afterwards the participants formed smaller groups to further discuss the variety of issues raised by the Seminar.

Results of consultation in Iraq

Massoud Khodabandeh of Iran-Interlink was invited to Iraq by the office of Prime Minister Noori Al Maleki for a series of consultations on the problem of foreign linked terrorism in the country.

The Iraqi Government is seeking a rapid and thorough solution to remove the remaining members of Mojahedin-e Khalq from Iraq and shut down Camp Ashraf.

While in Iraq Mr Khodabandeh met with representatives of the Iraqi Ministries of Human Rights, Security, Foreign Affairs and Defence. He also had meetings with advisors to Prime Minister Al Maleki, the Judiciary, NGOs and human rights organisations currently in Iraq. Further meetings have been held with representatives of the Kurdish Patriotic Union and regional government representatives.

The following represents a summary of the findings of Mr Khodabandeh from these meetings. It must be stressed that no differentiation is made at all in the various views below between former and active members of the MKO.

Minister of Human Rights Vajdan Mikhael Salem's point of view: Under no circumstances can we accept the MKO (whether as a group or as individuals, whether before or after renouncing terrorism) to stay in Iraq. We do not recommend this because we know of their past and the danger posed by Iraqi Shiite and Kurds (revenge) to them. They are only alive in Iraq because of American protection for them. The Ministry will help in the transfer of individuals to Iran or other countries in conjunction with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The Ministry will also give guarantees about good treatment by Iran under the terms of an amnesty for returning MKO and, from its offices in Iran, regularly monitors the situation of those who have already accepted voluntary repatriation.

Ministry of National Security point of view: We have evidence of the co-operation between the remains of Saddam and Al Qaida with the MKO using Camp Ashraf as a meeting place to plot against the Iraqi people. They are part of the destabilization forces in Diyali province. These individuals are trained by Saddam's Republican Guard and if given freedom inside the country, they will be the core trainers for insurgents. This is not acceptable and therefore the American Army should find other alternatives for them outside Iraq.

(The National Security Minister Shirwan Al Va'eli has repeatedly insisted there is no place for any terrorist organisation in the new Iraq and that Iraq has and will continue to have full security co-operation with neighbouring countries including Iran, Kuwait and etc, in order to eliminate the threats of terrorism in the region. Minister Shirwan Al Va'eli has stressed that he is talking with the Prime Minister and the Minister of Defence to expand Iraq's cooperation with other countries to fight terrorist networks and in this respect some workshops have already begun.)

Foreign Affairs Ministry point of view: The MKO and PKK are foreign terrorist organisations. They are especially harmful to the relations between Iraq and its neighbouring countries at this point of time. Iraq cannot accept nor afford further problems by accommodating international terrorist organisations whether as a group or as individuals.

Advisor to the Prime Minister's point of view: The MKO is the tip of the anti-Iraqi forces still in Iraq. They are responsible for the massacre of Kurds and Shiites and they should be handed over to the Iraq Judiciary to bring them to justice. The fate of the MKO (and other remains of Saddam who are wanted for war crimes and crimes against humanity) is a matter for Iraq and the US should hand them over.

Judiciary point of view: There are already claims against the heads of this organisation (about 150 individuals). There are arrest warrants as recent as a few weeks ago for crimes committed in the last few months by MKO heads (Abbas Davari, the political liaison of MKO in Camp Ashraf, Mozghan Parsaii, Commander of Rajavi's army in Iraq and Sediqeh Hoseini, Secretary General of the MKO). There are several ongoing investigations into the deeds of MKO leaders against Iraqi people. The Judiciary should investigate all of these and then decide who is to be deported and who is to be brought to justice.

UNHCR: (Ms Hanieh Mofti refused to accept a meeting with me or any of the families of those trapped in Camp Ashraf, although she travels regularly to Camp Ashraf for private meetings and dinner parties with the heads of the terrorist organisation.) As far as I could ascertain, Ms Mofti is sympathetic to the MKO's demand that all its members should be given refugee status in Iraq but not under the jurisdiction of the Iraqi Government. They should continue to be protected as a [uniformed military] group in Iraq but without the permission of the Iraqi Government.

[We must assume that refugee status can only be given to individuals and not to an army. In this case, perhaps Ms Mofti must wait for the US army to take the military uniforms from these people and then treat them as individuals according UNHCR rules.]

Amnesty International and other Human Rights organisations' point of view: MKO members should not be given to Iran, nor should they be given to Iraq because of the insecurity of human rights and the death penalty in those countries. MKO members need to be given humanitarian protection (not indemnity from prosecution for crimes) meaning that they will certainly need to be taken to third countries.

American Army point of view: No official view was made. However, after 5 years the army is apparently still prevaricating about US policies against terrorism. (Certainly the US army's ambiguous approach is widely perceived as facilitating terrorism in the region.) Actual behaviour of the US army toward internees at Camp Ashraf can only be interpreted as tacit approval for the group's continued existence and activities. (Camp Ashraf is used to host meetings of Diyali tribal leaders loyal to the Baathists).

The point of view of the Centre for International and Inter-governmental Studies of the University of Baghdad: (from the report of the symposium and according to their announcement and recommendation to the Iraqi Government) MKO individuals have to be helped by western countries. They should not be kept in Iraq for the good of people of Iraq and their own good. The group should be dismantled by US and UK forces before transfer outside Iraq. The main support for the group comes from London, Washington and Tel Aviv and the Mojahedin should be transferred to these places with the help of their backers.

Families of MKO members

When the interim Iraqi government assumed control of Iraq in June 2004, the internees in Camp Ashraf were granted protected persons status under the Fourth Geneva Convention. After years of forced [by Rajavi] estrangement, the families of people trapped in Camp Ashraf began to hope that they could at last get some news of their relatives there.

The Fourth Geneva Convention of course protects the internees from forced repatriation. Instead the families risked their lives to travel to Iraq from all over the world in the hopes of meeting a son or daughter, mother, father, wife, husband, brother or sister. Some families had not seen their relatives for over twenty years. Some were not even sure if they were still alive.

Such family visits were undertaken according to the rights established under Chapter VIII which deals with external relations of detainees, in particular Article 116 which states: 'Every internee shall be allowed to receive visitors, especially near relatives, at regular intervals and as frequently as possible'.

Article 8 also clearly states: 'Protected persons may in no circumstances renounce in part or in entirety the rights secured to them by the present Convention...'

But from the beginning the visiting families met resistance. For four years it has been almost impossible for anyone to visit their relative without the presence of MKO minders who overshadow the families to prevent free association or conversation. Even where families travelled to Iraq after taking legal advice and procuring legal documents outlining their right to have free and unfettered access to their relative, they have been unable to secure such meetings. Unfortunately, in some cases families have been turned away by American military police, acting presumably on orders from MKO commanders to refuse access.

This latter state of affairs has been experienced by so many families that there is no doubt in anyone's mind that the American soldiers are taking their instructions from the MKO rather than vice versa. There is no reason whatsoever – legal, moral or for security – that these families should be denied these visits. In one case a UK resident family was told by an American soldier to contact the MKO in Britain (where of course it is proscribed so that this action of itself would be illegal) and to ask the group to arrange a visit, including a stay in the MKO controlled Camp Ashraf. This family were left wondering what the legal ramifications would be if they had followed this advice, would they be allowed entry back into the UK without arrest for contacting a terrorist entity in the UK and visiting a terrorist training camp?

Where such obstacles are overcome and visits do take place due to the sheer courage and persistence of families who turn up at the gate of Camp Ashraf and refuse to leave, the conditions of the visit do not meet even a minimum standard expected under the Fourth Geneva Convention or indeed under any human rights legislation.

Families are harassed, insulted, physically assaulted and repeatedly accused of being 'agents of the mullahs' regime' sent to undermine the MKO's struggle for democracy and human rights in Iran. Among the most recent cases of a family's attempt to meet relatives was the Mohammady family from Canada. This was their ninth visit to Iraq in an attempt to visit their daughter Somayeh who was taken to Camp Ashraf some years ago when she was seventeen years old. Mr Mostafa and Mrs Mahboubeh Mohammady spent three months in Iraq and saw their daughter for only 45 minutes.

This time the parents were allowed to stay in a bungalow in the US part of Camp Ashraf for three days. On December 8, after constant requests to the Americans, they were able to meet with their daughter, Somayeh, for 45 minutes. Somayeh was afraid to speak to her father stating 'he is an agent of the Iranian Intelligence Ministry', but did talk to her mother.

On the morning of December 9 the American soldiers in charge of TIFP asked the Mohammady family to leave the camp since they had met with their daughter. The Americans escorted them to the gates and let them out while still watching them from behind their gates. As Camp Ashraf is located in a deserted area with the closest road and public transport some kilometers away, the Mohammadays began walking. Suddenly they were confronted by a group of MKO who pretended to be passing drivers and who offered them a lift.

Based on their prior knowledge and experiences of the MKO, Mr Mohammady and his wife refused their offer and kept walking towards the main road. At this point, the MKO grabbed Mrs Mohammady by force and pushed her into the car in an attempted kidnap. At the same time Mr Mohammady was defending himself against their physical attacks and also trying to secure their bags since their assailants were slashing them with knives and managed to break open their camera trying to remove the memory card by knife. When Mr Mohammady started shouting for help one of the MKO guys pulled a gun from under the driver's seat and put it to his head.

Realizing the seriousness of the situation the American soldiers who were watching from a short distance intervened to rescue them and later arranged for a safe ride to Baghdad. Upon arrival in Baghdad Mr and Mrs Mohammady received medical attention for their injuries and began legal action against the leaders of the MKO for the damages incurred by their family, including this latest assault.

The result was that the Baghdad Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for the three leading MKO members in Camp Ashraf - additional to two existing arrest warrants for each of the three which had previously been issued by two other courts.

In February two more families experienced disturbing meetings with relatives. Ali Bashiri and his daughter traveled from Norway with legal papers demanding a visit with the girl's mother. When Mr Bashiri went to the US embassy in Baghdad with papers drawn up by a Norwegian lawyer he was expelled. Eventually he and his daughter got to see the mother in the presence of MKO minders. The mother did not come closer than three metres and only swore viciously at her daughter before leaving.

In another case, Mr Reza Akbari Nasab traveled to Camp Ashraf to ask for the body of his nephew Yaser who died there last year so the family could bury him in Iran. Mr Akbari Nasab told Alaraghieh television:

"I went to the American Camp at Ashraf and asked to meet my brother and his son, I also asked them to let me go to my nephew's tomb and see the documents of his death.

"The American officials told me to make my request to the MKO authorities [sic]. During the hours I was waiting for my beloved ones the American soldiers and officials hosted me in a courteous manner.

"I was enjoying the friendly atmosphere of the American camp which had decreased the pressure on me when a man carrying a file came over shouting at me: "why have you come here?"

"He was speaking Persian angrily so I didn't recognize him. But he was no other than my kind and lovely brother, Morteza!

"He was carrying a file which he said contained my writings on the death of Yaser. He actually threatened me that he would hand them to the Americans since I had written some polite criticisms of the American officials.

"I told him sympathetically: "you may be right, but let's have a short talk which is something normal in any political organization". But he didn't accept and he didn't even let me get closer than 3 meters.

"My former kind brother insulted me in front of the American soldiers. My nephew Musa didn't get permission to visit me since he is a German citizen and the Mojahedin were afraid. The Americans didn't answer my questions simply and to answer my claim that the MKO members are manipulated they just said that it's not their responsibility!

"They didn't let me visit the tomb of Yaser either.

"I expected more of American democracy.

"While leaving, I told the American lieutenant: 'you are developing a new Al-Qaida.'"

There are many families like the Mohammadys, Bashiris and Akbari Nasabs, who refuse to give up on their relatives trapped in Camp Ashraf. But they have limited resources. Following a meeting with Massoud Khodabandeh who explained the situation in detail, the Iraqi Ministry of Human Rights pledged to help by supporting a newly formed non-governmental organization called Sahar Family Foundation which will provide help to the visiting families and to MKO members who leave the organization in Iraq.

Sahar Family Foundation has already established a network of safe accommodation in several towns, including Baghdad, to house the individuals who were removed from TIPF in December 2007. In January, three others left TIPF to take refuge with the group.

Sahar Family Foundation statement

The Sahar (Dawn) Family Foundation is a non-governmental, non-political and non-profitable organisation which has been established to provide humanitarian aid to the families of members of the Mojahedin-e Khalq Organisation (MKO) who are based in Camp Ashraf in Iraq. This foundation is solely focused on charitable and human rights issues regardless of political or group considerations and geographical boundaries and only aims to help the suffering families.

The Sahar Family Foundation covers a great number of families as well as former members of the MKO who seek help. This foundation enjoys good support amongst the local and international bodies in Iraq which is the base of the foundation.

The MKO has been based in Iraq, precisely in Camp Ashraf, for more than two decades. This organisation is run as a classic cult and therefore would not give its members the chance of free association with the outside world or with their families. Therefore the families of these members are suffering severely and seek assistance from humanitarian organisations.

When the former regime of Iraq was toppled, a small light of hope lit the hearts of the families and they thought that, in the new situation in Iraq, they would be able to visit their beloved ones freely and adequately without the presence of a third party. Some of these families have not heard from their relatives for more than 20 years and some even don't know if their beloved ones are still safe and sound. According to these families those who are residing in Camp Ashraf – as is the case with many cults throughout the world – are considered to be captives both mentally and physically and therefore are assumed as hostages. The Sahar Family Foundation is striving to reunite the members of these families again using every possible means.

Camp Ashraf is the base of the MKO members which is guarded by US forces in Iraq. On the other hand the present Iraqi government insists that Camp Ashraf must be dismantled. Iraqi constitutional law does not permit any foreign terrorist organisations to remain in that country. The US State Department as well as that of Canada, along with the European Union and the British parliament and many other governmental and international bodies have officially designated the MKO as a destructive and terrorist cult. Obviously the members of a cult and their families are considered to be the prime victims who must be helped. In May 2005 Human Rights Watch published a report called 'No Exit' which details human rights abuses meted out by the MKO against its own members.

At the present time Baghdad is the central meeting point for the misfortunate families and the former members, as well as concerned entities who are all waiting for the crack of dawn. They seek help from humanitarian bodies throughout the world. Anyone can help a little. On the other hand, of course, Camp Ashraf, according to many international security professionals, is a centre for training terrorists. The families are concerned about the fate of their children who are subjected to brainwashing and terrorist training.

Please contact us. We would be more than pleased to have your comments and ideas. Help us in any way you can. The members of Sahar Family Foundation are all volunteers who have moved to Iraq to work in the difficult situation of that country merely to gain family reunions.

Conclusion

When the regime of Saddam Hussein came to an end, 3,800 members of the Mojahedin-e Khalq organisation were bombarded, captured and disarmed by US Special Forces in Iraq and confined to Camp Ashraf.

Five years on the American military must be given full credit for the excellent job it has performed in containing the MKO in Iraq and keeping the people secure. Dealing with a dangerous, destructive cult is not an easy task. It is widely acknowledged that the American forces are perhaps the only ones who could do this, particularly in the violent and chaotic conditions of Iraq.

But the situation has now developed to the point at which urgent action must be taken to deal with the group. As this report has shown, the MKO can no longer stay in Iraq. The Iraqi Government has taken matters into its own hands and is pressing on with moves to prosecute and punish any MKO members the Judiciary can prove have been guilty of crimes against humanity and war crimes in Iraq, and to quickly remove all others. The whole organisation is at risk if it remains in Iraq.

Organisations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the International Committee of the Red Cross and others are absolutely clear that Iraq is not a place the MKO can stay. Indeed it presents perhaps the most dangerous place in the world for the group's members – even, as events with the TIPF people has shown, for the ones who have separated from the MKO. There should be no doubt at all that if the group does remain in Iraq and the Americans step back even a little from protecting it then there will be bloodshed and violence.

At this point in time, people are looking to the American Administration for leadership to resolve this problem. The MKO are prisoners and must be dealt with as such. It is expected that the American military will continue to garner the credit for dealing with the MKO and assist the efforts of human rights organizations, the families and the Iraqi Government rather than hinder them. The American Administration is facing a legal and moral dilemma which requires attention sooner rather than later.

In particular, does the American military intend to defy the Iraqi Judiciary when arrest warrants are served by not handing over the subjects? Will American soldiers continue to defy its moral and humanitarian obligations by continuing to repulse the families of MKO members who want only a private meeting with their relatives? Will American soldiers argue that they cannot bring MKO members the short distance from Camp Ashraf to Baghdad to meet a parent who has travelled thousands of miles to see them under the terms of protected persons status?

Sahar Family Foundation was established as an interim measure to help families of MKO trapped in Camp Ashraf and to help anyone who wants to leave. There should be no doubt that the existence of Sahar will increase and accelerate the defections from the MKO. Indeed this is already being seen. American soldiers can either help or hinder in this situation. The result will be the same but the credit for good action will go where it is due.

This however, does not address the fundamental problem of what to do with the active MKO members in Camp Ashraf. They must be given refuge somewhere and the only feasible place is in a western country. Currently MKO members in the camp exist in a kind of legal and moral limbo. While western governments are clear about the terrorist nature of the MKO in their own countries, none wants to take responsibility for what happens to the people in Iraq. Every major western government has proscribed the group as terrorist. No one wants them.

In Europe, efforts to de-proscribe the Mojahedin-e Khalq organisation have been led, particularly in the UK, by the neoconservatives in London, Washington and Tel Aviv. They argue that the Mojahedin has renounced violence. Until now, these powerful lobbies have evaded taking responsibility for or even acknowledging the humanitarian crisis looming over the people in Camp Ashraf. However, the value of this group for its supporters is that it represents 'the largest Iranian opposition group' because of the number of active members. It makes sense to have those members safe rather than languishing in Iraqi jails. Supporters like the British Parliamentary Committee for Iran Freedom, chaired by Lord Corbett of Castle Vale, have a moral and political obligation to rescue exactly those people they have vigorously promoted as the means to bring democracy to Iran. The lives and rights of the MKO members in Camp Ashraf must be protected as a priority.

This is only possible if they are brought to safety in the west. As one Iraqi Minister said bluntly, "the western supporters of the MKO especially in the UK should keep their tools in their own closets!". Both Iraq and Iran see Europe as the final and perhaps only destination for the MEK. Transformed from an army into a civilian group, this would allow the active members who wish to do so, to continue with non-violent opposition to the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Certainly de-proscription of the MKO in the UK would enable Iraq to remove the MKO as a group and allow London to receive them individually as refugees. The resources which are currently used to maintain the camp in Iraq must also be transferred to support them in the UK. Of course, any members who wish to voluntarily repatriate to Iran should continue to be protected by existing guarantees by the Iraqi Ministry of Human Rights and the ICRC.

This is a rescue package which is workable and which will have the best outcome for Iraq, the UK and the 'Iranian Resistance' which says it has renounced violence. This solution provides a straightforward and humanitarian resolution to the so-far intractable problem of what to do with the group. Indeed, given the facts, it is probably the only solution.

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