

The Washington Post

washingtonpost.com

A Section

Iraq Intensifies Efforts to Expel Iranian Group; Though Labeled Terrorist, MEK Has Updated U.S. on Tehran's Nuclear Program

Ernesto Londono and Saad al-Izzi

Washington Post Staff Writers

1298 words

14 March 2007

The Washington Post

FINAL

A10

English

Copyright 2007, The Washington Post Co. All Rights Reserved

For three years, thousands of members of a militant group dedicated to overthrowing **Iran's** theocracy have lived in a sprawling compound north of Baghdad under the protection of the U.S. military.

American soldiers chauffeur top leaders of the group, known as the Mujaheddin-e Khalq, or MEK, to and from their compound, where they have hosted dozens of visitors in an energetic campaign to persuade the State Department to stop designating the group as a terrorist organization.

Now the Iraqi government is intensifying its efforts to evict the 3,800 or so members of the group who live in Iraq, although U.S. officials say they are in no hurry to change their policy toward the MEK, which has been a prime source of information about **Iran's** nuclear program.

The Iraqi government announced this week that roughly 100 members would face prosecution for human rights violations, a move MEK officials contend comes at the request of the Iranian government.

"We have documents, witnesses," Jaafar al-Moussawi, a top Iraqi prosecutor, said Monday, alleging that the MEK aided President Saddam Hussein's campaign to crush Shiite and Kurdish opposition movements at the end of the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Moussawi said the criminal complaint would implicate MEK members in "killing, torture, [wrongful] imprisonment and displacement."

The group denied involvement in Hussein's reprisals.

"These allegations are preposterous and lies made by the Iranian mullahs and repeated by their agents," it said in a statement issued this week.

The case highlights the occasional discord between the U.S. and Iraqi governments on matters related to **Iran**. While the U.S. government has accused **Iran** of supplying Iraqi Shiite militias with sophisticated weapons that it says have been used to kill American troops, Iraq's Shiite-led government has expanded commercial and diplomatic ties with its majority-Shiite neighbor.

"This organization has always destabilized the security situation" in Iraq, said Mariam Rayis, a top foreign affairs adviser to Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, adding that the MEK's continued presence "could lead to deteriorating the relationship with neighboring countries."

MEK leaders dispute the prosecutor's allegations. They contend that **Iran** has infiltrated Iraq's political leadership while also supporting militant groups in an effort to keep the United States in a quagmire in Iraq. They also say

the Iranian government wants to forestall a U.S. attack on **Iran**.

"The Iranian regime wants very much to prevent the winds of change," Behzad Saffari, a spokesman for the group, said in a recent interview at a Baghdad hotel. "Instead of fighting the Americans in **Iran**, [the Iranian government] is fighting them in Iraq. If we have to leave Iraq, it means the Americans are defeated. It means **Iran** has prevailed."

Maliki told officials from neighboring countries during a meeting in Baghdad on Saturday that Iraq should not become a battleground where other nations attempt to settle their disputes.

The Iranian Embassy in Baghdad did not reply to questions about the MEK.

The MEK, also known as the People's Mujaheddin of **Iran**, was founded by students at Tehran University in 1965 as an opposition movement to Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the country's U.S.-backed dictator. The group clashed with that government and later with the Islamic Republic established by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1979.

In 1986, the MEK moved its headquarters to Iraq, where Hussein welcomed the organization. MEK fighters have been widely accused of backing Hussein's suppression of the Shiite and Kurdish uprisings, but MEK officials say Kurdish leaders have absolved them of playing a role in the crackdown on Kurds.

In 1997, during a period of warmer relations between Washington and Tehran under the Clinton administration, the State Department added the MEK to its list of foreign terrorist organizations.

The group's leader, Maryam Rajavi, lives in Paris. She has a cultlike following among members, some of whom set themselves on fire to protest her brief arrest in 2003 after French officials raided the group's offices. Rajavi has led efforts to have the group's terror label removed in the United States and Europe. In December, a European court overturned an E.U. order freezing the group's assets. The European Union has not removed the group from its terrorist list.

The MEK says it has several thousand members in **Iran**, but the extent of its support base is unclear. Most exiled members live in the camp at Ashraf, north of Baghdad.

After Hussein was toppled, the MEK agreed to turn over its weapons to U.S. military officials. In 2004, the U.S. military granted its members the status of "protected persons" under the Geneva Conventions and has since provided security for the camp.

Shortly after the camp was set up, FBI and State Department officials screened residents and found no evidence that would lead them to charge anyone with a crime.

A Washington Post special correspondent toured Camp Ashraf in January. It is a largely self-sufficient compound, and the majority of members haven't left in years. It has shops, a swimming pool, an ice cream store, a bakery and a soda factory that makes a cola- and orange-flavored drink locals call Ashraf Cola.

Last summer, Maliki gave the group six months to leave Iraq. Although the deadline has elapsed, Iraqi officials say they intend to expel the group after getting parliamentary approval.

MEK officers argue that their expulsion would be a violation of international law and have obtained a legal opinion to that effect from the U.N. refugee agency. They say they should be treated as refugees, not terrorists.

Lou Finton, the spokesman at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, said there has been no change in the government's position toward the MEK. A U.S. military spokesman in Iraq did not respond to questions about the MEK.

A senior U.S. military official who spoke on condition of anonymity said protecting the MEK was "not a big drain on our resources," adding, "This is a political problem between Iraq, **Iran** and the MEK."

If the group is expelled, it is unclear where Ashraf residents would go or what other country might take them. MEK leaders refuse to speak about such a scenario, reiterating that their expulsion would be illegal.

The leaders say they are a main source of intelligence on **Iran** and question why the United States keeps the

group on its terrorist list.

"All the important things that are talked about are things revealed by us," said Mohammad Mohaddessin chairman of the National Council of Resistance of **Iran**, the MEK's political arm, referring to information about **Iran's** nuclear ambitions and, more recently, the roadside bombs the United States says **Iran** has made available to insurgents in Iraq.

Moussawi, the Iraqi prosecutor, said the human rights case is not politically motivated. The issue of expulsion, which is not directly related to the pending criminal charges, is expected to come before the Iraqi parliament in coming weeks.

Some lawmakers have criticized Maliki for making the issue a priority at a time when Iraq is besieged by more serious problems.

"If you take it from a humanitarian side, I don't think they should leave until the situation can be resolved," Saleh al-Mutlak, a Sunni lawmaker, said in an interview. "It is surprising that the government of Iraq is giving such an order. This will only show that the Maliki government will obey **Iran's** orders."

Staff writer Ann Scott Tyson in Washington contributed to this report.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com> [<http://www.washingtonpost.com>]

WP20070314BAGHDAD14

Document WP00000020070314e33e0000y

© 2007 Factiva, Inc. All rights reserved.

