

Testimony of Amb. Lincoln P. Bloomfield, Jr. before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs,  
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations and Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia  
“Camp Ashraf: Iraqi Obligations and State Department Accountability,” December 7, 2011

My thanks to the Committee on Foreign Affairs for inviting me to testify today, and to the Chairman and Ranking Minority Member of each subcommittee for welcoming me to this hearing. It is an honor to be invited to testify to the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations and the Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia.

The focus of today’s hearing is the fate of 3,400 unarmed persons at Camp Ashraf, Iraq who may face imminent danger from Iraqi and Iranian forces. UN officials are working hard to uphold protocols and guidelines in seeking to resolve the status and future of these Iranian exiles as they would help any at-risk population. But the United States’ role is more complicated. For this is not a group of people without any connection to the US. Rather, it is a group of people belonging to an organization – the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK) – that our government lists as a Foreign Terrorist Organization and has long accused of heinous actions against America and patterns of behavior deemed despicable by civilized standards.

At the same time, it is a group of people who were targeted in 2003 by American forces in fulfillment of an assurance explicitly sought and received from US diplomats by the Iranian government at the negotiating table in Geneva prior to Operation Iraqi Freedom. I have been told that about 120 bombs were fired by the US on Camp Ashraf, killing 50 MEK personnel, even though, as the US Government later confirmed, the MEK were not belligerents in that conflict. US forces negotiated and signed a cease-fire agreement with MEK representatives at Camp Ashraf, removed all their weapons, facilitated individual investigative interviews with each resident by US law enforcement and intelligence personnel, collected signed contracts from each resident forswearing violence, and granted each resident a protected persons identity card. When the US handed control of Camp Ashraf over to Iraqi authorities in January 2009, the Commander of the US/Coalition Force, General Petraeus, sought and received assurances from the Iraqi government that the security of Camp Ashraf residents would continue to be guaranteed.

Nearly three years later, the readiness of the US to honor the pledge it made to uphold the security of Camp Ashraf’s residents is in serious doubt, as fatal attacks on Camp Ashraf’s residents by Iraqi armed forces trained and equipped by the United States have already occurred, in July 2009 and April 2011. Leaders and ministers of Iraq and Iran have made a very public bilateral agreement under which Iraq has committed to close Camp Ashraf by the end of 2011. Some in the US have questioned the legal judgments in Washington that formed the basis for the US military’s promise of security to Camp Ashraf residents in 2003; there have been suggestions that “protected persons” status is nothing more than a standard caution that military forces in combat should take care not to target civilians, including the entire population of Iraq. Still others have suggested that in any case, any such US obligation had its full effect only when the US was the occupying power in Iraq, and certainly did not carry over past the turnover of sovereign control to Iraq at the end of 2008.

I am here today to place these issues, and the related subject of Iran and the MEK, in a substantially different light than the narratives offered by the government and the American media. I do this with one purpose in mind: to help ensure that America's reputation and standing are enhanced, not diminished, by our handling of the drawdown of forces in Iraq and our posture toward Iran going forward.

I do not claim professional expertise on Iran, having never traveled to Iran and not having the ability to speak or read Farsi. However, Iran's actions have continuously touched my career, from the 1979 revolution itself to the 1983 Marine bombing, hostage-taking and similar terrorist actions in Lebanon in the 1980s, to the arms-for-hostages scandal, to the Argentina terror bombings, the mining of the Persian Gulf by Iran and reflagging of Kuwaiti tankers by the US, the accidental US shoot-down of the Iran Air flight, the role of Iranian irregular forces in helping Saddam Hussein smuggle oil out of Iraq in violation of UN resolutions, the rise of Hizballah and the facilitating role of Syria, the growing missile and rocket threat to Israel from Lebanon and Gaza, Iran's support to elements feeding instability in Iraq, Bahrain and Yemen, and of course its provocative quest for a nuclear weapons capability in violation of its international obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Like many Middle East experts, I have always had some awareness of the MEK – an entity that has been around for nearly 50 years and been on the US list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations for the past 14 years. But I only began to develop real knowledge about the MEK this year, when Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP, a law firm where I serve as a part-time consultant, began representing an American citizens' group seeking to have the MEK removed from the terrorism list. I am not a lobbyist and have not advocated a policy position relative to the MEK.

Instead, beginning this past spring, I have examined what the government, the press and outside commentators were saying about this group, and investigated the factual basis for those claims. For many years, very negative things have been said over and over again about the MEK – that it killed Americans in Iran in the 1970s and participated in the prolonged seizure of the American Embassy; that it was a combatant against American forces in Iraq, and helped Saddam Hussein's forces with their bloody suppression of the 1991 Kurdish and Shi'a uprisings; that it is a serial abuser of its own members' human rights – a secretive cult; and that it is committed to violent, anti-American, anti-democratic beliefs, no matter what it says. The two main themes are that the MEK has always been, and remains, a terrorist group by nature; and that it is universally rejected and even despised by the Iranian people, and thus should have no place in the conversation about Iran's political future.

My independent assessment of these allegations, dated August 16, which I have provided to the Committee, cited the most credible official and unofficial information sources I could find on these subjects; and in virtually every case, the allegations do not align with the facts. Moreover, my report cited repeated instances in which Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security was found to be secretly placing many of these allegations into trusted information outlets in Europe, Canada, the US and Iraq – to say nothing of the state-controlled media portrayal of the MEK within Iran since 1980. Additionally my assessment showed that since the mid-1980s the government of Iran has been explicitly negotiating

with the US and other Western governments to have the MEK labeled as a terrorist group and restricted accordingly.

My August report did not claim perfect knowledge about the MEK and its activities. I took care to note that there might be classified information clearly implicating the MEK in recent or planned terrorist activities. But the report was a challenge to anyone giving voice to these allegations about the MEK to back up their claims. If credible proof exists and my inquiry missed it, I fully expected the MEK's critics to point out gaps in my research and offer unimpeachable sources to the contrary, in which case I would stand corrected. That offer still holds.

Last month I spent five days in France, witnessing a public event regarding the circumstances of the 3,400 MEK individuals at Camp Ashraf. I was invited by the French National Assembly to discuss my report at a hearing of the Foreign Affairs Committee. I met many Iranian exiles and heard their individual stories, and also French officials including the former head of the DST, the French counter-intelligence service. I conducted an extended conversation with Mrs. Maryam Rajavi. I visited the broadcast studios of Iran National Television, which is sympathetic to the National Council of Resistance of Iran. And I brought back notes, books, articles and videos that together with my earlier assessment point to a materially different picture of reality than what one receives here in Washington from trusted sources such as the current State Department terrorism Country Report on the MEK, the recent New York Times front-page feature article on the MEK, and the common portrayal of the MEK by 'Iran experts' in the Washington policy community.

So one conclusion I offer to the Congress today is that there is a major untold story here. My experience with Iranian exiles sympathetic to the MEK, after asking literally hundreds of questions in recent months, is that no question has been too sensitive or off-limits, people welcome the scrutiny, and the MEK has a substantial database of information to support its answers. Am I saying that all of the MEK's claims are true? No, that is not for me to judge. If information offered by the MEK is fabricated or fraudulent, that should not be too hard to prove; and one of my purposes here is to put some of that information to the test of official and public examination. The same goes for revelations on this subject by French journalists and ex-officials. One could only speculate as to why our network television correspondents, mainstream journalists, and leading strategic analysts of Iranian affairs have not critically examined this issue. But they have not.

Why does this matter? Some say that it makes no difference whether or not the MEK are terrorists, killers of American citizens, and human rights abusers: no matter who they are or what they may have done, the people at Camp Ashraf are still a population at risk, just like any population at risk, and the proper agencies of the UN are working to resolve their situation, with cooperation from the US Government. Further, US officials have said that the inability of the US to offer refuge and asylum to any of these people due to the MEK's status as a listed Foreign Terrorist Organization and related restrictions, has no bearing on the willingness of other governments to take in greater or lesser numbers of Camp Ashraf residents. When one considers the larger backdrop of US-Iran relations and the deepening concern about Iran's nuclear program, with political turmoil rampant in neighboring Arab countries, it is understandable that US policymakers want to avoid further friction points and

provocations with Tehran, and focus our diplomatic efforts on the sanctions aimed at curbing Iran's nuclear program.

The problem with this cautious perspective is that it obscures the full scope of Iran's thirty-year campaign to eliminate the MEK, and the significance of a failure by the United States in particular to protect Camp Ashraf's residents from harm at the hands of either Iraqi forces or the Iranian regime.

Consider, even theoretically, an alternative reality to what Americans have been told for many years. What if an objective, unfiltered examination of the conflict between Iran's successive rulers and those who opposed repressive monarchy and religious dictatorship yielded a significantly different explanation of recent Iranian history? To wit:

- What if the organization today known as the MEK (and its political umbrella group the National Council of Resistance), including Massoud and Maryam Rajavi, had no involvement in the killing of Americans in the 1970s? (see below)
- What if the MEK record of violence against the Tehran regime from 1981-2001 that the US in 1997 termed "terrorism" was but one side of a two-way war that began in earnest in June 1981, with a half-million supporters of democracy rallying in Tehran alone, when Ayatollah Khomeini sent his forces out to conduct mass arrests and executions of all suspected MEK sympathizers? (As my assessment noted, the French Investigative Magistrate's decision in April 2011 dismissing all charges against the National Council of Resistance of Iran said, *"The dossier does not contain any evidence indicating an armed activity that would intentionally target civilians. If such evidence were available it would confirm terrorism and would annul any reference to resistance against tyranny...."*)
- What if the regime in Tehran has always feared the MEK/NCRI more than any other opposition party or movement because the MEK undermines the regime's ability to leverage Islam to retain power? (The MEK's rights-based program incorporating religious tolerance, separation of church and state, and – most significantly – gender equality, poses a direct challenge to the core principle, hence the legitimacy, of Iran's fundamentalist dictatorship – the doctrine called *velayat e faqih* – which reposes unchallengeable authority over executive, legislative, judicial, social and religious affairs in the person of the Supreme Leader.)
- What if the devotion of MEK members at Camp Ashraf and elsewhere that many view as evidence of a brainwashed cult, is instead the sacrifice and commitment of mostly educated exiles whose family members were executed for their political beliefs by the Iranian regime, and whose families in many cases are today separated inside and outside Iran for as long as the current regime is in power? (Estimates of MEK members and suspected sympathizers killed by the regime in 1981 and the ensuing decade number in the many tens of thousands, possibly as many as 120,000; Mrs. Maryam Rajavi, initially a student movement leader who ran for Parliament in Tehran in 1980 and received a quarter-million votes, lost two sisters: one was

executed by the Shah's secret police, and a second sister who was pregnant at the time was tortured to death in jail by the Khomeini regime.)

- What if no western government has ever labeled or imposed restrictions on the MEK as a terrorist group as a counter-terrorism policy response to MEK terror acts, but rather without exception these labels and restrictions have been imposed as diplomatic concessions in response to continuous demands from the government in Tehran? (Details below)
- What if the MEK in Iraq never fired on US forces? (The April 15, 2003 Cease-Fire Agreement co-signed by the local US/Coalition unit commander – the final text of which was negotiated between the US and MEK – includes the statement *'The NLA/PMOI [MEK] state that they have not fired even a single bullet against US/Coalition forces in the war because their only enemy is the religious dictatorship in Iran. NLA/PMOI also state that they have never been involved in the war or any act of hostility with U.S./Coalition forces.'* On July 26, 2004, the State Department spokesman said of the MEK: *"[W]e have determined that they were not belligerents in this conflict...."*)
- What if the commonly repeated allegation that the MEK in Iraq was an integral part of Saddam Hussein's forces that brutally suppressed the northern Kurdish and southern Shi'a uprisings in Iraq is false? (Eight years after the US intervention cleaned out the entire database of Saddam Hussein's regime, not one item of confirming evidence from DoD or the Intelligence Community has yet surfaced in public, and the State Department does not stand on this allegation, citing only press reporting.)

What if, in other words, the leading state sponsor of terrorism, Iran, has successfully persuaded Western governments including the US that it is in their interest to perpetuate institutionalized disdain, and accept only perfunctory responsibility, for the safety and security of the MEK personnel at Camp Ashraf, largely on the basis that these people have brought their predicament upon themselves and are undeserving of more consideration? This is not to minimize the difficulty of arranging for the protection, orderly processing and onward placement in third countries of these exiled Iranian regime opponents. But one wonders, if a population of dissident Syrian civilians fleeing the Assad regime in Damascus were holed up at Camp Ashraf, unarmed, having been promised by the US that we would assure their security, with the strong possibility of being attack by Iraqi forces by year's end – would our national effort be the same?

To be clear, I support my government and want elected leaders on both sides of the political aisle to represent America's interests with strategic vision and resolve. The sensitive questions I am raising are intended not to demean or embarrass, but to give the Administration and Congress some "top cover" to expand and reassess the body of information and analysis that form the basis for US policy.

While I lack the resources to verify or rebut important aspects of this tragic, violent chapter in recent Iranian history, I offer the following as a potentially more accurate rendering of what has led our government and others to the current dangerous impasse at Camp Ashraf. If true, these conclusions

have larger implications for US policy. Perhaps others have proof to the contrary; but finding no such proof in the open sources available to me, I urge the Congress to request the intelligence community to confirm or credibly disprove the following points:

- From its inception in the mid-1960s the MEK was a political movement of students seeking an Iran freed from external coercion and dependencies. The MEK today and its umbrella organization the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) are the followers of Massoud Rajavi (the one original top organizer of the MEK not killed by the Shah's regime) and his wife Maryam Rajavi. The MEK's base of support from the start was university students sharing strong nationalist and post-colonial liberationist aspirations that had been frustrated when Prime Minister Mossadeq was deposed in a CIA-led coup in August 1953 that restored the Shah to power. While the antagonism between the MEK student movement and the Shah's regime turned repressive and violent, the fight was over political rights and an end to authoritarian rule.
- Massoud Rajavi and the original MEK were not behind the killing of Americans in Tehran in the 1970s. While Massoud Rajavi and surviving followers were imprisoned in the 1970s under the Shah, a splinter organization with ties to Marxist groups in Cuba and Oman as well as George Habash's PFLP-GC appropriated and modified the MEK name and symbols, clashing with original MEK members, and killed Americans in Tehran. They were caught, confessed and were executed. (The 2005 State Department Country Report on the MEK correctly attributed the killings, as did reporting by the Washington Post at the time of the killings.)
- Ayatollah Khomeini met once with Massoud Rajavi to explore political collaboration but the latter would not accept Khomeini's terms for the Iranian Revolution. Not until Khomeini took power after his return to Iran in 1979 did he make clear that there would be no democracy or individual rights in Iran. Massoud Rajavi, once freed from prison, attracted thousands to his rallies in Tehran preaching democratic philosophy. Ayatollah Khomeini at first disqualified Rajavi from seeking elected office, then issued a secret *fatwa* ordering his execution. Pro-fundamentalist armed groups (the predecessor to the *bassij* militias that enforce social and religious restrictions) attacked MEK publication houses throughout Iran and harassed large MEK rallies. When in June 1981 it became clear that Massoud Rajavi's message of individual rights was popular and posed a threat to consolidating the revolution, Khomeini's regime engaged in mass arrests and executions, driving the MEK into hiding initially in Iranian Kurdistan, then France, later Iraq.
- The Shah's brutal security service, SAVAK, was not disbanded but rather co-opted by Ayatollah Khomeini's regime after the 1979 revolution. Veteran intelligence professionals with worldwide liaison relationships were given a choice to keep their properties and wealth in Iran under the new leadership in return for working as the foundation of the mullahs' Ministry of Intelligence and Security, known as VEVAK. Yves Bonnet, former head of the French counter-intelligence service (DST), has written a book, VEVAK – Au Service des Ayatollahs (2009) detailing this history. (Note – I have met with Mr. Bonnet, and only read portions of his book given the

limitations of my French language capacity.) This raises legitimate counter-intelligence questions of possible regime influence over outspoken Iranian experts resident in the west whose backgrounds might not otherwise suggest any affinity for the fundamentalist regime – particularly those who travel regularly to Iran without difficulty.

- In 1986, Massoud Rajavi and MEK personnel were expelled from France to Iraq not because of terrorist activity, but rather as a quid-pro-quo with the regime in Tehran in which France hoped to free 6 hostages in Lebanon. In the end, only two of the six French hostages were freed. This occurred not long after the US-Israel-Iran arms-for-hostages affair during which correspondence cited in the Tower Commission report included American compliance with Iran’s request that Washington denounce the MEK as terrorists, which the State Department did in 1985. France made a second effort to recover hostages in Lebanon in 1987, exiling a number of MEK personnel to Gabon; this effort came undone as MEK supporters staged public hunger strikes, and France enlisted Saddam Hussein’s intervention with Massoud Rajavi to quiet the controversy as the exiles were returned to France.
  
- The 2003 police round-up and arrest of 160 MEK (National Council of Resistance) individuals in France was not a French law enforcement response to terror activity, but rather was a diplomatic concession by France to Iran linked to the *Total* oil concession, the nuclear issue, and a planned visit to Iran by President Chirac. Jean-Claude Maurice, former senior reporter and editor of the Journal du Dimanche, accompanied French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin on a visit to Iran in 2003. As chronicled in his 2009 memoir, Si vous le repetez, je dementirai...Chirac, Sarkozy, Villepin (“If you repeat it, I will deny it”), after the press was dismissed at the outset of Minister Villepin’s meeting with Iran’s Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi, Mr. Maurice went back into the meeting room to retrieve his briefcase but was locked in as the doors were closed. His account of the conversation includes Foreign Minister Kharrazi explicitly requesting that France take action against the MEK, and asking that Iran’s Ambassador to France coordinate with then-Interior Minister Sarkozy. Shortly thereafter, as Mr. Maurice recounts the story, French authorities staged a spectacular raid on the National Council of Resistance (MEK), arresting Mrs. Maryam Rajavi and many others in their homes. (The most recent US State Department report on the MEK says of this event: *“In 2003, French authorities arrested 160 MEK members at operational bases they believed the MEK was using to coordinate financing and planning for terrorist attacks.”* The final verdict on France’s 8-year counter-terrorism investigation of the MEK, quoted above, dismissing all charges, is not mentioned.)
  
- The EU-3 (British, French and German) diplomatic effort in 2003-2004 to negotiate a resolution of Iran’s nuclear activities accommodated Iranian demands that these governments take action against the MEK. Details are discussed in Mr. Maurice’s book (previous item); the IAEA Information Circular of November 26, 2004 (INFCIRC/637), entitled “Communication dated 26 November 2004 received from the Permanent Representatives of France, Germany, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United Kingdom concerning the agreement signed in Paris on 15 November 2004” and signed by Ambassadors of the four governments, contains this sentence:

*“Irrespective of progress on the nuclear issue, the E3/EU and Iran confirm their determination to combat terrorism, including the activities of Al Qa’ida and other terrorist groups such as the MeK.”*

- Iran’s Ministry of Intelligence and Security has for years conducted an extensive and continuous campaign in foreign countries through agents and financial inducements, to introduce defamatory portrayals of the MEK’s beliefs, organizational culture and alleged activities with the goal that journalists and non-governmental entities outside Iran will condemn the MEK as a serial abuser of human rights and a cult. My August 16 assessment contains several references, including from allied security and intelligence services, court documents, UN reports and mainstream press reporting, in support of this conclusion.

If each of the above points is substantially correct, Americans should at a minimum recognize that the Ashraf issue is not isolated from larger equities. Whatever else one thinks of them, these people are survivors of a long, violent and tragic conflict between one group that successfully consolidated power in Iran and another group that suffered grievous losses and fought back against a religious dictatorship that continued to execute sympathizers at home while pursuing their supporters worldwide. Since 2001, sources seem to agree, the MEK has not engaged in violent tactics. As noted, the residents of Camp Ashraf voluntarily disarmed and accepted the protection of US forces in 2003.

Eight years later, US forces are exiting Iraq as the final act in an eight-year military intervention. Our President will receive the elected Prime Minister of Iraq in Washington in the coming week. US policymakers are working hard to manage an array of sensitive issues with Iran, foremost the effort to curb the latter’s nuclear weapons program.

It is, on the surface, a respectable and correct scenario. I repeat my abiding regard for all who serve the American people in the executive and legislative branches of our government, and respectfully cite the following concerns in the hope that leaders in the Administration and Congress will support – indeed demand with urgency – a deeper look at Iran’s campaign for regional influence, its strategies for regime maintenance, and the significance of Iran’s intelligence, informational and diplomatic activities to US and allied interests.

- As stated in my August assessment, the lethal Iraqi military attacks on unarmed residents of Camp Ashraf in July 2009 and April 2011 require the Administration to report to Congress under Section 3 of the Arms Export Control Act as to whether US weapons were utilized for purposes other than those authorized by the terms of transfer to the Iraq Armed Forces. Upholding US law governing arms transfers is essential to America’s reputation as a superpower.
- Further, the so-called Leahy Law requires that the State Department and the US Embassy in Baghdad investigate these attacks and judge whether any Iraqi military personnel have engaged in gross violations of human rights, and if so those personnel must be prohibited from ever receiving training and education from the US military. Here again our reputation is implicated.

- Beyond the legal requirements triggered by the two previous Ashraf attacks, I wish to associate myself with the many retired senior military leaders who have forcefully urged that the residents of Camp Ashraf be protected. The motives of these senior leaders in taking this stance, including three former Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, have been publicly questioned. I respect these officers and believe their sole motive is to preserve the honor of the United States, by living up to the commitments made by US military forces in a theater of combat. Any harm that would befall a single resident of Camp Ashraf at the hands of Iraqi or Iranian government forces, either within Camp Ashraf or elsewhere in Iraq, would constitute a promise not kept by America as our forces depart the country. Having paid such a heavy price for their service in Iraq, our military must be allowed to exit Iraq with honor.

Some Americans may not grasp the weight of these propositions, the spectacle of the US soft-pedaling its legal requirements on arms transfers, trying to extricate itself from a sense of duty to an unloved group of at-risk civilians, hoping that these and related inconveniences do not mar the tableau of the President's welcoming of the Iraqi Prime Minister next week to signal a new era. But I have no doubt that the leaders of Iran fully understand the symbolism of America's exit from Iraq and will miss no opportunity to degrade America's reputation and diminish our influence in Iraq and the region. Operation Iraqi Freedom may be over, but the future of the Middle East is being shaped right now. Iran is advancing its political and security agenda in many ways, in many places – are we connecting the dots?

I have obtained photographs, maps and videos of 300 loudspeakers arrayed around Camp Ashraf broadcasting death threats in Farsi 24 hours a day (except when international representatives visit), and yet I see no mention of this in the public domain. Can we not confirm the MEK's claims that 200 of the Camp's residents are wounded and yet medical supplies are not allowed in by Iraqi forces? That computer equipment for internet service has similarly been blocked from entry? That infrared jamming devices manufactured in Tehran are posted outside the Camp to block transmission of signals to the residents? The MEK alone is accused of human rights abuses against its own members there, including blocking access to information as a form of mind control.

Beyond the circumstances at Camp Ashraf, I am further mystified that so much information relating to this issue is so readily accessible in Europe, from credentialed French sources as well as Iranian exiles, and is common knowledge in French political circles, yet so little of this has surfaced in the US. Perhaps our correspondents and analysts are concerned that their ability to travel to Iran will end if they report this information and give a voice to the families of the Ayatollahs' many victims.

As with all the questions raised in this statement, I do not wish to see Americans divided against themselves or set against their government on this issue. Without doubt, Americans in and out of government want to know as much as possible about Iran's activities, particularly those aimed at influencing our policies to its advantage through indirect means. I thank the Committee and Subcommittees for the opportunity to participate in our national conversation about US policy and American interests, and I look forward to the Members' comments and questions.