

Testimony of Ambassador Lincoln P. Bloomfield, Jr.
before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
“Conditions at Camp Liberty: U.S. and Iraqi Failures,” September 13, 2012

My thanks to the Committee on Foreign Affairs for inviting me to testify today, and to the Chairman and Ranking Minority Member of the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations for welcoming me to this hearing. I am honored to join in your important deliberations, and offer the following views in my personal capacity.

I begin my testimony with three disclaimers: First, I have not been to Camp Liberty. Second, I have not been a first-hand witness to interactions over the past year between the United Nations and the State Department; and third, like many people I can only speculate on the extent and nature of Iran’s influence with Iraqi leaders or inside Iraq generally. What I can and will do is tell the Subcommittee what I know, and offer my recommendations on how best to safeguard American interests in this complex situation.

The Subcommittee has just heard from Mr. Tahar Boumedra, who was until recently the United Nations official with the closest involvement in matters affecting the Iranian exile population at Camp Ashraf and Camp Liberty. He served in Iraq for three and one half years. I have discussed these matters in detail with Mr. Boumedra and believe his first-hand knowledge should be taken seriously.

In any organization, when someone alleges wrongdoing, this creates a responsibility on the part of management. I was an Assistant Secretary of State for four years, overseeing 320 people. When one employee raised a complaint alleging improper conduct inside a part of my organization, I did not know if that person was credible, or if the complaint was legitimate. I did know, however, that sweeping it under the rug, or retaliating against the person making the allegation, was not an acceptable option for a public official. So I held an emergency town hall meeting and told the workforce I was going to cooperate fully and let professional experts come into our bureau and conduct a full investigation, which they did. It was painful; it was unpopular; but in the end, everyone knew that standards of professional conduct were to be upheld and would be enforced.

Contrast that to the United Nations’ reaction to Mr. Boumedra’s statements about why he resigned. On July 28, a spokesman for the UN Department of Political Affairs in New York said, “It is regrettable that such a distorted picture is being presented of the efforts of the United Nations in Iraq to resolve peacefully the situation of Camp Ashraf.” I find this reaction unsatisfactory and even disturbing.

The UN headquarters has just been told that UN field reporting from Iraq on this issue has been systematically doctored to portray a situation materially at odds with the reality; the specific concern is that the UN mission may have been complicit in disregarding and covering up violations of international standards of human rights and humanitarian obligations. Yet instead of launching an immediate investigation, or at least sending a veteran diplomat to ensure that UNAMI would adhere to UN standards and protocols in the future, the UN headquarters chose to disbelieve Mr. Boumedra.

Mr. Boumedra's legal training in London and years of work with NGOs promoting human rights and penal reform in Africa and the Middle East, as well as the fact that the UN recruited him and gave him significant responsibilities for three and a half years in Iraq speaks to his credentials. Last month I invited him to meet here in Washington with a group of experts on human rights, displaced populations and UN operations. The focus was not the Iranian exiles; this group wanted Mr. Boumedra's perspective on human rights issues in Iraq generally, based on his long tenure as the UN's Chief Human Rights Officer in Iraq. He impressed these experts with his knowledge and measured judgments.

Those who might question his motives should note that in May, Mr. Boumedra asked that his resignation become effective immediately, even though he could have served notice and collected severance pay for an additional period of time. From every indication I have seen, he is a principled, sincere and serious professional, not a publicity-seeker or disgruntled employee.

While I am disturbed by the stance of the UN Headquarters in response to Mr. Boumedra's disclosures, my concern about the US position goes beyond the obvious need to reassess UN reports and put the UNAMI mission back on track. If such alleged misreporting by the head of a UN field organization had occurred in southern Sudan or refugee camps in Turkey, it would also merit investigation, but the impact would mainly be humanitarian. Here, with the exiled Iranian opposition group being listed as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the State Department, and facing life-and-death security threats in Iraq, Mr. Boumedra's disclosures could have important foreign policy implications for the US as well.

Recall that Secretary of State Clinton testified this past February to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs that, "[W]e are trying to...avoid bloodshed and violence, and have the people from Camp Ashraf move to Camp Hurriya [Liberty], and have them processed as soon as the United Nations can process them." Recall as well that last December, the head of the UN Mission in Iraq, Mr. Kobler, announced the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Iraqi government, stating that the MOU "respects [Iraq's] international humanitarian and human rights obligations and protects the security and rights of the Camp's residents."

Recall that one year ago today, on September 13, 2011, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees issued a statement saying that many Camp Ashraf residents had already filed requests for determination of refugee status and as such, "...are accordingly now formally asylum-seekers under international law whose claims require adjudication. International law requires that they must be able to benefit from basic protection of their security and well-being. This includes protection against any expulsion or return to the frontiers of territories where their lives or freedom would be threatened (the *non-refoulement* principle)."

Let us be clear about what Mr. Boumedra has told us: the Prime Minister of Iraq, with Iran's encouragement and assistance, has made it a matter of public record that the government's policy is to make life unbearable for the Iranian exile population, with the evident intention that people will lose their will to remain at Camp Liberty and ask to depart, even without gaining refugee status or a host country destination. Upwards of 200 people believed by Iran to be the leaders among this population will face criminal prosecution by Iraq and likely transfer to Iran.

This – not the shortage of air conditioners, potable water or ramps for the disabled at Camp Liberty – is the serious problem raised by Mr. Boumedra’s disclosures. We have now been told that the goals articulated by United Nations agencies in Iraq and embraced by the Secretary of State are, in fact, not being pursued at all. A year after the Iranian exiles submitted refugee applications to UNHCR, only a handful of people have been processed. Throughout this relocation process for the Camp Ashraf residents, representatives of Iran including the Iranian Embassy in Baghdad have played a detailed, hands-on role with the Iraqi Prime Minister’s office and the leadership of UNAMI at every stage.

As Mr. Boumedra told the Swiss newspaper Tribune de Geneve on August 31, Camp Liberty, which requires visitors to pass through seven security checkpoints, is a “high security prison, not a transit point for asylum seekers.” Their security, which is codified in a promise by the United States which Mr. Boumedra says remains in effect under the Fourth Geneva Convention, is now being placed in the hands of an Iraqi commander at Camp Liberty, Colonel Sadeq, who led the April 2011 attack inside Camp Ashraf that killed dozens and wounded scores of defenseless residents. Mr. Boumedra said “The UN has deceived these people.” The question for Congress is whether the United States was similarly deceived, or whether it has understood this hidden agenda all along. I am not sure which is worse.

Complicating the US position further, Secretary of State Clinton has told Congress that the closure of Camp Ashraf will be “a key factor in any decision regarding the foreign terrorist organization status” of the group known as the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK), with which the Iranian exiles in Iraq are affiliated. In light of the new revelations, Secretary Clinton’s proposition to this group would appear to be a true Hobson’s Choice: either leave your home of 25 years, Camp Ashraf, to live in a detention camp surrounded by armed security forces who have recently attacked, killed and wounded many among you; or risk remaining on the terrorism list where intelligence, law enforcement and financial investigators will keep you separated from friends and relatives in the US and restrict your activities worldwide.

It is hard to believe that Secretary Clinton would knowingly associate the United States with such a policy approach, and indeed Justice Department attorneys have told the Appeals Court that Secretary Clinton has been so preoccupied with other important duties internationally that she has not had the opportunity personally to address the MEK terrorism listing issue in detail. So it falls to her subordinates to advise her on how best to protect America’s interests and honor. They of course have the option of disputing or dismissing Mr. Boumedra’s allegations as insignificant. The Committee is right to exercise oversight here in the interest of determining the true situation and assuring the integrity of US policy.

My conclusion is that the US would be well served by a serious re-look at the facts on the ground in Iraq. I am concerned that Iran’s agenda, reflected in Iraqi government actions, is seriously at odds with the United Nations’ goal of conducting “refugee status determination” with each of the Iranian exiles and arranging for third countries to accept them as refugees.

From what I have seen, the regime in Iran exhibits no interest in seeing more than 3,000 MEK members safely relocated in the West, where they can conduct political activities aimed at ending the

dictatorship in Tehran. Mr. Boumedra's account is more consistent with a scenario to compel these people to flee Camp Liberty and expose themselves to hostile Iraqi elements and Iranian intelligence services, once they are no longer accounted for by the UN and other interested governments and NGOs.

I cannot prove that Mr. Boumedra's account is accurate; but I would question the US Government's ability to be certain that he is wrong, without investigating. As tempting as it will be for officials to dismiss unsavory possibilities, the US must consider the risks posed by this situation.

- Once the last residents depart Camp Ashraf, are we certain Iran will not plant false evidence as it has attempted so often in the past, aimed at influencing a US counterterrorism intelligence review? The Camp Ashraf residents have called for an independent inspection, but the State Department has said this is not needed.
- Can we be sure that the people now relocated to Camp Liberty will not suffer a third massacre at the hands of the Iraqi forces guarding them?

US laws require that allies not misuse US-supplied military equipment, and that foreign soldiers known to have committed gross human rights abuses be banned from ever receiving US military training. Even with billions of dollars of American defense jobs lined up to support the Iraqi military's tank and fighter aircraft acquisitions from the US, it is hard to imagine the Administration and Congress will disregard US laws including the Arms Export Control Act and the Leahy human rights law if these exiles are lethally attacked by Iraqi security forces a third time – particularly with Colonel Sadeq in command at Camp Liberty. I for one expect Iran to use every available lever to destabilize our long-term security cooperation with Iraq, a strategically important program for which US soldiers sacrificed much.

The prospect that our security and foreign policy interests in Iraq are being manipulated behind the scenes by Iran, at a time when Iran's nuclear program is our number one foreign policy challenge, is troubling and merits our attention. Moreover, every American who values our influence as a champion of human rights, a reliable keeper of international legal commitments and a defender of humanitarian principles should want to ensure that we have not damaged our reputation by appearing to violate these in accepting dishonest assurances from UNAMI even as reputable third parties sounded alarms.

Some members of the subcommittee, foreign policy officials and outside experts may hear this testimony and believe the concerns I am raising to be overstated. To them I offer this concluding thought. Ten years ago I worked for a Secretary of State whose name was and is synonymous with honesty and integrity. When he was asked by the White House to present a detailed intelligence dossier to the UN Security Council, he spent four days at the CIA grilling analysts and weeding out claims that he determined might not be supportable by the facts. Despite this unprecedented scrubbing, the resulting intelligence dossier that was presented at the UN turned out not to be factually reliable.

Anyone who thinks that it cannot happen twice is mistaken. For the past year I have been researching the open-source dossier on the MEK, going back many years and examining the background to allegations commonly attached to the group. My findings will become public in the near future. Suffice it to say that this dossier also suffers from serious flaws and embellishments added over time. As with the Iraq WMD file, in due course the truth will be known about the MEK's past.

For now, I urge the subcommittee, and through them the Administration, to intensify their scrutiny of Iran's agenda inside Iraq. An appropriate first step would be an independent investigation of Mr. Boumedra's account, including the many ways in which these exiles have endured gratuitous and severe hardships in accommodating the American requirement that they vacate Camp Ashraf. Once the Iraqi authorities' record on this issue is better understood, it will be clear that no amount of supplies to the residents of Camp Liberty will alleviate the prospect that their basic human rights and safety will again be violated.

I would like to know why the US did not make a major effort a year ago to arrange for a neighboring country to host a proper UN transit facility, one where all the exiles and the UNHCR staff could conduct the necessary reviews in safety, free of coercion, and where none of these collateral liabilities could so readily be triggered against US interests. This still appears to be the obvious remedy, and I hope that Secretary Clinton will step in and use her influence to move the entire operation out of Iraq.

The task of relocating these Iranian exiles safely to onward destinations has been a difficult and thankless one, made even tougher with the recent disclosures by Mr. Boumedra. Despite these challenges, the US can rectify the situation, preserving its interests and reputation, by investigating the facts and reassessing their policy implications.

I thank the Subcommittee and look forward to your questions.