

No Good Options for Iranian Dissidents in Iraq

by [Patrick Clawson \(/experts/patrick-clawson\)](/experts/patrick-clawson)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Patrick Clawson \(/experts/patrick-clawson\)](/experts/patrick-clawson)

Patrick Clawson is Morningstar senior fellow and director of research at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.



Brief Analysis

In an April 8 confrontation at Camp Ashraf, Iraq -- home to some 3,400 members of the Iranian dissident organization Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK) -- Iraqi army forces killed at least thirty-four people, according to UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay. The clash highlighted an ongoing problem: what to do about the presence of several thousand people the Iraqi government badly wants to be rid of, when no other country to which they are willing to go will accept them. Distasteful as the current situation is, the status quo may be best.

The Confrontation

When Iraqi forces entered Camp Ashraf on April 8, Baghdad initially claimed that no shots had been fired. The government later changed its story, however, stating that three people had been killed in clashes between rock-throwing residents and security forces had simply been redeploying. On the day of the attack, the U.S. State Department announced, "Although we do not know what exactly transpired early this morning at Ashraf, this crisis and the loss of life was initiated by the Government of Iraq and the Iraqi military.

Under pressure, Baghdad allowed a UN team into Ashraf after a five-day delay. According to Pillay, "It now seems certain that at least 34 people were killed...including seven or more women...Most were shot, and some appear to have been crushed to death, presumably by vehicles...There is no possible excuse for this number of casualties." Pillay's account was consistent with footage released by the MEK showing columns of Iraqi armored personnel carriers entering the camp; vehicles are seen running down residents, and riflemen are seen shooting from close range, including at women. Camp witnesses have stated that 2,500 soldiers from eight battalions of Iraq's Ninth and Fifth Divisions participated in the attack.

As Iraqi forces remain in position to launch further military action, a recent statement by an Iranian official called for additional assaults. According to a report by the Fars News Agency -- often regarded as being close to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps -- Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's advisor for military affairs, Maj. Gen. Yahya Rahim Safavi, "praised the Iraqi army for its recent attack on the strongholds of the anti-Iran terrorist [MEK] and asked Baghdad to continue attacking the terrorist base until its destruction."

MEK Background

Designated by the State Department as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, the MEK was an underground opposition group in the shah's Iran during the 1960s and 1970s. After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the group fell out with the new regime, which imprisoned, tortured, and killed thousands of its members. The remnants fled to Iraqi sanctuaries, where they formed an armed force against Tehran during the Iran-Iraq War. There also is evidence that Saddam Hussein used the MEK against his domestic opponents, though the group denies this.

Today, Tehran loathes the MEK and continues to arrest, imprison, and execute accused members. The regime tends to blame the group for a great deal of Iranian dissident activity, including in cases where there is little evidence of any such link. In fact, the group disarmed following Saddam's overthrow in 2003, and no credible evidence exists showing MEK military action since then. The MEK formally renounced violence in 2004, which provided the basis for U.S. acknowledgement of a 'protected persons' status. Initially protected by U.S. forces, Camp Ashraf has been under Iraqi control since 2009.

Alternatives

Washington has repeatedly stated its interest in resolving the Ashraf situation. As State Department spokesman Mark Toner put it on April 12, "We're prepared to consider any assistance that we can -- that is requested by the Government of Iraq to develop and execute a negotiated plan to address the future of Camp Ashraf." Preparing such a plan will not be easy, however, because each available option is deeply flawed.

Repatriation to Iran. Camp residents have announced that their first choice would be to go to Iran, but only if the Islamic Republic agreed not to jail or persecute them for their past opposition efforts. Yet securing a guarantee that satisfied the residents would probably be difficult. And forcing MEK members to return to Iran against their will would violate several international agreements to which Iraq is party.

In 2007, UNHCR cautioned Baghdad to refrain from any action that could endanger the lives or security of camp residents, such as deportation to another country or forced displacement inside Iraq. Similarly, the International Committee of the Red Cross reminded Baghdad of its obligation to act in accordance with the principle of nonrefoulement -- that is, refugees should not be dispersed to a place where they would fear persecution. Washington reiterated these concerns on April 12, noting how Iraqi authorities "have provided written assurances that Camp Ashraf residents would be treated humanely" and that none of them would be "forcibly transferred to any other country where they might face persecution."

Settlement in a third country. If safe return to Iran proves impossible, camp leaders have stated that their second preference is to go to a European Union member country or the United States. But none of these countries is willing to take them. The State Department's continued designation of the MEK as a terrorist entity makes resettling group members in the United States impossible. It also considerably weakens Washington's leverage in urging other countries to accept them instead. The issue of whether the MEK actually belongs on the terrorism list was discussed in PolicyWatches 1366 and 1643. Here, it is appropriate to point out that the designation poses an important complication in resolving the diplomatic quandary over Ashraf.

A puzzling development is that UNCHR spokesman Andrej Mahecic recently said that agency is ready to accept applications for refugee status from camp residents if they sign individual statements renouncing violence as a means of achieving their goals. Although he contends that Ashraf residents have been unwilling to do so, the MEK disputes this.

Formal status in Iraq. If resettling in the West proves untenable as well, camp leaders have stated that they wish to remain in Iraq near the Iranian border in order to promote nonviolent resistance and keep hope alive for a return to

Iran when the regime collapses. Yet formally accepting the presence of Ashraf residents is politically unacceptable to some of the largest parties in the Iraqi governing coalition, including those closest to Iran. Tehran has made the MEK presence a major issue in bilateral relations, and harassing the group is one way for Baghdad to cultivate better ties with the Islamic Republic.

The MEK and its allies have long held unrealistic expectations about what Washington might do on behalf of Ashraf residents, such as opposing the 2009 handover of security responsibility for the camp perimeter to the Iraqi government. U.S. supporters of the group argue that continued protection of the MEK presence in Ashraf should be an American objective in negotiations regarding post-2011 cooperation with Baghdad. Yet Washington is unlikely to take on a cause so controversial in Iraqi politics on behalf of a group the State Department insists is a terrorist organization.

Status Quo Better than Alternatives

Barring the emergence of another alternative, the most feasible way forward is for the MEK members to remain in Ashraf, provided there are no further attacks against the residents. When acting Iranian foreign minister Ali Akbar Salehi visited Baghdad in January, Iraqi foreign minister Hoshyar Zebari announced that Baghdad was "determined to deal with this [MEK] issue," adding, "There are some humanitarian commitments to which our government is loyal, but fulfilling these undertakings should not harm Iraq's national sovereignty." That is a good formulation; now it is up to Washington to work with Baghdad to ensure that practice on the ground meets that standard. Toward that end, the United States should urge the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) to enhance its involvement. For example, the MEK and its friends in the U.S. Congress allege -- and Baghdad denies -- that the camp residents have been subject to harassment, psychological pressure from hundreds of loudspeakers, and medical restrictions. UNAMI or a similar agency could prove helpful as a neutral third-party arbiter able to report on the situation firsthand.

Patrick Clawson is director of research and director of the Iran Security Initiative at The Washington Institute. ❖

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