A Terrorist U.S. Ally?

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The MEK can be useful at a time when Western spy agencies are short on human intelligence in Iraq.

One of the stranger news items coming out of Iraq these days concerns an Iranian opposition group called the Mujahedeen-e Khalq (MEK). It's a U.S. government-designated terrorist organization that coalition forces first bombed from the air, then signed a cease-fire agreement with -- and finally disarmed and protected.

Say that again?

The MEK is not your typical anti-Western group, but an organization with a strong political presence in Western capitals and over 3,000 soldiers stationed in Iraq, singularly dedicated to one goal: overthrowing its "archenemy," the Islamic Republic of Iran. Of course, during its 17 years in Iraq, it also had to do Saddam Hussein's bidding. This situation raises several questions:

Is the MEK a terrorist group? No. It used terrorism decades ago, when its members attacked Americans. For the last 15 years, however, the MEK has been organized as an army, and its only violent actions have been directed against the Iranian regime.

Unlike Hezbollah (which targets Jewish community centers and shoots rockets into civilian areas), the MEK attacks specific regime targets. Unlike the PLO (whose leaders were terrorists more recently and arguably still are), the MEK really has foresworn this barbaric tactic.

Can the MEK liberate Iran? No. Its strategy of invasion by an army can't work. The foul theocracy in Tehran will come to an end when the democratic forces in Iran finally manage to push it aside. Foreigners can best help them by encouraging satellite-television transmissions from Iranians living in free countries (as U.S. Sen. Sam Brownback has recently proposed).

Can the MEK be useful? Yes. Western spy agencies are short on "human intelligence" -- meaning spies on the ground in Iran, as distinct from eyes in the sky. Coalition military commanders should seek out the MEK for information on the Iranian mullahs' agents in Iraq.

The MEK can also supply key information on developments in Iran -- where, despite a tendency toward exaggeration, it has had some major scoops. Its information in mid-2002 about Iran's nuclear program, for example, was better than what the International Atomic Energy Agency knew, thereby leading a shocked U.S. government to kick off an investigation that confirmed just how far advanced the Iranians are toward building a nuclear bomb.

Policy toward the MEK has long been quietly but intensely and bitterly debated in Washington. To curry favor with Iranian "moderates," the State Department in 1997 designated the group as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. Although 150 members of Congress publicly opposed this designation, a U.S. court of appeals recently upheld it.

This stark difference of views helps explain Washington's erratic policies of late. On April 15, the U.S. Army signed a cease-fire permitting the MEK to keep its weapons and use them against Iranian regime infiltrators into Iraq. This deal infuriated the State Department, which then convinced the president to undo it, leading to the strange sight of U.S. troops surrounding MEK camps on May 9, disarming its fighters and taking up positions to protect them.

That's a bad idea. Coalition forces are urgently needed to restore order elsewhere in Iraq. And State is dreaming if it thinks the sight of U.S. troops guarding the MEK will mollify Iran's mullahs.

Instead, as the U.S. Army recommends, MEK members should (after giving assurances not to attack Iranian territory) be permitted enough arms to protect themselves from their Iranian opponents. And in November, when the secretary of state next decides whether or not to re-certify the MEK as a terrorist group, he should come to the sensible conclusion that it poses no threat to the security of the United States or its citizens, and remove it from the list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations.

Finally, because Iran's mullahs irrationally fear the MEK (as shown by their 1988 massacre in the jails of Iran of 10,000 long-imprisoned MEK members and supporters), maintaining the MEK as an organized group in separate camps in Iraq offers an excellent way to intimidate and gain leverage over Tehran.

To deter the mullahs from taking hostile steps (supporting terrorism against coalition troops in Iraq, building nuclear weapons), it could prove highly effective to threaten U.S. meetings with the MEK or providing help for its anti-regime publicity campaign. ❖

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