

America's misguided blacklist

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International Herald Tribune, By Lord Waddington, Lord Archer of Sandwell and Lord Corbett of Castle Vale: If there is one issue that has dominated discussions among policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic, it is the devilish question of how to deal with an Iranian regime that has continued to frustrate the democratic ambitions of its people while meddling in the affairs of other nations.

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TEHRAN'S OPPONENTS

By David Waddington, Peter Archer and Robin Corbett

If there is one issue that has dominated discussions among policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic, it is the devilish question of how to deal with an Iranian regime that has continued to frustrate the democratic ambitions of its people while meddling in the affairs of other nations. As British policymakers, we have had our share of entanglements with the Iranian government, from the naval incident last year in which our sailors were detained, to the ongoing issues surrounding Iran's nuclear program. When it comes to Iran, we are in the same boat as the Americans.

What we find perplexing in light of our shared problem is why the U.S. government fails to take advantage of groups that seek to be helpful to the West with intelligence, information and support for Iranian pro-democracy movements. How can the United States assert that it is being tough on Iran while Washington designates Tehran's most despised enemy as a terrorist organization?

Unfortunately, this is the case with the Iranian anti-government group Mujahedeen-e-Khalq. Decades ago, well before the fall of the shah, this group was set up to secure a secular democracy for Iran. In its early years, the MEK developed a reputation for being outspoken in its opposition to what it viewed as American support for the shah. But its consistent demands for a secular and democratic Iran put it at odds with subsequent Iranian governments - and, in a strange twist of fate, with Washington, which rejected the group's ideas, tactics and goal of replacing the Iranian government.

In 1997, the Clinton administration placed the MEK on the State Department list of foreign terrorist organizations in order to accommodate the newly elected president of Iran, Mohammad Khatami, who it hoped would be a moderating influence. This hope did not pan out. But the MEK has remained on the list - to the cost of U.S. interests in the region.

After a very careful review, we are convinced that the MEK has been unjustifiably considered a terrorist organization and that its continued placement on the list is completely without merit and counterproductive.

Over the past five years, the group has contributed enormously to the gathering of vital information from inside Iran, particularly regarding Iran's clandestine nuclear program. It has been an invaluable intelligence source for the United States and Europe on both nuclear and terrorist threats posed by the Iranian regime. It's tireless efforts in support of replacing Iran's theocratic regime with a secular democracy have improved the chances for real change inside Iran.

On Nov. 30, 2007, a British court ordered the group to be removed from the British government's list of terrorist organizations. Along with 32 other members of Parliament from all three major parties, we appealed to the British authorities for it to be taken off the terrorist blacklist. Although the Home Office had fought to keep the MEK on the list, an extensive review by a three-judge court empowered to decide cases involving the de-listing of designated terrorist groups issued this important verdict. The court declared that the failure of the British government to lift the terrorist designation was "perverse" because the group "no longer satisfies any of the criteria necessary for the maintenance of their proscription" as a terrorist organization.

We believe that the court's decision is both fair and binding. Credible records demonstrate that the organization has not engaged in any violent activity since 2001. In 2003, it formally renounced terrorism and voluntarily disarmed. Extensive interviews and investigations of its members in Iraq at Camp Ashraf by U.S. security agencies confirm that the group poses no threat to U.S. security.

All of us are concerned about terrorism and legitimate threats to our national security and to the security of citizens everywhere. We will continue to work with the U.S. government on counter-terrorism. But we cannot support the labeling of a group like MEK as a foreign terrorist organization, especially given that the justification for doing so no longer exists. By legitimizing this pro-democracy movement, we strengthen the democratic forces inside Iran.

It is easy in the post-Sept. 11th world to label anybody a terrorist. But this kind of counterterrorism strategy only damages the credibility of freedom-loving countries like the United States and Britain.

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