

Why the World Should Care About the Fate of Iranian Dissidents in Iraq

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By Lord Carlile of Berriew, CBE, FRSA, QC

After a new round of talks between Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany, there might be some relief on the international stage. But such optimism could very well be misplaced. No discernible substantive issue was discussed. Although further talks will be held in Baghdad in May, as according to credible Reuter reporting, the two sides are poles apart.

As meetings go, 'constructive' would be an extremely generous description. Now for the reality test: what happens next, if anything?

All options compatible with civilised standards should remain on the table. That should include the potential of a peaceful change of government and government processes in Iran.

Of immediate concern is the issue of protecting Iranian dissidents. The fate of more than 3,300 members of the main opposition movement, the People's Mojahedin Organisation of Iran (PMOI/MEK), who are exiled in Iraq, is now an imperative world human rights issue.

As the wave of Arab Spring sweeps throughout the region, with Tehran facing growing domestic isolation, international sanctions and an internecine power struggle at the highest level, the Tehran mullahs sense a dire and macabre need to destroy their opponents. The dissidents in Camp Ashraf, near Baghdad, are at the top of the list.

On April 8, 2011, American-made Humvees equipped with high-calibre anti-personnel machine guns, manned by Iraqi guards, stormed Camp Ashraf at behest of Tehran, murdering 36 residents and wounding hundreds more. Despite international censure, the Government of Iraq vowed to close Camp Ashraf by the end of 2011. A massive international campaign averted such a disaster. Dozens of the most prominent U.S. officials in the current and the past four administrations campaigned unrelentingly for the safety of the Ashraf residents. America had a promise to keep - in 2003 Ashraf residents had voluntarily disarmed in return for U.S. protection until the final disposition.

This creditable push by the Americans has not been matched by the UK government, which displays little evidence of any interest in the human rights debacle it is witnessing against the PMOI.

After signing a Memorandum of Understanding between the UN and the Government of Iraq on Dec 25, and subsequent assurances by Secretary Clinton and the UN to guarantee the safety and welfare of Ashraf residents, Maryam Rajavi, the leader of Resistance, agreed for the residents to move to Camp Liberty, a former U.S. military base in Baghdad where they would be interviewed by the UNHCR ahead of their transfer to third countries.

The residents have adopted a responsible approach. In order to avoid a return of the violence they suffered last year, the dissidents showed tremendous flexibility and forfeited many of their fundamental rights by accepting relocation within Iraq to a camp with minimum facilities. So far, 1200 of the residents have been transferred to Camp Liberty.

Meanwhile the government of Iraq, at behest of Tehran, is trying to turn the camp into a prison. The area designated for Iranian dissidents is considerably less than a square kilometre. There is a critical shortage of water and electricity, and the sewage system is broken. In addition, the camp is rigged with surveillance cameras, along with more than 150 of the same Iraqi police who took part in last year's horrific April massacre.

Nevertheless the dissidents have proved true to their word and willing to face upheaval. Now the UN and the international community should do their part.

When addressing the UN Security Council on April 10, Ambassador Martin Kobler, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General in Iraq, stated: "The camp residents, despite initial difficulties, have shown goodwill and cooperation recently the relocation process. The residents have indeed come a long way. It is difficult to abandon the place where one has lived for more than two decades and I encourage the residents to continue to show goodwill and continue to work in a cooperative spirit."

At present, Camp Liberty does not provide the minimum humanitarian standards for residents. This must be addressed. So too, should the dissidents' human rights be honoured - their property rights, including movable and non-movable

property, must be accepted. The Government of Iraq should recognise the status of the residents of Camp Ashraf and Camp Liberty as asylum seekers and respect their rights under international law.

The UN must recognise Camp Liberty as a refugee camp designed to be the mid-term home for the PMOI. Instead it is attributed a "Temporary Transition Location", which deprives the residents of their most essential humanitarian standards.

And with regards to relocation of Camp Liberty residents to third countries, the parliamentarians stated that in order for the process to move forward, Western countries including Germany should provide necessary support to the UNHCR for faster refugee status redetermination and resettlement of the residents.

For 3,300 innocent people this is a life or death situation. But the issue internationally is much broader. The fate of a great nation and future of the whole region is at the stake. It is high time to defend the rights of Iranian dissidents in Iraq. The world has a direct interest.