

Testimony of General James L. Jones, USMC (Ret.)
Senate Committee on Armed Services
October 7, 2015

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Reed, and Members of the Committee, thank you for holding this important hearing on Iran's influence in Iraq—and its implications for the people of Iraq, the stability of the Middle East, and for America's interests and values.

In particular, thank you for providing long-overdue national focus on a related topic – the plight of approximately 2, 500 Iranian refugees who continue to languish in great danger at Camp Liberty in Baghdad.

The People's Mujahedin of Iran (referred to as MEK or PMOI) are exiles from Iran who have lived in Iraq since the mid-1980s. They oppose the regime in Tehran which has helped facilitate a campaign of harassment, intimidation, and murder against their encampment with the complicity of Iraqi authorities--despite America's promise to protect the men, women, and children of Camp Ashraf, now residing at Camp Liberty.

Before addressing this ongoing humanitarian tragedy in greater detail, I would like to briefly address the larger hearing topic of Iran's influence and objectives in Iraq. It will surprise no one when I say that the Iranian regime remains among the world's most consistent threats to global peace and stability.

It is a regime that artfully dodges its commitments, generates international friction to exert greater domestic control on its citizens, and constantly hardens its grip on the country. The Mullahs' government serially violates human rights, UN Security Council resolutions, and international law. They reject the right of Israel to exist by opposing and actively undermining the Middle East Peace Process. And, Tehran remains the chief antagonist of democracy and liberalization across the Middle East where a better future for millions of people struggles to emerge.

To the Mullahs, the concepts of human rights, rule of law, international norms of responsibility, and modernity are threats to be snuffed out, rather than virtues to be embraced. Their retrograde doctrine is one of power, dictatorship and domination over its people and the region, no matter the human cost. Its goal is the consolidation of the revolution which is martially enforced at home by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and prosecuted abroad by the Quds Force and Iran's many proxy groups.

The Iranian regime knows that the fall of Assad and the loss of Syria as a client state would be an enormous strategic loss. It continues to do everything within its power to avert that end, and to satisfy its hegemonic ambitions – in part, by supporting international terrorist groups that pose a clear and direct threat to the United States and our allies.

Unquestionably, Iran’s grand strategy – one that constitutionally compels it to export its brand of Islamic Revolution—entails consolidating the hold it has gained in Iraq—a grip it seeks to tighten, directly and through proxies; and by stoking the sectarian fires that have been such a gross impediment to the brighter future for which the Iraqi people, the United States, and our allies have sacrificed so much.

I recall early in this administration, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia’s warning to our government that then-Prime Minister “Maliki was not our friend”; but rather an Iranian sympathizer under Tehran’s influence. He has been proven right, unfortunately for the region.

Maliki may be gone but the Iranian tentacles are not. In fact, the fight against ISIL has given Iran a new pretext for extending its reach. We would be wise not to forget that Tehran isn’t interested in fighting ISIL to stop it from imposing an extreme brand of Islam through barbarity and manipulation in Syria, Iraq and elsewhere. The Mullahs are only interested in stopping ISIL from getting in the way of Iran sustaining a client state and imposing its brand of Islamic extremism through violence and manipulation.

Recently Assad hailed the “Russia, Iran, and Iraq alliance” in battling terrorism. I would submit that an Iraq being torn asunder by ISIL and dominated by Iran; an Iraq that has become a regional focal point of instability in the Middle East; and an Iraq that is allied with Assad, Putin, and the Grand Ayatollah is not the vision the United States and our allies head when we freed the country from the yoke of Saddam Hussein. It’s not why nearly 4,500 American service members paid the ultimate sacrifice and tens of thousands more wounded. It’s not the future the majority of Iraqis had hoped for and deserve.

This committee knows well the financial and kinetic powers that Iran wields to exert its influence and you know the basic tenets of its strategy to export revolution. You know the grave implications of Iranian efforts to shore up the Assad dictatorship and to prosecute the malignant Shiite-Sunni conflict in Iraq and foster its reach in Lebanon, Gaza, and Yemen. What is not as well known is that part and parcel of Iran’s subversive program in Iraq has been the persecution of nearly 3,500 Iranian objectors to the regime housed first at Camp Ashraf in Diyala Province and now at Camp Liberty in Baghdad.

The timeline accompanying today’s testimony tells the grim story. Colonel Wes Martin, testifying here today, commanded the unit in charge of protecting the refugees at Camp Ashraf as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

No one knows more about the antecedents and course of this tragic situation than Colonel Martin and Ambassador Lincoln Bloomfield. The ambassador is here and can be a great resource to you on the issue. He has prepared a statement on the MEK that I respectfully request be made part of the hearing record.

As Ambassador Bloomfield has chronicled in his extensive study, this is a group that has consistently opposed the Iranian regime and resided at Camp Ashraf in Iraq since 1986. During Operation Iraqi Freedom the group welcomed American troops, voluntarily disarmed, cooperated willingly and fully, and aided us by providing highly significant intelligence—and as Col. Martin points out –by helping protect U.S. service members.

In exchange, the United States promised to ensure the refugees’ protection. This solemn obligation transferred to the Iraqi government as part of its sovereign commitments and the terms of the 2009 U.S.-Iraq Status of Forces Agreement.

As the timeline shows, what followed these commitments has been a litany of bloodshed and mistreatment at the bidding of the Iranian regime complicit with elements of the Iraqi government all too eager to accommodate Iranian wishes.

I would just emphasize for the Committee the three most lethal events: a ground assault on Camp Ashraf that took place on July 2009 in which 12 unarmed residents were killed; another attack in April, 2011 in which 36 unarmed resident were killed; and a third attack in September, 2013 in which 52 unarmed residents were killed.

Colonel Martin’s testimony covers many other episodes of mistreatment and threat inflicted on the MEK during their tenure at Camp Ashraf and over the course of their time at Camp Liberty, formerly known as Camp Hurriya. Let me stress again Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee: the victims were unarmed men, women, and children that we promised to protect—a duty vested in the Government of Iraq upon our departure.

Despite these atrocities the United States has remained slow, ineffective, and even reluctant, in responding to our humanitarian obligation to facilitate the swift relocation of the refugees out of harm’s way. Unfortunately, this is exactly where the Camp Liberty refugees remain today – in harm’s way.

We can get into all the factors that have held up humanitarian relocation. In part it has been complicated by the hesitancy of some refugees to leave brethren behind at risk, or to renounce their association with the group which was removed from U.S. and European terrorist lists—a step that required exacting standards and findings.

The primary problem, however, has been our government's exceedingly slow and seemingly indifferent response to our commitments and the refugees' dangerous situation. In part, it's the product of a complex set of legal circumstances and interpretations that have been allowed to impede our receiving a fair number here.

As I mentioned, MEK was once listed as a Tier 1 foreign terrorist organization but our government delisted it several years ago and Europe delisted it years before. Nevertheless, the Department of Homeland Security now considers the MEK to be a Tier III entity on the basis of its past FTO designation, even though Tier III entities are defined as any group "which **engages** in" [note the use of the present tense] a variety of terrorist activity.

As I understand it, Tier III organizations are not specifically listed by any United States agency, but rather are determined on a case-by-case basis. DHS apparently has taken the position that it will consider every resident in Camp Liberty to be barred from admission to the United States for one or more of the following reasons:

- The individual was a member of a Tier I designated organization during the period of its designation,
- The individual is currently a member of a Tier III entity, or
- The individual was or is co-resident with MEK members and thus provided "material support" to a Tier I organization during its period of designation (i.e. at some point between 1997 – 2012) or to a Tier III entity now.

Further I'm informed that DHS has offered to consider the admission of persons who would (a) renounce any affiliation with the MEK, and (b) promise not to provide material support of any kind to the group (this could include advocating for U.S. political support of the MEK or NCRI).

Apparently if a person agrees to renounce the MEK and any future support, but is later found to have violated this commitment (even if unwittingly, e.g. by providing or accepting material support to or from a MEK member), then that refugee is vulnerable to deportation back to his or her country of origin — in this case, Iraq or possibly even Iran.

According to legal counsel there are at least two ways to solve this dilemma. DHS could exercise discretion by not designating the MEK as a Tier III entity. Thus persons currently affiliated with the group could be considered for admission without having to renounce any future membership or contact with the organization or its members. Alternatively, Congress could enact legislation expressly removing the MEK from the Tier I – III designations for the limited purpose of refugee admissibility of persons affiliated with the group; all other requirements for refugee admissibility would still apply.

I'm not a lawyer. While some may wish to get hung up on the legal complexities, others will want to debate the group's history and structure. We can certainly have those discussions.

What we know is that a lot of things we thought were true about the MEK for many years have been investigated in detail, and turn out to be untrue or greatly exaggerated. But history aside, even the State Department since 2012 has made clear that the National Council of Resistance and its affiliate, the MEK, are entirely political in character, and have been engaged in political opposition activities for the past 14 years at least.

It is time our government realized that the Iranian resistance has been misunderstood for many years in Washington due to false information, and they should be treated the same as our government would treat the political opposition from any country. If there are separate rules that should apply to the MEK, they should be preferential, not punitive measures, reflecting the fact that the resistance was the first to reveal Iran's secret nuclear enrichment activities in 2002 and then they turned over all their weaponry to American forces in 2003 in return for a commitment from the United States under international law that they would be protected. Every time we have fallen short of fulfilling this commitment, our country's reputation has been diminished, and Iran's regime has gained leverage against voices calling for democratic reform.

None of the falsehoods, distortions, or legal disputes can distract from what remains an irrefutable obligation: to aid a group of people who have cooperated with us, who have helped us, who protected us, who we promised to protect, and who remain in mortal danger. That's why such a large and growing, bi-partisan chorus continue to call for action.

Before further tragedy ensues, we can and we must meet our duty by expeditiously accepting an appropriate number of the remaining refugees here under fair and responsible terms; by exercising our leadership to get allies to do the same; and, above all, by keeping a solemn promise we made to friends of the United States before further bloodshed is visited on unarmed, vulnerable people. Keeping our promises is what good and great countries do.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I'm confident that with your insistence we can and will do what's right.

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