

Avoiding another Srebrenica at Ashraf in Iraq

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Over the past weekend, I met with nine Canadian citizens of Iranian origin who are former residents of Camp Ashraf. Despite the escalating risk to their own lives as Iraqi prime minister al-Maliki's threats to attack the camp by year's end nears, they were all reluctant to leave the 3400 other refugees behind. The nine stressed that the others, as escapees from Iran, have no other country which will currently accept them and would be killed if returned to Tehran.

The nine are pleased that the all-party House of Commons subcommittee on international human rights last week unanimously passed a motion calling for Iraq to allow international observers into Ashraf, to extend the deadline, and to ask the government of Canada to push for a UN Security Council resolution to locate a protective force at Ashraf.

One noted that his best friend "died in my arms" during the Iraqi army pre-dawn attack on April 8th, 2011. During this second massacre (the first was in 2009), 36 were killed and 350 were wounded. Elham Zanjani went from her home in Canada to Ashraf in 1999 at the age of 20. She was wounded in the April attack "when an Iraqi soldier threw a grenade at me...The day before the attack, the US embassy in Baghdad told us that the Iraqi forces were going to launch an operation. Despite our pleas to the commander of US forces... to stay, his unit was ordered out of the Camp at 9:20 pm on April 7th. That left us completely defenseless in the face of a massive assault by the Iraqi forces".



Elham Zanjani



Nouri al-Maliki

Al-Maliki wrote earlier this month: "I would like to see this complex issue (Ashraf) resolved peacefully and with the help of the United Nations. The camp's residents are classified as a terrorist organization by many countries and thus have no legal basis to remain ...No country would accept the presence of foreign insurgents on its soil, but we will work hard to find a peaceful solution that upholds the international values of human rights." Unfortunately, al-Maliki's words are hollow. Four days before the second massacre at Ashraf, he assured American diplomats in Baghdad that he would not attack the camp. Last week, AFP reported that he had called Ashraf residents a "criminal gang".

The nine want Canada to show leadership by pushing the UN Security Council to postpone the Dec. 31 deadline. One way of achieving this would be offering to bring a

limited number of the residents to Canada. Doing so might cause other governments to extend a similar offer, providing enough international pressure to extend the year end deadline for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to process all applicants. Approximately 900 residents appear already to have some connections to countries in Europe, North America and Australia.

Ashraf has a complex history. Many Iranian PMOI supporters, who opposed the regimes of both the Shah and the clerics, fled to France after tens of thousands of them were executed by the Khomeini regime after 1979. France expelled them in 1986 in order to obtain the release of some of its soldiers captured by Iran. Only Saddam Hussein would accept them, so they relocated to Iraq, and built Ashraf in the desert. The PMOI kept him at arm's length, however, and were neutral during the US invasion of Iraq in 2003.

In 1997, as a goodwill gesture to the new Khatami government in Iran, the Clinton administration put the PMOI on the State Department's list of terrorist organizations. Paul Martin as prime minister proscribed the PMOI in Canada in 2005. In Europe, seven courts have meanwhile ruled a similar designation "perverse" and removed it for the 27 EU countries. Despite a U.S. federal appeal court ruling in July, 2010, ordering the designation to be reviewed, the U.S. State Department has yet to make a decision. Ashraf residents have been designated as protected persons by the U.S. under the Fourth Geneva Convention. The Iraqi government under international law was required to take over the protection of all residents under the Convention when the Americans left Ashraf.

Col. Gary Morsch, MD, former U.S. Battalion Surgeon at Ashraf, told a Congressional hearing in July: "There were no findings of any terrorist activities... illegal activities, coercion of (PMOI) members, hidden arms, or ... evidence that the (PMOI) were not fulfilling their agreement with the US military to fully cooperate with and support the goals of the US in Iraq..." (Residents) "had come to Ashraf to voluntarily serve with the (PMOI) to establish a free and democratic Iran...It was with great sadness that I ... witnessed the abandonment of the residents of Camp Ashraf by the very government that ... asked me to risk my life to defend (them)...."

The UN has also been woefully weak on the protection of Ashraf, when it should be maintaining a monitoring mission at the camp, knowing that its mere presence would prevent further violence. On September 19, it finally acknowledged that residents are "asylum seekers" and must "benefit from basic protection of their security and well-being".

The time for humanitarian action to avoid another Srebrenica in Iraq is now.

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