

LATEST UPDATE: 12/12/2011

- BARACK OBAMA - IRAQ - NURI AL-MALIKI - PEOPLE'S MUJAHIDEEN ORGANISATION OF IRAN

The noose tightens around Iranian refugees at Camp Ashraf



The Iraqi government has announced that it plans to close Camp Ashraf, home to more than 3,000 Iranian dissidents by the end of the year. But the decision that has put the international community in a difficult position.

By [Marc DAOU](#) (text)

During his visit to the US this week, Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has a number of issues on the agenda, primarily the December 31, 2011, withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq. But at Camp Ashraf – home to more than 3,000 Iranian dissidents in Iraq - all eyes are set on whether Maliki's visit could bring a resolution to a looming crisis over the future of the refugee camp.

December 31 also happens to be the deadline set by Maliki's government to dismantle the camp, which is situated in Iraq's Diyala province about 60 kilometers north of Baghdad.

A sprawling camp that emerged in the mid-1980s, Camp Ashraf is a base of the People's Mujahideen Organization of Iran (PMOI), a resistance group opposed to the Iranian theocratic regime and reviled in Tehran. Under former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, the group - which is also called the Mujahideen Khalq - mounted attacks against the Iranian government.

Brig. Gen. David Phillips - Head of security at Camp Ashraf in 2004

Following the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, the camp was disarmed and secured by US troops until 2009, when the US turned the camp over to the Iraqi government.

Since the handover to the Iraqi government, human rights groups have criticised the Iraqi military of regularly targeting “[unarmed dissidents in the camp](#)”. The most recent incident occurred in April, when 34 camp residents were killed, according to the UN.

“Considering the previous dramatic incidents in the camp against its unarmed inhabitants, we can expect the worst, which would mean a new bloodbath if Baghdad implements its [December 31 camp dismantling] decision,” warned Afchine Alavi, a spokesman of the France-based National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), which is composed mainly of Mujahideen Khalq members.

Alavi was speaking at an international conference in Paris over the weekend, when NCRI members - along with a number of former senior US military and political leaders - called for “urgent action by the international community” to intervene with Iraqi leaders.

UN call for extension of camp closure deadline

The UN has appealed to the Iraqi government to delay the planned December 31 closure of Camp Ashraf, with UN special envoy for Iraq Martin Kobler calling on Maliki’s government to extend the deadline “in order to permit adequate time and space for a solution to be found”.

But the Iraqi government has insisted that the camp must close by the end of the year. Baghdad says Camp Ashraf is a security threat and Iraq’s UN ambassador Hamid al-Bayati maintains that Iraq cannot host any group “which will attack neighboring countries”.

Critics however state that the Iraqi government’s sole purpose for closing down the camp is to please the Iranian government. “No timetable, no interest in Iraq justifies the closure of Camp Ashraf,” said Alavi. “They’re acting solely in Iran’s interests. Iran dictates the terms to Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki.”

With Baghdad attempting to bolster ties with Iran, the dissidents in Camp Ashraf have become a major irritant to Iraq's Shiite-led government. Both countries have Shiite majorities and in Iraq, Shiite political groups dominate power with many Iraqi politicians – including Maliki – having spent time in exile in Iran.

Following the December 31, 2011, withdrawal of US troops, there are growing concerns in Washington over Iran’s influence in Iraq.

Lobbying to get struck off the terrorist list

Saturday’s conference in Paris ended with delegates issuing an appeal to US President Barack Obama. “On the eve of the Iraqi Prime Minister’s visit to the United States, we are writing to call for immediate action to prevent a humanitarian crisis in Camp Ashraf in Iraq,” said the final declaration.

The pressure on Washington is no coincidence. Under the Geneva Conventions, the US granted the refugees of Camp Ashraf the status of "protected persons" while maintaining the Mujahideen Khalq on the US list of terrorist organisations.

The EU, on the other hand, removed the group from its "black list" in 2009, following several court rulings. But the group has a shadowy reputation, with the New York-based [Human Rights Watch](#) accusing the Mujahideen Khalq of controlling the camp with an iron hand and muzzling residents who challenge its authority.

In a [New York Times](#) report, a US State Department official, who declined to be named, said the camp's leaders "exert total control over the lives of Ashraf's residents, much like we would see in a totalitarian cult," requiring fawning devotion to the group's leaders, Maryam Rajavi, who lives in France, and her husband, Massoud, whose whereabouts are unknown.

Supporters of the group however deny the charges say it has renounced violence and has not engaged in terrorist acts for a decade.

In an interview with FRANCE 24 on the sidelines of Saturday's conference, Brig. Gen. David Phillips, the commander of the 89th Military Police Brigade of the US Army, which was responsible for the security of Camp Ashraf in 2004, said he found no evidence that the group was a terrorist organisation.

"Initially, when I arrived at Camp Ashraf, I was told simply that they're a foreign terrorist organisation. I tried very hard to get information as to why they are that type of organisation. I was never able to substantiate any of those allegations, [which was] very frustrating for my soldiers and I," said Phillips.

As US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton completes a review of the terrorist designation, there has been a massive lobbying effort in the US for a designation reversal.

Andrew Card, Chief of Staff under George Bush, on Camp Ashraf

The lobbying effort has won high profile supporters in the US, including Andrew Card, President George W. Bush's chief of staff, who attended Saturday's conference in Paris.

"I'm a very strong advocate of their being taken off that list," said Card in an interview with FRANCE 24. "I hope that the Obama administration will move quickly to make sure they're no longer on the State Department terrorist list."

Card maintains that the US bears a responsibility to protect the residents of Camp Ashraf and that Washington's credibility is at stake following the attacks in the camp after the 2009 camp handover to Iraqi forces. "We want to make very sure that the word that America gave to the people of Camp Ashraf that they will be protected is respected by Prime Minister Maliki," said Card.

In a December 6 column in the [Washington Post](#), Maliki noted that “the camp’s residents are classified as a terrorist organisation by many countries and thus have no legal basis to remain in Iraq,” before adding, “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.”

Finding a peaceful resolution to the current crisis is just what the residents of Camp Ashraf want. But the clock is ticking and for the more than 3,000 camp residents, there little guarantee of what the New Year will bring.

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