

DURING DEBATE ON SYRIA, U.S. OFFICIALS MUST ALSO PROTECT IRANIAN OPPOSITION

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Written by Dr. Ivan Sascha Sheehan, Guest Contributor



As the U.S. debates whether to stand with the Syrian opposition and confront the atrocities committed by the murderous Assad regime in Syria this week, the Iranian regime is using Iraqi forces as proxies to massacre its own opposition—the People’s Mujahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI)—at Camp Ashraf. The facility, in Diyala province north of Baghdad, is home to approximately one hundred Iranian dissidents.

Most residents of Camp Ashraf—a decades long home to more than three thousand Iranians who fled persecution after the 1979 Revolution—were transferred to a former U.S. military installation near Baghdad named Camp Liberty last year. The transfer was predicated on assurances of protection and safe resettlement in third countries, promises that never materialized.

Since the move, residents of both Ashraf and Liberty have been denied access to their belongings, adequate shelter, safe water, and electricity. Assaultants acting on behalf of the Iranian regime also routinely assault and kill the dissidents, all of whom are unarmed.

Sunday’s heinous attack on Ashraf residents began at midnight when Iraqi forces, under the command of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, fired rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) into residents’ living quarters and subsequently opened fire on them. Less than twelve hours later, more than fifty-two individuals were reported dead and some forty residents were surrounded by Iraqi forces. Nine of those wounded were transferred to the Ashraf medical facility, where Iraqi SWAT units opened fire on them. Other victims of the attack were murdered execution style after they were arrested and handcuffed.

Rocket attacks have become a frequent occurrence at Camps Ashraf and Liberty. Sunday’s attack was the fourth such act of violence by the regime against the defenseless dissidents in 2013 alone. The hits—all designed to intimidate those opposed to clerical rule—have been deliberate attempts to break the back of Iran’s best-organized and most capable political opposition.

Early reports suggest that the Diyala province’s police commander, Jamil Shemeri, with express approval

from the Iraqi Prime Minister's Office, had been stationed in Camp Ashraf since Saturday night to oversee the massacre. Last Tuesday, General Qassem Sulleimani—the commander of the Iranian regime's terrorist Quds Force—reportedly personally delivered the attack orders to Maliki and his National Security Advisor Faleh Fayadh.

The violence against Iranian dissidents is a clear violation of the quadripartite agreement signed by the Iraqi government and ratified by the U.S. government and the United Nations on August 17, 2012.

In 2011, then U.S. Senator and Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee John Kerry issued a strong rebuke of an Iraqi missile and mortar attack that caused dozens to be killed and injured. In renouncing the attack, he called for a “thorough and serious investigation” of the “massacre” and insisted that the investigation “must hold accountable the responsible parties and ensure that there will be no sequel to these horrific events.”

More recently, U.S. Secretary of State Kerry has condemned assaults on residents of Liberty in the strongest possible terms by naming them “vicious and senseless terrorist attacks” and calling for the “terrorists responsible” to be brought to justice. But substantive action has not been taken to back these rhetorical flourishes.

In the wake of Sunday's horrendous violence, senior U.S. officials should denounce the crimes carried out by the Maliki government, insist that the perpetrators be brought to justice for war crimes, and ensure that the regime is not allowed to strike a fatal blow to the Iranian resistance. As the U.S. debates the merits of action in support of the Syrian people, senior U.S. officials should not lose sight of those that have long supported freedom for the Iranian people.

In the coming week, senior U.S. officials should promptly:

- Insist that the killing of Ashraf residents end immediately;
- Denounce the acts as clear violations of both international law and signed agreements;
- Demand that individuals taken hostage be released;
- Take action to ensure the protection of remaining residents from further incursions and acts of violence by airlifting all of the residents of Camps Ashraf and Liberty to the United States where they can truly await safe resettlement to third countries.

U.S. officials and world leaders must also build a case against the Maliki government for crimes against humanity and take steps to formally list the Iranian dissidents as refugees, worthy of all the protections and rights such a designation entails.

Just as brutal acts of violence directed at the Syrian people should not go unpunished, neither should heinous assaults on unarmed Iranian dissidents—including women and children.

President Obama's clarion call for action in support of the Syrian people should next be followed by a denunciation of violence against those that oppose the Iranian regime's brutality and through efforts to protect those that believe that Iran's future can be more peaceful than its past or present.

Dr. Ivan Sascha Sheehan is director of the graduates programs in Negotiation and Conflict Management and Global Affairs and Human Security in the School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Baltimore. He may be found at www.professorsheehan.com.

U.S. Navy photo by Photographer's Mate 1st Class Arlo K. Abrahamson.

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