

**Remarks of Steven M. Schneebaum, Esq.  
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My friends:

For nearly three years now, it has been my privilege to represent the United States families, friends, and loved ones of members of the People's Mujahedin Organization of Iran, who are at Camp Ashraf in Iraq. The 3,800 people of Ashraf live, unarmed, in a very dangerous neighborhood, and those who care about them are deeply concerned about their welfare.

In recent months, two members of the PMOI were kidnapped from the streets of Baghdad, in broad daylight. A bus transporting Iraqi workers at Camp Ashraf was bombed, and nearly 20 people died. Just a few weeks ago, a bomb destroyed one of the pipelines furnishing the Camp with water. No one can prove with certainty that these offenses were either committed or ordered by agents of Tehran, but we all know that Iranian operatives are carrying out all sorts of violent missions in Iraq, and we know that the PMOI is a favorite target for their hatred.

Food and medicine are also in short supply, and are no longer available through government distribution channels. These shortages do not now rise to the level of humanitarian crisis, but they are sufficient to cause increased worry about what the future might bring.

As we meet here at the United Nations to remind the world of the threats posed by the fundamentalist regime in Tehran, I ask that we take a moment to remember these brave men and women, who have committed themselves to changing that regime. I come not to ask for political support, but simply to remind you, and all of those who may pay attention to this gathering today, of the significant human rights challenges presented by the people of Ashraf.

The PMOI is considered by the Government of the United States to be a "foreign terrorist organization." In that classification, it is very unusual, if not unique: a group condemned as terrorists for seeking to remove from power a group of actual terrorists. We know, of course, that the denunciation of the PMOI resulted from failed efforts by the U.S. to engage Tehran in dialogue a decade ago. It was a gesture, futile in the end, and although it was ignored by the Iranians, it has severely complicated the lives of the members of the PMOI, and those who share their commitment.

Efforts to talk sensibly with Tehran failed, and other efforts will fail, because the mullahs have made it unmistakably clear: their objective is not negotiation with the West, or dialogue with the West, or an exchange of views with the West. Their objective is obtaining military, economic, cultural, and religious domination of the entire Middle East, and they will do whatever they perceive they have to do in order to achieve that objective. They care not one bit about United Nations resolutions that invoke international community standards, suggesting that Iran does not need, and cannot be trusted to maintain, a nuclear program. And similarly, they care not one bit about conciliatory gestures, meant to accommodate their fully justified fear that the PMOI threatens the continuation of their dictatorship.

It is time for the terrorist designation of the PMOI, the National Council of Resistance of Iran, and all of their affiliated organizations to be withdrawn. It is time for the West to recognize the PMOI as a legitimate resistance group, which espouses democratic ideals and seeks change by peaceful means. It is time for the United States Government to stop criminalizing political positions, and to permit the PMOI to enter the marketplace of ideas, where it will succeed, or fail, based on the merits of its arguments.

The people of Ashraf are not terrorists. And it is not only their lawyers and the members of their families who say so. It is no less than GEN George Casey, commander of the Multinational Force in Iraq, who wrote exactly that. Every single man and woman at Ashraf was investigated and interviewed by officials of the United States Government, and every single one was found to be, not a terrorist, but a civilian non-combatant, a protected person under the Fourth Geneva Convention.

That protected status has legal consequences. It means that the people of Ashraf must be treated humanely while they are in the care of the Multinational Force. Their forced repatriation to the country whose regime they have fled is absolutely forbidden. And when and if sovereignty over Diyala Province ever reverts to a functioning Iraqi government, those same obligations will attach to that government.

The people of Ashraf, before the invasion, were accepted in Iraq as refugees under the law. They qualify under the classic definition: they are unable or unwilling to return to their homeland, based on a reasonable fear that, were they to return, they would be persecuted for their political beliefs. The mullahs have never left any doubt about how they would treat the PMOI, were my clients' friends and relatives to return to their beloved country without renouncing those beliefs. Membership in the organization is a capital offense, and history amply shows that, when the government in Tehran says that an offense is punishable by death, death is indeed meted out, to men, women, and children, and in the most horrific ways.

It would be appropriate for the new Iraqi government to reaffirm the refugee status of the PMOI members at Ashraf. Such a proclamation would be an additional commitment to the protection of these people, who have shown themselves to be model guests over the years of their stay in Iraq. Millions of Iraqis have already gone on record as welcoming the PMOI, in the best traditions of Arab hospitality. Responsible leaders of the government of Iraq have repeatedly recognized the rights of their Iranian guests, and when other officials have on occasion strayed from that position, they have been severely, and correctly, criticized for that.

And the people of Ashraf have reciprocated: they have been good neighbors, providing jobs to local citizens. They have cooperated with the Multinational Force in ways both visible and secret. Most importantly, they have been role models for persons of deep conviction, who are not fundamentalist, who do not perpetrate violence, and who welcome women into positions of leadership in their society.

In 2004, I visited the people of Ashraf. I found that they have created a thriving green city in the desert. From there, they dream of building support for the overthrow of the brutal regime in Tehran. I found a patriotic passion, and a profound commitment to peaceful change. I met young men and women, and some not so young, who have willingly suffered enormous sacrifices to live in a way consistent with their ideals. I met with them individually and in small groups, and I spoke to them in their dining halls. And I was dazzled by their

enthusiasm, their optimism, and their willingness to continue to endure great hardships to promote the ideal of a free, democratic, and secular Iran.

As we urge the United Nations to adopt sanctions to deter Iran's frightening nuclear ambitions; as we condemn the rantings of a president who openly calls for the destruction of America's only consistent ally in the Middle East; as we rally to promote the cause of democratic change in Iran: let us remember, and let us pay our respects to, the people of Camp Ashraf. Their families and friends here in the United States ask that we watch closely to ensure continued respect for their loved ones' human rights, which are guaranteed by international law.

Let me say something to the people of Ashraf, who are watching this event by satellite television. Your friends and your families in the United States are thinking of you. We are committed to doing what we can to ensure that you are safe. We are raising our concerns with international agencies, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Friends of yours in the U.S. have met with both of those bodies within the last three weeks, and both have expressed assurances that they are aware of you, and will be following your progress. Those organizations are charged with applying, interpreting, and defending international law, and for that reason we know that we can count on their help.

Yes, international law protects the people of Ashraf. It does not matter even whether we agree or disagree with the political views of these men and women. International law recognizes their rights as humans: rights that are not dependent on the benevolence of a government, but which this great institution, the United Nations, was founded to honor, even when nations and their leaders would betray them. International law must prevail against the assaults of extremists, fanatics, and demagogues of every description.

And if it does – and when it does – then the people of Ashraf will continue to be safe, will continue to thrive, and will continue to work for their vision of a free, democratic, non-fundamentalist, and non-nuclear Iran. Thank you.