

# A March of Folly Toward Iran

Tough-guy posturing in Washington continues to push the United States toward another collision course in the Middle East, as two politically motivated actions ratcheted up tensions with Iran. Ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar sees troubling parallels with the march of folly that led to war in Iraq.

By Paul R. Pillar

Two actions at the end of last week, involving two different branches of the U.S. government, continued a pattern of unthinking support for anything that gets perceived as opposition to the Islamic Republic of Iran.

One such action was passage by the U.S. Senate in the middle of the night of a resolution declaring that the United States and other countries have a “vital interest” in working “to prevent the Government of Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapons capability.” The resolution “rejects any United States policy that would rely on efforts to contain a nuclear weapons-capable Iran.”

Never mind that this resolution buys into Benjamin Netanyahu’s “red line” game of talking about “nuclear weapons capability,” which by some measures Iran already has now, rather than possession of a nuclear weapon, which Tehran consistently disavows.

The most disturbing thing about the resolution is its categorical rejection, in the wee hours of the morning, no less, as Congress was rushing into its pre-election recess, of an entire category of policy options with no consideration whatsoever of the alternatives or any weighing of advantages and disadvantages in comparison with the alternatives.

All we get to accompany the rejection is a string of “whereas” clauses that repeat a familiar litany of things people don’t like about Iran.

Evidently some members who might otherwise have had reservations about this resolution were reassured by a clause stating that “nothing in this resolution shall be construed as an authorization for the use of force or a declaration of war.” The resolution passed 90-1, with Sen. Rand Paul, R-Kentucky, casting the only vote against.

But if the P5+1 (the countries of the UN Security Council plus Germany) continue refusing to offer any significant sanctions relief in return for major restrictions on Iran’s nuclear activities and as a result the negotiations with Tehran go nowhere, we will inevitably hear voices loudly proclaiming that military force is the only way to abide by the policy objectives that this

resolution declares.

Congressional statements such as this midnight resolution have a parallel from prior to the Iraq War: the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998. Although most of the members who voted for that legislation and the president (Bill Clinton) who signed it may have had no intention of facilitating a war, it became a benchmark that promoters of the war repeatedly referred to as a bipartisan statement that regime change in Iraq was the policy of the United States.

The other piece of anti-Iran posturing last week was the decision by the Obama administration to remove the Iranian cult-cum-terrorist group, the Mujahedin-e Khalq or MEK, from the U.S. list of foreign terrorist organizations. Adding groups to that list or removing groups from it is supposed to be a dull process of administrative and legal review, and usually it is.

But the MEK's case became the subject of a lavishly funded public-relations campaign, unlike anything seen with any other group in the 15-year history of the list. Prominent figures, including well-known Democrats as well as Republicans, reportedly received five-figure fees to speak on behalf of delisting the group.

Many members of Congress and others, even if they did not prostitute themselves through such arrangements, naively believed that anything or anyone opposed to the Iranian regime must be worth supporting.

No good will come out of this subversion of the terrorist-group list with regard to conditions in Iran, the behavior or standing of the Iranian regime, the values with which the United States is associated or anything else.

The regime in Tehran will tacitly welcome this move (while publicly denouncing it) because it helps to discredit the political opposition in Iran, a fact not lost on members of the Green Movement, who want nothing to do with the MEK.

The MEK certainly is not a credible vehicle for regime change in Iran because it has almost no public support there. Meanwhile, the Iranian regime will read the move as another indication that the United States intends only to use subversion and violence against it rather than reaching any deals with it.

Although the list of foreign terrorist organizations unfortunately has come to be regarded as a kind of general-purpose way of bestowing condemnation or acceptance on a group, we should remember that delisting changes nothing about the character of the MEK. It is still a cult. It still has near-zero popular support in Iran. It still has a despicably violent history.

As for more recent chapters of that history, given how public the delisting

issue became with the MEK, it probably would have been appropriate for the Department of State to address publicly the press reports, sourced to U.S. officials, that the MEK has collaborated with Israel on terrorist assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists. But that, of course, would have required the politically inconvenient act of publicly addressing Israeli terrorism.

Attention to the issue of moving MEK members from one camp in Iraq to another camp in Iraq, and about threats to the group from within Iraq, appears to have become in the end an excuse for caving in to the public-relations campaign. Whether the group resides at Camp Ashraf or Camp Liberty doesn't determine whether it meets the definition under U.S. law of a foreign terrorist organization.

Whatever problem there may have been at Camp Ashraf, it was the MEK itself that was balking at a move, not any Iraqis that threatened the group. If there is an issue of human rights and refugees, it is mainly one of permitting rank-and-file members to escape the control of the cult's leaders.

The MEK story also has a parallel with the Iraq War. A role that the MEK has to some extent assumed for anti-Iran agitators in this country, and that the delisting will only encourage, recalls the prewar role played by Ahmed Chalabi and the Iraqi National Congress (INC).

Each case involved a group of exiles with a slick talent for manipulating public opinion in the United States but a paucity of support in their own countries. A possible difference is that the MEK's support in Iran is even less than that of the INC in Iraq, given the former's treasonous behavior (in Iranian eyes) during the Iran-Iraq War.

Both of last week's actions, which involve both political parties and both the executive and legislative branches of the U.S. government, are discouraging not only for what they imply about discourse and policy on Iran but also for what they say more generally about U.S. policy-making. The competitive politics of an election campaign have not helped and probably have hurt.

Competitive politics did not have to hurt, especially at a time the Romney campaign is groping for any stick it can use to beat the Obama administration. On the MEK matter, the administration could be legitimately criticized for pusillanimously giving in to a terrorist group's public-relations campaign. It could be charged with appearing to convey approval to a group whose behavior is repugnant to American values. It could be further charged with hurting the cause of democracy in Iran and providing propaganda points to the Iranian regime.

But the campaign evidently is sticking with the usual simplistic approach that

anyone who bashes that regime must be a friend of ours, and besides, some prominent Romney advisers are among those who have spoken publicly on the MEK's behalf.

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## Buying Off the 'Terrorist' List

The label "terrorist" has been bent to political use so often the word has lost any semblance of objective meaning. American politicians and pundits like to hurl it against perceived enemies, but now it appears a group can escape the opprobrium with enough high-priced lobbying, Danny Schechter writes.

By Danny Schechter

Question: When is a terrorist a terrorist? Answer: When the U.S. government says so.

In the 1980s, when the mujahedeen in Afghanistan were assassinating members of the national government and the Russian troops dispatched to support it, the killers were, in Washington's view, freedom fighters. Yet, over the last decade, when these fighters turned against an Afghan government imposed by the United States and began killing Afghan officials and U.S. troops, they were branded terrorists.

In 2011, when armed groups battling Muammar Gaddafi's government in Libya were supported by NATO, they were called freedom fighters. This month, when some allegedly turned violently against the United States, which now dominates Libyan politics, they were castigated as terrorists.

And last week, the United States Government through a decision by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has decided that the Iranian group Mujahedeen Khalq, or People's Mujahedeen, which has been on the U.S. State Department's terrorist list for years, is being removed from the list.

That means the group and its supporters will no longer face financial and legal sanctions. One day, they were feared terrorists; the next day they were not. The "bad guys" became "good guys" with the swipe of a pen.

The New York Times says this feat was accomplished through what it describes as an “extraordinary” lobbying effort costing millions of dollars over many years. Reports the Times:

“The group, known as the M.E.K., carried out terrorist attacks in the 1970s and 1980s, first against the government of the Shah of Iran and later against the clerical rulers who overthrew him. Several Americans were among those killed. In the 1980s, it allied with Saddam Hussein, who permitted it to operate from Camp Ashraf [inside Iraq].

“But by most accounts, the M.E.K. has not carried out violent attacks for many years. While it is described by some critics as cult-like and unpopular with Iranians both inside and outside the country, the group has been able to gather large crowds at rallies in the United States and Europe to press its bid to reverse the United States’ terrorist designation, imposed in 1997.”

The decision comes just before an Oct. 1 cut-off date ordered by a federal appeals court. US News explains: “As recently as 2007, a State Department report warned that the M.E.K., retains ‘the capacity and will’ to attack Europe, the Middle East, the United States, Canada, and beyond.

“The M.E.K., which calls for an overthrow of the Iranian government and is considered by many Iranians to be a cult, once fought for Saddam Hussein and in the 1970s was responsible for bombings, attempted plane hijackings, and political assassinations. It was listed as a foreign terrorist organization in 1997.

“If the State Department does decide to delist M.E.K., whose name means ‘People’s Holy Warriors of Iran,’ it will be with the blessing of dozens of congressmen.”

No less than 99 members of Congress, Democrats and Republican alike, signed onto a congressional resolution to take the “holy warriors” off the list. Just last week at a rally in Paris, none other than former House Speaker and hyper-conservative Republican presidential candidate New Gingrich, now scurrying to pay off his campaign debts, was caught on camera bowing to the French-based movement’s leader Maryam Rajavi.

Top lobbying firms have been paid high fees for rounding up support for M.E.K.

US News explains: “Victoria Toensing of DiGenova & Toensing, a lobbying shop famous for its involvement in the Bill Clinton-Monica Lewinsky scandal, was paid \$110,000 in 2011 to lobby for the resolution. The firm Akin, Gump, Strauss, Hauer & Feld dedicated five lobbyists to getting signatures for the resolution, and was paid \$100,000 in 2012 and \$290,000 in 2011 to do so. Paul Marcone and

Association similarly lobbied for the resolution, and received \$5,000 in 2010 and \$5,000 in 2011 for its efforts.”

Glenn Greenwald has reported at Salon, “That close association on the part of numerous Washington officials with a Terrorist organization has led to a formal federal investigation of those officials. [P]aid MEK shill Howard Dean (a former Democratic liberal presidential candidate) actually called on its leader to be recognized as President of Iran while paid MEK shill Rudy Giuliani has continuously hailed the group’s benevolence.”

ProPublica, the not-for-profit media organization, has also revealed that a very prominent liberal journalist known for his Watergate reporting was paid to speak up for M.E.K

“On a Saturday afternoon last February, journalist Carl Bernstein got up on stage at the grand ballroom of the Waldorf Astoria in Manhattan and delivered a speech questioning the listing of an obscure Iranian group called the Mujahadin-e Khalq (MEK) on the U.S. government list of officially designated foreign terrorist organizations.

“The speech, before a crowd an organizer put at 1,500, made Bernstein one of the few journalists who has appeared at events in a years-long campaign by MEK supporters to free the group from the official terrorist label and the legal sanctions that come with it. He told ProPublica that he was paid \$12,000 for the appearance but that, ‘I was not there as an advocate.’

“Bernstein told the crowd that, ‘I come here as an advocate of the best obtainable version of the truth’ and as ‘someone who believes in basic human rights and their inalienable status.’ He also challenged the State Department, saying that if the agency ‘has evidence that the MEK is a terrorist organization, have a show-cause hearing in court, let them prove it.’”

Listening to the talk was a bipartisan group of prominent pols including ex-New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani, former congressman Patrick Kennedy, D-Rhode Island, former Attorney General Michael Mukasey, and former House Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Illinois.

This is a line-up that is hard to rent, much less buy, but M.E.K and its well connected lobbyists have shown how money makes things happen in Washington. It also shows how porous the terrorism issue is, subject to changes in political fashions, and how little the media knows or remembers and how open it is to being influenced by insiders, especially when there’s money to be paid for a few hours work.

It shows, too, the politics of provocation in action, part of a larger strategy

of escalating tensions. The tactics range from sending a naval armada to menace Iran, perhaps in hopes of staging a contemporary “Tonkin Gulf” incident in which any Iranian defensive maneuver or attack by “militants” could be projected as an act of aggression justifying air strikes and drone attacks.

Even the decision to refuse visas to Iranians coming to a UN meeting seems part of the same strategy designed to show critics in Israel and Republicans that the U.S. is ready to get tough.

The delisting of an Iranian terror group fits right in to an approach that could lead to an “October Surprise” designed to get voters to rally behind the flag and their Commander in Chief.

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