

America's Dubious Ally

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The White House is flirting with an armed Iranian organisation on its own "terrorist" blacklist.

In the wake of its victory in Iraq, Washington has been raising eyebrows by flirting with a bloody organisation that has long been condemned by the US State Department as a terrorist outfit - the Mujahideen-e-Khalq Organisation of Iran (MKO). US commanders signed a ceasefire agreement with the group last month, before backtracking last week by demanding its disarmament.

The original conciliatory deal with the "People's Army" which, over the past 17 years or so, has waged a low-level guerrilla campaign against the mullahs' regime in neighbouring Iran from its five main bases in Iraq, was struck on April 15. Under its terms, the movement would have been allowed to retain its huge military arsenal, comprising hundreds of tanks and thousands of light arms, provided that it did not commit any hostile acts against US forces.

Given its blacklisted status, this initial decision was bound to cause great consternation, both inside the US and in the wider international community. But it was all the more surprising given the MKO's very close links with Baghdad: its 3,000-strong militia had been closely linked to Saddam's regime since 1986, when its leaders were expelled from France and settled in Iraq, and had fought alongside the Iraqi army both in the latter stages of the Iran-Iraq war and during the recent American campaign.

According to high-level defectors, banned Iraqi weapons had also been hidden at its camps.

Above all, the MKO acquired notoriety when its militia assumed a key role in brutally suppressing the Shia rebellion of March 1991: tens of thousands died in the bloodbath that ensued, and the part played by the MKO fighters, known for their great loyalty to Saddam, has never been seriously denied. It was this grisly episode - rather than the involvement of its leader, Massoud Rajavi, in attacks on US citizens in Iran in the late 1970s and early 1980s, or the group's sponsorship of bombings and assassinations inside Iran - that accounted for the State Department's censure in 1997.

Behind the April 15 agreement lay the concern of allied commanders in Iraq not to tie down more troops than absolutely necessary and not to be burdened by tasks - such as disarming the MKO- that are deemed less essential than stabilizing the cities.

The Americans are also keen to find as much support as they can to counter the influence of the 5,000-strong Badr Brigade, the Shia militia whose members are operating inside Iraq and who some believe have the potential to foment serious unrest. The Badr Brigade is heavily backed by Iran's Revolutionary Guard, which the MKO has a vested interest in countering.

These considerations help explain why, during the recent campaign against Saddam Hussein, American planes bombed only a few, largely deserted MKO camps while sparing its main headquarters at Camp Ashraf, 80 kilometres north-east of Baghdad.

But there have also undoubtedly been ideological considerations, too. Despite its unpopularity with the Iranian public, the MKO is the only external armed opposition to Tehran and as such is of obvious interest to Washington hawks. Support for Rajavi's movement is an obvious means of applying leverage on Tehran, a member of President George Bush's "axis of evil", to limit support for the Badr Brigade and Palestinian radicalism and introduce democratic reforms.

Such a role for the MKO has long been championed by a large number of Congressmen and women, 150 of whom signed a petition last November which urged the Bush administration to drop it from the State Department's terrorist list.

US military officials last week announced a new deal with the group which will require its members to disarm and withdraw into their camps under US supervision. At the same time, senior Pentagon officials such as Douglas Feith, the under-secretary of defence for policy, have hotly disputed allegations of sharp disagreements between different factions within Washington.

"The Pentagon's position," Feith claimed last week, has always been that the group "is a terrorist organisation and should be disarmed."

But despite the new deal, the future of the MKO remains anything but clear. The precise terms of the ceasefire, itself only a temporary affair, have not yet been detailed, and it seems likely that some of its members will be allowed to retain part of their arsenal, or have some access to it, perhaps for "self-defence". In the longer-term, it remains possible that the MKO will revamp itself, changing its name, slogans and constitution in a chameleon-like bid to win over those who doubt its fitness as a US-backed anti-Iranian force.

President Bush is presently deciding on the MKO's final status. But if the MKO does win this next battle - the battle for effective US recognition - there can be no doubt that the White House will have a very difficult job to explain dealing with a blacklisted terrorist organisation in order to win a war against terror.

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