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Massacre at Camp Ashraf: Implications for U.S. Policy

Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
House Committee on Foreign Affairs

Introduction:

I'd like to express my gratitude to Chairman Rohrabacher and Ranking Member Rep. Carnahan for giving me the opportunity to testify before this subcommittee.

I had the privilege of serving as the Battalion Surgeon at Camp Ashraf, January – April, 2004, as a member of the US Army Reserve. My responsibilities included 1) overseeing the medical care of the members of the 530th MP Battalion, assigned to provide security for Camp Ashraf, home to members of the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK); 2) ensuring that the residents of Camp Ashraf and the MEK received proper medical care; 3) providing medical care to the MEK members who had voluntarily moved to the TIPF (Temporary Interview and Protection Facility); and, 4) overseeing the health and welfare of the MEK members during the interrogation phase of the official U.S. Government investigation.

Due to the nature of my responsibilities, I worked closely with all levels of the MEK, from the newest and youngest members of Ashraf, to the highest leadership of the MEK; even including MEK members who had moved to the TIPF after leaving the ranks of the MEK. I had full access to all areas of Camp Ashraf, and could interact freely with all MEK members. I also worked closely with the command structure of the 530th MP Battalion, as well as their higher command, the 89th MP Brigade, and its commander, COL David Phillips, now BG Phillips. During the interview and interrogation phase of the investigation, I worked closely with the various members of the investigating agencies that were onsite.

Based on the information I personally received or observed from the members of the MEK, the information I received from those who had surrendered to the TIPF, what I learned from discussions with the leadership of the 530th MP Battalion and the 89th MP Brigade, and, finally, based on the information I received from the various investigators, there were no findings of any terrorist activities, disloyalty to the mission of the US military in Iraq, illegal activities, coercion of MEK members, hidden arms, or any evidence that the MEK were not fulfilling their agreement with the US Military to fully cooperate with and support the goals of the US in Iraq. I directly observed many instances where the MEK were very helpful to the US, providing intelligence, cooperation, and support to the US mission in Iraq, which resulted in protecting the lives of me and the soldiers I served with. In point of fact, the MEK at Camp Ashraf played an important role in the success of our mission.

Assignment to Camp Ashraf:

I was deployed to Iraq in January, 2004, shortly after the beginning of the Iraq War. I was assigned to serve as the Battalion Surgeon for the 530th MP Battalion at Camp Ashraf. I was not briefed in any way about my assignment, and knew nothing about Camp Ashraf or the MEK. Everything I subsequently learned about the MEK and their history I learned from reading

confidential background reports supplied by the US military, and from my direct observations of the MEK and Camp Ashraf.

Impressions of Ashraf:

I arrived in Ashraf at night, by way of a convoy of HMMWVs. I had been told that Ashraf was nothing but a dry spot in the middle of the desert. As we neared Ashraf that first night, I saw a bright glow on the horizon that looked like a large city. This was Ashraf, a modern city of lighted streets and boulevards, not a poor third world village as I'd expected. When the daylight dawned, I was surprised by the beauty and magnificence of Ashraf. Far from being a dry spot in the desert, it was an oasis, with tree-lined boulevards, parks, and landscaped flower gardens. And it was a real city, with hospitals, schools, factories, stages and venues for music and the performing arts, mosques, stadiums, athletic fields, and even a large convention center.

Since my duties took me to other parts of Iraq, where I witnessed the living conditions of other US military units, I realized the unique place that Ashraf was. I would tell the soldiers I served with that we were in one of the most beautiful places in Iraq, and certainly, we were in the safest place.

I was also impressed with the quality of the residents of Ashraf. I was shocked to learn that all of them had come to Ashraf voluntarily to join the MEK. They came from Iran, and many other countries. Many came from the US, and had graduate and post-graduate degrees from some of America's finest universities. Those from the US spoke excellent English, and we talked of favorite football teams, the NBA, American baseball, and of music and history and world events. These were highly educated and highly motivated individuals who had come to Ashraf to voluntarily serve with the MEK to establish a free and democratic Iran, and were now working with the US to promote democracy in Iraq.

Iranian Influence:

It was obvious from the date of my arrival in January of 2004 that there was an insidious and growing intrusion of Iranian influence and intervention in Iraq. Because Ashraf was close to the border of Iran, and the border was not closed, the American forces observed the movement of Iranians and Iraqis across the border. Soon it became clear that the IED's being used against our soldiers were being supplied by Iran. In addition, there was evidence of Iranian agents that were active in Iraq, directly interfering with the US mission.

I raised the issue of the open border with my superiors. It seemed to me that controlling this border was imperative to stopping this Iranian interference. I was apparently naïve in thinking that this was even possible, with the length of the border and the limits to the size of the American forces.

The Investigation:

Although I was not directly involved in what I refer to as the Great Investigation, I was present during the months when every member of the MEK at Ashraf were interviewed, or, in some cases, interrogated. As I understand it, the lead agency on site was the FBI, although they were joined and supported by a variety of representatives of OGA's, including the DOS, CIA, DIA, DOJ, etc.

Arrangements were made to interview a certain number of MEK members each day, and a system was developed to select those individuals and transport them from the Convention Center in Ashraf to a series of temporary holding tents where the MEK members were held or housed, depending on how many hours or days their interviews lasted. MEK members would then be taken to individual tents that had been set up for the interviews. My role as the Battalion Surgeon was to ensure that the holding, housing, and interview conditions for the MEK did not adversely affect the health and well-being of each of interviewee. Because the Iraqi climate is very dry and hot, it was important to make sure that medically vulnerable MEK members were observed for signs of dehydration or heat illness. In addition, I monitored the health of the MEK members who were held for more than a day, making sure that those who were on prescription medications had access to them, etc.

The numerous personnel who had come to Ashraf for the investigation were housed and fed by the American forces. I was also responsible for any medical care needed by these personnel. Due to my knowledge of the MEK, and because I was present in the holding areas throughout the interviews, I spent a lot of time with the investigators and discussed many of the things they were learning. From these conversations, it appeared that many of the OGA representatives had come to Ashraf with expectations that they would find enough evidence on certain MEK members that would support bringing them back to the US for some type of prosecution. As I talked with some of these OGA personnel, I was struck with the impression that they knew very specifically who they were planning to identify for prosecution. As the days of the investigation wore on, the OGA interviewers became more and more frustrated because they were unsuccessful in finding any, or enough, evidence to warrant transfer to the US. One particular MEK member that had been previously identified was the son of the Rajavi's. The FBI interviewers hoped to convince him to abandon the MEK. The young man was held in isolation for several days, and interviewed for many hours, in the hopes that he would leave the MEK. There was great frustration when the OGA personnel were unsuccessful in recruiting him. Of the hundreds and hundreds of MEK members interviewed, I recall one interviewer telling me that about the only thing they came up with on the MEK members were some unpaid traffic fines. The interview process finally ended, without any MEK members found to have any significant ties to criminal activity or terrorism.

The cooperative partnership between the MEK and the US Forces:

The MEK provided great support to our American forces. We established cooperative partnerships to ensure the security of both groups. We relied on the intelligence gathering of the MEK in the region to assess risks for convoy travel, security operations, and force protection activities. In addition, due to the flow of individuals across the Iranian border, the MEK were able to monitor conditions on the border and within Iran.

The MEK at Ashraf were also very proactive in their community organizing in order to further the democratic goals of the US in Iraq. Numerous official functions were sponsored by the MEK, in which hundreds or thousands of Iraqis participated in International Women's Day activities, democratic round tables, leadership summits, etc. In addition, Ashraf was a center for music, drama, and other cultural activities, which were attended by area residents outside of Ashraf. In addition, the MEK provided medical services and technical support to the Iraqi citizens.

The American forces were frequently invited to participate in these activities, and attended as they were able. Special holidays, including Iranian, Iraqi, and American, were celebrated with joint dinners and activities. Even religious occasions were jointly recognized, with MEK members joining religious services held by the US chaplain, and vice-versa.

The spirit of friendship, respect, and cooperation was profound. I felt a common bond with the MEK members, knowing of their passion and commitment to establish a free and democratic Iran. Although the MEK had given up their arms, I felt that we were indeed comrades-in-arms, fighting for a common goal.

Current situation in Ashraf:

The assaults on the residents of Ashraf on July 28-29, 2009, and April 8th, 2011, with the resulting loss of life and extensive casualties suffered by the MEK, are well documented. Today, Ashraf is a city under siege. The citizens of Ashraf, who I and my fellow Americans worked so hard to protect and support, are now being denied the very things that the American forces had guaranteed--- security, food, medical care, to name a few. Because of my role as the physician responsible for their health and well-being, it is particularly disturbing that they are now being denied access to appropriate medical services.

One action that would help bring clarity to the current situation would be for a group of medical professionals to visit Ashraf, to directly assess their current medical conditions. Because of the sense of responsibility I still carry for the residents of Ashraf, I have volunteered to participate in such an assessment. I would be happy to join a Congressional, NGO, State Department, or UN group to conduct such an assessment. Other distinguished American physicians, such as Gov. Howard Dean, have also expressed interest in joining an assessment team.

Conclusion:

I voluntarily serve in the US Army Reserve as a physician, and I volunteered to serve in Iraq. When I learned of the noble mission I was part of--- protecting the members of the MEK at Camp Ashraf, I committed myself to serving with distinction, as did my fellow soldiers. I and my medical team worked tirelessly to provide and coordinate the medical care of the residents of Camp Ashraf. Knowing that my government had made a solemn pledge to the MEK to protect them, in return for the MEK's agreement to lay down their weapons and to fully cooperate with the US, I left Ashraf in 2004 with the full confidence that, no matter what the course of the war, the US would uphold its side of the agreement. It was with great sadness that I have now witnessed the abandonment of the residents of Camp Ashraf by the very government that had asked me to risk my life to defend these same people. From the videos I have seen of the attacks on Ashraf by the Iraqi forces, it appears that some of the vehicles and weapons used by the Iraqi forces were likely supplied by the US. In fact, in one video, of the July 2009 attack, American soldiers stood by and did nothing to intervene in one of the attacks. When a wounded resident approached them, they rolled up the windows of their vehicle and drove off.

Although there may be significant mitigating factors that have led my government to make the decisions it has, I believe there are few things as important or precious as the agreements we make. Our standing in the world is irreparably damaged when we fail to keep our sacred promises.

I have heard that our Embassy in Baghdad has suggested that Ashraf residents be relocated to another location in Iraq. That, in my judgment, would be a recipe for disaster. Unless the United States were to protect the residents in their new location, the residents would certainly meet certain death. The threat to these residents would not necessarily come directly from the Iranians, but from the Iraqi Government, its military, or its police forces. We should not forget that 47 residents of Ashraf have died at the hands of the Iraqis, and hundreds more wounded.

The United States cannot abandon the residents of Ashraf, and the United Nations has an equally important role to play in averting this looming disaster. It is clear that if Camp Ashraf residents are left alone to the Iraqi forces with no oversight, whether in Ashraf or anywhere else, they will be murdered. We must not allow that.

We must do everything we reasonably can to fulfill the agreement we made to the MEK in 2003. If nothing else, I would suggest that the United Nations take over the responsibility for protecting the residents of Ashraf, and begin the process of resettling its residents to friendly nations that would allow them to immigrate. To allow them to remain under the control of the Iranian influenced Iraqis is to risk even greater failure. Our national integrity is on the line as are the lives of the 3,400 Iranian political refugees in Camp Ashraf.

**United States House of Representatives
Committee on Foreign Affairs**

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Clause 2(g) of rule XI of the Rules of the House of Representatives and the Rules of the Committee require the disclosure of the following information. A copy of this form should be attached to your written testimony and will be made publicly available in electronic format, per House Rules.

1. Name: Gary Morsch, MD	2. Organization or organizations you are representing: Self
3. Date of Committee hearing: July 7, 2011	
4. Have <u>you</u> received any Federal grants or contracts (including any subgrants and subcontracts) since October 1, 2008 related to the subject on which you have been invited to testify? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No	5. Have any of the <u>organizations you are representing</u> received any Federal grants or contracts (including any subgrants and subcontracts) since October 1, 2008 related to the subject on which you have been invited to testify? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
6. If you answered yes to either item 4 or 5, please list the source and amount of each grant or contract, and indicate whether the recipient of such grant was you or the organization(s) you are representing. You may list additional grants or contracts on additional sheets. 	
7. Signature: 	

Please attach a copy of this form to your written testimony.