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COMMENTARY

People Power, Iranian-Style

By PAULO CASACA

Last April, on a tour of Iraq, I spent several days in a camp north-east of Baghdad populated by several thousand Iranians. They were members of Iranian People's Mujahedeen, an organization the regime in Tehran considers as its enemy number one, with America and Israel.

Arriving at Camp Ashraf after traveling around Iraq felt like reaching an oasis. Traffic police who imposed fines on speeding; Ashraf was the only place I found in Iraq where traffic rules were respected and enforced. People could move in peace and freedom. The urban infrastructure, such as water, sanitation and electricity, was very well maintained by the Iranians themselves.

The sprawling enclave looked like a microcosm of another Iran. Here, where all the road signs are in Farsi and English, I found an extraordinary collection of mainly middle class, university-educated activists united by their hatred of the Islamic fundamentalist regime in their homeland.

I was also struck by the cultural diversity: Dozens of well-stocked libraries, several theaters and movie halls, five orchestras and, according to Kamyar Izadpanah, a U.S.-educated composer, one of the best Persian music conservatories in the world. Two universities -- set up with the help of professors from Baghdad University -- teach a wide array of subjects from law to engineering.

About a third of these dissidents are women, and women hold senior leadership and management positions. One of them, the Mujahedeen's secretary general, Mojgan Parsai, studied computer science in the U.S. In Ashraf, women are proud of their achievements in gender equality. My most moving meeting was with former political prisoners, who described horrific torture and rape that they suffered at the hands of Iran's Revolutionary Guards.

At the "terrorism museum" in the middle of the camp, an astonishingly large number of terrorist devices used by the Iranian regime to liquidate its opponents are on display. Photographs and grim statistics chronicle 450 acts of terrorism around the world attributed to Tehran's operatives -- irrefutable proof that these activists have been the victims of terrorism and the Iranian regime the perpetrator.

I left the camp with the clear impression that the Iranian Mujahedeen is a legitimate resistance movement that merits the support of the free world. In a region still

dominated by intolerance, tyranny and blind fanaticism, this movement is advocating an Islam based on democratic governance, secularism, tolerance, and gender equality. The fact that the movement is led by a woman -- Maryam Rajavi, who lives near Paris -- only sharpens the contrast with a regime that bars women from high political office.

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I recount my experience because I believe the Mujahedeen constitute our best chance to counter the growing Iranian threat. And counter it we must. While Iraq dominates the U.S. presidential campaign, it is Iran that is fast becoming the focal point of international concern. Rightly so. Iran is home to an Islamic fundamentalist regime that openly sponsors terrorism, foments violence in Iraq, develops long-range missiles, and has been caught "red-handed" concealing critical aspects of its advanced nuclear program.

Where does this leave the West's policy options? Some in Europe and in the U.S. -- oblivious to the evident failure of years of "constructive engagement" with Iran that only strengthened the more radical faction of the theocratic clique -- insist on continuing on the same path. But Iran's mullahs are proven masters in the art of taking the carrot and asking for more. If we don't change course, we may end up with nothing better than a promise of compliance that Iran -- like North Korea in the 1990s -- could secretly break. This is precisely what Iran did when the "EU-3" foreign ministers visited Tehran last October and struck an agreement with the Iranian leaders to suspend uranium enrichment. We now know that the promise was never respected.

The Iranian leaders' intransigence is to a large extent based on their perception of a widening gulf between the U.S. and Europe. This, Iranian strategists declare, creates a "security margin" for Tehran. They seem convinced that the trans-Atlantic divide will prevent any serious action against the Islamic Republic. The hard-line ayatollahs already ridicule the very idea of Security Council sanctions.

In their view, trade rather than other concerns ultimately determine Europe's position on Iran, while the U.S. is bogged down in Iraq. This situation has provided Tehran with an exceptional window of opportunity that it hopes will be wide enough to take its nuclear weapons project beyond the point of no return. As long as the regime remains in power, Iran will continue to be a source of instability and terrorism.

Europe has a grave moral and political responsibility to adopt a new, firm approach on Iran. The failure of past diplomatic and economic sanctions imposed on Iraq is no argument to foreclose the use of effective pressure against Iran, even though the current state of global oil markets would complicate any decision. But the West must start sending the right signals if its resolve is to be taken seriously in Tehran. It must stop sending trade missions to Iran, as both the U.K. and France recently did. And it must stop staging big diplomatic events to promote ties with the Iranian regime, as Germany did.

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There is, however, a much more effective way to obliterate the Iranian rulers' "margin of terror" -- what their "security margin" really means -- and that is to support the Iranian people's democratic aspirations. Western governments must speak out more forcefully in support of the millions of Iranians, particularly the young and women,

who want to see a democratic, secular and pluralist government replace the current theocracy.

It is my view, shared by more than 1,000 members of parliaments in Europe, that our first political step should be to end the international blacklisting of the mullahs' principal opposition movement -- the Iranian Mujahedeen.

Many in the U.S. Congress and prominent voices in international law endorse the call. Senior U.S. officials confirm that an exhaustive, 16-month investigation by several U.S. government agencies, including the State Department and the FBI, has exonerated members of the Iranian Mujahedeen of terrorist charges. Officials on both sides of the Atlantic are on the record as saying that the only reason why the group was put on the U.S. terrorism list in the first place was to send a "goodwill gesture" to the Iranian regime.

Let Iran's clerical rulers know that their "security margin" is history. That's the only way to save the world from cataclysmic options a few months, or years, down the road.

Mr. Casaca, a Socialist Euro-MP from Portugal, is president of the European Parliament's delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.