

Bureau of Investigative Journalism-BOIJ website

April 8th, 2011

MEK defectors were interrogated by Iranians while in Iraqi custody, refugee alleges

By Melanie Newman and Henry

The Iraqi government gave Iranian officials access to former MEK members under house arrest in Iraq, a defector from the group has alleged.

Shahram Parvin, a member of the MEK's political leadership who left Ashraf in April 2009 along with some twenty others, claims the defectors were individually interviewed by an Iranian official while under the custody of the Iraqi government in a hotel in Baghdad.

By Stephen Dann/Flickr

He said: "After I decided to leave the camp, I was taken by armed guards to a hotel in Baghdad, where I was told a member of the Iraqi human rights ministry would meet me. On arrival, I was ushered into a small room where a man asked me various questions. Some of the questions made me suspicious and I refused to answer. I later learned this man was from the Iranian embassy".

He added that the same official promised to help him move to the West if he collaborated "in activities against the MEK", and interviewed other members of the group from a desk set up in the hotel corridor.

Parvin alleged that the UNHCR and ICRC were aware of the situation but failed to act effectively to prevent the interrogations. A US diplomatic cable sent in December 2009 notes that the UNHCR had been denied access to the defectors for two weeks and had commented that the Baghdad hotel was "accessible to Tehran."

The claims are also supported by several suggestions in leaked US diplomatic cables that Tehran was interfering in Iraq's governance at that time.

In September 2009 a cable from US ambassador Christopher Hill quoted Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki complaining that Iran was "intervening increasingly boldly in the Iraqi political process". Mr Hill was prompted to comment that Maliki's remarks about Iranian involvement in Iraqi internal affairs were "the strongest we have heard."

Commenting on the defectors in a different cable, Mr Hill said most claimed to feel betrayed by the MEK and had asked to be resettled in the West.

After months of house arrest they were complaining of "purgatory" and hopelessness, according to the cable. "Many also expressed disappointment with the US and other Western countries for refusing to accept them as refugees," Hill wrote on 18 September 2009. "One man questioned why, after renouncing their ties with the MEK, they were still treated as terrorists and refused resettlement, pointing out that even former Guantanamo refugees were being resettled in Europe".

The group was held at the hotel for over a year. Most eventually returned to Iran. Parvin was one of two defectors granted asylum by European countries; the UK accepted him in November 2010 on the grounds of his past UK residence and his strong family ties with the country.