

Meeting with Ibrahim Khodabandeh and Jamil Bassam

REBUTTAL OF AN ITEM IN FARSI ON IRAN DIDBAN (WEBSITE
REPORTEDLY BELONGING TO THE
IRANIAN MINISTRY OF INTELLIGENCE) ON JUNE 24TH

I have been told that the above item also appears in Farsi on the Iran-Interlink website

There was no "delegation of experts". Sir Teddy Taylor MP and I arrived together from London at 2.00am on Monday, 14th June 2004. When he approached me on the Wednesday afternoon before my visit, saying he had been invited to accompany me to Tehran by the Iranian Government, I explained that my purpose was to visit two political prisoners that I had been granted permission to see – unexpectedly – by the Iranian Government.

Up to the point of our arrival at the prison at around 2.00pm we thought I would see Ibrahim Khodabandeh and Jamil Bassam while Sir Teddy Taylor was shown some of the prison.

I knew Anne Singleton was in Tehran but did not expect her to be present for my meeting with Mr Khodabandeh and Mr Bassam. Anne Singleton is the sister in law of Ibrahim Khodabandeh, had at one time been a supporter of the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) but is now a dedicated opponent of the movement and runs an anti-NCRI website, Iran-Interlink. The description of her as "representing a non-governmental human rights organisation" attempts to give the impression that she is neutral in the struggle between the Government of Iran and the NCRI (and its military wing, the People's Mojahedin of Iran, known as the PMOI or MKO or MeK).

When Sir Teddy Taylor and I were taken into a room full of people it was apparent that my meeting would not be private and Sir Teddy Taylor would not be seeing any of the prison.

Anne Singleton was in the room with her young son. A British freelance reporter (we later found out) with an assistant was already conducting an interview with a prisoner (with another prisoner acting as an interpreter). It soon became apparent that these were two ex-MKO/PMOI members. The "two famous British journalists" are not, as far as I know "famous", nor were they a part of any delegation of which I was a member.

There were other people in the room but no introductions were made so I cannot comment on the presence of "two prominent Iranian human rights personalities" (also described as "Iranian jurists") other than to say its very odd that I was not introduced to them if they were part of a "delegation of experts".

I am described on the website as "one of a handful of supporters of the Mojahedin" in the House of Commons. The NCRI has broad support in the House of Commons and in the House of Lords. For example, in September 2002, 331 MPs (a majority of backbenchers) and 122 Peers declared, 'supporting the people of Iran and the People's Mojahedin Organisation to achieve democracy and human rights is essential for the defeat of terrorism

at home and abroad'. In January of this year, 305 MPs and Lords stated 'the PMOI is an essential part of the drive to halt the advance of fundamentalism in Iraq and the terrorist tag should be removed immediately'. Hundreds of supporters and a majority of backbenchers in the House of Commons is far more than a handful!

Whilst I did not have the sort of private meeting with Mr Khodabandeh and Mr Bassam that I would have liked, I did feel reasonably happy that we were able to exchange private words – even though there were always people around us eg around a dining table. That is why I felt I could describe the circumstances as acceptable. I must admit I was pleased that I was able to see them and talk to them at all.

The conclusion which was made that "as a result, many of the prejudices that he had towards the political situation in Iran had been shaken, if not shattered" is the conclusion of someone who has not spoken to me.

Earlier in the item I am quoted as telling the meeting in Paris that "this was a tough, but encouraging week". This is an accurate conclusion. It was tough because I had a series of meetings with people who had suffered from the military activities of the PMOI. It was encouraging because I was told that the offer of a general amnesty to the NCRI members came from all institutions of Government and would hold good if the military wing put down its arms. This was obviously better than a declaration made on television.

I explained I was not the agent or representative of the NCRI but, as a supporter of the NCRI, I felt that announcing a general amnesty was not enough. The history of dealings going back to 1980 meant that there was deep distrust. I believed, for the amnesty to be real, that negotiations would be needed on the terms of the amnesty and its subsequent monitoring by a body like the United Nations.

I would hope that it will prove possible for such a general amnesty to be properly negotiated. Although I fear the way my visit and views have been abused on the Iran Didban website could diminish such hopes.

The paragraph, "*It is worth noting that the leaders of the sect and their lackeys in London were infuriated so much by the visit that they even shouted at Mr Griffiths to try to prevent him from going to Iran*" is a complete fabrication: not a word is true. The leaders of the NCRI in London and Paris encouraged me to make this visit. Like me, they were surprised it was granted, but nobody tried to stop me from going and certainly no-one shouted at me "to try and prevent me from going to Iran".

Whilst on the visit I was asked whether the NCRI had tried to discourage me from going to Iran but I made it quite clear that the opposite was the case: they encouraged me to go.

I have never said that "the only solution is to negotiate". I believe it would be the best solution and I have passed on this judgement to Madam Rajavi and the NCRI leadership in Paris. I hope, despite the inaccuracies on the Iran Didban website, the possibility of negotiation is still on the table.

I will be seeking an early meeting with His Excellency, Ambassador Samardi, to discuss my visit and the possibilities of developing the offer of a general amnesty into a specific negotiated agreement. This will enable the NCRI to assess and respond to this offer.

I close by re-iterating the thanks I have expressed to the Government of Iran for allowing me to meet Ibrahim Khodabandeh and Jamil Bassam. I met Mr Khodabandeh and Mr Bassam in the prison and outside; Ibrahim Khodabandeh at three meals and Jamil Bassam at one.

I am sorry that an inaccurate report of my visit has appeared on the Iran-Didban website and been repeated on the Iran-Interlink website. I hope, however, despite this, that progress can be made to settle this long running, bitter, violent and tragic dispute.

Win Griffiths MP
June 2004