

US soldiers detain prominent Iraqi ally: a warning to governing parties to toe the line

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Angry demonstrations took place last weekend in Basra, Najaf, Karbala and other predominantly Shiite cities of southern Iraq in protest against the US detention last Friday of Ammar Hakim, a leading figure within the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and the son of Abdel Aziz Hakim, the party's principal leader.

Hakim and at least three bodyguards were seized by American troops for alleged passport irregularities as he returned to Iraq from a visit to Iran. US officials later claimed that it had been a mistake and that the detainees had been well treated.

Hakim, however, rejected the US statements, saying he had been carrying a valid passport. In a nationally televised press conference on Saturday, Hakim angrily denied that "he was treated politely". He declared that a US soldier "kicked me violently against a wall," then handcuffed and blindfolded him. Hakim was held for several hours before being released. His personal effects were searched and he alleges that a number of rifles and pistols, and more than \$6,000 cash taken from his staff, have not been returned.

SCIRI, a Shiite fundamentalist, Iranian-aligned party, has played a key role in all the pro-US Iraqi governments since the 2003 invasion. Thousands of members of SCIRI's former armed wing, the Badr Brigade, have enlisted in the US-trained Iraqi Army and have fought with US forces against the Iraqi resistance—including against the Shiite uprising led by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr in April 2004.

In recent months, amid US dissatisfaction with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, SCIRI leader Adel Abdul Mahdi has been touted in Washington as a possible replacement. Underscoring SCIRI's importance, George Bush personally invited Abdel Aziz Hakim to Washington last December to secure his

backing for the planned surge of US troops. He was feted by Bush as "one of the distinguished leaders of a free Iraq".

It is absurd to suggest that Ammar Hakim's identity was not known—if not by the soldiers who were ordered to detain him, then certainly by their superiors. As the son of a key US ally, his movements in and out of Iraq would be closely followed by the American intelligence operatives inside the country and the Iraqi government's own security forces, if only to seek to prevent his assassination or kidnapping by anti-occupation insurgents.

Given the extent of Iraqi opposition to the US occupation, it appears to be reckless in the extreme for the Bush administration to poison relations with one of its few consistent supporters. Ammar Hakim is considered the political heir in waiting to take over the SCIRI leadership from his father.

Friday's incident is the second provocative US action against SCIRI in recent months. On December 21, American troops raided the Baghdad compound where the organisation's leadership resides, including the elder Hakim. The home of Hadi al-Ameri, the leader of the Badr Brigade, was ransacked and two Iranian citizens and eight Iraqis detained. Computers, videos, maps and other documents were seized.

The American actions can only be understood within the context of the advanced preparations to extend the Iraq war to an assault on Iran, with which SCIRI is closely associated. SCIRI was formed in Iran by Iraqi Shiite exiles in 1982 and shares the religious views of the Iranian regime.

Under conditions of a build-up of American forces in the Persian Gulf, Washington is sending a clear message that it will not tolerate any dissent from the Shiite parties within its puppet government in Baghdad.

The treatment of SCIRI is a warning to all governing parties to sever or cut back relations with Iran, do nothing to obstruct war preparations and contain the inevitable opposition of the masses—or face the consequences.

Last year, there were open hints, including from US officials, that plans have been drawn up to dispense with the current Iraqi government and replace it with some form of military junta.

The US military is already seeking to destroy or at least seriously disrupt the armed Iraqi Shiite militias that could launch attacks on American forces in support of their Iranian co-religionists. A primary target of the “surge” of thousands of additional US troops to Baghdad is the large anti-occupation Mahdi Army militia loyal to Moqtada al-Sadr, who called for armed struggle against the US in 2004 before accepting a truce and political role in the government.

Hundreds of Sadrism militiamen have been detained during American sweeps into Shiite districts of Baghdad over the past month. This week, US troops have for the first time since 2004 begun making large-scale entries into the working class suburb of Sadr City, stronghold of the Mahdi Army. Occupation spokesman Major General William Caldwell told the Arab media the US military would “increase our operations in the coming days”.

The members of an obscure Shiite cult known as the Soldiers of Heaven, which opposes the occupation and the Iraqi government, are also being systematically hunted down. Hundreds were massacred in a village near Najaf last month. This week, an Iraqi military spokesman claimed that another 157 cult members had been rounded up in the predominantly Shiite southern province of Qadisiyah.

SCIRI is openly supporting the crackdown by US troops against the Sadrists and the Soldiers of Heaven. As the US steps up its military operations in Iraq and its war drive against Iran, tensions between the occupation forces and the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad can only increase. At protests on the weekend over Hakim’s detentions, Associated Press reported that local leaders of SCIRI’s Badr Brigade and the Sadrism movement—which at times have engaged in armed conflicts against one another—joined together to bitterly denounce the US.

A Sadrism spokesman in Najaf, Oon Abid Ali, told

demonstrators: “This is a message that the US troops could arrest any figure going against its plans. We shall be seeing a lot more such acts soon.” A Badr representative, Mohammed Mousawi, declared: “We did not expect that it would reach this level of naiveté and meanness. We are asking the US troops to get out of Iraq immediately.”

Such statements reflect far broader sentiment among the Iraq’s majority Shiite population, for whom the US invasion has brought only death and economic ruin, and who are increasingly hostile to the collaboration of the Shiite parties with the occupation. However desperately the upper echelons of the Shiite parties seek to appease Washington and restrain popular anger, the US repression is creating the conditions for precisely what it is seeking to prevent—increased active opposition and resistance to the US forces in Iraq.



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