

Standoff over detained British sailors occasions US threats against Iran

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President George Bush made his first public statement on Iran's detention of 15 British sailors and marines on Saturday, nine days after the affair began. Iran's action was "inexcusable behaviour," he said, calling on Iran to "give back the hostages."

His comments suggest that the United States is considering utilising the Iranian action against its British ally as an excuse for launching military action against Tehran, thus portraying long-planned aggression as an act undertaken in defence of a European state.

Russia certainly fears that this is the case. After Bush's remarks, Moscow hurriedly warned that there are plans for an attack on Iran this month. "Russian intelligence has information that the US Armed Forces stationed in the Persian Gulf have nearly completed preparations for a missile strike against Iranian territory," the Novosti news agency reported. "The Pentagon has drafted a highly effective plan that will allow the Americans to bring Iran to its knees at minimal cost," a senior Russian intelligence official told Novosti.

Last week, Russia's Col.-Gen. Leonid Ivashov claimed that the Pentagon is planning "a massive air strike" on Iran. "I have no doubt there will be an operation, or rather an aggressive action against Iran," he said.

Russia seems to be attempting to prevent the US launching a war against Iran by making its knowledge of military plans public. Novosti's report follows the Russian refusal to support Britain's demand for a United Nations Security Council resolution against Iran that placed the blame on Tehran. The final UN resolution passed last Thursday expressed "grave concern" over the incident rather than "deploring" Iran's actions as Britain had wanted.

The veteran American journalist Seymour Hersh published an article in the *New Yorker* magazine earlier this year that gave a detailed account of American plans to launch such an attack, and suggested that US covert forces were already operating inside Iran. Hersh broke the Abu Ghraib story and originally made his name by revealing the My Lai massacre in Vietnam. He has good contacts within the US political, military and intelligence establishment. When Bush was asked about Hersh's claims, he did not deny them and said that he would not take the military option off the table.

In the context of the massive build up of naval forces in the Persian Gulf, some kind of confrontation with Iran was almost inevitable. The US, with two aircraft carrier battle groups, currently has its largest naval presence in the region since it launched the invasion of Iraq. Britain has doubled the size of its naval presence since October 2006.

Almost 80 percent of European trade with the Middle East passes through these waters. France, which has long presented itself as an opponent of the war against Iraq, clearly has no intention of allowing the US and Britain to have control of this strategic region and has

dispatched its own aircraft carrier to participate in the allied operations.

The capture of the 15 Royal Navy personnel has elicited a wave of patriotic fervour from the British media. Leading the pack is the *Daily Telegraph*. It warned, "Iran's defiance makes Britain look powerless." It complained of "a week of secret diplomacy and public grandstanding which began with a series of mistakes and miscalculations that appear to have highlighted Britain's military impotence and waning status as a world power."

UK Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett was criticised for refusing to travel to London for a meeting of Cobra, the emergency government committee, when the incident first occurred. According to the *Telegraph*, her civil servants have expressed "surprise" that she chose to stay in her constituency.

There are, however, serious political problems for Britain in taking military action against Iran that would endanger the lives of the 15 sailors and marines. The *Telegraph* has carried out a poll to see how many people in Britain would support military action against Iran and has come up with the exceedingly small figure of 7 percent. Even after more than a week of unmitigated jingoism and chauvinism, it has proved impossible to muster more support for fresh military action. The experience of the Iraq war has left its mark on British public opinion.

However, Blair has shown himself willing to fly in the face of mass opposition before. He has tied himself to Bush's war drive, and if the US president's mumbled words mean that Washington has decided to launch an attack on Tehran, Blair cannot and will not change course.

In recent months, even as the military preparations have been put in place for a further war, there have been differences within the Washington administration about when and under what circumstances a war should be launched against Iran. The *Guardian*, which represents a significant section of liberal opinion in Britain, has set great store by such disagreements within the Bush administration.

A recent leader article expressed the hope that pressure from Vice President Dick Cheney and White House adviser Elliot Abrams for a military confrontation with Iran would be resisted because "the British government has serious allies in Washington. The US secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice, and the defence secretary, Robert Gates, are pursuing engagement and are prepared to talk to Tehran."

It is not that the *Guardian* doubts the danger of war, but it hopes such an outcome can be averted by diplomatic manoeuvres in the corridors of power. Just as Secretary of State Colin Powell was held up as the voice of reason in Washington, so now his successor Condoleezza Rice is being looked to by those in the British establishment who hope that diplomacy will carry the day. There is

little doubt, however, that should military action be taken, the *Guardian* will once again claim that with diplomacy having failed, Iran must suffer the consequences of its own actions.

While differences exist in Washington, they are largely over timing and tactics rather than whether war against Iran is ultimately necessary. The neoconservative American Enterprise Institute has been setting out the case for war for some time. It has seized on the detention of the British personnel to inflame opinion in the US by drawing comparisons with the US embassy hostage crisis in 1979.

“The Iranian seizure of 15 British naval personnel is an outrage—and an opportunity,” argued AEI Resident Fellow David Frum. “It forced the captured female sailor to wear the Islamic hijab, a violation of her Geneva Convention right to practice her own religion,” he fulminated before getting to his real point—that this crisis “opens a chance to mobilise European opinion to action.”

Europeans will realise that “One of their own has been attacked and threatened with the prolonged abuse of its military personnel. The story will appear on television night after night after night. The longer it continues, the more British people and other Europeans will wonder: Is there anything we can do? And the good news is: Yes, there is.”

Michael Rubin, another AEI Fellow, declares the detention of the British personnel to be an act of war. It is an opinion with which Freedom Scholar Michael A. Ledeen concurs—“the Iranians have committed an act of war on a NATO country,” he writes, and the other members of the alliance should be told they have to abide by their treaty obligations.

The neoconservatives of the AEI may be setting out the case most vociferously, but they are not alone in thinking that the standoff between Iran and Britain should be used to prepare for a military attack on Iran. Senator Joseph Biden, who is chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and a contender for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2008, said on the April 1 “Fox News Sunday” program, “We can all get tougher on them diplomatically and ratchet this thing up....

“I would argue that this is a product of the increasing success of the Bush administration’s new strategy on Iran, and I mean that sincerely,” he continued. “They have made Iran the world’s problem.”

Biden said that Bush should make plans for action that would cut off Iran’s “importation of refined oil and affect their export of crude oil. You can hit them very, very badly. But I don’t think you talk about that publicly. Were I president, I wouldn’t be talking about that. I’d be planning that while I was moving on every front diplomatically.”

Tehran is clearly concerned that the crisis may be used as a *casus belli* and has taken a more conciliatory line. Iranian television showed more footage of the sailors and Marines on April 2, but claimed to detect a shift in Britain’s position that could help resolve the crisis.

“It seems that Britain has shifted a little bit from its stance in the last one or two days over the undeniable facts and from some of its clamour,” a television commentary said. “If this path continues, one can hope that the issue would be resolved in a bilateral process and far away from fuss and clamour and with achieving Iran’s logical demands.”

While making no concessions, British Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett did tone down her rhetoric at a European Union summit in Germany last Saturday. “I think everyone regrets that this position has arisen,” she said. “What we want is a way out of it.”

In response, the Iranians appear to have stepped up their efforts to

reach a diplomatic solution. Dr. Ali Larijani, secretary general of Iran’s National Security Council, appeared on Britain’s “Channel 4 News.” In an extensive interview, he said that Iran did not intend to put the British detainees on trial and would not demand an apology from Britain. The only stipulation he made was that a delegation be sent to settle the question of whether the British boat strayed into Iranian territory in the disputed border region of the Shatt al Arab waterway.

Larijani is one of the most senior Iranian politicians after Supreme Leader of Iran Ayatollah Khamenei. He was at one time leader of the Revolutionary Guards, the force that captured the British boat, and represents conservative elements critical of those who want closer relations with the West.

A further step towards easing tensions was taken by the Iraqi government with the release yesterday of an Iranian diplomat Jalal Sharafi, who was seized more than eight weeks ago by gunmen in Iraqi military uniforms. Iraqi foreign minister Hoshyar Zebari denied there was any connection to the detained British sailors, but the timing cannot be coincidental. Zebari also repeated his government’s call for the US military to release five Iranian officials detained in Irbil in January.

The situation remains fluid, and the present confrontation may yet end peacefully. Even if the present crisis over the detained Royal Marines and sailors is resolved, some important lessons must be drawn. Once again, leading figures in both the Republican and Democratic parties in the US, as well as in the British political establishment, have demonstrated their proclivity for war. The criminal clique around Bush and Blair is determined to effect “regime change” in Iran in order to gain control over the country’s vast oil resources, as they have done in Iraq. This bloody drive to secure global hegemony can be halted only by an independent, socialist movement of the international working class.



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