

# Iran's release of sailors: A humiliating episode for Britain

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Iran's release of the 15 British naval personnel captured in the Gulf is the dénouement of a humiliating episode for the Blair government and for British imperialism.

Since they were captured by Iranian naval forces in the Shatt al Arab waterway, the sailors and marines have come to epitomise the gap between Britain's pretensions as a world power and its actual capabilities.

Prime Minister Tony Blair's response to the incident, with repeated declarations that he was seeking a diplomatic solution, is not an indication of a new pacifist turn by one of the architects of the Iraq war. It was forced upon him by his reliance on the United States, both politically and militarily.

The sailors seized were part of Britain's contingent in a US-led naval force that includes two aircraft carriers. This force has been mustered by the Bush administration as part of its political campaign against Tehran, demanding that Iran end its nuclear programme and alleged sponsorship of the insurgency in Iraq.

Blair has acted as Washington's key ally in seeking to isolate the Iranian regime and impose the strictest sanctions possible, with the attendant preparations for a possible military assault in future.

But Blair's efforts to enable Britain to punch above its weight by an alliance with the US have suffered a grave setback as a result of the debacle in Iraq, something of which Iran is fully aware and which conditioned its attitude to London's demands for the sailors to be released.

The Iranian regime avoided any bellicose posturing, but continually insisted that the British personnel were captured because they had trespassed into its waters. Its diplomats were successful in countering the Blair government's somewhat half-hearted attempts to take a hard line, portraying this and Britain's refusal to admit

wrongdoing as an arrogant effort to inflame the situation.

Tehran will have calculated that Britain could not move independently of the US. And, in turn, the ability of Washington's more hawkish elements to win support for a military response was weakened. Within American ruling circles, there is significant opposition to a military attack on Iran, particularly under conditions where the US is still bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan. Internationally, the US finds itself isolated.

There were clear calls from the neoconservative media and think-tanks for the capture of the British to be met with a hostile response, or at least that it not to be allowed to divert from such action in the near future. Mario Loyola wrote in the *National Review* online edition that "the United States must make it clear to the Iranians that abandoning the non-proliferation regime will trigger a military confrontation. The British should have defended the hostages when they were surrounded. The United States cannot now be paralyzed in its response to Iran out of a desire to protect a group of sailors from an allied country that was incapable of protecting them itself... Otherwise, in a few years, Iran could be holding all of us hostage."

But the best that Bush could offer such of his supporters was to insist that the captured sailors were "hostages" and that they should be handed over unconditionally.

Washington's difficulties contributed to London only being able to secure the most limited formal censure of Iran's actions at the United Nations and from the European Union.

Within Britain, the more strident voices in the media were opposed by those insisting that diplomacy be given chance to work, particularly with British lives at

stake.

In both countries, moreover, military action meets its most serious opposition among working people. Neither Bush nor Blair is in a position to simply push for an immediate attack on Iran in the face of popular hostility to their war-mongering—and a belief that both are inveterate liars. Even a poll by the right-wing *Daily Telegraph* found that a mere seven percent of respondents had been convinced by the jingoistic media campaign against Iran that military action should be taken.

In the end, despite Bush's insistence that there should be no quid pro quo, Iran appears to have been able to secure certain concessions in return for releasing the 15, most notably the release by Iraq of Iranian diplomat Jalal Sharafi, seized two months ago by gunmen in Iraqi military uniforms. Washington is also considering an Iranian request to visit five of its officials seized in January by the US military in the northern Iraqi city of Irbil and held incommunicado for more than two months.

It was in these circumstances that Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad mounted yesterday's press conference to mark the Persian New Year, during which he again insisted that the British sailors and marines had invaded Iran's waters. After first attacking the West for its Middle East policy, he announced that the sailors would be released as a "gift" to Britain and that they were pardoned in order to mark both the Prophet Muhammad's birthday on March 30 and the Easter holiday.

After asking Blair not to punish the 15 for having admitted to being in Iranian territorial waters, he continued, "Instead of occupying the other countries, I ask Mr. Blair to think about the justice, to think about the truth and work for the British people, not for himself."

Whereas no concessions had been made by the British government to secure the releases, Britain had pledged "that the incident would not be repeated," he said.

Speaking later yesterday, Blair did not thank the Iranian president, but addressed the Iranian people, stating, "We bear you no ill will. We respect Iran as an ancient civilisation. The disagreement we have with your government we wish to resolve peacefully... in the future we hope to do so."

Blair's attempt to take the moral high ground is both nauseating and not to be believed, given that similar statements by him could be cited with respect to Iraq. No one should assume that the setback he has suffered will mean a let-up.

For its part, Washington responded aggressively to Ahmadinejad's move, particularly his statement that Iran could reconsider its relations with the US if President Bush's attitude changed.

Insisting that there would be no change in US policy—and therefore no lessening of the danger of war—State Department spokesman Tom Casey said, "The behaviour that needs to change is the Iranians', not the United States."

The US would only deal directly with Iran if it gave up its uranium enrichment programme, he added.



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