

Iranian diplomat accuses US of detention and torture

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Senior Iranian diplomat Jalal Sharafi told the country's state-run TV last weekend that the US had been involved in his seizure and detention in Iraq and that CIA officers had taken part in his interrogation and torture. Sharafi, who was released last week, had been missing for more than two months after armed gunmen in the uniforms of the elite 36 Iraqi Commando Battalion bundled the diplomat into a car in the predominantly Shiite neighbourhood of Karrada in central Baghdad.

"I was kidnapped on a Baghdad street while shopping by officials who had Iraqi defence ministry ID cards and were riding in American forces vehicles," Sharafi explained. He said he was taken to a base near Baghdad airport and questioned in Arabic and English. The CIA officials were mostly interested in Iranian influence in Iraq and assistance to the Iraqi government and Iraqi groups.

"Once they heard my response that Iran merely has official relations with the Iraqi government and officials, they intensified [the] tortures and tortured me through different methods days and nights," Sharafi said. According to the Fars news agency: "He [Sharafi] showed reporters the marks left by torture on his body that are now being treated by doctors."

Sharafi said his captors eventually softened their treatment in an effort to encourage him to cooperate. "Later, they released me under pressure from Iraqi government officials. They dropped me near the back of the airport," he said. Sharafi reappeared at the Iranian embassy in Baghdad, where he was the second secretary, on April 3—one day before Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad announced the release of 15 British sailors and marines detained for allegedly entering Iranian waters.

Iraqi officials denied any linkage between the release

of Sharafi and the British naval personnel. "Really, it has no connection whatsoever," Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari told the *New York Times*. In his only statement on the detention of the British sailors, US President Bush declared there would be no quid pro quo. But the timing of Sharafi's release could not have been purely coincidental.

During Sharafi's abduction on February 4, local Iraqi police managed to stop one of the vehicles involved and seized four men who said they worked for an Iraqi security service. Two months later, Zebari still claimed not to have found out who the thugs worked for. But, as the *New York Times* noted, "others familiar with the case said they believed that those responsible worked for the Iraqi Intelligence Service, which is affiliated with the Central Intelligence Agency".

US officials immediately repudiated Sharafi's allegations. White House spokesman Gordon Johndroe told the media that the US had nothing to do with Sharafi's detention, branding the claims as "the latest theatrics of a government trying to deflect attention away from its own unacceptable actions". An unnamed US intelligence official baldly stated that "the CIA does not conduct or condone torture". Given the systematic US abuse of detainees at Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib and the CIA's network of secret prisons, such denials are not credible.

The US military has been focussing on Iranian officials inside Iraq for months. In his January 10 speech on Iraq, President Bush accused Iran and Syria of aiding anti-US insurgents in Iraq and announced that US forces would "seek out and destroy" networks supplying arms and training. Within hours, US special forces raided the Iranian liaison office in the northern city of Irbil and detained five Iranian officials, who have now been held for more than three months.

The British and international media have focussed attention on Iran's alleged abuse of British sailors, but are completely silent on the US treatment of Iranians who have been held incommunicado and detained without charge. Washington has simply ignored the demands of Iraqi government for their release, making a mockery of Iraqi sovereignty. The US claims that the five are members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard who were involved in assisting Shiite militia, but has provided no evidence to support the claim.

The American military only announced last week that the International Red Cross had been allowed to visit the prisoners. The Pentagon is still considering an Iranian request to visit them.

In an interview on Al Arabiya television, Massoud Barzani, president of Iraq's northern Kurdish autonomous region, pointed out that the Iranian office in Irbil was not secret. "That office was doing its work in a normal way and had they been doing anything hostile, we would have known about that," he said.

Barzani claimed that the US forces had been targeting a visiting Iranian delegation, including two commanders of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, rather than the officials in the Irbil office. "They [the commanders] came here and came here openly. Their meetings with the [Iraqi] president and myself were reported on television. The Americans came to detain this delegation, not the people in the office. They came to the wrong place at the wrong time," he said.

Barzani's chief of staff, Fuad Hussein, told the British-based *Independent* that the US had been seeking to capture Mohammed Jafari, deputy head of the Iranian National Security Council, and General Minojahar Frouzanda, intelligence chief of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. The raid on the Irbil office followed the US arrest of Iranian officials in Baghdad last December, which included a provocative raid on the compound of Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, leader of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)—a major component of Iraq's coalition government.

According to veteran US journalist Seymour Hersh, these detentions are simply the tip of the iceberg. In an article in the *New Yorker* in February, he alleged that as many as 500 Iranians had been arbitrarily detained and interrogated at any one time, including many Iranian humanitarian and aid workers. The targeting of high-

level officials such as Mohammed Jafari and General Minojahar Frouzanda suggests an organised US campaign not only to extract information, but to send a message to the Iraqi government to cut ties with Iran and to deliberately provoke a reaction from Tehran.

The unproven claim that Tehran is arming insurgents in Iraq is just one of several excuses being whipped up by the Bush administration as a possible pretext for attacking Iran. The US also accuses Iran of having a secret nuclear weapons program and of supporting "terrorists" throughout the Middle East. President Ahmadinejad's announcement on Monday that Iran had started producing enriched uranium on "an industrial scale" was seized on by Washington to threaten tougher UN sanctions.

The US military has stationed two aircraft carrier battle groups in the Persian Gulf and is strengthening the military capabilities of its Gulf state allies. During the standoff over the captured British sailors, the US navy held large-scale military exercises in the Gulf. According to the *Guardian* newspaper, the US proposed to mount aggressive air patrols inside Iranian air space over the country's military bases—a highly provocative move that could have precipitated a clash. Britain reportedly declined the offer.

In another sign of heightened tensions, Iran is now warning that failure to release the other five Iranian officials could impair relations with Iraq. "We are serious about the way we will confront those behind the arrest of the Iranian diplomats in Iraq," Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki said last weekend. Tehran subsequently refused to allow Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to overfly Iranian airspace on his flight to Japan.

In this highly charged atmosphere, further US provocations have the potential to escalate the present confrontation with Iran into a military conflict.



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