

US continues detention of five Iranian officials in Iraq

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19 April 2007

In a decision that was barely reported, the Bush administration resolved last week to continue to hold five Iranian officials seized in the northern Iraqi city of Irbil on January 11. While the US and international media was flooded with stories about Iran's contentious arrest of 15 British sailors last month, there was not a murmur of protest over the illegal and provocative American detention of the Irbil five.

Their arrest came just hours after President Bush declared in his January 10 speech on Iraq that the US military would "seek out and destroy" alleged Iranian networks supplying arms and training to anti-US insurgents. American special forces broke into the Iranian liaison office in Irbil around 3 a.m., disarmed the guards, hauled down the Iranian flag and seized computers, documents and the five officials. The raid provoked muted protests from both the Iraqi government and the Kurdish regional government, neither of which had been previously informed of the operation.

The Bush administration has alleged that the detainees were members of the Quds Force, an arm of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, and were engaged in providing money and arms to Iraqi militia groups. More than three months after their detention, however, the US military has produced no evidence, nor have any charges been laid. US officials have dismissed Iranian claims that the five had diplomatic protection, even though the liaison office had functioned as a de facto consulate since well before the US invasion in 2003 and was in the process of being fully credentialed.

According to a *Washington Post* article last weekend, the US administration's top-level foreign policy team discussed the issue at a meeting on April 10. The details provided by unnamed US officials are limited, but nevertheless shed some light on the inner dynamics

of the Bush administration and its increasingly aggressive stance toward Iran.

As the *Washington Post* explained: "Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice went into the meeting Tuesday advising that the men be freed because they are no longer useful, but after a review of options she went along with the consensus, US officials say. Vice President Cheney's office made the firmest case for keeping them. Their capture signals that Iran's actions are monitored and that Iranian operatives face seizure."

Associated Press confirmed that Cheney's staff had "won the internal administration tussle". The outcome undercuts recent media commentary that Cheney and his militarist neo-con allies have been eclipsed in the administration by the rising star of Rice and her diplomatic initiatives in the Middle East. While the issue may appear to be relatively minor, Cheney put his foot down for a reason.

By blocking the release of the Iranian officials, Cheney is undermining a top-level conference in Egypt next month organised by the Iraqi government to bring together the foreign ministers of its neighbours, including Iran, and the permanent members of the UN Security Council, including the US. Speculation has been rife that Rice may try to use to the meeting to open a dialogue with her Iranian counterpart. The Iranian government, however, is threatening not to attend while the US continues to hold its officials.

Despite all its talk about seeking "a diplomatic solution" to its confrontation with Iran, the Bush administration has only heightened tensions with Tehran. Two US aircraft carrier battle groups have been menacingly stationed in the Persian Gulf and a third "replacement" is on its way to the region. In the midst of the standoff over the British sailors, US warships conducted a major military exercise not far from

Iranian waters. Many media reports have indicated that the CIA and US military are actively supporting opposition groups and armed militias inside Iran.

At the same time, the US propaganda war is running unabated. The White House continues to accuse Iran of building nuclear weapons and is demanding even tougher UN sanctions over Tehran's refusal to shut down its uranium enrichment program. The US persists in making unsubstantiated allegations that Iran is arming and training Shiite militias in Iraq. Last week, military spokesman Major General William Caldwell alleged, rather implausibly, that Tehran was also arming Sunni fanatics—that is, Shiite Iran was assisting groups that regard Shiites as heretical enemies. This week, the US Joint Chiefs of Staff General Peter Pace claimed that Iranian weapons were flowing to Sunni Taliban fighters in Afghanistan. Any or all of these allegations may be exploited by the US in the future as the pretext for attacking Iran.

The essential lawlessness of the Bush administration is summed up in its inner “tussle” over the five detained Iranians. As reported by the *Washington Post*, the discussion revolved around purely pragmatic arguments, devoid of any consideration of principle, international law or Iraqi sovereignty. Cheney's view was that the Iranians should be held as a message to Tehran that its “actions are monitored,” as opposed to Rice who considered the detainees “no longer useful”.

In effect, the five Iranians are being held by Washington as hostages to be exploited as the situation dictates. The Bush administration has ignored repeated calls by the Iraqi government for their release and invoked the threadbare legal pretext that the US military in Iraq has the right under UN resolutions to protect itself. Like many others held by the US in Iraq, the five Iranians have no recourse to legal action or any other avenue to challenge their continued detention. The US finally allowed the International Red Cross to visit the prisoners, but, to date, has refused requests for Iranian officials to see them.

According to the *Washington Post*, the Bush administration decided that the Iranian officials should remain in custody and go through a periodic six-month review, like the 250 other foreign detainees held by the US military in Iraq. The next review is not expected until July. As one US official told Associated Press, the men will be held “certainly a good number of weeks”

and possibly for several months. In any event, they are unlikely to be released before next month's conference in Egypt.

A second *Washington Post* article revealed last Sunday that the number of Iraqis in US custody in two huge prison complexes has dramatically increased to 18,000—up from 10,000 a year ago. In the past month alone, US forces have detained another 1,000 Iraqis. About 8,000 have been held for more than a year and 1,300 have been in custody for two years. None has been charged. They are not treated as prisoners of war and are not afforded basic rights under the Geneva Conventions.

A final point should be made about the detained Iranians. One possible purpose for which they may be exploited is the strange case of former FBI agent Robert Levinson, who went missing on a trip to Iran's Kish Island last month. According to various reports in the US media, Levinson, who was an FBI expert on organised crime, was on a business trip to Kish Island—a resort area that does not require a visa to enter. After retiring from the FBI in 1998, he set up his own private security company and is also a principal in an international investigative firm. According to Associated Press, he was last heard from around March 11, while in a coastal area of southern Iran, purportedly working for an independent filmmaker.

Levinson's disappearance has prompted a top-level intervention by the Bush administration, which has repeatedly asked Iranian authorities via Swiss intermediaries for information about the Levinson. State Department spokesman Sean McCormack told the media on Monday that the US had sent another request over the weekend. McCormack declared, rather hypocritically, that Iran should conduct “a good faith search for an American citizen,” regardless of the political differences between the two countries. It may be that the US is holding the five Iranian detainees in reserve as bargaining chips in exchange for Levinson, whose dubious activities raise the legitimate suspicion that he was operating as an American spy.



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