

Bush denounces detention of US-Iranian citizens

Peter Symonds
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In the lead-up to this week's G-8 summit, US President Bush injected another element into his administration's aggressive campaign against Iran by issuing a statement last Friday "strongly condemning" Tehran for detaining four American citizens. He demanded their immediate and unconditional release, as well as information about a fifth American, Robert Levinson, who has been missing since March.

Three of the four detainees—Haleh Esfandiari, Parnaz Azima and Kian Tajbakhsh—were charged last week with espionage and endangering Iran's national security. The three were arrested separately in early May, after earlier being prevented from leaving the country and interrogated. The fourth—Ali Shakeri—has reportedly been detained in Iran, but has yet to be charged. All hold dual US-Iranian citizenship.

Iranian authorities have yet to outline a case against the four. But a statement from the Intelligence Ministry on May 21 accused Esfandiari of receiving money from billionaire speculator George Soros's Open Society Institute and trying to encourage a "soft revolution" by setting up a network "against the sovereignty" of Iran. "This is an American designed model with an attractive appearance that seeks the soft-toppling of the country," the statement read on state TV declared.

The four may have been opponents of the Iranian regime and its policies. Esfandiari is a scholar with the Woodrow Wilson International Centre, who is particularly concerned about women's rights in Iran and has a longstanding relationship with Farah Pahlavi, widow of the ousted Iranian shah. Azima is a journalist with the US-funded propaganda station Radio Farda. Kian Tajbakhsh, an urban planner, consulted for the Open Society Institute, and Ali Shakeri, a businessman, was on the board of the University of California at Irvine's Centre for Citizen Peacebuilding.

However, while it is undoubtedly the case that Washington is promoting "regime change" in Iran, Tehran has provided no evidence that any of the four were directly involved. Esfandiari, Azima and Shakeri were all visiting elderly

relatives. Tajbakhsh's work for the Open Society Institute was being conducted with the knowledge of the Iranian government. If indeed their general associations are the only evidence of spying and subversion, the detention of the four is unwarranted and simply plays into the hands of the US administration.

Prominent Democrats have joined Bush in denouncing the arrests. The *Washington Post* reported on May 23 on the bipartisan campaign, including calls by Democratic presidential candidates Barrack Obama, Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden demanding Esfandiari's release. Both the Senate and the House are preparing resolutions calling for her freedom and a group of 16 female senators have written to UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon calling for his urgent intervention.

The various indignant denunciations of Tehran's actions by the Bush administration and congressional Democrats are, however, completely hypocritical. The US military and intelligence agencies have arbitrarily and indefinitely detained, and in some cases tortured, thousands of individuals in Iraq, Afghanistan, Guantánamo Bay and secret CIA prisons. These include at least five Iranian officials who were seized in a pre-dawn raid in January on a liaison office in the northern Iraqi city of Irbil. Unlike Esfandiari, Azima and Tajbakhsh, the five have not been formally charged and have been denied contact with their relatives.

The *Washington Post* has inflated the detentions into a new "Iran hostage crisis," declaring in an editorial last Friday that the charges against Esfandiari, Azima and Tajbakhsh were "ludicrous" and demanding their release. While Tehran has not substantiated its charges, it cannot simply be dismissed as "absurd" that the American agencies would exploit academics, journalists and consultants to further the Bush administration's aim of destabilising the Iranian regime. As Iranian officials have pointed out, Washington was actively involved in fomenting the so-called colour revolutions in Eastern Europe and the Lebanon.

Last year, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice

announced a \$75 million boost in funding for anti-Iranian propaganda, through outlets such as Radio Farda, and for Iranian oppositionists inside and outside Iran. Two recent media reports—in the ABC News network and the British-based *Telegraph*—confirmed that President Bush formally authorised the CIA this year to implement a coordinated campaign of propaganda, disinformation and financial manipulation to undermine the Iranian regime. Numerous articles in the US and British press over the past two years, in particular by investigative journalist Seymour Hersh in the *New Yorker*, have highlighted more sinister US activities inside Iran, including support for armed groups among the Kurdish, Baluchi and Azeri minorities.

In this context, there are many unanswered questions about the murky activities of the missing fifth American. Robert Levinson is a former FBI agent, who disappeared after flying to the Iranian island of Kish in March 8. He clearly chose Kish as his entry point because he did not require a visa for this resort and free trade zone. The initial claims that he had been working for an independent filmmaker were replaced by a series of articles reporting that he had contacted an American, Dawud Salahuddin, who is living in Iran after allegedly murdering an Iranian dissident in Maryland in 1980. Why Levinson undertook such a risky enterprise, if indeed that was his purpose, has been the subject of considerable speculation, but is yet to be explained.

As for its description of the detained Americans as “hostages,” the *Washington Post* has failed to register similar outrage and indignation over the arbitrary US detention of the five Iranian officials. The same newspaper reported in April on a top-level White House meeting at which their fate was decided. As the article explained, Secretary of State Rice argued for their release “because they were no longer useful”. But Vice President Dick Cheney’s office insisted on their continued detention as a warning to Tehran that “its actions are monitored and that Iranian operatives face seizure”. In other words, the five are being held as hostages to be exploited in any dealings with Tehran.

As far as the Bush administration is concerned, the detained American citizens are just an expedient device for intensifying pressure on Iran. The timing of Bush’s statement last Friday is bound up with US demands for a third UN resolution imposing tougher economic and diplomatic sanctions on Tehran over its refusal to shut down uranium enrichment and other nuclear programs. The G-8 foreign ministers issued a joint statement last Friday warning Iran of further action, but China, Russia and some European powers are opposed to tough penalties and back a diplomatic deal to end the confrontation.

As National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley told the media, the American detainees are one more argument against any compromise with Tehran when details of any new UN resolution are discussed at the full G-8 meeting this week. “It underscores the character of this regime, and it underscores the problem we have for those people who say, ‘Well, why don’t you talk to Iran?’ It is a good reminder at how difficult this regime is, and of the kinds of policies it’s pursuing,” he said.

In preparation for the G-8 meeting, Bush officials have also reiterated other US allegations and threats against Iran, including that Tehran is supplying arms and training to anti-US insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan. In Kabul yesterday, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates again asserted that Iranian-made weapons were reaching Taliban fighters but stopped short of alleging that the Iranian regime was directly involved. At the same press conference, Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai denied that the Iranian government was responsible and declared that relations between the two countries had “never been as friendly as they are today”.

Speaking at a regional security conference in Singapore on Saturday, Gates restated the Bush administration’s demand that the UN Security Council should impose stronger penalties against Iran “not next year or the year after, but right now”. While supporting a “diplomatic solution,” he did to rule out military action against Iran over its nuclear programs, saying only that it was an unattractive option. A large US naval armada is currently engaged in provocative military exercises in the Persian Gulf, not far from Iran’s shoreline.

While the American “hostages” are currently being used as an additional argument for tougher UN penalties, they could readily also become one more pretext for military action against Iran.



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