Another US provocation: Iranian officials arrested in Baghdad

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Late on Tuesday night, the US military detained a visiting delegation of Iranian officials at a Baghdad hotel. The men were handcuffed, blindfolded and dragged away under the glare of TV cameras for further interrogation. Following protests in Tehran and appeals by Iraqi government officials, the delegation, which had been formally invited by the Iraqi Electricity Ministry, was finally released on Wednesday morning.

The episode is a sign of things to come. Amid escalating American denunciations of Iran for its alleged "meddling" in Iraq, nuclear weapons programs and ties to "terrorist" organisations, more such incidents can be expected to heighten the climate of confrontation, to humiliate and goad Tehran into reacting, and to lay the basis for a possible US military attack on Iran.

Details of the arrests remain sketchy. According to the comments of hotel staff to the *New York Times*, six representatives from the Iranian Energy Ministry—Jamal Bayati, Abathar Mirzani, Mohsen Ashouri, Saed Raai, Hassan Tharif and Bahmatullah Muradi—checked into the state-owned Sheraton Ishtar hotel in central Baghdad on Monday. Muradi was accompanied by his wife. The delegation was assisted by Iraqi drivers, interpreters and guards.

On Tuesday afternoon, the delegation was stopped at a nearby American checkpoint, their cars searched and several weapons—an AK-47 assault rifle and two pistols—confiscated. US soldiers claimed that the Iraqi guards had identification, but no official permit to carry the weapons. While they were questioned, the Iranian officials were eventually allowed to proceed to their hotel.

Later that night, however, US troops reappeared at the hotel. Mohaned Abed, the night manager, told the *New York Times*: "The American soldiers arrived about 9.30 p.m., entered the hotel and their commander asked me about the Iranian delegation, how many they were, their room numbers and did I have a copy of their room keys. I told him that the Iraqi Ministry of Electricity had invited them, that they were guests of the ministry and that we had a letter from the ministry confirming this."

Abed said the soldiers entered the al-Warkaa restaurant on the hotel's ground floor, brought the Iranians into the lobby and questioned them. "After about 15 or 20 minutes they gathered the Iranians' personal belongings, put them in plastic folders, put blindfolds on their eyes and then accompanied the delegation outside the hotel," he said. Footage shot by Associated Press TV cameramen waiting outside showed soldiers carrying what appeared to be luggage and at least one briefcase and a laptop computer bag. Two Iranian embassy officials carrying diplomatic credentials also appear to have been detained.

The US military has failed to answer the most obvious questions. Who ordered the soldiers to return to the hotel to make the arrests and on what basis? If the pretext was the already confiscated weapons of the Iraqi security detail, why detain the Iranian officials? Who tipped off the media to be prepared for high-profile arrests outside the Sheraton hotel? The entire incident has all the hallmarks of a political provocation orchestrated at senior levels to create a diplomatic furore.

The arrests came just hours after President Bush delivered a speech to an American Legion convention, in which he denounced Iran as "the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism". In particular, Bush repeated unsubstantiated accusations that the Iranian regime was arming and training Shiite militia responsible for attacking US troops inside Iraq. Demanding that Iran

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halt these actions, the US president warned: “I have authorised our military commanders to confront Tehran’s murderous activities.”

A similar sequence of events took place in January. President Bush delivered a speech on January 10, declaring that the US military would “seek out and destroy” alleged Iranian networks supplying arms and training to anti-US insurgents. Within hours, American special forces broke into the Iranian liaison office in the northern Iraqi city of Irbil, disarmed the guards, hauled down the Iranian flag and seized computers, documents and five officials. Despite protests from both the Iraqi and Kurdish regional governments, the US military has detained the five Iranians without trial for more than seven months, claiming they are members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corp.

This week’s arrests prompted an immediate intervention by the Iraqi government. Prime ministerial adviser Yasin Majid told Reuters the Iranian officials had been invited to Baghdad by the Iraqi Electricity Ministry to help establish a power station in the southern city of Najaf. Iran’s Foreign Ministry issued a formal protest yesterday denouncing the arrests as illegal. Ministry spokesman Mohammad Ali Hosseini declared that the detentions were an act of interference in Iraq’s internal affairs.

Yesterday morning, the Iranian officials were handed over to the Iraqi prime minister’s office. Saadi Othman, an Iraqi adviser to General David Petraeus, the top US general in Baghdad, told the BBC that the incident had been “regrettable” and had “nothing to do” with President Bush's remarks on Tuesday. The US military offered no explanation, either for the arrests or the release.

One final point needs to be added about this strange incident. Tehran recently announced that Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad would be making his first official visit to Baghdad. The Iraqi invitation, which is yet to be finalised, was reportedly made during the trip by Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to Tehran earlier this month to discuss closer cooperation between the two countries. Neither Maliki’s trip nor the prospect of Ahmadinejad’s arrival in Baghdad was well received in Washington.

The arrests on Tuesday send a sharp message of US displeasure to the Maliki government about its developing ties with Tehran, as well as a rather obvious threat to future Iranian delegations.

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