

On eve of UN general assembly, US military arrests Iranian official in Iraq

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In another incident calculated to inflame tensions with Iran, the US military detained an Iranian official in the northern Iraqi city of Sulaimaniyah in a predawn raid on Thursday, claiming he was a member of the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps.

According to Iraqi officials, US soldiers burst into Sulaimaniyah Palace Hotel around 4 a.m. and seized three members of an Iranian business delegation who had been discussing trade issues and the opening of a new border crossing near Panjween. The delegation was in Iraq at the invitation of the Kurdish regional government.

Two of the Iranian detainees—the mayor of the city of Qasr-e Shirin and a businessman—were later released. Aghai Farhadi, who is in charge of cross-border commercial transactions in the office of the governor-general of Iran’s Kermanshah province, remains in US detention.

The US military issued a string of statements on Friday accusing Farhadi of transporting roadside bombs and being involved in the “infiltration and training of foreign terrorists in Iraq”. Pentagon press secretary Geoff Morrell went one step further, inferring that the detainee had been acting under Quds Force orders and denouncing Iran once again for being “a dangerous, meddling influence in Iraq”.

As in previous cases, the US has presented no evidence to substantiate its allegations. No weapons were seized in the raid and put on display. No details were provided from the “intelligence reports” to indicate which “foreign fighters” Farhadi had infiltrated and trained—not even their nationalities. Even by the US military’s own accounts, most “foreign fighters” in Iraq are Sunni Arabs, many of them religious zealots who are deeply hostile to the “Persians” of Shiite Iran.

Thursday’s raid on the Sulaimaniyah Palace underscored Washington’s contempt for Iraqi government and law. The US military did not inform the Kurdish regional government of the operation and has ignored its protests and demands for Farhadi’s release. The office of Kurdish regional president Massud Barzani issued a statement yesterday, declaring: “We consider this action by the Americans to be illegal.” Tehran has condemned the arrest as “unwarranted” and lodged a protest with the Iraqi authorities in Baghdad.

The raid is the third this year. In January, US special forces broke into the Iranian liaison office in the northern city of Irbil, hauled down the Iranian flag, seized computers and documents, and arrested five Iranian officials. The operation took place hours after a speech by President Bush declaring the US military would “seek out and destroy” Iranian networks in Iraq. Despite demands for their release by the Iraqi and Kurdish regional governments, the US military has continued to detain the five, claiming they are members of the Quds Force. No charges have been laid and no details have been provided to support the allegations.

Late last month, US soldiers seized six Iranian energy officials along with their Iraqi translators and guards from a restaurant at Baghdad’s Sheraton Ishtar Hotel where they were staying. The detainees were handcuffed, blindfolded and dragged away under the glare of TV cameras on the pretext that their Iraqi guards had no official permits for their weapons. Stories began to circulate in the US press of “illicit” Iranian weapons. The arrests came just after a speech by President Bush denouncing Iran as “the world’s leading state sponsor of terrorism”. The Iranian delegation, which was in Iraq to discuss the construction of a power station, was released the

following day along with a statement by an Iraqi adviser to US General David Petraeus describing the incident as “regrettable” and having “nothing to do” with Bush’s remarks.

The latest arrest takes place as the Bush administration intensifies its propaganda campaign against Iran’s alleged nuclear weapons programs and “meddling” in Iraq. US Under Secretary of State Nicholas Burns convened a meeting in Washington on Friday to press the permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany to agree to a third round of tougher sanctions against Iran over its refusal to shut down its nuclear facilities. The UN General Assembly convenes next week against a backdrop of thinly disguised threats by the US and its allies to take action against Iran. Last Sunday French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner bluntly warned on TV that the world had to “prepare for the worst [and]... the worst is war”.

One of the measures being demanded by Washington is tougher UN sanctions against the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). According to articles featured last month in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, the Bush administration is actively considering formally branding the entire IRGC, which has an estimated 125,000 soldiers and other personnel, as a “specially designated global terrorist” organisation—a step that would allow the US to take punitive action against individuals and companies—including foreign corporations—that have any dealings with the IRGC’s extensive network of businesses. Such a move would also add one more pretext to justify a US attack on Iran.

The *Washington Post* indicated that an announcement on this issue would be made at the UN General Assembly session. Farhadi’s arrest could not have been more conveniently timed to place the IRGC’s Quds Force in the media spotlight and to add one more unsubstantiated accusation as President Bush mounts the UN podium next week to denounce Iran.



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