

US Navy vessels impounded in Iranian waters

Keith Jones
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Iran has impounded two US Navy high-speed boats and their crews—ten sailors in all—that were found yesterday a mile or more inside the country’s territorial waters in the Persian Gulf.

Effectively admitting that the US vessels had violated Iranian sovereignty, an American official said the vessels had suffered mechanical failure. No other details were provided and no explanation was given as to how both boats could suffer mechanical failure.

The vessels, which were purportedly travelling from Kuwait to Bahrain, were interdicted by the naval division of Iran’s Revolutionary Guards near Farsi Island, the site of a major Iranian naval base. According to the *New York Times*: “The waters where the boats were sailing are a frequent location for intelligence collection by the United States, Iran and many Gulf countries.”

Both the Obama administration and Pentagon appeared to downplay the incident, saying that Tehran has agreed to return the American sailors forthwith.

US Secretary of State John Kerry, who on learning of the seizure of the vessels immediately contacted his Iranian counterpart Javed Zarif, said Tuesday evening the US sailors would be released “very soon.”

Appearing on CNN, White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest said: “Everybody should be aware of the fact we have been in touch with the Iranians and they have assured us that our sailors are safe and that they’ll be allowed to continue their journey promptly.”

According to press reports, the sailors will be transferred to a vessel from the USS Harry S. Truman aircraft-carrier strike group in international waters Wednesday morning. The CBC reported an anonymous US Defense Department official as saying that “it was deemed safer to carry out the exchange in daylight.”

Obama’s Republican opponents were quick to seize on the incident to repeat their charge that Obama is “appeasing” Tehran and demand a renewed campaign

of economic sanctions and military threats against Iran.

They, along with a minority faction of the Democratic Party leadership, are bitterly opposed to the nuclear agreement the Obama administration, Russia, China and the major European Union powers reached with Iran last year. Under that agreement, Iran made sweeping concessions, dismantling much of its civil nuclear program and agreeing to the most intrusive-ever nuclear inspections regime, in exchange for the suspension of punishing US-led economic sanctions.

Texas Senator and Republican presidential candidate Ted Cruz called the capture of the US sailors “the latest manifestation of the weakness of Barack Obama.”

Jeb Bush tweeted: “If our sailors aren’t coming home yet, they need to be now. No more bargaining. Obama’s humiliatingly weak Iran policy is exposed again.”

A third candidate for the Republican nomination, Florida Senator Marco Rubio, accused Obama of letting Iran “get away with many things” and said this would “accelerate” once the Iran nuclear deal came into force. “That’s why as president on my first day in office I will repeal the nuclear deal.”

Arkansas Republican Senator Tom Cotton, one of the most outspoken opponents of the Iran deal, said Iran’s “hostile action” was “exactly what I and so many others predicted.” The nuclear deal “would embolden their aggression.”

The reality is that the US has maintained a massive military flotilla off Iran’s Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea shores for decades. The nuclear agreement is a neo-colonial “unequal treaty” extorted from Iran through an economic blockade tantamount to war, a massive US military build-up and years of war threats.

Yesterday’s incident comes at a critical point in the implementation of the nuclear accord that was reached last July. Sometime next week, officials from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) are

expected to confirm that Tehran has dismantled or mothballed much of its civilian nuclear infrastructure and reduced by more than nine-tenths its stockpile of enriched uranium. On Monday, Iran reportedly completed the removal of the core of its heavy-water reactor in Arak and filled it with cement.

Once the IAEA certifies that Iran has fulfilled its initial commitments under the nuclear accord, Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif and EU Foreign Policy Chief Frederica Mogherini are to issue a joint statement declaring that “implementation” of the nuclear accord has begun, the trigger for beginning the roll back of the sanctions and the time-limited parts of the 15-year agreement.

Iran has been the subject of bitter disputes within the US political and military-security establishments. The differences, however, are entirely of a tactical character—over how best to maintain US strategic dominance over the Middle East and assert global hegemony.

Obama calculates that the nuclear deal gives US imperialism significant leverage over Iran, the better to seek to harness the Islamic Republic’s bourgeois ruling elite to serve its strategic interests in stabilizing the Middle East and ultimately moving against Russia and China.

Since signing the nuclear accord a half-year ago, the Obama administration has continued to ratchet up military pressure on Iran. This has included backing the Saudi invasion of Yemen and stepping up its support for Islamist forces seeking to overthrow Syria’s Bashar al-Assad-led Baathist regime, Iran’s only governmental ally in the region. And, even as the US is bound under the nuclear agreement to dismantle some economic sanctions against Iran, the White House is preparing to impose other sanctions over Iran’s ballistic missile program.

At the same time, the Obama administration has suggested that if Tehran proves useful in arriving at a “political settlement” in Syria, i.e., in replacing the Assad regime with one more pliant to US interests, it would be willing to move forward to rapprochement with the Islamic Republic.

This policy is opposed by other sections of the US ruling class and military-security apparatus. They believe anything but the immediate and total subjugation of Tehran to US strategic interests is

unacceptable and fear the detrimental impact of closer ties with Iran on Washington’s traditional regional clients, particularly Israel and Saudi Arabia.

In recent days, Saudi Arabia has stepped up its belligerence against Iran, beginning with the provocative January 2 execution of the dissident Saudi Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr.



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