

# Iran releases US sailors in run-up to nuclear sanction relief

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14 January 2016

Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Wednesday released 10 US sailors it had detained after they entered Iranian territorial waters, putting an end to a potential military confrontation in the Persian Gulf.

The speedy diplomatic resolution of the incident took place against the backdrop of the imminent implementation of the nuclear agreement reached last July between Iran and the so-called P5+1, consisting of China, France, Germany, Russia, the UK and the US.

"Following the illegal and unpermitted entry of two American Navy vessels into the Islamic Republic of Iran's territorial waters near Farsi Island in the Persian Gulf on the evening of the previous day, the vessels stopped, obeying a warning by IRGC vessels, and their crew members, who comprised nine male Marines and one female Marine, were placed under arrest," a statement issued by the IRGC read.

"After technical and operational examinations done in interaction with the country's relevant political and national security authorities and the establishment of the inadvertent and unintentional nature of the entry by the American Navy crafts and their apology, a decision was made to free them," it added.

IRGC Navy Commander Rear Admiral Ali Fadavi, however, said in an interview on Iranian national television that the incident had risked a major armed confrontation in the Gulf. He said that US warships and warplanes had engaged in "non-professional and irresponsible behavior" after American commanders realized the two boats had been taken to Farsi Island. He added that the Iranian forces broadcast warnings to the US fleet and that they had been prepared to fire upon it resulting in "such a disaster that would have been a first in the American history."

The Pentagon remained tight-lipped about the incident, offering no official explanation and allowing

only that "the Navy will investigate the circumstances that led to the sailors' presence in Iran."

The sailors were captured aboard two Riverine Command Boats (RCBs), high-speed military assault craft armed with heavy machine guns and heavily armored. They can be used to deploy special operations units as well as for intelligence purposes.

Iran released photographs and videos showing the US sailors kneeling on the deck with their hands behind their heads as they surrendered to the IRGC, and later seated on Persian carpets in the room where they were detained on Farsi Island, a heavily restricted base for the Revolutionary Guards' navy.

Initially, the Iranian Guards charged that the boats had been "snooping" in Iranian waters. Later, however, they accepted that one of the boats had suffered mechanical failure and drifted to within three miles of Iran's Farsi Island, in the middle of the Gulf. The other boat supposedly stayed with it.

This official story, however, has been called into question on two counts. First, the US Navy claimed that the boats were intercepted while making a cross-Gulf voyage from Kuwait to Bahrain, a distance which is not consistent with the use of these shallow-water craft.

Moreover, claims that one of the boats had suffered mechanical failure were called into question when Iran turned the vessels over to other US Navy crews, which sailed both of them away without any apparent difficulty.

It appears probable that the assault boats were on another mission that Washington is keeping secret and which the Iranians have chosen to ignore rather than risk an escalating confrontation with the US.

The incident unfolded under conditions of sharp tensions in the region, particularly between Iran and Saudi Arabia, whose ruling monarchy has intentionally

sought to provoke a confrontation with Tehran by beheading the Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr and subsequently cutting off all diplomatic and trade ties with Iran.

The US had also confronted Iran over an alleged incident in which its navy test fired missiles near an American warship. Washington also threatened to impose a new round of sanctions over Iranian ballistic missile tests, but has since failed to carry it out.

Secretary of State John Kerry issued a statement Wednesday expressing his “gratitude to Iranian authorities for swiftly resolving this matter.”

Vice President Joe Biden, however, followed up with a refutation of Iranian reports that the US had apologized for the incident, claiming that there “was nothing to apologize for.” Iran later issued a video of one of the US sailors apologizing for the violation of Iranian sovereignty, but US officials dismissed it, saying that it did not represent an official statement.

The incident stands in stark contrast to similar earlier violations of Iranian waters by foreign warships, including a case in 2007 in which 15 British sailors and marines aboard two small craft were held for nearly two weeks after being captured.

The conciliatory reaction from Tehran, including by the IRGC, which was among those factions thought to have opposed the major concession made to Western pressure in the nuclear deal, appears to indicate a consensus within Iranian ruling circles that the implementation of the agreement and the anticipated relief from punishing sanctions should not be derailed.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is expected to certify by the end of this week that Iran is in compliance with the terms of the nuclear agreement. Iran shipped virtually its entire stockpile of low-enriched uranium to Russia at the end of last month, unplugged thousands of centrifuges and, according to a statement from John Kerry Wednesday, disabled the central vessel, or calandria, for its heavy water reactor at Arak, which had been capable of producing plutonium, a precursor for nuclear weapons.

Iran has also agreed to subject itself to the most intrusive inspections regime ever imposed, all to establish that its nuclear program is not being used to produce nuclear weapons, something which Tehran has denied ever doing.

For Washington, the nuclear issue has always served

as a pretext for imposing maximum pressure on Tehran in a bid to isolate Iran and weaken it as a regional power capable of countering US influence in the Middle East and Central Asia.

With confirmation that Iran is in compliance with the nuclear deal, a sweeping range of sanctions are supposed to be lifted as early as next weekend. This would include the unfreezing of some \$100 billion in Iranian assets, the lifting of an embargo on Iranian oil sales and the reintegration of Iranian banks into the international banking system.

Significant sections of the US ruling establishment are sharply opposed to the nuclear agreement, which stands to benefit US imperialism’s European and Asian competitors in terms of new sources of oil along with contracts and investments opportunities. These layers want a military confrontation with Iran, while the Obama administration seeks through both diplomatic efforts and military pressure to realign the Iranian bourgeois regime behind US interests in the region.

The capture of the two boats in Iranian waters provoked a Republican barrage of denunciations of the Obama administration for failure to adopt a more confrontational approach to Iran.

After the speedy release of the US personnel, there were new condemnations of Kerry for thanking Iran and acknowledging that the sailors were “well taken care of.”

Republicans seized upon the photographs and video of the captured sailors. Arizona Senator John McCain called Kerry’s remarks “unbelievable,” while Florida Senator and presidential candidate Marco Rubio called the images “really horrifying.” He added, “That is why on my first day in office, in that Oval Office, I am going to cancel this ridiculous deal he has cut with Iran.”



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