

Iran: escalating tensions behind capture of British sailors

By Chris Marsden
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Though it appears that they will be released shortly, the capture and detention of eight British sailors in the southern Shatt al-Arab waterway border with Iraq has focused attention on the sharp tensions that have developed between Iran, the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States.

An Iranian armed forces spokesman, Ali Reza Afshar, said “the order for the release of the vessels and their military crew was issued” after UK forces said they had “made a mistake.”

Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi said the British sailors “will be freed today [June 23].”

The immediate circumstances leading up to the capture of the eight are unclear. It appeared that the six Royal Marines and two Royal Navy sailors were detained on Monday, June 21, while on a mission to train an Iraqi river patrol crew.

Their three vessels were apparently captured a long way over the border that runs down the middle of the Shatt al-Arab, 120 miles of tidal waterway formed by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

A vital trade route for both countries, it is Iraq’s only access to the Persian Gulf. Control of Shatt al-Arab was one of the major disputes involved in the ruinous Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988, and it is extraordinary that the sailors were apparently so careless. A British military spokesman acknowledged, “The waterway runs over a mile wide. The border runs pretty much down the middle of it.”

It may be that the flotilla was involved in some kind of reconnaissance operation. Although the Ministry of Defence has refused to elaborate, reports have stated that the eight crewmen were armed with American special services weapons. The Iraqi patrols are meant to clamp down on smugglers dealing in oil and weapons from Iran bound for Islamic resistance groups in Iraq, as well as militants seeking access to the country.

But Iran appears to have accepted that the incursion was accidental. An Iranian spokesman said the army command was satisfied that the arms and equipment carried in the three British launches had been for use during their patrolling duties.

In any event, the encounter itself may be accidental, but the tensions that provoked it are real.

The arrests came at a time of strained relations between the UK and Iran, which is due to Britain’s key role in the US war against Iraq, the subsequent occupation of the country, and the part London is also playing in supporting various diplomatic efforts by Washington attacking Iran itself.

In past weeks, there have been angry demonstrations outside the British embassy in Tehran to protest the occupation of Iraq and invasions and attacks on Shia holy places, such as Najaf and Karballah, which are centres of resistance to the occupation. Forces within the Iranian ruling elite have connections to some of the groups now operating in Iraq, although the regime itself has largely acceded to Washington’s demands that it stay clear of Iraqi affairs.

The role being played by the Royal Navy in training Iraqi personnel on the Shatt al-Arab is itself provocative, particularly to members of Iran’s Republican Guard, for whom it is a special area of interest.

Conflict with Britain has been worsened by the readiness of Prime Minister Tony Blair to risk his previous efforts to cultivate relations with the “reform wing” around President Khatami—elements more amenable to direct collaboration with the Western powers—by backing the threatening posture taken by Washington toward the Iranian regime.

President George W. Bush has included Tehran prominently on his list of states accused of backing terrorism that make up the so-called “axis of evil.” Recent months have been dominated by the drive of the US to utilise the United Nations’ International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) as a mechanism for placing maximum pressure on Iran.

Iran was forced to agree to allow IAEA inspectors into the country to investigate claims that its nuclear power programme concealed a covert nuclear weapons programme. Since then it has variously been accused of a failure to cooperate fully with inspectors, of possessing small amounts of weapons grade plutonium, and of making attempts to buy

equipment for nuclear weapons production from China in return for oil.

On June 18, the IAEA passed a resolution that had been endorsed by Britain, France and Germany, as well as the US, condemning Iran for its failure to cooperate with inspectors.

Just one day later, the European Union issued a statement strongly criticising Iran for human rights abuses. The statement warned Iran that if it failed to correct its human rights record, the EU would block the signing of a proposed Trade and Cooperation Agreement.

This elicited a sharp response from Tehran, with the chief of the Iranian judiciary, Ayatollah Mahmud Hashemi Shahrudi, condemning the EU's failure to denounce "the crimes being perpetrated in Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine." He stated that the EU's double standards were due to what the *Tehran Times* described as "the pressure exerted on them by hegemonic powers."

On this at least, the Ayatollah is correct. The Bush administration does not at this time contemplate a direct challenge to Iran, particularly in the run-up to the US presidential elections. But sections of the Republican far right have gone as far as to advocate military intervention, or at the very least economic warfare. And the administration itself has taken a very bellicose stance.

Asked on June 21 whether the US is considering imposing sanctions on Iran, Secretary of State Colin Powell answered that Tehran had been "put on notice" by the IAEA resolution and that "we will have a chance to examine their response in September and at that time judgements can be made as to what action might be appropriate."

The US position is in part an attempt to cut across the efforts of Britain and the other European powers to cultivate relations with Iran and secure their own controlling interest in its trade in oil.

Following Khatami's election as president in May 1997, the EU opened what it described as "a comprehensive dialogue" with Tehran that continued until the start of the Iraq war. Its eventual aim was the securing of a Trade and Cooperation Agreement first proposed in November 2001 and adopted as policy in the summer of 2002.

The EU is Iran's main trading partner. According to its own figures, in 2001 EU imports from Iran totalled 6.7 billion euros, and EU exports to Iran amounted to 6.6 billion euros. More than 80 percent of EU imports consist of oil products, but its exports to Iran largely consist of heavy machinery.

However, the offensive by Washington is not only detrimental to the interests of the European powers but also to those of the US bourgeoisie and its Arab allies.

The war against Iraq has destabilised the entire Middle

East. One manifestation of this is that it has inevitably strengthened Iran's specific weight in Middle Eastern affairs. The previous policy of the US depended heavily on its ability to play off Iraq against Iran, which is no longer possible. Moreover, its occupation of Iraq has fuelled the growth of fundamentalist forces within Iraq supportive of Iran, while undermining the more overtly pro-Western forces around Khatami in Iran itself and strengthening more hardline elements amongst the mullahs and the military.

An editorial in Britain's the *Times* called the arrest of the eight sailors "a shot across the coalition's bow, a clear warning that Tehran intends to play a dominant role in the Gulf after the new Iraqi government takes over in eight days' time."

Urging caution on Britain's part, it predicted that subsequent events would be determined by who wins out in a power struggle between Khatami and Iran's supreme religious leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei .

An accompanying opinion column by Vanora Bennett warned of a "resurgent Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps." It noted that 90 out of 209 deputies in the Iranian parliament were "members and ex-members of this ideological branch of the Armed Forces."

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