

CRISES & LOST OPPORTUNITIES: LONDON, TEHRAN, & THE "BRITISH 15"

In the public domain, the recent dispute over the detention of 15 British sailors and marines by Iranian authorities was a large but singular wave. Arising suddenly and dominating political and media discussion in Britain and Iran for almost two weeks, breaking equally quickly with President Ahmedinejad's surprise announcement of the detainees' release, complete with presentation of suits and gifts, the crisis within days left only the ripples of whether or not the detainees should be allowed to sell their stories to the British media.

Any closer inspection of the waters --- in the Persian Gulf and beyond --- would show, however, that the denouement was a false one. Indeed Prime Minister Blair highlighted this with his choreographed reaction, before cameras in front of 10 Downing Street, 24 hours after the climactic Ahmedinejad statement. Ostensibly welcoming home the sailors/marines, Blair seized upon the slaying of four British troops outside Basra to link Iran to the twin evils of support of Iraqi insurgency and to "terrorism":

"The general picture, as I have said before, is that there are elements, at least, of the Iranian regime that are backing, financing, arming, supporting terrorism in Iraq."ⁱ

Whether or not the subsequent press conference in Devon with the returning sailors/marines, and indeed the marketed accounts of Faye Turney and Arthur Batchelor were episodes in a strategic denunciation, the press seized upon the account to query

For the detention of the 15 may have begun as a "local" incident but it was inevitably going to become far more. This was not because, as more sensational British press speculation would assert, the Government in Tehran ordered the taking of "hostages" as a show of force or as a counter to Western sanctions of Iran's nuclear programme. Nor was it evidence of an inner cabal, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, exerting its influence within and beyond Iranian politics. Rather, as soon as the 15 were taken to Tehran, they became part of



British sailors and marines face the press following their release from Iran.



wider, pre-existing disputes and political manoeuvres on both sides of the Anglo-Iranian divide.

Amidst the initial debate over the position of the British crew when it was surrounded by Iranian forces --- a debate which ended inconclusivelyⁱⁱ --- the context for the confrontation was usually missed. Rumours and evidence of American plans to carry out covert operations for intelligence-gathering and possibly for destabilisation of the Iranian regime had circulated for months. Indeed one of the 15, Captain Chris Air, told Sky News before his detention, "It's good to gather int [intelligence] on the Iranians."ⁱⁱⁱ One could speculate therefore that Iranian forces near the land and waterway "border" would be on heightened state of readiness to react against any perceived transgressions and, conceivably, to make an example of the transgressors.

Perhaps more importantly, Iran could point to its own experiences with "detention". On 11 January five Iranians working at a government office in Erbil in northern Iraq were taken into custody by American forces; less than a month later the First Secretary of the Iranian Embassy in Iraq, Jalal Sharafi, was seized by abductors in Iraqi security uniforms, and a day after that, a high-ranking Iranian military officer disappeared in Turkey. An unexpressed but clear link was drawn by the Iranian Government: if the case of the British personnel was to be raised as one for negotiation leading to release, then the cases of the detained Iranians should also be considered.

And, of course, these immediate military and security cases are part of strategic tensions in the region and beyond. Iraq is the most prominent setting for these conflicts (and, potentially, co-operation), but both Tehran and London are increasingly committed to the ongoing, complex struggle for influence and control in Afghanistan and, via Afghanistan, entangled in a re-definition of relations with Pakistan. Both Tehran and London, as a junior partner of the Americans, are participants in the purported remaking of the Middle East from Israel/Palestine to Lebanon to Saudi Arabia. Regional influence and power in turn intersects with the Iranian pursuit of nuclear energy and Britain opposition, again linked to Washington's position, to what it claims is the pursuit of nuclear weapons capability.

The "location" of the British boat, therefore, was not as important as its "location" within these existing issues and disputes. For example, the US and Britain had failed over many months to get the passage of meaningful sanctions, linked to the disputed Iranian nuclear programme, in the United Nations Security Council. On 15 March the Council "agreed in principle to ban all Iranian arms exports and freeze the financial assets of 28 Iranian officials and institutions", but this was more of a symbolic compromise between the US-UK line and powers such as Russia and China wary of tough economic measures.^{iv} For London, however, the detention of the British sailors/marines offered another basis for an appeal to the Council.^v Indeed, key Iranian officials



anticipated and feared this strategem: when Britain announced that it would pursue further sanctions, Tehran warned that the sailors/marines could be tried for espionage and sentenced to seven years in jail.^{vi}

With hindsight, London's failure to get a hardening of the Security Council's position and, following that, a strident European response to Tehran may have been a salvation. Further sanctions and escalated rhetoric would have raised questions, if not immediate consequences, about the political positioning in Iraq, Middle Eastern arenas such as the Lebanon, and Afghanistan. It may have elevated the strategic option of an attempted "Sunni bloc", including and linking Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, against Iran (and, conceivably, Syria).

Instead, unexpected opportunity emerged. Unable to base itself on the legal or political position that the troops were clearly taken from Iraqi waters, the Blair Government had to concentrate upon bilateral discussions with Tehran, whether through established (if unadmitted) contacts or through new channels. It is unclear, and perhaps irrelevant, which side made the renewed approach, but the public presentations surrounding those discussions offered an important insight into the Iranian handling of the crisis and development of policy.

In the simplistic portrayal of Iranian rule, all important decisions must emanate from the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, or President Ahmedinejad. This portrayal was unsettled in the initial days of the crisis, as both the Supreme Leader and Ahmedinejad offered few public statements and speculation grew over the role of the "Republican Guard" (the IRGC).^{vii} The Western media's uncertainty was well-merited even if it stumbled toward tangential or even misleading conclusions. In particular, it missed the significance of the interviews given by Dr Ali Larijani, the Head of the Supreme National Council, to outlets such as Channel 4 in London. Larijani was initially treated as a spokesman for the Government then, in some more astute outlets, as a negotiator with the British.

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In fact, Larijani's emergence signalled far more. As the former head of Iran's nuclear programme and a Presidential candidate in 2005, he occupied an influential position in Iranian decisionmaking, one that, with his chairmanship of the Supreme National Council, became vital. Ahmedinejad's reticence in the early days of the dispute was not strategic calculation; rather, his direction of foreign policy had been curbed by the Supreme Leader and other political leaders, particularly after his ill-judged comments on the Holocaust. Far from being directed by the President, the Supreme National Council (which generally parallels the American National Security Council) had taken charge of responses --- both specific and general --- in the crisis).

Larijani's discussions with Blair's adviser Sir Nigel Sheinwald, bolstered and projected by his media appearances, thus indicated that the Iranians not only wanted a resolution to the crisis but wished to use the resolution as an opening for discussion both on the linked issues of communications and detentions and on the wider political and nuclear questions. Building upon Larijani's formula that "there should be a delegation to review the case...to clarify whether [the British sailors/marines] have been in our territorial waters or not", the Iranian Ambassador to London, Rasoul Mohavedian, told the *Financial Times* that Tehran would welcome "any steps that could defuse tensions in the region."^{viii} Thus, Ahmedinejad's flamboyant release of the detainees was symbol for a substance determined by others. On 3 April, amidst the decisive discussions, the President's press conference was abruptly cancelled. A day later, after agreement with the Supreme National Council, he could declare that, guided by the Prophet Mohammed, Iran was freeing the detainees as a "gift" to Britain.

Evidence of the manoeuvring between the Supreme National Council, supported by the Supreme Leader, and the British soon emerged, often outside the cognisance of the media. The day before Ahmedinejad's surprise announcement, The kidnapped First Secretary, Jalal Sharafi, was suddenly released.^{ix} Equally suddenly, the US military confirmed that it was reviewing a request by the Iranians for access to the Erbil Five.^x

But, cutting across these initiatives was the Blair statement of 5 April. The attribution of blame to the Iranians for the Basra killings was a clear signal that, if any further discussions were to occur with Tehran, Britain must be the plaintiff and Iran the respondent. The Prime Minister, far from releasing the pressure on the Iranians, was seeking to increase it.

The strategy backfired, however, when the press conference of the released detainees with its graphic description of psychological pressure was superseded by the row over the sale of their stories. Media attention turned away from Tehran's "evil manipulations" to the flaws of a British military which could have sanctioned its sailors/marines to make a profit from their travails and focused upon Minister of Defence Des Browne rather than Ahmedinejad.

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There have been further episodes in Washington and London's denunciation of Iran. The US military modified Blair's charges to hint at Iranian sponsorship of the Taliban and attacks on international forces in Afghanistan.^{xi} The State Department followed with a warning about Iran's "unhealthy" activities.^{xii}

Yet there may be another twisting of the tale. At the height of the crisis, even as many in the British media and political circles were calling for a showdown, Robert Gates, the new US Secretary of Defense publicly stated, "The regional talks recently held in Baghdad were a good start toward improved cooperation, and our government is open to higher-level exchanges [with Iran]."^{xiii} A month later, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has made clear that she is willing to talk with Iranian representatives at the follow-up summit on Iraq. Tehran, which has advocated the discussions even as Sunni-led Arab states such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt have stalled, is likely to seize the diplomatic opening.^{xiv}

Parallel to this, the visit of Javier Solana, the EU , to discuss Iranian nuclear development brought cautious optimism, with Larijani commenting, "There were new ideas rising up. These ideas need time to grow and develop. But you can say this was a good first step."^{xv} Significantly, Gates endorsed further discussions, "These things don't work overnight, but it seems to me clearly the preferable course to keep our focus on the diplomatic initiatives, and particularly because of the united front of the international community at this point."^{xvi}

Of course, it is far too soon to expect detailed US-Iranian negotiations on the region and on Iran's nuclear programme. The Iranians will probably set conditions such as the release of the Erbil Five, and Washington, at least in the short term, will continue to press the public line that sanctions are necessary against what it projects as an unreliable and potentially dangerous Tehran. The shift signalled by Gates and Rice is no less significant, however. Only four months ago the Bush Administration rejected the Iraq Study Group report, which called for discussions with Iran. Now it is following that route. With the touted "surge" already failing to curb Moqtada al-Sadr, politically and militarily, let alone the general pattern of violence across Iraq, and with the departure of erstwhile hawks such as Donald Rumsfeld, it appears that key officials in



President Ahmedinejad meets Faye Turney during the symbolic and public release.

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Washington are accepting that confrontation with Iran is not a magic remedy for challenges hundreds of miles away.

Whether the British Government, in the last dog days of Tony Blair's rule, has reached that same conclusion is a more difficult question. Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett and her officials are loudly proclaiming, "There will be repercussions in terms of policy options."^{xvii} This could well be public cover for a more discreet recognition that the British 15 should not be the pretext for a drawn-out feud or even for back-channel discussions, but the possibility remains: has London chosen to play the Western enforcer even as some of its American friends are questioning whether "make my day" is the right message to be sending in these troubled times?

POSTSCRIPT: THE WOMAN IN RED

The much-anticipated (in the "West", if not in Tehran) US-Iran exchange at the Sharm el-Sheikh summit on Iraq turned out to be, at least for the American media, an amusing diversion. Seated across from Condoleezza Rice at dinner, whether by chance, by a clumsy attempt at diplomatic brokering, or by some mischievous humour on the part of the hosts, Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki quickly made his excuses and departed. The purported explanation was Mottaki's offence at the attire --- a long red evening dress and a stole --- of a female violinist entertaining the table. US State Department spokesperson Sean McCormack quipped, "I don't know which woman he was afraid of, the woman in the red dress or the Secretary of State."^{xviii}

The diplomatic spin scored a couple of short-term points, turning the responsibility for blocking dialogue back on Tehran, but it obscured a more important development and left a vital question. The development was Rice's meeting with the Syrian Foreign Minister, Walid al-Moualem, which reportedly concentrated on oversight of the Syrian-Iraqi border. Suddenly the US military, which had long condemned Syria for support of the Iraqi insurgency, was praising Damascus: "There has been some movement by the Syrians. There has been a reduction in the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq."^{xix}

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If the discussion with al-Moualem had immediate security considerations, the shift in the Bush Administration's policy may go beyond a belated acceptance of the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group. The clumsy formulation of the Axis of Evil has hidden the more pertinent dynamic of political and economic cooperation between Damascus and Tehran. Talking to the former could bolster an American strategy of isolating the latter.

But, if this is true, Washington is setting aside part of its regional strategy. Since 2003, the Administration waged a vigorous battle for a "free" Lebanon, meaning both a withdrawal of Syrian forces and political operatives and the emergence of a pro-American Government. The partial success of Syrian's military retreat was not followed by a total political departure and, more importantly, a stable, pro-American Lebanese administration. Assad's popularity at home is still bolstered by his support for Hezbollah (indeed, if one was mischievous, he/she might suggest that Washington had unwittingly bolstered Hezbollah --- and therefore Assad --- with its approach to Lebanon, especially over the last year). Any follow-up to Rice's talks with al-Moallem, despite the American insistence that discussions are confined to the Iraqi security situation, will probably have to accept a pause or at least a limitation on any American intervention in the Lebanon. In addition, Washington may have to consider a Damascus request for the revival of talks with Israel on a settlement of the Golan Heights, a request either implicitly or explicitly rejected since the mid-1990s. by officials connected with the current Administration.

Moreover, this is a far from trifling gamble. The approach to Syria highlights the difficulty of containing Iran. The attempt to do this through a high-profile Saudi (read Sunni) position, supported by the Gulf States, immediately ran into trouble; in part because of internal conditions in the Kingdom, in part because the Saudis wanted to seize the initiative on the Israel-Palestine question, and in large part because Saudi intervention in Iraq may simply fuel civil war and an anti-American insurgency. Playing nicer with Damascus, even if it limits Syrian intervention with Tehran, does not offer a palliative for any of those problems.

The opening to Syria is no trump card in the US-Iranian game. It's not even a possible ace. What has been striking after the summit has been the lack of American noise beyond the trumpeting of the Woman in Red. No pronouncement by Washington on the Iranian nuclear issue, no follow-up on the threat of the Iranian "Revolutionary Guard". Even the alleged Iranian support of the Iraqi insurgency has been set aside.

Britain, for its part, has not gone on the offensive suggested in the last paragraph of my earlier thinkpiece. Foreign Secretary Beckett --- whose diplomacy, in contrast to that of Tony Blair, is apparently welcomed by the Iranians --- did meet Mottaki. Few details were offered to --- or even sought by ---

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the press, but it appears that the Foreign Office's "review" may indeed be a wide reassessment of Britain's strategic approach to Iran, Iraq, and the Persian Gulf.

And Tehran? This is probably the most important question. The "Woman in Red" pseudo-story took all eyes off the diplomatic ball. The Iranian explanation for Mottaki's walkout, beyond any comments about the violinist, was that the US Government --- desperate for any sign of "progress", and thus needing Tehran more than Tehran needs Washington --- was not going to get a free photo opportunity with Iran's officials. If there are going to be talks, they will have to be quiet and behind the scenes.

Mottaki's stepping away from the table may --- and probably does --- indicate that Iran would prefer quiet, behind-the-scenes talks it also indicates, however, that Iran may be setting up pre-conditions for those talks. The release of the Erbil Five may be one requirement; as Mottaki made clear at Sharm al-Sheikh, "We hold the perpetrators of this clumsy and adventurous act responsible for its consequences." Another may be a clearer signal that the US military commitment in Iraq is not open-ended, following Mottaki's statement, "The United States must accept the responsibilities arising from the occupation of Iraq and should not put the blame on others."^{xx}

There has been speculation that Mottaki's rebuff of Rice may point to the developing internal debate in Tehran. Larijani's manoeuvres in the crisis of the British detainees, indicated that he, supported by the Supreme Leader, might welcome the opening of limited discussions with the Americans. It is not clear that Ahmadinejad supports this position, and despite managing Larijani's Presidential campaign in 2005, there are indications that the Foreign Minister is closer to the President. An intriguing hint that the US might be cognizant of these divisions, and indeed might be encouraging them, came in a brief mention that "US sources...suggested that the Americans [felt] the right man for the first such meeting in nearly 30 years was Ali Larijani, Iran's national security adviser, not Mr Mottaki".^{xxi}

Yet, despite this domestic manoeuvring, it is doubtful that Mottaki and Ahmedinejad would have publicly defied any decision by the Supreme National Council, especially if they had Ayatollah Khamenei's approval. So the Foreign Minister's stand at Sharm al-Sheikh was not so much a signal of Ahmadinejad's fightback against others in the Iranian system who had been curbing his authority as it was a sign of consensus --- that, even as the Bush Administration is retreating from confrontation, Tehran is upping the ante for any meaningful talks. Just like the British 15, the Woman in Red was only a walk-on actor in a much larger play.

As this "goes to press", the US Government has announced that Ryan Crocker, the US Ambassador in Iraq, will meet Iranian counterparts within



weeks. For all of Dick Cheney's bluster, on his trip to the region, about standing down Tehran's threat, the State Department in particular has accepted that the negotiations with Iran must take place through diplomatic channels. As a spokesman for the National Security Council explained, a bit testily, "The president authorized this channel because we must take every step possible to stabilize Iraq and reduce the risk to our troops, even as our military continue to act against hostile Iranian-backed activity in Iraq."^{xxii}

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ⁱ <http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page11445.asp>

ⁱⁱ Tehran responded to the initial British insistence that the crew was definitely in Iraqi waters with an offer to share its GPS data and other technical information. London rejected the approach but, afterwards, somewhat muted its claim that Iranian forces knew they were seizing the sailors/marines illegally. For further analysis, see the provocative claim, "How I Know Blair Faked Iraq Map", by Craig Murray, the former British Ambassador to Uzbekistan, at http://www.mailonsunday.co.uk/pages/live/articles/news/newscomment.html?in_article_id=445896&in_page_id=1787&in_a_source=

ⁱⁱⁱ With the exception of an article in the *Daily Telegraph* and then the *Observer*, the British press largely ignored Air's revelation. In contrast, it was featured prominently on Al Jazeera's English-language channel.

^{iv} <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/03/15/AR2007031500248.html>

^v <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/03/29/AR2007032900216.html>

^{vi} http://news.independent.co.uk/world/middle_east/article2405137.ece

^{vii} http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/guest_contributors/article1588760.ece

^{viii} <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/04/07/AR2007040701135.html>

^{ix} <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/04/world/middleeast/04iraq.html>

^x <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/05/world/middleeast/05iraq.html>

^{xi} http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/18/world/middleeast/18military.html?_r=1&oref=slogin

^{xii} <http://www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,,2060393,00.html>

^{xiii} <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/03/27/AR2007032702224.html>

^{xiv} <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/03/30/AR2007033001927.html>

^{xv} <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/27/world/middleeast/27briefs-iran.html>

^{xvi} <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/04/18/AR2007041801916.html>

^{xvii} <http://www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,,2064052,00.html>

^{xviii} http://news.independent.co.uk/world/middle_east/article2514302.ece

^{xix} <http://www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,,2072035,00.html>

^{xx} <http://www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,,2072950,00.html>

^{xxi} <http://www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,,2072035,00.html>

^{xxii} <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/05/13/AR2007051300304.html>