

Iranian diplomat kidnapped in Baghdad: another US provocation?

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The abduction of an Iranian diplomat in Baghdad on Sunday evening has further heightened tensions between Washington and Tehran, amid a continuing US military buildup against Iran in the Persian Gulf.

US officials have denied any role in the kidnapping, but the incident certainly serves the Bush administration's purposes by undermining Iranian diplomatic activity and souring relations between Iraq and Iran. Moreover, while it is not clear who carried out the kidnapping, several aspects of the operation point to American involvement.

Jalal Sharafi, the second secretary at the Iranian embassy, was abducted by gunmen dressed as Iraqi commandos in the predominantly Shiite district of Karrada in central Baghdad. Two vehicles blocked his car and Sharafi was bundled into the one of the vehicles, which sped off. Police arrested at least four of the gunmen after opening fire and disabling one of the vehicles.

Iraqi officials told the media the men wore the uniform of the elite 36th Iraqi Commando Battalion—part of the Special Operations Forces Brigade that operates closely with the US military. All the captured gunmen carried official Iraqi military identification that appeared to be genuine, according to US and Iraqi officials who spoke to the New York Times.

The captured gunmen did not remain in police custody for long, however. Uniformed officials with government badges appeared at the lock-up and demanded that the men be handed over, purportedly so they could be transferred to the serious crimes unit. The detainees simply disappeared. Interior Ministry and Defence Ministry spokesmen told Associated Press they had no information and no idea where the suspects went.

Yesterday, Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari announced that four Iraqi military officers had been detained over the abduction. He said they were being questioned, but provided no further information. No one has claimed responsibility for the kidnapping and no demands have been issued by Sharafi's abductors.

Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Mohammad-Ali Hosseini condemned the abduction and warned it would harm relations between Iran and Iraq. He held the US military "responsible for the life and safety of the Iranian diplomat". Pointing to possible US involvement in the kidnapping, he added: "Based on reliable information, certain agents behind the terrorist act have been arrested. They acted under US supervision."

US officials in Baghdad and Washington have denied any role in the incident. Military spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Carver declared that no unit of the Multi-National Forces Iraq (MNF-I) was involved. White House spokesman Tony Snow told the media: "We don't really know a whole lot about it at this point." While Sunni insurgents, rogue military elements or even criminal gangs could have been responsible, it certainly cannot be ruled out that US forces engineered the abduction.

In his January 10 speech announcing the escalation of the US war in Iraq, President Bush accused Syria and Iran of supporting anti-US insurgents in Iraq and declared that the US military would "seek out and destroy" these networks. At least 10 Iranian officials, including two credentialled diplomats, have been detained by the US military in two operations; one on December 20 in Baghdad and the other in the northern city of Irbil on January 11. The five detained in the raid last month are still in US custody, despite protests by Iran and by Iraqi government officials.

The US has yet to provide any evidence that any of the detained Iranian officials were involved in illicit activities or more broadly that the Iranian regime is arming Shiite militias in Iraq. A "dossier" purporting to prove US allegations against Tehran was due to be made public on January 31 but its release was cancelled and no future date has been set. Bush's National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley openly admitted at a press conference on February 3 that the briefing was "overstated".

In an article on February 6, the US-based think-tank Stratfor, which has close ties to the defence and intelligence establishment, considered US involvement in Sharafi's abduction quite plausible and pointed to several motives. "It is important to note that Sharafi's position at the embassy is the kind of diplomatic posting that frequently would be a cover for intelligence operatives," the article commented. "So if he were an Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security operative of some importance, kidnapping him would disrupt Iranian operations as the US security offensive in Baghdad gets under way.

"Second, the United States has been very public in saying it intends to become more aggressive toward Iranian covert operations as part of its effort to bring pressure against Tehran. US intelligence has substantially ramped up the collection of information on Iran—a move that would serve whether the goal was to actually attack Iran, plan negotiations or just try to figure out the mind of Tehran. The snatch of a second secretary would fit into this effort."

If the purpose was to extract information, the US military could not openly detain and hold an Iranian diplomat without a blatant breach of international law. Nevertheless, as the Stratfor article explained, "an opportunity to question him would be of real value to the United States. Maintaining plausible deniability would be the key. But arranging for Sharafi's abduction by a third party would be a feasible way of obtaining the intelligence sought by the United States. It is therefore quite possible that this was a US-authorized operation executed by Washington's Sunni allies."

Whoever carried it out, the US stands to benefit politically from the abduction, which directly cuts across relations between the Iranian and Iraqi governments. As it prepares for a military confrontation with Iran, the Bush administration has adamantly refused to hold direct talks with Tehran to resolve outstanding disputes over alleged nuclear weapons programs and support for anti-US insurgents. The Iraqi government, however, is based on a

coalition of Shiite parties, all of which have longstanding connections with Tehran, putting it increasingly at odds with Washington.

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki told CNN last week that the US and Iran should not use Iraq as a proxy battleground for their disputes. "We have told the Iranians and the Americans, 'We know that you have a problem with each other, but we are asking you, please solve your problems outside Iraq'," he said. "We will not accept Iran using Iraq to attack the American forces. We don't want the American forces to take Iraq as a field to attack Iran or Syria."

While the US refuses to talk to Iran, top Iraqi officials continue to visit Tehran. Last week the Iraqi government invited Iran and Syria to send delegations to Baghdad in March for talks on security issues that could include other countries in the region. The US, which has not been asked to attend, broadly welcomed the meeting but did not comment directly on Iranian and Syrian involvement.

On Monday, Abdul Aziz Hakim, leader of the Supreme Council of Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), publicly appealed for the US to hold direct talks with Iran, saying: "All Iraqi statesmen support [US-Iran] talks and we believe negotiations will bear many results." SCIRI, one of the largest Shiite factions in the Maliki government, has close ties with the Iranian regime. Hakim was in Tehran to meet with Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

The Bush administration, which ignored Hakim's remarks, has no intention opening negotiations with Tehran. Far from wanting to resolve the disputes with Iran, the US is casting around for pretexts to intensify the pressure on the Iranian regime and prepare for a military attack. In the event of war with Iran, Washington's current Shiite-dominated puppet regime will rapidly become a liability.

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