

What We Don't Know About Iran's Capture and Release of U.S. Sailors

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Fundamental questions now center on how exactly the seizure occurred, how the sailors were treated, and whether Washington offered a quid pro quo for their release.

It is too early to draw conclusions about the capture and release of 10 U.S. Navy personnel by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. It's clear, however, that the incident will be important to how supporters and critics of the nuclear agreement frame their argument in the coming months.

To be clear, the speed with which the Americans were let go -- less than 24 hours after their capture -- was welcome. This contrasts sharply with incidents in 2004 and 2007 involving British Royal Navy personnel, which lasted three and 13 days, respectively. One British marine captured in 2004 said later that he had been subjected to mock executions.

So far, the Obama administration seems to be taking the sailors' release as not only good news but also as a vindication of sorts. A statement by Secretary of State John Kerry said the incident demonstrated the value of the administration's engagement with Iran. That's not self-evident. In 2004 and 2007, the British had even more extensive ties with Iran, including formal diplomatic relations and an embassy in Tehran. Yet that country faced greater difficulties in achieving the return of its naval personnel. And the diplomatic channel between Mr. Kerry and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif has not secured the release of other Americans detained by Iran.

The Obama administration likely sees the incident as validating the idea behind its approach to nuclear diplomacy: that concluding an agreement with Iran would lead to a broader warming of bilateral relations. Mr. Zarif is thought to enjoy little influence with the IRGC, which is considered more anti-American than Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and his supporters; the Guards are more closely aligned with hard-liners engaged in a bitter power struggle

with Mr. Rouhani ahead of Iran's parliamentary elections in February. This factionalism inside the Iranian regime is often offered as an explanation for the inability of U.S. interlocutors to secure the release of imprisoned Americans; detainees are effectively cards the hard-liners play against not just the U.S. but also their domestic adversaries. If Mr. Zarif played a role in the Guards' decision to release the U.S. sailors, it would be a surprise.

The administration's conclusions seem premature, as critics of the administration have noted. The sailors were not immediately released but were held overnight, questioned, and photographed for media consumption. Photos and video have shown the sailors kneeling with their hands clasped above their heads. Video of sailors being questioned and one apologizing as part of the exchange was reportedly shown on Iranian television; broadcasting propaganda images of prisoners violates the Geneva Convention. All of this will be seen as a provocation designed to embarrass the U.S. and a contrast to Washington's recent reluctance to perturb relations with Tehran.

Several questions must be answered: How, precisely, did the two boats and their personnel fall into Iranian hands, and did the initial incident take place in waters that are internationally recognized as Iranian territory? How were the sailors treated while detained? Were their boats and equipment inspected or manipulated before being returned? Did the U.S. offer any quid pro quo for their release? (Any gesture that U.S. officials make toward Iran in the coming weeks will almost certainly be interpreted as such.) And, finally, what was behind the IRGC's release of the sailors?

Answers to the last question are of particular importance to those crafting U.S. policy toward Iran. One can hope the sailors' quick release portends a shift in Iranian power dynamics or officials' attitudes toward the U.S., but it's also possible that Iranian officials were seeking to safeguard sanctions relief that almost certainly would have been delayed had the incident dragged out.

This incident must be triangulated against other Iranian actions, including its testing of ballistic missiles, a live-fire incident in the proximity of U.S. Navy and commercial shipping vessels, the continued detention of Iranian-Americans, the recent ransacking of the Saudi embassy in Tehran, and Iran's undiminished support for the Assad regime in Syria. All of these things point toward continuity, rather than change, in Iran's regional policy.

Initial explanations should also be taken with a grain of salt. If Iran's actions were more provocative than first reported, policy makers risk reinforcing a moral hazard if they do not focus on that provocation but reward its reversal.

Michael Singh is managing director of The Washington Institute. This article originally appeared on the Wall Street Journal blog "Think Tank." (<http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2016/01/13/what-we-dont-know-about-irans-capture-and-release-of-u-s-sailors/>) ❖

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