

# The British Naval Detainees and Iranian Public Opinion

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Brief Analysis

**A**t an April 3 news conference in Tehran, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad unexpectedly announced the decision to release fifteen captured British marines and sailors. In a theatrical gesture that included assailing Western policy in the Middle East and accusing the British crew of entering Iranian waters, he pardoned the detainees to mark both the Prophet Muhammad's birthday on March 30 and what he reportedly called "Christian Passover." (In Farsi, "Pesah" means Passover and "Fash" means Easter. According to the Islamic Republic News Agency report of his remarks, the president used Pesah instead of Fash.)

According to the Iranian constitution, only the Supreme Leader has the legal right to pardon detainees, given his role as commander-in-chief of military forces and supervisor of judiciary power. The president does not have the right to pardon any detainee, whether held by the military or the judiciary. The British detainees were seized by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), a military organization under the direct supervision of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The circumstances surrounding their release involve many difficult questions, many of which are impossible to raise publicly inside Iran without fear of reprisal. It is noteworthy that Khamenei remained silent throughout the crisis. Perhaps the Supreme Leader wanted Ahmadinezhad to pardon them because such a decision would demonstrate the president's authority.

Whatever the reason, Iran's seizure of British personnel in disputed waters was yet another example of the regime's style of resorting to complex measures to make a political point, underscoring the unpredictability of managing a diplomatic crisis with Tehran.

## Tehran's Handling of the Crisis

It is still unclear whether the capture was preplanned or not, but all evidence demonstrates that the incident occurred at a propitious juncture for Iran. The British forces were arrested on March 23, the third day of Nowruz, which is the beginning of the Iranian calendar and the most celebrated annual holiday in Iran. During the first two weeks of Nowruz, the entire country is on leave and no newspaper is published. This is the best time for the government to manage public opinion to its advantage. Historically, some of the Supreme Leader's most shocking decisions -- such as the abrupt closure of nearly twenty newspapers in 2000 -- took place at this time.

For several days during the British crisis, Iranian state radio did not report on the incident at all, while in the West it

remained a top story. Later, Iranian state media failed to report the reaction of the United Nations, Britain, and other Western entities in an objective and impartial way. Moreover, the British captives' "confession" was initially shown on al-Alam TV, an Arabic satellite affiliate of Iranian state radio and television.

Overall, the regime did not seem intent on using the British detainee crisis as propaganda, as it did with the American embassy hostages in 1979. Iranian state media tried to downplay its significance by censoring Western reactions while simultaneously communicating that Iran had the upper hand.

#### Iranians' Reaction to the Release

In an April 5 editorial titled "I Did Not Feel Proud," the reformist newspaper Aftab-e-Yazd criticized Ahmadinezhad for releasing the detainees just twenty-four hours after British prime minister Tony Blair gave a forty-eight-hour ultimatum. The author of the editorial wrote, "If we wanted, as the president says, to pardon them while we had the authority to try them, why did we not release them before Blair's ultimatum or three days after it?"

On the same day, in an article posted on the Baztab website (affiliated with Mohsen Rezaei, former IRGC commander-in-chief) author Sayed Amar Kalantari flatly addressed the president with ten criticisms. First, he wrote that Ali Larijani, secretary of the Supreme Council of National Security, was in charge of the issue and should have announced the decision to release the detainees. He also wrote that either the judiciary or the IRGC had the power to decide whether to release or to bring the Britons to trial -- not the president. Kalantari's main criticism was that the crisis cost Iran dearly without providing any benefit. Etemad, another reformist newspaper, ran an article by Iraj Jamshidi titled "Unpredictable President," which argued that Ahmadinezhad likes to show that he is unpredictable just for unpredictability's sake -- not for any practical considerations.

Later, on April 7, Hossein Shariatmadari, director of the Keyhan newspaper (controlled by the Supreme Leader), wrote an editorial trying to downplay the importance of the story itself: "Entry by the military forces of one country into the territorial waters of another, especially in [a] region with no distance between two territorial waters, is not an unexpected event. In such circumstances -- if any military spy operation did not take place -- patrol boats get interrogated and, after giving a guarantee not to do it again, they get released. But Iran tried to take this as an opportunity to maneuver its authority and break the supremacy of Britain and its allies." Shariatmadari implicitly admitted that the decisions made during the crisis were not necessarily the best possible for Iran.

In recent months, rumors of a probable U.S. military attack on Iran have been a real concern for many Iranians, but Khamenei, as well as other officials, have told the Iranian people that the U.S. military is unable to attack Iran. Fears of U.S. attack persist, however. Arresting fifteen British personnel and accusing them of violating Iranian territorial waters was a move that showed Iranian public opinion that the Iranian military is ready and courageous enough to confront any threat. But this image was damaged by the perception of Iran giving in to Blair.

In the first session of parliament following the two-week Nowruz holiday, some Iranian legislators criticized the president for releasing the detainees. "It was against the Iranian people's dignity that the president, along with his cabinet members in the president's palace, escorted the sailors who violated the territory of Iran," said Ismael Jabarzadeh, a reformist legislator. Many other members wanted to criticize the president on the same issue, but the Majlis speaker did not permit them to do so.

#### Conclusion

Choosing to detain British military personnel was a significant moment in the three-decade history of the Islamic Republic's relationship with the West. Perhaps the foremost lesson is that, during crucial times, all diplomatic means and mechanisms should be used -- especially direct negotiation. The British government continued negotiating bilaterally while simultaneously issuing direct ultimatums and pressing Tehran through the UN and European Union. Without such direct negotiation, the crisis might have lasted longer.

Mehdi Khalaji, a Next Generation fellow at The Washington Institute, is author of [The Last Marja: Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=250) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=250>) (2006). ❖

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