

U.S. Show of Force Does Little to Help Blair

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Articles & Testimony

Iranian television's airing of two more "confessions" by captured Royal Navy personnel is a worrying escalation of the crisis which began on March 23 with the seizure of 15 British sailors and marines in the Gulf.

It comes following the weekend's demonstration outside the British embassy in Tehran, a stunt obviously instigated officially and designed to show British diplomats and their families that they too are exposed to harm and perhaps even arrest.

Such action would be against all diplomatic norms. But Iran, or at least the country's most revolutionary elements, have showed complete disregard for proper behaviour since the US embassy was seized in 1979 and its diplomats held for 444 days.

Then, the US embassy was described by the revolutionaries as a "den of spies". The captured naval personnel have not been accused of that -- yet -- but the Revolutionary Guards who ambushed them have claimed that the Royal Navy has regularly intruded into Iranian waters. Now, as in 1979, Iranian Foreign Ministry officials have sounded diplomatic but seem to be cut out of the decision-making loop.

A further source of anxiety for the London has been the emergence of Iran's fiery President Ahmedinejad into the crisis, after an initial silence. Annoyed by Tony Blair's appeals -- "shouts" to "different international councils" (the United Nations and the European Union).

There remains a faint but diminishing hope for an early diplomatic settlement. Britain could promise not to violate deliberately Iran's waters again, a fairly meaningless statement given that London denies it did so when the personnel were seized. (It is probably also at odds with Britain's, or anyone else's, right to "innocent passage".) That might be good enough for the Iranian Foreign Ministry but is unlikely to be sufficient for Ahmedinejad.

Iran's supreme leader is Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, so far silent. He has a limited world view. His personality suggests that no-one would label him "supreme arbiter". The big realist in Iran is usually thought to be another cleric, Hojatoleslam Hashemi Rafsanjani, but he is currently mired in the scandal of France's Total oil company, whose chief executive has been accused of bribery.

Washington is increasingly concerned. Speaking at Camp David on Saturday, President Bush said, "Iran must give back the hostages", though the use of the "h" word might only have exacerbated the situation in London's view.

Perhaps more significantly, the US has let it be known that when one of its aircraft carrier groups leaves the Gulf soon it will be seamlessly replaced by another. It might not help solve the current crisis but makes it likely -- perhaps even certain -- that if Iran's Revolutionary Guards try the same trick again, there will be a stronger response. But that does not resolve Mr Blair's dilemma today.

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