

Tehran's new political dynamic

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With the capture of fifteen British sailors and marines by Iranian forces on 23 March 2007, the real chieftains ruling the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) emerged from the shadows to send a double signal to the international community: that despite failures in Iran and setbacks abroad, they remain defiant and capable of mounting an asymmetrical attack [1] against western interests - but that they can also act pragmatically.

The context of the seizure was the Islamic Republic's double failure in the international arena in recent months: diplomatically at the United Nations over its nuclear-power programme [2], and militarily in failing to deliver a decisive blow to western power in Lebanon, Palestine or Iraq. These setbacks were reinforced by increasing domestic opposition and rebellion from various social and professional sectors, and by the detention, defection [3] and elimination of members of the IRI's leading cardinals. Such reverses meant both that the cardinals' morale was low, and that that they considered the time ripe for an external show of force to ideologically mobilise their footsoldiers - at a moment when they judged swift military retaliation very unlikely.

The IRI retreated [4] once the international diplomatic pressure against it gained momentum. Britain froze all its official bilateral business, apart from the minimal contacts needed to resolve the crisis. In addition it was threatened with the prospect of France, Germany and Italy following suit.

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"Iranians on the freedom path [6]"
(27 February 2006)

"An ayatollah under siege ... in Tehran [7]"
(4 October 2006)

The capture

The fifteen British service personnel were captured at gunpoint by Iranian forces on 23 March, and held for twelve days until their release on 4 April [8]. Alireza Nourizadeh, a prominent Iranian journalist with a wide array of contacts within the regime in Tehran, reveals that the British were taken by elite units of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) navy who had been planning the operation for over a week. The captives were handed over to the IRGC Quds Brigade and transferred first to the former United States embassy compound [9] in Tehran (now known as *Gharargah Ramazan*) and later to a compound in the west of the capital.

Nourizadeh [10] maintains that there is no evidence suggesting that President Ahmadinejad was aware of the operation. Indeed the incident underlined the president's poor standing among the

top echelons, highlighted too when he was obliged to acquiesce in the release of the captives soon after having endorsed their detention on 2 April (when he asserted: "This is the same spirit which will set the world on fire").

President Ahmadinejad's backing down scored a point for [Ali Larijani](#) [11], secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, who has presidential ambitions. Nourizadeh insists that because of his current [position](#) [12], Larijani, who is closely associated with the IRGC since his days as its head of intelligence in the 1980s, was undoubtedly aware of the plans to capture the British forces.

The incident also indicated that the foreign ministry in Tehran had no independent discretion and served as a tool to delay the crisis reaching its boiling-point. This breathing-space allowed the chieftains to exploit the incident for [propaganda](#) [13] purposes.

During a meeting of European Union foreign ministers in Bremen on 30 March, the British foreign secretary Margaret Beckett [complained](#) [14]: "I mean we are calling to, for information as to where our people are being held which is being denied and by whom. We are calling for access to them which is also being denied and we're calling, of course, for their release and this kind of event will only increase the pressure for them to be released because it's clear that they are being used."

However, the regime's internal disorganisation manifested itself when Tehran presented a second set of satellite coordinates to prove the British were in Iranian territorial waters, when the first set they had provided proved them to be in Iraqi territorial waters.

The nature of Iranian news websites, with the latest reports and commentaries about the detainees and their situation, also pointed the responsibility in the direction of the IRGC and exposed its objectives. The [Al-Alam](#) [15] news network, which released the image of the captives, is the Arabic channel of the Islamic Republic of Iran's broadcasting system. It was set up in 2003 and has news bureaus in Baghdad and Beirut, and broadcasts mainly to audiences in the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean region. It can even be viewed in Iraq without the use of a satellite receiver.

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The battle of succession

The crisis sheds light on the internal politics in Iran where the battle to succeed Ayatollah Ali Khamenei [26] as supreme leader has intensified. The reformist camp has largely disappeared from the Iranian political scene, yet the regime's own core constituency has further reduced in size; as a result, the centre of political gravity has shifted to the right. The IRGC controls the winning-card in this contest, as it has gained unprecedented power [27] and influence, politically and economically, under President Ahmadinejad. The battle-lines are drawn between these three, unequal forces.

The pragmatists who like money are rallying behind former president (1989-1997) Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, head of both the Assembly of Experts and the Expediency Council. The forces that view modernity as corrupt and an endangerment to the existence of the regime, and who consider Rafsanjani and former president (1997-2005) Mohammad Khatami [28] as its symbols, are coalescing around the Iraq-born head of the judiciary, Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi. Shahroudi was the theological guide of Ayatollah Khamenei. The most fanatical demagogues centre on Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi [29], the spiritual mentor of President Ahmadinejad.

Rafsanjani's alliance with anti-Ahmadinejad conservatives had initially allowed him to consolidate his position, in three ways. First, the alliance successfully managed to pass a bill in Iran's parliament to cut the term of Ahmadinejad's presidency by eighteen months. The bill still awaits the approval of the Guardian Council before it can be executed. Second, it began collecting signatures on a petition to impeach the president. To date it has not managed to collect the required number. Third, Rafsanjani visited the Iranian *Shi'a* "sources of emulation" in Qom, the theological backbone [30] of the Islamic Republic, to enlist their support. He proposed strengthening the executive powers of the Assembly of Experts to actively manage the daily affairs of the state according to the original socio-cultural and judicial precepts of the 1979 Islamic revolution.

However, Rafsanjani has been hit hard by Ayatollah Shahroudi's judiciary, which has through legal proceedings severely curtailed his access to financial resources. In addition Ahmadinejad has expanded his power by appointing 20,000 of his trusted supporters to key positions in the intelligence networks, in law enforcement and among provincial governorships. His government has cracked down against the activities and freedom of travel of civil-society groups, increased repression of centres of learning, instigated a campaign of character assassination against its opponents, and initiated charges of espionage against those who have refused to keep silent.

Divisions within the IRGC

An Iranian source with detailed knowledge of the IRGC explains that this factionalism has made its mark in the ranks of this force whose rigorous training - including deep indoctrination of Islam and the tenets of the revolution - had, until now, kept it immune from internal strife. Three different mindsets [30] within the IRGC are at variance with and distrustful of one another.

The first is the ideologically driven and zealot Basij [31] militia, the Qods brigades and the commanders of the IRGC navy. The second is elements which have profited from the privatisation of lucrative publicly owned companies in oil, gas, telecommunications, the internet, smart cards, electronics and scientific research. The third, and competing against these two groups, is the officers who fought in the Iran-Iraq war [32] of 1980-88. They operate within a regular chain of command and value order and predictability, and they despise the dogmatic and those in business.

On various occasions, when confronting domestic resistance the regular ranks of IRGC have come into open conflict with members of the Basij. They blamed the Basij for inflaming the situation by going berserk and brutalising demonstrators. Three of these incidents are: July-August 2005 in Kurdistan [33], June 2005 against women activists [34] and October 2006 against followers [35] of Ayatollah Seyyed Hossein Kazemeini Boroujerdi.

The capture of the British marines has strengthened the position of the hardliners and outmanoeuvred Rafsanjani to the extent that he has remained silent on the issue, as has Khatami.

On 11 April, a piece in the reformist daily [36] *E'temad* said, "This release, ... disarmed the reformists, those authors of humiliation whose rotating representative keeps doing the rounds of western states to assure them of their pacifist positions and effectively assure them that the wishes of Britain and America will be carried out. The weapon of these internal agents is at any rate now useless. In other words, the blade of reformers and the politically bankrupt, or of the power and money mafia who have been banging on the drums of war against Ahmadinejad for two years, has lost its edge."

More importantly the resolution of the crisis proved the Islamic Republic's vulnerability. It could not afford the cost of its defiance: the freezing of all bilateral business relations not only with Britain, but also with Germany, France and Italy. In the end British proactive diplomacy won, even though the British government failed either to realise it or to capitalise on it.

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