



## Why Iran Seized the British Marines

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New York -- The most ominous detail about Iran's seizure of 15 British Royal Marines in the Shatt-al-Arab waterway on Friday morning is that the servicemen were reportedly taken into custody by the navy of the Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The IRGC is a powerful, separate branch of the Iranian armed forces. Soaked with nationalist ideology, it has grown into a state within a state in Iran, with its own naval, air and ground forces, parallel to official government institutions. The IRGC is directly controlled by Supreme Leader Ayatullah Ali Khamenei, the ultimate font of religious and political power in Iran. The IRGC also has its own intelligence arm and commands irregular forces such as the basij -- a voluntary paramilitary group affiliated with President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad -- and the Quds force, which has been accused by the U.S. of supplying material to Iraqi insurgents bent on killing American soldiers. The IRGC is also known for its clandestine activities including logistical support for militant organizations like Lebanon's Hizballah, which it helped to set up in the 1980s, and several Shi'a militia groups in Iraq. The IRGC's activities are often a thorn in the side of Iran's Foreign Ministry, which is forced to repair the ruptures in Tehran's diplomatic relations with countries the Guard has inflamed with its self-directed adventures. Nevertheless, it has been one of Iran's main instrument in projecting power and influence over the last few decades.

Because the IRGC's actions are always interwoven with the religious-nationalist ideology of Iran's hardliners, extricating the British may be complicated. The Royal Marines, assigned to HMS Cornwall, had been on an anti-smuggling procedure sanctioned by the U.N. but were apparently taken into custody anyway by Iranian naval vessels in the Shatt-al-Arab, a 120-mile stretch of salt marsh disputed between Iraq and Iran. It is the second such incident. In June 2004, Iran took eight British marines and sailors from their patrol boats, keeping them for three days, saying they had breached the maritime border. While they were held, the servicemen were paraded around blindfolded and forced to apologize on Iranian TV, before being released. At that time, the Iranian presidency was held by Mohammad Khatami, considered a moderate more accommodating to the West. The current administration in Tehran is led by Ahmadinejad whose confrontational stance has been the bane of Washington. (In a recent speech, U.S. Treasury Secretary Stuart Levey charged that the Revolutionary Guard's "control and influence in the Iranian economy is growing exponentially under the regime of Ahmadinejad." He noted the Guard is taking over regular government functions such as management of the Tehran airport and building a new Tehran metro. The growing economic clout may be why IRGC's current commander in chief, Rahim Safavi, is considered a pragmatist in Tehran political circles. However, his public comments hardly reflect that political pragmatism.

This week's Shatt al-Arab incident occurs amid a contretemps over Ahmadinejad's proposed trip to the U.N. Security Council to argue for his country's right to pursue the development of nuclear energy, a goal that has met with international opprobrium. According to CNN, the Iranian president has cancelled his weekend trip because Washington has not issued visas for the crew of his plane. (The U.S. State Department insists that all visa requests were honored.) At the same time, Tehran remains in the middle of a dispute with the United States over the detention in January of six of its officials in the Iraqi city of Erbil, taken from the Iranian consulate there. The U.S. insists the six were being investigated in regard to aiding Iraqi insurgents. Washington has referred all inquiries in the current incident to the British Ministry of Defense.

As Iran increases the volume of its militancy, the rest of the nations on the gulf have grown more and more nervous. The public speculation about a potential war between the U.S. and Iran have added to that anxiety, as have incidents like the taking of the British marines and an earlier event in March when the Saudi Arabian navy engaged an Iranian submarine. No shots were fired but the Saudis found the sub near the Saudi city of Jubail, a coastal industrial center that is the site of major Saudi petrochemical and oil installations, as well as the location of the King Abdul Aziz naval base. The Saudis minimized the incident, accepting the Iranian explanation that the sub's closeness to Jubail was a mistake. The Saudis also did not want to further stress relations between Riyadh and Tehran. But an Arab source in the gulf believes that the incident may have been an Iranian political message to the U.S. and the world -- a reminder that Iran has assets in the gulf to threaten American and its allies there.

By Howard Chua-Eoan

*Reported by Scott Macleod/Cairo, Jumana Farouky/London and Elaine Shannon/Washington*

