

US forces carry out provocative raid on Iran's consulate in northern Iraq

By [Peter Symonds](#)

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In the early hours of yesterday morning, US forces raided the Iranian consulate in the northern Iraqi city of Irbil, detaining at least five employees. The arrests were clearly aimed at reinforcing the bellicose message contained in President Bush's speech, just hours before that the American military would "interrupt the flow of support from Iran and Syria" and "seek out and destroy the networks providing advanced weaponry and training to our enemies in Iraq."

Since 2005, US officials have repeatedly accused Iran and Syria of assisting anti-US insurgents inside Iraq, but have failed to provide any evidence. In the aftermath of yesterday's raid, the American military issued a bland statement declaring that six people "suspected of being closely tied" to anti-coalition activities had been detained as part of "routine security operations". "[T]he Coalition will continue to work with the government of Iraq to prevent interference by hostile actors in Iraq's internal security affairs," the statement added.

The operation, however, was anything but routine. According to local Kurdish officials, at around 3 a.m. US troops disarmed the guards outside the consulate, broke into the building and confiscated computers and documents. Military helicopters circled overhead. While American officials denied that the liaison office had diplomatic protection, it functioned as a consulate issuing travel documents, carrying out other consular tasks and was awaiting official recognition. An Iranian flag flying over the building was hauled down during the raid.

As for "working with the government of Iraq", the US military did not bother to inform any Iraqi government officials or the regional Kurdish government of their plans. A cautious statement from Kurdish authorities pointed out that the consulate was protected by international agreement and warned the operation "does not help the efforts to bring peace, stability and security to the rest of Iraq." The statement added that it would be "better to inform the Kurdistan government before taking actions against anybody."

Associated Press reported that a second US raid yesterday at Irbil airport nearly led to a shootout between American troops and local Kurdish security forces. The American troops attempted to abduct people from inside the airport perimeter, but were surrounded by Kurdish troops. Iraqi foreign minister Hoshyar Zebari told the media that "the group has come from nowhere" and "were unwilling to reveal their identity". Zebari, a senior Kurdish politician who has collaborated with the US occupation from the outset, said that he did not doubt "the integrity of our friends in the coalition [but] this is a very delicate situation."

The detention of the Iranian consular employees provoked an angry response from Tehran, which sent a letter of protest to the Iraqi government. Iran's foreign ministry summoned the Iraqi and Swiss ambassadors and demanded an explanation for the incident. (Switzerland represents US interests in Iran.) Iranian spokesman Mohammad Ali Hosseini told state-run radio that the US action reflected a "continuation of pressure" on Iran, aimed to "create tension" between Iraq and its neighbours.

The raid was not only aimed against the Iranian regime, but also at sending a warning to Iraqi authorities not to interfere with US strategic plans. The US puppet regime in Baghdad headed by Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki is dominated by Shiite fundamentalist parties, all of which have longstanding connections to Iran. By detaining Iranian employees in Irbil, the Bush administration is directly undermining Iraqi government attempts to establish ties with Iran and making clear that Iraqi foreign policy will be decided in Washington, not Baghdad.

An exasperated Iraqi spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh told the media yesterday that his government was seeking clarification from US and Iranian officials over the detentions. Urging an improvement in relations between the US and Iraq's neighbors, he declared: "Sometimes we [Iraq] pay the price for the tension in relations between Iran and the United States and Syria." The Bush administration has emphatically rejected any negotiations with Iran and Syria.

Yesterday's operation in Irbil is the second such American provocation against Iranians in Iraq. Last month, the US military detained at least five Iranians in two raids in Baghdad, claiming they were involved in assisting anti-US insurgents. In the first on December 20, US soldiers stopped a car and arrested four people—three Iranians and an Iraqi. Two of the Iranians were credentialed diplomats who had been invited to visit Iraq by Iraqi President Jalal Talibani during his trip to Tehran in December. All four were finally released. At the insistence of the US, the Iraqi government sent the two diplomats back to Iran.

In a pre-dawn operation on December 21, US troops raided a house in the compound of Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, leader of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), which is a major component of Maliki's ruling coalition. Two Iranians and eight Iraqis were arrested in the home of Hadi al-Ameri, the chairman of the Iraqi parliament's security committee and head of the Badr Organisation, SCIRI's armed wing. The US military claimed that the two Iranians were senior military officials and those documents, maps, photographs and videos were seized. A rather vague, unsubstantiated allegation was made that there was evidence connecting some of those detained "to weapons shipments to armed groups in Iraq".

Hakim, who had held talks in Washington with President Bush just a week before, meekly fell into line and issued no protest. Neither did Iraqi President Talibani, a prominent Kurdish leader. But there is no doubt that both were outraged by the US actions. The willingness of the US to ride roughshod over those who have been among their loyal allies in Iraq—SCIRI and the Kurdish parties—is the sharpest indication that, as it prepares to confront Iran, the Bush administration will brook no opposition from its puppet regime in Iraq.

In testimony yesterday before the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice reinforced one of the central themes of President Bush's speech on Wednesday: that the US would take a more aggressive stance against Syria and particularly Iran. In his speech, Bush not only declared the US intention of ending Iranian and Syrian

interference in Iraq, but also announced the dispatch of a second aircraft carrier group to the Persian Gulf and the deployment of anti-missile systems to America's allies in the Gulf States.

Rice was asked point blank by committee chairman Joe Biden whether the Bush administration was intending to take military action in Iran and Syria to break up their alleged "flow of support" to insurgents. While emphasizing that the initial focus would be inside Iraq, she did not exclude strikes against the two neighboring countries. "Obviously, the president isn't going to rule anything out to protect our troops. But the plan is to take down these networks in Iraq," she said.

In comments on CBS's "Early Show", Rice amplified further, indicating that the US was gathering together an anti-Iranian coalition in the Middle East. Asked if the stage had been set for a confrontation with Iran and Syria, she replied: "Well obviously, the president's never going to take an option off the table. But he believes at this point that what we're looking at is the need to solidify the consensus, the interests of these [Gulf] states that all fear Iran's moves in the region, fear the regional aggression of Iran."

When asked a similar question on NBC's "Today Show", Rice highlighted the December arrests of Iranian officials in Baghdad, declaring: "Around Christmas time, we did find a group of Iranians who were engaged in activities detrimental to our forces. We went, we took them, we then told the Iraqi government that they needed to be expelled from the country and they were. The Iranians need to know, and the Syrians need to know, that the United States is not finding it acceptable and is not going to simply tolerate their activities to try and harm our forces or to destabilize Iraq."

Rice's reply, which provided no substantiation of US allegations against Iran, confirms that the December raids were approved, if not planned, at the top levels of the White House. Yesterday's operation in Irbil demonstrates that there will be more such provocations in the coming months as the Bush administration attempts to create new pretexts for a reckless, military adventure against Iran.

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