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Why are we rewarding Iran?

By Jeff Jacoby, Globe Columnist | July 25, 2007

FOUR MONTHS ago, Iranian Revolutionary Guards seized 15 British sailors and marines in the Persian Gulf, and held them hostage for nearly two weeks. They were released only after a [stage-managed appearance](#) with Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who freed the captives as "a present to the British people" and was thanked for his "forgiveness" by one of the servicemen.

For this outrage, Tehran was richly rewarded. How richly? Let us count the ways:

It humiliated the British government, which declined to label the abduction of its personnel an act of war or retaliate with anything stronger than press releases. It demonstrated the ease with which it is able to flout international law and civilized norms. It exposed the cravenness of Britain's European allies, which [refused London's request](#) for a freeze on exports to Iran. It secured the release of an Iranian "diplomat" being held in Iraq, and allowed Iran access to five members of its paramilitary Quds Force, which trains insurgents to murder Americans, whom US troops in Irbil had arrested in January.

Tehran soon grabbed another set of hostages. Early in May, it arrested four visiting American citizens: [Haleh Esfandiari](#), a director of the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars; social scientist [Kian Tajbakhsh](#) of the New York-based Open Society Institute; journalist [Parnaz Azima](#) of Radio Farda, the Persian-language equivalent of Radio Free Europe; and peace activist [Ali Shakeri](#) of the Center for Citizen Peacebuilding at the University of California at Irvine. Iran accuses the four of espionage; all but Azima are being held in Tehran's notorious [Evin Prison](#).

Now, why would Tehran -- already at odds with the United States for sponsoring international terrorism, supporting Iraqi death squads, stoking hatred of the United States, repressing dissidents, and illegally pursuing nuclear weapons -- want to further complicate its relations with Washington? Nearly three decades into a regime one of whose defining characteristics is thuggish criminality, some people are still baffled when the mullahs act like thuggish criminals.

"How Iranian officials can believe they will benefit from Ms. Esfandiari's imprisonment is impossible to understand," a New York Times [editorial brooded](#). But it's no mystery. Tehran takes hostages because it benefits from doing so. The 444-day abduction of US diplomats in 1979 solidified the Khomeini dictatorship's jihadist bona fides and showed that the Great Satan's nose could be bloodied with impunity. Twenty-eight years later, the mullahs find that the seizure of American citizens still pays off nicely. Consider:

The International Atomic Energy Agency [reports](#) that Iran's ability to produce weapons-grade uranium is accelerating, and Washington reacts not with fury or alarm, but with an antsy craving for more "engagement" with Tehran. On May 28, the United States holds its first [high-level public talks with Iran](#) since 1980, putting a feather in Tehran's cap. On July 18, Esfandiari and Tajbakhsh are dragged before [Iranian TV cameras](#) to make coerced "confessions" of guilt. The American response? More high-level talks -- and *not* for the purpose of demanding the hostages' release. "When US Ambassador Ryan Crocker sits down today for only the second round of direct US-Iranian talks in 27 years," Bloomberg [reported](#) yesterday, "there's one issue that won't be on the agenda: the fate of four Iranian-Americans being held against their will in Tehran. US negotiators don't want the detainees to get in the way of their main priorities."

There was a time when Americans seized by international outlaws could expect their government to consider them a priority.

In "[Power, Faith, and Fantasy](#)," a sweeping account of America's 230-year involvement in the Middle East, historian Michael Oren recalls the 1904 kidnapping of Ion Perdicaris, a 64-year-old Greek-American expatriate in Morocco. Perdicaris was abducted by gunmen loyal to Ahmad ben

Muhammad al-Raisuli, a Berber warlord, who demanded a large ransom and political concessions from the sultan of Morocco. When the sultan refused, writes Oren, President Theodore Roosevelt ordered seven US warships to steam toward the Moroccan coast.

"On the morning of May 30, the gleaming white bow of the battleship [Brooklyn](#) was sighted off the shores of Tangier. Soon, a detachment of Marines landed in the port to guard the American consulate, while an additional 1,200 leathernecks prepared to occupy Tangier, if necessary. . . . But the move was merely an admonishment, as Roosevelt made clear in a telegram to the sultan: PRESIDENT WISHES EVERYTHING POSSIBLE DONE TO SECURE THE RELEASE OF PERDICARIS. . . . WE WANT PERDICARIS ALIVE OR RAISULI DEAD." Morocco got the message. Perdicaris was freed.

Granted, threats and gunboat diplomacy are not always wise. But there are times when they are far more effective than "engagement." Faced with the enemy we face -- a hostage-taking, nuke-pursuing, terrorist-sponsoring, apocalypse-invoking, America-hating Iran -- what would TR have done?

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