



U.S. Sailor Detained by Iran Shown Apologizing to Iranians in Video

More information about the detainment of 10 U.S. sailors by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards from January 12 through 13 is being made public. An Iranian video that surfaced on the day of their release shows a sailor apologizing to Iranian interrogators.

The sailor, whose name and rank were not identifiable in the video because he was wearing a Navy T-shirt with no insignia, was identified by Iran's Press TV as the commander of the two-boat unit. He said plainly on camera:



It was a mistake that was our fault and we apologize for our mistake.... It was a misunderstanding. We did not mean to go into Iranian territorial water.... The Iranian behavior was fantastic while we were here. We thank you very much for your hospitality and your assistance.

When asked by the Iranian how they came to be captured, the American replied:

The Iranian patrol boat came out when we were having engine issues and had weapons drawn, so we tried to talk to them until more boats came out and took us in.

The sole female sailor in the group was wearing a head scarf that apparently had been given to her by the Iranians to comply with Islamic tradition.

U.S. Central Command spokesman Lt. Cmdr. Ben Tisdale said in a statement to CNN:

The video appears to be authentic, but we cannot speak to the conditions of the situation or what the crew was experiencing at the time. The crew is currently undergoing the reintegration process and we will continue to investigate this incident. What matters most right now, however, is that our sailors are back safely.

However, the incident was very disturbing to former Naval officer Chris Harmer, who is now an analyst with the Washington, D.C.-based Institute for the Study of War, who criticized the personnel involved on two counts.

First, said Harmer, "The substance of [the] problem here is the U.S. Navy looks extraordinarily incompetent in its ability to transit boats without violating Iranian waters. They look incompetent to know how to deal with a mechanical malfunction."

Second, said Harmer, "Now that they've been taken into custody, they're apologizing."

The *Washington Examiner* quoted Harmer in a January 13 report in which the former Naval officer said that the sailor's apology broke the U.S. military's code of conduct, which instructs service members taken captive to give their name, rank, service number, date of birth, and nothing else. His main concern is that many people will see this apology by a service member in uniform as an apology on behalf of the U.S. Navy.



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“He is not authorized and he should not be apologizing for anything he does while on active duty,” Harmer said. “If he did something wrong, someone in his chain of command will issue an apology.”

Harmer, a 20-year Navy veteran who was once the deputy director for future operations at the Navy headquarters in Bahrain, cited his own experience to conclude that this incident indicated one of two possibilities: Either someone in the Fifth Fleet’s command approved a navigation plan that brought the boats too close to Iran’s Farsi Island, where the boats entered Iranian waters, or that the sailors violated the plan they were given. He continued:

The American public deserves to know why the United States Navy cannot operate professionally in the Persian Gulf. You’re not fighting anybody, you’re not towing anything, you’re not doing a mission, you’re just moving from point A to point B.

The U.S. military’s Central Command (CENTCOM), which oversees all U.S. military operations in Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia, on January 18 released more complete details about the detention of the 10 U.S. sailors by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.

The sailors, nine men and one woman, were traveling in two small Riverine command boats, headed from Kuwait to Bahrain, where the Navy’s Fifth Fleet is based. As the boats traveled southward in the Persian Gulf, they kept to the middle of the waterway, along the water boundary between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

CENTCOM’s account of the incident stated:

The planned transit path for the mission was down the middle of the Gulf and not through the territorial waters of any country other than Kuwait and Bahrain.

Iran claims as its territory all waters in the Gulf within 12 nautical miles of its land, as well as waters that are within 12 nautical miles of any islands in the Gulf claimed by Iran. The U.S. patrol boat apparently inadvertently strayed into the 12-mile territorial water surrounding the Iranian island of Farsi, which is located in the middle of the Gulf.

The question of how the Navy boats went off course, as well as other questions, will be addressed soon, CENTCOM’s statement promised: “A Navy command investigation initiated Jan. 14 will provide a more complete accounting of events.”

While visiting CENTCOM’s headquarters in Tampa last week, Defense Secretary Ash Carter said simply that the boat crews had “misnavigated.” An AP report also cited a statement from command that indicated that the investigation will focus on the U.S. sailors’ treatment while in custody, including any interrogation by Iranian personnel.

The more recent CENTCOM statement said, according to AP:

At some point one [of the two boats] had indications of a mechanical issue in a diesel engine which caused the crews to stop and begin troubleshooting.

AP noted that the report explained that because the boats were traveling together, the other boat also stopped. At this point they were in Iranian territorial waters, “although it’s not clear the crew was aware of their exact location,” added the statement.

At a crucial time in U.S-Iranian relations, when the United States has just lifted sanctions against Iran, this misstep by and apology from a U.S. naval crew makes the United States look weak and incompetent. That this change in U.S. policy has not necessarily created good will with the Iranians was



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revealed by a statement made by Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on January 19, who stated in a letter to President Hassan Rouhani:

I reiterate the need to be vigilant about the deceit and treachery of arrogant countries, especially the United States, in this [nuclear] issue and other issues.

Be careful that the other side fully meets its commitments. The comments made by some American politicians in last two, three days are suspicious.

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