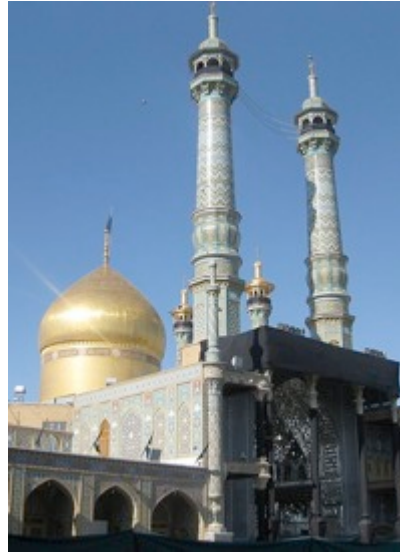




Written by on August 3, 2009

Iran Detains Three American Tourists

At least two Iranian state-run TV stations — Press TV and al Alam — reported on August 1 that the nation's border police on the previous day arrested three American hikers who apparently inadvertently strayed across the poorly marked border separating Iran from Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region.



According to VOA News, the Americans arrived in the Iraqi Kurdish capital of Irbil earlier in the week and were staying at Ahmed Awa, a mountain resort near the border with Iran. Kurdish officials say that the trio had been warned that the Iranian border was nearby. And news broadcasts on al Alam claim that Iranian border security officers warned the Americans not to enter their country.

Since the United States has not had diplomatic relations with Iran since the 1979 revolution, U.S. interests in the country are represented by Swiss diplomats, who were attempting to meet with the hikers.

Hakem Qadir, the head of security in the Iraqi Kurdish region, said that the three left Ahmed Awaa in the morning, headed for a nearby waterfall, VOA reported. He said that Iranian soldiers surrounded and arrested them, after they went further toward the Iranian border and into Iran.

CNN cited Kurdish officials' identification of the three hikers as Shane Bauer, Sarah Shourd, and Joshua Fattal.

"My husband and I are eager for the best welfare and conditions for our son, Josh, and for the other two companions he's with," Josh's mother, Laura Fattal of Elkins Park, Pennsylvania, told CNN Radio. "And that is our only concern, his welfare and the best conditions for him."

A fourth hiker originally with them, Shon Meckfessel, a graduate student at the University of Washington, stayed behind in Iraq. He was identified by his grandmother, Irene Meckfessel of Carmichael, California. Mrs. Meckfessel told CNN that her grandson stayed behind because he felt sick and that he subsequently met with a consular official at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, which notified her that he was there.

The *Los Angeles Times* in an August 2 article quoted a statement from the Kurdistan regional government that said: "After walking around the area and hiking the mountain, [the American hikers] lost their way due to their lack of familiarity with the location."

The statement said that the Kurdistan government is doing "its utmost to find a solution."

Citing a Kurdish official, the report noted that about 1 p.m. on July 31, the hikers telephoned a friend (presumably Meckfessel) who had remained behind in Sulaymaniya and told him they were surrounded by armed men. The friend raised the alarm, and the three haven't been heard from since.



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This was the second time this year that a U.S. citizen has been detained by Iranian officials. On January 31, Roxana Saberi — a U.S.-born journalist of mixed Iranian and Japanese parentage — was arrested in Teheran. She had been working as a journalist there since 2003, operating a news bureau for the independent broadcast news agency Feature Story News (FSN). In 2006, Iranian authorities suddenly and without explanation revoked Saberi's press accreditation and closed the FSN bureau in Teheran. Using a second press accreditation, she continued freelancing in Iran for the BBC, but in late 2006, that accreditation was also revoked. Saberi decided to remain in Iran to research a book and do some freelance reporting, occasionally filing reports for NPR and ABC Radio.

Following her arrest, Saberi's father back in the United States stopped hearing from her after 10 days and shared his concerns with the journalistic community. Representatives of several news organizations wrote an open letter to the Iranian government on March 10, and the following week, after their daughter had been imprisoned for 47 days, Saberi's parents called on Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, asking for his intervention in her case. Finally on April 6, her parents were allowed a 30-minute visit with her in Evin Prison. Two days later, Saberi was convicted of espionage. Shortly afterwards, her Iranian lawyer, Abdolsamad Khorramshahi, told Reuters news service: "Saberi has been sentenced to eight years in jail. I'll definitely appeal the verdict."

On April 19, Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad wrote to Saberi's prosecutors: "Please, personally observe the process to ensure that the defendant's are allowed all legal rights and freedom in defending themselves and that their rights are not violated even by one iota." On May 11, Saberi was finally released from prison after the appeals court suspended her eight-year jail sentence, reducing the charge from espionage to possessing classified information. She still maintains that the document in question was not classified because it had no classified stamp on it.

There are noteworthy similarities between the detention of the American hikers by Iranian police and the arrest of [Laura Ling and Euna Lee](#), the two U.S. journalists detained by North Korea on March 17.

In June, Ling and Lee were convicted in a closed trial and sentenced to 12 years of hard labor. In "[Held hostage in North Korea](#)," an article in the *Boston Globe* for August 2, columnist Jeff Jacoby observed: "For nearly five months, two American journalists have been held hostage by the government of North Korea."

Justifiably indignant, Jacoby writes: "They have been held in an unidentified detention center — two more pawns to be used in Pyongyang's never-ending shakedown of the United States. Washington has responded quietly. There has been no public condemnation of North Korea's thuggish behavior, only a request that the women be granted 'amnesty' and set free."

As to North Korea's motivations for holding two Americans hostage, we can look to the rift between the communist state and the United States over U.S. support for United Nations Security Council Resolution 1874, which was adopted unanimously by the United Nations Security Council on June 12. The resolution imposes further economic and commercial sanctions on North Korea and encourages UN member states to search North Korean cargo, in the aftermath of an underground nuclear test conducted on May 25, 2009. Though the two women were sentenced four days earlier, on June 8, an article in the official North Korean newspaper warned that North Korea would consider any new UN sanctions resolution a "declaration of war."

That very day, a North Korean court sentenced Ling, 32, and Lee, 36, to 12 years of "reform through labor" for an illegal border crossing and an unspecified "grave crime."



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Like North Korea, Iran has come under pressure from Western allies and the UN to stop its nuclear fuel enrichment programs. On February 4, 2006, the 35 member Board of Governors of the IAEA voted 27-3 (with five abstentions: Algeria, Belarus, Indonesia, Libya, and South Africa) to report Iran to the UN Security Council. On April 12, 2006, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said that the Security Council must consider "strong steps" to induce Tehran to change course in its nuclear ambition. The next day, President Ahmadinejad pledged that Iran will not stop its uranium enrichment and that the world must treat Iran as a nuclear power, saying: "Our answer to those who are angry about Iran achieving the full nuclear fuel cycle is just one phrase. We say: Be angry at us and die of this anger," because "We won't hold talks with anyone about the right of the Iranian nation to enrich uranium."

Iran and North Korea each have a history of taunting the United States (Iran by holding 53 Americans hostage for 444 days from November 4, 1979 to January 20, 1981, and North Korea by seizing the U.S.S. Pueblo in international waters on January 23, 1968 and holding its crew hostage until December 23, 1968.) and receiving a very weak response in return for their hostile actions. Both have come under pressure from the United States and the UN to stop their nuclear enrichment programs. And both have recently arrested Americans who appear to have wandered inadvertently over their borders.

The reader can draw his own conclusion about whether these incidents follow a pattern or are mere "coincidences."

One thing, however, seems certain: U.S. citizens abroad will come under increased risk of detainment by hostile foreign governments unless the United States demonstrates greater strength in protecting its citizens from arbitrary detainment by tin-pot dictatorships. It wouldn't hurt if we would avoid being a party to provocative UN Security Council resolutions as well. Joining the UN in issuing condemnations while pursuing a pantywaisted foreign policy is the reverse of the foreign policy advocated by Teddy Roosevelt — it amounts to speaking loudly while carrying no stick at all.



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