

From 15 to millions

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

Blindfolded Westerners paraded by Iranian Revolutionary Guards are hardly new. In 1979, the guards paraded for the cameras 52 blindfolded Americans seized at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and held hostage for 444 days.

Now it's 15 British sailors, seized late last week in what the Iranian government claims were Iranian waters. Britain says they were in Iraqi waters, searching commercial ships for contraband, as British ships have done for some time now.

Take your pick of potential reasons why President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who some former American hostages believe was a participant in their seizure, chose this moment to thumb his nose at the West: To change the subject from United Nations sanctions against Iran, strengthened within hours of this incident? To negotiate an exchange for a former official and Revolutionary Guard who defected to the West earlier this month? To bolster support for Ahmadinejad's oppressive regime, which has antagonized many Iranians? To bolster support for Western opponents of the Iraq war? Whatever Iran's reasons, Britain has no reason to provoke such an incident and, having suffered two years ago a similar hostage-taking, has every reason to dissuade Tehran that extortion won't pay.

As London demands the immediate release of the sailors, Tehran may be easing toward just that, especially if an unspoken but credible "or else" underlies the diplomatic solution. From that comes a larger worry, instructive for a United Nations that too often dithers or retreats: What would the "or else" be if Iran comes to wield a nuclear weapon?

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