

RELEASE IN  
PART B6

**From:** sbwhoeop [redacted]  
**Sent:** Friday, October 22, 2010 6:18 PM  
**To:** H  
**Subject:** H: Iran hikers info. Sid

B6

Just now the NYT is reporting what I assume you already know, that the US hikers held prisoner in Iran were grabbed in Iraq. I also assume that you saw the report last June that they were seized by a Revolutionary Guard officer now held for drug running and murder.

It seems that the hikers were too close to a drug trail. I will send you memos on latest political intel and policy ideas for Europe in next few days. Sid



## US Hikers Were Seized in Iraq

By Babak Sarfaraz

Posted on June 24, 2010, Printed on October 22, 2010

<http://www.theinvestigativefund.org/investigations/international/1338/>

KURDISTAN PROVINCE, IRAN—

Since their arrest last July by Iranian forces near the Iraq border, three Americans — Shane Bauer, Josh Fattal and Sarah Shourd — have been at the center of a high-stakes diplomatic struggle between Tehran and Washington. Iranian authorities have repeatedly accused the three of entering Iran to conduct espionage. Meanwhile, friends and family of the three, along with the State Department, the Committee to Protect Journalists, *The Nation* and The Investigative Fund [Bauer has written Investigative Fund stories that appeared in *The Nation* and *Mother Jones*], have rejected the spying charge and suggested that the Americans accidentally crossed the border while on a recreational hike. Despite a well-publicized visit by the detainees' mothers in May, Iran has released little information about the circumstances of their arrest or the status of their case.

*The Nation* and The Investigative Fund have located two witnesses to the arrest who claim that Bauer, Fattal and Shourd were on Iraqi territory when they were arrested — not in Iran, as Iranian officials have asserted. Two additional sources report that the Revolutionary Guards officer who likely ordered their detention has since been arrested on charges of smuggling, kidnapping and murder.

The witnesses are residents of a Kurdish village in Iraq called Zalem, which lies a few miles from the Iran border; they declined to be identified, fearing retaliation from Iranian forces, who have been known to conduct missions across the border. The witnesses separately reported noticing the three Americans as they hiked up a mountain in the scenic Khormal

region, which straddles the border. Part of the mountain lies in Iraq and part in Iran, but except for a few watchtowers and occasional signposts, the border here is largely unmarked, although local residents are familiar with its boundaries. The witnesses, who followed the Western-looking hikers out of curiosity, say that around 2 pm on July 31, as the hikers descended the mountain, uniformed guards from NAJA, Iran's national police force, waved the hikers toward the Iranian side using "threatening" and "menacing" gestures. When their calls were ignored, one officer fired a round into the air. As the hikers continued to hesitate, the guards walked a few yards into Iraqi territory, where they lack jurisdiction, and apprehended them.

These witness accounts corroborate a statement Bauer made on May 20 during a tele-vised reunion at a Tehran hotel between the hikers and their mothers. As the *New York Times* reported, Bauer "denied that they had walked into Iran, as they were accused of doing, before stopping himself and saying, 'We can't really talk about that.'"

Farhad Lohoni, a local tribal leader, had previously claimed that the American hikers had been snatched from Iraq in a cross-border raid by Iranian agents, as reported in the *Daily Telegraph* in August 2009. Lohoni said that his relatives had seen a group of men cross the border into Iraq, and he told the *Telegraph* that the hikers "were targeted and captured by a group that came over from Iran, ignoring Iraq's sovereignty. We know this and it means that Iran must have wanted to take Americans hostage at this sensitive time."

A State Department spokesman said that he had been unaware of evidence that the three were arrested in Iraqi territory but would not comment further.

Once captured, Bauer, Fattal and Shourd were sped by car to the local headquarters of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards in Marivan, a town close to the border in the province of Kurdistan. When they arrived, according to two sources, the Americans were remanded into the custody of Lt. Col. Heyva Taab, then head of the Revolutionary Guards' intelligence unit in the region. According to these sources — a former member of the Revolutionary Guards and an official who serves in the provincial government at Sanandaj — only Taab would have had the authority to order the Americans' detention and eventual transfer to Tehran. A branch of the Iranian military with at least 125,000 personnel, the Revolutionary Guards are responsible for maintaining national security throughout the Islamic Republic.

"When I heard the news that they had arrested American hikers, I immediately thought, This is the work of the intelligence arm of the Revolutionary Guards, because they have people in this region," says Idris Ahmedi, an Iranian Kurdish exile and a regional expert who is a visiting scholar at Georgetown University. "I thought they were most likely

lured into Iranian Kurdistan, where they could arrest them. It is consistent with Iran's past actions."

Less than a month later, in late August 2009, Taab himself was arrested and charged with the July 6 murder of the son of Mostafa Shirzadi, the Imam Joma (Friday prayer leader) of Marivan, an influential cleric in the region. Shirzadi's nephew was also allegedly killed by Taab. Since his arrest Taab has been implicated in a vast criminal enterprise encompassing a profitable smuggling operation and dozens of murders, rapes and kidnappings. According to the Sanandaj official, numerous lawsuits, perhaps hundreds, have been filed against Taab in Kurdistan, alleging libel, theft, rape, kidnapping and murder. Taab's case has twice been before a judge, and he awaits execution in a Tehran prison.

Although the state-run Iranian press has not reported on Taab's crimes, they were made public in a series of articles in January and February by a Kurdish news site, Kurdistan Va Kurdnews, run by the Kurdistan Democratic Party. [A February 17 article](#) describes Taab as the head of a "criminal band" and reports that Taab and seven accomplices were under arrest by the Revolutionary Guards for their role in a vast number of illegal killings.

Several sources describe Taab as the central power in Kurdistan province. According to locals and experts, control of the border lies in the hands of the Revolutionary Guards, in particular their intelligence unit, *Etelaat Sepah*, whose local division had been commanded by Taab for about five years. "At this point it's really the *Sepah*, the Revolutionary Guards, that are in charge, especially in the western provinces, especially because the Americans are on the other side, in Iraq," says Kaveh Ehsani, an assistant professor of international studies at DePaul University and an Iran expert who serves as a contributing editor to the journal *Middle East Report*. "On the surface the security force [NAJA] is in charge, but it really is the Revolutionary Guards that control the borders."

It is a region where, according to several Iran experts, smuggling and cross-border traffic are routine. The Iraq-Iran border is "relatively porous because it's mountainous," says Faraz Sanei, an Iran researcher at Human Rights Watch, which issued a report last year on political freedom in Iranian Kurdistan. Sanei describes the border as a common escape route for dissidents — journalists, human rights advocates and Iranian Kurds—as well as a commonly used trade route for goods. "Smuggling is something that has taken place and continues to take place there, whether it be of goods or of humans across the border. It's something that happens quite often."

Soon after Taab took charge of the *Sepah* in the northwestern quadrant of Kurdistan, he began to enrich himself off the black-market border economy. According to the Sanandaj

official and the former Revolutionary Guards officer, who had firsthand knowledge of Taab's activities, Taab's first scheme involved selling merchandise confiscated from petty smugglers, known as *koolbars*, who traffic consumer goods across the border (a trade depicted in the Iranian film *A Time for Drunken Horses*, which won the Caméra d'Or at Cannes in 2000).

The region is also home to a variety of Kurdish nationalist groups that have been demanding autonomy from the central Tehran government. One of these, the Party for Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK), is affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party, a Kurdish separatist organization that engages in armed conflict within Turkey and has been labeled a terrorist organization by the United States and other governments. Since 2005 PJAK, based in the mountains in Kurdish Iraq, has been in open conflict with Tehran and has claimed responsibility for killing dozens of Revolutionary Guards soldiers in cross-border raids on Iranian military bases, as well as for the February 2007 downing of an Iranian military helicopter by a shoulder-launched missile in Khoy, in Western Azerbaijan province, which killed thirteen Iranian soldiers.

It has been speculated that some of these Kurdish militants enjoy US support. In April 2006, Representative Dennis Kucinich wrote a letter to President Bush questioning whether the US government was "fomenting opposition and supporting military operations in Iran among insurgent groups and Iranian ethnic minority groups, some of whom are operating from Iraq." Kucinich named two groups, including PJAK. In November of that year, Seymour Hersh reported in The New Yorker that "Israel and the United States have also been working together in support of a Kurdish resistance group known as the Party for Free Life in Kurdistan," and that a government consultant told him that the Israeli government had provided "equipment and training" to PJAK.

The United States and Israel have denied any involvement with PJAK. Still, these allegations of support have gained substantial traction inside Iran and may have undergirded Taab's decision to detain Bauer, Fattal and Shourd as well as the repeated public charges of espionage against the three. In early April, for instance, Iranian Intelligence Minister Heydar Moslehi told Iran's Press TV that "it is quite obvious to us that the three Americans arrested in Iran last year had links with Western and Israeli intelligence services."

The Iranian government has retaliated against rising Kurdish militancy by launching a counteroffensive on PJAK, inside Iran and across the border in Iraq. In August 2007, for example, Iranian soldiers crossed into Iraq and attacked several villages, McClatchy reported. Most recently, on June 4, officials in Iraq's semiautonomous Kurdish region alleged that "a small unit of Iranian soldiers," including a tank and

several other vehicles, had penetrated more than a mile into Iraqi Kurdistan's Arbil province in search of Kurdish rebels. Until his arrest, Taab was a key player in Iran's counter-offensive. The former Revolutionary Guards officer says that several current members of the Guards told him that Taab's stated goal was to "completely wipe out PJAK" in his jurisdiction. According to Ahmedi, the scholar at Georgetown, Taab was involved in recent cross-border assassinations of Iranian Kurds in Iraqi Kurdistan. The Kurdish weekly *Awena* reported that Taab and his unit assassinated two Kurds on December 15, 2008.

According to the former officer and the Sanandaj official, Taab's criminal enterprise grew beyond smuggling in 2007, when he made his first forays into murder. *Koolbars*, the petty border smugglers, are often killed by land mines or fatally shot by border police. So Taab concocted a scheme to kidnap *koolbars* as well as ordinary unemployed Iranian Kurdish civilians, dress them in the uniforms of PJAK insurgents and then kill them—claiming they'd died in a military clash—in order to collect a bounty, as high as \$40,000 a head, from his superiors in the Revolutionary Guards. He was assisted in this plot by at least nine others, seven of whom have been apprehended. The article in Kurdistan Va Kurdnews named all seven, including Haji Majid Muqimiyan of Kermansha, identified as a ringleader.

PJAK has officially denied involvement in these border clashes, including in a May 3, 2009, post to the Iranian website *Tabnak*, which is published by Mohsen Rezai, a former head of the Revolutionary Guards. Many of the PJAK clashes may, in fact, have been "bogus," said the Sanandaj official. "More or less no clashes with PJAK have been reported in the area since Heyva Taab and his gang were busted."

A mother of one *koolbar* tearfully described her son's disappearance. She said he went missing the same day in early 2009 that the government later claimed a clash with PJAK had taken place. The woman, a resident of a border town in Iranian Kurdistan, is a plaintiff in one of the lawsuits against Taab; she asked that her name and location not be mentioned, for fear that it would harm her case in court.

Taab's scheme was wildly successful, according to the Sanandaj official, who said one bank account under Taab's name has had nearly \$6 million deposited in it since 2008. This macabre scheme ended only in the spring of 2009, when Taab killed a local official's brother who was seeking work in the area and, more decisively, last July when he killed the cleric's son.

On June 11 Mohammad Javad Larijani, secretary general of Iran's High Council for Human Rights, said that the government's investigation was nearly complete and a trial for Bauer, Fattal and Shourd "should not be very far from

now.” In a statement issued on June 17, the mothers of the hikers called on Iran either to prosecute or release their children. “Iran has no legitimate reason at this stage not to release them or move forward with a fair trial in which our children can openly answer any allegations against them.” “These new revelations, if indeed true, show the hikers have been victims of political machinations and manipulation,” said Hadi Ghaemi, executive director of the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran. “The fact that they have been held for so long without prosecution strongly supports this trend. Under Iranian laws, they have committed no crime and should be released immediately. Their Iranian lawyer, who has studied the judicial files against them, has consistently maintained the only charge against them is illegal entry, which is subject to a fine and not arbitrary detention for so long. With this new information, even that charge appears fabricated, and there is no basis for holding them.” As of the press date, Shane Bauer, Josh Fattal and Sarah Shourd have been detained by Iran for ten months and twenty-three days.

*This article was reported in collaboration with the Investigative Fund at The Nation Institute. Naseh Afrani, a pseudonym, contributed reporting from Kurdistan province, and Nicholas Jahr contributed reporting from New York.*

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October 22, 2010

## Iran Seized U.S. Hikers in Iraq, U.S. Report Asserts

By MICHAEL R. GORDON and ANDREW W. LEHREN

Iran has accused three American hikers of illegally crossing into Iranian territory in July 2009 and is still holding two of them in prison. But a classified American military report made public by WikiLeaks, which describes the chaotic day when the hikers were detained, asserts that the hikers were on the Iraqi side of the border when they were seized.

The initial reports of any incident are not always correct. But one American government official who served in Iraq said that the field report was generally consistent with what he had been told by Iraqi officials — namely, that the hikers were close to the border but on the Iraqi side.

The episode began when four Americans traveled from Syria to northern Iraq, planning to hike up the Ahmed Awa, a mountainous area with a dramatic waterfall. One American, Shon Meckfessel, became ill and stayed behind when his friends — Shane M. Bauer, Joshua F. Fattal and Sarah E. Shourd — set out on July 31.

A July 31 field report states that Mr. Meckfessel learned of the arrests when a “female called him saying they were being surrounded by armed men.”

At first, the American military did not know who was holding the Americans. An intelligence officer at the American Army division based in northern Iraq, the report notes, initially described the event as a “kidnapping” and said the three American tourists “were being taken to the Iranian border.”

The report lists a number of military grids where the Americans were believed to have been hiking or had been detained — all on the Iraqi side of the border.

As documented in the report, the frenetic effort to locate the American hikers and to interview Mr. Meckfessel appeared to support the claim that they were tourists and not American intelligence operatives, as Iran has alleged. A drone aircraft was sent to look for the missing Americans, and two F-16s jet fighters were alerted. American Special Operations forces were sent to pick up Mr. Meckfessel, so he could be taken to Baghdad for questioning.

As the day wore on, the Americans received a report from an officer with the pesh merga, the Kurdish military force in northern Iraq, that the Iranians had detained three American citizens “for being too close to the border.” The July report reflects some frustration with the hikers for their “lack of coordination” in venturing to northern Iraq and offers some thoughts on the episode’s broader implications.

“The leadership in Iran benefits as it focuses the Iranian population on a perceived external threat rather than internal dissension,” it notes. [Read the Document »](#)