



You got to know when to hold'em

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How do you feel about the American hostages in Iran?

No, not the guys back in the Seventies, the ones being held right now.

What? You haven't heard about them?

Odd that, isn't it? But they're there. For example, for two months now, Haleh Esfandiari has been detained in Evin prison in Tehran. Ms. Esfandiari is a U.S. citizen and had traveled to Iran to visit her sick mother. She is the director of the Middle East program at the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, which is the kind of gig that would impress your fellow guests at a Washington dinner party. Unfortunately, the mullahs say it's an obvious cover for a Bush spy. Among the other Zionist-neocon agents cur-

rently held in Iranian jails are an American journalist, an American sociologist for a George Soros-funded leftie group, and an American peace activist from California, Ali Shakeri, whose capture became known shortly after the U.S. and Iran held their first direct talks since the original hostage crisis.

Two months in an Iranian jail is no fun. Four years ago, a Montreal photojournalist, Zahra Kazemi, was arrested by police in Tehran, taken to Evin prison, and wound up getting questioned to death. Upon her capture, the Canadian government had done as the State Department is apparently doing – kept things discreet, low-key, cards close to the chest, quiet word in the right ears ... By the time Zahra Kazemi's son, frustrated by his government's inef-

fable equanimity, got the story out, it was too late for his mother.

Still, upon hearing of her death, the then Foreign Minister of Canada, Bill Graham, expressed his "sadness" and "regret," which are pretty strong words. But then, as Reuters put it, this sad regrettable incident had "marred previously harmonious relations between Iran and Canada." In his public pronouncements, Mr. Graham tended to give the impression that what he chiefly regretted and was sad about was that one of his compatriots had had the poor taste to get tortured and murdered on to the front pages of the newspapers. With an apparently straight face, he passed on to reporters the official Iranian line that her death in jail was merely an "accident." The following year, Shahram Azam, a physician who'd examined Ms. Kazemi's body, fled Iran and said that she had broken fingers, a broken nose, a crushed toe, a skull fracture, severe abdominal bruising, and internal damage consistent with various forms of rape. Quite an accident.

The longer American prisoners are held in Evin, the more likely it is they'll meet with a similar accident. It would be nice to think the press has ignored these hostages out of concerns that they might inflame the situation. (To date, only *National Review*, Bill Bennett on his radio show and various doughty Internet wallahs have made any fuss.) Or maybe the media figure that showing American prisoners on TV will only drive Bush's ratings back up from the grave to the rude health of

intensive care. Or maybe they just don't care about U.S. hostages, not compared to real news like Senate sleepovers to block unblocking a motion to vote for voting against a cloture motion on the best way to surrender in Iraq.

But I'll bet the mullahs wouldn't really care if everyone put Haleh Esfandiari on the front pages 24/7. It's only a few months since they seized a bunch of Royal Navy sailors and Royal Marines in international waters (an illegal act) and paraded them all over Iranian TV (in breach of the Geneva Conventions) and dressed up the female sailor in Islamic garb (another breach).

And the U.N. and the EU and all the other transnational arbiters of global order sent a strong message: "Whoa, you guys really need to tamp things down, de-escalate, defuse the confrontation..." Er, but for some reason, they sent the strong message to the British government, not the Iranians. And, with the sailors' humiliation all over the media, the British public was inclined to agree. Almost to a man, they rose up and told Tony Blair: "This is all your fault for getting us into Iraq."

But outrage at Iran? There was none. The ayatollahs figure that's how it usually goes with a plump, complacent western world that just wants to be left alone and wishes these crazies would stop trying to catch its eye. Officially, Iran is "negotiating" with the European Union over its nuclear program. If this were a real negotiation, instead of a transnational pseudo-negotiation,

the Iranians would be concerned to stop any complicating factors coming into play. Instead, every week they gaily toss new provocations into their EU chums' laps: In recent days, they've stoned to death various fellows for adultery and homosexuality, two activities to which Europeans are generally very partial. But why let a few stonings throw your negotiations off track? And, if the Americans are so eager to get a seat at the negotiating table, why not remind them of the rules of the game? Last week, the Iranians paraded their U.S. hostages all over TV as they confessed to engaging in espionage, along the way fingering the Woodrow Wilson Centre and George Soros as key elements in the plot to overthrow the ayatollahs. If only.

The week before, Iran captured 14 spies near the Iraqi border whom it claimed were agents of American and British intelligence equipped with surveillance devices. The "spies" in question were squirrels – as in small furry animals very protective of their nuts (much like the Democratic Party re Mr. Soros). I'm prepared to believe that a crack team of rodents from NUTS (the

Ninja Undercover Team of Squirrels) abseiled into key installations in Iran and garroted the Revolutionary Guards, but not that the U.S. and British governments had anything to do with it. If they have any CIA or MI6 training at all, they must be rogue squirrels from the Cold War days who've been laid off and gone feral.

In America, public opinion is in no mood for war with Iran. In Washington, Congress is focused on finding the most politically advantageous way to lose in Iraq. In Europe, they've already psychologically accepted the Iranian nuclear umbrella. In the western world, where talks are not the means to the end but an end in themselves, we find it hard despite the evidence of 30 years to accept that Iran talks the talk and walks the walk. Once it goes nuclear, do you think there will be fewer fatwas on writers, stonings of homosexuals, kidnappings in international waters, forced confessions of American hostages, and bankrolling of terror groups worldwide? These latest hostages are part of a decades-old pattern of behavior. The longer it goes without being stopped, the worse it will be.