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WARNING: TOPIC: DOMESTIC POLITICAL, INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL,
 MILITARY
 SERIAL:IML2016011365408626

BODY

COUNTRY: IRAN, SAUDI ARABIA, UNITED STATES

SUBJ: (U) BBC MONITORING: IRAN BLOG HIGHLIGHTS 7-13 JANUARY 2016

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SOURCE: Caversham BBC Monitoring in English 13 Jan

16 (U)

TEXT:

[PUBLICATIONS]

[OSC Summary]

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The detention of 10 US sailors for entering Iran's territorial waters and the continuing fallout from the growing hostility in ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia were the top talking points on Persian-language blogosphere in the period under review.

In the late hours of 13 January, Iran's semi-official Fars News Agency broke an unexpected story: the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps' (IRGC) naval forces had detained two US warships near Farsi Island, a small territory in the Persian Gulf guarded by the IRGC.

One of the warships reportedly broke down while training in the Gulf and ended up "drifting" into Iranian waters "unintentionally", according to US sources.

Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif was swift to reassure US Secretary of State John Kerry that the sailors would be freed and allowed to continue their mission. The IRGC's navy commander, Rear-Admiral Ali Fadavi, confirmed the forces were in contact with Zarif and the Foreign Ministry.

The development was all the more significant considering Tehran and Washington are days away from implementing the landmark nuclear agreement signed last summer, both aware any long-term scuffle could scupper the prospects of the accord coming into force. Therefore, both sides saw in their interest to avoid protracting the scenario.

"Reckless"

Although the sailors were set free the next morning as promised and any exacerbation of events was avoided, the news garnered widespread interest among bloggers.

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On Google Plus, bloggers posted various takes on the proceedings. "Shahin Sartipi" called the statements released by the IRGC "empty bragging". (<http://tinyurl.com/gqn8m9t>)

Pro-reform "Narges" suggested domestic hardliners were using the story to portray Zarif as a weak diplomat who had personally intervened and forced the IRGC to release the sailors.

"The hardliners are claiming Kerry had phoned Zarif to ask for their immediate release, prompting Zarif to feel frightened and ask the IRGC to let the Americans go; as if the IRGC takes orders from Zarif." (<http://tinyurl.com/gw48e8j>)

Conservative blogger "Sadat" accused moderate President Hasan Ruhani's government of visible weakness in foreign policy, which he said had made the US more "hawkish and reckless".

"The government's push for the unconditional release of American trespassers has gifted the US a new model: Illegally enter [our waters or land]. Even if some preserve the national dignity and confront you, there are others who would score an own goal without demanding official apology or trying the trespassers; and then after that, [you can] sneer at a nation," she posted. (<http://tinyurl.com/gn7jw4x>)

"By the way, what would have happened to our forces if two of our warships had been captured in US waters? Would they have freed our sailors as quickly as that?" asked blogger "Saedeh" in a post which was widely circulated.

Others highlighted the more measured and cautious tone used by the Iranian authorities, in what seemed to be a departure from the traditionally-applied anti-Western terminology.

"The words 'aggression, arrest or hostage' were not used in the IRGC's statements," blogger "Davood Zamani" pointed out.

"Catastrophe"

More than a week after the incidents which led to the break-off of ties between Tehran and Riyadh, Iranian bloggers turned their attention to possible ramifications for the government and the response by some of its senior officials to the ongoing tension.

Well-known opposition blogger "Dalghak Irani" was unimpressed with the choice of words adopted by Government Spokesman Mohammad Baqer Nowbakht, who had been asked about Djibouti following Saudi Arabia's

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lead in severing ties with the Islamic Republic.

"What role does Saudi Arabia play in Iran's national development to make us upset about its severing of ties with us? We have no concern about Saudi Arabia cutting ties with us, even if they have a large country like Djibouti on their side," Nowbakht was quoted as saying ironically after the incident.

"Never mind the fact that the government spokesman's boasting of the cutting off of ties with an influential country in the region is wrong and weak, but mentioning the name of another country like Djibouti in a mocking and belittling manner by a government official is a moral and political catastrophe," wrote "Dalghak Irani", before calling on President Ruhani to appoint a new spokesperson.
(<http://tinyurl.com/z8q45qe>)

Babak Dad, a famous pro-reform blogger, said the government's response to the crises of Saudi allies severing ties with Tehran would have geopolitical and strategic consequences.

"Iranian tankers or ships have been relying on Djibouti's friendship and support while passing through the Bab al-Mandeb Strait towards the Mediterranean, specifically because their well-equipped defence bases have repeatedly pushed back pirates wandering around the strait. Now, in the absence of stability in Yemen and any ties with Djibouti, Iran's public and private shipping industries will suffer a great deal in terms of safety and security," he commented.
(<http://tinyurl.com/gojpb6w>)

[Description of Source: Caversham BBC Monitoring in English -- Monitoring service of the BBC, the United Kingdom's public service broadcaster]

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