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# The botched US raid that led to the hostage crisis

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A failed American attempt to abduct two senior Iranian security officers on an official visit to northern Iraq was the starting pistol for a crisis that 10 weeks later led to Iranians seizing 15 British sailors and Marines.

Early on the morning of 11 January, helicopter-borne US forces launched a surprise raid on a long-established Iranian liaison office in the city of Arbil in Iraqi Kurdistan. They captured five relatively junior Iranian officials whom the US accuses of being intelligence agents and still holds.

In reality the US attack had a far more ambitious objective, The Independent has learned. The aim of the raid, launched without informing the Kurdish authorities, was to seize two men at the very heart of the Iranian security establishment.

Better understanding of the seriousness of the US action in Arbil - and the angry Iranian response to it - should have led Downing Street and the Ministry of Defence to realise that Iran was likely to retaliate against American or British forces such as highly vulnerable Navy search parties in the Gulf. The two senior Iranian officers the US sought to capture were Mohammed Jafari, the powerful deputy head of the Iranian National Security Council, and General Minojahar Frouzanda, the chief of intelligence of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, according to Kurdish officials.

The two men were in Kurdistan on an official visit during which they met the Iraqi President, Jalal Talabani, and later saw Massoud Barzani, the President of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), at his mountain headquarters overlooking Arbil.

"They were after Jafari," Fuad Hussein, the chief of staff of Massoud Barzani, told The Independent. He confirmed that the Iranian office had been established in Arbil for a long time and was often visited by Kurds obtaining documents to visit Iran. "The Americans thought he [Jafari] was there," said Mr Hussein.

Mr Jafari was accompanied by a second, high-ranking Iranian official. "His name was General Minojahar Frouzanda, the head of intelligence of the Pasdaran [Iranian Revolutionary Guard]," said Sadi Ahmed Pire, now head of the Diwan (office) of President Talabani in Baghdad. Mr Pire previously lived in Arbil, where he headed the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), Mr Talabani's political party.

The attempt by the US to seize the two high-ranking Iranian security officers openly meeting with Iraqi leaders is somewhat as if Iran had tried to kidnap the heads of the CIA and MI6 while they were on an official visit to a country neighbouring Iran, such as Pakistan or Afghanistan. There is no doubt that Iran believes that Mr Jafari and Mr Frouzanda were targeted by the Americans. Mr Jafari confirmed to the official Iranian news agency, IRNA, that he was in Arbil at the time of the raid.

In a little-noticed remark, Manouchehr Mottaki, the Iranian Foreign Minister, told IRNA: "The objective of the Americans was to arrest Iranian security officials who had gone to Iraq to develop co-operation in the area of bilateral security."

US officials in Washington subsequently claimed that the five Iranian officials they did seize, who have not been seen since, were "suspected of being closely tied to activities targeting Iraq and coalition forces". This explanation never made much sense. No member of the US-led coalition has been killed in Arbil and there were no Sunni-Arab insurgents or Shia militiamen there.

The raid on Arbil took place within hours of President George Bush making an address to the nation on 10 January in which he claimed: "Iran is providing material support for attacks on American troops." He identified Iran and Syria as America's main enemies in Iraq though the four-year-old guerrilla war against US-led forces is being conducted by the strongly anti-Iranian Sunni-Arab community. Mr Jafari himself later complained about US allegations. "So far has there been a single Iranian among suicide bombers in the war-battered country?" he asked. "Almost all who involved in the suicide attacks are from Arab countries."

It seemed strange at the time that the US would so openly flout the authority of the Iraqi President and the head of the KRG simply to raid an Iranian liaison office that was being upgraded to a consulate, though this had not yet happened on 11 January. US officials, who must have been privy to the White House's new anti-Iranian stance, may have thought that bruised Kurdish pride was a small price to pay if the US could grab such senior Iranian officials.

For more than a year the US and its allies have been trying to put pressure on Iran. Security sources in Iraqi Kurdistan have long said that the US is backing Iranian Kurdish guerrillas in Iran. The US is also reportedly backing Sunni Arab dissidents in Khuzestan in southern Iran who are opposed to the government in Tehran. On 4 February soldiers from the Iraqi army 36th Commando battalion in Baghdad, considered to be under American control, seized Jalal Sharafi, an Iranian diplomat.

The raid in Arbil was a far more serious and aggressive act. It was not carried out by proxies but by US forces directly. The abortive Arbil raid provoked a dangerous escalation in the confrontation between the US and Iran which ultimately led to the capture of the 15 British sailors and Marines - apparently considered a more vulnerable coalition target than their American comrades.

### **The targeted generals**

#### **\* MOHAMMED JAFARI**

Powerful deputy head of the Iranian National Security Council, responsible for internal security. He has accused the United States of seeking to "hold Iran responsible for insecurity in Iraq... and [US] failure in the country."

#### **\* GENERAL MINOJAHAR FROUZANDA**

Chief of intelligence of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, the military unit which maintains its own intelligence service separate from the state, as well as a parallel army, navy and air force