

# U.S. detention of key Shiite raises ire

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**BAGHDAD, Iraq** - U.S. troops detained the eldest son of Iraq's most influential Shiite politician for nearly 12 hours Friday as he crossed back from Iran - the same route Washington believes is used to keep powerful Shiite militias flush with weapons and aid.

Even though the U.S. ambassador issued a rapid apology, the decision to hold Amar al-Hakim risks touching off a backlash from Shiite leaders at a time when their cooperation is needed most to keep a major security sweep through Baghdad from unraveling.

It also highlights the often knotty relationship between U.S. military authorities and Iraq's elected leaders, whose ties to neighboring patrons - Syria backing Sunnis, and Iran acting as big brother to majority Shiites - add fuel to sectarian rivalries and bring recriminations from Washington about alleged arms smuggling and outside interference.

Shiite reaction to the detention was quick and sharp, with some officials suggesting it was a veiled warning about the limits of ties to Iran.

"What happened is unacceptable," Shiite lawmaker Hamid Majid Moussa told Al-Forat television. "The Iraqi government and the American forces must put an end to such transgressions," Shiite lawmaker Hamid Majid Moussa told Al-Forat television.

The station is just one part of the multilayered clout of the al-Hakim family.

Al-Hakim's father, Abdul-Aziz al-Hakim, met with President Bush at the White House in December. He is the leader of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, or SCIRI, the country's largest political force.

The bloc carries the strongest voice in the 275-seat parliament and holds critical sway over the fate of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. It also maintains very close ties to Iran, which hosted the elder al-Hakim and other SCIRI officials before the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003.

In December, American forces seized two Iranian security agents at the elder al-Hakim's compound in Baghdad. Six other Iranians were arrested Jan. 11 at an Iranian liaison office in northern Iraq. The U.S. military said they were members of Iran's elite Revolutionary Guard. Tehran denies the charges.

Washington has repeatedly accused Iran of funneling weapons to militants, including lethal roadside bombs that have targeted U.S. troops.

But the U.S. ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, tried to defuse any showdowns with Shiites that could upset a 10-day-old offensive seeking to reclaim Baghdad's streets from militants and sectarian deaths squads. Shiite militias appeared to clear the way for the effort by rolling back fighters and checkpoints.

"I am sorry about the arrest," Khalilzad said. "We don't know the circumstances of the arrest and we are investigating and we don't mean any disrespect to Al-Sayed Abdul-Aziz al-Hakim or his family."

Khalilzad promised: "We will find out what has happened."

A U.S. Embassy spokesman in Baghdad, Lou Finton, said al-Hakim "was not singled out" and "soldiers were following standard procedure" since the border crossing was closed at the time. But he did not offer details on how al-Hakim's entourage entered Iraqi territory if the crossing point was sealed.

The younger al-Hakim, 35, was taken into custody at the Zirbatyah crossing point southeast of Baghdad along with his security guards, said his father's secretary, Jamal al-Sagheer. Al-Hakim was freed about 12 hours later, but his bodyguards remained in custody, al-Sagheer said.

The New York Times quoted advisers to al-Hakim as saying American forces had beaten several of the guards after stopping the convoy. The Times also quoted an unidentified U.S. military official as saying al-Hakim was detained because he had an expired passport and was traveling with people who had a large number of guns.

But in an interview after his release at the provincial governor's office in Kut, al-Hakim displayed a passport with an expiration date of Sept. 17, 2007, the Times reported on its Web site Friday.

"They arrested me and my guards in an unsuitable way, and they bound my hands and blindfolded me," the Times quoted Amar al-Hakim as saying. "They took our phones, bags, money, documents and the guards weapons, and sent us to an American base."

"They claim the reason for the arrest was because my passport had expired," he said, "but as you can see my passport expires on the 17th of September."

U.S. officials could not immediately be reached for comment on the report, because of the late hour in Baghdad.

Amar al-Hakim heads a charity dedicated to the memory of his uncle, Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim, who was killed along with scores of others in a car bombing in Najaf in August 2003. His father took over SCIRI after the killings, and Amar is apparently being groomed to take his place someday.

Although the reason for the detention was not immediately clear, suspicion fell on Washington's accusations about suspected Iranian weapons or money pipelines to major Shiite groups, including SCIRI and sometimes-rival the Mahdi Army militia of radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr.

Both Washington and Iraqi leaders have vowed that no one would be exempt as the major security operation is under way in Baghdad.

"Washington doesn't want to start a war with Iran, but instead is trying to set some boundaries," said Andrew Exum, a regional affairs analyst at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. "This (al-Hakim) situation may not be true saber rattling, but a kind of saber rattling to try to contain Iranian influence."

In the southern city of Basra, about 300 SCIRI supporters protested the detention. "No, no to America," they chanted. "No, no to Satan."

A Shiite lawmaker, Hameed Moalah, said he wasn't sure what message Washington was trying to send. "But it is certainly a negative one," he added.

In another part of Iraq, an emissary for the U.S. commander in Iraq also delivered a sobering assessment of what it would take to defeat insurgents.

Retired Army Gen. Jack Keane, a top Pentagon envoy touring areas northeast of Baghdad, said the security clampdown in the capital has pushed militants out of the capital. But he conceded there weren't "enough forces to secure the population" and said Iraqis are not ready to handle the battle alone.

He was the latest official to outline the Pentagon's new approach: Instead of training Iraqi forces to take over national security on a fast-track timetable, U.S. forces plan to throw more troops at the resourceful and adaptable insurgents.

"The violence is too high," said Keane, who was sent on a fact-finding mission by Gen. David Petraeus, the new commander of U.S. forces in Iraq. "So our new strategy is to bring the violence down so Iraqi forces can deal with it."

Underscoring the increase in violence, an Associated Press tally for February showed that at least 1,897 Iraqi civilians had been wounded as of Friday, the highest number of wounded civilians in a month since the AP began keeping track in May 2005. The actual number of casualties is believed to be far higher as many go unreported and the dangerous conditions in Iraq make it difficult to collect information.

The spike could be due to a rash of major truck bombings in Baghdad and the southern city of Hillah shortly before the start of the Baghdad security operation, as well as an increase in U.S. military operations to restore order in the capital.

The U.S. military, meanwhile, said three U.S. soldiers were killed Thursday in combat in volatile Anbar province, but did not give specific locations or circumstances for the deaths.

In Basra, police said they arrested a suspected Sunni insurgent with links to al-Qaida. Issa Abdul-Razzaq Ahmed, 22, was on the Iraqi Interior Ministry's most-wanted list, accused of financing and recruiting fighters, said provincial police commander Gen. Mohammed al-Moussawi.