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January 15, 2016

The Honorable Ray Mabus
Secretary of the Navy
2000 Navy Pentagon
Washington, DC 20350

Dear Secretary Mabus:

We write to you with deep concern regarding the capture of ten U.S. sailors by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) on January 12, 2016. Photos and video released by the IRGC showing these Navy personnel blindfolded or kneeling on decks with their hands behind their heads suggest that this incident was not free of hostile intentions, as the State Department and other Administration officials have asserted. According to an IRGC statement, State Department officials may have even been coerced into apologizing to Iran and vowing, "not to repeat such mistakes" in order to secure their release.

The only apology, however, that should have been made by U.S. officials should have been directed toward the American people for allowing our Navy sailors to fall into the hands of Iranian forces. This is an incident that should not have happened in the first place. Our understanding is that Iran completely flouted standard nautical protocol for vessels in the type of situation that the Administration has described.

Iran's actions raise serious questions regarding the potential compromise of our national security. We are concerned that Iranian officials may have gained access to technology and manuals aboard U.S. Naval ships. Additionally, Iranian officials may have interrogated our sailors for intelligence regarding Navy operations in the Persian Gulf.

Other recent, aggressive behavior by Iran, including a ballistic missile test, suggests that the nuclear agreement with Iran, far from thawing tensions, has actually raised the specter of military conflict. This blunder sends a message of capitulation to Iran and to our adversaries around the world

In light of these concerns, we request answers to the following questions regarding the circumstances surrounding this seizure and current Navy protocol in the Persian Gulf. The American people fully expect that Navy policy should reflect the continued contentious nature of relations with Iran and ensure that U.S. military personnel and equipment are fully protected.

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1) In 2007, Iranian naval forces seized 15 British seamen, with Britain denying Iran's claims that these Navy personnel had illegally entered Iranian waters.

   Does Navy intelligence suggest that these vessels were actually within Iranian territory? If the vessels were within Iranian territory, how deep were they within that territory and how did they end up there?

2) A statement by Secretary Kerry characterized these U.S. Navy sailors as being in distress. Conflicting reports also suggest that either the vessels ran out of fuel during a refueling operation in the area of Farsi Island or that the vessels suffered mechanical failure in either their navigational or engine systems.

   Is the Navy aware of any distress signals issued by either of the combat vessels? Did either or both vessels run out of fuel? Does any data collected during the investigation suggest that navigational or any other equipment aboard the ships malfunctioned or failed prior to Iranian capture? Was the Navy aware of any other information that would have suggested that the vessels were in distress?

3) If the Navy was aware that either of these vessels were in distress, what actions, if any, were taken to recover them prior to capture by Iranian forces? Why was the U.S. Navy unable to secure the vessels prior to arrival by the IRGC?

4) Were either of the vessels in contact with the higher headquarters prior to Iranian capture and if so, was headquarters leadership aware of the pending contact with IRGC officials? If headquarters was not in communication with the vessels, what caused this failure? If headquarters was in communication with the vessels, what specific instructions were given to the commanders of each of these vessels?

5) Who authorized the decision to surrender the ships to Iranian authorities? Why was this decision made?

6) Please describe the actions taken by Iran in capturing the U.S. vessels and sailors. Was there any communication between Navy sailors and IRGC officials prior to their capture? Were IRGC officials able to board the U.S. vessels? Were U.S. sailors held at gunpoint?

7) Please describe standard U.S. and Iranian protocol in the Persian Gulf for ships in distress and unintentionally behind another's territory. To what extent do Iran's actions described in the response to question #4 conform to such protocols?

8) Have Navy operations in the Persian Gulf and U.S. Navy protocols for these types of incidents changed since the nuclear agreement with Iran was finalized in 2015? If so, in what way?

9) Did IRGC interrogate the U.S. Navy sailors? Has Navy's investigation suggested that intelligence regarding Navy operations in the Persian Gulf, or any other U.S. military matters, may have been compromised due to questioning by Iranian officials?

10) Reports have surfaced that Iran may have seized GPS systems aboard the ships.

Were the Iranians able to inspect technology and systems aboard the vessels? Did Iran seize any such GPS systems, or any other equipment, and if so, has Iran returned all U.S. Navy property? What, if any, knowledge of U.S. Navy capabilities may have Iran gained by this incident?

11) Iran has distributed propaganda photos and videos of the imprisoned sailors, which may be in violation of the Geneva Convention. How does the Navy plan to respond?

Thank you for your service and prompt attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

John Fleming, M.D.
Member of Congress

Trent Franks
Member of Congress

Doug Lamborn
Member of Congress

Mo Brooks
Member of Congress

Jim Bridenstine
Member of Congress

Steve Russell
Member of Congress