

NYT AND THE IRANIAN CAPTURE STORY

In a curious story yesterday, the NYT quotes freed Iranian captive Sarah Shourd explaining that when she and two other hikers were captured in July 2009, they were inside Iran.

Ms. Shourd, 32, said she wanted to correct the gathering false impression, fueled by a classified United States military report made public last week by WikiLeaks, as well as earlier American and British news reports, that the hikers were detained inside Iraq and forced across the border. Her comments came just days before her two fellow hikers, her fiancé, Shane M. Bauer, and their friend Joshua F. Fattal, both 28, are scheduled to go on trial in Iran on Saturday.

On the fateful day, when they approached the armed border guard who had gestured to them, "He pointed to the ground and said 'Iran' and pointed to the trail we had been on before he waved to us, then said 'Iraq,'" Ms. Shourd said by telephone from her home in Oakland, Calif. "We did not actually enter Iran until he gestured to us. We were confused and worried and wanted to go back."

The NYT reports this without acknowledging—or amending—their earlier report on the capture, which (not least because NYT used different redaction standards than Wikileaks) was a key part of spreading the story that they were captured in Iraq.

Perhaps the NYT has left the two contradictory stories as they are because of the later story's implied suggestion about Shourd's motive. Her fiance is about to go on trial in Iran, and she surely wants to do anything she can to improve

his chances of being freed, even if it means supporting Iran's version of the story. And if you think about it, the story most sources are telling is that the hikers had no idea which side of the border they were on, which means any certainty Shourd has about where they were captured would come primarily from her Iranian captors.

Note, too, that the NYT only seeks comment from the State Department, and not DOD or any other government agency, to clarify the question. The State Department appears very interested in avoiding any conclusion about whether the hikers were in Iraq or Iran.

The United States State Department has never suggested the version published by WikiLeaks, she said, always maintaining that it did not know how their arrest happened.

The State Department spokesman, Philip J. Crowley, confirmed that on Sunday. "We don't know whether they had two feet on one side or the other or one foot on each," he said. "All we know is Iran has held them far too long."

Which in turn suggests that the NYT is not interested in using the story to get to the truth of the issue, but rather to make sure Shourd's refutation of the DOD report appears in a prominent location.

At the moment, I won't say any more about the credibility of the many conflicting stories that have been told about this capture, except to remind that the NYT (but not Wikileaks) left the closing date on the report unredacted; that closing date, at least, appears to show the report being closed—at 2:18 on July 31—almost two hours before the first time recorded in the report, 4:00.

That doesn't say anything about the credibility of the report.

But what NYT's contradictory stories about the capture appear to suggest is that, in their glee to release the Iran capture report in a form that served their Michael Gordon-written narrative about Iran, they may have done far more than WikiLeaks itself did to put American lives at risk. That is, by publishing the report and the story, the NYT introduced a claim that Shourd feels obliged to refute before her fiance's trial starts.

I'll let others weigh in on the journalistic ethics of the NYT's contradictory stories. I just wanted to note this to point out that the US' own attempts to craft the WikiLeaks dump with their preferred spin seems to have done the most damage, thus far.