

Kidnapped Britons are Bargaining Tool

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The kidnapping of five Britons in Iraq is probably part of a wider political confrontation, one in which the hostages could be a bargaining tool with insurgent Iraqi groups or even the Iranians, an expert on international relations has suggested today.

Professor Scott Lucas has indicated that the five British hostages might have been seized with a view to an exchange for five Iranians taken by American forces in January.

Professor Lucas said: "The detention of the Iranians in Erbil, in northern Iraq, has really angered Iranian authorities. They have unsuccessfully been trying to gain access to them for four months.

"The kidnapping of the five Britons could be indirectly or directly linked to this situation."

Professor Lucas, from the University of Birmingham's Department of American and Canadian Studies, is a leading specialist on US and British foreign policy and the situation in Iraq. He believes that the seizure of the Britons may have been prompted by intensified operations, including airstrikes, by American and British forces in Baghdad and Basra last week.

In particular, Professor Lucas notes that the Mehdi Army, led by Shi'a cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, called for retaliation after the slaying of one of its most prominent figures, Abu Qadir, by British forces: "If this is true, then it represents a stepping up of their operations and is very serious news for the US and British forces."

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Further Media Information

Prof Scott Lucas is available for interview today and can be contacted on 07939 520001 / email: w.s.lucas@bham.ac.uk

You can also contact Anna Mitchell in the Press Office on 0121 414 6029 / 07920593946.

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