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Iran Questions Detained U.S. Hikers

By SAM DAGHER and [SHARON OTTERMAN](#)

BAGHDAD — [Iran](#) said Tuesday that it was questioning three young Americans arrested last week while hiking near the country's border with Iraq and has charged them with illegal entry into the country, Iranian state television reported.

"They are definitely Americans," Iraj Hassanzadeh, a security official in Iran's western Kurdistan region, told Iran's Arabic-language Al Alam television, Reuters reported. "They were detained four days ago. We don't know whether they are tourists or not. We are questioning them."

The three were arrested in the western Iranian district of Marivan, at a border point known as Malakh-Khur, Iran's state-funded Press TV station reported, adding that they were traveling on Syrian and Iraqi visas and were therefore not legally permitted to cross the border.

Kurdish authorities in Iraq have identified the Americans as Shane Michael Bauer, of Emeryville, Calif.; Joshua Felix Fattal, of Cottage Grove, Ore.; and Sarah Emily Shourd, of Oakland, Calif. Kurdish officials said they were students, two of whom were studying Arabic in Damascus, Syria. Mr. Bauer and Ms. Shourd have also worked as freelance journalists, most recently in the Middle East.

Swiss diplomats representing American interests in Iran said Monday they were trying to confirm the detentions with the Iranian Foreign Ministry and had requested consular access to the detainees, said Lars Knuchel, the head of public information for the Foreign Ministry in Bern, Switzerland. Iran and the United States have not had formal diplomatic relations since the American hostage crisis of 1979.

"Obviously, we are concerned," Secretary of State [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) told reporters on Monday, adding that the United States still did not have confirmation that Iran was holding the three Americans. "We want this matter brought to a resolution as soon as possible, and we call on the Iranian government to help us determine the whereabouts of the three missing Americans and return them as quickly as possible."

Writing on the Web site Brave New Traveler, Ms. Shourd, 30, described herself as a "teacher-activist-writer from California currently based in the Middle East. She loves fresh broccoli, Zapatistas and anyone who can change her mind."

A 2003 graduate of the [University of California at Berkeley](#), she wrote an article for the site in 2008 about a family of [Iraqi refugees](#) in Aden, Yemen. More recently, in February, she wrote an article for a Web site called New America Media from Damascus.

Mr. Bauer, 27, who is Ms. Shourd's boyfriend, describes himself as a freelance journalist and photographer on [his Web site](#). He has traveled widely, and most recently wrote an article from Baghdad for the June issue

of The Nation magazine on the Iraqi Special Operations Forces. A Minnesota native, he graduated with honors from Berkeley in 2007 with a degree in peace and conflict studies and won an award for his photographs of Darfur, Sudan, the university said in [a statement](#).

Sandy Close, the executive director of Pacific News Service, the parent company of New America Media, said Mr. Bauer left for the Middle East in the fall of 2008 and had since contributed a dozen stories to the service. He was based in Damascus, she said, and last contacted the service on July 27, saying he planned to spend a week in Kurdistan and file an article about the Kurdish elections.

Mr. Fattal, 27, also attended Berkeley and was working and residing until eight months ago at a sustainable living research center in Cottage Grove. He was raised in Elkins Park, Pa., where his parents still live.

The three Americans were arrested by Iranian border guards on Friday afternoon after hiking into Iranian territory. The Kurdistan regional government's adviser on foreign relations, Falah Mustafa, said the authorities would seek a second meeting on Monday with Iran's consul general in the region's capital, Erbil, to discuss the case. Mr. Mustafa said the Foreign Ministry in Baghdad was approaching the Iranian Embassy.

A fourth American who was with the group when it first entered the region from the Turkish border on Wednesday was identified as Shon Gabriel Meckfessel, 36, a native of California. Mr. Meckfessel had a cold, however, and decided not to join his companions on their trek.

Mr. Meckfessel, a writer and graduate student in linguistics at the [University of Washington](#), is now believed to be at the United States Embassy in Baghdad. The head of the Iranian Parliament's foreign policy committee, Alaeddin Boroujerdi, confirmed the arrest of the Americans on Sunday, according to Press TV, a station owned by the Iranian government.

Another Iranian state-owned television station said on Saturday that the Americans had been arrested for illegal entry.

Kurdish officials said the group had camped out Thursday night at the border. Their tents, blankets and other belongings, including notebooks and a bottle of whiskey, were found Friday at the campsite.

Sam Dagher reported from Baghdad, and Sharon Otterman from New York. Alan Cowell contributed reporting from London.

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