

Iran's American and Other Western Hostages

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Background

More than 40 years after the start of the [Iran hostage crisis](#), Iran continues to take Americans and other Westerners hostage, particularly persons who also hold Iranian citizenship. The Iranian regime currently holds several known American and European citizens, residents, and asylees on trumped-up charges.

Iran takes hostages for several reasons. They serve as bargaining chips for the regime to extract geopolitical concessions from other countries. The government also seeks to punish undesirable behavior and send a message to Iranians to refrain from internal dissent. Finally, Iran does not recognize dual citizenship, so by targeting dual nationals, the regime demonstrates to the Iranian expatriate community that they are not beyond Tehran's grasp.

Some hostages' names have been made public by their loved ones in order to build international pressure on Iran to free them. Families of other captives have chosen to keep their cases secret in the hope of quietly obtaining their release. Here, UANI profiles current publicly disclosed hostages—as well as several recently released ones and two who were executed or otherwise died in captivity—to spotlight both their plight and the criminal nature of the regime in Tehran.

American Hostages

Afshin Sheikholeslami Vatani

Iranian Kurdish Environmentalist and U.S. Permanent Resident



Biography

Afshin Sheikholeslami Vatani is a civil engineer, environmentalist, Iranian national, and U.S. permanent resident. He [immigrated to America](#) in 2015.

Prior to immigrating, Vatani, a Kurd, had [served a year in prison](#) for “propaganda against the state” because of his political activism. However, his sister [said](#) that in recent years, “[H]e has not engaged in any political activities... Other than his professional career, he has only been working with charities and focusing on environmental issues, cleaning up the environment and planting trees.” Since immigrating, he had traveled to Iran several times without incident.

Arrests

Vatani was [arrested](#) on February 17, 2019, at his parents’ home in Sanandaj, the capital of Kurdistan province. The authorities released him after a month. In March 2020, he was [sentenced](#) to three months and one day in prison for “[spreading propaganda against the Islamic Republic of Iran](#),” but his sentence was commuted because of the rapid spread of COVID in Iran’s prison system. According to the Kurdistan Human Rights Network (KHRN), the authorities have [prohibited Vatani from leaving Iran](#).

Iranian security agents [rearrested](#) Vatani on June 27, 2020, at his parents’ home.

Treatment in Captivity

Vatani was held in solitary confinement for 86 days without access to his family or lawyer. The KHRN [reported](#) that the authorities questioned him “about cooperation with one of the Kurdish opposition parties, holding meetings and organizing street protests in October 2019 in Sanandaj in protest to the Turkish army’s attack on Syrian Kurdistan.”

Release on Bail

Vatani was [released on bail](#) on September 20, 2020, according to the KHRN.

Emad Shargi

Iranian-American Businessman



Biography

Emad Shargi is an Iranian-American businessman. He was [born in Iran](#) but left as a child, as did his wife, Bahareh Amidi Shargi, a poet.

Emad [completed](#) a bachelor's degree in economics from the University of Maryland and a master's in management information systems from George Washington University in Washington, DC. He [worked](#) for years in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, as a [partner](#) at Executive Aircraft Sales.

After their children left for college, Emad and Bahareh decided in 2017 to [move back to Iran](#). He [reportedly](#) worked in a senior role at Sarava, an Iran-based venture-capital and holding company [that made investments in Iran's technology sector](#). After Emad's arrest, Sarava claimed that his employment had ended in May of 2018. The firm added that the charges against him were unconnected to his service and that he could not have viewed information about the firm's clients or the companies Sarava invested in.

Arrests

On April 23, 2018, over a dozen agents of the authorities [entered](#) the Shargis' home and arrested Emad. There are [conflicting reports](#) about whether Bahareh was also arrested. The regime also [seized](#) the Shargis' passports and electronic equipment.

As noted below, Emad was [released from prison](#) in December 2018 and cleared of all charges by Tehran's Revolutionary Court in late 2019. However, the regime [held on to Emad's passport](#), and a news story wrongly reported that the Shargis were arrested again. The court also [summoned](#) him for three hearings during 2020.

Emad was [arrested](#) again on December 6, 2020, according to a January 14, 2021, article by the regime-affiliated Young Journalists' Club (YJC). The YJC claimed he had previously been [sentenced](#) to ten years in prison for "espionage and military intelligence gathering" but was released on bail pending appeal and that the authorities caught him at an airport as he was trying to flee Iran. The *New York Times* also [reported](#) that Emad had been detained while trying to escape into northern Iraq.

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Emad is the first and only known American hostage of Iran [taken after Joseph R. Biden Jr. was elected](#) president of the United States.

Treatment in Captivity

After his [first arrest](#) on April 23, 2018, Emad was [jailed for eight months](#) at the notoriously brutal [Evin Prison](#) in Tehran and spent part of that time in [solitary confinement](#). He was held in the prison's ward 2A, which is controlled by the IRGC's intelligence branch, and questioned about his travel and commercial dealings. Bahareh was also questioned and warned that they would retaliate if she spoke with U.S. officials or the media. The authorities [released](#) Emad in December 2018.

About six weeks after Emad was arrested again in December 2020, his family [said](#) in a statement that they “have no idea where he is or who has him.” His daughters [said](#) in April 2021 that they “have no way of knowing how he is, except for a couple of short, monitored phone calls.” They added: “He is trapped in terrible conditions during a deadly pandemic and is being refused a vaccine.”

Since that time, Shargi's family has learned that he is again jailed at Evin Prison. In October 2022, according to the family, Shargi [inhaled tear gas and smoke](#) and [nearly died](#) during [riots and a fire](#) at Evin.

Charges, Trial, and Sentencing

Emad was reportedly [charged with espionage](#), but, as noted below, he was cleared of all charges by Tehran's Revolutionary Court in late 2019. However, as noted above, the regime [kept Emad's passport](#), and the court [summoned](#) him for three hearings during 2020.

After Emad's second arrest in December of 2020 was made public, a friend of the Shargis' [said](#) Emad had been told to go on November 30, 2020, to a court in Tehran and was informed then that the court had convicted him—with no trial or prior notice—of spying, and gave him a ten-year prison sentence. He was not allowed to retain a copy of the document detailing his conviction.

Emad was released on bail pending appeal. However, as noted above, he was arrested on December 6, 2020, as he tried to flee Iran.

International Reaction

After Shargi's arrest became public in January 2021, the U.S. Department of State [commented](#) that it was “aware of the reports that Iran has detained another U.S. citizen.”



In agreement with her husband, Bahareh [left Iran](#) for the U.S. in 2020 to be with their children. She lives in Washington, DC, where she directs activities to free Emad.

Shargi's daughters, Ariana and Hannah, [wrote in a 2021 editorial](#): "As we write this, he should be here with us, barbecuing in the backyard of the house he has lived in for more than 20 years... Instead, he is in a cell." They called on the U.S. government "to do everything in their power to bring home our dad and the other American hostages being unjustly detained in Iran," and for "the international community to persevere in seeking justice for these individuals torn away from their loved ones." They added, "We are pleading with the Iranian government to return our father safely to us."

Move to House Arrest

Shargi was moved from Evin Prison to house arrest in August 2023 as part of a [pending U.S.-Iran deal](#) for the release of him and four other Americans held hostage by Iran. As part of the arrangement, \$6 billion in Iranian funds frozen due to U.S. sanctions would be unfrozen and several Iranians held in U.S. prisons would be released.

Morad Tahbaz

Iranian-American-British Environmentalist



Biography

Morad Tahbaz ([born October 1, 1955](#)) is an environmentalist and a citizen of the United States, United Kingdom, and Iran. The Tahbaz family was [reportedly](#) wealthy, and his father once owned the preeminent newspaper *Kayhan* before the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Tahbaz's passion for wildlife and nature began in his youth, according to an [online biography](#). He co-founded the Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation (PWHF), a wildlife-conservation organization that regularly gave to international conservation groups.

Tahbaz received a bachelor's degree from Colgate University in 1977 and a master of business administration from Columbia in 1983. As of August 2022, his [Facebook profile](#) lists his home as Weston, Connecticut.

Arrest

Tahbaz and eight of his PWHF colleagues were arrested in January 2018. They had been [using camera traps to monitor endangered species](#), including the Persian leopard and Asiatic cheetah. Iran's [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps](#) (IRGC) said the environmentalists were [committing espionage](#) by photographing Iranian military installations.

Tehran Prosecutor Abbas Jafari Dolatabadi [stated](#) that the detainees had worked for the CIA and the Mossad, with the goal of "infiltrating the scientific community, and collecting information from the country's sensitive and vital centers, including missile bases." However, an Iranian opposition-run news website, Kalame, [claimed](#) the environmentalists were seized because they "had resisted the IRGC's excessive demands to encroach on environmentally protected regions for the installation of missile sites."

Tahbaz's wife, Vida, went to Iran after Morad's arrest, and the regime is [prohibiting her from leaving](#).

Treatment in Captivity

With one exception, the environmentalists, [including Tahbaz](#), are being held in Tehran's notoriously brutal [Evin Prison](#). They are in Ward 2-A, controlled by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

Reports [claim](#) Tahbaz suffers from cancer and was in critical condition, as of March 2019, because his jailors denied him medication and other treatment and did not transfer him to a hospital.

The jailed environmentalists [reportedly](#) have been psychologically tortured in prison, including through solitary confinement for months, threats of death, threats of the arrest and killing of their family members, and threats of injection with hallucinogens. Their jailors have denied them access to legal counsel and permitted only a few meetings with the family. [Sources claim](#) some of the detainees were beaten.

Roxanne Tahbaz, Morad's eldest daughter, [said](#) "he tries not to talk about" his conditions in prison. "I think he's so conscious of the fact that he's still our dad," she said. "He gets a chance to call for about two minutes, very infrequently. And then he's always like, 'I love you. I miss you. Tell me what's happening in your life? What's going on at work? Can I give you any advice?' He's always been that kind of dad. My mum was always the light of the room. And my father was always very collected, calm."

Charges, Trial, and Sentencing

Tahbaz and his fellow prisoners were [initially accused](#) of espionage. However, in October 2018, nine months after their arrest, Tahbaz and three others were [formally charged](#) with "sowing corruption on earth"—a crime that carries the death penalty. The regime refused to provide any evidence of wrongdoing to the defendants' attorneys before trial and [did not allow](#) the accused to see the full indictments and evidence before being convicted and sentenced.

The environmentalists' trial [began](#) in January 2019 in Branch 15 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran. Prosecutors reportedly relied mostly on confessions extracted by torture and later retracted. The presiding judge was [Abolghassem Salavati](#), nicknamed "the Hanging Judge" or "the Judge of Death" for imposing harsh sentences, including capital punishment, in political cases. Salavati refused to let the defendants choose any lawyers except those on a judiciary-approved list.

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The trial [was suspended](#) in March 2019, before the Iranian new year. In May, a committee comprised of the intelligence, interior, and justice ministers and the president's legal deputy examined the environmentalists' case and stated that there was no evidence of espionage. Several senior Iranian government officials also urged that the prisoners be released.

Nonetheless, the trial [resumed](#) in August 2019. However, in October, a judiciary spokesman announced that the capital crime of "sowing corruption on earth" had been dropped. The defendants remain accused of other offenses, [including](#) "assembly and collusion against national security" and "cooperation with the U.S. enemy government and [Israel] against the Islamic Republic of Iran for the purpose of spying for the CIA and Mossad." [According](#) to a lawyer for one of the accused, Tahbaz was tried on October 12, 2019.

On November 20, 2019, the authorities [reportedly](#) told Tahbaz and the other defendants—without legal counsel present—that they had been sentenced to prison sentences of varying lengths, with Tahbaz receiving ten years. In February 2020, Iran's judiciary [upheld](#) the prison sentences on appeal, including Tahbaz's.

First Furlough

On March 16, 2022, British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss [announced](#) that Tahbaz had been furloughed from prison, simultaneously with Iran's full release of British hostages Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Anoosheh Ashoori and their return to the U.K. The furlough and releases happened after the U.K. paid Iran \$530 million to erase a debt dating back to the 1970s. The shah's government had purchased military vehicles from the British, but the vehicles were not delivered due to the intervening overthrow of the shah and the establishment of the Islamic Republic in its place.

Truss said that development was "the result of tenacious and creative British diplomacy... years of hard work and dedication by our brilliant diplomats, and intensive efforts over the past 6 months." She added, "We have the deepest admiration for the resolve, courage and determination Nazanin, Anoosheh and Morad [Tahbaz, another British hostage who was simultaneously briefly furloughed from prison], and their families, have shown. They have faced hardship that no family should ever experience and this is a moment of great relief." She also thanked the government of Oman for its help in getting the hostages freed. Truss added that the money the U.K. paid to Iran "will be ring-fenced solely for the purchase of humanitarian goods."

[Tahbaz's family was "distraught"](#) that the U.K. government hadn't secured Tahbaz's return home. Tarane Ahbaz, Morad's sister, [said](#), "We were in touch with [Tahbaz, Zaghari-Ratcliffe, and Ashoori] right up until two days before when they told us there was great hope that all three were coming together. There was this build-up and then suddenly silence. The big

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conundrum now is that they have paid this debt and where does that leave my brother? What card do they have to play? You get a feeling after all this that he is a pawn.”

British Minister of State for Europe and North America James Cleverly claimed that the Iranian regime said that Tahbaz’s American nationality complicated his case. “But we don't stop, we have never stopped and we will continue working to get his full permanent release and his return home to his family," Cleverly asserted.

The *Times of London* [cited](#) an anonymous “informed source” who said that Tahbaz was not permitted to leave Iran because he was also a U.S. citizen, and the Iranians demanded that the U.S. also pay them, not just the U.K. “The deal was done, but at the end the Americans said no,” the source said.

Tahbaz’s relatives said that during his furlough, he “remain[ed] under guard in a two-bedroom flat with his wife. [She] “has also had her passport confiscated by the Iranian regime” and the couple had “no liberty to speak to the outside world.”

However, [Iran re-imprisoned Tahbaz](#) just two days later, Friday, March 18, 2022, [reportedly](#) taking him “from the family home in Tehran in a black car under armed guard, while his wife looked on in tears.” Tahbaz’s family [announced](#) his re-imprisonment in a statement. “We the family are distraught at this moment," they said. “We were confident and assured that the UK government had taken on responsibility to secure his release... After the euphoria of Nazanin and Anoosheh's homecoming, there's a worrying sense that the UK government hasn't pressed the Iranian authorities for Morad's freedom in the same way.” A Tahbaz family member [said](#) Tahbaz was “shattered and in disbelief. He did not think that the U.K government would abandon him. He was born in the U.K.”

The British Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (FCDO) said the Iranian regime had told them that Tahbaz had been taken back to Evin Prison to have an ankle tag fitted, which should have been done before he was released. “We hope to see him returned to his home in the coming hours,” said the FCDO. “Morad Tahbaz is a tri-national and we are working closely with the United States to secure Morad's permanent release.” However, Tahbaz’s attorney [said](#) he “was not informed about any ankle tag.” He added, “Unfortunately, we have no idea if or when he is going to be released. He is back in Evin for the time being.”

A U.S. Department of State spokesperson [said](#) that nothing less than an immediate furlough for Tahbaz would contravene Iran’s pledges to the U.K. “We are not a party to this arrangement,” the spokesperson stated, “but would join the UK in considering anything short of Morad’s immediate furlough a violation of Iran’s commitment. We are urgently consulting with the UK on appropriate responses. We continue to work night and day to secure the release of our wrongfully detained citizens, including U.S.-UK citizen Morad Tahbaz.”

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However, the Iranian regime [kept Tahbaz in Evin Prison](#) over the weekend before taking him to, reportedly, [a hotel in Tehran](#). Roxanne Tahbaz said that the authorities [brought Morad back to prison](#) 24 hours later. An FCDO spokesperson [criticized](#) Iran's action. "Iran has failed to honour their committed to releasing Morad from prison on indefinite furlough," the spokesperson said. "Continuing his horrendous ordeal sends a clear message to the international community that Iran does not honour its commitments. We continue to urge the Iranian authorities, at every opportunity, to release him immediately."

After Iran took Tahbaz back to prison from the hotel, Tahbaz [went on hunger strike for nine days](#), ending it due to his family's pleas. "He wanted the UK to know that he was still there and suffering and that he felt betrayed and abandoned," Roxanne Tahbaz [said](#).

Roxanne also [said](#) that in the past, the British government had twice proposed to the Tahbaz family that at the same time that Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Ashoori were released and returned home, Tahbaz could be freed from prison but kept in Iran. "We vehemently disagreed with that approach," Roxanne said. "We were quite certain that if they did that, as soon as the others were back home, they'd put him back in prison. And that's exactly what happened."

Reports of Looming Release

In April 2022, three Iranian pro-regime media outlets [reported](#) that Iran and the U.S. had agreed to a deal in which Iran would release Tahbaz and two other American hostages, Baquer and Siamak Namazi. In exchange, the U.S. would release frozen Iranian funds "several times" more than the \$530 million the U.K. paid Iran.

A State Department spokesperson [appeared to deny the reports](#), however. "Reports that Iranian funds held in restricted accounts in third countries will be transferred are false," the spokesperson said. "...[The U.S. has] two separate negotiations underway with Iran: one for a mutual return to full implementation of the JCPOA and one on the release of all four US citizens unjustly detained in Iran... Unfortunately, at this stage, neither negotiation has been successfully concluded."

Second Furlough

The regime [released Tahbaz on bail](#) in July 2022 and put an electronic bracelet on him. He is staying with his wife at the Tahbaz family home in Iran. Roxanne Tahbaz [said](#) the release will "allow him to receive the medical attention he urgently needs."

Oman apparently assisted in facilitating Tahbaz's release. U.S. Special Envoy for Iran Robert Malley [tweeted](#) that he had "extended our warmest thanks to Oman for its help in achieving the furlough of Morad Tahbaz" in a meeting with the Omani foreign minister. A State

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Department spokesperson [told](#) al-Monitor that “We are grateful to Oman and the UK for continuing to press Iran to fulfill this commitment. Simply put: Iran is unjustly detaining innocent US nationals and others and should release them immediately.”

The FCDO [said](#) in a statement after Tahbaz’s release that “Morad is a tri-national and we continue to work closely with the United States to urge the Iranian authorities to permanently release him and allow his departure from Iran.”

Move to House Arrest

Tahbaz was moved from Evin Prison to house arrest in August 2023 as part of a [pending U.S.-Iran deal](#) for the release of him and four other Americans held hostage by Iran. As part of the arrangement, \$6 billion in Iranian funds frozen due to U.S. sanctions would be unfrozen and several Iranians held in U.S. prisons would be released.

International Reaction

The Trump administration publicly called for Tahbaz’s release, including in a [State Department video](#) posted on social media on June 6, 2019 (World Environment Day). On June 9, 2019, Brian Hook, U.S. special envoy for Iran, [said](#) he had been negotiating with Tehran to free Tahbaz and other American nationals, trying to build on recent prisoner swaps that had freed U.S. citizens Xiyue Wang and Michael White. Likewise, the Biden administration’s special envoy for Iran, Robert Malley, [tweeted](#) in January 2022 that “Iran should release [Tahbaz], the Namazis, Emad Shargi, and Morad's fellow UK citizens immediately.”

The British government has publicly [urged](#) Iran to free all UK-national hostages. British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss released a statement about Tahbaz on his 66th birthday, October 1, 2021. “As Morad Tahbaz turns 66 today, he faces another birthday spent unjustly detained in Iran, Truss said. “I call on Iran to immediately end its cruel treatment of Morad and allow him proper medical treatment. I raised Morad’s case with the Iranian Foreign Minister last week and remain committed to bringing him home to be reunited with his family.”

United Nations human rights experts condemned Iran’s arrests of the environmentalists. “We are concerned that Iranian authorities now seem to be arresting and investigating peaceful scientific activists for their invaluable conservationist work,” they said on February 23, 2018. “It is hard to fathom how working to preserve the Iranian flora and fauna can possibly be linked to conducting espionage against Iranian interests. The detention and punishment of environmentalists for their work to conserve and protect the natural environment cannot be justified]. Nowhere in the world, including Iran, should conservation be equated to spying or regarded as a crime. Detention of human rights defenders for their work is arbitrary in nature.”

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The United Nations Environment Programme has [urged](#) that the environmentalists be “guaranteed a fair, transparent, and independent trial.”

Several human rights organizations have also spoken out against the environmentalists’ imprisonment. Human Rights Watch has demanded that they [receive adequate access to medical treatment, be released](#) instead of being detained arbitrarily without being charged, and that a [fair and transparent investigation](#) be launched into allegations that they have been tortured. Amnesty International has also [called](#) for the environmentalists to be released and the charges against them to be dropped. Conservationist groups, including the [Environmental Conservation Society](#) and the [World Wildlife Fund](#), have also issued statements supporting the hostages, as did famous British anthropologist and primatologist [Jane Goodall](#). Actor Leonardo DiCaprio also [expressed support](#) for the environmentalists on social media.

Relatives of the jailed environmentalists have [written](#) to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran’s supreme leader, and Ebrahim Raisi, then the head of Iran’s judiciary and now Iran’s president, seeking their loved ones’ immediate release.

Possible Intimidation of Journalists

Two Iranian environmental journalists who publicly panned the treatment of Tahbaz and his imprisoned colleagues later [conspicuously backtracked](#), apologizing for their initial comments and supporting the Revolutionary Court’s verdict. These recantations likely resulted from coercion by the regime, since Iran is one of the world’s [worst persecutors of journalists](#) and has previously pressured members of the press to retract or change pieces critical of the government.

Shahab Dalili

Iranian Retired Shipping Official and U.S. Permanent Resident



Biography

Shahab Dalili is a retired Iranian shipping official. According to his [LinkedIn page](#), he worked for over 26 years for the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines (IRISL), starting as a deck officer and retiring in 2012 as deputy general manager of the company's department of maritime affairs. The U.S. has [sanctioned IRISL](#) multiple times for its involvement in Iran's arms-proliferation activities.

Dalili's LinkedIn page indicates that in 2014, he immigrated to the U.S. and founded a Virginia-based "marine survey and consultancy service to all interests in marine industry." [Reportedly](#), Dalili is a permanent resident of the U.S. His wife [has said](#) that she and their children are U.S. citizens.

Arrest

[According](#) to Voice of America, Taghato, a Farsi-language news outlet operated by Iranians living in the U.S., first broke Dalili's case. In 2018, Taghato tweeted that the Iranian regime arrested Dalili on March 20, 2016, after he traveled back to Iran following the death of his father, and sentenced him to ten years in prison for "allegedly cooperating with a hostile government." Taghato also stated that Dalili's family had not gone public about his case.

In July of 2019, released Iran hostage [Nizar Zakka told](#) Voice of America he shared a cell with Dalili.

Dalili's wife broke her silence in a video statement that the hostage advocacy group Hostage Aid Worldwide [tweeted](#) on March 22, 2022. Mrs. Dalili said her husband had been jailed in Iran's notoriously brutal Evin Prison since 2016 on charges of "aiding and abetting the U.S." She added, "As I heard about Iran and how hostages are being released, I'm asking President Joe Biden and his team: Please bring Shahab home. Please don't forget Shahab Dalili. Please free Shahab Dalili."

Controversy Over Hostage Status

The Biden administration has [yet to make a determination](#) under U.S. law (the [Robert Levinson Hostage Recovery and Hostage-Taking Accountability Act](#)) that Dalili is wrongfully detained. Such a determination would make certain U.S. government resources available for Dalili's case.

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A State Department spokesperson [said](#) on August 14, 2023, “We don’t discuss the specific details of individual cases who have not deemed—been deemed wrongfully detained. There is a process that is ongoing as it relates to actively reviewing and assessing individual cases for indicators for wrongful detention. I’m certainly not going to get into those.” Secretary of State Antony Blinken did not directly answer a question on August 15, 2023, about why Dalili had yet to be designated, instead [stating](#), “We continue to look and will always continue to look at the situations, conditions of other Americans around the world who may be detained.”

Omission from Hostage Release, Family’s Reaction, and Hunger Strike

Dalili was [not included](#) in a pending U.S.-Iran deal in 2023 for the release of five Americans held hostage in Iran. Dalili’s son, Darian, said that when he found out his father had been omitted from the arrangement, he e-mailed several State Department employees, saying, “You are leaving my father to die.” Both Darian and his father engaged in a multi-day [hunger strike](#) in protest.

Acting U.S. Special Envoy for Iran Abram Paley has spoken with Dalili’s relatives. However, Darian [said](#) Paley did not answer the family’s questions.

Siamak Namazi

Iranian-American Businessman and Consultant; Son of Hostage Baquer Namazi



Biography

Siamak Namazi (born October 14) is an Iranian-American businessman who is the longest-held current American hostage in Iran. He resided in Dubai before Iran took him captive.

Siamak's [father, Baquer](#), served as a former government official under the Shah, including as governor of the oil-rich province of Khuzestan in western Iran. Siamak's family came to the United States in 1983, when he was a boy. He became a

U.S. citizen in 1993.

After graduating from Tufts University in Massachusetts, Namazi returned to Iran for compulsory military service. From 1994 to 1996, he [worked](#) as a duty officer with the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning in Tehran. In 1998, Namazi [founded](#) Future Alliance International, a Washington, D.C.–based consulting company focused on the risks of doing business in Iran. Namazi later [worked](#) as managing director at his family's consulting firm, [Atieh Bahar Consulting](#), which [sought](#) to assist Iranian businesses with developing ties with foreign firms seeking to operate in Iran.

He served as a World Economic Forum Young Global Leader and as a public policy scholar at the Wilson Center in Washington, D.C., where [he advocated for closer relations between the U.S. and Iran](#). He had been the [head of the strategic planning division for Crescent Petroleum](#), an oil and gas company based in the United Arab Emirates, when he was arrested in Iran.

Arrest

Namazi was [stopped and interrogated](#) by Iran's [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps](#) (IRGC) when he arrived in Tehran on July 18, 2015, after [flying from Dubai to visit his parents](#). He was questioned daily by IRGC agents, who claimed he was committing espionage for Western governments for the following three months. The IRGC [refused to let Namazi use legal counsel](#), telling him that he could only hire an attorney from a list handpicked by the regime and never give him the list.

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The authorities [arrested](#) Siamak on October 13, 2015—one day before his birthday—and put him in Evin Prison’s Ward 2-A, which is controlled by the IRGC’s intelligence branch.

Treatment in Captivity

Siamak confirmed in a *New York Times* [op-ed](#) in June 2022 that the authorities put him in solitary confinement for the first 27 months of his prison sentence. “Often kept in a bare, closet-size room, I slept on the floor and received food from under the door—like a dog. I endured unutterable indignities....’ According to his brother Babak, Siamak was [tased, beaten, and otherwise tortured](#), was [compelled to watch footage of his father in detention](#), and had undergone lengthy interrogations.

On February 21, 2016, Siamak’s mother, Effie, wrote in a Facebook post that Siamak called her and said he had broken off a [hunger strike](#) he had recently initiated. Siamak’s health has [reportedly](#) deteriorated significantly during his captivity.

Charges, Trial, and Sentencing

On July 11, 2016, Tehran’s prosecutor revealed publicly that [Siamak had been indicted on unmentioned charges](#).

On October 17, 2016, Iran’s judiciary-linked Mizan news agency posted a video of Siamak’s arrest as evidence of “America’s humiliation.”

On October 18, 2016, it was announced that Baquer and Siamak were [sentenced to 10 years in prison](#) and fined \$4.8 million on charges of cooperating with the U.S. government. Tehran Islamic Revolutionary Court [Judge Abolqassem Salavati](#), infamously known as “the Judge of Death” and “the Hanging Judge” for sentencing defendants to death or long prison terms, [presided over](#) the Namazis’ trial, which [lasted only a few hours](#). Effie, Baquer’s wife, [announced on Facebook](#), “Now both my innocent son Siamak and my Baquer are in prison for no reason.”

On August 28, 2017, Baquer and Siamak’s appeals were [denied](#).

Furlough Requests

The regime refused to let Baquer Namazi leave Iran to get medical treatment, including [“immediate surgery](#) for a 95–97% blockage in one of his internal carotid arteries—the pair of main arteries that supply blood to the brain,” according to an October 2021 letter from his American lawyers to an official in the office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights. Siamak’s attorney, Hojjat Kermani, [called on](#) the regime to permit Baquer to go abroad for surgery. Barring that, Kermani said, Tehran should furlough Siamak to allow him to be with his

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father. Unable to leave the country, Baquer [underwent](#) the aforementioned surgery in Iran on October 26, 2021.

In September 2022, the Namazi family [said](#) Baquer needed another operation “within weeks,” this time on blockages in his left carotid artery. Babak Namazi also implored the regime to release Siamak from prison to be with his father. “I am begging Iran to show the smallest amount of humanity by allowing Siamak to be with my dad and help take care of him during his recovery,” Babak stated. “I also call on the US to drastically increase its efforts to obtain my family's freedom before it's too late. Time is not on our side.”

Reports of Looming Iran-U.S. Hostage Release Deal

In April 2022, three Iranian pro-regime media outlets [reported](#) that Iran and the U.S. had agreed to a deal in which Iran would release Baquer, Siamak, and American-British-Iranian national Morad Tahbaz. In exchange, the U.S. would release frozen Iranian funds “several times” more than the \$530 million the U.K. paid Iran.

A State Department spokesperson [appeared to deny the reports](#), however. “Reports that Iranian funds held in restricted accounts in third countries will be transferred are false,” the spokesperson said. “[The U.S. has] two separate negotiations underway with Iran: one for a mutual return to full implementation of the JCPOA and one on the release of all four US citizens unjustly detained in Iran... Unfortunately, at this stage, neither negotiation has been successfully concluded.” Iranian authorities have a habit of hyping the release of frozen assets to prop-up the national currency, even if such a deal is not imminent.

Op-Ed from Prison

Siamak authored an [op-ed](#) from prison entitled, “I’m an American, Why Have I Been Left to Rot as a Hostage of Iran?” which the *New York Times* published on June 29, 2022. Namazi wrote that “the Biden administration’s approach to rescuing Americans in distress in Iran has failed spectacularly so far and unless the president intervenes immediately, we are likely to languish in this abyss for the foreseeable future.” He criticized Washington for linking the release of the American hostages to the success of negotiations to restore an international agreement on Iran’s nuclear program.

Namazi urged President Biden to make concessions—even politically unpopular ones—to Iran in exchange for the freeing of the hostages. “Mr. Biden, I implore you to put the lives of innocent American detainees above Washington politics and make the tough decisions necessary to free all of us immediately,” he wrote. “While political backlash is inevitable, the prolonged suffering and potential deaths of hostages are not.”

Furlough

On October 1, 2022, Siamak's attorney Jared Genser [told](#) Reuters the regime had furloughed Siamak from Evin Prison for one week, subject to renewal. U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres's spokesperson [announced](#) the same day that Tehran had allowed Baquer to travel abroad "for medical treatment."

Iranian official and semi-official sources made conflicting statements about whether these steps were part of a quid pro quo involving the release of Iranian funds frozen overseas (most likely in South Korean bank accounts) due to sanctions.

Semi-official Iranian news agency Nournews [tweeted](#) on October 1, "Intensive negotiations were held with the mediation of a regional country regarding the simultaneous release of Iranian and American prisoners in recent weeks. Billions of dollars from the blocked resources of #Iran are also about to be released in this framework." Likewise, the state-controlled Islamic Republic News Agency [claimed](#) "with the finalization of negotiations between Iran and the United States to release the prisoners of both countries, \$7 billion of Iran's blocked resources will be released... Washington is pursuing at the same time the release of its citizens detained in Tehran and the release of Iranian funds in South Korea."

However, two regime officials said Tehran both lifted the travel ban and granted the furlough solely on humanitarian grounds. Deputy judiciary chief [Kazem Gharibabadi](#) and foreign-ministry spokesperson [Nasser Kanaani](#) both said there was no quid pro quo. Kanaani did add that negotiators had made progress toward the unfreezing of Iranian money held overseas.

The Biden administration denied reports of a trade of funds for hostages.

"Reports from Iranian sources of a transfer of funds related to the release of Baquer Namazi and furlough of Siamak Namazi are categorically false," [said](#) a National Security Council spokesperson. "Any claim that Iran's lifting of a travel ban on Baquer Namazi was part of a deal for a transfer of frozen funds is categorically false," a department spokesperson [said](#). "We understand that the lifting of the travel ban and his son's furlough were related to his medical requirement... We continue to have indirect discussions on possible humanitarian arrangements to facilitate the urgent release of the remaining US citizens wrongfully detained by Iran, but we have nothing further to announce at this time."

Return to Prison

Siamak Namazi was [sent back to prison](#) on October 12, 2022.

Hunger Strike

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Namazi [began a hunger strike](#) in mid-January 2023, on the seventh anniversary of a U.S.-Iran prisoner exchange that excluded him. Namazi is using the strike to [pressure](#) the U.S. and Iran to make a deal to release him. In an open letter to President Biden, Namazi [wrote](#),

In the past I implored you to reach for your moral compass and find the resolve to bring the US hostages in Iran home. To no avail. Not only do we remain Iran’s prisoners, but you have not so much as granted our families a meeting... Day after day I ignore the intense pain that I always carry with me and do my best to fight this grave injustice. All I want sir, is one minute of your days' time for the next seven days devoted to thinking about the tribulations of the U.S. hostages in Iran. “All I want sir, is one minute of your days' time for the next seven days devoted to thinking about the tribulations of the U.S. hostages in Iran. Just a single minute of your time for each year of my life that I lost in Evin prison after the U.S. Government could have saved me but didn’t. That is all. Alas, given I am in this cage all I have to offer you in return is my additional suffering. Therefore, I will deny myself food for the same seven days, in the hope that by doing so you won’t deny me this small request... When the Obama Administration unconscionably left me in peril and freed the other American citizens Iran held hostage on January 16, 2016, the U.S. Government promised my family to have me safely home within weeks. Yet seven years and two presidents later, I remain caged in Tehran’s notorious Evin prison, holding that long overdue IOU along with the unenviable title of the longest held Iranian-American hostage in history.

Move to House Arrest

Namazi was moved from Evin Prison to house arrest in August 2023 as part of a [pending U.S.-Iran deal](#) for the release of him and four other Americans held hostage by Iran. As part of the arrangement, \$6 billion in Iranian funds frozen due to U.S. sanctions would be unfrozen and several Iranians held in U.S. prisons would be released.

International Reaction

Siamak’s friends and family have asked the regime to release him and his father. As [COVID-19 ravaged Iran](#) in the spring of 2020—particularly endangering inmates living in the Iranian prison system's appalling conditions—the regime [temporarily released](#) tens of thousands of prisoners. The Swiss government, which handles U.S. diplomatic interests in Iran, [requested](#) that Siamak be granted a humanitarian furlough. To date, however, he remains in prison.

The U.S. government has repeatedly condemned Namazi’s detention and called for his release. In response to Namazi’s January 2023 hunger strike and open letter to President Biden, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre [said](#) Biden had received Namazi’s letter and the

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government is “continuing to work to bring him home, along with U.S. citizens who are wrongfully detained in Iran...”

Other Western Hostages

Abdolrasoul Dorri-Esfahani

Iranian-Canadian Accountant and Nuclear Negotiator



Biography

Abdolrasoul Dorri-Esfahani is an Iranian-Canadian accountant and former adviser to the governor of the Central Bank of Iran. He [oversaw negotiations](#) on the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action's banking provisions, also known as the Iran nuclear deal.

Arrest

Dorri-Esfahani was [arrested](#) in August of 2016 as he was about to leave Iran and return to Canada. He was [released on bail](#) pending trial.

Charges, Trial, and Sentencing

Dorri-Esfahani was [accused](#) of having links to British intelligence and giving sensitive information to the United States in exchange for payments by both countries.

In October 2017, the judiciary [announced](#) that Dorri-Esfahani had been sentenced to five years in prison, and Iran's Tasnim News Agency [reported](#) that he would return to jail to begin his sentence. Even though Iran's intelligence minister [claimed](#) that Dorri-Esfahani was innocent and had even cooperated with the ministry's counterintelligence branch, his appeal was [rejected](#).

Smear Campaign

In September of 2018, the intelligence wing of Iran's [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps](#) (IRGC) [released](#) a propaganda video portraying Dorri-Esfahani as having been paid to infiltrate Iran's negotiating team for the nuclear deal and being influential in the deal's formation. The video claimed Dorri-Esfahani worked with multinational firms like PricewaterhouseCoopers to provide key information to foreign negotiators.

Ahmadreza Djalali

Iranian-Swedish Expert in Emergency Disaster Medicine



Biography

Dr. Ahmadreza Djalali (born January 14, 1972) is an Iranian-born Swedish citizen (a Swedish resident at the time of his detention by the Iranian regime) and an expert in emergency disaster medicine. He is a scientist at the Research Center in Emergency and Disaster Medicine (CRIMEDIN), run by the University of Eastern Piedmont in Novara, Italy, and a professor at the Free University Brussels (VUB). His colleague Caroline Pauwels, Director of the Free University in Berlin, described his efforts as “[important humanitarian work](#).”

Dr. Djalali has a [Ph.D. in medical science](#) (disaster medicine) from Karolinska Institute in Sweden and an MD from Tabriz University in Iran. He has published 46 scientific articles in journals across the world. His previous work included collaboration with Tehran University and Shiraz University, and the Natural Disaster Medicine Institute in Iran.

Arrest

Dr. Djalali was [arrested on April 24, 2016](#), in Tehran by Iran’s Ministry of Intelligence agents. Djalali was visiting Tehran from Sweden, where he lived with his wife and two children, at the official invitation of Tehran University.

On January 5, 2017, Djalali’s wife, Vida Mehrannia, [publicly revealed](#) that her husband was imprisoned in Iran. According to Vida, “Ahmadreza had always traveled to Iran by invitation of state organizations, including the Red Crescent, and never experienced problems before.” The family had remained quiet after his arrest because they hoped, to no avail, that there was some “mistake or misunderstanding, and that he would be acquitted and released.”

In an undated [letter](#) smuggled out of prison, Djalali wrote that the regime had arrested him for refusing to spy for Iran’s intelligence ministry on European Union states.

Treatment in Captivity

Djalali was [jailed without trial](#) in the notoriously brutal [Evin Prison](#) since his arrest on bogus charges of “collaborating with enemy states.” Djalali was reportedly [placed in solitary confinement](#) in the prison’s [Ward 209](#). The intelligence ministry—and not the prison system’s bureaucracy— controls that ward, which houses political prisoners.

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Ward 209 is infamous—even by the standards of Evin Prison—for its tormenting of inmates. The names of those detained there are not put on Evin’s prisoner list, and Iranian parliamentarians have been denied access to it. Former prisoners there [told](#) Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty that they were “subjected to long and multiple daily interrogations,” “deprived of sleep and medical care,” “threatened by authorities with indefinite imprisonment,” and “beaten up.”

Djalali was [interrogated in Ward 209 for seven months](#) without access to legal counsel, before being moved to a general ward. His wife noted that “[a]fter he was transferred to a public ward, he was permitted legal counsel, but his lawyer told us he cannot talk about the case because it involves national security.” After he was transferred, the Islamic Revolutionary Court still [blocked every single attempt](#) he made to engage a lawyer to represent him.

On December 25, 2016, when his interrogators threatened him with a harsh sentence, [Djalali began one of several hunger strikes](#). According to his wife, “[H]e says that if they are going to execute him he prefers to die under hunger strike.”

In October of 2017, an audio recording of Djalali was [posted to YouTube](#). In it, he said the authorities had compelled him to recite while being videotaped two “confessions”—scripted by his captors—to committing espionage for a “hostile government.” Djalali said the authorities had psychologically tortured him into making his recorded confessions, including by threatening to execute him and arrest his children. Djalali said the charges against him were false and made up by agents from the intelligence ministry. Iranian state television broadcast a [forced confession](#) by Djalali on December 17, 2017. His wife [said](#) that the authorities threatened to kill his family if he did not read the statement.

Djalali is experiencing severe health issues. His wife [said](#) in February of 2019 that after receiving test results indicating he may have leukemia, he was scheduled to travel from prison to see cancer and blood specialists. However, the authorities stopped him from going because he refused to wear his prison uniform while away from Evin. Djalali also reportedly [lost 24 kilograms \(almost 53 pounds\)](#) due to his hunger strike. According to [several human rights and academic groups](#), Djalali also suffers from high blood pressure, a low heart rate, gallstones, a hernia, malnutrition, gastritis, and depression, among other maladies.

Djalali’s wife [stated](#) that he had been moved from Evin on July 29, 2019, to an undisclosed location where he was in solitary confinement, watched by a camera.

The regime reportedly [returned Djalali to solitary confinement](#) on November 24, 2020, as a preparatory step for his execution. There Djalali remained, in limbo, until April 14, 2021, when he was put back in a multi-inmate cell.

In March 2021, U.N. human rights officials [said](#) Djalali was “in a critical condition and near death.” They added that he has been in solitary confinement for more than 100 days, with bright light shined into his cell all day and night to prevent him from sleeping. Due to Djalali’s medical problems, the officials also said that he had lost a “dramatic” amount of weight and had difficulty speaking.

The regime hasn’t even temporarily released Djalali as the COVID-19 virus has ravaged Iran. Inmates living in appalling conditions in Iran’s prison system are at particular risk of contracting the virus. As of April 3, 2020, Iran had released a reported [100,000 some-odd prisoners](#), presumably to reduce the population density in its prisons and thereby minimize the spread of the virus, but Ahmadreza Djalali remains in prison, simultaneously awaiting execution and at risk of contracting COVID-19.

Djalali’s wife, Vida, [told](#) Amnesty Italy in January 2022 that the authorities had not allowed him to speak with his family for over 15 months. She said that his health has further deteriorated, and that he suffers from “amnesia, gastritis, gallstones... insomnia, anxiety, panic attacks, and severe depression. He also was not allowed to visit his mother when she got sick or to attend her funeral.

Djalali [underwent emergency surgery](#) later in January 2022 for an abdominal hernia, and the regime quickly returned him to prison thereafter, instead of allowing him to recuperate in a hospital.

The NGO Iran Human Rights [reported](#) in April 2022, that Djalali had been assaulted by staff in the prison infirmary on April 4. The staff allegedly “beat him up” after Djalali discovered that they were “stealing his medication” and asked for it back. Reportedly, the authorities continue to prevent Djalali from being in touch with his relatives.

Charges, Trial, and Sentencing

Djalali reportedly was charged with “[working with enemy states](#)” and “[spreading corruption on earth.](#)” Djalali’s trial began on January 30, 2017, in the Islamic Revolutionary Court in Tehran. On the first day, [Judge Abolqassem Salavati](#) read him the indictment and [said](#), “Your sentence is death and it won’t change at the end of the trial.” Salavati is [nicknamed](#) “the Hanging Judge” or “the Judge of Death” for imposing harsh sentences, including capital punishment, in political cases. Djalali [claimed](#) that he had been compelled to make videotaped confessions, psychologically tortured, and threatened with death.

On February 3, 2017, Djalali’s employer, Free University Brussels (VUB), announced that he had been [sentenced to death](#) and that the execution was scheduled to take place in two weeks. Ahmadreza informed his family in Iran that he was forced to sign a confession, which

became the basis for his death sentence. According to VUB, [the charges appeared to be related to Djalali's international contacts](#). A joint master's program at VUB that Djalali completed "draws students and professors from countries around the world," *Science* magazine reported, "including the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Israel."

In December of 2017, Djalali's sentence was [upheld](#) on appeal.

Imminence of Execution

On September 17, 2020, the International Observatory of Human Rights received from Djalali's wife an [audio recording](#) of an interview with him. Djalali said, "I am still under continuous risk of being executed," adding that nonetheless, "I have decided to sustain and fight with this catastrophe."

Djalali added that the prosecutor's office told him that while he is still liable to capital punishment, "[T]hey are ready to solve this problem if Sweden decides to help me. Practically, not just verbally. As I heard from them, Sweden not only doesn't perform any real action to save me and release me, but also they may prefer that I'd be executed." Djalali said that the Swedish government's treatment of his family is "very unfriendly," claiming, "By now, none of Swedish authorities, such as the Minister of Foreign Affairs Ann Linde, or before her, have allowed my spouse or children to meet them. Never."

On November 24, 2020, Djalali [reportedly](#) called his wife and told her he thought the authorities would execute him soon. Reports conflicted as to whether he was thrown back into solitary in [Evin's Ward 209](#) or [Raja'i Shahr prison](#) in the Iranian suburb of Karaj. [Reportedly](#), the regime frequently transfers inmates to solitary in Raja'i Shahr before their executions. However, the *Guardian* [reported](#) on December 2 that the authorities had not transferred Djalali to Raja'i Shahr.

An Iranian news agency [reported](#) on May 4, 2022, that Djalali would be executed by May 21. The move to execute Djalali may be in response to a push by Swedish prosecutors for a life sentence for Iranian national Hamid Nouri, who is on trial for war crimes he allegedly committed during the Iran–Iraq War (1980–88). A Stockholm court said the verdict in Nouri's case would be announced on July 14. Iran [summoned](#) the Swedish ambassador on May 1 in protest, "describing the trial and Nouri's imprisonment "as completely illegal" and calling for the trial's end and Nouri's release.

On May 10, 2022, an Iranian judiciary spokesman ruled out a swap of Djalali for Nouri and maintained that Djalali would be executed. "These two issues are not related," Zabihollah Khodaian [said](#). "Mr. Nouri is innocent and Mr. Djalali was arrested two years prior to Mr. Nouri's case. There is thus no possibility of an exchange of these two individuals... Djalali has

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been sentenced to death on several charges and the verdict is final. The sentence will be carried out.”

However, on May 16, 2022, a spokesman for Iran’s foreign ministry [said](#) the judiciary is weighing a request by Djalali’s lawyers to delay his execution.

International Reaction

Amnesty International [repeatedly](#) has [demanded](#) that the Iranian regime nullify Djalali’s capital-punishment sentence.

A petition calling for Djalali’s release and [signed by over 300,000 supporters](#) was sent to Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif. In August of 2019, Zarif said the Iranian government would “do our best on humanitarian grounds to see if the sentences on Mr. Djalali can be delayed, but he has been accused of multiple capital crimes... and he has been convicted of them.”

In February of 2018, the Swedish government [granted Djalali citizenship](#) in order to improve their ability to negotiate with Iran over his case.

In December of 2018, 121 Nobel laureates [wrote](#) to Supreme Leader Khamenei, asking him to permit Djalali to “return home to his wife and children and continue his scholarly work for the benefit of mankind.”

United Nations human rights experts have [expressed concern](#) that Iran denied Djalali access to health care and [called on](#) Iran to stop his impending execution.

Swedish Foreign Minister Ann Linde [tweeted](#) that she spoke with her Iranian counterpart, Mohammad Javad Zarif, about Djalali’s case on November 24. She added that “Sweden condemns the death penalty and works to ensure that the verdict against Djalali is not enforced.” An Iranian foreign ministry spokesperson [said](#) that the Swedish government’s understanding of Djalali’s status was “incomplete and incorrect,” and that Zarif told Linde that “Iran’s judiciary is independent and any meddling in the issuance or execution of judicial rulings is unacceptable.”

On March 18, 2021, seven U.N. human rights officials [urged](#) the Iranian government to release Djalali.

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On July 21, 2021, 14 human rights and academic groups [called on](#) the U.S., EU, and individual European governments to obtain Djalali's release. The organizations included Scholars at Risk, the Middle East Studies Association, the International Observatory of Human Rights, and PEN America.

In 2021, Scholars at Risk [gave Djalali the Courage to Think Award](#), which "recognizes individuals, groups, or institutions that demonstrate an exemplary commitment to protecting scholars and promoting academic freedom, whether through professional work, private or community service, or by facing personal risk."

After reports on May 4, 2022, that the regime would execute Djalali by May 21, Swedish Foreign Minister Ann Linde [tweeted](#) that the reports were "[e]xtremely worrying." She added that Sweden and the EU "condemn the death penalty and demands [sic] that Djalali be released. We have repeatedly stated this to Iranian representatives."

European Union Political Director Enrique Mora, coordinator of negotiations to revive the Iran nuclear deal, [tweeted](#) on May 13, 2022, that in meetings with Iran, he "raised the need to stop the execution of #AhmadrezaDjalali and asked for his release on humanitarian grounds."

A spokesperson for United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet has [called on](#) Iran not to execute Djalali and to annul his death sentence. "Use of the death penalty for espionage offences is incompatible with international human rights law," she said. "Countries that have not yet abolished the death penalty may only impose it for the 'most serious crimes,' which is interpreted as crimes of extreme gravity involving intentional killing."

Cécile Kohler and Jacques Paris

French Trade Union Official and Her Husband/Partner



Biography

Cécile Kohler is a French national and educator who heads the National Federation of Education, Culture and Vocational Training (FNEC FP-FO), [reportedly](#) the largest federation of teachers' unions in France. Jacques Paris is her [husband](#) or [partner](#), according to reports.

Arrest

Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security [announced](#) on May 11, 2022, that it had arrested two Europeans for "promoting unrest and instigating chaos," in the words of the Iran International news service. The ministry claimed the two had entered Iran in order to exploit ongoing protests to undermine Iranian society and had met with the Coordination Council of Iranian Teachers' Trade Associations, which has organized numerous demonstrations.

On May 12, a French trade union [stated](#) that the two detainees as Kohler and her unnamed husband and said they had traveled to Iran as tourists for Easter. Iran International [reported](#) that the two had arrived in Tehran on April 29, stayed two days, and then visited the cities of Kashan and Esfahan before being arrested during their return to Paris on May 8.

Iranian state television [broadcast more particulars](#) on May 17, identifying both Kohler and Paris by name and claiming "the two spies intended to foment unrest in Iran by organizing trade union protests." The broadcast said the two "took part in anti-government protests and met members of the so-called Teachers' Association," displaying footage of the detainees [meeting with demonstrating Iranian teachers](#) and [participating in demonstrations](#). A recording of the arrest was also shown.

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On May 9, the regime also arrested Anisha Asadollahi and Keyvan Mohtadi, two Iranian labor activists, translators, and writers who served as translators for Kohler and Paris. The authorities have yet to announce the charges against the two.

Coerced “Confession”

On October 6, 2022, Iranian state television aired a video in which Kohler and Paris [confessed to espionage](#). “I am Cecile Kohler,” she said. “I am an intelligence and operations agent at the DGSE [France’s Directorate General for External Security] ... We were in Iran to prepare the ground for the revolution and the overthrow of the regime of Islamic Iran.” Paris stated that “[o]ur goal at the French security service is to pressure the government of Iran.” The network reported that Kohler and Paris had entered the country with “chunks of money... which was meant to fund strikes and demonstrations.”

International Reaction

On May 12, the French foreign ministry [“condemn\[ed\]”](#) what it called a “groundless arrest” and “call[ed] for [the detainees’] immediate release.” The ministry said the government had “fully mobilized” to help the two, had sought consular access to them, and had summoned the head of Iran’s embassy in Paris to explain the arrest.

U.S. State Department Spokesperson Ned Price [said](#) on May 17 that “We echo... [France’s] condemnation of these arrests. We similarly call on France to immediately release these two French nationals.”

After the video of Kohler and Paris “confessing” aired on Iranian state television on October 6, 2022, a French foreign ministry spokesperson [condemned](#) the Iranian regime’s behavior and stated that Kohler and Paris were being held as “state hostages.” “The staging of their alleged confessions is outrageous, appalling, unacceptable and contrary to international law,” the spokesperson said. “This masquerade reveals the contempt for human dignity that characterizes the Iranian authorities. These alleged confessions extracted under duress have no basis, nor did the reasons given for their arbitrary arrest.”

Fariba Adelkhah

French-Iranian Academic



Biography

Fariba Adelkhah is a French-Iranian anthropologist at the university SciencesPo in Paris. She has published a study of Islamic women in Iran and, more recently, has focused on Shiite clerics' movements between Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan. She has spent extensive time researching in Iran, and has largely stayed out of politics. In 2009, she [wrote](#) an open letter to Iran's then-president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, protesting the government's equating of academic research to espionage.

Arrest

On June 5, 2019, Adelkhah was [arrested](#) in Iran—[reportedly](#) by the intelligence service of the [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps](#) (IRGC)—where she was [conducting research and visiting her mother](#). Her SciencesPo colleague and longtime companion [Roland Marchal](#), who had flown to Tehran to spend the Eid holiday with her, was also arrested.

Treatment in Captivity

Marchal was held, and Adelkhah remains, in Tehran's notoriously brutal [Evin Prison](#). Unlike Marchal, Adelkhah has [not been allowed](#) to meet with French consular officials because Iran does not recognize dual nationality.

On June 22, 2020, Agence France-Presse [published](#) a story about a secret audio recording from Anousheh Ashoori, another hostage held by Iran. Ashoori said a fellow detainee told him the detainee saw Adelkhah entering the prison being beaten and dragged by her hair.

Adelkhah's international support committee [claims](#) that the Iranian authorities offered to release her if she stayed in Iran and stopped her scholarly activities. She allegedly refused that offer. Marchal said after his release from prison that Adelkhah wants an unconditional release. "She wants to go out with her head held high, with her computer and her field notes, and does not want her release to be subject to restrictions on her rights of expression in Iran. She wants to continue doing her research work in Iran and does not want to submit to any blackmail."

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On December 24, 2019, Adelkhah started a [hunger strike](#) to [demand](#) that the regime release Marchal and her. She [ended it](#) on February 12, 2020, due to health concerns, and shortly after that, Adelkhah was admitted to the prison's hospital for acute kidney damage. Her lawyer [said](#) in May of 2020 that Adelkhah still had kidney problems and walked with difficulty.

In early February of 2020, Marchal and Adelkhah [petitioned](#) for permission to marry so that they could meet with each other in prison. No judgment on their petition was made public.

Reports in September of 2020 claimed that [Adelkhah was being transferred from Evin Prison](#), but no further details were provided.

Charges, Trial, and Sentencing

The regime held Marchal and Adelkhah for months without making criminal charges public, but finally disclosed that he would be tried for "[collusion to endanger national security](#)," while she would be tried for both that charge and "[propaganda against the political system of the Islamic Republic](#)." She had also initially been charged with "espionage" (by contacting dissidents and civil rights activists under the pretense of her research) and "disturbing public opinion" (by opposing laws mandating gender discrimination and requiring women to wear head-coverings), but those counts were [dropped](#).

The trial [commenced](#) on March 3, 2020, though only Adelkhah appeared. Further proceedings were postponed until April 18, 2020.

After the couple's trial began on March 3, 2020, their Paris-based [committee](#) of supporters [condemned](#) the hearing as a "masquerade of justice" and accused the regime of "deliberately putting in danger the lives of our two colleagues—already weakened—by keeping them in an overcrowded jail while the country is hit by a serious coronavirus epidemic whose scale is being played down and which is not under control."

On May 16, 2020, Adelkhah was [sentenced](#) to five years in prison for the aforementioned "collusion" charge and one year for the "propaganda" charge. Her lawyer [said](#) that he expected the prison terms would be served concurrently. An Iranian judiciary spokesman [announced](#) on June 30 that Adelkhah's appeal was denied and she would serve a total of five years in prison. Her prison sentence ends in [June 2024](#).

Marchal's Release

Iran [freed](#) Marchal on March 20, 2020, in exchange for France simultaneously [releasing](#) Jalal Rohollahnejad, an Iranian accused of violating U.S. sanctions laws. Marchal returned to France the next day. The regime continues to hold Adelkhah hostage in Evin Prison.

Adelkhah's First Furlough

Adelkhah's lawyer announced on October 4, 2020, that she had received an [indefinite furlough](#) and is staying with her sister and brother-in-law in Tehran. The authorities required her to [wear an electronic ankle monitor](#) and not go further than 300 meters from where she lives. Her attorney did not say if the regime released her due to the widespread COVID-19 infections in Iranian prisons.

The Iranian authorities [imprisoned Adelkhah again](#) in January 2022, claiming she had broken the conditions of her house arrest "dozens of times" [despite multiple warnings](#).

Adelkhah's Second Furlough

Adelkhah's attorney said on August 9, 2022, that the authorities had [furloughed her for five days](#). The regime [reimprisoned her](#) after five days.

Release from Prison

The regime [released](#) Adelkhah from prison on February 10, 2023. Her lawyer said the next day that Adelkhah's release was final, but that it was undetermined when the authorities would permit her to leave the countries.

International Reaction

In July of 2019, French President Emmanuel Macron [personally asked](#) Iranian President Hassan Rouhani to explain the reason for Adelkhah's arrest. France's foreign ministry also [insisted](#) on consular access to her "without delay," to no avail. In October 2019, the ministry outright [demanded](#) Adelkhah's release.

In December of 2019, the French government [summoned](#) Iran's ambassador and demanded again that Marchal and Adelkhah be released and that French consular officials be allowed to meet with them. France's foreign minister [reiterated](#) those demands to his Iranian counterpart in February of 2020, and President Macron again [urged](#) Tehran to free Adelkhah after Marchal was freed in March of 2020.

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SciencesPo has [claimed](#) that it is taking several steps to help Adelkhah and Marchal, working closely with the French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs and the French National Centre for Scientific Research. The university specifically mentioned that it had made sure that the two hostages had a very experienced attorney who is on the Iranian regime's approved list. In July of 2019, the SciencesPo faculty issued a [message](#) expressing their "warmest support" for Adelkhah and her family and their "strong hope" for her speedy release. The International Sociological Association [endorsed](#) that message.

Also, in July of 2019, the president of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) and the chair of its Committee on Academic Freedom sent a [letter](#) in support of Adelkhah to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, and Major General Hossein Salami, the IRGC's commander-in-chief. The MESA officials objected to the regime's increasing imprisonment of academics and urged the recipients to free Adelkhah immediately and make sure she returned to France safely.

In May of 2020, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian [decried](#) Adelkhah's prison sentence. "This sentencing was founded on no serious elements and was politically motivated," he said. "So, we firmly say to the Iranian authorities to release Fariba Adelkhah without delay." Le Drian added that "This decision makes our relations with the Iranian authorities a lot more difficult." A foreign ministry spokesman [condemned](#) the denial of her appeal in late June of 2020.

Adelkhah's support committee has [characterized](#) Iran's repeated hostage-taking of scholars and researchers as a challenge to academic freedom and the "international scientific community." In that vein, the committee [criticized](#) France's minister of higher education, research, and innovation, Frédérique Vidal, for showing "indifference" to Adelkhah's case despite its significance for academic freedom. The committee said Vidal had "confined herself to a few mechanical statements" and referred questions to the French foreign ministry. "Her silence is shocking and contemptuous of our profession as researchers and teachers," they added.

Vidal, a former biochemist and university administrator, [denounced](#) the Iranian judiciary's rejection of Adelkhah's appeal in late June of 2020, calling it "unacceptable" and saying, "The freedom of researchers must be guaranteed everywhere in the world." The support committee [also](#) criticized European countries for their silence on Adelkhah's detention, and called for "suspension of international scientific cooperation with Iran" until the regime released imprisoned academics.

A portrait of Adelkhah was displayed on the façade of Paris's City Hall on June 5, 2020, the one-year anniversary of her arrest.

In late September 2020, France, Germany, and the U.K., in a coordinated action, [each summoned the Iranian ambassadors](#) to those respective countries to protest the Iranian

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regime's imprisonment of citizens of those countries, as well as other human rights abuses. However, there were no reports that any of the three governments threatened Iran with any consequences if those policies continued.

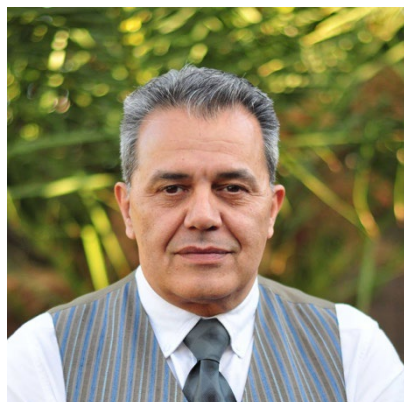
In December 2020, Adelkhah was [granted](#) the Irène Joliot-Curie Prize for Woman Scientist of the Year by the French Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation.

After Iran again imprisoned Adelkhah in January 2022, France's foreign ministry [said](#) the government "demands the immediate release of Ms. Adelkhah," [adding](#) the move "can only have negative consequences on the relationship between France and Iran and reduce confidence between our two countries." President Macron [stated](#) that the action was "entirely arbitrary" and that "the whole of France" was "mobilized for her release." During a phone call on January 29, 2022, President Macron [urged](#) Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi to immediately free Adelkhah.

After Adelkhah's release from prison on February 10, 2023, the French foreign ministry [stated](#) that "[i]t is essential that all of Ms. Fariba Adelkhah's freedoms are restored, including returning to France if she wishes."

Jamshid Sharmahd

Iranian-German Activist, U.S. Visa Holder, Broadcaster, and Businessman



Biography

Jamshid Sharmahd is a businessman and broadcaster and an official of the [Kingdom Assembly of Iran](#) (aka Tondar). Tondar is a small exile group that opposes the Iranian regime and seeks to restore the monarchy, but opposes Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi, making it an outlier among monarchist groups.

According to a [profile](#) on Tondar's website, Sharmahd was born in Iran in 1955 and emigrated to Germany, where he studied electronic engineering in university and then worked for large multinational corporations like Siemens and Bosch.

In 1997, per Tondar, Sharmahd founded his own software engineering firm in Germany. In 2002, he formed the U.S. company [Sharmahd Computing](#) and moved to Los Angeles the following year. He holds a U.S. visa but is not an American citizen or permanent resident, [according](#) to the Global Liberty Alliance, which represents him.

Involvement in Tondar

According to Tondar, Sharmahd joined the group while living in LA, which has a large Iranian expatriate community. He set up [Tondar's website](#) and created and ran Tondar's broadcasting arm, [Radio Tondar](#).

The Iranian regime [claims](#) that Tondar, [with the help of the U.S. and U.K.](#), has carried out terrorist attacks in Iran, including a [2008 explosion at a Shiraz mosque](#) that killed 14 and wounded more than 200. The group initially appeared to [take credit](#) for the attack but later [distanced itself](#) from responsibility for the blast and claimed the site was not a mosque but a base of the Basij, the volunteer paramilitary branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Tondar did [assume responsibility](#) for a blast at an Iranian refinery in 2016 and the bombing of a seminary school in 2019. However, the group itself has not offered much evidence for its claims, and the U.S. has not designated Tondar a foreign terrorist organization.

After Tehran announced Sharmahd's capture in 2020, Tondar [proclaimed](#) that it "will continue to fight even in the absence of companions and commanders." However, Sharmahd's family [says](#) that he is only Tondar's spokesperson and was not involved in any attacks. Likewise, [according](#) to Sharmahd's legal representatives, he "has repeatedly held that he had no involvement in any attack. He merely advocates for the freedom of the Iranian people."

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In 2009, the regime [convicted and executed three men](#) for the Shiraz mosque explosion, alleging they were affiliated with Tondar and had acted on instructions from a CIA agent. In 2010, the government hanged two Tondar members who had “confessed to obtaining explosives and planning to assassinate officials.”

Assassination Attempt

The Iranian government allegedly [sought to assassinate Sharmahd](#) in 2009. An Iranian American, Mohammad Reza Sadeghnia, [reportedly tried](#) to contract with a hit man to kill Sharmahd, but the desired hit man instead reported Sadeghnia to the police and testified against him. A leaked U.S. State Department cable claimed that Sadeghnia had confessed to working for the Iranian regime and surveilling Sharmahd.

Sadeghnia [served one year in prison](#) before being released on probation. After receiving permission to visit his sick father in Iran, he did not return for a court date and disappeared.

Capture

[According](#) to the Global Liberty Alliance, Sharmahd traveled from the U.S. to India and Germany in March 2020, reportedly for business. During his trip, he was stranded for three months in Mumbai due to COVID restrictions. According to his counsel, Sharmahd then went to Amsterdam to get a flight home, but the U.S. did not allow Sharmahd to return because he did not hold citizenship or a green card. Sharmahd then decided to return to India via a connecting flight to the United Arab Emirates city of Dubai.

While in Dubai, Sharmahd [corresponded with his family](#) on July 28. He then went incommunicado. His phone’s GPS indicated that Sharmahd remained at his hotel in Dubai that day. According to the hotel, Sharmahd checked out on July 29, and GPS tracking shows his phone crossed the border from the UAE to Oman that day, even though Oman did not permit tourists to enter then due to the coronavirus. His wife [received a text from his phone](#) saying he was OK and would call her. The next day, July 30, [his phone’s signal terminated](#).

Iran’s intelligence ministry [announced](#) two days later, August 1, 2020, that it had arrested Sharmahd “following a complicated operation.” The regime called Sharmahd “the ringleader of the terrorist Tondar” and said he “directed armed and terrorist acts in Iran from America,” including the aforementioned 2008 Shiraz mosque bombing.

Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Abbas Mousavi [thanked](#) Iran’s intelligence services for capturing Sharmahd and criticized the U.S. for “supporting this terrorist group.”

Treatment in Captivity

Iranian state television has broadcast [two coerced “confessions.”](#) In the first, aired shortly after the regime announced his capture, a blindfolded Sharmahd, [his face seemingly swollen](#), assumed responsibility for the Shiraz mosque attack, saying, “They needed explosives and we provided it.”

[Sharmahd’s family](#) and [human rights groups](#) have expressed concern for his health, claiming he has Parkinson’s disease, diabetes, and heart disease.

Germany’s foreign ministry official [stated](#) that their embassy has “frequently requested consular access” to Sharmahd. “However,” he added, “Iranian authorities have denied these requests.” Tehran does not recognize dual nationality, and therefore does not grant foreign consular access to Iranians who hold additional citizenships.

As permitted by Islamic Republic law, the authorities have also refused to let the lawyer picked by Sharmahd’s family meet with him or see the charges against him, [according](#) to his daughter, Gazelle, “because his case is in an investigation phase at this time.” They have offered to grant access to an attorney from a list approved by the regime, provided the family [paid the lawyer \\$250,000](#).

Sharmahd has been allowed a [few phone calls with his family](#). He informed them in November 2020 that he was jailed in Iran’s infamously brutal [Evin Prison](#), but later told them he had been moved to a location he did not name. In March 2021, he mentioned that he had lost about 40 pounds and that the authorities had pulled several of his teeth, but did not provide additional details.

Sharmahd’s daughter Gazelle [said](#) in July 2022 that her father’s condition had worsened and that the regime had severely restricted him from speaking with his family. “720 days in isolation. He is a Parkinson’s patient, and he is in severe pain. All of his teeth, with the exception of two, have fallen out. They are emotionally and psychologically torturing him... And Germany’s government just says we condemn the death penalty in general. They have to do something.”

Gazelle added that in the last year, the authorities had only permitted Jamshid to speak with his wife twice and had tried to force Sharmahd’s children to “put remote spy control software on my father’s software.” When the regime realized that they would not comply, it cut off their access to him.

In July 2023, Gazelle [expressed concern](#) that Sharmahd’s execution was imminent because he had been allowed a rare phone call with his family. She said that Sharmahd had not known

about his death sentence. She added that he was unable to walk or talk normally because the authorities were denying him medication to treat his Parkinson's Disease. "They're killing him softly in solitary confinement in this death cell," Gazelle said. "But even if he survives that, they're killing him by hanging him from a crane in public. They want a public execution for my dad, to send out this message of terror: that anybody who speaks out against the regime, we can do this to you—look at this person that's hanging there."

Charges and Trial

The regime has accused Sharmahd of responsibility for the 2008 Shiraz mosque attack. After Sharmahd's arrest, Iranian state TV also [accused](#) Tondar of launching an explosion at the Tehran mausoleum of Iran's first supreme leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, that wounded several persons, and of planning to attack a dam and to detonate cyanide bombs at a book fair in Tehran.

Sharmahd [went on trial](#) on February 6, 2022, for "spreading corruption on earth," which carries a death sentence. The [presiding judge](#) was the Tehran Revolutionary Court's [Abolqassem Salavati](#), who is [nicknamed](#) "the Hanging Judge" or "the Judge of Death" for imposing harsh sentences, including the death penalty, in political cases.

Sharmahd's daughter, Gazelle, said he had not been allowed to meet with his lawyer and that the lawyer had not been permitted to review the evidence.

In July 2022, Sharmahd [asserted his innocence](#) of all charges against him in the final session of his trial. He said that he had indeed signed a confession while in prison, "but I didn't do anything." Gazelle told the press a regime attorney told her that a ["death sentence is certain."](#)

Death Sentence

The Iranian judiciary's Mizan news agency reported on February 21, 2023, that Sharmahd had been [sentenced to death](#), adding that he could appeal his sentence to the Supreme Court.

On April 26, 2023, the spokesman for Iran's judiciary [said](#) that the Supreme Court had upheld Sharmahd's death sentence and that "implementation measures will be taken accordingly."

International Reaction

The day the regime announced Sharmahd's capture, a U.S. Department of State spokesperson [said](#) the administration was "aware of reports related to the detention of Mr. Sharmahd. The Iranian regime has a long history of detaining Iranians and foreign nationals on spurious charges. We urge Iran to be fully transparent and abide by all international legal standards." In

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June 2021, another spokesperson from the State Department [said](#), "We will work with our allies, many of which have citizens currently detained by Iran, to seek their citizens' release and stand up to the disgraceful practice of using unjust detentions of foreign citizens as a political tool."

The German government long [said little](#) about Sharmahd's case, aside from affirming that it has repeatedly and unsuccessfully sought consular access to him. However, in August 2023, a spokesperson for Germany's foreign ministry [stated](#) that Sharmahd's case is a "top priority."

Sharmahd's daughter, Gazelle, has [criticized](#) Berlin for negotiating with Iran to restore the 2015 nuclear deal while Sharmahd remains in prison. "The Foreign Office is negotiating with the kidnapers of a German citizen in Vienna," she said. "How can you tolerate that as a free citizen? Germany is a big trading partner, and they can put pressure on them. They can do something, they have to do something, they cannot accept such an injustice, but they do nothing."

Human rights organizations, including [Human Rights Watch](#) and [Amnesty International](#), have protested Sharmahd's detention.

"We're seeking support from any democratic country, any free country," Sharmahd's son, Shayan, [said](#). "It is a violation of human rights. You can't just pick someone up in a third country and drag them into your country." He [added](#) in July 2020: "Don't be keep silent, we have to speak up. Now is definitely the time. And that goes out not just to all the people, but to all the governments, and the organisations. It affects everybody."

Gazelle Sharmahd has [stated](#) that her father's detention has devastated their family. "My mother has not had a single night of sleep since her partner and love of her life was forcefully taken after 40 years of marriage," she said. "My brother and I are desperate about what to do without our role model, our father, and our best friend. My daughter, his only grandchild, was born five months ago, and I do not even want to imagine that he may never have the chance of holding her in his arms." Gazelle said that Jamshid "did not commit any crime, unless freedom of speech or the press are considered illegal in this world. He has spent his life speaking up for the oppressed people of Iran and has taught us through his actions that helping those that cannot help themselves is one of the most important virtues of humanity."

After Sharmahd went on trial, Gazelle Sharmahd [criticized](#) the American and German governments for their inaction on her father's case. "America and Germany, where are you?" she asked. "You go to Vienna to fancy hotels [for nuclear talks] while my dad is paraded in this made for a television show or kangaroo trial. Where is your humanity? The so-called international community: Where is this compassion for your fellow human being? If Iran wants

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to be treated as an equal among the nations, it has to earn it. The supreme leader is making a mockery of you all.”

She added, “We still do not know how he is, we just saw these pictures that were allowed to be circulated by the press. I can see the sheer terror in my dad’s face, even hidden behind the mask and the prisoner uniform. They could not hide the terror that is evident in his eyes. 555 days of isolation, torture and forced confessions, yet he is still in shock when they present this garbage of a show trial to him. How can anyone endure this amount of physical and psychological pressure for such a long time?”

Sharmahd’s U.S.-based attorney, Jason Poblete, [echoed Gazelle’s criticisms](#). “The German and American governments have a duty to secure Mr. Sharmahd’s unconditional release from Iran; they are not doing nearly enough. If the U.S.-Iran envoy, Robert Malley, cared more about helping Americans rather than inking a deal Iran is already breaking, Jimmy and other hostages would be home today.”

On February 21, 2022, after Sharmahd’s death sentence was announced, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock [decried](#) it as “absolutely unacceptable.” She added, “We call on Iran to remedy these shortcomings in the appeals process, correct the verdict accordingly and refrain from the death penalty. Imposing the death penalty on Mr. Sharmahd will provoke a strong reaction.” Baerbock also [stated](#) that Sharmahd did not receive “even the beginning of a fair trial,” that Germany had been “repeatedly denied” consular access and access to Sharmahd’s trial.

Controversy Over Hostage Status

The Biden administration has not [made a determination](#) under U.S. law (the [Robert Levinson Hostage Recovery and Hostage-Taking Accountability Act](#)) that Dalili is wrongfully detained. Such a determination would make certain U.S. government resources available for Dalili’s case. A State Department spokesperson [said](#) on August 14, 2023, “We don’t discuss the specific details of individual cases who have not deemed—been deemed wrongfully detained. There is a process that is ongoing as it relates to actively reviewing and assessing individual cases for indicators for wrongful detention. I’m certainly not going to get into those.” Secretary of State Antony Blinken did not directly answer a question on August 15, 2023, about why Dalili had yet to be designated, instead [stating](#), “We continue to look and will always continue to look at the situations, conditions of other Americans around the world who may be detained.”

Omission from Hostage Release

Sharmahd was [not included](#) in a pending U.S.-Iran deal in 2023 for the release of five Americans held hostage in Iran. A U.S. State Department spokesperson said that because Sharmahd is a

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German citizen, “I will leave it to our partners in Germany to speak to his situation. What I can say is that the Iranian regime’s treatment of Mr. Sharmahd has been reprehensible. He has been sentenced to death after a legal proceeding that has been widely criticized as a sham trial. And we condemn this kind of treatment in the strongest of terms.”

Kamal Alavi

Iranian-Swiss Businessman



Biography

Kamal Alavi is an Iranian-Swiss dual national and the CEO of Stratxx, a telecommunications company. He [reportedly](#) worked for the Iranian regime in the 1980s.

Alavi, who received a degree in physics from the University of Texas, [announced](#) in the mid-2000s that he had a strategy to use solar-powered airships, instead of cellular phone towers, to provide wireless mobile reception in Switzerland.

In 2014, Stratxx [declared](#) that it had launched a tethered airship, called the X-Tower, “to carry telecommunications and broadcast payloads.” In a test, the airship “broadcasted 12 digital television and two FM radio channels,” Stratxx claimed. However, Stratxx did not proceed with its plan, instead, [declared bankruptcy](#) later that year. The company’s assets were transferred beforehand to Swiss Space Sensors Technologies AG, which Alavi runs.

[According](#) to a news report, Alavi has “been active in the introduction of advanced technology of military night-vision radars and space balloons in [Iran].”

Detention

When Alavi traveled to Iran in recent years is unknown. The regime has [reportedly](#) held Alavi in the notoriously brutal [Evin Prison](#) since no later than 2017 because he allegedly [revealed](#) “confidential information of the Iranian Space Agency.” He has [reportedly](#) completed his prison sentence but is not being released until he pays the government \$250 million and transfers all his shares in Swiss Space Sensors Technologies AG to Iran’s security and police organs.

Louis Arnaud
French Banker



Biography

Louis Arnaud, 35 as of January 2023, is a French banking consultant.

Arrest

Arnaud was [arrested](#) on September 28, 2022, while traveling in Iran. His parents describe him as an avid traveler and “simple citizen of the world” who, prior, to arriving in Iran, had visited Italy, Greece, Turkey, Georgia and Armenia on the same trip. They said Arnaud had not “taken part in any protest, nor expressed ideas hostile to Iran, its government or Islam.”

Treatment in Captivity

Arnaud’s parents [say](#) he is being held in “very harsh detention conditions,” and that the authorities have denied them direct contact with him aside from one brief telephone call. The French ambassador to Iran visited Arnaud on December 11, 2022.

Maciej Walczak

Polish Scientist and Academic



Biography

Maciej Walczak is a Polish scientist who [heads the department of environmental microbiology and biotechnology](#) of Nicolaus Copernicus University (NCU) in Toruń, Poland.

Arrest

Iranian state media [stated](#) on July 6, 2022, that the intelligence branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps had detained Walczak and several other foreign nationals for “acts of spying,” including “taking earth samples in restricted areas” during a “missile exercise... by the IRGC Aerospace Force” in Iran’s central desert. The media outlets broadcast video of Walczak, the other foreigners, and the supposed espionage activities.

“He enters the country under the guise of a scientific exchange with a university,” the Islamic Republic News Agency claimed, “but as tourists, they go to Kerman and Shahdad region at the time of a missile test, where they take samples of soil, water, rock, salt and mud. He is the head of the biological and biotechnology department of the Copernicus University in Poland, which is associated with the Zionist regime.”

An NCU spokesperson [told](#) BBC Persian that Iran had also detained two Polish colleagues of Walczak who travelled to Iran with him, but that they were released and had returned to Poland.

The Polish foreign ministry said in a [statement](#) on July 7, 2022, that “a Polish national was taken into custody in Iran in September 2021. The consular services have maintained contact with the Pole and his family ever since; the detainee has been provided with legal aid. Consular and diplomatic steps have been taken to make it possible for him to return to Poland as soon as possible. We have also been coordinating our subsequent actions with allied states. Considering the best interests of the highly reputed scientist, the MFA will not disclose any details of the case and requests that his privacy and the privacy of his relatives be respected.”

Treatment in Captivity

Someone who reportedly was detained with Walczak for a week [told](#) BBC Persian that Walczak was interrogated two or three times daily and that the guards did not permit him to speak with his family. Walczak reportedly told his fellow detainee that his interrogators asked him for his address in Poland and later showed him photos of his house, scaring him. The detainee and a source close to Walczak's family also said to BBC Persian that the Iranian government has spoken with its Polish counterpart about a prisoner swap, but the Polish foreign minister said that there are no Iranian prisoners in Poland.

Charges and Sentencing

BBC Persian reported on July 7, 2022, that [Walczak had been sentenced to three years in prison](#), according to an NCU spokesperson. [The charges are unknown](#).

Mehran Raof

British-Iranian Labor Activist



Biography

Mehran Raof is a labor rights activist and national of Iran and the U.K. who has divided his time between the two countries.

Arrest

On October 16, 2020, IRGC intelligence functionaries raided and searched Raof's home and [arrested](#) him, confiscating his computer and several other belongings. The Iranian regime arrested other labor rights activists throughout the country that month.

A colleague of Raof who lives in London [told](#) the *Daily Telegraph* that Raof helped translate news articles from English to Farsi. He added that the Iranian government had detained Raof and 15 other workers because a young girl had surreptitiously recorded their conversations about labor rights at a coffee shop.

Treatment in Captivity

The authorities threw Raof into Iran's notoriously brutal [Evin Prison](#). He has been in solitary confinement for months, and the authorities have refused to let him contact his immediate family—none of whom live in Iran—or meet with the judiciary-certified Iranian attorneys whom his family hired to represent him. His friends have attempted to hire an attorney of Raof's choice, but the government has refused to make Raof's case file available to that lawyer before Raof's trial.

Charges and Trial

The regime has never publicly stated the precise charges against Raof and the status of his case. His trial date was [set](#) for April 28, but little or no news from his trial was reported publicly.

Sentencing

Raof was [sentenced](#) to 10 years' imprisonment by Branch 26 of Tehran's Islamic Revolutionary Court, according to an August 4, 2021, tweet by his lawyer. The attorney, Mostafa Nili, said that Raof was sentenced to ten years for the crime of "participating in the management of an illegal group" and eight months "for propaganda activities against the regime."

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A Britain-based supporter of Raof, Satar Rahmani, [said](#) that the judge who presided over Raof's trial told Raof in Evin Prison that he "deserved" the sentence. Raof had told the judge that he was afraid that he would die in prison.

International Reaction

The British government "strongly" [condemned](#) Raof's sentence, stating, "We continue to do all we can to support Mehran and his family, and continue to raise his case at the most senior levels."

Amnesty International first [brought Raof's case to light](#) and has called for his immediate release.

Meimanat Hosseini-Chavoshi
Australian-Iranian Academic



Biography

Meimanat Hosseini-Chavoshi is an Australian-Iranian citizen and demographer who is [employed as an academic](#) at the University of Melbourne's School of Population and Global Health. She has [written](#) about the [Iranian government's population-control policies](#).

Arrest

Hosseini-Chavoshi visited Iran in 2018 to go on a study tour and [speak at a conference](#) on aging populations at the invitation of the labor and social-welfare ministry.

Hosseini-Chavoshi was [arrested](#) in Tehran on her way to leave Iran in December of 2018. after going on a study tour in the country and [speaking at a conference](#) on aging populations after being invited to do so by the labor and social-welfare ministry.

Charges

The authorities charged Hosseini-Chavoshi with [trying to "infiltrate" Iranian institutions](#) in order to [impede the government's efforts](#) to increase the country's birth rate.

International Reaction

In December of 2018, a Human Rights Watch researcher [published](#) an analysis of Hosseini-Chavoshi's case and the broader problem of detention of dual nationals and foreign nationals in Iran. She stated that "Iranian authorities should ensure the rights of these detainees and grant them fair trials to end this grave misjustice."

Additionally, the Committee of Concerned Scientists [wrote](#) to Ayatollah Sadegh Larijani, then the head of Iran's judiciary, in December of 2018, urging that she "be released immediately and unconditionally" and that she and a fellow family-planning scholar whom had been brought in questioning be allowed "to continue their academic work without harassment or intimidation." The Middle East Studies Association's Committee on Academic Freedom also [wrote](#) to Larijani

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and to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as well, urging them to release Hosseini-Chavoshi and other imprisoned scholars immediately and “ensure their safe return to their countries of residence and to their families.”

Release and Possible Exit Ban

Hosseini-Chavoshi’s lawyer [announced](#) in January of 2019 that she had been released. Iranian state television later [reported](#) that the charges against her were dismissed. However, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation [reported](#) in October of 2019 that she had not been heard from since her release and that the regime may be preventing her from leaving Iran.

Trial and Sentence

On November 1, 2020, the BBC [reported](#) that Hosseini-Chavoshi had been convicted of “colluding against national security” by researching the use of birth control in Iran, and had been sentenced to five years’ imprisonment. She reportedly is out on bail.

Nahid Taghavi

German-Iranian Human Rights Activist



Biography

Nahid Taghavi is a longtime human rights activist who resided in Germany but also had an apartment in Iran, [according](#) to Middle East Eye.

Arrest

The authorities [arrested](#) Taghavi while she was visiting Tehran in October 2020. Satar Rahmani, a supporter of imprisoned British-Iranian hostage Mehran Raouf, [said](#) that both Taghavi and Raouf were arrested after going to [secretly record](#) meetings of activists at a Tehran coffee shop.

Treatment in Captivity

Amnesty International [said](#) in February 2021 that the regime was keeping Taghavi in “prolonged solitary confinement.” The *National* [reported](#) that she was being held at Tehran’s notoriously brutal [Evin Prison](#) and had been infected with COVID-19.

Taghavi’s daughter, Miriam Claren, [said](#) that the authorities only permitted Nahid’s brothers to visit her in April 2021, almost seven months after her arrest.

Charges and Trial

Taghavi’s trial reportedly [started](#) on April 28, 2021. Taghavi’s daughter [said](#) the proceedings were held in secret.

Sentencing

Taghavi was [sentenced](#) to more than ten years’ imprisonment by Branch 26 of Tehran’s Islamic Revolutionary Court, according to an August 4, 2021, tweet by her lawyer. The attorney, Mostafa Nili, said that she was sentenced to ten years for the crime of “participating in the management of an illegal group” and eight months “for propaganda activities against the

regime.” Taghavi’s daughter, Miriam, [confirmed](#) the sentence, saying the trial was held in secret.

Medical Furlough

[Iran furloughed Taghavi](#) in July 2022 so that she could get treatment for neck and back problems.

Return to Prison

The authorities [forced Taghavi to go back to prison](#) on November 13, 2022, even though she reportedly did not complete her medical treatment.

International Reaction

A spokesperson for Germany’s foreign ministry [stated](#) in August 2021 that Germany could not provide Taghavi consular aid because she was on trial in her native country. Frank Schwabe, the German opposition Social Democratic Party’s human rights spokesman, criticized Taghavi’s conviction and sentencing, [saying](#), “The charges are baseless and the verdict a farce.”

Taghavi’s daughter [said](#) Nahid, and other human rights activists sentenced at the same time as her, are “not members, or leaders, of a group. Their minds are left-wing, but this is it. “They are in prison because of the systems of belief and [the regime] created a case against them.”

Reza Eslami

Iranian-Canadian Academic



Biography

Reza Eslami is an Iranian-Canadian [professor of human rights and environmental law](#) at Shahid Beheshti University (SBU) in Tehran. He [earned a Ph.D. in law](#) from McGill University in Montreal, Canada, and taught at SBU for [almost 20 years](#). He was a [visiting fellow at McGill](#) from 2019–20. He has [authored](#) 17 books and more than 50 articles on human rights.

Arrest

Eslami was [arrested](#) at SBU in May 2020 by agents of Iran’s Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS). They searched his office and seized his personal effects, including computers, books, and cellular phones. They also searched his home. He was arrested because he [participated in a legal training course](#) in the Czech Republic put together by a U.S.-funded Czech nongovernmental organization.

The regime jailed Eslami in the notoriously brutal [Evin Prison](#). He is held in [Ward 209](#), which houses political prisoners, is reportedly run by MOIS, and is known for particularly harsh conditions for inmates.

Charge, Trial, and Conviction

The authorities [charged](#) Eslami with “cooperating with an enemy state”—namely, the U.S.—through his involvement in the aforementioned course. In an audio recording from prison, Eslami said the charges were “baseless” and said his scholarship was free of “political, security and foreign-relations issues.”

Eslami’s trial [began](#) on October 20, 2020, in Branch 15 of Tehran’s Islamic Revolutionary Court. He was tried before Revolutionary Court [Judge Abolqassem Salavati](#), who is [nicknamed](#) “the Hanging Judge” or “the Judge of Death” for imposing harsh sentences in political cases.

In February 2021, he was [convicted and sentenced](#) to seven years’ imprisonment and prohibited from traveling abroad or teaching. On appeal, his sentence was [reduced](#) to five years. After Eslami was sentenced, he was [reportedly](#) put in the general population of Evin.

Shahram Shirkhani

Iranian-British Lawyer



Biography

[Shahram Shirkhani](#) is an Iranian-British attorney, founding partner of the Tehran international-law firm Shirkhani and Alavi, and teacher at the faculty of law of Islamic Azad University in Tehran. Shirkhani's [Twitter profile](#) states that he “offers in-depth experience in finance, banking, and commercial law.”

Charges, Conviction, and Sentence

An Iranian judiciary spokesperson [announced](#) on August 12, 2020, that Shirkhani had been sentenced to ten years in prison for espionage. The spokesperson, Gholamhossein Esmaili, said that in recent months, the regime had arrested Shirkhani; fellow Western hostage [Massud Mossaheb](#), an Iranian-Austrian; and three other unnamed Iranians “who were spying for foreign intelligence services.” Esmaili did not disclose any information about Shirkhani’s arrest, his pre-trial detention, the prison where he is incarcerated, or the country for which he allegedly spied.

Recently Released or Escaped

Anousheh Ashoori

Iranian-British Businessman



Biography

Anousheh Ashoori (born April 9, 1954) is a British-Iranian dual national and businessman who ran a building-supplies company and lived periodically in the U.K. since he was 17. His daughter Eilka, an actress, residing in London, [said](#), “My father has nothing to do with politics and told us not to get involved in politics.”

Arrest

Ashoori was [detained](#) in Tehran in 2017 while [visiting his mother](#).

Treatment in Captivity

Ashoori’s daughter [said](#) that he was held in solitary confinement for five months. She [added](#) that her father’s captors had put him through “systematic torture,” including telling him that the Iranian regime-controlled gangs could “stab your daughter or wife in London.” She stated that Ashoori tried to kill himself because he was so distressed and wanted to protect his family.

Ashoori suffers from chronic dental problems and requires regular checkups, but his jailers have [refused](#) to treat him outside the prison. Ashoori’s family claims that the prison’s dentists are “15th-century butchers” who use the same unsterilized instruments on one patient after another. Ashoori said in an audio recording that the dentists in prison charge inmates for any treatment other than extracting teeth.

The regime has [not given Ashoori British consular access](#) because Iran does not recognize dual nationality.

On June 22, 2020, Agence France-Presse [published](#) a story about a secret audio recording from Anousheh Ashoori. He pleaded for help from U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson, saying, “My fear is that the British government has forgotten us.” Another [audio message](#) from Ashoori was released on August 13, 2020, the third anniversary of his imprisonment. “With the rampant rise

of Covid-19 in Iran, particularly in Evin, I am not even sure if I will have the chance to hold my wife and children in my arms again,” Ashoori said. “Dear Prime Minister Johnson and President Rouhani, please put yourselves in my position and tell me what lengths you would go to as an innocent man to be with your family. I implore you to get me and my fellow British nationals out of this hellhole before it is too late for us. Our lives are in your hands.”

Ashoori has also used his recordings to reveal information on human rights violations at Evin Prison. These abuses include prisoners being killed as they were brutally interrogated and dying of medical illnesses that resulted from the abject conditions in Evin. Common ailments because of squalid conditions at Evin [include](#) heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, diabetes, cancer, tooth and hair loss, eye problems, anxiety, and depression. The authorities also authorized administering electric shock treatments to prisoners at psychiatric hospitals.

Trial and Sentencing

On August 27, 2019, Iran’s judiciary [announced](#) that Ashoori had been convicted for connections to the Mossad and “acquiring illegitimate wealth” and sentenced to a combined 12 years in prison.

Hunger Strike

Elika Ashoori [announced](#) on January 22, 2022, that her father would begin a hunger strike the next day in solidarity with others, including former American hostage and UANI Senior Advisor Barry Rosen, striking to seek the release of all Iran hostages.”

International Reaction

A spokesperson for the British Foreign Office [said](#), “We have been supporting the family of [Ashoori] since his detention and our embassy in Tehran continues to request consular access, The treatment of all dual nationals detained in Iran is a priority and we raise their cases at the most senior levels. We urge Iran to let them be reunited with their families.”

Elika Ashoori [criticized](#) the British government in May 2021, saying U.K. ministers and other officials “refused to use the name” of her father when speaking publicly about the plight of British-Iranian dual nationals detained by Iran. “Boris Johnson has never mentioned us or been in contact with us privately,” Elika told the *Times of London*. She expressed concern that the government would give up fighting for Ashoori’s freedom if it obtained the release of more prominent British-Iranian hostage Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe.

Release

On March 16, 2022, the Iranian regime [released](#) Ashoori and her fellow hostage Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe (also a British-Iranian) into the custody of the British government, and the two left Iran. The two were freed after the U.K. paid Iran \$530 million to erase a debt dating back to the 1970s. The shah's government had purchased military vehicles from the British, but the vehicles were not delivered due to the intervening overthrow of the shah and the establishment of the Islamic Republic in its place.

British Foreign Secretary Truss [announced](#) the release. Truss said that development was “the result of tenacious and creative British diplomacy... years of hard work and dedication by our brilliant diplomats, and intensive efforts over the past 6 months.” She added, “We have the deepest admiration for the resolve, courage and determination Nazanin, Anoosheh and Morad [Tahbaz, another British hostage who was simultaneously briefly furloughed from prison], and their families, have shown. They have faced hardship that no family should ever experience and this is a moment of great relief.” She also thanked the government of Oman for its help in getting the hostages freed. Truss added that the money the U.K. paid to Iran “will be ring-fenced solely for the purchase of humanitarian goods.”

Baquer Namazi

Iranian-American Former Senior U.N. Official, Father of Hostage Siamak Namazi



Biography

Iranian-American Baquer Namazi, born on October 1, 1936, worked in [several significant Iranian government positions](#) under the Shah, including as a [provincial governor](#). He also worked as a [UNICEF representative](#) in several countries, including Kenya, Somalia, and Egypt. Baquer most recently ran Hamyaran, an umbrella organization of Iranian NGOs.

Arrest

On February 22, 2016, Baquer was [arrested](#) after arriving in Iran to visit his son, [Siamak](#), whom the Iranian regime held and continues to hold hostage. Security forces [detained](#) Baquer at Tehran's Imam Khomeini airport at night [as he returned home to Iran from Dubai](#), where he had gone for a medical check-up and visited his grandchildren.

According to a report by news agency Fars, which is affiliated with Iran's [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps](#) (IRGC), Namazi was arrested [in order](#) "to uncover the complex layers of vast financial and intelligence corruption by a network that is associated to the UK and America." The report also accuses Baquer of training his son Siamak in "espionage and infiltration and subversion operations." A state-run television news program [called](#) Baquer an "agent of the Pahlavi regime [the former Iranian monarchy]" and said that ever since he came to Iran in 2002, Baquer has worked with foreign political figures and groups to create a "network that would implement the ambitions of Western spy agencies and anti-revolutionary lobbies."

After Baquer's arrest, his wife, Effie Namazi, [posted on Facebook](#), "Now both my innocent son Siamak and my Baquer are in prison for no reason."

Treatment in Captivity

The authorities threw Baquer into Tehran's notoriously brutal [Evin Prison](#), where he was denied access to their family's lawyer and spent long periods in [solitary confinement](#).

According to his wife, Baquer has a [severe heart condition](#) and a host of other serious medical problems that require treatment, including epilepsy and severe blockages in the major arteries to his brain. According to Baquer's son, Babak, his father [has lost about 25 pounds](#) during his

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time behind bars. According to the New York Times, Baquer was [hospitalized four times](#) between January 2017 and January 2018. He also underwent [triple bypass surgery](#) during his captivity.

Charges, Trial, and Sentencing

On October 18, 2016, it was announced that Baquer and Siamak were [sentenced to 10 years in prison](#) and fined \$4.8 million on charges of cooperating with the U.S. government. Tehran Islamic Revolutionary Court [Judge Abolqassem Salavati](#), infamously known as “the Judge of Death” and “the Hanging Judge” for sentencing defendants to death or long prison terms, presided over the Namazis’ trial, which [lasted only a few hours](#). On August 28, 2017, the Tehran Appeals Court [denied](#) Baquer and Siamak’s appeals.

Medical Furlough and Travel Ban

In August of 2018, Baquer was granted an extended medical furlough. However, for four more years, the regime refused his family’s [requests](#) to permit Baquer to travel outside Iran to receive treatment.

In the fall of 2021, Baquer required “[immediate surgery](#) for a 95–97% blockage in one of his internal carotid arteries—the pair of main arteries that supply blood to the brain,” according to an October 2021 letter from his American lawyers to an official in the office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights. One of the attorneys, Jared Genser had [claimed](#) earlier that year that 80 percent of the artery was clogged, greatly increasing Baquer’s risk of getting a stroke. He also reportedly suffers from acute depression and adult-onset, stress-caused epilepsy.

The lawyers’ letter said that if Baquer got surgery in Iran, he would continue to suffer from severe stress that would impede his post-surgery recovery, and also would likely become infected with COVID-19, which has ravaged Iran and overloaded its medical system. Moreover, Siamak Namazi’s lawyer [called on](#) the regime to permit Baquer to go abroad for surgery. Barring that, attorney Hojjat Kermani said, Tehran should furlough Siamak to allow him to be with his father.

Prohibited from going abroad, Baquer [underwent](#) the aforementioned surgery in Iran on October 26, 2021. Genser said the procedure “appear[ed] to be a success,” but again called on the regime to let Namazi leave Iran. “[D]ire concerns remain about the quality of aftercare available in Iran, the significant risk of Covid-19 exposure in the hospital, and the need for a stress-free environment for recovery, all of which threaten Baquer’s survival and long-term well-being,” Genser said.

In September 2022, the Namazi family [said](#) Baquer needed another operation “within weeks,” this time on blockages in his left carotid artery. Babak Namazi also implored the regime to release Siamak from prison to be with his father. “I am begging Iran to show the smallest amount of humanity by allowing Siamak to be with my dad and help take care of him during his recovery,” Babak stated. “I also call on the US to drastically increase its efforts to obtain my family's freedom before it's too late. Time is not on our side.”

Sentence Commutation

Babak Namazi [said](#) in February 2021 that one year prior, Iran commuted his father’s prison sentence to time already served.

Reports of Looming Hostage Release Deal

In April 2022, three Iranian pro-regime media outlets [reported](#) that Iran and the U.S. had agreed to a deal in which Iran would release Baquer, Siamak, and American-British-Iranian national Morad Tahbaz. In exchange, the U.S. would release frozen Iranian funds “several times” more than the \$530 million the U.K. paid Iran.

A State Department spokesperson [appeared to deny the reports](#), however. “Reports that Iranian funds held in restricted accounts in third countries will be transferred are false,” the spokesperson said. “[The U.S. has] two separate negotiations underway with Iran: one for a mutual return to full implementation of the JCPOA and one on the release of all four US citizens unjustly detained in Iran... Unfortunately, at this stage, neither negotiation has been successfully concluded.” Iranian authorities have a habit of hyping the release of frozen assets to prop-up the national currency, even if such a deal is not imminent.

End of Travel Ban

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres’s spokesperson [said](#) on October 1, 2022, that Tehran had allowed Baquer to travel abroad “for medical treatment.” The regime also furloughed Siamak Namazi from Evin Prison for one week, subject to renewal, Jared Genser [told](#) Reuters.

Iranian official and semi-official sources made conflicting statements about whether these steps were part of a quid pro quo involving the release of Iranian funds frozen overseas (most likely in South Korean bank accounts) due to sanctions.

Semi-official Iranian news agency Nournews [tweeted](#) on October 1, “Intensive negotiations were held with the mediation of a regional country regarding the simultaneous release of Iranian and American prisoners in recent weeks. Billions of dollars from the blocked resources of #Iran are also about to be released in this framework.” Likewise, the state-controlled Islamic

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Republic News Agency [claimed](#) “with the finalization of negotiations between Iran and the United States to release the prisoners of both countries, \$7 billion of Iran's blocked resources will be released... Washington is pursuing at the same time the release of its citizens detained in Tehran and the release of Iranian funds in South Korea.”

However, two regime officials said Tehran both lifted the travel ban and granted the furlough solely on humanitarian grounds. Deputy judiciary chief [Kazem Gharibabadi](#) and foreign-ministry spokesperson [Nasser Kanaani](#) both said there was no quid pro quo. Kanaani did add that negotiators had made progress toward the unfreezing of Iranian money held overseas.

The Biden administration denied reports of a trade of funds for hostages.

“Reports from Iranian sources of a transfer of funds related to the release of Baquer Namazi and furlough of Siamak Namazi are categorically false,” [said](#) a National Security Council spokesperson. “Any claim that Iran's lifting of a travel ban on Baquer Namazi was part of a deal for a transfer of frozen funds is categorically false,” a department spokesperson [said](#). “We understand that the lifting of the travel ban and his son’s furlough were related to his medical requirement... We continue to have indirect discussions on possible humanitarian arrangements to facilitate the urgent release of the remaining US citizens wrongfully detained by Iran, but we have nothing further to announce at this time.”

Siamak Namazi was [sent back to prison](#) on October 12, 2022.

Departure

Baquer Namazi [flew from Iran to Oman](#) on October 5, 2022. He then [flew to the United Arab Emirates](#) for medical treatment.

International Reaction to Hostage Taking

The U.S. Department of State has repeatedly protested Baquer’s detention. Jared Genser [said](#) he and Baquer’s family has been in touch with U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and Special Envoy to Iran Robert Malley. In response to Baquer’s lawyers’ claims in October 2021 that he needed emergency surgery, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken [tweeted](#) that Iran should permit Baquer “to seek the medical attention necessary to save his life.” Blinken noted, “It’s been almost six years since [Baquer]’s seen his children. At a time like this, he should be surrounded by his entire family.”

Benjamin Brière

French Tourist



Biography

Benjamin Brière is a French national who [reportedly](#) works in the events field. He is [35](#) as of March 2021.

Arrest

According to his sister, Blandine Brière, Benjamin began a road trip in 2018 that took him by van to Scandinavia and later to Iran. The regime [arrested](#) Brière in May 2020 while he was flying a drone near Iran's border with Turkmenistan.

Treatment in Captivity

The authorities are [holding Brière hostage](#) at Vakilabad Prison in the city of Mashhad. About a dozen other inmates are in his cell. "Benjamin is holding up physically, even if it's very tough," his sister stated. She [said](#) in May 2021 that she had been able to speak with her brother four times in the past year. "They are 13 people in a dormitory, without any privacy... He has been through several interrogations but was not mistreated, that's what he tells us."

In February 2021, one of Brière's lawyers, Saeid Dehghan, [disclosed](#) publicly for the first time that his client had been arrested and claimed that the authorities were denying Brière access to legal counsel. The French embassy stated that it was in "regular contact" with Brière and providing him consular services. A [report](#) from March 2021 indicated that Brière now could meet with his attorneys.

Charges and Trial

According to Dehghan, the regime [charged](#) Brière on March 14, 2021, with spying and "spreading propaganda against the system." Dehghan said the first charge was due to his "taking pictures in forbidden areas," and that the second count stems from a social media post by Brière that mentioned that wearing a hijab is required in Iran but not in other Muslim states.

On May 30, 2021, Dehghan [said](#) prosecutors had confirmed they had concluded their investigation and that Brière would indeed be tried for espionage and spreading "propaganda against the system." The form of espionage Brière was charged with reportedly is punishable by [up to three years' imprisonment](#), while the propaganda charge is punishable by three months to one year in prison. Two other charges, propagating "corruption on earth" and consuming

alcohol, had been dismissed following the investigation. Iranian authorities [announced](#) Brière's trial would begin on January 20, 2022.

Trial, Conviction, and Sentencing

Brière's lawyers [confirmed](#) on January 21, 2022, that Brière had gone on trial in a closed courtroom. Dehghan claimed that the court indicated it might want to exploit his client for a prisoner trade. "Using the word #exchange, they made their stance clear," he said.

Brière was convicted on January 25, 2022, and [sentenced to eight years and eight months in prison](#). According to Dehghan, Brière was convicted of a new, harsher charge, "cooperation with hostile states against Iran," and sentenced to eight years. He also received eight months for anti-regime propagandizing. Lawyer Philippe Valent said the trial was a "masquerade," that Brière was denied "a fair trial in front of impartial judges," and was not given access to the complete indictment. He said Brière would appeal his sentence.

Dehghan announced on June 28, 2022, that an appeals court had [upheld](#) Brière's sentence. The court's reportedly justified its decision by claiming that Brière was "an agent in the service of an enemy state [France]," had expressed "sympathy with the victims of the Ukrainian plane [that Iran shot down in January 2020]," and possessed "IT expertise" and "more than one hard drive and mobile phone." The attorney also [said](#) that the state had charged his client with having sex with Iranian women but had not set a trial date.

Hunger Strike

Brière [began a hunger strike](#) on December 25, 2021, because, according to his sister, "the authorities had not permitted him to call his family for Christmas and "also to draw attention to the mistreatment he has suffered for twenty months." Blandine Brière and Benjamin's French attorney, Philippe Valent, also [said](#) the hostage's "feeling of abandonment—and distress" had prompted him to launch the strike to alert Iranian and French authorities to the absurdity of his detention." Blandine [said](#) prison guards were subjecting him to "psychological torture," including by promising him that he could speak with his family by phone and later reneging. "Physically he was doing OK (until now), but morally he has really started to sink," she added.

Benjamin's Iranian lawyer [called out](#) the judiciary for inaction on the case. "What is Mashhad's Revolutionary Court waiting for before investigating the political charges of (Benjamin Briere) who has been detained for 570 days?!" he said.

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Blandine Brière announced on February 2, 2022, that Benjamin had [ended his hunger strike](#) after 35 days. Lawyer Saeid Dehghan said his client had lost 13 kilograms during the strike.

Release

French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna [announced](#) on May 12, 2023, that Iran had released Brière and fellow hostage Bernard Phelan. The two [returned to France](#) that day. Colonna added that she had spoken to Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, at which time she “thanked all those who worked to secure these releases” and “recalled France’s determination for the other French citizens still being held in Iran also to regain their full freedom swiftly and benefit from their right to consular protection.”

Iran’s foreign ministry [called](#) the release a “humanitarian action.”

International Reaction

Brière’s attorney and family [did not go public](#) about his captivity until February 2021, seeking to negotiate his release quietly. The French foreign ministry has said, as noted above, that it is providing Brière consular services and that he and the French embassy speak regularly. Brière’s family is impatient, however. “We get regular updates from Benjamin, but ten months after his arrest that’s no longer enough,” Blandine Briere stated. “We need to be sure that France will do everything to get him out of there.”

Blandine Brière has called her brother’s captivity “[completely grotesque](#)” and [called](#) the charges against her brother are unfounded. “His dream was to travel with his campervan, meet new people and discover new landscapes,” she stated. “The accusations are baseless. He was a tourist who was hoping to snap pretty pictures. And here we are, in the middle of an outrageous story... We're talking about a simple gadget, a drone you can get for 100 euros in any shop, meant for tourism photos, that's all.” [She added](#), “He [Benjamin] says himself he doesn’t understand what’s happening to him.”

On May 26, 2021—the anniversary of Brière’s arrest— Blandine Brière [pleaded for help](#) from French President Emmanuel Macron in an open letter published in the French magazine *Le Point*. In a [Facebook post](#) that same day, Blandine “beg[ged]” Macron “to make this detention stop” and “to use all the diplomatic means necessary to obtain [her brother’s] liberation.” She also said:

Mr. President, it’s after a long year of waiting, of worrying and of incomprehension that I write to you, to call on you to help free Benjamin who is today cut off from his own life, from those who love him, and from the rest of

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the world. One year that Benjamin, and we, his loved ones, have gone through hell. We are powerless, facing a scenario as unreal as it is incomprehensible.

She [told the press](#), “We are angry, we have no visibility. We carefully kept silent for months—as we had been asked—but it is no longer possible, as we are not moving forwards.”

After one of Brière’s lawyers revealed in late May of 2021 that Brière would go on trial, France’s foreign ministry [called](#) the charges “incomprehensible,” adding that it “knew of nothing that could back [them] up.”

France’s foreign ministry [condemned](#) Iran’s January 2022 conviction and imposition of a prison sentence on Brière, calling it “unacceptable” and not factually grounded. During a phone call on January 29, 2022, President Macron [expressed "concerns"](#) over Brière’s status.

Bernard Phelan

French-Irish Travel Consultant



Arrest

Phelan, 64 (as of December 2022), a Paris-based travel consultant and French-Irish dual national, was [arrested](#) in October 2022 while traveling in Mashhad, Iran, during widespread domestic protests against the regime. He was [arrested together with a travel-company executive](#), who was released shortly thereafter.

Treatment in Captivity and Hunger Strike

The authorities are [holding](#) Phelan at Vakilabad prison in Mashhad, after previously keeping him in [solitary confinement](#) elsewhere for several weeks. They [did not give Phelan French consular access](#) until January 9, despite multiple requests, and have not permitted him to speak with his relatives.

Phelan [told](#) his sister in a letter that he is being held in a block where prisoners are housed before their execution, and that since his arrival, two inmates have been hanged. He also said that the lights are always turned on in his cell, in which 16 other foreigners are also kept, and that there is no glass on the window, so it is always very cold. He has not been permitted gloves or a hat.

Phelan [suffers from multiple medical ailments](#), including a heart condition, arteriosclerosis, a “very fragile” digestive system, and chronic pain in his lower back.

At the start of 2023, Phelan began a [hunger strike](#) to protest his captivity. On January 16, he started refusing liquids as well. A French diplomat said that Phelan was “showing serious signs of physical and psychological exhaustion.” His sister [said](#) on January 20 that Phelan had suspended the strike but would resume it if there was no progress on his case.

Phelan’s sister [stated](#) on February 7, 2023, that his health was declining. His eyesight was failing and he was suffering from knee pain but had not been given a cane or crutches by his captors.

Charges

Phelan has reportedly [been accused](#) of “propaganda against the Iranian regime,” “[taking] photographs of Iranian police officers, and of a burning mosque,” sending photographs to the British newspaper the *Guardian*, and “stealing two pieces of 900-year-old pottery from a historic village he had travelled to.”

Release

French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna [announced](#) on May 12, 2023, that Iran had released Phelan and fellow hostage Benjamin Brière. The two [returned to France](#) that day. Colonna added that she had spoken to Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, at which time she “thanked all those who worked to secure these releases” and “recalled France’s determination for the other French citizens still being held in Iran also to regain their full freedom swiftly and benefit from their right to consular protection.”

Iran’s foreign ministry [called](#) the release a “humanitarian action.”

International Reaction

The French foreign ministry has [demanded](#) that Phelan be released immediately, adding, “We are extremely concerned given the extreme fragility of his health situation. The denial of medical access at this point from the Iranian authorities is completely unacceptable.” On January 25, 2023, French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna communicated this demand directly to Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian.

Irish Foreign Minister Micheál Martin [said](#) on January 22, 2023, that the Irish government had made “very clear” to the Iranian regime that Phelan should be released “on humanitarian grounds.”

Gholamreza (Reza) “Robin” Shahini

Iranian-American human rights activist and student



Biography

Iranian-American Gholamreza ([Reza](#)) Shahini, who goes by “Robin,” [left Iran as a refugee in 1988](#) and lived in Germany before moving to the United States in the early 2000s, where he [completed a bachelor’s degree](#) at San Diego State University. Speculating on why Shahini was arrested, Denera Ragoonanan, a friend of his, [said](#), “Robin has been known for his advocacy of human rights on social media. This advocacy, unfortunately, did not sit well with the Iranian government.”

According to family members, Shahini [converted to Christianity](#), which could have added to his troubles with the Islamic Republic. Shahini also had planned to continue his studies and had been accepted into a [graduate program in homeland security at San Diego State](#). This fact may have contributed to the Iranian judiciary’s decision to prosecute him.

Arrest

Shortly after graduating from San Diego State University, the 46-year-old returned to Iran to see his sick mother on May 25, 2016. On July 11, 2016, security forces [arrested Shahini in the northern city of Gorgan](#). According to Shahini, “[it was a terrifying moment](#), and they blindfolded me and they took me to the custody and I did not know where I was.”

Treatment in Captivity

Reza has asthma and before he was detained, one of his teeth was operated on and needed further treatment. The authorities did not respond to his family’s requests to send him to a dentist outside the prison to prevent an infection. Shahini was held for six days in [solitary confinement](#) at the Neynava Detention Center in Gorgan and then transferred to the city’s main prison, where he was held in solitary confinement for four days.

Shahini’s family also [alleged](#) that authorities withheld his asthma medicine and placed him in smoking areas of Gorgan prison to aggravate his condition. In addition, Shahini said, [speaking to Vice News via phone from prison](#), “[T]hey were interrogating me every morning, every afternoon, and I was always by myself in my cell.”

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When Shahini's sentence was announced on October 24, 2016, he said that he was [planning to go on a hunger strike](#) to protest his imprisonment, and [did so](#) in the spring of 2017. [In retaliation](#), Shahini's captors shaved his head, took away his notebook, suspended phone calls with his family, and threw him into solitary confinement.

Charges and Conviction

On August 16, 2016, the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (ICHRI) reported that Shahini was [formally charged](#) with "acting against national security," "participating in protest gatherings in 2009," "collaborating with Voice of America (VOA) television," and "insulting the sacred on Facebook," but that his lawyer had not been granted access to the evidence being used against Shahini.

The ICHRI viewed the arrest of Shahini as a sign of Iran's "[lasting paranoia](#)" over the Green Revolution of 2009, which authorities accused Shahini of actively supporting. Shahini told Vice News, "Whatever information they had is all in the pictures I posted in Facebook, in my web blog, and they use all those evidence to accuse me." He [acknowledged](#) that he voiced support for the Green Movement in its protests against the disputed 2009 election results, but had since been a supporter of current President Hassan Rouhani.

On October 24, 2016, it was reported that Robin Shahini was [sentenced to 18 years in prison](#) for "collaboration with a hostile government." Shahini said he "just laughed" after hearing his sentence. Shahini was also convicted of "[insulting sanctities](#)." That charge can include a number of offenses, such as criticizing Islam or principles of the Islamic Republic. The sentence was issued after only one session before the Revolutionary Court in Gorgan on October 15, 2016. [Shahini's trial lasted only three hours](#), and his lawyer had less than 30 minutes to defend him.

International Reaction

The U.S. Department of State [told news media](#) that it had seen reports of Shahini's detention, but for privacy reasons, [it would not go into specifics](#) about its efforts in particular consular cases. The Department also stated, "The safety and security of U.S. citizens remains our top priority. We continue to use all the means at our disposal to advocate for U.S. citizens who need our assistance overseas."

Release on Bail, Escape, and Lawsuit

Shahini was [released on \\$62,000 bail](#) in 2017 after a hunger strike. Sometime in 2017 or 2018, he [left Iran \(method undisclosed\) and came to the U.S.](#)

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Shahini filed a lawsuit in a U.S. federal court against the Iranian government and several senior officials of Iran's [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps](#) (IRGC). The suit claims that Shahini's jailers [subjected him](#) to "sleep deprivation, interrogation, solitary confinement, painful shackling, malnutrition, and denial of medical care." Shahini also said that he was attacked, injured, and traumatized by two prisoners—at the government's direction—using a garrote, and threatened with sexual assault if he did not admit to committing espionage for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

Shahini's lawsuit accuses the Iranian regime of engaging in racketeering by taking hostages to extract financial concessions from the U.S. and other countries. The suit asserts that Iran has violated the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act, which has usually been applied against organized-crime and drug-cartel leaders.

Through his lawsuit, Shahini seeks to build in U.S. courts a record of senior Iranian regime figures engaging in taking Westerners hostage. Wins in court could serve as justification for sanctions against Iranian government officials by national governments and international organizations, like the United Nations.

Jolie King and Mark Firkin
British-Australian Travelers



Biographies

Jolie King, a British-Australian national, and her Australian boyfriend, Mark Firkin, visited Iran in 2019 as part of their [plan to travel the globe by car](#) from their home in Australia to London and blog about their trip. [King is a building designer and Firkin is a construction manager.](#)

Arrest

King and Firkin were [arrested](#) in Iran in June of 2019, [reportedly](#) after they flew a drone without a permit in an area near Iranian military installations.

Treatment in Captivity

King was [reportedly](#) held in Tehran's notoriously brutal [Evin Prison](#), where, [according to a fellow prisoner's husband](#), she spent weeks in solitary confinement. Firkin's whereabouts during his detention were not disclosed.

Release

Australia's foreign minister [announced](#) on October 5, 2019, that, after extended conversations between her and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, King and Firkin had been released, the charges against them were dropped, and they had returned to Australia. Simultaneously, the Australian attorney general publicly disclosed that it would not extradite to the United States an Iranian student [accused](#) of exporting U.S.-origin military radar equipment to Iran.

Kamal Foroughi

British-Iranian Consultant



Biography

Kamal Foroughi is an elderly British-Iranian who worked in Tehran as a consultant for the Malaysian oil-and-gas firm Petronas. He was born on September 3, 1939. His work for Petronas [included](#) facilitating meetings with senior Iranian oil-and-gas officials and arranging Iranian government-funded scholarships for Iranians to study in Malaysia.

Arrest

Foroughi's family claims plainclothes officers [arrested](#) him in Tehran in May of 2011 without producing a warrant.

Treatment in Captivity

Foroughi was held in Tehran's notoriously brutal [Evin Prison](#), and [reportedly](#) spent 18 months in solitary confinement. Because Iran does not recognize dual nationality, the regime [did not let British diplomats meet with him](#). As of [2015](#), the authorities also did not permit Foroughi's relatives to meet with him in prison, though they were allowed to speak by phone.

Foroughi's family repeatedly expressed concern about his access to medical care, [stating](#) that he did not undergo any medical tests until 2015. They [said](#) in 2016 that he was awaiting an operation for cataracts in both eyes. In 2017, Foroughi's family [claimed](#) that the authorities were denying them and Foroughi access to his medical test results.

Charges, Trial, and Sentencing

Foroughi was [convicted](#) in 2013 of espionage and possessing alcohol and sentenced to a combined eight years in prison. His family claimed the judiciary did not provide them any supporting evidence of those charges. Foroughi was tried before Tehran Revolutionary Court [Judge Abolqassem Salavati](#), who is [nicknamed](#) "the Hanging Judge" or "the Judge of Death" for imposing harsh sentences, including capital punishment, in political cases.

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Twice, the authorities raised hopes that Foroughi would be released, only to dash them. In July of 2016, Foroughi's son [publicly announced](#) that the Iranian judiciary had told the prisoner's lawyer the would be freed within a week, but no release occurred. In 2017, Foroughi was [granted](#) brief medical leave from prison but a promised longer furlough was later denied.

International Reaction

Kamal Foroughi's son, Kamran, ran a campaign for his father's release, including a [Change.org petition](#) with over 230,000 signatures. 219 British MPs and 42 members of the House of Lords signed a 2007 [letter](#) to then-Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson asking him to seek the release of Foroughi and two other British nationals held hostage by Iran.

The British Foreign Office [said](#) in 2015 that it provided help to the Foroughi family, was worried about Foroughi's health, and had brought it up repeatedly with the Iranian government at the highest levels, pressuring them to provide him with access to regular health care and an attorney, and ultimately to release him on the grounds of his poor health.

European Union then-High Representative Federica Mogherini [stated](#) in 2017 that she "is aware of the imprisonment of both Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe [another British national] and Kamal Foroughi and their cases remain of utmost concern to the EU. The EU has raised their cases on a number of occasions with the Iranian authorities. The EU has asked for their release on humanitarian grounds and underlined the need to provide adequate medical care during their detention. The EU will continue to closely follow the cases and use every opportunity to raise them..."

Amnesty International [called](#) for Foroughi to receive specialized medical care outside prison and to be released outright. The organization [noted](#) that "Foroughi's treatment appears to be part of a wider pattern whereby the Iranian authorities have brought spurious national security-related charges against dual-nationals and other individuals with foreign connections."

Release

In late 2018, the Iranian regime [released](#) Foroughi, but he had to remain in Iran until his Iranian passport was renewed, which did not happen until February of 2020. Foroughi remained in Iran several weeks more because most flights were full because of the coronavirus pandemic and the Iranian new year. In March 2020, Foroughi [left](#) Iran and returned to his family in London. His son said that Foroughi "seem[ed] physically healthy."

Foroughi was imprisoned by the Iranian regime for over seven years and held in Iran against his will for almost nine years in total.

Kameel Ahmady

British-Iranian Academic



Biography

Kameel Ahmady is a British-Iranian [social anthropologist](#) who has conducted research in areas including female genital mutilation (FGM) and child marriage in Iran. He is an [ethnic Kurd](#).

Ahmady left Iran at age 18 to go to university in the U.K. He attended [several British universities](#), including the London School of Economics and Political Science and the University of Kent, and became a U.K. citizen.

Ahmady [moved back to Iran](#) in 2005 to research FGM in his home country. In 2015, he published the first comprehensive study of FGM in Iran, [claiming](#) the practice is performed in at least four major Iranian provinces, even as local authorities ignored the issue or said that FGM was not being carried out.

Arrest

Ahmady was arrested on August 11, 2019, and jailed in Tehran's notoriously brutal [Evin Prison](#), [according](#) to his wife, Shafagh Rahmani.

Treatment in Captivity

Ahmady was initially [placed in solitary confinement](#). On August 28, 2019, Rahmani [claimed](#) the authorities had not allowed her to visit Ahmady and the two were only allowed to speak by phone three times. She added that she was not told the reason for his arrest and that the judiciary had rejected several attorneys that Ahmady's family had hired to represent him. In [mid-September](#), Rahmani and Ahmady were finally able to meet at the prosecutor's office. He [told her](#) that he had been moved to a cell with other inmates and was no longer being interrogated.

That month, Rahmani [said](#) that the authorities had extended her husband's detention by another month and still had not disclosed the charges against him, telling her that he faced several charges for unnamed actions. However, Ahmady had told her his interrogators had focused on his research activities.

Release on Bail

Ahmady was [released](#) in November 2019 on a five-million-rial bail, equivalent to about \$40,000 in the U.S.

Charges and Trial

On October 1, 2019, the Iranian judiciary [confirmed](#) Ahmady's arrest for the first time, claiming he was connected to institutes affiliated with foreign intelligence agencies. A judiciary spokesman said that Ahmady's case was still in its initial investigation stage.

Ahmady's trial was presided over by Tehran Revolutionary Court [Judge Abolqassem Salavati](#), who is [nicknamed](#) "the Hanging Judge" or "the Judge of Death" for imposing harsh sentences, including capital punishment, in political cases. Ahmady said the trial consisted of "two staged, farcical court sessions full of legal flaws."

In December 2020, Salavati found Ahmady guilty and sentenced him to a total of [nine years and three months in prison](#) and a \$700,000 fine. His [purported crimes](#) included:

- cooperating with the U.S., a "hostile government";
- cooperating with foreign governments, parliamentarians, and embassies to carry out and/or research a "homosexual product in Iran" and "early child marriage project in Iran", and to advocate for legislation to raise the legal age for marriage in Iran;
- advocating for the United Nations Sustainable Development Agenda;
- cooperating with "foreign obstinate Medias [*sic*],"
- sending a report critical of the regime to the United Nations special rapporteur on the human rights situation in Iran;
- "communicat[ing] with anti-revolution and problematic institutes and foundations";
- Traveling to Israel;
- possessing a taser and pepper spray; and
- possessing alcohol.

A higher court [denied Ahmady's appeal](#).

Escape

While free on bail and appealing his conviction, Ahmady [fled Iran](#) through the mountains on Iran's western border in December 2020 and returned to the U.K.

Kamran Ghaderi

Iranian-Austrian Businessman



Biography

Iranian-Austrian businessman Kamran Ghaderi, a Kurd, is the CEO of Avanoc, an Austrian IT management and consulting company that has operated in Iran for many years. Ghaderi had been living with his wife and three children [in Vienna](#) at the time of his arrest.

Arrest

Ghaderi was [detained upon arrival in Tehran on January 2, 2016](#), when visiting for an official Austrian-Iranian trade meeting attended by senior Austrian officials. [In response to his arrest](#), his wife Harika said, “everything he’s been doing is legal, he was working in Iran; it’s not forbidden.”

Treatment in Captivity

Ghaderi was held at Tehran’s notoriously brutal [Evin Prison](#), and was [kept in solitary confinement](#) for almost a year. He was denied access to Austrian consular assistance and was not allowed to speak with a lawyer until two days before his trial. He was allowed to call his mother in April of 2016 for the first time since his arrest. Since then, she was allowed to visit him in prison every other week. Harika said her husband had [lost a lot of weight](#) since his arrest. In December 2018, a report [claimed](#) that the authorities were denying him treatment for a tumor in his left leg and had not provided him the opportunity to do physical therapy to recover from surgery to relieve disc pain in his back.

The Hengaw Organization for Human Rights, which reports on violations of Iranian Kurds' human rights, claimed in December 2020 that Ghaderi had [contracted COVID-19](#) in prison.

Charges, Trial, and Sentencing

On October 18, 2016, Tehran Prosecutor General Abbas Jafari Dolatabadi said that Ghaderi was among six individuals who received [10-year prison sentences for spying](#) and working with the U.S. government. According to the anonymous source, the prosecution [used a coerced](#)

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[confession](#) to convict Ghaderi. “They threatened him that if he didn’t cooperate, his wife would be taken into custody. They [forced him to sign a confession](#) under intimidation and psychological torture, otherwise they had nothing to convict him of espionage.” Ghaderi also [stated](#) that his interrogators lied to him, claiming that they had arrested his mother and brother and would keep them imprisoned until he agreed to make their desired confession.

Responding to the charges, [his wife said](#), “How can they say something like that about Kamran? I don’t understand,” adding that he had no ties to the United States and was not involved in politics. She said that the family is planning to appeal the sentence.

In an [open letter](#) to Austrian Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg in April 2021, the families of Ghaderi and fellow Iranian-Austrian hostage Massud Mossaheb slammed Schallenberg for refusing to pressure Iran publicly to release the captives. “You do not publicly request their release, nor do you publicly acknowledge the injustice, torture and illegality of their imprisonment,” the families wrote. “After years of continuing to rely on ‘silent diplomacy,’ we interpret this either as a sign of resignation, a lack of commitment or a lack of will to consider alternative strategies.” The hostages also criticized the minister for not communicating with them for over a year. They urged him to use the April international negotiations in Vienna over the Iran nuclear deal to publicly demand that Iran free Ghaderi and Mossaheb.

Austria’s Foreign Affairs Ministry [told the media](#) that the cases of the two hostages were at the “top of our agenda” and that the ministry had raised the issue during the Vienna talks. “We have been consistently advocating for their unconditional release in all our contacts with the Iranian government at all levels. Austrian citizens imprisoned abroad are entitled to consular protection. We constantly work on obtaining improvements of prison conditions and adequate medical treatment for the persons concerned. In our efforts, we are in close touch with the families of the prisoners. Our ultimate goal is the prisoners’ release and to see them reunited with their families and loved ones.” In solidarity with the #FreeTheHostages campaign launched by former American hostage and UANI Senior Advisor Barry Rosen during the Vienna nuclear negotiations in 2022, Ghaderi’s wife [announced](#) that her husband would undertake a hunger strike in Evin Prison.

Release

On June 2, 2023, Austria’s foreign minister [announced](#) that Iran had released Ghaderi and fellow Iranian-Austrian dual national Massud Mossaheb and that they were returning home. The Danish foreign minister announced the same day that Iran had freed an unnamed Danish citizen. The ministers thanked their Omani and Belgian counterparts for their “valuable support,” indicating that Oman had brokered the release and that Belgium’s recent release of Iranian terrorist and former diplomat Assadollah Assadi may have been connected to the release of the Austrian and Danish hostages.

Karan Vafadari and Afarin Niasari
Iranian-American Art Gallery Owners



Biography

Karan Vafadari and Afarin Niasari are a married couple who live and manage an art gallery in Tehran. Karan is an [American-Iranian dual national](#) who practices Zoroastrianism. His wife, Afarin Niasari, is an architect and Muslim with Iranian citizenship and [holds a U.S. green card](#). Karan attended the Alborz High School in Tehran and earned a degree in electronic engineering and management at New York University. Karan's three children live in the U.S.

Arrest

Afarin Niasari was [detained by IRGC agents](#) at the Tehran airport in late July 2016 as she was about to board a flight to attend a family wedding abroad. The agents told her to call her husband and ask him to come to the airport. When he arrived, he was also arrested, and both were taken to Iran's notoriously brutal [Evin Prison](#).

The following day, the couple was [brought in handcuffs to their home](#), where agents took down hanging works of art, smashing some of them in the yard while confiscating others. They were then taken to their art gallery, where agents destroyed or impounded their artwork.

On August 2, 2016, Tehran Prosecutor Abbas Jafari Dolatabadi said that two unnamed "[Iranian dual nationals](#)" (apparently referring to Vafadari and Niasari) had been charged with organizing mixed-gender parties for foreign diplomats and their Iranian associates and serving alcohol in their home, a "[center of immorality and prostitution](#)." He claimed [4,000 liters of alcohol](#) had been found at the couple's residence. Soon thereafter, a member of parliament, Hadji Deligani, publicly referred to the two by their first names and made [similar accusations](#), adding that the two committed "extortion."

The legal proceedings and Iranian media have not noted that [Vafadari is Zoroastrian](#), and therefore is not subject to Islamic laws prohibiting alcohol and mixed-sex gatherings. Under Iran's [constitution](#), Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians "are free to perform their religious rites and ceremonies, and to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education." Karan's U.S.-based sister, Kateh Vafadari, [added](#) in a letter to Iran's Supreme Leader: "In our faith and traditions, parties can be mixed. At the same time, we respect other religious traditions, such as Shiism, where men and women guests are in separate quarters."

Vafadari has reportedly [asserted](#) that prior to his detention, he had been attempting to reclaim land that was seized from his family following the 1989 Islamic Revolution. In her letter to the Supreme Leader, Kateh Vafadari said Karan and Afarin were arrested “to fabricate a case for the purpose of extortion and property seizure.”

Treatment in Captivity

Kateh Vafadari stated that Karan and Afarin were initially [held in solitary confinement](#) for a month at [Evin Prison’s Ward 2-A](#), which the [IRGC’s](#) intelligence organization controls, and later transferred to a group holding cell. Intelligence officials interrogated Afarin and pressured her to spy for them on the international art community, including her friends and even her husband. When she refused, she was thrown back into solitary confinement.

The Vafadari family was able to visit Karan and Afarin in prison several times. IRGC intelligence agents repeatedly promised family members that the couple would soon go free, but the two remained imprisoned. In the letter Kateh wrote to the Supreme Leader, she said that the jailed couple had been subjected to “[extortion, property seizure, and national security threats](#)” ever since their arrest. [For months](#), the Vafadaris were held without being charged, and they were subjected to repeated interrogations, denied legal counsel, and repeatedly placed back in solitary confinement.

Charges, Trial, and Sentencing

According to Kateh, in a preliminary hearing in March of 2017, [Judge Abolghassem Salavati](#) reinstated charges against the couple that were previously dropped due to lack of evidence. Salavati is nicknamed “the Hanging Judge” or “the Judge of Death” for imposing harsh sentences, including capital punishment, in political cases.

The charges he reinstated against Karan and Afarin [reportedly included](#) “attempting to overthrow the Islamic Republic,” collaboration with enemies of the state, espionage, “recruiting and signing up spies through foreign embassies,” “assembly and collusion against national security,” associating with foreign diplomats, holding dual nationality, possession of alcoholic beverages in their home, and using their residence as a center of prostitution. Salavati also barred the couple’s lawyer from the hearing and ordered Karan to fire her.

In January of 2018, Karan released a letter from prison, revealing that the couple [had been sentenced](#). On the charge of espionage, Afarin was sentenced to 16 years in prison, and Karan was given 27 years’ imprisonment and 124 lashes, had all his property confiscated, and was fined \$243,000. Karan also received 15 years in prison for hosting parties and celebrations in his home; three years and a \$162,000 fine for accepting gifts of alcoholic beverages from

foreigners, including diplomats; and 18 months, 64 lashes, and a fine of \$38,000 for consuming wine.

Karan Vafadari claimed that the authorities had confiscated his property by unprecedentedly employing [a 1928 law](#) permitting the state to sell or seize the assets of persons who voluntarily renounced their Iranian nationality. However, Vafadari never gave up his citizenship.

Release on Bail

Karan and Afarin sought to be released pending their appeal, but Judge Salavati [imposed bail](#) equivalent to \$13.5 million for each of them. When Vafadari's family tried to post bail for Afarin, the judge reportedly refused, saying, "If I wanted her free, I wouldn't have set [the bail] so high." However, in July of 2018, Karan's son Cyrus [stated](#) that the two had finally been released on bail.

Permanent Release

In a move that was not publicly reported, Karan and Afarin were quietly permitted to leave Iran at an unspecified date.

International Reaction

The Vafadari family initially decided not to publicize their case, hoping that it would be resolved more quickly through private channels. However, due to anonymous threats and blackmail demands by phone, Kateh Vafadari, [went public on December 2, 2016](#), on behalf of her family with a letter to Iran's Supreme Leader calling for the immediate release of her brother and his wife. According to Kateh, the phone calls by several unknown individuals seeking to extort money started after an Iranian member of parliament publicly mentioned the detained couple by name in November of 2016.

Kateh Vafadari runs a [campaign](#) for Karan and Afarin's release. Additionally, Karan's son, Cyrus, drafted a [Change.org petition](#) supporting his parents' release that over 15,000 people signed.

Kylie Moore-Gilbert

Australian-British Academic



Biography

Kylie Moore-Gilbert is an Australian and British citizen and a lecturer in Islamic studies at the [University of Melbourne](#). She has a doctorate in Gulf studies from that institution. She has published research on the [2011 Arab Spring](#) and [numerous Gulf political issues](#). Her most recent grant-funded project was a [study](#) of “Iran’s relationship with Bahrain’s Shi’a after the Arab Uprisings.”

Arrest

Moore-Gilbert was arrested and imprisoned in [September of 2018](#), several weeks after [reportedly](#) taking a course on Shiite Islamic studies in the Iranian holy city of Qom. Her name was not made public until [September of 2019](#) due to her family’s preference to seek her release quietly, through diplomatic channels, and [their fear](#) that naming her could damage her chances of being released.

Treatment in Captivity

The regime held Moore-Gilbert for almost two years in Tehran’s notoriously brutal [Evin Prison—reportedly](#) in Ward 2-A, which is controlled by the intelligence wing of the [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps](#) (IRGC). She was [reportedly](#) held in solitary confinement, [sleeping on the floor](#) and with the lights always on. Her family was [not permitted](#) to visit her, but she was [allowed](#) to meet with Australian consular officials. She [reportedly](#) was denied access to legal counsel, and went on several [hunger strikes](#) to protest her treatment by the prison authorities. Iranian law only permits the use of solitary confinement during interrogation and investigation, but Moore-Gilbert reportedly [remained isolated at Evin](#) long after her conviction.

Human rights activist and former Evin Prison inmate Reza Khandan [wrote](#) on Facebook in May of 2020 that Moore-Gilbert had tried to kill herself on multiple occasions, but the imprisoned academic’s family [denied](#) that assertion.

In [letters smuggled out of prison](#), Moore-Gilbert affirmed her innocence, affirming that she is not and never has been a spy, and rejected offers from the Iranian regime to commit espionage on behalf of Tehran. She also wrote that her health had “deteriorated significantly,” and that

she had been taken to a hospital twice and to Evin's infirmary six times. "I think I am in the midst of a serious psychological problem," she said, adding, "I can no longer stand the pressures of living in this extremely restrictive detention ward anymore. My situation here is even more difficult due to the ban on having any phone calls with my family. I worry a lot about their reactions to my verdict but I cannot talk to them. This is really inhumane."

News media [reported](#) in June of 2020 that prison guards beat and drugged Moore-Gilbert after she organized a choir to protest their detention. She had also been contacting new prisoners to warn them about whom to trust and to give them moral support in the face of threats from the jailers. Moore-Gilbert was later observed to be virtually comatose at points and covered with bruises.

In July of 2020, Australian government officials [told](#) journalists that the regime had moved Moore-Gilbert to the notorious Qarchak women's prison (formally called Shahr e-Rey) southeast of Tehran. Qarchak, reportedly built in an idle chicken farm, "holds prisoners in overcrowded and unhygienic conditions, without access to safe drinkable water, decent food, medicine and fresh air," [according to Amnesty International, also noting that](#) "Prisoners have reported urine-stained floors, filthy showers and bathroom facilities, a severe shortage of beds and the prevalence of contagious diseases."

While Qarchak is primarily used to hold inmates convicted of common crimes, the facility has also been used to hold and further harm prisoners of conscience, who have been subject to [physical](#) and [verbal abuse](#) and [denied medical treatment](#). A number of inmates have also been [diagnosed with the novel coronavirus](#).

The Qarchak prison's management ordered two inmates to follow Moore-Gilbert constantly and monitored her communications with others, some prisoners [reported](#). She apparently did not contract COVID-19 and had sufficient funds in her commissary account to purchase food and water.

In October 2020, Moore-Gilbert reportedly [discussed problems regarding her detention](#) with Mohammad Mehdi Haj Mohammadi, who runs Iran's Prisons Organization, and Ali Bagheri-Kani, who is the secretary of the Iranian High Council for Human Rights. Later that month, the authorities [transferred her back to Evin's Ward 2A](#).

Charges, Trial, and Sentencing

CNN [reported](#) on September 18, 2019, that a source told them Moore-Gilbert had been tried and sentenced to ten years' imprisonment for espionage. Iran's foreign ministry and judiciary gave conflicting statements about the matter, with the former confirming that Moore-Gilbert

had been sentenced in 2018 for espionage, but the latter claiming she was “spying for another country” but has yet to be tried.

International Reaction

Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne has [stated](#) that she has brought up the cases of Moore-Gilbert and other Australian hostages in Iran “many times” with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif. The foreign ministry [said](#) in May of 2020 that “Dr. Moore-Gilbert's case is one of our highest priorities, including for our embassy officials in Tehran. We do not accept the charges upon which Dr. Moore-Gilbert was convicted and continue all efforts to have her returned to Australia as soon as possible.” On September 11, 2020, the second anniversary of Moore-Gilbert’s arrest, Payne issued a [similar statement](#), adding, “The Government believes the best approach to secure Dr Moore-Gilbert’s release is through diplomatic channels.” A ministry spokesperson made a similar comment, [saying](#), “We believe the best chance of resolving Dr Moore-Gilbert’s case lies through the diplomatic path and not through the media,” a spokesman said.

However, [Free Kylie Moore-Gilbert](#), an organization of her colleagues and friends, have [criticized](#) Canberra’s reliance on quiet diplomacy. “We are growing increasingly concerned that the Australian government has accepted Kylie’s incarceration in Qarchak prison, the ‘worst women’s prison in the world’ as her new normal,” it said. “Its current strategy has failed even to protect the most fundamental rights of this Australian citizen abroad.” The group [believes](#) that “[t]he key to bringing Kylie home is exerting significant pressure on the Australian government.” It added, “Our government needs to use every political and diplomatic tool at its disposal to bring her home... So far, there has been very little publicity or public discussion around Kylie’s case in Australia, which means that there have been few improvements in Kylie’s situation.”

On September 15, 2019, Rudy Giuliani, a lawyer for then-President Donald Trump and former mayor of New York City, [tweeted](#) his outrage at the Iranian regime’s treatment of Moore-Gilbert, writing, “Dr. Kylie Moore-Gilbert, the third foreign national revealed this week to be imprisoned in Iran. Arrested, charged, and convicted for undisclosed actions. Sentenced to 10 YEARS without any public record of a trial! These are typical actions of the Ayatollah’s #REIGN OF TERROR!”

An Amnesty International official has [expressed concern](#) that the authorities may have engaged in “serious human rights violations” against the detained Australians, “including denial of access to a lawyer and even torture or other ill-treatment.”

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Release

On November 25, 2020, Iran [released](#) Moore-Gilbert as part of a three-way swap with Australia and Thailand. Thailand released three Iranians imprisoned there for scheming to assassinate Israeli diplomats in Bangkok in 2012. The Iranian regime was linked to the attack, and IRGC-affiliated social media accounts named the three plotters as Saeed Moradi, Mohammad Khazaei, and Masoud Sedaghat Zadeh. A spokesperson for Thailand's foreign ministry claimed one of the three had completed his sentence and the other two would serve the remainder of their sentences in Iran.

Massud Mossaheb

Iranian-Austrian Businessman



Biography

Massud Mossaheb is an elderly Iranian-Austrian dual national based in Vienna. He was [born in 1937 in Iran](#) and [moved to Austria in 1965](#), attaining a doctorate in mechanical engineering from the Vienna University of Technology. He [worked](#) in Iran for the International Atomic Energy Agency in 1977–78, prior to the Islamic Revolution. He later [worked](#) for the German technology company Siemens, where he served as technical project manager of Austria’s first space mission.

According to Mossaheb’s daughter, he worked pro bono for the [Iranian-Austrian Friendship Society](#) (ÖIG), which was founded in 1991 by the then-foreign ministers of Iran and Austria. Mossaheb [served as secretary-general](#) of the society, which names as one of its focuses “developing economic relations between the two countries, with ÖIG acting in close cooperation with the Austrian Federal Economic Chamber and the Tehran Foreign Trade Office.” The group states that it “has numerous contacts with Iranian authorities and can informally assist in initiating and maintaining contacts.”

Arrest

The regime [arrested](#) Mossaheb in late January of 2019 when he traveled to Iran with a delegation from [MedAustron](#), an Austrian radiation therapy and research firm seeking to establish a center in Iran. The president of ÖIG, former Austrian defense minister Werner Fasslabend, [expressed surprise](#) that the Iranians took Mossaheb as a hostage, given the latter’s devotion to building Iranian-Austrian cooperation. “[T]here is no connection” between Mossaheb’s arrest and his consulting work for the MedAustron project,” Fasslabend said.

Treatment in Captivity

Amnesty International [stated](#) that the regime initially detained him in a hotel room, where they deprived him of sleep and questioned him without access to legal counsel, eventually forcing him to sign documents. He was then transferred to Tehran’s notoriously brutal [Evin Prison](#), where he was [placed in solitary confinement](#) for weeks, refused health care, threatened with physical abuse, denied sleep, and not permitted access to legal counsel. Because Iran does not recognize dual citizenship, Mossaheb has not been granted Austrian consular access.

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Amnesty International released an [alert](#) in November 2020 claiming Mossaheb suffers from “serious medical conditions, including heart and kidney failure, diabetes and high blood pressure, for which he needs ongoing specialist medical care and daily access to medication.” Amnesty said the regime refused to let him see a cardiologist outside the prison.

In January 2021, a [secret audio recording](#) of Mossaheb was released. In it, he pled with listeners to “help me and rescue me from this hell.” He said that he suffers from multiple medical illnesses, including diabetes, a faulty heart valve, neuropathy, cystic lung disease, and a kidney cyst. Mossaheb added that he also had a stroke, received nine rounds of kidney dialysis, and contracted COVID-19. Mossaheb’s daughter added that he “now suffers from asthma, shortness of breath, and severe depression.”

Charges, First Trial, Sentencing, and Second Trial

Mossaheb languished in prison for close to one year before his trial, which [commenced](#) on January 4, 2020. According to a pro-Mossaheb Twitter account, on May 20, the Revolutionary Court [sentenced](#) him to ten years’ imprisonment for espionage, and an appeals court [upheld](#) Mossaheb’s sentence on July 13. However, al-Jazeera did not [report](#) that Mossaheb had been convicted until August 11.

A judiciary spokesperson said Gholamhossein Esmaili said Mossaheb was “spying for [the] Mossad and Germany in the guise” of his ÖIG work, giving them intelligence on the “missile, nuclear, nanotechnology and medical fields” in Iran.

On May 5, 2021, Iranian human rights lawyer Hosein Taj [tweeted](#) that Branch 41 of Iran’s Supreme Court had granted Mossaheb a new trial.

Medical Furlough

In late November 2022, Mossaheb was [indefinitely furloughed from prison](#) for medical reasons. The Austrian foreign ministry said the furlough resulted from “intensive diplomatic efforts.” Mossaheb reportedly must stay in Iran.

International Reaction

The Austrian government was in touch with Mossaheb’s family and [tried](#) to use “silent diplomacy” to get Mossaheb released. In July of 2019, Austrian Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg contacted his Iranian counterpart, the [supposedly moderate](#) Mohammad Javad Zarif, seeking his help to free Mossaheb. On July 31, 2019, seven months after Mossaheb’s arrest, an Austrian foreign ministry spokesman [said](#) his government had insisted—unsuccessfully—that Tehran release Mossaheb as a humanitarian gesture, given his age.

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Mossaheb's daughter, Fanak Mani, has [written](#), "I wish my homeland—Austria and the European Union—would fight more for their hostages in Iran. The careful exchange of courtesies... proves to be a dead end. We are not talking about individual cases, but now about systematic hostage-taking. Shouldn't you reclaim your own people first before continuing profitable business with Iran? In any case, we will not accept the fact that an innocent man should spend the rest of his life incarcerated...."

ÖIG President Werner Fasslabend [urged](#) Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif to enforce "clarity and the rule-of-law principles" in this "absolutely incomprehensible and absurd matter."

In an [open letter](#) to Austrian Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg in April 2021, the families of Mossaheb and fellow Iranian-Austrian hostage Kamran Ghaderi slammed Schallenberg for refusing to pressure Iran publicly to release the captives. "You do not publicly request their release, nor do you publicly acknowledge the injustice, torture and illegality of their imprisonment," the families wrote. "After years of continuing to rely on 'silent diplomacy,' we interpret this either as a sign of resignation, a lack of commitment or a lack of will to consider alternative strategies." The hostages also criticized the minister for not communicating with them for over a year. They urged him to use the April international negotiations in Vienna over the Iran nuclear deal to publicly demand that Iran free Mossaheb and Ghaderi.

Austria's Foreign Affairs Ministry [told the media](#) that the cases of the two hostages were at the "top of our agenda" and that the ministry had raised the issue during the Vienna talks. "We have been consistently advocating for their unconditional release in all our contacts with the Iranian government at all levels. Austrian citizens imprisoned abroad are entitled to consular protection. We constantly work on obtaining improvements of prison conditions and adequate medical treatment for the persons concerned. In our efforts, we are in close touch with the families of the prisoners. Our ultimate goal is the prisoners' release and to see them reunited with their families and loved ones."

Release

On June 2, 2023, Austria's foreign minister [announced](#) that Iran had released Mossaheb and fellow Iranian-Austrian dual national Kamran Ghaderi and that they were returning home. The Danish foreign minister announced the same day that Iran had freed an unnamed Danish citizen. The ministers thanked their Omani and Belgian counterparts for their "valuable support," indicating that Oman had brokered the release and that Belgium's recent release of Iranian terrorist and former diplomat Assadollah Assadi may have been connected to the release of the Austrian and Danish hostages.

Michael White
U.S. Navy Veteran



Biography

Michael White is a California native who served for 13 years in the U.S. Navy. He suffers from asthma and cancer. He [flew](#) from Los Angeles to Dubai on July 9, 2018, and then from there to Iran to visit a woman he claimed was his girlfriend. He [visited](#) her four times in several years, prior to his detention.

Arrest

White's family announced in January of 2019 that he was arrested in July of 2018 while in Iran to visit his girlfriend. The Iranian foreign ministry [claimed in January of 2019](#) that White was arrested "in the city of Mashhad a while ago, and within a few days after his arrest the U.S. government was informed of the arrest through the Swiss Embassy in Tehran." According to his mother, Joanne, he was taken to court at least twice and has been held in Vakilabad Prison. White is the first American—to public knowledge—that Iran has taken hostage during the presidency of Donald Trump.

Treatment in Captivity

[According](#) to his mother, White, who has asthma and previously had cancer, "was badly beaten when he was arrested and... has been taken to court at least twice for proceedings in Farsi that he couldn't understand. My son is not well. His health is deteriorating, and I want him back so I can get him the care he badly needs." A spokesman for White's mother later [said](#) that she was concerned that his cancer had returned. And in [August of 2019](#), after the authorities permitted them to meet with White, Swiss diplomats learned that his cancer had come back. The diplomats were told that prison hospital physicians had excised a melanoma from his back and that White still had other health problems, including dental issues caused by his previous courses of chemotherapy. His mother [said](#) that the authorities whipped his bare feet and put a gun to his head.

Just after Christmas in 2019, [White spoke with his mother](#), who recorded the conversation, about his jailers' appalling treatment of him. "They've done everything to press me," White said. "They really have. I mean, they put me in isolation. They, like I said, subjected me to

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torturous conditions, deprivation of food and water, numerous times.” White added, “I’m going crazy. This place is a junk hole. Right now, I’m in a cell that’s overcrowded, big time. Here’s the thing: They don’t really bring me food. The prisoners have to pay for it, but I don’t have money to be paying for that.” White also mentioned that he was so “distracted” that he had wanted to commit suicide and tried to hang himself.

Charges, Trial, and Sentencing

An Iranian prosecutor [stated](#) in January of 2019 that White’s arrest was premised on the claim of an “individual plaintiff” and that he might be charged with security-related offenses, but was also being investigated for other, undisclosed possible security crimes.

The White family’s lawyer [announced](#) in March 2019 that White had been convicted of two charges—insulting Iran’s leadership and posting private photos on public platforms (namely, uploading a photo of him sitting with his girlfriend)—and sentenced to ten years in prison. The lawyer added that White’s court-appointed lawyer did not know English. However, then–Secretary of State Michael Pompeo later [stated](#) that White was serving a 13-year sentence. White appealed the sentence, but in September of 2019, White’s mother [said](#) that he had lost his appeal. White’s family started a [GoFundMe](#) account in 2019 to pay for legal representation.

In a [conversation with his mother](#) (who recorded the call) in December of 2019 about the legal system’s processing of his case, White claimed that the fix was in against him. “I went to this appellate court thing supposedly,” he said, “and they had a phony hearing. Then they bring up allegations of spying that they said before. I’m like what the hell are these guys doing? They have zero evidence. They made stuff up.”

International Reaction

Prior to his conditional release, the Trump administration largely [did not comment](#) on White’s case in particular, while repeatedly calling for Iran to release all its American hostages. In February of 2020, before Iran conditionally released Iran on medical furlough, White’s mother complained about the administration’s treatment of his case, saying, “If it was a priority, they would have brought him back already. I don’t think they’re paying enough attention.”

When asked about White’s case by a journalist in January 2019, then–Secretary of State Mike Pompeo lauded the administration’s work to get hostages released but [demurred](#) from commenting about White. “With respect to the Michael White case in particular, I can’t say much,” Pompeo said. “It’s an ongoing consular matter.” However, in January of 2020, Pompeo [tweeted](#) about White, saying, “For the second straight year, U.S. Navy veteran Michael White spent his birthday suffering in a horrible Iranian prison. The Iranian regime must release all American and foreign hostages!” In March of 2020, as the [novel coronavirus spread in Iran’s](#)

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[prisons](#), Pompeo [warned Iran](#) that “[t]he United States will hold the Iranian regime directly responsible for any American deaths. Our response will be decisive.”

In March of 2020, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the United Nations special rapporteur on human rights in Iran, Javaid Rahman, [called on the regime](#) to temporarily release prisoners of conscience and political prisoners.

Temporary Release

The regime [temporarily released](#) White and tens of thousands of other prisoners as the [COVID19 virus has ravaged Iran, killing over 62,000](#) people as of March 27, 2021. Inmates living in appalling conditions in Iran’s prison system are at particular risk of contracting the virus.

White was freed on a medical furlough on March 19, 2020, but was prohibited by the regime from leaving Iran. White was transferred to the custody of the Swiss embassy, which handles U.S. diplomatic interests in Iran, and was immediately flown to Tehran for treatment.

The White family’s spokesman [announced](#) on March 25, 2020, that since White’s release, he had exhibited “symptoms consistent with COVID-19” and was hospitalized “in a crowded ward for COVID-19 patients.” The family requested that White be granted “an immediate humanitarian medical evacuation” to the U.S. The *New York Times* later [reported](#) that White had indeed been infected with COVID-19 while imprisoned but had recovered.

White’s mother had previously [expressed worry](#) that he would contract COVID-19 and die in prison because his immune system was compromised. She said prison personnel had not properly flushed and cleaned White’s chemotherapy port, which could cause a possibly lethal blood infection.

Permanent Release

Michael White [left Iran](#) on June 4, 2020, after an apparent U.S.-Iranian deal to exchange White for two Iranians detained in the U.S. for alleged crimes. The release capped off months of negotiations between the two governments and [aided by Switzerland](#), which represents U.S. interests in Iran.

An Iranian official and the White family’s spokesman [confirmed](#) in early May of 2020 that the Iranian and American governments were negotiating a deal to send White home in return for the release of an unnamed Iranian-American doctor out on bail in the U.S. [Reports](#) later identified the doctor as Majid Taheri, aka Matteo Taerri. Federal prosecutors charged the doctor, a Florida resident, with violating U.S. sanctions by attempting to export to Iran a filter with applications for biological and chemical warfare. Taheri was also charged with evading the

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[Bank Secrecy Act](#), which requires that any bank transfers of \$10,000 or more be reported to the Treasury Department, by setting up transfers under the reporting threshold. Taerri [pled guilty but was released on bail](#) in March of 2020 at the request of federal prosecutors because of his possible involvement in a swap for Michael White.

Reuters [reported](#) that a prisoner trade might involve deportation from the U.S. of another Iranian, academic Sirous Asghari, who was charged with violating American sanctions on Iran by stealing American trade secrets. Asghari was [acquitted](#) in 2019 but [detained](#) by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency, which was [unable to deport him](#) because he had contracted COVID 19 and, because of the pandemic, the number of flights to Iran were drastically diminished. The aforementioned Iranian official [stated](#) that “[t]hese three cases are entangled together, Asgari, White, and the Iranian American doctor.”

On May 11, 2020, President Trump [retweeted](#) a link to an article by *Time* that reported that Iran’s cabinet spokesman had indicated his government’s willingness to negotiate with Iran “without preconditions” about a prisoner exchange.

On June 2, 2020, two days before Tehran permitted White to leave, the U.S. [deported Sirous Asghari](#) to Iran. The day of White’s release, the Justice Department also [asked a judge to sentence Majid Taheri to time served](#), and the jurist granted the prosecutors’ request. The U.S. government is [allowing](#) Taheri to visit relatives and obtain medical care in Iran and then return.

Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe

British-Iranian Project Manager at Nonprofit



Biography

Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe is a British-Iranian project manager at Thomson Reuters Foundation, a charitable organization promoting socio-economic progress, independent journalism, and the rule of law.

Arrest

Zaghari-Ratcliffe was [detained on April 3, 2016](#), at Tehran's Imam Khomeini Airport by officials believed to belong to Iran's [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps \(IRGC\)](#). She had [traveled to Iran on March 17, 2016, to visit her family](#) during the Persian New Year holiday. She was [detained as she was about to return to the U.K., along with her toddler daughter, Gabriella](#).

Before being taken into custody, Zaghari-Ratcliffe was allowed to leave Gabriella in the care of her parents, who had accompanied her to the airport. The authorities initially confiscated Gabriella's British passport, but it was eventually returned, and Gabriella left Iran for the U.K. in October of 2019.

Treatment in Captivity

Zaghari-Ratcliffe was interrogated and [held in solitary confinement for 45 days](#) in an undisclosed detention center in Kerman in southern Iran. Her family [paid bail](#) to keep her from being returned to solitary. On June 5, 2016, Zaghari-Ratcliffe was [transferred from Kerman Prison](#) to a ward in Iran's notoriously brutal [Evin Prison](#) controlled by the intelligence organization of the [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps \(IRGC\)](#). While in Evin, she briefly shared a cell with Homa Hoodfar, a Canadian-Iranian professor arrested in June of 2016 and released on September 26, 2016.

After her arrest, Zaghari-Ratcliffe was long [denied the right to access a lawyer](#). She was allowed a meeting with her parents and daughter for the first time on May 11, 2016, in a hotel room in Kerman. The meeting, which lasted over two hours, took place in the presence of security agents. According to her husband, "When she met [her family] at that hotel, [she wasn't able to](#)

[stand up she was so weak](#). She couldn't walk without getting a blackout. She wasn't able to pick up her baby, and our baby had to be put on her lap, she was so weak."

Zaghari-Ratcliffe [was permitted to make several brief phone calls](#) to family members in Iran [and, intermittently, to her husband outside the country](#), and those were only to tell him she had stood trial and been sentenced to five years in prison. Authorities halted the phone calls to her family in Iran on June 5, 2016. In July 2016, her husband reported that [she had lost weight, seen her hair fall out, and was virtually unable to walk](#).

As interrogators grilled Zaghari-Ratcliffe in 2016, they reportedly lied to her, [claiming her husband was cheating on her](#) and that they had proof. "It's a very practised technique of really breaking someone," Richard said. "That fear and abuse led her to feel suicidal. She said to me: 'It would be better if I just died and you could get on with your lives.'"

In October 2016, Zaghari-Ratcliffe's husband told Amnesty International that his wife's [health had sharply deteriorated and that she was even contemplating suicide](#). She was suffering from heart palpitations in addition to pain in her hands, arms, and shoulders, and blurred vision. On November 13, 2016, she began a hunger strike to express her despair over the prospect of never being released.

On November 25, 2016, Zaghari-Ratcliffe told her family that [IRGC officials had pressured her](#) to choose between them moving their two-year-old daughter Gabriella into Section 2A of Evin Prison with her for up to three days a week, or Nazanin signing a document to say that she does not want "the right to be with her young daughter."

On August 23, 2018, Zaghari-Ratcliffe was granted a [three-day furlough](#) to see her daughter and other family members in Iran, but her request for an extension was [denied](#) and she returned to prison on August 26.

In January of 2019, the British press reported that the IRGC had unsuccessfully tried to [recruit](#) Zaghari-Ratcliffe as a spy in exchange for her release. The Guards wanted her to spy on the U.K. Department for International Development and the [Small Media Foundation](#), which describes itself as a "human rights research lab and information design studio."

Zaghari-Ratcliffe went on a [hunger strike](#) in January of 2019 to protest her lack of medical care for multiple health problems, including neck pain, lumps in her breasts, and numbness in her arms and legs. She [ended the strike](#) when the prison authorities agreed to give her medical treatment.

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Zaghari-Ratcliffe and her husband launched a [joint hunger strike](#) in June of 2019, seeking her unconditional release. The strike lasted 15 days, and Richard Ratcliffe spent it on the street outside the Iranian embassy in London.

In July of 2019, Zaghari-Ratcliffe was [moved](#) to a hospital psychiatric ward. Her husband said she was put in de facto solitary confinement and chained to her bed for six days, after which the authorities gave in and transferred her back to prison.

Zaghari-Ratcliffe issued an unprecedented [open letter](#) in October of 2019. She pleaded for her release and claimed that “My child and I are the playthings of politicians, inside and outside our homeland, who have used us as tools to try to achieve their own political goals.”

Zaghari-Ratcliffe and her family expressed concern in February of 2020 that she had [contracted COVID-19](#). “I feel very bad in fact,” she said. “It is a strange cold. Not like usual. I know the kinds of cold I normally have, how my body reacts. This is different. I am just as bad as I was. I often get better after three days. But with this there is no improvement. I haven’t got one bit better.” She added that she had had a very sore throat and intermittent fever, as well as breathing difficulties and general pains and fatigue, and was not tested for the virus. A spokesman for Iran’s judiciary [claimed](#) Zaghari-Ratcliffe was healthy and not suffering from COVID-19.

Zaghari-Ratcliffe needs urgent mental health care immediately, according to an international NGO. The Independent Forensic Expert Group of the [International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims](#), upon request of the human rights advocacy group [Redress](#), evaluated Zaghari-Ratcliffe’s health. It [concluded](#) that the evidence they collected is “highly” consistent with her claims of torture and other ill-treatment in prison, and that because of that ill-treatment, she “suffers from serious and chronic post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), major depression and obsessive-compulsive disorder.”

Further, due to her experiences in prison, Zaghari-Ratcliffe also lives with “physical pain and impairment that developed over the course of her imprisonment, including neck, shoulder and arm pain and numbness, tooth pain, possible an[e]mia, and breast lumps, which have not been adequately evaluated or treated.”

The body also stated that even though Zaghari-Ratcliffe is presently out of prison, her symptoms will worsen until and unless the regime lets her leave Iran and reunite with her family in the U.K.

Initial Charges, Trial, and Sentencing

Richard Ratcliffe has [stated](#) that his wife and her family “have never seen a copy of the charges on which she was sentenced. There is no written documentation on anything. So they preserve the space to make it up as they go along at every stage.”

On April 27, 2016, the family was told that Zaghari-Ratcliffe was being held for “[reasons related to national security](#),” without elaborating on further details, and that she would likely be held for another two or three months until the completion of an investigation. She was [subsequently accused of partaking in a plot to overthrow the Iranian government](#).

On June 9, 2016, Richard Ratcliffe said Nazanin [telephoned her family in Iran informing them that she had been told she was going to be released](#), “and then, after she did that, someone called her parents and said: ‘there has been a mistake, we are changing things, and she is being transferred.’”

On June 15, the IRGC in the Kerman Province [accused](#) Zaghari-Ratcliffe of being a “top operative in a foreign network” who participated in a “plot for the soft overthrow of the Islamic Republic.” An [official IRGC statement](#) in Iranian media accused her of attempting to overthrow the Islamic Republic as “one of the chief members of networks of adversary institutions who — with the direction and support of foreign media and espionage services — has committed her criminal acts over the past few years.”

On August 14, 2016, Zaghari-Ratcliffe faced a [secret trial](#) before Revolutionary Court Judge [Abolqasem Salavati](#), [nicknamed](#) “the Hanging Judge” and “the Judge of Death” for imposing harsh sentences, including capital punishment, in political cases. On September 9, 2016, Salavati [sentenced her to five years in prison](#) for undisclosed crimes.

Zaghari-Ratcliffe appealed the sentence, but [according](#) to her husband, a Revolutionary Court judge dismissed her appeal in a secret session on January 4, 2017, though the decision was only announced on January 22.

During the appeal hearing, [two new accusations](#) were raised against Zaghari-Ratcliffe. These charges included the claim that she was knowingly married to a British spy, and that she acted as the head of recruitment for BBC Farsi at the time of its founding in 2009. She never worked for BBC Farsi and she had been to Iran on holiday many times without a problem since she left her role as Project Assistant for BBC Media Action in 2010.

In April of 2017, the Supreme Court [rejected](#) Zaghari-Ratcliffe’s final appeal, leaving her five-year prison sentence in place.

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In October of 2017, Tehran’s prosecutor general said Zaghari-Ratcliffe was imprisoned for directing “a BBC Persian online journalism course aimed at recruiting and training people to spread propaganda against Iran.” In December of 2017, Iranian state television [said](#) she was “found guilty of spying and spreading propaganda against the Islamic Republic.” Specifically, Zaghari-Ratcliffe allegedly ran “training courses for recruits at the BBC World Service Trust and the ZigZag Academy,” the latter engaged in “training and recruitment of human resources for the launch of BBC Persian Service and deployment of undercover reporters in Iran to gather intelligence.” She purportedly “identified potential Iranian recruits and invited them to attend the training courses, received and reviewed their resumes, managed financial affairs related to the courses in Malaysia and India, picked trainers, assessed the performance of the participants and managed the ZigZag Academy’s websites.”

Also, in October of 2017, Zaghari-Ratcliffe’s family [disclosed](#) that at a hearing at Evin Prison, she was told that she was facing new charges, including “joining and receiving money from organizations working to overthrow the Islamic Republic, and attending a demonstration outside the Iranian Embassy in London.” The additional charges disqualified her from applying for early release and could tack on 16 more years in prison to her sentence.

A judge [told](#) Zaghari-Ratcliffe in July of 2018 that she would remain in prison until the British government repaid Iran a debt of 400 million pounds for an unfulfilled military sale in the 1970s, implicitly reaffirming that the regime was holding her hostage as leverage to extract concessions from the U.K. In September 2019, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif [said](#) that in 2016, the British government offered to release those funds to Iran in exchange for Zaghari-Ratcliffe’s release, but British Foreign Minister Jeremy Hunt retracted the offer upon taking office in 2018. In September of 2020, British Defense Secretary Ben Wallace [told](#) lawyers for Zaghari-Ratcliffe and other British hostages that the government was trying to repay Iran.

Furlough

As the [novel coronavirus ravaged Iran](#) in the spring of 2020, and particularly endangered inmates living in the Iranian prison system’s appalling conditions, the regime [temporarily released](#) Zaghari-Ratcliffe and tens of thousands of other prisoners. She left Evin Prison on a medical furlough on March 17, 2020, and was placed under de facto house arrest. She was [forced to wear an ankle monitor](#)—for which her family had to pay a fee—and may not move more than 300 meters (less than one-fifth of a mile) from her parents’ home. ([Reportedly](#), she was the only temporarily released political prisoner required to wear one.)

Zaghari-Ratcliffe’s furlough originally was to [end](#) on April 4, but on May 20, her family [tweeted](#) that her medical furlough had essentially been extended indefinitely—until the regime decides whether to grant her request for clemency.

On September 20, 2020, [according to Zaghari-Ratcliffe](#), IRGC officers harassed her at her parents' home. They falsely claimed that she had broken her ankle monitor—even though the IRGC had no legal involvement in managing the device—and threatened to take her back to the Revolutionary Court. She refused to let the officers in and called the Tehran prosecutor's office to protest the harassment.

Finish of Original Sentence, New Charges, New Trial, and New Sentence

On September 8, 2020, while Zaghari-Ratcliffe was furloughed at her parents' home in Tehran (see above), and [reportedly](#) about six months before her original prison sentence would end, she appeared before Tehran's Revolutionary Court. The court told her she would be [tried on new charges](#) on September 13, just five days later.

However, on September 13, at the last minute, the court [postponed Zaghari-Ratcliffe's trial](#) without providing a reason. She reacted with anguish and fury, telling her husband, "People should not underestimate the level of stress. People tell me to calm down. You don't understand what it is like. Nothing is calm."

"This morning I just wanted to scream out loud for 10 minutes," she said, "or to bang my head against the wall— just to let it out. I really can't take it anymore. They have all these games, and I have no power in them. Sometimes I am just full of anger, ready to explode. I find myself hating everything in this life, including myself. There is no escape.

"I would have rather it happened today," added Zaghari-Ratcliffe. "I do not sleep at all while the case is hanging over me. This morning I wanted to get it over with—to know where I stand now rather than continue with this whole stupid game."

On March 7, 2021, while Zaghari-Ratcliffe was under house arrest, [her original five-year jail sentence ended](#). The authorities removed her ankle monitor and permitted her to leave her parents' house. However, they [refused to let her leave Iran](#) and [put her on trial again](#) on March 14 for the new charge of "spreading propaganda against the regime." Specifically, the regime [accused](#) her of taking part in a demonstration outside Iran's embassy in the U.K. in 2009 and speaking with the BBC's Persian service.

The [second trial](#) lasted one day and was again presided over by Abolqasem Salavati. Richard Ratcliffe said that his wife had been allowed to make a statement denying the charges and that the verdict would likely come within days.

In late April 2021, Nazanin was [sentenced](#) to a year in prison and prohibited from leaving Iran for a year thereafter. Zaghari-Ratcliffe's lawyer said in October 2021 that an appeals court had [upheld](#) her sentence "without holding a hearing." She has yet to return to prison, but, [according to her husband](#), "she's now just waiting for the phone call, saying 'Turn up at this prison on this day.'"

International Reaction

Since going public with the news of Zaghari-Ratcliffe's arrest, her husband, Richard, has relentlessly campaigned for her freedom. He [launched a petition](#) calling for her release that more [than three million people](#) signed as of March 2020.

The British government has sent mixed signals about its responsibility for Zaghari-Ratcliffe and its view of her detention. When Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif suggested her release in 2019 as part of a prisoner exchange, Britain's then-foreign secretary, Jeremy Hunt, [called](#) the offer "vile," saying, "what is unacceptable about what Iran is doing is that they are putting innocent people in prison and using it as leverage."

The U.K. [granted](#) her diplomatic protection in 2019, which Iran has [rejected](#). This move has raised the matter beyond a consular dispute and into a full bilateral legal dispute between Iran and the U.K. However, the Foreign Office [wrote](#) to her attorneys that the U.K. was not legally required to provide consular services to British nationals overseas, that it does not view her case as hostage-taking, and that it could not look into claims that the Iranian regime tortured or otherwise ill-treated her.

Jeremy Hunt, at that time no longer foreign secretary, criticized his government's move, claiming the country was "beginning to look weak." "We must show the world that if you imprison a British citizen on trumped-up charges you will pay a very heavy price," Hunt stated, "because Britain is a major player on the world stage and intends to remain one [after its withdrawal from the European Union]."

When the regime granted Zaghari-Ratcliffe a two-week medical furlough in March of 2020, British then-Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab [said](#) that he was "relieved," and urged the regime to "ensure she receives any necessary medical care... [and] now to release all UK dual nationals arbitrarily detained in Iran, and enable them to return to their families in the UK."

In early September of 2020, the U.K. Foreign Office [protested](#) after the Revolutionary Court in Tehran told Nazanin it would try her on additional charges. "Iran bringing new charges against Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe is indefensible and unacceptable," a Foreign Office spokesperson said. "We have been consistently clear that she must not be returned to prison." Former British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt [tweeted](#), "Nazanin has already served most of her sentence for

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a crime she didn't commit. This is hostage diplomacy and Iran needs to know that Britain will not stand for it.”

In late September, the U.K., France, and Germany, in a coordinated action, [each summoned the Iranian ambassadors](#) to those respective countries to protest the Iranian regime’s imprisonment of citizens of those countries, as well as other human rights abuses.

According to the [Guardian](#), the U.K. Foreign Office gave the Iranian ambassador a letter saying, as the newspaper described, that “Iran’s policy of arbitrary detention is seriously undermining its international standing” and claiming that “British citizens, including dual nationals, are languishing in Iranian prisons, often under harsh conditions and without justification. It argues they have been arbitrarily detained and deserve to be reunited with their families.” The letter also takes issue with Iran’s oppression of domestic human rights advocates and protesters, and states, verbatim, “A free and independent media is essential to a functioning society. Cultural organisations, that connect people across borders, benefit all our peoples.”

However, the letter reportedly did not threaten any repercussions if Iran continued the aforementioned policies, and the Foreign Office has never described British dual-national detainees in Iran as hostages.

On October 29, 2020, the British government [summoned](#) the Iranian ambassador “following news that imprisoned British-Iranian aid worker Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe is to be recalled to court in Iran....” According to a statement from the U.K. Foreign Office, “We have made it clear to the Iranian ambassador that his country’s treatment of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe is unjustified and unacceptable, and is causing an enormous amount of distress.”

A report from the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention [condemned](#) the imprisonment of Zaghari-Ratcliffe. On October 24, 2016, [petitions were delivered to the U.K. Foreign Office](#) with a letter co-signed by 117 Members of Parliament and 24 Members of the House of Lords calling for the release of Zaghari-Ratcliffe and two other British-Iranian citizens. The petition, signed by more than 73,000 supporters, was sponsored by Amnesty International.

After an Iranian appeals court upheld Zaghari-Ratcliffe’s new sentence in October 2021, British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss [said](#) the decision to sustain the “baseless” charges against Zaghari-Ratcliffe was an “appalling continuation of the cruel ordeal she is going through.” She added, “We are doing all we can to help Nazanin get home to her young daughter and family and I will continue to press Iran on this point.”

However, Zaghari-Ratcliffe’s British member of Parliament, Tulip Siddiq, [slammed the U.K. government](#), saying, “Whatever the Prime Minister [Boris Johnson] has been doing to free Nazanin is clearly not working. It’s time for the UK Government to pay the debt we owe to Iran,

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stand up to their despicable hostage taking and finally get Nazanin home.” The hostage’s husband, Richard, also [criticized the Johnson government](#). “One of the challenges I find with this Government is that it doesn’t deal with problems until they become crises,” he stated. This is Iran threatening a crisis. One hopes that the Government takes it seriously.”

British Foreign Secretary Truss called Zaghari-Ratcliffe on December 26, 2021, [telling](#) her, “You are a priority, we are working on things,” according to Richard Ratcliffe.

Release

On March 16, 2022, the Iranian regime [released](#) Zaghari-Ratcliffe and her fellow hostage Anousheh Ashoori (also a British-Iranian) into the custody of the British government, and the two left Iran. The two were freed after the U.K. paid Iran \$530 million to make up for the aforementioned unfulfilled military sale.

British Foreign Secretary Truss [announced](#) the release. Truss said that development was “the result of tenacious and creative British diplomacy... years of hard work and dedication by our brilliant diplomats, and intensive efforts over the past 6 months.” She added, “We have the deepest admiration for the resolve, courage and determination Nazanin, Anousheh and Morad [Tahbaz, another British hostage who was simultaneously briefly furloughed from prison], and their families, have shown. They have faced hardship that no family should ever experience and this is a moment of great relief.” She also thanked the government of Oman for its help in getting the hostages freed. Truss added that the money the U.K. paid to Iran “will be ring-fenced solely for the purchase of humanitarian goods.”

Nizar Zakka

Information Technology Expert and Advocate of Internet Freedom



Biography

Nizar Zakka is a [Lebanese national and permanent U.S. resident](#). He is an information and communications technology expert and secretary-general of the Arab information and communications technology organization IJMA3. Zaskka holds both a bachelor's and master's degree in computer science from the University of Texas at Austin. Zakka has led development projects for corporations such as Cisco and Microsoft, and has also done contract work for the U.S. State Department.

Arrest

Zakka [traveled to Tehran](#) at the invitation of the Iranian government—specifically by Iran's then-Vice President for Women and Family Affairs Shahindokht Molaverdi, an ally of President Hassan Rouhani—on September 15, 2015 to participate in the second International Conference and Exhibition on Women in Sustainable Development, held between September 15 and 18.

Zakka [was last seen](#) on September 18 leaving his hotel in a taxi to the airport to fly to Beirut, but he never boarded his flight. On October 31, 2015, the Beirut-based *Daily Star* [reported](#) that Iran's [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps](#) (IRGC) was holding Zakka. Zakka was reportedly [transferred to Ward 2-A of Evin Prison](#), which is [used to hold political prisoners](#) and is under control of the IRGC.

Treatment in Captivity

Iranian authorities imprisoned Zakka for over 1,350 days, where he was [repeatedly interrogated](#) about his ICT work and asked if he was a spy, which he denied. He was forced under pressure to give his email address and password to his interrogators. Zakka was not allowed to have any contact with his family for several months after his arrest. In protest of the authorities' refusal to allow him access to his family, he went on hunger strike between March 13 and April 4, 2016, and was later given intermittent access to his family through telephone calls and visits.

While in prison, Zakka had [several health conditions](#), including severe back pain and blood in his stool. His family said that he lost a significant amount of weight and became very weak. Despite this, the authorities denied him proper medical care, including his medication. He launched a

second week-long [hunger strike](#) in August 2016 to protest the placement of four additional prisoners in his cell, including one who claimed to be a member of the Islamic State (ISIS). According to his lawyer, Jason Poblete, Nizar was [subject to psychological torture and physical strains](#) and his family members have also been intimidated.

Trial and Sentence

On November 3, 2015, Iranian state broadcaster IRIB reported that Zakka was in the custody of authorities on [suspicion of being an American spy](#). IRIB described him as a “[treasure trove](#)” because of “connections with intelligence and military bodies in the United States.” As evidence, Iranian state TV [displayed a photo of Zakka in army-style fatigues](#), which Zakka’s family said was from a homecoming parade he participated in as an alumnus of the American military high school he attended in Georgia.

In January 2016 Zakka was allowed to appoint a lawyer, but he was not allowed to meet with him in private until April 2016. Up until this point, he was not made aware of the charges against him. On April 4, 2016, he learned from his lawyer that his charges included “collaborating with hostile governments,” presumably the U.S. government.

On August 22, 2016, Nizar Zakka was taken before Branch 15 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran for his first trial session. This was followed by a 30-minute session on August 30 when he was told that his trial had concluded and that he would receive the verdict within 12 days. Nizar Zakka’s lawyer was denied full access to his case file to prepare his defense and was only allowed limited opportunities to communicate with his client before the trial. On September 20, 2016, Zakka’s lawyer announced that he had been [sentenced to 10 years in prison and a \\$4.2 million fine](#) for collaborating against the state.

On September 24, 2016, Nizar’s brother Ziad [responded to his sentencing](#): “This trial was a total mockery of Justice; Nazir was sentenced after only two court sessions and Iran refused to permit the attendance of the Lebanese consul.” The family is now asking for a retrial in front of an international body such as Amnesty International, in the presence of a legal representative of the Lebanese Republic. Nizar, said through his attorney on October 26, 2016, that Iranian officials in April [told him it would take as much as \\$2 billion to ensure his release](#) from captivity. In September, Iranian officials lowered that amount to \$4 million and told him that he was spared the death penalty but would remain in prison for ten years until the payments are made.

Release

In June 2019, reports surfaced that Iran would hand Zakka over to Lebanese officials. [Dueling](#) accounts of Zakka's release then began to leak. Lebanese media [claimed](#) that Zakka had been pardoned at the request of President Michel Aoun, who is a political ally of Iran's terror proxy Hezbollah. However, the Iranian press [alleged](#) that Zakka had been freed only because of the intervention of Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah. When Iranian officials finally released Zakka on June 10, General Abbas Ibrahim, the head of Lebanon's General Security Directorate, was in Tehran to oversee the transfer.

Olivier Vandecasteele

Belgian Aid Worker



Biography

Olivier Vandecasteele is a Belgian humanitarian aid worker. He has [worked for several international aid organizations](#) for [about 17 years](#), including Relief International (RI), Norwegian Relief Council (NRC), and Médecins du Monde. He has worked in Afghanistan, India, Mali, and Iran. Vandecasteele headed the NRC's Iran office starting in 2015 and did the same for RI from 2020 to 2021, returning to Europe thereafter. He distributed humanitarian assistance in Iran during the COVID pandemic.

[According to Iran International](#), RI replaced Vandecasteele because of internal organizational issues. However, an “informed source” told that outlet that RI may have let Vandecasteele go due to pressures by Iran’s interior ministry’s foreign citizens’ bureau.

Vandecasteele [holds](#) a bachelor’s degree in economics and management from the Université Saint-Louis—Bruxelles, a master’s degree in management sciences from the Louvain School of Management in Belgium’s University of Louvain, and a postgraduate degree in international relations and conflict resolution from Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in Belgium.

Arrest

Iran’s [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps](#) (IRGC) [arrested and imprisoned Vandecasteele](#)—purportedly for [espionage](#)— on February 24, 2022. He had returned to Iran that month—against the Belgian government’s recommendation—to vacate his Tehran apartment, according to his close friend Olivier Van Steirtegem. “We need to put ourselves in his shoes: he was living there for five or six years—his life was there,” said Van Steirtegem. “He had to go back.” Van Steirtegem [added](#) that Vandecasteele is “purely humanitarian, not political... an innocent guy in jail.”

Treatment in Captivity

The IRGC [jailed Vandecasteele](#) in Tehran's [notoriously brutal Evin Prison](#), where he is in [solitary confinement](#). According to Van Steirtegem, Vandecasteele has been permitted two brief meetings with Belgium’s ambassador to Iran. The hostage’s cell contains no bed or other furniture and [his health has declined](#). “He’s eating nothing but potatoes, lentils and sugar,” said Van Steirtegem. “He’s lost 15 kg and has an infection. The Iranians said he'd seen a doctor but the doctor couldn't speak English.”

Announcement of Arrest

Belgian Justice Minister Vincent Van Quickenborne [announced](#) on July 5, 2022, that Iran had arrested a Belgian man on February 24 for “espionage” and had “illegally” detained him since then. Vandecasteele’s family and Belgian members of parliament said publicly that he was the detained Belgian.

Prisoner-Swap Treaty

On March 11, 2022, just 15 days after Vandecasteele’s arrest, the Belgian government [signed a treaty](#) with Iran allowing Belgium to send Iranian nationals convicted of crimes in Belgium back to Iran to finish out their sentences, and vice versa. The agreement also permits each country to grant amnesty to their returned nationals.

Several Belgian and American lawmakers and human rights groups, [former senior U.S. national security officials](#), and as Iranian exiles, [opposed the treaty](#). They claimed, among other things, that the accord “institutionalized” Iranian hostage-taking and would result in Belgium sending back Assadollah Assadi, an Iranian diplomat convicted in Belgium of [masterminding a plan to bomb a rally](#) in France by an Iranian opposition group. Assadi is serving a 20-year prison sentence.

Belgian MP Darya Safai, who was born in Iran, said the treaty did not exclude those convicted of terrorism and therefore could endanger Iranians abroad. “My life and that of my husband, children, and so many others are in danger.”

Green Party MP Wouter De Vriendt also criticized the treaty, [asking](#), “Are we going to voluntarily release the handcuffs of a convicted terrorist and give them to Iran as a gift with a big bow around it?”

Van Quickenborne [said](#) during parliamentary debate on the treaty that after Assadi’s arrest, the threat to Belgium from Iran had increased. “From day one, we have felt pressure from Iran and the security situation of our interests has deteriorated systematically,” he said. He warned that each of the 200 Belgians still in Iran “could be next to be locked up” and that Belgium’s intelligence community believes that the threat from Iran would increase if parliament voted down the treaty.

Belgian Prime Minister Alexander DeCroo, responding to criticism from opposition legislators, said, angrily [replied](#), “What do you tell his family, that we are going to let him rot in his cell? Belgium does not abandon its citizens.” Newly appointed Belgian Foreign Minister Hadja

Lahbib, appointed last week, [said](#) the government had exhausted its diplomatic options to get Vandecasteele released. “We could raise our voices more, but we'd be screaming into the desert,” she stated.

Court Orders Blocking Assadi’s Return to Iran and Suspending the Treaty

On July 22, 2022, the Brussels Court of Appeal temporarily [blocked the Belgian government from returning Assadi](#) to Iran. The court ruled that the rights of Iranian expats seeking to block the transfer “could be irreparably violated” if Assadi was transferred to Iran before an adversarial court hearing took place to adjudicate the matter.

In December 2022, Belgium’s Constitutional Court [suspended the prisoner-trade treaty](#), claiming it could cause “serious harm.”

Possible Extradition Request

The U.S. government may request that Belgium extradite Assadi, according to a *Brussels Times* [report](#) on July 25, 2022.

Hunger Strike

Vandecasteele’s family said on November 29, 2022, that he had [begun a hunger strike](#) in opposition to his “inhumane” treatment in detention, which, the relatives said, “amount to the equivalent of torture.”

Conviction

Belgian diplomats were given consular access to Vandecasteele at the end of November 2022 for the first time in almost two months. The [BBC](#) reported that “[h]e told them that he had appeared before a court without the knowledge of Belgian diplomats or his Iranian lawyers, and that he was convicted of all charges brought against him without being told what he was alleged to have done.”

Sentencing

In December 2022, one day after Belgium’s Constitutional Court suspended the prisoner-swap treaty, Vandecasteele was [sentenced](#) to 28 years in prison. In January 2023, the Iranian judiciary’s official news portal reported that Vandecasteele’s sentence had been [increased](#) to 40 years in prison, 74 lashes, and a fine. The charges he was sentenced for were “espionage, cooperating with the US against the Islamic Republic, money laundering and smuggling \$500,000 out of Iran.”

Request for Prisoner Exchange

Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo [said](#) on April 27, 2023, that his government was considering Tehran's request to swap Vandecasteele for Assadi.

Release

Vandecasteele was [released](#) May 26, 2023, in an Oman-brokered exchange for Assadi.

International Reaction

Vandecasteele's family [said](#) that Belgium's prime minister told them in December 2022 that the hostage's only chance for release was through a prisoner swap.

In response to the report of Vandecasteele's sentencing, Belgian Foreign Minister Hadja Lahbib [stated](#) on January 10, 2023, that "Iran has provided no official regarding the charges against Olivier Vandecasteele or his trial. We will summon the Iranian ambassador today, given the information circulating in the press. Belgium continues to condemn this arbitrary detention and is doing everything possible to put an end to it and to improve the conditions of his detention."

Roland Marchal
French Academic



Biography

Roland Marchal is a French sociologist employed by the university SciencesPo in Paris. Marchal's research [focused](#) on sub-Saharan Africa, particularly civil wars and state formation in that region. He formerly [served](#) as chief editor of the French academic journal *Politique Africaine*. He [holds degrees](#) from the Ecole des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales and the University of Paris VI.

Arrest

Marchal flew to Tehran in June of 2019 to spend the Eid holiday with his colleague and longtime companion, Faribah Adelkhah, but he was [arrested](#) upon arriving in Tehran—[according to Marchal](#), by the [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps](#) (IRGC). Adelkhah, a French-Iranian dual national, was also arrested.

Treatment in Captivity

Marchal was held, and Adelkhah remains, in Tehran's notoriously brutal [Evin Prison](#). He [said in an interview](#) after his release that he was initially held in solitary confinement, with the light on 24 hours a day, and he was only allowed out of his isolation for a half hour twice daily. At first, he did not have a bed, and the authorities permitted him to call his family only three times during his detention.

Adelkhah, who holds both Iranian and French citizenship, has [not been allowed](#) to meet with French consular officials because Iran does not recognize her dual nationality. Marchal was [permitted](#) to meet with the French officials several times, as well as with an attorney.

Roland's health [reportedly](#) deteriorated in prison. In December of 2019, Adelkhah started a 49-day [hunger strike](#) to [demand](#) that the regime release Marchal and her. Marchal [said](#) after his release that his detention contributed to weight loss, exacerbated osteoarthritis, chest pains, and an abdominal hernia.

In early February of 2020, Marchal and Adelkhah [petitioned](#) for permission to marry so that they could meet with each other in prison. No judgment on their petition was made public.

Charges and Trial

The regime held Marchal and Adelkhah for months without making criminal charges public. Marchal said in an interview after his release that typically, the IRGC would arrest and isolate people first and then interrogate them to find crimes to charge them with.

Finally, the government disclosed that Marchal would be tried for “[collusion to endanger national security](#),” while Adelkhah would be tried for both that charge and “[propaganda against the political system of the Islamic Republic](#).” Their trial [commenced](#) on March 3, 2020, but after Adelkhah appeared and [objected](#) to the regime’s choice of her attorney, Marchal was not brought into the courtroom and further proceedings were then postponed indefinitely without explanation.

International Reaction

Marchal’s detention was initially [not made public](#) at the request of his family and the French Foreign Ministry, the latter of whom reportedly did not want the matter to become a reason for a “nationalist flare-up” in Iran. The academic’s imprisonment was reported on for the first time by the French newspaper [Le Figaro](#) in October 2019. At that time, the French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs (MEAE) [said](#) it was “mobilised to obtain his release” and “urge[d] the Iranian authorities to be transparent and act without delay to put an end to this unacceptable situation.”

In December of 2019, the French government [summoned](#) Iran’s ambassador and demanded again that Marchal and Adelkhah be released and that French consular officials be allowed to meet with them. France’s foreign minister [reiterated](#) those demands to his Iranian counterpart in February of 2020.

SciencesPo has [claimed](#) that it has taken several steps to help Marchal and Adelkhah, working closely with the MEAE and the French National Centre for Scientific Research. The university mentioned that it had made sure that the two hostages had a very experienced attorney who is on the Iranian regime’s approved list.

After the couple’s trial began on March 3, their Paris-based support group [condemned](#) the hearing as a “masquerade of justice” and accused the regime of “deliberately putting in danger the lives of our two colleagues—already weakened—by keeping them in an overcrowded jail while the country is hit by a serious coronavirus epidemic whose scale is being played down and which is not under control.”

UNITED AGAINST NUCLEAR IRAN

Release

Iran [freed](#) Marchal on March 20, 2020, in exchange for France simultaneously [releasing](#) Jalal Rohollahnejad, an Iranian accused of violating U.S. sanctions laws. Marchal returned to France the next day.

The Iranian government had recently [released 85,000 prisoners temporarily](#) to limit infections as a coronavirus epidemic ravaged the country. The day before Marchal's release, the regime [announced](#) that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei would grant amnesty to 10,000 prisoners, including an unstated amount of political ones.

The regime continues to hold Adelkhah hostage in Evin Prison. On May 16, 2020, Adelkhah was [sentenced](#) to five years in prison for the aforementioned "collusion" charge and one year for the "propaganda" charge. French President Emmanuel Macron has [urged](#) Tehran to also free her.

The U.S. sought to prosecute Rohollahnejad for trying to illegally export military-use American technology to Iran on behalf of a company allegedly linked to Iran's [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps](#) (IRGC). Earlier in March, the highest court in France [approved his extradition](#) to the States. The U.S. State Department [slammed](#) France for its "unilateral decision" to release Rohollahnejad, stating, "It is regrettable in this instance that France failed to uphold its treaty obligations and prevented justice from being pursued." Rohollahnejad [went back](#) to Iran after his release.

Roya Saberi Negad Nobakht
British-Iranian Dual National



Arrest

Nobakht [was arrested by the cybercrime intelligence unit of the Revolutionary Guards](#) in October 2013 while visiting friends in the city of Shiraz, Iran. She traveled to Tehran to see family that month, and about two weeks into the trip, she flew to Shiraz to visit a friend and was arrested at the airport. She was then taken back to Tehran and [charged with](#) “gathering and participation with intent to commit crimes against national security” and “insulting Islamic sanctities.” Her husband said his wife’s [arrest was over comments she had made on a Facebook](#) group about the Iranian government being “too Islamic” and that she had only been charged after a confession was extracted from her “under duress.”

Biography

Roya Saberi Negad Nobakht [moved](#) to Stockport, Manchester, England, to join her husband, Daryoush Taghipoor, in 2007. Nobakht and her husband are [naturalized British citizens](#).

Treatment in Captivity

Nobakht was taken to Tehran’s notoriously brutal [Evin Prison](#), where she was reportedly subjected to “[physical and psychological torture](#), insults and humiliation” in jail. She was moved to Shahre Rey Prison, an all-female jail with “unspeakably inhuman” conditions where inmates are often subject to beatings by guards. Nobakht has also been denied access to medication, held in solitary confinement, and forced to stand outside in the winter in wet clothes which resulted in kidney problems for which she has been denied treatment. She was later returned to Evin, where she [was suffering from an unknown disease](#). Nobakht had [limited conversations](#) with her family. She was allowed to phone her husband and speak to him for a few minutes every one or two months while the security guards monitored the call.

Charges, Trial, and Sentencing

Nobakht was put on trial alongside seven other people and [sentenced to 20 years in prison](#) on April 14, 2014, for Facebook posts which allegedly criticized the Iranian regime for being too controlling and Islamic. During the trial, her lawyer was present but was not allowed to speak on her behalf. Later in 2014, Nobakht was [granted a retrial](#) where she was allowed to defend herself for the first time. Nobakht was verbally told that her sentence was reduced to seven

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years, but she was given no legal papers to confirm this. According to her husband, “Roya is [not a political activist](#) in any way. She is just a normal citizen.”

International Reaction

In 2014 the “[Free Roya Now](#)” campaign was launched to highlight Roya’s plight and encourage the British government and European Union to put pressure on the Iranian regime to secure Roya’s release.

On October 24, 2016, a [petition was delivered](#) with a letter co-signed by 117 Members of Parliament and members of the House of Lords calling for the release of Roya Saberi and two other British-Iranian dual nationals. The petition, signed by more than 73,000 supporters, was sponsored by Amnesty International, was delivered to the UK Foreign Office. In addition, a [petition](#) from Change.org was signed by more than 230,000 supporters and was delivered to Prime Minister Theresa May.

Release

Nobakht was [released](#) from prison on August 25, 2017, but she was prohibited from traveling for two years. It is unclear as of June 2020 whether the ban has already expired and whether Nobakht has left Iran.

Sabri Hassanpour

Dual Iranian-Dutch National, Political Activist



Biography

Hassanpour is a Dutch-Iranian dual national and outspoken critic of the Iranian regime who serves as the [executive director and host of the Persian-language online network](#) “Simay-e Rahayi” (Vision of Liberation). He is also reportedly a member of the National Iranian Congress to Save Iran, which aims to establish a shadow government and parliament in exile for Iranians.”

Arrest

Hassanpour was [arrested in Iran on April 21, 2016](#). Hassanpour, who currently is a resident and citizen of the Netherlands, had reportedly traveled to Iran to visit relatives. Some sources close to him [claim](#) “he was abducted from Turkey during a meeting with family and transferred to Iran.”

Treatment in Captivity

Hassanpour was reportedly transferred to Evin Prison’s clinic [following a heart attack](#) on November 15, 2016. Prison officials reportedly [refused requests](#) by Hassanpour for needed open-heart surgery. A source close to Hassanpour said that he “[suffers from asthma and heart disease](#) [and] is in a bad health condition due to constant insults and mistreatment...” In addition, [Hassanpour’s wife was unable to follow up](#) on his case because she lives in the Netherlands and feared that if she traveled to Iran, she might also have been arrested.

Charges, Trial, and Sentencing

Hassanpour was put on trial by Iran’s Revolutionary Court on November 12, 2016, for “[propaganda against the state and acting against national security](#).” Presiding Judge [Abolghasem Salavati](#) reportedly told Hassanpour he would receive a “[heavy verdict](#)” for signing a letter in support of prisoners on a hunger strike. Hassanpour started a [hunger strike](#)—including refusing to take his medication—in protest on May 9, 2017. He was [released](#) and permitted to return to the Netherlands in May of 2018.

Saeed Malekpour

Iranian National and Canadian Permanent Resident Who Escaped from Imprisonment for Life



Biography

In 2004, Saeed Malekpour [emigrated from Iran to Canada](#) with his wife Fatima Eftekhari so she could continue her studies. They both attended the University of Victoria, where Fatima earned her PhD and Saeed followed in her footsteps. Saeed had earned a degree in mechanical engineering from Sharif University of Tehran and hoped that a Canadian degree would help him earn a better job. Before his move to Canada, Saeed worked for Iran Khodro, one of the country's largest automakers.

By the fall of 2008, Fatima was enrolled in a post-doctoral degree at the University of Toronto and [preparing for their move to a new home in Richmond Hill](#). Saeed had been [working as a freelance web designer and programmer](#). He created a program to improve the uploading of photos to websites. At the time of his arrest, Malekpour was a [Canadian permanent resident](#), with protection under Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms. He was on a path to receiving Canadian citizenship and did not participate in Iranian politics.

Arrest

Malekpour was [arrested on October 4, 2008](#), while visiting his dying father in Iran. Malekpour was "snatched from a Tehran street in broad daylight and stuffed into the back of a car. He was blindfolded, beaten, and then taken to a detention center." In March 2010, Malekpour wrote a letter about his arrest: "[\[A\] few agents physically beat me severely and verbally abused me](#), while I remained handcuffed and blindfolded. They forced me to sign a few forms, but I was not able to read the contents." According to Amnesty International, [Malekpour's arrest and sentencing were part of a larger operation called Gerdab](#) (Whirlpool) which was conducted by the Cyber Crimes Unit of the Revolutionary Guards in 2008 and sought to crack down on on-line activities deemed "immoral" or "un-Islamic."

Treatment in Captivity

At Iran's notoriously brutal [Evin Prison](#), Malekpour was [tortured physically and psychologically into confessing](#) to "running a network of porn sites, being a pedophile and a pervert." He was [held in solitary confinement](#) from his arrest until August 16, 2009, during which time he was denied contact with his family or legal counsel. Malekpour was again transferred to solitary confinement on December 21, 2009, and remained there until February 8, 2010. He [told](#)

journalists after his escape that he had been thrown into solitary two more times, once for two days and one for 195.

Prison guards [dislocated Malekpour's jaw](#) in January 2009 when they beat him and kicked him in the face. Malekpour [made a televised "confession" in 2009](#) that he later retracted in a letter sent from inside prison. Malekpour wrote, "A large portion of my confession was extracted under pressure, physical and psychological torture, threats to myself and my family, and false promises of immediate release upon giving a false confession to whatever the interrogators dictated ... Such mistreatment was aimed at forcing me to write what the interrogators were dictating, and to compel me to play a role in front of the camera based on their scenarios."

Malekpour "[suffered severe injuries due to beatings](#), and serious illnesses while in prison, including kidney problems and rheumatism, none of which have been properly treated." He detailed the torture he endured in a [March 2010 letter](#): "Most of the time, the torture was performed by a group. While I remained blindfolded and handcuffed, several individuals armed with cables, batons, and their fists struck and punched me. At times, they would flog my head and neck... Sometimes, they used extremely painful electrical shocks that would paralyse me temporarily... Once, in October 2008, the interrogators stripped me while I was blindfolded and threatened to rape me with a water bottle."

In addition to describing the physical torture in his letter, Malekpour reported that he found the psychological torture he experienced even worse. He writes: "[The physical torture was nothing compared to the psychological torments](#). I endured long solitary confinement without phone calls or the possibility of visiting my loved ones, constant threats to arrest and torture my wife and family if I did not co-operate, threats to kill me. They also gave me false news that my wife had been arrested. My mental health was severely threatened. I had no access to any books or journals in the solitary cells, and at times, I would not speak to anybody for days."

After the authorities commuted Malekpour's second death sentence, he was moved into the prison's general population, but his health paid the price for years of physical and emotional abuse. He [suffered a heart attack](#) and was taken to the hospital, where he was shackled to his bed and kept under permanent guard.

Sentencing and Conviction

Malekpour's trial began on November 29, 2009, over a year after his arrest. He was represented by a lawyer that was not permitted to meet with him until a few minutes before the trial started. During the trial, the court dismissed Malekpour's allegations of torture and mistreatment as lies. In December 2010, he was [sentenced to death](#), convicted of "designing and moderating adult content websites," "agitation against the regime," and "insulting the sanctity of Islam." At the same time, he was sentenced to seven and a half years' imprisonment

on charges of “insulting the Leader,” “insulting the President,” “insulting Islamic sanctities,” and “spreading propaganda against the system.” There was no evidence against Saeed other than the forced confession extracted under torture.

The death sentence was rescinded by the Iranian Supreme Court in June 2011 and the case was transferred to a lower court for further investigation. Following a retrial, in October 2011 Saeed was again sentenced to death in November 2011 by a branch of the Revolutionary Court. In January 2012, this [second death sentence was upheld](#) by the Supreme Court.

After international condemnation, Malekpour’s death sentence was subsequently commuted to a life imprisonment. In August 2013, his lawyer announced that the death sentence had been reduced by Iran’s Amnesty and Clemency Commission because Malekpour had “repented for his actions.” Malekpour then began [serving a life sentence](#) in Evin Prison.

International Reaction

In 2011, Canada’s foreign ministry [issued a statement expressing concern](#) over the fate of Malekpour as a Canadian of dual nationality. In 2012 the Canadian House of Commons took an [urgent and unanimous stance](#) expressing deep concern for Malekpour’s safety and demanding that Iran be held accountable for his treatment and release Malekpour and other unjustly detained prisoners.

In October 2016, the international digital rights NGO Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) [published a statement and online action](#) urging Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to fight for Malekpour’s release. His case has also been pursued by Amnesty International and other prominent human rights organizations.

Furlough and Escape

In the summer of 2019, the Iranian authorities granted Malekpour a furlough. He then [escaped](#) Iran via another country and returned to Canada.

Xiyue Wang

Chinese-American Graduate Student at Princeton University

Biography



[Xiyue Wang](#) was born and raised in Beijing, China and became a naturalized U.S. citizen in 2009. Wang studied in China as a child and into his first year of college when he then dropped out for a chance to study in India. In 2003, Wang was [accepted](#) to the University of Washington and received a bachelor's degree in International Studies. He later studied Russian and Eurasian studies at Harvard University, and in 2008 he [worked](#) as a Princeton in Asia fellow at the law firm Orrick in Hong Kong. After [working](#) at Orrick for a year, Wang moved to

Afghanistan to become a Pashto translator for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). In Afghanistan, Wang helped collect bodies or body parts of those killed in clashes and offered aid to those injured and captured, including Taliban militants.

In [2013](#), Wang began graduate studies in Eurasian History at Princeton University. At the time of his arrest, Wang was working on his [dissertation](#) studying regional governance practices across multiple countries in the late 19th and early 20th century. In Iran, he was interested in studying decades-old archival materials on the administrative and cultural history of the Qajar dynasty, which ruled from 1785 to 1925.

Princeton professor Stephen Kotkin [described](#) Wang as a polite, respectful, and inquisitive researcher who traveled extensively in Central Asia, Russia, Afghanistan, and Iran. Wang is “linguistically gifted,” his adviser said, with the ability to speak in Chinese and read in Persian, Turkic, Pashto, and Russian. Kotkin added, he is “everything an adviser could hope for” in a graduate student.

Arrest

Wang was arrested by Iranian authorities on August 8, 2016, as he tried to leave Iran for Russia. Between January 25 and March 10, 2016, Wang [visited](#) Iran to attend a Farsi language program at the Dekhoda Lexicon Institute and International Center for Persian Studies. On May 1, 2016, he [returned](#) to Iran to continue his language studies and conduct dissertation research at libraries in Iran. Before traveling to Iran, Wang sent letters [explaining](#) his research to the Iranian Interest Section at the Pakistani Embassy in Washington, DC (which issued his visa), and to the libraries in Iran that he planned to visit. According to a [statement](#) from Princeton, “he was not involved in any political activities or social activism; he was simply a scholar trying to gain access to materials he needed for his dissertation.”

Princeton and Wang's family learned of his arrest in August 2016, but [decided](#) to keep it confidential based on recommendations that publicity might obstruct efforts to secure Wang's release. Wang's confinement became known [publicly](#) on July 16, 2017, when Iran's judiciary announced his sentence, accusing him of "infiltrating" the country and sending confidential material abroad.

Treatment in Captivity

Wang was held at Tehran's notoriously brutal [Evin Prison](#) starting in August 7, 2016, where he spent his first 18 days in solitary confinement. While Wang was still locked up, Princeton University [said](#), "the prison conditions are difficult and have contributed to a worrisome decline in Mr. Wang's health." Wang has been [permitted](#) to make phone calls to his wife on a weekly basis and has had several visits from his attorney.

Charges, Trial, and Conviction

On July 17, 2017, Iran's judiciary [announced](#) that Wang was sentenced to 10 years in prison on charges of spying for the United States. A spokesman for Iran's judiciary said that an American had entered the country at the direction of the U.S. and was identified and arrested. "It has been confirmed and verified that this individual has come to Iran for infiltration," the spokesman was [quoted](#) as saying.

Wang was [accused](#) of entering Iran under the cover of a master's student, but digitally [archiving](#) 4,500 pages of Iranian documents and conducting "super confidential research for the U.S. Department of States, Harvard Kennedy School and British Institute of Persian Studies." A report from Mizan, a news agency [associated](#) with Iran's judiciary, contains a quote from Wang in which he praises the British Institute for Persian Studies for facilitating access to Iran's National Archives and other libraries. The quote was used as evidence of his spying activities, the report said, adding, "Wang admits his mission in Iran." In the announcement, Iran's judiciary [confirmed](#) that Wang is appealing the Iranian court's initial sentence.

International Reaction

On July 18, 2017, Wang's wife Hua Qu, [called](#) on authorities to release her husband, saying he was "unjustly imprisoned." In her first comments on his case, Wang's wife described her husband as "one of the kindest, most thoughtful, and loving men I have ever known... Our son has missed his father for more than a year of his young life, as my husband has been unjustly imprisoned for espionage that I know he did not and would never commit." Princeton University Professor Stephen Kotkin also [said](#), "He is innocent of the charges of espionage."

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The U.S. State Department did not provide details on Wang's case but [called](#) on Tehran to immediately release "all U.S. citizens unjustly detained in Iran." [According](#) to Princeton University, the U.S. communicated with and provided support to Wang while in prison. Since his confinement, Wang has had four consular visits by the Swiss embassy, which represents U.S. interests in Iran. Princeton University has also retained counsel for Wang in Iran, working daily to secure Wang's release and to support him and his family.

In May 2019, Wang reached his 1,000th day in prison—as his wife wrote in an [op-ed](#), a period "twice the time the American diplomats were held hostage from 1979 to 1981."

Release

On December 7, 2019, the Iranian regime [released Wang from prison and transferred him to U.S. custody](#) as part of a prisoner swap. Tehran freed Wang in exchange for the U.S. dropping charges against and releasing Iranian national Massoud Soleimani. Soleimani, a scientist, was [arrested](#) in 2018 for violating American sanctions laws by conspiring and attempting, without authorization, to export biological materials from the U.S. to Iran. Wang was held hostage by Iran for over 1,200 days.

On November 3, 2021, Wang filed [suit](#) against Princeton University alleging that Princeton urged "him to study in Iran in the wake of the nuclear deal and then leaving him to 'rot' in a notorious torture prison after he was arrested on bogus espionage charges." Wang's lawsuit identifies researchers and scholars at Princeton who he claims stymied efforts to free him from prison. Specifically, "Dr. Rahmani, Mr. Mousavian, and other Princeton employees made the intentional decision not to utilize their political capital in Iran to assist Mr. Wang."

Executed or Otherwise Died in Captivity

Robert Levinson

American Private Investigator and Retired FBI Agent



Disappearance

American private investigator and retired FBI agent Robert Levinson disappeared on March 9, 2007, on Iran’s Kish Island, while [reportedly](#) on an unauthorized CIA mission to [investigate corruption by Iranian regime officials](#). Levinson’s family received a hostage video and photos of him in 2010–11. That aside, he was not [“publicly seen or heard from since”](#) his disappearance. A U.S. district court judge [found](#) in March of 2020 that the Iranian regime most likely took Mr. Levinson hostage (see the “Lawsuit” section below).

Treatment in Captivity

In November 2010, the Levinson family received a hostage video of Mr. Levinson in which he appeared [gaunt, emaciated, and heavily bearded](#). Levinson was known before his disappearance to [suffer from gout, hypertension, and diabetes](#). In April 2011, the Levinson family [received](#) a series of pictures of him. Levinson’s family has [never received any other information](#) from his captors. A U.S. district court judge [found](#) in March of 2020 that the Iranian regime most likely tortured Mr. Levinson. (See the “Lawsuit” section below.)

Attempts to Locate

In April 2007, about a month after Mr. Levinson disappeared, the Iranian regime’s English-language media channel Press TV published an article entitled “Ex-FBI man in Iran not ‘missing’ at all.” The report [stated](#) that an unnamed “American businessman and retired FBI agent gone missing from Iran’s Kish Island” had been “in the hands of Iranian security forces since the early hours of March 9.” The piece added that while U.S.–Iran tensions “complicated” the situation, “the authorities [were] well on the way to finishing the procedural arrangements that could see him freed in a matter of days.” No further such reports appeared in Iran’s state-run media.

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In March 2011, then–Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton [stated](#) that the U.S. government had “received recent indications that Bob is being held somewhere in southwest Asia.” (A State Department spokesperson [said](#) in 2009 that southwest Asia includes Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.)

In an interview in September of 2012, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, then president of Iran, [did not deny](#) that Iran held Levinson and indicated that Iran and the U.S. had negotiated about Levinson.

In December 2013, Iran-based American fugitive Dawud Salahuddin disclosed that he witnessed [Iranian police detaining Mr. Levinson](#) at the time of his disappearance. Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has “[denied all knowledge of Levinson’s whereabouts.](#)” Yet, there is “[consensus](#)” among U.S. officials that the [Iranian government is responsible](#) for images taken of Mr. Levinson by his captors.

According to documents disclosed on January 22, 2016, [Iranian officials knew far more about Mr. Levinson then previously suggested.](#) The documents are from a memo sent to the FBI in 2011 after a meeting in Paris between an American, a Russian, and Iran’s ambassador to France.

During the meeting, the Iranian ambassador said that his government was willing to release Mr. Levinson, who was being held by Iran, if the U.S. helped delay an assessment criticizing Iran’s nuclear activities. “The ambassador made it clear that they have Robert Levinson and that they are willing to release him without conditions,” said the report. “They do, however, want tangible, ‘symbolic’ assurances that the messages they are sending have been received at the highest levels.” It is unclear what actions, if any, American officials took after the meeting.

In January 2016, President Barack Obama [said](#) Iran had “agreed to deepen our coordination as we work to locate Robert Levinson.” Secretary of State John Kerry [stated](#) a day later that “the Iranians are cooperating” in the effort. However, at a press briefing on October 18, 2016, then–State Department spokesperson Mark Toner said the Iranians “[haven’t lived up to](#)” their commitment to providing information about Mr. Levinson’s whereabouts.

In 2017, a National Security Council spokesperson [said](#) executive-branch officials had contacted Mr. Levinson’s relatives to promise them that the Trump administration was prioritizing his case.

In October of 2019, the United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances [informed](#) the Levinson family that “According to the statement of Tehran’s Justice Department, Mr. Robert Alan Levinson has an on going case in the Public Prosecution

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and Revolutionary Court of Tehran.” However, Tehran later [said](#) that the “on going case” was simply an investigation of Mr. Levinson’s disappearance.

In November 2019, the U.S. State Department [offered](#) a \$20 million reward for information leading to Levinson’s “safe location, recovery, and return.” The FBI has long extended a similar reward of \$5 million.

Lawsuit

In March of 2017, Mr. Levinson’s wife and children [sued Iran](#) for taking him hostage and torturing him, [seeking](#) \$150 million in compensatory damages and \$1.35 billion in punitive ones. Iran did not contest the lawsuit, and on March 9, 2020, a U.S. district court judge for the District of Columbia entered a [default judgment](#) for the Levinsons. The judge also appointed a [“special master”](#) to assess damages for Mr. Levinson’s wife and each of his children and recommend the amount of damages awarded.

Death

On March 25, 2020, Mr. Levinson’s family [announced](#) that “We recently received information from U.S. officials that has led both them and us to conclude that our wonderful husband and father died while in Iranian custody. We don't know when or how he died, only that it was prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.” They added, “His body has not yet been returned to us for a proper burial. We don’t even know when, or even if, his body would be returned to us. This is the very definition of cruelty.”

Then-President Donald Trump [said](#) Mr. Levinson was “a gentleman” and “outstanding,” but expressed doubt about the former FBI agent’s purported death. “They've been making the statement to the family, I believe,” he stated. “It's not looking good; he wasn't well for years anyway, in Iran. It's not looking promising ... we feel terribly for the family. It's not looking great, but I won't accept that he’s dead. They haven't told us that he's dead, but a lot of people are thinking that that’s the case.”

Then–U.S. National Security Adviser Robert O’Brien later expressed more certainty about Mr. Levinson’s fate, saying, “While the investigation is ongoing, we believe that Bob Levinson may have passed away some time ago... Iran must provide a complete accounting of what occurred with Bob Levinson before the United States can fully accept what happened in this case.” Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif [reportedly](#) informed the U.S. government of Mr. Levinson’s death.

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4,766 days passed between Mr. Levinson's disappearance and the announcement of his likely death—over 13 years, and more than ten times as long as the 1979–81 Iran hostage crisis. Mr. Levinson may be the [longest-held hostage in American history](#), depending on when he died.

Ruhollah Zam

Activist and Journalist, French Resident, and Iranian National



Biography

Ruhollah Zam was an Iranian activist and former journalist who [lived in exile](#) with [refugee status](#) in France and openly sought the overthrow of the Islamic Republic. He ran Telegram channels used to spread information to Iranians protesting the regime and encourages viewers to join demonstrations. Zam’s channels—particularly AmadNews—disseminated times and places of upcoming rallies to its subscribers, who numbered more than a million. He also published controversial materials undermining the regime, including documents revealing government corruption and malfeasance.

Zam was [born in Tehran in 1973](#). He said he left Iran after being [jailed](#) in Tehran’s notoriously brutal [Evin Prison](#) after the controversial 2009 presidential election and [accused](#) of working with foreign intelligence agencies. His father is a cleric who served in the Iranian government in the 1980s and has condemned his son’s work. Zam has said that some of his relatives in Iran have been [detained for months](#) in order to compel him to shut down his Telegram channel and return to Iran.

Arrest

In mid-October of 2019, Iran’s [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps](#) (IRGC) [announced](#) that it had arrested Zam after he was “guided into the country” via a “complicated intelligence operation,” [adding](#) that Zam had “stepped into intelligence trap of the Guards some two years ago.” The IRGC [posted](#) news of Zam’s arrest on his Telegram channel, as well as a photo of Zam in captivity, with the caption “This is just the beginning.”

The IRGC [claimed](#) Zam was being guided and safeguarded by American, Israeli, and French intelligence agencies, and called him “one of the main people of the enemy’s media network and psychological warfare.” A senior IRGC general [said](#), “Zam was a key figure of intelligence services for throwing the country into disarray... and driving a wedge between the Iranian people and government.”

The *Times of London* [reported](#) that a female Iranian intelligence agent persuaded him to go to Iraq, where he was abducted and brought back to Iran. [According](#) to Radio Farda, the French newspaper *Le Figaro* said that it had sources who said Zam was lured to Iraq with a promise of meeting leading Shiite Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. Iranian exiles and experts in Paris have theorized

that French intelligence at least tacitly agreed to the IRGC operation in order to get Iran to release two imprisoned French academics.

According to the [Financial Times](#), Zam's wife, Mahsa Razani, said her husband was traveling to Iraq "for a business meeting and knew and trusted the woman in question." A friend of Zam's told Iranian media that he was keen to raise money for a television channel, adding that Shirin Najafi, an administrator at Amadnews, showed him 15 million in euros-in €500-euro notes on her bed and told him to come to Iraq to take the money personally to Paris. The friend claimed that the Iranian regime had gotten her to cooperate with them against Zam. Najafi, now reportedly in hiding, denies asking Zam to come to Iraq, and [told](#) the Iran International satellite channel that she asked Zam not to go, but he insisted.

On October 17, 2019, Iranian state-run television [reported](#) that IRGC agents arrested Zam in Iraqi Kurdistan, near the border with Iran. Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government denied that Zam had ever been in Iraqi Kurdistan. The IRGC has not disclosed where it arrested Zam, but an IRGC official [revealed](#) that the Guards had captured him with the cooperation of a foreign intelligence service.

After Zam's arrest, regime hardliners [accused](#) officials in President Hassan Rouhani's administration of leaking information to AmadNews, and one member of parliament claimed that several administration officials had been arrested for cooperating with Zam's website.

On October 23, 2019, an IRGC spokesperson [claimed](#) that the Guards had "already captured many of [Zam's] contacts inside the country." Media and others tied to the IRGC have [said](#) that finding Zam's network of sources is more important than capturing the activist himself.

Treatment in Captivity

The regime [forced](#) Zam to confess on Iranian television to engaging in "counter-revolutionary" actions at the direction of France. He [apologized](#) to the Islamic Republic, [said](#) he regretted "what has happened in the past three or four years," and stated that he was "wrong" to trust foreign governments like France's, and "especially governments that show they do not have good relations with the Islamic Republic," including the United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

Charges, Trial, and Sentencing

Zam's trial [began](#) on February 10, 2020, in Tehran's Revolutionary Court. It was presided over by [Judge Abolqassem Salavati](#), who is [nicknamed](#) "the Hanging Judge" or "the Judge of Death" for imposing harsh sentences, including capital punishment, in political cases. Zam was reportedly charged with either [15](#) or [17](#) counts, [including](#) "sowing corruption on earth"

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insulting “the sanctity of Islam,” and “conspiring with the US Government against the Islamic Republic of Iran”—all of which carry the death penalty—as well as having “committed offences against the country's internal and external security,” “complicity in provoking and luring people into war and slaughter,” “espionage for the French intelligence service,” “spying for Israeli intelligence services via the intelligence services of one of the countries in the region,” “establishment and administration of the Amad News channel and the Voice of People,” and “insulting Ruhollah Khomeini and Ali Khamenei.”

At trial in February, Zam reportedly [contested](#) the claim that the U.S. is an “enemy state.” He also admitted to meeting someone from the U.S. National Security Agency, but only regarding a visa application. At [another trial session in May](#), a prosecutor accused Ruhollah Zam of links to espionage activities and claimed Zam was not a member of the press. Zam disputed those claims, asserting that he operated as a journalist and broadcaster.

An Iranian judiciary spokesman [announced](#) on June 30, 2020, that Zam had been convicted and sentenced to death for 13 counts, which were grouped together and treated as cases of “sowing corruption on earth.” He was also sentenced to life in prison for [“several other charges,”](#) which were unnamed.

On December 10, 2020, an Iranian court [upheld](#) the death sentence against Zam. Zam has one more chance to appeal the decision under Iranian law, and the judiciary chief also has the power to cancel the ruling and order a retrial if he finds it was in violation of Sharia.

International Reaction

Zam’s wife, Mahsa Razani, who resides in France, [told](#) the BBC Persian Service that “My husband was abducted. I saw [reports] of his arrest on Iranian television and could not believe it until I saw the video when I realised he was kidnapped.”

After Zam’s abduction, the French foreign ministry [stated](#), “We reiterate our commitment to upholding the rule of law and in particular, the freedom of expression and the right of asylum, and therefore strongly confirm [sic; presumably “condemn” was intended] Ruhollah Zam’s arrest.” After Zam’s death sentence was announced, the foreign ministry [denounced](#) it as “a serious blow to freedom of expression and press freedom in Iran.”

Execution

On December 12, 2020, Iran’s state television reported Ruhollah Zam was executed.

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The European Union [condemned](#) in the “strongest terms” Zam’s execution, recalling “its irrevocable opposition to the use of capital punishment under any circumstances,” according to a statement from the EU’s External Action Service.

The French Foreign Ministry said in a [statement](#), “France condemns in the strongest possible terms this serious breach of free expression and press freedom in Iran. This is a barbaric and unacceptable act that goes against the country’s international commitments.”

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) [condemned](#) the execution and Amnesty International said it was “shocked and horrified” by Iran’s action.