

# *U.S. Reaches Deal With Iran to Free Americans for Jailed Iranians and Funds*

Five American detainees will eventually be allowed to leave Iran in exchange for Tehran gaining access to \$6 billion for humanitarian purposes and the United States freeing several jailed Iranians.

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The United States and Iran have reached an agreement to win the freedom of five imprisoned Americans in exchange for several jailed Iranians and eventual access to about \$6 billion in Iranian oil revenue, according to several people familiar with the deal.

As a first step in the agreement, which comes after more than two years of quiet negotiations, Iran has released five Iranian American dual citizens into house arrest, according to officials at the State Department and the National Security Council.

“This is just the beginning of a process that I hope and expect will lead to their return home to the United States,” Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken said on Thursday. “There’s more work to be done to actually bring them home. My belief is that this is the beginning of the end of their nightmare.”

The prisoners are Siamak Namazi, Emad Sharghi and Morad Tahbaz, who had all been jailed on unsubstantiated charges of spying, as well as two others whose families withheld their names. One of the unnamed Americans is a scientist, and the other is a businessman, according to two people briefed on the arrangements of the release.

The three named prisoners and one other person were transferred on Thursday from Evin Prison, one of the most notorious detention centers in Iran, to a hotel in Tehran, the capital, where they will be held for several weeks until they are allowed to board an airplane, Jared Genser, the lawyer for Mr. Namazi said. One other prisoner, an American woman, had been released into house arrest earlier, according to several people familiar with the arrangements who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the final deal.

“While I hope this will be the first step to their ultimate release, this is at best the beginning of the end and nothing more,” Mr. Genser said in a statement. “But there are simply no guarantees about what happens from here.”

He said the Americans were told they would be held at the hotel under guard by Iranian officials.

Ali Bagheri Kani, Iran’s deputy foreign minister and chief nuclear negotiator, said the United States and Iran had reached a deal for a prisoner exchange and the release of Iran’s billions of dollars of assets. He said Iran had received the “commitments necessary” from the United States that it would honor the deal. Iran’s state news agency, IRNA, reported that five Iranians would be released from American prisons in exchange for the five Americans released by Iran.

Iranian media presented the deal as a victory for the conservative administration of President Ebrahim Raisi and called it “honorable diplomacy.”

Biden administration officials declined to comment or to confirm details about what Iran will get in return. But the people familiar with the agreement said that when the Americans are allowed to return to the United States, the Biden administration will release a handful of Iranian nationals serving prison sentences for violating sanctions on Iran.

The United States will also transfer nearly \$6 billion of Iran's existing assets in South Korea, putting the funds into an account in the central bank of Qatar, according to the people familiar with the deal. The account will be controlled by the government of Qatar and regulated so Iran can gain access to the money only to pay vendors for humanitarian purchases such as medicine and food, they said.

The deal with Iran — a bitter adversary of the United States — is the latest in a series of high-profile prisoner swaps engineered in secret by the Biden administration in an effort to bring home Americans whom the State Department deems wrongfully detained in foreign countries.

Mr. Namazi, 51, was given a 10-year sentence and has been held in Evin Prison since 2015 on charges of “collaborating with a hostile state.” Mr. Sharghi, a businessman, was sentenced in 2020 to 10 years in prison on charges of spying. Mr. Tahbaz, a conservationist who was arrested in 2018, was sentenced to 10 years on charges of having “contacts with the U.S. government.”

All have denied the charges, and the United States has said the three were wrongfully detained. In a statement, Babak Namazi, Siamak's brother, said, “We have suffered tremendously and indescribably for eight horrific years and wish only to be reunited again as a family.”

Neda Sharghi, Emad's sister, said in a statement shared by their lawyer that “my family has faith in the work that President Biden and government officials have undertaken to bring our families home and hope to receive that news soon.”

Biden administration officials do not believe that there are other Americans being held in Iran. In 2020, officials in President Donald J. Trump's administration concluded that Robert A. Levinson, the retired F.B.I. agent who disappeared in Iran in 2007 on an unauthorized mission for the C.I.A., died while in Iranian custody, according to a statement from his family at the time.

Thursday's prisoner exchange deal was nearly completed in March but stalled when Iran detained one of the unnamed U.S. dual citizens, according to two Iranians close to the government who were familiar with the agreement. The United States demanded that the prisoner also be included, but Iran initially refused, the two Iranians said.

People familiar with the negotiations between the United States and Iran, which were mediated by Oman, Qatar and Switzerland, said the final deal took shape in recent months and that all sides had been working on the logistics for weeks.



Evin Prison in Tehran. After the American detainees are transferred from Evin Prison to a remote hotel, they will remain under house arrest until they board a plane to Qatar. Wana News Agency, via Reuters

Unlike previous prison swap deals when detainees immediately boarded a plane out of Iran, this exchange will take place in a series of coordinated steps, according to Ali Vaez, the Iran director for the International Crisis Group, a conflict prevention organization, who is familiar with the terms of the deal.

The Americans will be allowed to leave Iran once the money arrives in the Qatari bank account, a process expected to take four to six weeks because of the complexity of licensing and sanctions exemptions paperwork required for moving a large sum belonging to Iran, Mr. Vaez said. The detainees are expected to be taken to Doha, the Qatari capital, on a government airplane because of the central role Qatar played in brokering the deal, he said.

The Iranians detained in the United States can also leave for Doha for the exchange. But it is unclear whether they would want to because many live in the United States with their families, Mr. Vaez said.

A key part of the agreement has been the Biden administration's willingness to transfer the billions in oil revenue held in South Korea.

The planned release of the Iranian funds quickly generated controversy on Thursday. Republicans have condemned the idea of allowing Iran to have direct access to its frozen financial assets, which could end up in the hands of its elite military force, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, and be used to fund and arm militants across the Middle East.

In 2016, President Barack Obama settled a dispute with Tehran over a \$400 million arms deal as part of an agreement to release four American citizens detained in Iran. Republicans assailed the conclusion of negotiations to limit the country's nuclear ambitions as well as the settlement, calling it a ransom payment — an accusation Mr. Obama denied.

Former Vice President Mike Pence, who is running for the Republican presidential nomination, on Thursday lashed out at the new arrangement with Iran as “the largest ransom payment in American history to the Mullahs in Tehran.”

“China and Russia, who are also holding Americans hostages, now know the price has just gone up,” Mr. Pence wrote in a post on X, formerly known as Twitter.

The people familiar with the financial arrangement insisted that the transfer to allow Iran access to its own funds for humanitarian purposes is not a ransom payment and is not unprecedented.

Iran has opened similar accounts in more than a half-dozen other countries to accept payments for oil purchases from those governments despite U.S. sanctions that blocked the country from gaining access to the money for most purposes. Over the years, Iran has managed to spend funds held in India, Turkey and elsewhere as a result of exceptions to the sanctions for humanitarian needs.

Mr. Vaez said the Treasury Department had spent many months ensuring that the funds could be used only for humanitarian purposes.

“All Iran can do under this deal is submit orders to a bank in Doha for food and medicine and a limited number of medical equipment that do not have dual military use,” Mr. Vaez said. “The bank in Doha would pay for the goods, and Qatari companies would deliver them to Iran. Iran has no direct access to the funds at all.”

“The Biden administration has a strong argument,” Mr. Vaez added. “If you are against this deal, you are against Americans coming back home, and you are against Iranian people having access to food and medicine.”

The Tasnim news agency, which is affiliated with Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps, said that the process to transfer \$6 billion from South Korea had already started.

People familiar with the discussions said Brett H. McGurk, the coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa at the White House, met with officials in Oman in early May to discuss a prisoner swap with Iran.

The breakthrough comes as Washington and Tehran remain unable — despite extensive efforts — to reach an agreement to address tensions around Iran’s advancing nuclear program and heavy U.S. sanctions. More than a year of talks to restore the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, which President Donald J. Trump unilaterally abandoned in 2018, collapsed last summer.

While in Oman, Mr. McGurk led indirect talks with Iranian officials, with a goal of reaching an informal agreement under which Iran would cap its enrichment of uranium material to a level below what was needed to fashion a nuclear weapon and to limit its military aid to Russia, among other objectives. In return, the United States would agree not to tighten sanctions or pursue certain other punitive measures against Iran in international forums.

U.S. officials have long insisted that their diplomacy to free imprisoned Americans is not directly connected to talks related to Iran’s nuclear program. Analysts say additional progress by Iran toward a nuclear weapon could prompt military action by Israel, the United States or both countries. Iran maintains that its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes and denies it is pursuing a bomb.

In late May, the sultan of Oman went to Iran to meet with Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the country’s supreme leader. They discussed a swap, according to people familiar with the discussions.

Mr. Biden has made bringing home detainees a priority during his first years in office. In March, the United States secured the release of Paul Rusesabagina, a human rights activist detained in Rwanda. In December, Russia agreed to release Brittney Griner, an American basketball star, in exchange for Viktor Bout, a convicted Russian arms dealer known as the Merchant of Death.

But others remain in detention. In March, Russia accused the Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich of espionage and detained him. Mr. Biden has said his administration is working on the release of Mr. Gershkovich.

The Biden administration’s recent Iran diplomacy has been complicated by the absence of its Iran envoy, Robert Malley, who was placed on unpaid leave in late June amid a review of his security clearance. The State Department has not explained the reason for the review.

Michael Crowley contributed reporting from Washington.

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