

GLOBAL

# Iran Will Keep Taking Hostages If the Money Keeps Flowing

Those of us who have survived Iran's prison system rejoice when hostages are freed. But we also worry about what our governments trade away.

By Kylie Moore-Gilbert



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AUGUST 25, 2023

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The first time I saw Siamak Namazi was while I was in my cell in Evin Prison, in Tehran. I didn't realize it at the time, but the longest-held American hostage in Iran was being kept only a few hundred meters away from where I crouched on stained and threadbare carpet, my eyes fixed on a dusty wall-mounted television screen. I didn't understand Farsi back then, but I knew *Amrika*, and had come to recognise the word *jasoos*, too, given the abandon with which the term was thrown about the interrogation room.

This gaunt, bookish-looking man on my screen, whose hollow eyes flitted toward the camera every few seconds—he was supposed to be “America's top spy”?

I was more incredulous still when the narrator cut to footage of an elderly man with wispy white hair and a kind face: Baquer Namazi. Suspenseful music played over dramatically backlit images of father and son posing with flags and symbols of the Great Satan. The bold and noble Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) had captured two dangerous American infiltrators, bravely rescuing Iran from an ungodly, diabolical plot.

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Part of me wanted to groan, or roll my eyes, or even laugh. But I had learned to be wary. I felt a deep disquiet seep into my gut. The Namazis' charges were ludicrous, but they were also deadly serious. In a place like Iran, people are routinely executed for less.

The first time I saw Morad Tahbaz was through the back window of a meeting room attached to the prison duty officer's station. Tahbaz was the first defendant in a group case involving Iran's premier environmental-conservation NGO, and two of his co-defendants were my cellmates. They had told me that Tahbaz had been moved from the men's section of our IRGC-controlled interrogation unit to what was referred to as “the villa,” a self-contained room with a small garden annex where the IRGC prefers to keep long-term prisoners, such as the *Washington Post* reporter Jason Rezaian. The conditions were supposed to be better there, and as a British American, Tahbaz was one of the IRGC's highest-value prisoners. I watched Tahbaz pace


listlessly around a narrow, paved courtyard, stopping to inspect a leafy potted plant before retreating back inside. He was rumored to have survived cancer while in custody. Even back then, in 2019, there were murmurs of a deal to secure his freedom—a deal that never materialized, until now.

From my chats with low-level IRGC functionaries, I understood there to be a ranking of sorts as to which foreign prisoners fetch the highest price. Complete foreigners are generally more valuable than dual-nationals. Western Europe is better than Eastern Europe is better than Japan. The Chinese whisk their citizens away in a matter of months; detainees from the developing world can expect to serve their sentences in full. Americans and Israelis are the most expensive hostages to extract, and are therefore the most coveted.


“At least you’re not an American” was a phrase I’d sometimes hear from Iranian political prisoners trying to encourage me not to lose hope. As an Australian researcher arrested after being invited to attend an academic conference in Iran, I was lower down the value chain than Siamak Namazi or Morad Tahbaz, but my freedom was still considered worthy of significant concessions. I served two years and three months in two Iranian prisons before being exchanged in a prisoner swap for three convicted IRGC terrorists held in Thailand. Like Namazi, Tahbaz, and a third American hostage, Emad Shargi, who are reportedly on the cusp of being freed under an agreement between the United States and Iran, I had received a 10-year sentence for the wholly unsubstantiated charge of espionage.

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Dealmaking with the Islamic Republic is a grubby business, albeit one that is becoming normalized given the sheer frequency with which Iran is now resorting to hostage-taking to achieve foreign-policy, or even budgetary, objectives. Hostage diplomacy is on the rise worldwide, as the global rules-based order is buffeted by a resurgent authoritarianism coupled with the growing international perception of a United States in decline. Iran is one of

its most egregious perpetrators, and so far Tehran has been able to simultaneously defy both international human-rights principles and basic laws of economics in commanding higher and higher prices for a proliferation of foreign hostages held in its prisons.

Namazi, Tahbaz, and Shargi are the public faces of the latest iteration of Iran's lucrative hostage-taking enterprise, which has reportedly secured the Islamic Republic both a prisoner exchange, involving Iranian nationals held in American prisons, and the transfer of \$6 billion in Iranian funds frozen in South Korean banks under sanctions. This is the second cash-for-hostages deal between Iran and the United States this century. The first involved \$1.7 billion in frozen assets from a historical arms purchase, which the Obama administration transferred in 2016 in conjunction with the certification of the JCPOA nuclear deal, and contingent upon the release, officially, of four American citizens, including Rezaian. A similar deal was reached between Iran and the U.K. in 2022, in which a historical military debt of £400 million was transferred to Tehran in exchange for two British Iranian hostages.

Every time a hostage is freed, those of us who have survived Iran's prison system collectively rejoice. We are a surprisingly large cohort, and our numbers swell further as Iran's hostage-taking grows bolder and more blatant. Namazi, Tahbaz, Shargi, and two other Americans whose names have not been released have been removed from prison and placed under house arrest, in anticipation of the second phase of the deal: the arrival of the \$6 billion into a Qatari bank account. The Qataris will ostensibly act as guarantors to ensure that the Iranians use these funds only for humanitarian purposes.

Such provisions should be taken with a healthy dose of skepticism, however. Nothing is preventing Iran from, for example, moving the equivalent of \$6 billion from school and hospital funding across to the military or the IRGC, before plugging the gap with the South Korean money. Although our community of former Iran hostages is thrilled that five innocent Americans are soon to be freed, many of us have felt compelled to speak out against any deal that might conceivably incentivize Iran's hostage-taking further.

I remember the moment I was released from Evin as though it was yesterday: A flurry of bureaucracy, last-minute taunts from my IRGC captors, a furtive final glance at the gray and soulless courtyard at the entrance of the interrogation unit. Being forced to stand in front of the gates of Evin to film a bizarre interview, excerpts from which would make it into a 15-minute-long propaganda clip that aired on that evening's news broadcast. The IRGC's opulent private hangar at Mehrabad airport. Squeezing the Australian ambassador's hand goodbye as she led me up the stairs to board the plane that would spirit me out of Iranian airspace. And finally, the feeling that I could breathe deeply again, for the first time in nearly two and a half years.

I am overjoyed for Namazi, Tahbaz, Shargi, and the others. I know that all five of them right now are probably tempering their elation with pragmatism, warning themselves not to be seduced by false hope. One year into my incarceration, I was left behind in a prisoner-swap deal that saw two Australian backpackers released from Evin. I know that the American hostages will be reminding themselves that nothing is over until it's actually over. Namazi and Tahbaz have also felt the pain of being left behind: \$1.7 billion was not enough to buy Namazi's freedom in 2016, and Tahbaz, also a British national, was left out of last year's £400 million deal with the U.K. I can't speak for what they are feeling, but I suspect they would be aghast to know that, in spite of the eye-watering sum of money involved, the current deal will once again leave U.S. nationals behind.

Late last month, when news of a new American hostage deal began circulating, it was reported that U.S. negotiators had angered their Iranian counterparts by seeking to add one additional American to the deal at the last minute. The families of two U.S. permanent residents, considered U.S. nationals under the 2020 Robert Levinson Hostage Recovery and Hostage-Taking Accountability Act, had been campaigning vocally for their loved ones' inclusion. One of these, Virginia resident Shahab Dalili, was reported in Iranian media to be the unnamed American. Dalili has already served seven years of a 10-year sentence, yet his family has been waiting for the State Department to formally grant him "wrongfully detained" status since 2019. Although such a designation is not a requirement for the U.S. government to negotiate a prisoner's release, it elevates the management of the detainee's case to the Office of the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs (SPEHA), which is explicitly tasked with bringing Americans home. Under the Levinson Act, permanent residents as well as citizens are eligible for SPEHA representation.

Similarly, the lawyer of California resident Jamshid Sharmahd applied to the State Department for a wrongful-detention designation within a month of Sharmahd's shocking abduction by IRGC agents from Dubai International Airport in July 2020. The Sharmahd family is still awaiting the U.S. government's decision, in spite of the fact that the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention ruled that Jamshid was a victim of arbitrary detention back in April 2022 and called for his immediate release. He was a legal resident of the United States for almost 20 years and is owed protection under the Levinson Act, but the State Department continues to deflect responsibility onto Germany, where he holds citizenship. Sharmahd has been sentenced to death in Iran and could be executed at any moment.

We know that Dalili has heard of the deal, because he has already recounted his anguish at being left out of it to his family on the phone from Evin Prison. This is a kind of despair that eats away at you from inside. You feel abandoned and worthless; you see year after pointless year stretching out before you on an endless loop; you find that your carefully cultivated and closely guarded will to go on has somehow evaporated.

That some hostages are simply more valuable than others has long been the case. Just ask former Marine Paul Whelan, who has been left behind twice now in American prisoner swaps with Russia, and might even suffer this fate a third time as the State Department negotiates with Moscow over the *Wall Street Journal* reporter Evan Gershkovich. The feeling that you are one of the unimportant ones, that someone has judged your freedom not worth whatever resources must be expended—this pain diminishes even the pure elation of eventually gaining one's liberty.

The public outcry against the current deal, particularly from the Iranian American community as well as among Iranians themselves, has in my mind been largely justified. The United States has long been resolute in refusing to negotiate with non-state-actor hostage-takers, including terrorist groups, yet has found itself led down a slippery slope by a notoriously slippery Iranian regime whose hostage-taking apparatus is dominated by the IRGC, which is itself a proscribed terrorist organization. The exchange of \$1.7 billion for four hostages in 2016 has become \$6 billion for five hostages in 2023, yet in spite of the enormous markup, U.S. nationals are still being left behind. What is worse, Iran emerges from this deal further emboldened and motivated to take yet more hostages, perhaps in exchange for other large sums of sanctioned money frozen abroad in places such as Japan.

Six billion dollars is an awfully large amount of money. It could cover a hell of a lot of arms shipped to Hezbollah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Ansarullah. It could cover the salaries of thousands of Basij and IRGC militiamen, with additional bonuses for torturing, raping, and beating protesters. And it could keep the children of regime officials in overseas property and luxury goods for many lifetimes.

Cash-for-hostages deals encourage regimes like Iran's to view innocent human lives as commodities that can be bought and traded for profit. Over the decades, the Islamic Republic has refined its hostage-taking business model into an extortion racket that is one of its most powerful foreign-policy levers. As long as countries like the United States are willing to acquiesce to its insatiable demands for ever-increasing sums of ransom, we can expect Iran to commodify a seemingly endless supply of hostages.

International cooperation is clearly necessary if Iran's behavior is to be curtailed in any systematic way. The Islamic Republic now targets the citizens of a wide array of Western nations; our governments should be on the same page as to how to respond when a citizen is taken, so that the approach of one country does not inadvertently undermine another's. But even in the absence of such a multilateral accord, the United States can adopt a much stronger response than it has done.

Financial payments, regardless of where the funds come from, provide an incentive for hostage-taking, and as such they are fundamentally at odds with the U.S. government's responsibility to ensure the security of its citizens. They are also a slap in the face to the brave people of Iran, many of whom are in the streets, risking their life to denounce the regime in the name of freedom, democracy, and gender equality—values that America professes to hold dear. The U.S. government should be no less steadfast in refusing to pay state-backed hostage-takers like the IRGC (a proscribed terrorist organization) than it is when the Islamic State (also a proscribed terrorist organization) or another non-state actor captures an American.

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The U.S. government needs to understand that Iran's regime views conciliatory measures, such as declining to enforce sanctions, not as friendly gestures to smooth the path to negotiation, but as signals of weakness. Instead the United States should come up with a firm, punitive response to any further Iranian hostage-taking and announce this policy publicly, leaving the Islamic Republic no doubt as to America's determination to follow through. Punishing and wide-ranging sanctions should be on the table, as should a crackdown on assets and visas for the family members of top regime officials, many thousands of whom live or study in the West. Such an approach could be modeled on the successful campaign targeting Russia's oligarchs that followed the invasion of Ukraine. The United States should also press allied countries to follow its lead in listing the IRGC as a terrorist organization.

We can welcome the release of Siamak Namazi, Morad Tahbaz, Emad Shargi, and others, and at the same time call for an end to cash-for-hostages deals that reward and enrich nasty authoritarian regimes such as the Islamic Republic. Hostage diplomacy is a wicked conundrum that offers no clean solution: Every option available to diplomats is a bad one, and every action risks either consigning victims to indefinite suffering or creating new ones. The American way is not, nor should it be, to abandon innocent citizens detained overseas. Washington should continue to negotiate for its hostages abroad and to find creative ways to bring them home. But there should be no more cash bonanzas for hostage-takers, and punitive measures should be publicly and preemptively adopted to send a clear signal that in the future hostage diplomacy will be punished and discouraged, not tolerated and rewarded.

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