

# Why Is Iran Imprisoning Iranian-Americans?

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Press reports over the space of one week in late October said three Iranian-Americans had received lengthy prison sentences in Iran. Reza Shahini, a California resident visiting family members, was sentenced to an eighteen-year prison term. Businessman Siamak Namazi and his elderly father, Baquer, a former UNICEF employee, were sentenced to ten-year terms a week later. As with previous such arrests in recent years, theirs were carried out by hard-liner forces in the country's law-enforcement agencies. Though the charges they faced were vague, arrested foreigners are typically accused of participating in fantastic plots to overthrow the theocratic Iranian state. In all, at least six Americans and two Iranian citizens with U.S. green cards are reported to be [imprisoned or have vanished](#) in Iran.



*Washington Post* reporter Jason Rezaian waves to media shortly after his release from Iranian prison. (Photo: Kai Pfaffenbach/Reuters)

What is behind the arrests? As always with Iran, there may not be conclusive answers. The regime's contradictions and ambiguities are particularly apparent in these cases. Iran has indulged in its share

of mixed-messaging as well. Its diplomats abroad frequently meet with Iranian expatriates and invite them to return to Iran, seeking to tap the diaspora's talents for its economic development. Some of these expatriates have landed in the notorious Evin prison, sparking questions about the motives behind such moves.

The regime has several possible motives. Foremost is a concern about internal discord. In a recent speech, the head of the [\*\*Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps\*\*](#), Mohammad Ali Jafari, said that since 2005, Iran's leadership has seen the risk of internal insurrection as its top security concern. This notion was validated in 2009, when President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's fraudulent re-election sparked massive protests. The demonstrations that engulfed Iran that summer were even larger than those of the Arab Spring, in 2011. The regime took extraordinarily harsh measures to repress the protests.

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Though the 2009 protests have largely been forgotten in the West, they remain a constant concern of Iran's right-wing circles. Nearly every day, conservative papers such as Kayhan carry stories about how external actors and their domestic accomplices conspired to organize the demonstrations. These external actors range from the Central Intelligence Agency to the BBC to Western think tanks. Iranian-Americans have been added to this ever-growing list.

Hard-line sectors of the Iranian government, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, and the Guardian Council, have long equated academic research with espionage and commercial ventures with acts of subversion. Seeing enemies lurking everywhere, they have established elaborate means for addressing what they describe as the threat of "soft revolutions" instigated from abroad. By blaming external forces, the hard-liners conveniently ignore that the regime is unpopular and only hangs on by the threat of force. Iranian-Americans who move comfortably between the two societies thus represent a tempting target. In the hard-liners' suspicious minds, expatriates who are familiar with Iran yet infested with Western mores could serve an insidious role as stokers of dissent.

### **Contaminating Influences?**

Khamenei and his hard-line allies also fear the "China model." Communist China embraced state capitalism in the 1980s, leading to stunning economic growth. Along with its integration into the global economy, however, came a Western cultural onslaught—the introduction of movies and

music—that has transformed China’s major urban centers. In today's China there is nothing really communist about the ruling Communist Party. Iranian hard-liners worry that any opening to the West—nearly 60 percent of Iranians are under the age of thirty—will cause their youth to be absorbed by its cultural influences and decadence, robbing Iran of its ideological identity. It is a losing battle. With the advent of the internet and social media, Iranian youth are readily turning to Western dramas and music. Still, it is a battle that the hard-liners and their thought police are intent on waging.

The nuclear arms control agreement signed by Iran and major world powers represented a unique threat to the hard-liners. Khamenei and his allies insisted that such an agreement did not mean that Iran was ready to open up and welcome foreigners. They view commerce with suspicion, fearing it will be the **harbinger of unwelcomed change** and that reliance on exports and foreign creditors will diminish Iran's independence.

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In the view of many hard-liners, Iran must rely on its indigenous resources, not Western investment, to economically develop. As Revolutionary Guard commander Ebadollah Adullah said in November 2016, “Today we see the people who desperately try to import capital from outside. However, if we had a source of trust in society, the people would have put their money in the economy instead of depositing it in banks. Then there will be no need for attracting foreign capital.” A state that is isolated from the West is one that is best capable of sustaining its revolutionary values. Iran cannot go the way of China. Thus, visiting Iranian-Americans have become a convenient target for such hard-liners. By imprisoning them, the regime signals that it is not ready to open up and will act with vengeance and arbitrariness against those it identifies as agents of subversion.

### **The Hostage Trade**

Locking up dual nationals serves a dual purpose. In addition to striking a blow against perceived disruptive influences, the regime uses the imprisoned expatriates as bargaining leverage. Washington Post journalist Jason Rezaian and several other imprisoned Iranian-Americans were released as the United States sent \$400 million to Iran. The Obama administration denied it was a ransom, saying instead that it was repayment for funds seized in 1979. Still, the release of prisoners is surely seen by some circles in Tehran as an effective means of drawing money from an enemy that has presided over punishing sanctions for decades.

This was not the first time the United States and Iran have exchanged money for hostages. The Reagan administration in 1985 and 1986 sold Iran arms in exchange for the release of U.S. hostages held in

Lebanon by the Iranian proxy group Hezbollah.

The plight of innocent Americans languishing in prisons takes an emotional toll on presidents and their advisors. Ronald Reagan was haunted by the specter of his countrymen being held in prison, and his visits with their families left him anguished. This led Reagan to pursue [an unsavory deal with Iran](#) that ultimately scandalized his administration and tarnished his presidency. Similar humanitarian reasons may have led the Obama administration to make its own exchange with Iran.

The dilemma of how to deal with American hostages in Iran will now fall to the Trump administration. In the end, it is impossible to know why the country's hard-line elements have undertaken this latest spate of arresting Iranian-Americans. The regime's paranoid style of politics, fear of Western inroads, and greed may be among the motives. But what is clear is that innocent people are trapped in an arbitrary system of justice in which they face fabricated charges and harsh conditions. Their tragedy should be a reminder of the true nature of the Islamic Republic.