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Iran's Growing List of Hostages

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In recent months, Iran's hostile regime has again resorted to one of its favorite tactics: taking hostages to advance its aggressive foreign policy. Iranian hardliners have learned that taking hostages helps them gain concessions from foreign governments and enables them to conjure up external enemies as convenient bogeymen to unify Iranians under their own radical leadership. Hostage-taking helped propel Iranian hardliners to power after the 1979 seizure of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran; it helped them secure American weapons and spare parts for their war against Iraq during the 1985–1986 Iran-Contra affair; and it paid off earlier this year when the seizure of 15 British sailors in Iraqi territorial waters enabled Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to puff himself up on the world stage. The U.S. must firmly demand the release of Iran's newest hostages and rule out making any concessions that would encourage Iran to take more hostages in the future.

Iran's latest round of hostage-taking has netted it four Iranian-American dual nationals and perhaps another American who went missing in Iran. The most prominent hostage is Haleh Esfandiari, director of the Middle East Program at the Washington-based Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, who was arrested May 8 after four months under house arrest and several weeks of questioning. Esfandiari, who traveled to Iran last year to visit her ailing 93-year-old mother, was prevented from leaving the country in December after her American and Iranian passports were stolen by thugs (a favorite tactic of Iran's secret police) while she was en route to the airport to return home.

Iran's Intelligence Ministry charges that Esfandiari, a 67-year-old grandmother, was involved in a propaganda campaign to foment a "soft revolution" against the brutal clerical regime. Kian Tajbakhsh, an Iranian-American sociologist working for the Open Society Institute, has also been charged with seeking the overthrow of the Iranian government. He and Esfandiari are being held in Tehran's notorious Evin Prison, which contains many other Iranian political prisoners and dissidents.

They may soon be joined by Ali Shakeri, a peace activist, and Parnaz Azima, a correspondent working for Radio Farda (the joint Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty–Voice of America Persian-language radio broadcast to Iran), who have also been held on trumped-up charges. Azima's passport was confiscated by Iranian authorities when she arrived in February 2007, also to visit a sick mother. On May 15, she was informed that she was charged due to her work for Radio Farda, which Iranian prosecutors claim is "an institution that spreads propaganda against the Islamic Republic."

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty President Jeffrey Gedmin blasted the Tehran regime for its heavy-handed behavior: "There is absolutely no reason for

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Iranian authorities to be treating Ms. Azima in this way. She was traveling to Iran on private business when her passport was seized. I find it ludicrous that Iranian authorities feel the need to criminalize a daughter's desire to visit her severely ill mother."

A fifth American, a private investigator named Robert Levinson, disappeared in early March during a visit to Iran's Kish Island and is believed to be held by the Iranian authorities. Levinson, a retired FBI agent, reportedly had traveled to Iran to investigate a matter on behalf of a private client.

The five Americans may have become pawns in Tehran's efforts to force the release of five Iranian revolutionary guards captured by U.S. troops in Iraq in January. The regime likely hopes that supporters of the hostages will pressure the Bush Administration to release the Iranian detainees and even blame U.S. policy for the hostages' predicament. But Esfandiari was blocked from leaving Iran the month before the Iranians were detained. This suggests that her case also may be related to the regime's goals on other fronts, particularly its ongoing crackdown on political dissent.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has presided over a systematic campaign against political dissidents, human rights activists, labor leaders, and women's rights activists since coming to power in 2005. Liberal professors and student leaders have been purged from Iran's universities. Many newspapers have been closed down, journalists have been punished, and bloggers have been arrested for criticizing the regime. By targeting the four dual U.S.-Iranian citizens, Tehran is sending a chilling

message to the Iranian diaspora, particularly in America, that its liberal influence is not welcome. And it seeks to deter Iranians hungry for political and economic reforms from associating with foreign organizations.

Haleh Esfandiari's arrest is ironic; she is an advocate of dialogue with Iran and the restoration of diplomatic relations. But it should not be surprising. Iran's hardliners oppose détente with the U.S. because it contradicts their ideology, which calls for unceasing hostility to the "Great Satan." Moreover, they see improved relations with the U.S. as a potential threat to their grip on power.

Iran's radical regime essentially holds 65 million Iranians as hostages. As long as that situation continues, Iranian hardliners will not think twice about taking foreign hostages to advance their goals. The United States should help Iranians to free themselves, not make concessions that would reward a repressive regime for taking more hostages.

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