Hostage-Taking as a Weapon Against Western Democracies

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The unlawful detention of foreign citizens for leverage and concessions has historically been used by autocratic regimes, including Iran, ever since the 1979 Tehran hostage crisis. The tactic is being currently used by Iran in trying to swindle governments to get what it wants in an effective attempt to try to negotiate with the United States and Europe. Iran plays on the fact that democracies are committed to looking after a fellow citizen in danger. There is a real risk that hostage-taking becomes a norm in autocratic attempts to coerce the West.

Arbitrary Hostage-Taking as an Attempt to Achieve Geopolitical Goals

As we see authoritarian regimes such as Russia, Iran, China, and North Korea increasingly rely on the imprisonment of foreign citizens to get concessions from Western democracies. This issue has become more serious than ever as conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East keep the stakes high at every level.

Let's look at the case of Evan Gershkovich, an American journalist accused of espionage and detained over a year in a Russian prison between 2023 and 2024. It is important to note that he was released, along with other Western political dissidents, as a result of negotiations involving several actors and an exchange with the Russian convicted murderer Vadim Krasikov. Krasikov had been found guilty in 2021 of terrorism and murder of a rebel leader in Berlin. This exchange occurred within the context of the war in Ukraine, signaling a new era for what might be defined as "hostage diplomacy".

Similarly, Iranian authorities have increasingly imprisoned Westerners to trade them with money, or just to get what the regime wants. Hostage diplomacy is part of the Iranian asymmetric war on the West, trying to leverage foreign citizens to get concessions and overcome its diplomatic isolation and the economic sanctions regime Teheran is subjected to. As such, hostage diplomacy is part of the growing range of hybrid security threats that characterize the currently insecure geopolitical environment.

We see the Iranian regime currently exploiting this tactic also because it has proved effective. As democracies care about their citizens, so there is democratic and public pressure on leaders to do something to free one of its citizens unjustly imprisoned. That is the case for Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, who has spoken to Cecilia Sala's family and recently visited Donald Trump in Mar-a-Lago, to push for cooperation or the approval of a prisoner swap with Abedini.

Cecilia Sala's Imprisonment by Iranian Authorities: A Tactical Use of Hostage-Taking Against the West

The young Italian foreign correspondent Cecilia Sala was imprisoned in Iran on 19. December 2024, in what appears to be an attempt to use the journalist as a bargaining chip in its relations with the United States and Europe. The arrest, which came with the accusation that Sala was "violating the laws of the Islamic Republic", seems to be intertwined with the previous detention of the Iranian businessman Mohammad Abedini. On 16. December 2024, Abedini was arrested by Italian authorities under a US warrant at Milan Malpensa Airport.

Abedini is accused of being involved in an Iranian-led drone attack in Jordan that killed three American troops. Neither the US Justice Department nor the Italian government have officially declared a link between the

two imprisonments, while the Iranian regime has declared no connection between the two arrests. Yet, the Islamic Republic of Iran has used Western prisoners as "political leverage" ever since the 1979 US Embassy crisis in Teheran.

The case transformed into an international diplomatic crisis, that highlights how common it is becoming for authoritarian regimes to use hostage-taking as a tactic against Western powers. This is exemplified by Russia's detention of the Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich, who was released in August 2024 after more than a year of detention.

A prisoner swap is the most reasonable and actionable solution to such a crisis. Yet, it will not solve the issue of the increasing level of aggressiveness coming from Iran, directed at the United States and its allies like Italy. The Italian government surely was not expecting to be involved in the US-Iran geopolitical tensions. It is unclear if the next President of the United States would have approved the fact that an Iranian engineer designated by the US as a terrorism facilitator might be freed to save an Italian journalist.

Indeed, the Italian and Iranian intelligence and foreign affairs ministries cooperated effectively in making sure that Cecilia Sala was safe and able to do her job freely. Cecilia Sala flew back to Italy on 8. January 2025, thanks to "diplomacy and teamwork", as Italy's Foreign Affairs Minister Antonio Tajani stated on X.

To conclude, arbitrary hostage-taking has always been used, but this new and more frequent use of the tactic should serve as a warning to democratic governments. As autocracies keep on leveraging democracies' care for their citizens, leading them to negotiations and concessions, democratic leaders need to push back and try to deter such coercive tactic.