



President Trump to reshape American Hostage policy

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“Hostage deals in times of crisis enable the U.S. on the one hand to adhere its long standing policy according to which it does not negotiate terror, and on the other leverage a crisis or a unique need of the counterpart for promoting U.S. interests and obtain the release of American Captives”

The Trump administration announced on March 19th, 2020 that two American citizens, held in Iran and Lebanon have been released at the same day; Mr. Fakhouri, a NH resident was put on a USAF plane on his way home after spending many months in a Beirut prison under a false allegation that he had abused Lebanese prisoners in the 1990s, while the IDF held positions in Southern Lebanon. Per the Trump administration, Hezbollah was behind the Fakhouri detainment, attempting to pressure the latter to change its policy vis a vis Lebanon and particularly Hezbollah, in light of the mounting U.S. sanctions imposed on Hezbollah (designation as a terror organization, financial and personal sanctions, etc.). Similarly, Michael White, a US Navy veteran and a cancer victim, was sentenced in the summer of 2018 to 13 years in prison for “insulting the supreme leader Khamenei in public”. The timing of White’s sentencing coincided with the shift in the U.S. policy vis a vis the nuclear agreement (JCPOA) and the subsequent retirement of the U.S. from it. These days, a deal has been struck between the parties and White has been transferred to the Swiss embassy in Tehran [the Swiss have been serving as the U.S.-Iran communications channel for years], pending the conclusion of the deal and his return to his California home in the near future.

On the other side of the “pond”, it was the French president, Macron, who has arrived at similar understandings with the Rouhani Regime. Roland Marcel, a French citizen, was released on March 21, after he was sentenced for five years in jail for false allegations of security breaches. In return for Marcel’s release, France released an Iranian engineer who has been incarcerated for violating the sanctions against Iran and associate with IRGC.

In between the lines, it would seem that the outbreak of COVID-19, served as a catalyst to close the deals in the U.S.-France-Iran (and Lebanon its proxy) triangle, in light of the widespread scope and severity of the COVID-19 outbreak in Iran and the concerns for the lives of the foreign citizens imprisonment. Further, judging from Trump’s suggestion to provide humanitarian aid to Iran, it seems that the outbreak even served as a leverage to close the MIA deal on terms that were convenient to the Trump administration. That said, Iran and other countries hostile to the U.S., such as Maduro’s Venezuela, are still holding under false allegations, American captives.

For decades, The U.S. formal hardline policy does not negotiate with terror and refuse to be extorted by states and terror organizations that hold American captives. Robert O'Brien, President's Trump National Security Advisor and formerly the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs (named by President Trump as "Chief Hostage negotiator"), clarified in his speech at the 19th ICT Conference (September 2019, Herzliya, Israel), that the U.S. policy is still firm on this sensitive and important issue, to both the administration and the families of the captives alike - the U.S. does not negotiate with terrorists and will not be extorted. Yet, in the ever-changing global landscape, the Middle East included, the U.S identifies opportunities that will serve its hostage affairs policy while bringing about an early release as possible of American citizens held captive.

Indeed, kidnapping foreign citizens and holding them hostage is not a new phenomenon, especially in the Middle East and aside from being one of terrorism's chronic hallmarks, it is also intended to serve economic, regional and political interests. Thus, given a political will by leaders on both sides, hostage release deals tend to get closed if they serve two combined goals: (i) diverting the local public interest from other pressing matters; (ii) to reap significant hostage affairs achievements which get significant public attention and appreciation and translate into increased favorability ratings.

These kinds of deals in times of crisis for the involved states enable the U.S. on the one hand, to adhere to its long standing policy according to which it doesn't negotiate with terror (and terror sponsoring states) and on the other leverage a crisis or a unique need of the counterpart state to promote U.S. interests and obtain the release of prisoners while reaping the accolades in the media and the public as well as the gratitude of the families of the released prisoners. President Trump cultivate such deals, as an area of significant foreign-policy success in his presidency. The party holding the prisoners is in some sort of a bind (economic, political, security, etc.) and the U.S. has relative advantage that can be leveraged to different form of payment, in the sense the release is a part of a larger scale solution or deal and therefore doesn't fall under the narrative of hostage negotiation which ends with payment to the captor but rather the release and the consideration the captor gets is merely a stage in a larger scale deal.

Practically speaking, since the negotiations in such matters are volatile they are usually being conducted via a mediator (in the U.S.-Iran case, the Swiss ambassador to Tehran) and obscurity as to the terms of the deal is kept even upon the repatriation of the hostage to his homeland (vs. public prisoners release deals). Even so, it is evident that the consideration to Iran was on the civil-

humanitarian-economic level, while preserving obscurity regarding other more sensitive components, if there were any.

As we understand the deal, the consideration given to Iran was purely on the civil level and no component addressed any core security or political issue between Iran and the U.S. nor did the deal change the longstanding policy the U.S. has regarding Iran. In this spirit, based on the sense of success and the favorable outcome Iran enjoyed in the latest hostage affair, if Iranian street economic or public health situation will worsen in the foreseeable future, there is a possibility that Tehran will be more flexible on more complex issues, such as the nuclear issue, its presence in Syria and other core sensitive issues, let alone release other Americans held captive.

One way or the other, it seems that the American modus operandi is trickling into other countries, such as France. The “business-defense paradigm” shaped by President Trump may be an interesting case study for Israeli government in its efforts to wear down the Iranian intentions and interests beyond its borders, such as its combined military and political effort to push Iran away from Syria, the Hezbollah buildup in Lebanon and other regional challenges.

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