

Foreign Policy Institute - Ankara

Author - Peder Sjöman

Hostage Diplomacy: Iran and Sweden, Possible Forced Prisoner Exchange

Introduction

The Swedish EU official, Johan Floderus, has surpassed 600 days in Tehran's infamous, Evin prison, with more than 300 days reportedly spent in isolation. Floderus was on a holiday and was heading home, when he was detained at Tehran airport on suspicion of espionage. For about 30 minutes each week, Johan found himself permitted to walk, exposed briefly to air and sunlight in the prison. The illumination within the cell persisted around the clock, and the process did demand a hunger strike, after more than nine months in prison, to finally secure his first return home-call to his family (SVT, The family: The imprisoned Swede's human rights are violated in the Iranian prison). The uncertainty looms over Floderus fate whether a return to Sweden, a prison sentence in Iran, or even the possibility of facing the death penalty will occur. The charges against Mr. Floderus allege espionage on behalf of Israel, invoking the gravest accusation in Iran's legal framework known as "Corruption on Earth" which carries the death penalty as the highest form of punishment.

The case has been criticized by both the Swedish Foreign Ministry and the EU's Foreign Policy Chief, Josep Borell, who stated that: "I really want to emphasize that I personally and my entire team at all levels, in close cooperation with the Swedish authorities and the man's family, have pressed for Iran to release him, he says, adding that they will not give up until he is free." and "At every diplomatic meeting, at every level, we have raised the issue. Tirelessly." (SVT, EU: Working "tirelessly" for Johan Floderus). Sweden's Foreign Minister, Tobias Billström, wrote in an undisclosed statement to Sweden's state media, SVT: "The government has worked and is working very intensively on the case. The person in question is being arbitrarily detained and must therefore be released immediately...". A number of such statements have come in various media contexts, but the events occurring behind the scenes or in closed-door discussions remain uncertain.

The dilemma

The emerging understanding is that Iran is seeking a prisoner exchange involving the two Swedish citizens, Johan Floderus and Ahmadreza Djalali, an exchange for the convicted Iranian, Hamid Noury. Djalali already faces a confirmed death sentence from the Iranian revolution court in 2017. The *Stockholm district court* sentenced the Iranian citizen, Hamid Noury, to life imprisonment for participation in mass executions in Iran in 1988. The district court verdict claims that Noury selected prisoners, who were then to be brought before a committee that subsequently determined whether they were to face execution or not. Noury did deny the accusation. Recently, Noury was again convicted by the *Supreme Court of Appeal* for grave crimes against international law, from his involvement in the executions (SVT, New verdict against Iranian Hamid Noury today). The day after the court confirmed the sentence against Noury, swiftly, information emerged from state media in Iran indicating that the trial against Floderus had resumed. In contrast to the abrupt commencement of the trial in early December, which was swiftly adjourned, Floderus was accompanied by Sweden's Charge d'affaires from the Swedish Embassy in Tehran during this subsequent proceeding as it was denied during the first day in court (SVT, Trial against Swedish Johan Floderus resumed in Iran). The fact that the trial swiftly followed Noury's sentencing underscores that this is purely a political maneuver on Iran's part. Simultaneously, the day after Noury's sentence was established, Iranian state media spread a propaganda video in which Djalali "confesses" that he is, among other things, a de facto spy for Israel, which has been strongly contradicted as many claim that under unreasonable circumstances, he was forced to admit this.

It is not the first time that foreign citizens have been detained in Iran, through exchanges of prisoners or by means of ransom. In such a scenario, Iran would request a nation to release the frozen funds, enabling Iran to regain access to the money and subsequently facilitating the return of its citizens. A notable instance occurred a few months ago when the U.S. repatriated five citizens in exchange for Iran gaining access to 6 billion dollars (Reuters, U.S. prisoners freed from Iran make emotional return home after swap deal). This statement originates from Reuters, "Iran has arrested dozens of foreigners and dual nationals in recent years, mostly on espionage and security-related accusations. Rights groups have criticised the arrests as a tactic to win concessions from abroad by inventing charges, an accusation Tehran denies." (Reuters, Aid worker back in Belgium after Iranian diplomat prisoner swap).

Belgium in similar situation

In February 2022, a Belgian aid worker, Olivier Vandecasteele, was arrested in Iran and subsequently convicted of espionage. This led to a sentence of 74 lashes and 40 years in prison. At that time, an Iranian diplomat had been convicted in Belgium, in 2021, for his involvement in a foiled bomb plot in France, receiving a 20-year prison sentence. Both countries rejected the charges against their respective citizens. The resolution to this complex situation came through a prisoner exchange, involving the Belgian aid worker and the Iranian diplomat.

How will Sweden react to a possible prisoner exchange?

Very few believed that the government of Belgium would agree to this prisoner exchange with the Iranian authorities, then most western countries, do not accept to be exploited by non-democratic regimes. Now, with Sweden facing a comparable situation, attention has shifted to Sweden and Stockholm. The Swedish government finds itself in a challenging position, as approving a prisoner exchange for the two Swedish citizens in Iran would necessitate a complex explanation to the Iranian community in Sweden. The judgment against Noury stands as the sole vindication on earth regarding the executions that occurred in 1988.

The day the court reached its decision, numerous Iranians were present, holding pictures of men and women who had been executed in 1988. How Sweden's government will behave in this matter remains to be seen. To risk the lives of Floderus and Djalali in Tehran or to release an individual who has been convicted of severe breaches of international law and multiple executions. It's conceivable that he will be seen as a hero in Iran if the prisoner exchange goes through, *when* the executions was commissioned by the one who led the Iranian revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini. There is no justification for the Iranian people or the country's leadership to hold him responsible for actions that were deemed appropriate by their former great leader.

Closing statement

I anticipate that the Swedish government will carefully evaluate the situation and ultimately decide to prioritize the well-being of the two Swedes currently detained in Iran. Regrettably, it appears that Ahmadreza Djalali may face execution before any further developments,

including the potential exchange. Thus, I do believe this distressing situation might entail a direct one-for-one prisoner exchange between Iran and Sweden, involving Floderus for Noury. The reaction if this comes into effect, will be a celebration on the streets of Tehran, while there will be joy to bring Floderus home, sadness that Djalali may have been executed and great disappointment for all the Iranians who live in Sweden, who now after so many years had received rectification for their relatives who passed away in 1988. The exact events in the near future are uncertain; it now depends on the diplomatic discussions between Stockholm and Tehran.

References:

Reuters. "U.S. prisoners freed from Iran make emotional return home after swap deal" {online} Published on September 19, 2023.

<<https://www.reuters.com/world/american-prisoners-freed-by-iran-head-us-after-choreographed-swap-2023-09-19/>>. {Accessed December 22, 2023}.

SVT. "EU: Working "tirelessly" for Johan Floderus" {online} Published on September 5, 2023. <<https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/eu-jobbar-outtrottligt-for-johan-floderus/>>. {Accessed December 23, 2023}.

SVT. "New verdict against Iranian Hamid Noury today" {online} Published on December 19, 2023. <<https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/rattengang-mot-floderus-aterupptogs-i-iran>>. {Accessed December 25, 2023}.

SVT. "Swedish-Iranian researcher Ahmadreza Djalali close to being executed in Iran" {online} Published on September 5, 2023. <<https://www.svt.se/nyheter/utrikes/svensk-iranska-forskaren-ahmadreza-djalali-nara-att-avrattas-i-iran/>>. {Accessed December 23, 2023}.

SVT. "This has happened in the case of Johan Floderus" {online} Published on September 24, 2023. <<https://www.svt.se/nyheter/utrikes/detta-har-hant-i-fallet-med-johan-floderus>>. {Accessed December 23, 2023}.

SVT. "Trial against Swedish Johan Floderus resumed in Iran" {online} Published on December 20, 2023.

<<https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/rattegang-mot-floderus-aterupptogs-i-iran>>. {Accessed December 22, 2023}.