

Research Briefing
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Dual nationals imprisoned in Iran

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Summary

Iran detains an unknown number of foreign and dual nationals, mostly on charges of espionage. Many of those detained have sought to avoid publicity for their cases, in fear this will jeopardise negotiations for their release.

Research published in 2022 suggests at least [66 foreign and dual nationals have been detained by Iran since 2010](#). 15 have links to the UK. At least [40 foreign and dual nationals were also reportedly arrested](#) during the protests in Iran that followed the death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022.

This research briefing details the known British-Iranians detained in Iran, some recent releases of detainees, and debates and assessments of how the UK Government can best support detainees and secure their release.

Allegations of arbitrary detention

The NGO Human Rights Watch has argued that since 2014 there has been a growing practice of [“politically motivated arrests” against dual nationals](#) in Iran. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has ruled that [many dual nationals have been arbitrarily detained](#), while the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran has expressed [“serious concern” about the use of espionage charges](#) against such individuals.

Are dual nationals part of a wider power play?

Campaigners have linked the detention of dual nationals to geopolitical tensions between Iran, Europe, and North America. They argue detainees may be being used as “hostages” for [negotiations on reviving a nuclear deal with Iran](#) to limit its nuclear programme (these [talks have stalled since 2022](#)).

A number of [dual and foreign nationals were also arrested in Iran in the wake of the protests](#) that followed the death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022. The Iranian Government blamed outside intervention for the protests.

Critics of the UK Government also argued a £394 million debt owed by the UK to Iran for undelivered armoured vehicles and tanks was [part of the reason for the detention of UK-Iranian dual nationals](#). The equipment was ordered by the last Shah of Iran but cancelled by the UK in response to his overthrow in the Iranian revolution of 1979.

The [UK Government had long accepted liability for the debt](#), and [came to an agreement to repay it in 2022](#). The UK has released the funds to be used for humanitarian purposes only, though the Commons Foreign Affairs Committee has expressed [concern over the delay in arranging repayment](#) and the lack of controls on how Iran will spend the funds.

The [UK Government argues the repayment was a separate issue](#) to the detention of dual nationals and also rejects any [link between detainees and the nuclear talks](#). The settlement of the debt was announced alongside the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Anoosheh Ashoori in March 2022.

What tools can be used to help detainees?

[Iran does not recognise dual nationality for Iranians](#). This means that if dual nationals are detained, its government will not grant consular access to foreign officials to visit them in detention or attend their trials. However, foreign [governments have raised such detentions with the Iranian authorities](#). They have also sought to [develop an international coalition](#) against states that arbitrarily detain dual and foreign nationals.

In 2023, the Foreign Affairs Committee published its [report on state-level hostage situations](#). It argued the UK Government should strengthen deterrence through applying sanctions against those involved in detention, and to employ “the strongest possible language to call out situations of state hostage taking.” [The Government said it would continue to work to secure the release of detainees](#) but rejected several committee recommendations, including the establishment of a separate Director to manage these cases.

Known dual nationals detained and released

Brian Jenkins, from the think-tank the RAND Corporation, has noted since May 2011 [there has always been at least one known British national detained by Iran](#), and argues that Iran is conducting a form of “coercive diplomacy.”

Several foreign and dual nationals have been released, including British-Iranians. In the case of [Australia](#), the [United States](#), [Germany](#) and [France](#), these are believed to primarily be the result of prisoner deals. Many of those released do not hold Iranian nationality. For the UK:

- British-Iranian Kamal Foroughi was allowed to leave in 2020 after [a seven-year sentence for spying charges](#).
- In 2022, Aras Amiri was freed from Iranian detention after the country’s [supreme court acquitted her of espionage charges](#).
- In 2022, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, first detained in 2016, and Anoosheh Ashoori, detained in 2017, [were released and allowed to return to the UK](#) following successful UK-Iran negotiations.
- Morad Tahbaz, detained in 2018, [was released in 2023](#) under a US-Iran agreement. Tahbaz is an Iranian American, who holds UK citizenship.
- [Mehran Raouf](#), arrested in 2020, remains in Iran.

In January 2023, Iran executed Alireza Akbari, a British-Iranian dual national, on charges of spying (which he denied). The [UK condemned the execution and imposed sanctions on Iran’s prosecutor general in response](#). The UK also condemned the execution of Swedish-Iranian [Habib Chaab](#) in May 2023.

1 Detained UK dual nationals

Several British-Iranian nationals have been identified by their families as being detained in Iran. The UK Government considers their detention to be “arbitrary and unacceptable,” and has called for their release.¹

1.1 Execution of Alireza Akbari, 2023

British-Iranian Alireza Akbari, a former Iranian Defence Minister, was detained in 2019. He was convicted on charges of spying for the UK—charges he denied. His wife says he spent a period in solitary confinement.²

In January 2023, Iran posted a video of what is considered a forced confession.³ BBC Persian also broadcast a message in which Akbari said he was tortured and forced to confess. The UK Government raised his case directly with Iranian authorities and requested consular access.⁴

On 14 January, Iranian authorities announced Akbari had been executed. The UK Government [said the execution was “politically motivated”](#) and imposed sanctions against Iran’s prosecutor general, Mohammad Jafar Montazeri. This means his assets are frozen and a UK travel ban is applied.⁵ The UK’s ambassador from Tehran was also temporarily recalled for consultation. Ten other countries and the European Union condemned the execution, and the UK Government said it would consult on further steps.⁶

Iran also summoned the British Ambassador to Iran, accusing the UK of “acts of sabotage” and criticised its “meddling and destructive statements” relating to dual nationals (Iran does not recognise dual nationality).⁷

The Times newspaper reports Akbari was the first dual national executed by Iran since the 1980s.⁸ His execution led to questions over whether the UK will reappraise its support for a revived nuclear agreement with Iran,⁹ though the Government says it will work to prevent Iran acquiring nuclear weapons.¹⁰

¹ Foreign Affairs Committee, [Oral evidence: Work of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office \(FCDO\)](#), HC 253, 6 October 2020, Q233. Sources accessed January and April 2022, 22 May and 1 September 2023 (unless stated).

² [Factbox: Alireza Akbari: The British-Iranian dual national executed by Iran](#), Reuters, 14 January 2023

³ [Iran releases taped “confessions” by dual British citizen sentenced to death](#), Al-Monitor, 12 January 2023

⁴ [Alireza Akbari: Iran preparing to execute British citizen-family](#), BBC News, 12 January 2023

⁵ FCDO, [UK sanctions Iranian prosecutor general](#), 14 January 2023

⁶ HC Deb, [16 January 2023](#), c25

⁷ Iran Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [British Ambassador to Tehran summoned](#), 14 January 2023

⁸ [“Execution casts doubt on British support for Iran nuclear deal.”](#) The Times, 16 January 2023

⁹ [“Britain reconsidering Iran nuclear deal after execution \[...\]”](#) Telegraph, 14 January 2023

¹⁰ HC Deb, [16 January 2023](#), c32

1.2 Those arrested in response to 2022 protests

From the death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022 to late 2022, Iran experienced a substantial wave of protests. These focused on the country's Islamic dress code and saw some minority groups reportedly targeted by the Government.

The Iranian Government blamed outside influence, including European states, for the protests, and [arrested a number of individuals linked to foreign countries](#).¹¹ In December 2022, Iranian state media reported that seven individuals with links to the UK, including some dual nationals, [had been arrested by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps](#).¹²

No further details have been published on those arrested.

1.3 Mehran Raoof, 2020-present

In October 2020, the British-Iranian labour activist, Mehran Raoof, was arrested in Iran. He was reportedly given a ten-year sentence in August 2021 for participating in an outlawed group and distributing anti-government propaganda. Amnesty International says he is being held in solitary confinement.¹³

In March 2022, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) said it is in contact with his family. The [family has asked for the case to be kept out of the public domain](#).¹⁴

2 Other imprisoned dual nationals

Many other countries have also seen dual nationals detained in Iran. As in the case of British-Iranians, not all those detained are likely to have publicised their cases.

The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has published [regular reports addressing claims submitted by dual nationals](#) that have been arbitrarily detained in Iranian prisons, and often expresses concerns about their lack of consular assistance and medical treatment. In September 2021, judging

¹¹ [Iran says 40 foreigners arrested for taking part in anti-government protests](#), CNBC, 22 November 2022

¹² [Iran's guards arrest UK-Iranian dual nationals over protests](#), Reuters, 25 December 2022

¹³ [UK condemns 10-year sentence for dual national in Iran as tensions rise](#), The Guardian, 7 August 2021; Amnesty International, [British-Iranian labour activist detained](#), undated

¹⁴ PQ 143739 [[Mehran Raoof](#)], 28 March 2022

Austrian-Iranian Kamran Ghaderi to be arbitrarily detained, it concluded [there is a “systematic problem” in Iran](#):

In its 28-year history, the Working Group has adopted numerous opinions in relation to the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Working Group is concerned that this indicates a systemic problem with arbitrary detention in the country, which amounts to a serious violation of international law.¹⁵

The United States Institute for Peace has published a list of known North American, Australian and European [dual nationals and foreigners held in Iran](#) (updated 5 September 2023). The BBC has also published a list: [Iran’s dual nationals and their uncertain fate](#) (19 September 2023).

Several dual nationals have also been sentenced to death by Iranian authorities. These include:

- Jamshid Sharmahd (German-Iranian): Detained in 2020 and accused of involvement in a 2008 terrorist attack in Shiraz. He was put on trial in July 2022 and sentenced to death in February 2023. The German Government called for the decision to be reversed and says that no fair trial took place.¹⁶
- Ahmad-Reza Djalali (Swedish-Iranian). First arrested in 2016 on charges of collaborating with Israel. In May 2022, Iran said he would shortly be executed. This coincided with reports that a Swedish court was considering sentencing a former official in Iran’s judiciary.¹⁷

In May 2023, Swedish-Iranian Habib Chaab was executed by Iranian authorities. Chaab had been accused of participating in a terrorist attack in 2018. Sweden condemned the execution. His execution follows that of British-Iranian Alireza Akbari in January 2023.¹⁸

3

Release of detainees

In recent years, some foreign and dual nationals have been released. Many have not held Iranian nationality. This is also only a partial picture of those released—many have chosen not to publicise their cases.

¹⁵ UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, [A/HRC/WGAD/2021/27](#), 6 September 2021, para 61

¹⁶ [Iran confirms death sentence of German dual national](#), DW, 26 April 2023

¹⁷ [Iranian decision to execute Swedish dual national sparks backlash](#), Al-Monitor, 5 May 2022

¹⁸ [Habib Chaab: Iran executes Swedish-Iranian for alleged terrorism](#), BBC News, 6 May 2023

2016: Return of US/American-Iranian nationals

In 2016, four Americans were freed following a prisoner deal involving the release of Iranian nationals imprisoned in the US. Three were American-Iranians. For the full circumstances of their release, see below, page 14.¹⁹

2020: Return of Australian, German, French, and British nationals

Kylie Moore-Gilbert, an Australian-British academic, was [released in a prisoner swap](#) involving Australia, Israel and Thailand.²⁰

French researcher Roland Marshall was freed [following a reported prisoner swap](#). His partner, French-Iranian Fariba Adelkhah, was released from prison in 2023.²¹

The Iranian Government says a prisoner swap between Germany and Iran resulted in the [release of an unnamed German national](#).²²

British-Iranian Kamal Foroughi was [allowed to return to the UK](#), having been arrested in 2011 on spying charges. He had been given a seven-year sentence in 2013.²³

2022: British Council worker released

In 2022, British Council worker Aras Amiri [was freed from Iranian detention](#). She had been sentenced to ten years imprisonment in 2018 over espionage charges. The Iranian Supreme Court acquitted her of the charges levelled against her. She holds Iranian nationality, but lives in London.²⁴

¹⁹ [Iranian prisoners released in swap: Who are they?](#), CNN, 18 January 2016

²⁰ [Kylie Moore-Gilbert has been released in exchange for three Iranian men: Who are they?](#), ABC News, 26 November 2020

²¹ [Iran frees French researcher in apparent prisoner swap](#), Al-Jazeera, 21 March 2020 and [Freed French-Iranian academic Fariba Adelkhah still unable to leave Iran](#), RFI, 24 March 2023

²² [German citizen freed in prisoner swap, says Iran](#), DW, 18 February 2020

²³ [Kamal Foroughi, 80, back in UK nine years after arrest in Iran for "spying."](#) The Times, 2 April 2020

²⁴ [British council worker Aras Amiri returns to the UK after release](#), The Telegraph, 12 January 2022

2022: Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Ashoori released

In March 2022, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe was released after nearly six years in detention, following an agreement between the UK and Iran.

Her detention began in 2016, when she was arrested at Tehran airport. According to her family, she was on holiday to visit her parents. She was then sentenced to five years in prison for plotting against the Iranian Government—a charge she denied.

She was moved to house arrest in March 2020. In March 2021, when the original sentence was due to expire, she was subject to a new trial for spreading propaganda and sentenced to a further year.²⁵

Both the [UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention](#) and [NGOs such as Redress](#) raised concerns about her health while she was detained.²⁶ Upon her initial arrest, Zaghari-Ratcliffe also spent 45 days in solitary confinement, with no access to legal or consular support.²⁷

As part of the same agreement, Anoosheh Ashoori was also released after five years detention in March 2022. His family said Iranian authorities also made them pay a £27,000 fine within 12 hours to secure his release.²⁸

Ashoori was [detained in Iran in 2017](#). He was reportedly visiting his mother. In August 2019, he was sentenced for ten years for alleged ties to Mossad, the Israeli national intelligence agency. His wife says he was held in solitary confinement “on and off for months” in 2019.²⁹

2022: Belgian prisoner-swap treaty with Iran

In July 2022, the Belgian parliament approved a prisoner-swap treaty with Iran. Belgium’s Government argues this will allow the return of detained aid worker Olivier Vandecasteele and other Belgians potentially threatened with detention in Iran.³⁰

²⁵ [Who is Nazanin Zaghari Ratcliffe and why was she jailed in Iran?](#), BBC News, 22 March 2022

²⁶ UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, [Opinion No. 28/2016 \(Iran\)](#), August 2016, para 52; Redress, [UK Government must recognise Nazanin as a victim of torture \[...\]](#), 12 March 2021

²⁷ UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, [Opinion No. 28/2016 \(Iran\)](#), August 2016, para 51

²⁸ [Iran made Ashoori family raise £27,000 in 12 hours to secure his release](#), The Guardian, 18 March 2022

²⁹ [Iranian spying charge “preposterous,” prisoner’s wife says](#), BBC News, 27 September 2019

³⁰ [Belgium ratifies controversial prisoner-swap treaty with Iran](#), France 24, 21 July 2022

However, in January 2023 Vandecasteele was sentenced to 40 years in prison on charges including espionage and collaboration with the United States.³¹

2022: Baquer Namazi

Siamak and Baquer Namazi (American-Iranians) were arrested in 2015 and 2016, respectively. They were both tried for collusion with the US—charges they deny. In October 2016, they were sentenced to ten years in prison.

In October 2022, Iran lifted a travel ban against Baquer and provided humanitarian furlough to Siamak. While there were initial reports their release was linked to the potential unfreezing of Iranian assets in South Korea, the US denied this. Analysis for the Washington Institute suggest that the decision was likely linked to the poor health of Baquer Namazi and there were no signs of a larger agreement.³²

Siamak Namazi was returned to Iran’s Evin prison in October. In January 2023, he began a hunger strike.³³ He was released in September 2023 as part of the US-Iran agreement—see below.

2023: French and US nationals released, and Morad Tahbaz

In May 2023, France announced French national Benjamin Briere and Franco-Irish Bernard Phelan had been released. Iran’s foreign ministry said they were released as a “humanitarian act”.³⁴

French-Iranian Fariba Adelkhah was released from prison in February 2023, though she remains in Iran.³⁵ She was detained in 2019 on charges of espionage, imprisoned for five years a year later, and released to home detention in 2020. In January 2022, she returned to prison.³⁶

In September 2023, a prisoner swap between the US and Iran took place. Five citizens were allowed to leave Iran, including Morad Tahbaz and Siamak Namazi.

³¹ [Oliver Vandecasteele: Belgian aid worker sentenced to 40 years in Iran](#), BBC News, 11 January 2023

³² H. Rome, [The latest chapter in Iran’s hostage diplomacy](#), Washington Institute, October 2022

³³ [American held in Iran launches hunger strike and writes to Biden asking him to do more for detainees](#), CNN, 16 January 2023

³⁴ [Iran frees two French citizens, says Macron](#), Reuters, 12 May 2023

³⁵ [French-Iranian academic Fariba Adelkha released from Tehran prison](#), France 24, 10 February 2023

³⁶ [Paris demands that Tehran immediately release French-Iranian academic Fariba Adelkhah](#), France 24, 12 January 2022

Morad Tahbaz is an Iranian American who also holds British citizenship. He was detained in 2018 alongside five other wildlife conservatists, being accused of spying.³⁷

When Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Anoosheh Ashoori were released and allowed to return to the UK in March 2022 (see section 3 of this briefing) Tahbaz was released to house arrest in Iran. Then Foreign Secretary, Liz Truss, said the [Government had “pushed very hard” to get him out of prison](#) but there were complications in him being a tri-national, with the US also involved.³⁸

To facilitate the 2023 agreement, the United States unfroze around US\$6 billion in Iranian assets held in South Korea. The funds will be held in Qatari banks which Iran will have no direct access to. Iran will only be able to deploy the funds for the purchase of humanitarian goods and agricultural products. The US released four Iranians who had been arrested for violating sanctions and one who acted as an unregistered agent of the Iranian government.³⁹

Oman, Qatar, and Switzerland helped mediate the agreement.⁴⁰

4

How can countries support detained dual nationals?

[Iran does not recognise dual nationality for Iranian nationals](#). This means that, if detained, its government will not grant consular access to foreign officials, such as those from the FCDO, to visit them in detention.⁴¹

Summary of UK actions

In the case of the UK, the FCDO has raised the issue of dual nationals [directly with the Iranian foreign ministry](#). All individual cases are also raised with Iranian authorities, with the aim of securing appropriate medical treatment and due process. More widely, it seeks to hold Iran to account via UN bodies such as the Human Rights Council.⁴²

In April 2021, the UK Prime Minister raised the case of dual nationals with the Iranian President.⁴³

³⁷ [Iran “sentences wildlife activists” accused of spying](#), BBC News, 20 November 2019

³⁸ HC Deb [16 March 2022](#), cc 946, 949

³⁹ US Institute for Peace, [Iran-US prisoner swap: Detailed factsheet](#), 20 September 2023

⁴⁰ US Institute for Peace Iran Primer, [US and Iran reach agreement on prisoners](#), 22 August 2023

⁴¹ Gov.UK, [Foreign travel advice: Iran](#), accessed 22 May 2023

⁴² FCDO, [Human rights and democracy report 2020](#), July 2021, ‘Overseas prisoners

⁴³ Ten Downing Street, [PM call with President Rouhani of Iran](#), 10 March 2021

The UK also extended diplomatic protection to Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe in 2019 and had been considering an application of Anoosheh Ashoori for the same.⁴⁴

Diplomatic protection may secure the protection of an individual overseas, and work towards their repatriation. In Zaghari-Ratcliffe's case, the Government said it demonstrated that [Iran's treatment had fallen short of its international obligations](#) and that local means of redress had been exhausted.⁴⁵ See section 6 and 7 for more on UK efforts.

New Executive Order in the United States, 2022

In July 2022, President Biden issued a new executive order relating to American hostages and others detained abroad. As a result of the order, federal agencies will be able to impose consequences, such as sanctions, against those involved in hostage-taking or wrongful detention and share increased levels of information between agencies. The US will also add a risk indicator of detention to its travel advice. This will include Iran.⁴⁶

5

Are detentions linked to Iran's nuclear deal?

Since taking office in 2021, the Biden Administration, together with other permanent members of the UN Security Council (the UK, France, Russia and China) and Germany have sought to re-establish the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to limit Iran's nuclear programme. The JCPOA was previously agreed under the Obama Administration but abandoned by President Trump in 2018.⁴⁷ Talks are currently stalled.

US-based human rights group, the Center for Human Rights in Iran, has said European countries and the US should use the talks [to secure the release of their detained nationals](#).⁴⁸

Iranian negotiators have [accused the US and UK of linking the exchange of prisoners with talks on reviving the JCPOA](#), something that both countries deny.⁴⁹ In April 2022, an Iranian government official said a prisoner swap with

⁴⁴ PQ HL 4240 [[Diplomatic service: British nationals abroad](#)], 7 December 2021

⁴⁵ Foreign and Commonwealth Office, [Foreign Secretary affords Nazanin Zaghari Ratcliffe diplomatic protection](#), 7 March 2019

⁴⁶ [Biden signs executive order aimed at American hostages abroad](#), Politico, 19 July 2022 and White House, [Background press call on President Biden's new executive order \[...\]](#), 18 July 2022.

⁴⁷ See Commons Library, [The status of the Iran nuclear deal](#), CBP9338

⁴⁸ [Biden urged to secure release of hostages in Iran in nuclear deal talks](#), Middle East Eye, 2 July 2021

⁴⁹ [Iran accuses US, UK of holding prisoner exchange talks "hostage."](#) Al-Jazeera, 17 July 2021

the United States was a possibility if steps were taken in other areas such as unfreezing Iran's assets abroad.⁵⁰

Any acts relating to detainees are likely to have consequences for trust between negotiators. Iran's [imprisoning of French-Iranian national Fariba Adelkhah](#) in January 2022, for example, saw France warn of only "negative consequences" between the countries.⁵¹ This occurred in the midst of talks in Vienna on reviving the nuclear deal.

6 Have UK detentions been linked to the UK's past debt to Iran?

In March 2022, the UK Government announced it had negotiated the release of Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Ashoori from Iran, and that Morad Tahbaz would be released to house arrest from Iranian prison.

In the same statement, then Foreign Secretary, Liz Truss, announced the settlement of £394 million debt owed to Iran by the UK. The Government has consistently denied a link between the debt and detention of dual nationals, with the Foreign Secretary stating the issues were negotiated "in parallel."⁵²

Why did the UK owe Iran money?

Between 1971 and 1976, when Iran was ruled by the Shah, the Iranian government ordered 1,500 tanks and armoured vehicles from the UK, at the cost of £650 million.

The contracts were placed with International Military Services Ltd (IMS), a private limited company that was wholly owned by the Government, under the Ministry of Defence (MOD).

Following the overthrow of the Shah in 1979, the MOD paused the sale. Only 185 tanks had been delivered to that point.⁵³

The Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has called for the return of the money, in lieu of the unfulfilled contract.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ [Iran says deal on prisoner release, foreign funds imminent](#), Al-Monitor, 11 April 2022

⁵¹ [Paris demands that Tehran immediately release French-Iranian academic Fariba Adelkhah](#), France 24, 12 January 2022

⁵² FCDO, [Foreign Secretary statement on Iran](#), 16 March 2022

⁵³ [The MOD, the arms deal, and a 30-year old bill for £400 million](#), The Independent, 24 April 2010

⁵⁴ [Iran renews call on UK to pay off outstanding debt](#), Al-Monitor, 23 March 2021

The debt is estimated to be around £394 million.

[Court judgments in the 1990s established UK liability.](#)⁵⁵ The Government long acknowledged [a legal duty to repay the debt](#), but never set a timetable for its repayment.⁵⁶ All legal proceedings on the debt have now been dismissed.⁵⁷

Was the debt linked to the detention of dual nationals?

Some, including Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe's husband, Richard Ratcliffe, and his constituency MP, Tulip Siddiq, argued [paying the debt was a precondition for the release of Zaghari-Ratcliffe.](#)⁵⁸

The family of Anoosheh Ashoori also considered his detention to be related to Iran's relations with the UK—either [linked to the debt](#) or UK [actions against Iranian oil tankers heading to Syria](#) in violation of international sanctions.⁵⁹

The UK Government has said it regards it as [“unhelpful” to connect the cases of imprisoned dual nationals with the debt](#) to connect the cases of imprisoned dual nationals with the debt, considering them to be separate issues, with one significantly pre-dating the other.⁶⁰

While officially those detained in Iran have mostly been so on the grounds they have committed acts of espionage, one unnamed Iranian Government official was reported in May 2021 as saying the UK's debt was linked to the detention of Zaghari-Ratcliffe.⁶¹

What challenges to repayment were there?

Talks on repaying the debt experienced several challenges, including how the money could be transferred without breaking US sanctions restricting financial transactions with Iran. Sanctions are in place to pressurise its

⁵⁵ HC Deb, [International military sales](#), 11 March 2014, cc105-106WH

⁵⁶ HC Deb, [16 November 2021](#), c216WH

⁵⁷ PQ 157475 [[Iran: International Military Services](#)] 26 April 2022

⁵⁸ HC Deb, [16 November 2021](#), c218WH

⁵⁹ [Britain must honour its debt to Iran and free my husband Anoosheh Ashoori](#), The Times, 18 November 2021; [Son of jailed British-Iranian: “My dad’s never been political.”](#) Al-Jazeera, 1 October 2019

⁶⁰ HC Deb, [25 October 2021](#), c58; [Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe: UK and Iran in talks over debt but unlinked to case](#). BBC News, 4 May 2021

⁶¹ [“Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe: UK downplays Iran reports a deal has been struck to secure release”](#), Sky News, 2 May 2021

government to improve its human rights record and to limit its nuclear programme.⁶²

While the Government has highlighted the sanctions regime in place against Iran as a barrier to any settling of the debt, the US, which also owed US\$ 1.7 billion to Iran, [was able to arrange payment in January 2016](#) via the Swiss and Dutch National Banks. Final payment was delivered as cash to Iran.⁶³

Also in January 2016, [four US prisoners were released from Iranian detention](#). The Obama administration denied any connection between the two events, instead highlighting a prisoner transfer agreement.⁶⁴ The release also coincided with the coming into force of the Iranian nuclear deal.⁶⁵

In response to a question from the former Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, on whether the UK could follow the US example, [the Prime Minister said in November 2021 that it was “worth considering.”](#) though there would be complications.⁶⁶

On the part of the US, the Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, said in May 2021 that [any repayment would be the “sovereign decision” of the UK.](#)⁶⁷

How was the debt eventually paid?

In March 2022, the Foreign Secretary said a confidential agreement with Iran had been reached to pay £393.8 million to settle the debt. Liz Truss said the sums would be available for humanitarian purposes only and do not break any international sanctions, counter-terrorism financing laws, or anti-money laundering regulations.⁶⁸

The funds will be paid by the Ministry of Defence and will not count as Official Development Assistance, and therefore not form part of the UK’s aid budget.⁶⁹

The successful talks between the UK and Iran were facilitated by Oman, and the funds eventually sent via the Bank of Oman, rather than in cash or to the Iranian Central Bank or Ministry of Defence.⁷⁰ The Foreign Secretary said the

⁶² [Iran says UK is discussing how to repay £400m debt](#), The Guardian, 10 December 2021

⁶³ Brookings Institute, [The US, Iran, and \\$1.7 billion: Sorting out the details](#), 3 October 2016

⁶⁴ [Iranian prisoners released in swap: Who are they?](#), CNN, 18 January 2016

⁶⁵ The Obama Whitehouse, [Implementation Day](#), accessed 17 January 2022

⁶⁶ Commons Liaison Committee, [Oral evidence from the Prime Minister](#), 18 November 2021, Q165

⁶⁷ US Embassy in the UK, [Secretary Anthony J. Blinken with Justin Webb of BBC Radio 4](#), 5 May 2021

⁶⁸ HC Deb, [16 March 2022](#), c944

⁶⁹ HC Deb, [16 March 2022](#), c 949; PQ 142508 [[Iran: Debts](#)], 23 March 2022

⁷⁰ [Debt, sanctions and a cold Westminster tent](#), The Guardian, 16 March 2022

new Iranian Government, in place under President Ebrahim Raisi since August 2021, had allowed negotiations to “start afresh” on some issues.⁷¹

In April 2023, [the Commons Foreign Affairs Committee criticised the speed and nature of the repayment](#), and the missing of a potential opportunity in 2017 to repay the debt through medical supplies. The Committee also expressed concern for the lack of safeguards or leverage the UK has in ensuring Iran only uses the funds for humanitarian purposes.⁷²

In response to the Committee, in July 2023 the Government said the “nature and resolution of the debt was complex” and that it would have been inappropriate to pay the debt while it was subject to litigation. It said the debt has been discharged “in full compliance” with UK and international sanctions, counter-terrorism financing, and anti-money laundering regulations.⁷³

7 Has the UK Government done enough?

The Government has been criticised by human rights groups such as Redress, MPs including the former foreign secretary, Jeremy Hunt, and Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe herself for not acting decisively enough in her case, and those of other dual nationals being held in Iran.⁷⁴

7.1 Committee suggestions for action, 2020

In 2020, the Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC) argued the Government had been “ineffective” on securing the release of detainees in Iran. It acknowledges that a tried tool, providing detainees diplomatic protection, had not worked, as Iran has dismissed this when used for dual nationals.⁷⁵

The FAC called on the Government to:

- Recognise the detainees as hostages
- Lead an international convention on state hostage taking to prohibit and call out the practice, and

⁷¹ HC Deb, [16 March 2022](#), c948

⁷² FAC, [Stolen years: Combating state hostage diplomacy](#), HC 166, 4 April 2023, paras 81-86

⁷³ [Government response to FAC report on stolen years](#), 6 July 2023, paras 56 to 58

⁷⁴ Redress, [Richard Ratcliffe’s hunger strike over UK Government’s inaction deeply worrying](#), 24 October 2021; [Freeing Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe took too long, Jeremy Hunt says](#), BBC News, 22 March 2022 and [“This should have happened six years ago”: Nazanin Zaghari Ratcliffe demands answers](#), Telegraph, 21 March 2022

⁷⁵ FAC, [No prosperity without justice: The UK’s relationship with Iran](#), HC 415, December 2020, para 56

- Sanction Iranian human rights abusers.⁷⁶

Currently, the 1983 International Convention against the taking of hostages is intended to address individual hostage-takers, rather than those backed by a state. Representatives of Ashoori and Zaghari-Ratcliffe have argued Iran is engaged in “hostage diplomacy.”

The FAC argued considering Iran’s actions in these terms [could allow greater tools to be applied to counter Iran’s behaviour via the UN](#).⁷⁷

Chris Bryant, a Member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, named some of those alleged to have participated in hostage taking and human rights abuses in Iran in December 2021 and July 2022. He called upon the FCDO to take action against them.⁷⁸

Government response

In response to the FAC, [the FCDO said it would continue to work to secure the release of those detained](#), including impressing on Iran the need for their release. It noted the Committee’s recommendation on state-hostages but said it did not accept dual nationals were being used as diplomatic leverage. It would not speculate on any future sanctions.⁷⁹

In February 2021, the UK joined a new Canada-led initiative to put greater international pressure on those states who arbitrarily detain dual and foreign nationals. The [Canada Declaration](#) affirms core rights such as the ability of consular officials to access detained nationals.⁸⁰ As of March 2022, there are 69 signatory states.⁸¹

7.2

Further Committee consideration, 2023

Following the release of Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Ashoori in March 2022, the FAC announced a further inquiry into state-level hostage situations.

[Those giving evidence to the Committee](#) included former Foreign Secretaries Jeremy Hunt and Lord Philip Hammond, and former Foreign Office Minister Alistair Burt.⁸²

⁷⁶ FAC, [No prosperity without justice: The UK’s relationship with Iran](#), HC 415, December 2020, summary

⁷⁷ As above, paras 59 and 63

⁷⁸ HC Deb, [21 July 2022](#), c1149; HC Deb, [8 December 2021](#), c165WH

⁷⁹ FCDO, [Response to the FAC’s No prosperity without justice](#), 16 February 2021, para 16

⁸⁰ FCDO, [UK backs Canadian initiative against arbitrary detention](#), 21 February 2021

⁸¹ [Written evidence by the FCDO to the FAC, SLH0021](#), May 2022

⁸² FAC, [Stolen years: Combatting state hostage diplomacy](#), HC 166, 4 April 2023, ‘Witnesses’

Committee recommendations, 2023

The Committee was critical of the support the FCDO has provided and argued that hostage taking is a “growing threat” to both the international rules-based order and UK nationals.⁸³ Committee recommendations included:

The establishment of a position of Director for Arbitrary and Complex Detentions within the FCDO

The Committee argued the position would improve consistency in how the families of those detained are supported by the FCDO, and help coordinate efforts across the UK Government.⁸⁴

Greater UK international efforts

The Committee said the UK should increase its efforts internationally:

- At the UN Human Rights Council and related bodies
- By referring cases to the International Court of Justice when UK consular access is denied
- Through working with Canada’s Declaration Against Arbitrary Detention in State-to-State Relations (see above, page 16) to develop voluntary measures for states to deter arbitrary detentions.⁸⁵

Applying sanctions

The Committee said the Government should outline further measures on sanctions to apply against those involved in the detention of UK nationals.⁸⁶

Increased engagement with the UK Parliament

The Committee argued that parliamentary scrutiny can play an important role in cases of state hostage taking, and that the ability of parliamentarians to scrutinise the government’s efforts was weakened by the limited information available to MPs (other than the constituency MP engaged with specific cases).

The Committee recommended the Government provide it with a private annual report on the situation for UK nationals arbitrarily detained abroad.⁸⁷

Review of diplomatic protection offered to those detained

The Committee judged that the offer of diplomatic protection to Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe in 2019 was “poorly implemented.” It heard several

⁸³ FAC, [Stolen years: Combatting state hostage diplomacy](#), HC 166, 4 April 2023, para 99

⁸⁴ As above, para 42

⁸⁵ As above, paras 18, 100, 102

⁸⁶ As above, paras 95, 102

⁸⁷ As above, paras 47 to 49

criticisms on the offering of diplomatic protection in the evidence submitted to it, including that such protection is considered a “largely symbolic measure” and was applied inconsistently.

The Committee recommended a review of how diplomatic protection is used and how it should be employed in the future.⁸⁸

Government response

A [Government response](#) was published in July 2023. The Government said:

- It was content with the FCDO’s current structure to respond to detention cases. It did not agree with the recommendation to establish a separate post of Director for Arbitrary and Complex Detentions, arguing ministers and senior existing officials were best placed to lead on these issues.⁸⁹
- It would continue to raise the issue at the UN, with the G7, and through the Canadian initiative.⁹⁰
- It would keep its sanctions regime against Iran under review.⁹¹

Following the Government’s response, it announced in July it would bring forward legislation to establish a new sanctions regime against Iran, which would expand the criteria on which sanctions can be applied.⁹²

- It would not provide an annual report on the progress of cases of arbitrary detention, citing the need to protect information and the “limited number of cases of arbitrary detention for diplomatic leverage.”⁹³
- It did not accept that changes in responsible ministers or civil servants had affected the resolution of cases of arbitrary detention.⁹⁴

Recommendations the Government accepted included providing advice to families who wish their cases of detention to be made public and improving support for those newly-released.⁹⁵

⁸⁸ FAC, [Stolen years: Combatting state hostage diplomacy](#), HC 166, 4 April 2023, paras 44 to 46

⁸⁹ [Government response to FAC report on stolen years](#), 6 July 2023, para 26

⁹⁰ As above, para 62 to 63

⁹¹ As above, para 67

⁹² HC Deb, [6 July 2023](#), cc996-8

⁹³ [Government response to FAC report on stolen years](#), 6 July 2023, para 36

⁹⁴ As above, para 20

⁹⁵ As above, paras 40 to 41 and 54 to 55.

Committee statement on Government response, July 2023

The Committee Chair, Alicia Kearns, [described the Government response as “disappointing”](#) and failing to engage with the majority of recommendations that the Committee had made.⁹⁶

In a [Committee statement delivered in Westminster Hall in July](#), the Chair discussed the report’s recommendations. Her concerns primarily centred on the high turnover of ministers and civil servants within the FCDO, the Committee’s recommendation for a designated senior official to lead on cases of detention, the need to seek greater consular access to those detained, and improved communications with the families of those detained.⁹⁷

7.3

Could the UK proscribe the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps?

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was established following the 1979 Iranian revolution as a counter to Iran’s established military forces. It also works overseas providing money, technology, and training to Iran-aligned groups in countries such as Syria and Yemen,⁹⁸ and has been linked to the arrests of some dual and foreign nationals in Iran.

The FAC has previously called for the proscribing of the group as a terrorist organisation. This would make it a criminal offence to belong to the IRGC and invite support for it, among other offences.⁹⁹ The UK Government has said it will not speculate on future action and that the IRGC is already subject to sanctions.

Since the September 2022 protests in Iran, in which the IRGC has formed part of the Iranian Government’s response, calls for their proscribing have been renewed. In January 2023, several MPs speaking in a Commons debate on Iran called for the proscribing of the group,¹⁰⁰ as did the Labour Party following the death of Alireza Akbari.¹⁰¹

In October 2022 Iran criticised reports that the European Union was considering the designation of the IRGC as a terrorist organisation. An Iranian

⁹⁶ FAC, [Foreign Affairs Committee publishes “defensive” Government response](#), 6 July 2023

⁹⁷ HC Deb, [6 July 2023](#), cc376-79WH

⁹⁸ Commons Library, [Iran’s influence in the Middle East](#), August 2022.

⁹⁹ Home Office [Factsheet: Proscription](#), November 2021

¹⁰⁰ HC Deb, [Iran, 12 January 2023](#), c727-772

¹⁰¹ [Declare Iran’s revolutionary guard a terror group](#) [...], The Independent, 15 January 2023

foreign affairs ministry spokesperson argued the IRGC is an “official military institution” of Iran and the decision would be treated as “non-constructive.”¹⁰²

For debates on proscribing the IRGC, see section 4.3 of the Commons Library research briefing on the [2022 Iran protests](#), May 2022, and Insight [One-year anniversary of the Mahsa Amini protests in Iran](#), September 2023.

8 Further reading

House of Commons proceedings/reports

- House of Commons Debate, [State hostage taking](#), 6 July 2023, cc376-80WH

The Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Alicia Kearns, gave a statement on the Committee’s report on state hostage taking (see below for the report).

- House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, [The FCDO’s approach to state level hostage situations](#), HC 166, 5 April 2023, and [Government response](#), published on 6 July 2023

Assesses the UK’s response to arbitrary detention undertaken by foreign states.

- House of Commons Debate, [Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe: Forced confession](#), 24 May 2022, cc168-73

Debate on the confession Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe signed when first detained.

- House of Commons Debate, [Iran detainees](#), 16 March 2022, cc943-91

Government statement on release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Anoosheh Ashoori to the UK, and Morad Tahbaz to house arrest.

- House of Commons Debate, [Detention of Anoosheh Ashoori in Iran](#), 26 January 2021, cc335-40

Debate on Ashoori’s detention. Includes contributions from the Foreign Office and his constituency MP, Janet Daby.

¹⁰² [Kanani: Europe should not enter into the process of confrontation](#) [...], Islamic Republic News Agency, 31 October 2022

- House of Commons Debate, [Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe](#), 16 November 2021, cc191-218WH

Debate on Zaghari-Ratcliffe's detention. Includes contributions from her MP, Tulip Siddiq, and the Foreign Office.

Information on foreign and dual nationals detained

- C. Ferstman and M. Sharpe, [Iran's arbitrary detention of foreign and dual nationals as hostage-taking and crimes against humanity](#), Journal of International Criminal Justice, March 2022

Examines Iran's detention of dual and foreign nationals since the Iranian revolution of 1979.

- United States Institute for Peace, [Dual nationals and foreigners held in Iran](#), last updated 5 September 2023

Provides details of those known to be in detention, and a summary of US and Iranian Government positions.

- Center for Human Rights in Iran, [Who are the dual and foreign nationals imprisoned in Iran?](#), last updated 5 October 2022

Summary of known dual and foreign nationals imprisoned in Iran.

Prison conditions in Iran

- Amnesty International, [Iran: Leaked video footage from Evin prison offers rare glimpse of cruelty against prisoners](#), August 2021

Many dual nationals are held in Evin prison.

- US Department of State, [2022 country reports on human rights practices: Islamic Republic of Iran](#), 20 March 2023, section C

Summarises reports on prison conditions in Iran in 2022.

- Human Rights Watch, [Iran: Targeting of dual citizens, foreigners](#), September 2018

Assesses the court process in Iran and recent history of detentions.

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