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Abstract

Recently Belgium reached a shameful deal with Tehran: an innocent Belgian aid worker, Olivier Vandecasteele, held for 455 days in Iran on fake charges of spying, was swapped for an Iranian intelligence officer, Assadollah Assadi, convicted to 20 years in prison for orchestrating together with two Belgian citizens a bomb attack in June 2018 against a major gathering of an Iranian opposition group near Paris, France. This "victory" of the regime could impact negatively on dozens of other cases of European citizens taken hostage in Iran for their alleged role in the huge popular protests against the death of the young woman Mahsa Amini in police custody and the ferocious repression by the government's Islamic Guards.

Keywords: Iran, IRGC

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Olivier Vandecasteele, the Belgian aid worker held for 455 days in Iran, has finally been released, Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo announced on Friday 26 May.

Vandecasteele was arrested on a visit to Iran in February 2022 and sentenced in January 2023 in a closed-door trial to 40 years in prison and 74 lashes on charges including spying. He was working with the Norwegian Refugee Council and Relief International in the Islamic Republic from 2015 to 2021.

The 42-year-old Belgian was released after a diplomatic battle with the Iranian regime, which was pushing for his return to be conditional on the freeing of an Iranian imprisoned in Belgium.

Belgium courts convicted Assadollah Assadi in 2021 to 20 years in prison for his role in planning in June 2018 a bomb attack that targeted the gathering in Villepinte, France, of the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), an exiled Iranian opposition group abroad known also as Mujahedeen-e-Khalq (MEK).

Prosecutors tied Assadi to a couple, stopped by the Belgian police and found with 550

grams of TATP explosives and a detonator.¹

Among dozens of prominent guests at the rally in Villepinte that day were then-President Donald Trump's lawyer, Rudy Giuliani; Newt Gingrich, former conservative speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives; and former Colombian presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt.

Assadi served then as the third counselor at Iran's Embassy in Vienna. The only Iranian diplomat ever brought to trial in Europe for direct involvement in terrorism, he was arrested in Germany, where he did not enjoy diplomatic immunity, while he was on holiday. German authorities later extradited Assadi to Belgium.²

In March 2022, Belgium negotiated a prisoner exchange agreement with Iran that provided a legal means of transferring a person convicted in Iran to Belgium and would have allowed the swap of Vandecasteele for Assadi.

Dozens of Belgian and international legal and human rights experts and the Paris-based NCRI requested to have the agreement annulled, resulting in the Belgian Constitutional Court suspending the deal in December 2022 on the grounds that Assadi could have been released once he returned to Iran. However, the path was smoothed by a bilateral treaty that took effect last month under which Belgian prisoners in Iran can serve their sentences at home and vice versa.³

Belgium was accused by the NCRI of paying a "shameful" ransom for hostage-taking. It claimed that the deal between the two countries would "embolden the religious fascism ruling Iran to continue its crimes through repression and regional and international terrorism."

Upon arrival to Tehran on Friday, Assadi received a hero's welcome by government spokesman Ali Bahadori Jahromi and Kazem Gharibabadi, the deputy head of the Judiciary who is also secretary of the High Council for Human Rights as well as several other officials. The official Iranian News Agency (IRNA) titled the event "Diplomat returns to Iran after 5 years of illegal detention and captivity by Belgium."⁴

According to IRNA, Belgian police arrested Assadi for plotting an attack against the "anti-Iran Mujahedin-e Khalq (MKO) terrorist organization," a claim strongly rejected by the former diplomat and Iranian authorities.⁵

According to the Iranian website *Press TV*, citing an Iranian senior official, the diplomat

1 https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/05/26/iran-belgium-prisoner-swap-oman/9df04c66-fba6-11ed-bafc-bf50205661da_story.html.

2 <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/irans-deadly-diplomats/>

3 <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/iran-releases-belgian-aid-worker-in-controversial-prisoner-swap/>

4 <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202305268884>.

5 <https://en.irna.ir/news/85122773/Diplomat-returns-to-Iran-after-5-years-of-illegal-detention-by>

was detained in Belgium on false terror-related charges and “his release from jail is a victory for Iranians.”⁶ Assadi’s release is the “outcome of efforts by responsible authorities to defend the rights of their fellow citizens abroad,” said Kazem Gharibabadi, secretary of Iran’s High Council for Human Rights, promising to continue such efforts.

If the release of the two prisoners was celebrated with great fanfare by their respective countries, none mentioned a link between the two cases. This step was, however, taken by the Sultanate of Oman, which did not hesitate to speak of an “exchange” of detainees.

Belgium’s prisoner swap deal negotiations since 2021 only encouraged Iranian terrorism and paved the way for more Europeans to be taken hostage.

Most recently, Iranian security forces have arrested nine people from Germany, Poland, Italy, France, the Netherlands, Sweden and other countries for their alleged role in the popular protests against the death of Mahsa Amini in police custody in Iran. The nine unidentified persons were detained “during the riots or while plotting in the background,” the Iranian intelligence ministry said in a statement to the media.

On 12 May 2023, two French nationals held in Iran – Benjamin Brière and Bernard Phelan – were also released, while Belgium was still negotiating the release of its only hostage in Iran. Brière was arrested in May 2020 on espionage charges, while Phelan was arrested on 3 October 2022 for allegedly endangering national security.

According to a statement by the Iranian Foreign Ministry, the two Frenchmen were released as part of a “humanitarian action”, which referred to “requests from the French side at various levels and after negotiations”. French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna announced that there had been no “quid pro quo” for these releases.

Four French men and women are still being held in Iranian jails. According to the French daily *Le Point*, the outcome of the Assadi case could also facilitate the release of the last four French hostages still held by Iran but it will only reinforce Tehran in its practices worthy of another time.⁷

The 2017-2018 Wave of Iranian Terrorism in Europe

Only rarely have the Iranian leaders been deterred to use terrorism in Europe: when their leaders felt that there was a direct threat to them, like in the case of the Mykonos trial in Germany, in 1997.

On September 17, 1992, the secretary-general of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran, Sadeq Sharafkandi, and three of his associates, were assassinated in Berlin’s Mykonos

6 <https://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2023/05/26/704142/Iran-Belgium-Assadollah-Assadi-Mohammad-Jamshidi-Jamshidi-chief-staff-Gharibabadi-human-rights->

7 https://www.lepoint.fr/monde/humanitaire-contre-espion-l-inavouable-echange-conclu-entre-la-belgique-et-l-iran-26-05-2023-2521819_24.php#11

restaurant. Following the Mykonos assassinations court verdict in April 1997, in which the Iranian government was judged to have “inspired, supported, and supervised” the terrorist act, Iran-German relations spiraled downward.

Both countries recalled their ambassadors, ministerial-level cooperation halted, the expulsion of diplomats by both sides begun, and the “critical dialogue” with Europe was suspended. The other European countries followed suit. Relations with Europe deteriorated, leaving Iran feeling detached from the developed world.

For almost two decades the leaders of the Tehran regime were deterred by the Mykonos indictments.

But, in the years 2017-2018, after a long suspension of its terrorist activity in Europe, Iran again staged a wave of terrorist attacks, most of them frustrated, against elements of the Iranian opposition in Europe.

The June 30, 2018, foiled bomb attack against the NCRI gathering in Villepinte was part of this Iranian terrorist campaign, potentially the most lethal one.

In January 2018, after weeks of surveillance, German authorities raided several homes tied to Iranian operatives who were reportedly gathering information on potential Israeli and Jewish targets in Germany. Arrest warrants were issued for 10 Iranian agents, but none were detained.

In March 2018, Albanian authorities arrested two Iranian agents on terrorism charges after they were caught guarding a location where the Iranian New Year (Nowruz) celebrations were about to begin.

In June 2018, an investigation by Dutch intelligence led to the expulsion of two Iranian diplomats after the murder several months earlier of an Iranian Arab activist shot dead in the Dutch capital.

In late September 2018, three dangerous people involved in a “serious crime” and travelling in a Swedish registered car were hunted by Danish police. A Norwegian citizen of Iranian origin was arrested in Sweden on 21 October in connection with the alleged plan. Norway extradited to Denmark the man who was seen taking pictures of the Danish home of a leader of The Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahvaz (ASMLA), an Arab nationalist insurgent group that advocates for a separate Arab state in Khuzestan Province of Iran.

After stressing that the latest Iranian terror plots demonstrate a pattern that goes well beyond the two incidents in France and Denmark, Giulio Terzi, former Foreign Minister of Italy, asked Western leaders to recognize the futility of attempting to bribe Iran's leaders into compliance with international standards.

A policy of “maximum pressure” is much more likely to compel reasonable behavior, he argued. Danish Prime Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen and intelligence chief Finn Borch

Andersen called for European Union sanctions after they discovered the plot to kill Danish residents associated with the ASMLA.

Finally, in January 2019 the European Union designated the Iranian intelligence unit and two of its staff as terrorists, and froze their assets, as the Netherlands accused Iran of two killings on its soil and joined France and Denmark in alleging Tehran plotted other attacks in Europe.

Iran continues to hold two dozen foreigners who Western capitals and families regard as hostages.

Conclusion

As demonstrated by this author, historically, the Iranian strategy in the use of blackmail terrorism has been shaped by the lack of stamina and decisiveness of the leaders of the United States, the Western democratic global power, and France, the global actor representing the historic liberal values of the Occident, during the long crisis of numerous hostages in 1979 in Tehran, and later in Lebanon, and clearly the lack of tangible reaction to the bombings in Beirut and the streets of Paris in the 1980s.⁸

Lately, Europe is facing a new wave of so called "hostage diplomacy" to silence any international support to the popular pacific uprising against the Ayatollah's brutal regime. The European leaders directly involved in the support to their beleaguered citizens, the UN and the international community, the human rights NGOs, personalities of all walks of life should act strongly against this policy and isolate the Iranian disgraceful theocratic regime.

Unfortunately, Belgium government's decision to bend under the Iranian pressure and blackmail, has complicated Europe's attempts to fight Tehran's terrorist and subversive activities on its soil.

8 <https://ict.org.il/irans-strategy-of-terrorist-blackmail-in-a-historic-perspective/>