



The Cambridge Security Initiative

## **IRAN: PRISONER SWAPS DO NOT PORTEND DIPLOMATIC OPENING**

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A recent prisoner exchange between the U.S. and Iran reflects a slight easing of tensions as Tehran continues to recalibrate its response to the U.S. “maximum pressure” campaign to avoid a military clash. The exchanges probably will not lead to bilateral negotiations. Instead, Tehran appears to have adopted a “wait and see” approach, alternatively engaging in small-scale provocations while signalling de-escalation, probably biding its time in hopes of a new U.S. president in January 2021.

On 4 June, U.S. Navy veteran Michael [White](#) was released after nearly two years as part of a deal between the two countries. Just days later Majid Taheri—a dual U.S.-Iranian citizen accused of violating U.S. sanctions—was released by the U.S. On 2 June, Iranian scientist Sirous [Asgari](#) was released, although the U.S. State Department indicated this was not part of the prisoner swap. Asgari was acquitted of stealing scientific secrets in the U.S. and deported.

Iran’s [foreign ministry](#) subsequently urged Washington to release its remaining citizens, noting Tehran is prepared to swap all prisoners but without direct talks. Tehran claims the U.S. is holding as many as 24 Iranians while at least [three U.S. citizens](#) remain imprisoned in Iran. U.S. Special Envoy for Iran Brian [Hook](#) indicated Washington would like a face-to-face meeting to accelerate prisoner releases and offered to discuss all the issues between the two countries, noting, “The door for diplomacy on our side is wide open...” Hook also reiterated that the U.S. wants the UN Security Council to impose an indefinite arms embargo on Iran.

Tehran has taken additional steps aimed at reducing tensions. Most importantly, it chose not to block the ascendancy of Mustafa al-Kadhimi to the premiership in Baghdad, despite his pro-U.S. inclinations. Iran also appears to have directed its proxies in Iraq to stand-down although there have been a number of small-scale attacks on bases with U.S. personnel recently, almost certainly to remind the new government in Baghdad that Tehran still wields influence and power.

### **Outlook**

While additional prisoner exchanges are possible, Tehran is unlikely to engage in bilateral negotiations with Washington on its nuclear program, or other issues including its ballistic missile program and malign regional activity, absent sanctions relief. Indeed, [a military aide](#) to Supreme Leader Khamenei recently reiterated there would be no talks with the U.S. Tehran probably prefers to wait until the November U.S. presidential election, hoping a new U.S.

president might ease sanctions and return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action ([JCPOA](#)). It may also calculate open conflict with the U.S. would boost President Trump's popularity and re-election chances.

The UN-imposed arms embargo, however, expires in October, and a successful U.S. move to extend the embargo or to impose “snapback” sanctions is probably the next flashpoint. Indeed, on 23 June, Washington introduced a [UN Security Council draft resolution](#) to extend the arms embargo. Iran has threatened [five responses](#), all in the nuclear realm. These include limiting IAEA inspections, increasing level of enrichment (probably to 20 per cent), ceasing implementation of the [Additional Protocol](#) of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), leaving the JCPOA altogether, and withdrawing from the NPT completely. The exclusive focus on nuclear issues reflects Tehran's intent to avoid direct military confrontation with the U.S., a war it knows it cannot win.