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## **HOSTAGE AID WORLDWIDE LAUNCHED IN RESPONSE TO DRAMATIC INCREASE IN HOSTAGE DIPLOMACY BY SOME NATIONS**

*Hostage Aid Worldwide launch brings the majority of international high profile hostages and former hostages, leaders of global advocacy groups, members of Congress and former government officials and advisors to Presidents together to resolve the scourge of international hostage-taking.*

**The international community must recognize the problem of hostage diplomacy and governments must do far more to combat it.**

- Hosted by Hollywood actress and Amnesty International UK Ambassador Nazanin Boniadi
- Representatives from current and previous cases included Nizar Zakka (Iran, 2019), Richard Ratcliffe husband of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe (Iran, current), Kylie Moore Gilbert (Iran, 2020), Xiyue Wang (Iran, 2019), Jason Rezaian (Iran, 2016), Alan Gross (Cuba, 2014), Sam Goodwin (Syria, 2019) and Barry Rosen (Iran, 1981).
- Keynote speakers Diane Foley (James W. Foley Legacy Foundation), US Congressman Ted Deutch (Chair of the Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa and Global Counterterrorism), Senator Jeanne Shaheen (Committee on Foreign Relations)
- Panelists included James O'Brien (former Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs) and Dr. Julia Nesheiwat (former Homeland Security Advisor to President), International human rights lawyers Jason Poblete, Jared Genser, Dr. Tatiana Eatwell, Dr. Carla Ferstman and former FBI special agent and terrorism expert Ali Soufan (Soufan Center)

*New York---* Hostage Aid Worldwide,\* a new international organization whose mission is to assist in ending the rise of the hostage-taking phenomena by disrupting the hostage business model through using data and AI, held its launch event with a webinar, reaching out to analysts, hostages, families of hostages, and

members of congress in a groundbreaking event, holding out hope with initiatives in technology and cooperation.

The launch, a webinar, that lasted more than two hours and began with a word addressed by Congressman Ted Deutch and Senator Jeanne Shaheen and engaged more than 20 individuals deeply concerned with the scourge of international hostage-taking, took place on the eve of the stalled release of U.K. dual-national, Nazanin Zaghari Ratcliffe, and possible negotiations between the United States and Iran on reviving the nuclear deal, first signed in 2015.

The event was packed with high profile speakers, including former advisors to US Presidents, FBI Special Agents and Presidents of global advocacy groups. An extraordinary feature of the launch was the gathering together of numerous former hostages to speak and impart wisdom on the practice of hostage diplomacy.

Hostage taking is already accepted as an extreme form of torture, but governments must recognize the burgeoning problem and do far more to combat it. Every day there are high profile prisoners and countless unknown yet equally tragic victims who continue to suffer unimaginable cruelty and long term trauma.

### **Nazanin Boniadi Opens the Launch**

Hosting the event was actress and Amnesty International UK Ambassador, Nazanin Boniadi. In her opening remarks, Nazanin set the tone by saying, “Hostage taking is a trending threat to diplomatic norms...In my time in advocating for former hostages, one thing has remained disturbingly constant—we simply aren’t doing enough to end hostage diplomacy.”

Hostage diplomacy is the practice whereby states arbitrarily detain foreign or dual nationals with the intention of using them as bargaining chips in international negotiations. The practice is used by regimes such as Iran, China and Korea.

### **Congressman Ted Deutch Delivers Keynote Address**

In his keynote address to the members of the webinar, US Congressman Ted Deutch, Chair of the Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa and Global Counterterrorism firmly declared, “We must continue to make clear that those who engage in hostage taking or unlawfully detain Americans will be met with a

powerful response from the United States Congress. We will not be silenced while American lives are used as political pawns.”

### **Kylie-Moore Gilbert, Former Hostage, Hopes Hostage Aid Worldwide will help bring an end to Hostage Diplomacy**

Australian/British academic Kylie Moore-Gilbert who was released in November 2020 from her hostage ordeal of two years in an Iranian prison as part of a prisoner swap, used her keynote speech at the Hostage Aid launch to say, “Governments are increasingly being forced to negotiate over the lives of their innocent citizens in order to meet the demands of state-based hostage takers, often paying a heavy price in exchange... We hope that Hostage Aid Worldwide will be a first step in bringing this inhumane practice to an end.”

### **Panels on the Hostage-taking Business Model and the Different International Conventions on Hostage Taking**

The launch featured a number of panels, the first of which focused on the pre-existing – mechanisms – and their limitations – to address hostage diplomacy. The panel discussed the UN Convention on Hostage Taking, the Canadian Hostage Accountability Act as well as the Magnitsky and Levinson Acts. Speaking on the strength of the Canadian Hostage Accountability Act, Former Presidential Envoy on Hostage Affairs James O’Brien said, “Its great value is to name the problem. Normally these kinds of arbitrary detentions hide within the thousands of detentions of foreign nationals each year and the associated arbitrary administrative acts....Now it’s front and center and we can begin to discuss it.”

In addition, a report by the UK Foreign Affairs Committee had urged the UK government to begin referring to such detainees as hostages. A barrier to resolutions has been that the UN Convention on Hostage Taking does not encompass hostile states arbitrarily detaining foreign nationals within its definition of hostage taking.

### **Hostage-Taking in Iran**

Another panel focused on hostage taking in Iran, perhaps the most insidious user of hostage diplomacy in today’s world. Former hostage in Iran and American-Chinese citizen Xiyue Wang noted, “Any political deal that does not explicitly address Iran’s hostage taking behavior will not stop Iran’s hostage taking... I

believe that the JCPOA is partly responsible for Iran's hostage taking spree after January 2016. I think the idea of the JCPOA in large part is to encourage Iran to be a part of the international community and a responsible actor in the civilized world. But as we have seen the JCPOA has failed and Iran has begun taking hostages at a higher rate."

Also participating on the panel was Richard Ratcliffe, husband of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, the British-Iranian national who is still being held hostage in Iran even though her sentence, which was due to end on Sunday March 7, passed without her release. At the webinar, he said UK officials' efforts to resolve her case have abjectly failed, as he called her imprisonment a "blot on British diplomacy."

"There has to be a cost to inertia," Ratcliffe said. "Otherwise, the Iranian government can wait a long time ... governments have got an awful lot more patience than ordinary people living their lives."

In an exclusive to Hostage Aid Worldwide, Ratcliffe blasted Iran by saying, "The striking abusiveness of Nazanin's hostage case - taking a mother and baby on holiday to recover money under sanctions, and holding them for years, potentially even beyond the prison sentence, denying a small child her mother, and the likely chance of a young woman ever having another child again, all precisely because it grabs the headlines - is something sobering. It says something about the brazenness of Iran's hostage industry in recent years, but also its growth."

Ratcliffe was encouraged by Hostage Aid Worldwide's stance that there is a "redline" when it comes to hostage-taking. "Nazanin's story is not just a tragedy. It is a warning. Hostage Aid Worldwide is right - the world needs to wake up," he said.

### **While There is a Lack of Consensus on Dealing with Hostage Diplomacy, Hostage Aid worldwide 'Gives Victims and their Families...the Strength to Bring about Change'**

By the end, the webinar had touched on the important point that there is no consensus about how best to deal with hostage diplomacy. However, by engaging lawmakers, former hostages and families under the same umbrella, Hostage Aid Worldwide provided an opportunity to progress on the eradication of this practice.

Speaking after the event, Director of the International Observatory of Human Rights Valerie Peay said “It has been a privilege to work with the former hostages who have joined together to form Hostage Aid Worldwide and we at IOHR are fully supportive of the work, focus and experience that they will bring to this new venture. No one should be used as a hostage bargaining chip and Hostage Aid Worldwide will give the victims and their families the collective strength and technological know-how to bring about change. I look forward to future collaboration and supporting such a good initiative.”

### **Quotes:**

#### **Mariam Claren on her Mother Nahid Taghavi, a German-Iranian’s Internment, Speaks Out**

Other victims of Iranian human rights violations and hostage families, like Mariam Claren, whose mother, Nahid Taghavi, a German-Iranian dual national was suddenly arrested in her apartment by Iranian police and accused as a “security threat.” No one has been given access to her in Evin prison---(no lawyers or German diplomats). The German foreign office says it has done what it can, but the Iranian authorities do not recognize dual national status.

Mariam Claren tells the world: “My mother, Nahid Taghavi is yet another horrific example of somebody taken by the authorities and placed into solitary confinement without trial and denied access to lawyers. I am desperately worried for her safety so it is therefore extremely encouraging to join Hostage Aid Worldwide and meet with others who have been through the same experiences. Over the months I have come to realize that this is a truly global problem and we need a coordinated and globally aligned solution which HAW is working to achieve”

#### **Nizar Zakka, founder of Hostage Aid Worldwide says HAW’s Data-Tracking System is a Boon to Families of Hostages**

Nizar Zakka, a U.S resident, was arrested while visiting Tehran in 2015 and was subsequently sentenced to 10 years in jail for alleged charges of spying for the U.S. In September, 2015 he traveled to Iran as an official guest of Iran’s Vice President for Women and Family Affairs, Shahindokht Molaverdi to attend the international conference and exhibition on the Role of Women in Sustainable

Development and was arrested by Iran's Revolutionary Guards on his way back to Washington. He was then transferred to Iran's Evin prison and sentenced to 10 years in prison "for cooperating with a foreign power." He was released in June of 2019.

Nizar Zakka, says, "Once I was released from captivity, I came to realize how much pain I could have avoided had my family had access to data on similar cases. Therefore, I decided with other former hostages and experts to join hands to develop a data driven tracking system that can be used by families and governments to avoid history repeating itself with other innocent people."

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*\* Hostage Aid Worldwide (HAW) <https://hostageaid.org> is a Vermont based non profit which assists hostage victims and their families by providing insight on their cases, coordination with governments and UN bodies and a strategy to disrupt the hostage business model. We do this by combining global advocacy with data driven methods. Currently working with victims from USA, UK, Australia, Germany and others.*

*Recent comments by Secretary of State Blinken on the hostage business model:*  
<https://www.foreigndesknews.com/middle-east/iran/sec-blinken-demands-iran-reqime-release-all-u-s-hostages/>