

## Defying Rising Tensions, Iran and U.S. Work Toward a Prisoner Swap

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### Body

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The talks come even as the Trump administration intensifies its 'maximum pressure' strategy of sanctions against Iran and threatens to shoot Iranian gunboats in the Persian Gulf.

Iran and the United States are negotiating a deal that would release a United States Navy veteran held by the Iranian authorities in exchange for an Iranian-American doctor detained by the Americans, according to a senior Iranian official and a spokesman for the veteran's family.

The negotiations are extraordinary in that they are happening at all, given the rising tensions, bombast and threats of military force that have punctuated the relationship between the Iranian government and the Trump administration.

The senior Iranian official, Abolfaz Mehrabadi, deputy director of the Iranian interests section at the Pakistan Embassy in Washington, said the negotiations aim to exchange the veteran, Michael R. White, 48, who has been held in Iran for nearly two years, with the Iranian-American doctor, whom he would not identify. Mr. Mehrabadi said "the talks have not reached a conclusion yet."

The spokesman for Mr. White's family, Jonathan Franks, said he also had been told negotiations were underway between the two sides, although he had no further details.

"If the Iranians have a symmetrical deal on the table we would love for the administration to take it and bring Michael home," Mr. Franks said.

Prisoners have been an especially emotional issue in the long-estranged relationship between Iran and the United States, beginning with the seizure of Americans at the United States Embassy after Iran's Islamic revolutionaries seized power more than four decades ago.

Iran holds at least four Americans, including at least three of Iranian descent. Iran says about two dozen Iranians are held by the United States.

The advent of the coronavirus pandemic may have played a role in the prisoner negotiations. Mr. White, infected with the coronavirus while in prison, was temporarily released in late March as part of a prisoner furlough to help control the contagion. He has been in the custody of the Switzerland Embassy in Tehran, which represents United States interests there.

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Mr. Franks said Mr. White had recovered from the infection.

Despite the prisoner negotiations, all other dimensions of the United States-Iran relationship have been worsening.

The Trump administration has escalated sanctions on Iran since repudiating the 2015 nuclear deal negotiated by the administration of President Barack Obama, contributing to a sharp weakening of Iran's economy. White House officials have rejected calls by Iran and others for a humanitarian easing of those penalties because of the coronavirus crisis. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has pressed to renew a United Nations Security Council arms embargo against Iran that expires in October.

Iran in return has steadily taken a more defensive and provocative posture, increasing enrichment of uranium above the limits set in the nuclear deal, launching a military satellite and engaging with its proxy militias across the Middle East.

President Trump tweeted last month that he had ordered the United States Navy to "shoot down" Iranian boats if they harassed American vessels in the Persian Gulf. Iranian military commanders responded that Iran would retaliate.

The State Department spokeswoman, Morgan Ortagus, said bringing home detained Americans was a priority for Mr. Trump. "We work with the Swiss every day on the health, safety, and release of U.S. citizens wrongfully held in Iran," Ms. Ortagus said.

Details about the physician Iran wants to swap for Mr. White are not clear. Mr. Mehrabadi, the Iranian diplomat in Washington, said the doctor was out on bail and had dual citizenship in Iran and the United States. He added that dual-citizen prisoners currently held in Iran were not part of this round of negotiations.

The Iranian-American prisoners in Iran are all held on murky espionage charges that they have denied: Siamak Namazi, a businessman; his father Baquer Namazi, a retired United Nations official, and Morad Tahbaz, an environmentalist and businessman.

Mr. White, a cancer survivor, has been serving a 10-year sentence since 2018, on charges of insulting Iran's supreme leader and for privacy violations. He had traveled to Iran to meet a woman whom his family said he had met and fallen in love with on the internet.

Iran is also seeking the release of an Iranian-American scientist in the United States, Sirous Asgari, 59, who tested positive for the coronavirus last week while in the custody of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, as he awaits deportation.

Mr. Asgari was acquitted last November in federal court on charges of stealing trade secrets in violation of sanctions while on a sabbatical visit at an American university in Ohio. ICE agents detained him for deportation after his case had been dismissed.

While it appears Mr. Asgari is not part of this prisoner negotiation, his fate is not entirely detached from it. Mr. Mehrabadi said he had relayed to his American contacts that speedy release of Mr. Asgari would expedite Mr. White's return home.

"These three cases are entangled together, Asgari, White and the Iranian American doctor," Mr. Mehrabadi said.

Mr. Asgari's case has received prominent attention in Iran. The parliament's national security committee held a meeting on Monday and discussed it, according to official Iranian media.

Mohammad Javad Zarif, the foreign minister of Iran, tweeted about him in March, denouncing the United States for keeping Mr. Asgari and other Iranian scientists as "hostage" even as the coronavirus pandemic was worsening.

Mr. Asgari, a professor who received his Ph.D. in the United States, teaches at Tehran's elite Sharif University. He is an expert in engineering civil and defense jet engines.

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In a telephone interview from detention Mr. Asgari said he had no affiliations with the government or armed forces but had done research and contract work for Iran's civil and defense aviation industry.

Mr. Asgari said Iranian officials had approached his family several times to offer his name for a swap with Mr. White and Xiyue Wang, the Chinese American scholar. Mr. Wang was released in a swap with another Iranian scientist in December. Mr. Asgari said he had refused to be part of any prisoner exchange because he was innocent of any wrongdoing.

In March, ICE agents attempted to deport him to Iran but that flight cancellations caused by the pandemic had made that impossible, so he remained detained. ICE said in a statement that he would be deported "when he is medically cleared to travel and normal air travel resumes."

Mr. Asgari's lawyers said they were advocating for ICE to release him on parole because of his health condition and to allow family members in the United States to take custody of him until flying to Iran becomes possible.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/06/world/middleeast/Iran-American-prisoner-negotiations.html>

## Graphic

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PHOTO: Michael R. White, above, a U.S. Navy veteran being held in Iran, was infected with the novel coronavirus while in prison there. (PHOTOGRAPH BY WHITE FAMILY, VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS)

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