

Iran releases former U.S. Marine after repatriating a scientist

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Body

Iranians and Americans have completed an apparent hostage exchange, albeit denied by the parties. This Thursday afternoon Washington confirmed that **Michael White**, a Navy veteran who had been seized in Iran for nearly two years, has embarked on a plane chartered by Switzerland -- a representative of his interests on Iranian soil. The news comes shortly after the authorities celebrated the return of **Sirous Asgari**, a scientist accused in 2016 of stealing secrets and subsequently acquitted.

White's mother Joanne, who revealed a few months ago that her son was suffering from cancer, has ruled in a statement that "the nightmare is over." It began in July 2016, when the 46-year-old former Marine was seized in Mashhad. **White had traveled to the eastern Iranian city of Mashhad to meet a young woman he had met on the Internet.** According to sources, the arrest came after a complaint from the family.

In March 2019, the man **was sentenced to ten years in prison** on two counts: insulting the Supreme Leader and posting private photographs on social media, presumably of him with his partner. Last March, Michael White was one of thousands of beneficiaries of a released permit guaranteed by the authorities to **prevent the massive contagion of coronavirus in Iranian prisons.** It was feared that, because of his precarious state of health, White would succumb to Covid-19.

Bill Richardson, a former U.S. ambassador to the UN, was one of the architects of Michael White's repatriation. He has confirmed to the Associated Press that **the prisoner, who had been handed over to the Swiss authorities three months ago, was diagnosed with coronavirus** and has been recovering. Richardson had met with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and the Iranian ambassador to the UN to address the case.

Asgari, 59, was also infected. The scientist and professor at Theherani Polytechnic University of Sharif **was accused of stealing trade secrets from an Ohio University project for the Navy.** However, although a judge dropped all charges last November, the Iranian was placed in immigration and customs control custody to date, traveling across various points in the country and eventually contracting the disease.

Asgari's situation resulted in an exchange of tweets between **Iranian and U.S. officials accusing each other of disinterest in repatriating their respective nationals.** "The US needs to address this issue as dealing with another sovereign government," Javad Zarif, who offered dialogue, said two months ago. There are at least four Americans imprisoned in Iran, who claims that a dozen of their own languish in the US.

A White family spokesman has again reported on Thursday that the charges against Michael were a "pretext for a kidnapping for reward." Washington has blamed Iran for arresting people of interest, including activists, businessmen and academics with dual nationality - Iran does not recognize the foreigner - to force beneficial

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political reactions from its opponents. Although, similarly, not only Tehran, but more and more observers are pointing to Trump for doing the same.

In any case, and **despite the closeness of both repatriations, Iran and the Us deny that what happened was a prisoner exchange.** Two days ago, Iran's Foreign Office, Abbas Mousavi, said Asgari had been "released under the premise of his acquittal." Similarly, according to the AP agency, White's release is integrated into another prisoner agreement involving an Iranian American who is expected to remain in the US.

HIGH TENSION BETWEEN WASHINGTON AND TEHRAN

This episode is the latest in a series of timid openings dominated by a high-tension stage between Washington and Tehran. **The "maximum pressure" strategy declared by Donald Trump after arriving at the White House**, which included forcing the demolition of the nuclear deal signed by his predecessor and reimposing sanctions, led Tehran to raise its belligerence in the region. Both countries nearly collided earlier this year, with the US assassination of General Qasem Soleimani.

Although always intestate, and almost always through intermediaries such as Switzerland and Oman, negotiations between Iranians and Americans allowed for another exchange last December. In that case, Chinese-American scholar Xiyue Wang was released along with the release of Massoud Soleimani, another scientist imprisoned in the US accused of violating sanctions. But other cases involving British, French and Australian nationals remain to be resolved.

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