



[The Prisoner Swap and Its Effect on the US-Iran Relationship](#)

By Brenna Haggerty

After two years of careful negotiations, Iran and the United States have officially completed a prisoner exchange. The deal, mediated by Qatar, with help from Oman and Switzerland, is a rare success in Iranian-American diplomacy. The United States saw the safe return of five citizens, while five Iranians convicted of nonviolent crimes in the United States received clemency. In addition, the United States unfroze six billion dollars of Iranian oil revenue that was held due to sanctions. Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi has declared the swap a humanitarian action and a step upon which other actions can be taken. The transfer of prisoners was set into motion when South Korea sent the funds to Qatar, which will monitor the use of the money. The unfrozen assets are for humanitarian use only, and if they are misappropriated, the United States will move to block the funds.

Tensions between Iran and the United States have been heightened since 2018 when then-president Donald Trump left the Iran nuclear deal, officially named the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). When President Biden took office, he promised to revive the JCPOA, but negotiations became complicated by Iran's violent crackdown on protestors and the accusations that they provided Russia with drones for use in the war with Ukraine. It was also difficult for the U.S. to rebuild the trust lost between the two negotiating parties. Iran still feared that if another deal was made the U.S. would simply pull out again. Because of this, Biden maintained the sanctions placed on Iran. In the wake of the prisoner exchange, the Biden administration announced that it would introduce new sanctions under the Levinson Act for Iran's acts of wrongful detainment. These sanctions will target former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad for his alleged involvement in the disappearance of former FBI agent Robert Levinson sixteen years ago and the Ministry of Intelligence for its role in arresting and interrogating Americans in prison. In his statement, Biden also promised to continue imposing sanctions for Iran's "provocative actions in the region." This announcement comes just days after the one-year anniversary of Mahsa Amini's death where the United States announced an increase in sanctions on Iran for their human rights abuses.

Since the deal was announced, there has been immense backlash from the Republican Party for ceding to Iran and "paying ransom" for the prisoners. Some Republicans claim that, by unfreezing funds, this deal will encourage Iran to detain more Americans in the future. There has also been misinformation spread about the origin of these funds. The Biden administration emphasizes that the frozen funds were Iranian assets and that they will be carefully monitored by Qatar and the United States. Aside from Republican criticism, the deal has received widespread praise as a "step in the right direction." Sayyid Badr Al-Busaidi, the Foreign Minister of Oman, believes this deal may create an avenue for peace in the region. In Iran, reactions varied. In the ultraconservative newspaper Keyhan, the headline read, "America Kneels Before Iran." In the reformist Shargh newspaper, however, the exchange was deemed a "positive diplomatic step." Aside from any political bias, the deal was well-received in Tehran overall.

The exchange has stirred up debate about the future of the Iran nuclear deal now that diplomatic relations seem to be improving. Amidst the speculation, U.S. officials have made it clear that the prisoner swap deal is separate

from all other talks with Iran, including the nuclear issue. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken emphasized that the exchange does not “speak to anything else in the relationship.” While many analysts agree that the deal is a promising step forward, revival of the Iran nuclear deal is unlikely. Even if this exchange does open up diplomatic channels between Iran and the United States, there would still be many hurdles to reestablishing the JCPOA. The United States still has a number of sanctions implemented against Iran. There is also still a massive anti-western sentiment in Iran. A single diplomatic success cannot erase that. The prisoner exchange deal appears to have been purely transactional and does not seem to signal progress toward the renewal of the JCPOA.

The timing of the prisoner exchange deal further prevents progress with the nuclear deal. With the 2024 presidential election looming, the Biden administration is focusing all of its energy on reelection. The administration will protect itself, and that means avoiding uncertain entanglements with foreign countries. There are few U.S. relationships more uncertain than the connection with Iran. Over 80% of Americans have an unfavorable view of Iran. Biden does not want to make concessions to Iran before the election, because it would invite harsh Republican attacks and lower his overall popularity. Iran will likely also hold back from making any agreements to maintain some leverage if Trump wins the vote. Biden’s best path forward is to come to an unofficial understanding with Iran that can reduce tension while capitalizing on this diplomatic momentum. The JCPOA is currently unsustainable, but Biden can still make some progress with an unwritten agreement.