



**FOLEY
FOUNDATION**

BRINGING AMERICANS HOME

RESEARCH SERIES

**2024 HOSTAGE
AND WRONGFUL
DETAINEE LANDSCAPE**

By **Elizabeth Richards**



ABOUT THE JAMES W. FOLEY LEGACY FOUNDATION

The James W. Foley Legacy Foundation (Foley Foundation) was established less than three weeks after the brutal murder of conflict journalist and humanitarian James “Jim” Foley by ISIS in August 2014.

With the firm conviction that the United States must prioritize the freedom of Americans unjustly held captive abroad over other policy considerations, the Foley Foundation successfully advocated for and was a key participant in a 2015 review of the effectiveness of the U.S. government’s policy on the hostage-taking of Americans internationally. Recommendations from the review led to the creation by executive order of the principal elements of today’s U.S. government “hostage enterprise” including the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs, the Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell, the Issue Manager for Detainee and Hostage Affairs at the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, and the Hostage Response Group at the National Security Council. This structure was later codified into law by the 2020 Robert Levinson Hostage Recovery and Hostage-Taking Accountability Act. Since its creation in 2015, the hostage enterprise has secured the freedom of over 145 Americans held hostage abroad.

The Foley Foundation connects families of those held hostage or wrongfully detained with the resources needed to endure their loved one’s captivity, and it supports these families’ public advocacy efforts to secure their freedom. Reports in the *Bringing Americans Home* research series have been a critical tool for educating policymakers and the public as to the nature of this national security threat. These reports identify and recommend reforms needed to speed the return of Americans held captive abroad and to deter and prevent future hostage-taking.

Learn more at www.jamesfoleyfoundation.org, by viewing the documentary, *Jim: The James Foley Story*, and by reading *American Mother* by Colum McCann with Diane Foley.

OUR MISSION

To advocate for American hostages and wrongful detainees held abroad and promote journalist safety.

OUR VALUES

Moral Courage

Inspired by Jim Foley, we seek to encourage and empower all to act with moral conviction - one person at a time for the good of others.

Justice

We are committed to resolving the injustice of hostage-taking through research that shapes policies to deter captors and hold them accountable.

Compassion

We empathize with and help hostage families confidentially: listening, identifying the resources they need and the obstacles they face, while advocating for their loved ones' swift return.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Richards is the Director of Hostage Advocacy and Research at the James W. Foley Legacy Foundation. Liz is a United States Air Force veteran who served as the Hostage Mission Manager at Fort Meade, Maryland. In this role, Liz led a team focused on hostage recovery, resolving 18 cases of captivity around the world and rescuing 30 civilians. As

an adjunct university professor, she taught behavioral statistics and research methods. While in the role of private sector research associate, Liz applied her background in clinical psychology to conduct qualitative research projects. She also volunteers as an advocate for the health and empowerment of women and girls.

The Foley Foundation offers its special thanks for the contributions of Harrington Mirkow of Marquette University's Les Aspin Center for Government whose efforts enabled a more well-rounded and on-time final product.

A NOTE FROM THE PRESIDENT AND FOUNDER

Dear interested fellow Americans,

When the U.S. government failed to save American journalists James Foley, Steven Sotloff, and aid workers, Kayla Mueller and Peter Kassig, from captivity by ISIS in 2014, I established the James W. Foley Legacy Foundation because I knew the United States of America could do better by our fellow citizens.

For the past decade, the Foley Foundation has advocated for the freedom of all U.S. nationals taken hostage or wrongfully detained abroad and has conducted research to ensure that U.S. policy protects Americans abroad. We have sought to hold our government accountable for addressing this national security threat through groundbreaking qualitative research involving families of Americans held captive abroad, returned hostages, government officials, and experts from outside of government. We believe our nonpartisan, independent research is critical for policymakers and the American people to understand the threat posed by international hostage-taking, especially because our government does not publish official metrics.

This first report in our *Bringing Americans Home* research series for 2025 is a quantitative analysis

of the hostage taking and wrongful detainee landscape as it was at the end of 2024 including how the landscape has evolved since 2005. Alarming, this analysis reveals that the threat of international abductions continues to grow, particularly the risk of wrongful detention.

The “U.S. hostage enterprise,” as it is informally called, was built to recover U.S. nationals taken hostage abroad. It was neither designed to recover those wrongfully detained by nation states (who now hold the vast majority of Americans held captive) nor to deter or prevent adversaries from taking our people.

I commend the U.S. government for bringing home over 145 U.S. nationals from captivity since 2015. Our nation must, however, summon the moral courage and marshal the resolve necessary to not only bring innocent Americans home, but to also deter and prevent the odious practice of hostage-taking.

Respectfully yours,



Diane Foley

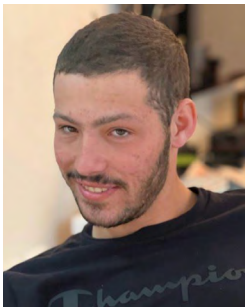
IN MEMORIAM

As advocates for American hostages and wrongful detainees held abroad, the Foley Foundation wishes to acknowledge and honor the Americans who died in captivity, or whose fate became publicly known, during 2024.

In March, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) announced that **Itay Chen**, an IDF soldier, who was believed to have been taken hostage by Hamas was killed during the initial attack on October 7, 2023. His remains are still held hostage by Hamas, denying him and his family a proper burial. In May, the family of **Majd Kamalmaz**, a humanitarian and psychologist, learned of his passing while being held captive by the Syrian Assad regime sometime after he was detained in 2017. **Hersh Goldberg-Polin** was attending a music festival when he was taken hostage by Hamas on October 7, 2023. He displayed courage throughout his captivity, losing an arm as he repelled grenades to keep others safe

during the attack. Hersh was brutally murdered by Hamas at the end of August during a failed rescue attempt. Finally, in December, the IDF confirmed that **Omer Neutra**, an IDF tank commander from Long Island, New York, was killed by Hamas on October 7, 2023. His remains also continue to be held in Gaza, preventing his family the ability to memorialize him with a proper burial.

Working closely with many families of Americans taken captive unjustly, we are ever mindful that every life lost to these crimes against humanity has a horrific and profound impact on the victim's families, their communities, and the nation. We conduct research to ensure the public may understand the scale and scope of this national security threat facing all Americans and to help inform the development of effective policies, legislation, and solutions to counter and ultimately neutralize it.



Itay Chen



Majd Kamalmaz



Hersh Goldberg-Polin



Omer Neutra

Photos courtesy of the families of each hostage.

An illustration of three hands in a light beige color, arranged in a circle with fingers pointing towards the center. The hands are semi-transparent, allowing the text and other elements to be seen through them.

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**AMERICANS WERE HELD
HOSTAGE OR WRONGFULLY
DETAINED OVERSEAS
IN 17 COUNTRIES IN 2024.**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At one point in 2024, at least 54 Americans were held hostage or wrongfully detained overseas in 17 countries. The Foley Foundation assessed the majority of them (83%) as wrongfully detained. At least 17 Americans were released from captivity last year, the vast majority (47%) through prisoner exchanges.

Despite some success in freeing the wrongfully detained, there was little progress in freeing American hostages. In addition, statistical analysis of the data used for this report suggests that more Americans were wrongfully detained between 2015 and 2024 than in the 10 years prior (2005-2014). This finding may be due, in part, to the establishment of specific criteria for “wrongful detention,” a legal term defined by the Robert Levinson Hostage Recovery and Hostage-Taking Accountability Act (Levinson Act) that was signed into law at the end of 2020. Additionally, with several high-profile cases of wrongful detention by state actors, there has been greater media attention paid to the issue, more public reporting and hence,

an enhanced ability through open-source research to track how many Americans may be held captive by nation states.

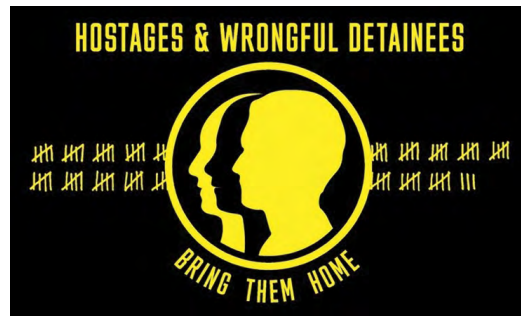
Measuring the full extent of U.S. hostage taking and wrongful detention abroad is challenging because of the lack of official metrics and often limited publicly available information. Variations in definitions, criteria, and terminology employed by nations and media organizations globally also create confusion, which has led to differing numbers and lists.^a These challenges highlight the need for transparent, official metrics and consistent, unambiguous terms to understand the problem, coordinate international responses, and implement effective deterrence and prevention strategies. Finally, as the nature of the threat has shifted from hostage-taking toward wrongful detention, a focused, whole of government study is warranted to develop a proactive national strategy and a comprehensive set of policies, tools, and capabilities to address this dynamic national security threat.

^a The United States is the only nation that uses the term “wrongful detention” in these cases with most international organizations and nations using the term “arbitrary detention” instead.

INTRODUCTION

This paper describes the hostage and wrongful detention landscape for 2024 using descriptive and inferential statistics. It explores the problem in terms of the known number of Americans held, the number of new cases during the past calendar year, number of releases, and number of deaths. This paper is *not* an assessment of the effectiveness of the U.S. hostage enterprise or U.S. hostage policy.^b The analysis presented here cannot be used to draw inferences about the efficacy of the U.S. hostage enterprise or U.S. hostage policy as both are outside of the scope of this paper.

There is no publicly agreed upon number of U.S. nationals (also referred to below as “Americans”) who are taken hostage and wrongfully detained abroad. The U.S. government does not provide exact numbers, citing national security concerns, and instead officials speak in general numbers.¹ For example, in various public forums, Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs Roger Carstens while in office shared round numbers with qualifiers like “about” or “around” regarding the number of Americans being wrongfully detained.² By comparison, the Foley



The U.S. Hostage & Wrongful Detainee Flag, designed by David Ewald and families of Americans unjustly held captive abroad, was codified as a national symbol by Congress in 2023.

Foundation publishes on its website an assessed number of Americans held captive, which is kept up to date as new information becomes available. At any given time, there has been a substantial gap between the rough count the government sporadically shares, and the specific number of Americans detained wrongfully as assessed by the Foundation. Not all cases are public, however, and the Foundation believes that the actual number of Americans unjustly held captive abroad to be higher than its own published statistics. This lack of clarity can be confusing to anyone seeking to understand the scale and scope of the threat, such as Congress, media organizations, researchers, or the general public.

b For the Foley Foundation’s latest assessment of the U.S. hostage enterprise, please refer to our 2024 Bringing Americans Home report on our website (<https://jamesfoleyfoundation.org/hostage-advocacy/hostage-report/>).

As illustrated by Figure 1, every year thousands of Americans are arrested overseas.^{3,4} The vast majority of these arrests and detentions are not wrongful and “arise out of legitimate law enforcement and judicial processes.”⁵ According to the U.S. government, in exceptional circumstances (i.e., less than 1% of instances), the detention may be assessed as wrongful.⁶ The 2020 Levinson Act defines criteria for wrongful detention cases (Figure 2, next page). It is less clear how the U.S. Department of State applies those criteria.⁷ Citing national security concerns, the department does not share publicly how the Levinson Act’s criteria are interpreted and applied when reviewing cases for potential designations of wrongful

detention to avoid creating a roadmap for captor countries.⁸

The government’s concern for potentially incentivizing perpetrators is understandable; however, the lack of transparency may lead to confusion in how the public perceives the hostage-taking and wrongful detention national security threat and its scope.⁹ Different organizations and news outlets publish their own lists of Americans being held hostage or wrongfully detained, often in specific countries.^{10,11,12} This lack of consistency in methods for identifying hostage and wrongful detention cases leads to inconsistent reporting, which may impact how the public understands cases of Americans being unjustly held.

Figure 1

CATEGORIES OF DETENTION AND APPROXIMATE SHARE OF AMERICANS HELD ABROAD

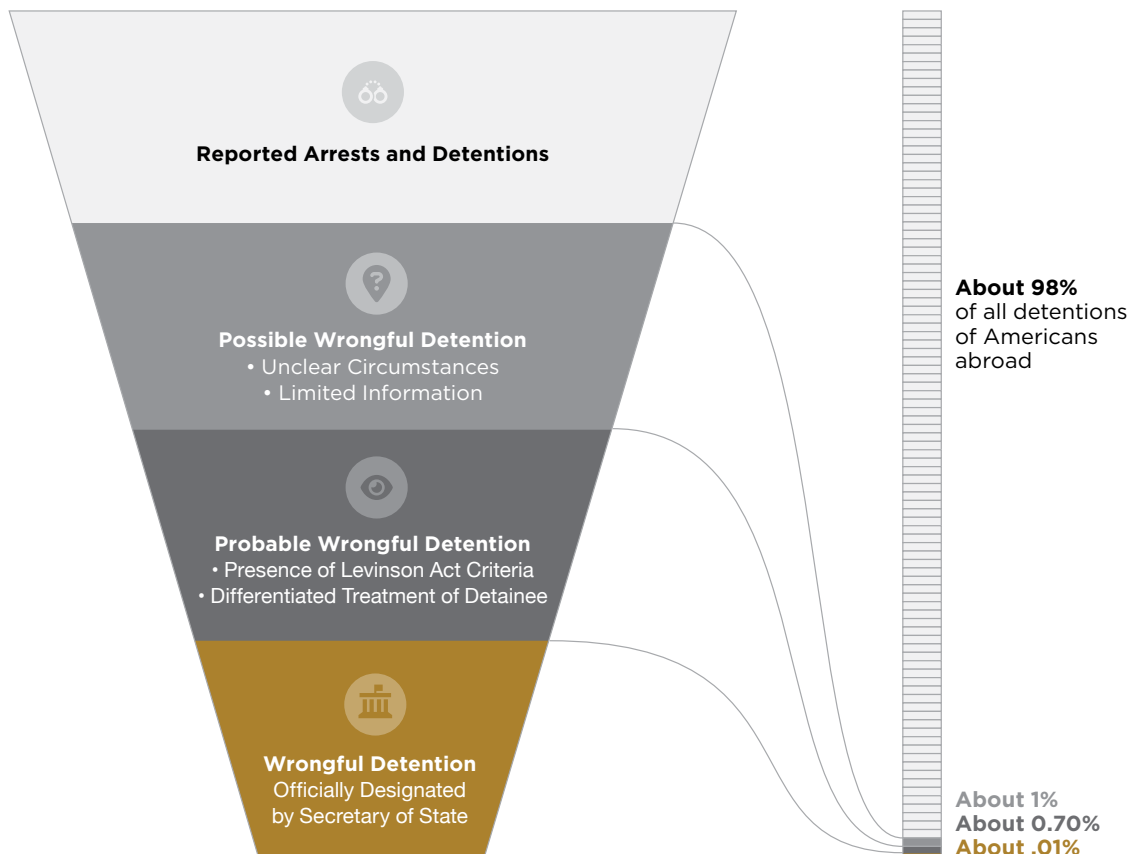


Figure 2

LEVINSON CRITERIA

Robert Levinson Hostage Recovery and Hostage-Taking Accountability Act, Sec. 2. (a) Review. — The Secretary of State shall review the cases of United States nationals detained abroad to determine if there is credible information that they are being detained unlawfully or wrongfully, based on criteria which may include whether—

1. United States officials receive or possess credible information indicating innocence of the detained individual;
2. the individual is being detained solely or substantially because he or she is a United States national;
3. the individual is being detained solely or substantially to influence United States Government policy or to secure economic or political concessions from the United States Government;
4. the detention appears to be because the individual sought to obtain, exercise, defend, or promote freedom of the press, freedom of religion, or the right to peacefully assemble;
5. the individual is being detained in violation of the laws of the detaining country;
6. independent nongovernmental organizations or journalists have raised legitimate questions about the innocence of the detained individual;
7. the United States mission in the country where the individual is being detained has received credible reports that the detention is a pretext for an illegitimate purpose;
8. the individual is detained in a country where the Department of State has determined in its annual human rights reports that the judicial system is not independent or impartial, is susceptible to corruption, or is incapable of rendering just verdicts;
9. the individual is being detained in inhumane conditions;
10. due process of law has been sufficiently impaired so as to render the detention arbitrary; and
11. United States diplomatic engagement is likely necessary to secure the release of the detained individual.

DEFINITIONS

The U.S. government defines hostage-taking as “the unlawful abduction or holding of a U.S. national against their will by a non-state actor in order to compel a third person or governmental organization to do or abstain from doing any act as a condition for the release of the person detained.”^{13,c} Americans held by a government that refuses to acknowledge that it is holding them also fall into this category. The Levinson Act sets out 11 criteria that provide a framework to inform the Secretary of State’s decision-making process.¹⁴ Ultimately though, the decision to designate an American as wrongfully detained is at the discretion of the Secretary.¹⁵ The Foley Foundation bases its own assessments on the U.S. government’s definitions of hostage-taking and wrongful detention.¹⁶ One exception is that the Foley Foundation includes individuals who are subject to exit bans (i.e., individuals who are not imprisoned but who are unable to leave the country in which they are located) in its count of wrongful detentions whereas the U.S. government does not. Exit bans accounted for 25% (9) of the total number of detentions the Foley Foundation counted as unjust at the end of 2024. The Foley Foundation’s inclusion of exit bans



From left to right, Liz Richards (author), Benjamin Gray, and Diane Foley. *Foley Foundation photo.*

explains some of the discrepancy in the number of wrongful detentions we report as compared to the generalized numbers cited by the U.S. government.

c Non-state actors may include terrorists, pirates, and criminal organizations.

LIMITATIONS

The data presented in this report are based on records maintained in a Foley Foundation database. This database originated out of the Combating Terrorism Center's dataset.¹⁷ The number of Americans held hostage or wrongfully detained

overseas is likely higher than what is recorded in the dataset used for this report, which is limited to open-source reporting and private reports by family members of those held captive. In both cases, sufficient information may not be available, or the information may be ambiguous, making assessments of the applicability of the Levinson Act criteria difficult. Past academic literature has noted the role the media plays in shaping what cases draw public attention and what cases do not receive extensive coverage.¹⁸ This media bias is likely reflected in the Foley Foundation dataset as cases that garner more media attention are more likely to be noticed. Media attention may also result in more public information about a case, facilitating the Foley Foundation's evaluation of a case against Levinson Act criteria. Additionally, some families may not come forward or seek support for a variety of reasons (e.g., fear of retribution against a loved one being held). Without awareness of a case, it cannot be reflected in the dataset. Furthermore, as passage of the Levinson Act codified the definition of wrongful detention in the final days of 2020, cases that may have otherwise met that definition may be missing from the dataset prior to calendar year 2021.



2024 AT A GLANCE

In total, at least 54 Americans were held hostage (9) or wrongfully detained (45) overseas in 17 countries at some point during 2024 (Figure 3).^d Consistent with recent years, wrongful detention cases accounted for the majority of situations where Americans were unjustly held in 2024 (83%). At the start of 2024, there were 47 Americans held hostage (6) or wrongfully detained (41). That number peaked in 2024 at 49 Americans unjustly held because of new detentions in January and

February. There were 17 releases in 2024, the majority a result of prisoner exchanges with other countries. There were also at least two additional wrongful detentions in the final months of the year. 2024 concluded with 36 Americans still held hostage (5) or wrongfully detained (31) in 15 countries. These 36 Americans had been held for an average of 5.9 years (median: 4.7 years), with a duration of detention that spans from just under two months to over 22 years.

HOSTAGES

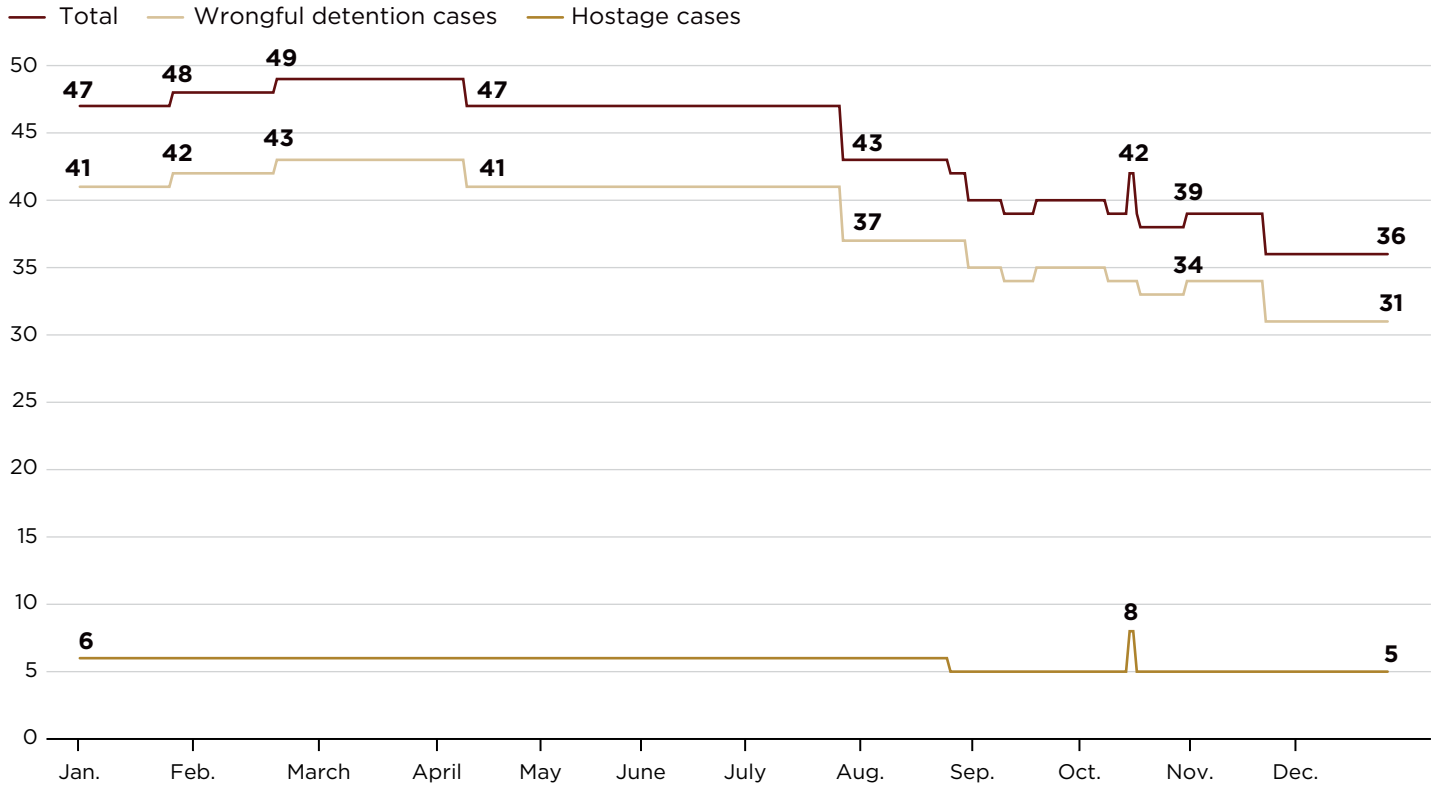
As indicated by Figure 3, progress on securing the release of Americans being held hostage stagnated in much of 2024 and then reversed with the tragic death of Hersh Goldberg-Polin in captivity at the end of August.¹⁹ In

October, there was a brief spike, when a news team was taken captive and held for about 48 hours, before being released. Aside from those two events, the hostage landscape remained unchanged for the year.

^d This number does not include the remains of four Americans killed in the October 7, 2023, attack by Hamas. Hamas continues to hold their remains hostage, denying their families a proper burial for their loved ones.

Figure 3

AMERICANS HELD IN CAPTIVITY, 2024



WRONGFUL DETAINEES

The overall number of Americans wrongfully detained decreased slightly in April, with the lifting of exit bans on two individuals detained in Saudi Arabia. The next notable change occurred on August 1, with the release of four Americans from Russia.²⁰ This release signaled the start of progress for the rest of the year, with the release of additional

Americans being wrongfully detained elsewhere in the world. Consistent with the past few years, wrongful detention cases comprised the majority of cases of Americans being unjustly detained overseas. On December 31, 2024, 86% of Americans held captive unjustly were categorized as wrongfully detained.

STATISTICAL COMPARISONS

As seen in Figure 4, a review of the last 20 years (2005 to the end of 2024) revealed a significant increase in reports of Americans being taken hostage or wrongfully detained over time^{e,f}. Additionally, the number of Americans assessed to be unjustly held captive overseas has significantly increased over the last 10 years compared to years prior^g. In particular, there appears to be an increase in cases of Americans reported to be wrongfully detained from 2015-2024, compared to 2005-2014^h. This finding may be, at least in part, due to more attentive tracking by non-governmental organizations of wrongful detentions in the latter decade, as well as establishment in 2020 of a legal definition of what constitutes a wrongful detention per the Levinson Act.

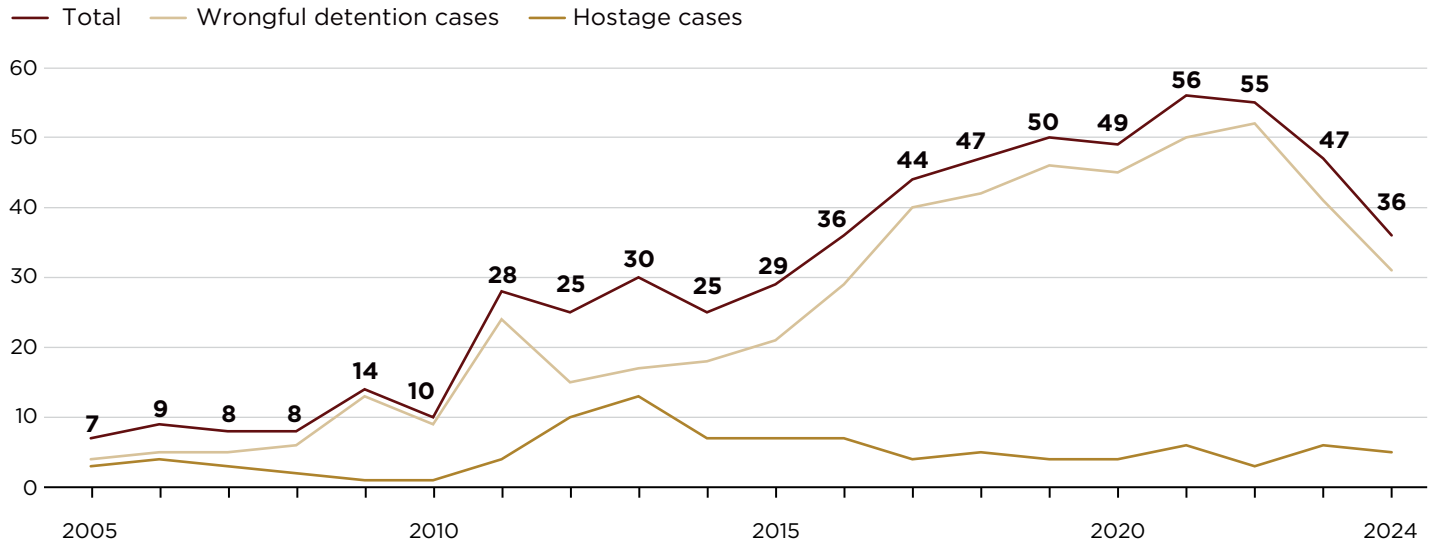


Artist Isaac Campbell (right) in front of the Bring Our Families Home public mural in Washington D.C. in July 2024.
Foley Foundation photo

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- e** In the notations below, standard statistical notations are used, (e.g., M stands for mean, SD stands for standard deviation).
 - f** A strong, positive correlation was found between year and total held, $r = .88$, $p < .001$, year and hostages held, $r = .64$, $p = .045$, and year and detainees held, $r = .83$, $p = .003$, such that, for all three variables, as years increased, so did the number held.
 - g** An independent t -test indicated that significantly more total Americans have been held from 2015-2024 ($M = 44.90$, $SD = 8.75$) compared to 2005-2014 ($M = 16.40$, $SD = 9.42$), $t(18) = -7.01$, $p < .001$, $d = -3.14$.
 - h** An independent t -test indicated that significantly more Americans were wrongfully detained from 2015-2024 ($M = 39.70$, $SD = 9.84$) compared to 2005-2014 ($M = 11.60$, $SD = 6.84$), $t(18) = -7.01$, $p < .001$, $d = -3.32$.

Figure 4

TOTAL NUMBER OF AMERICANS HELD IN CAPTIVITY, 2005-2024



WHERE AMERICANS WERE HELD

In 2024, Americans were held across 17 countries. Despite recent successes in securing releases from China and Russia, consistent with past years, China and Russia together still accounted for about a third of all known cases of Americans being unjustly held overseas at the end of the calendar year. The number of wrongful detentions in both countries is likely higher given the limited access that U.S. Consular Affairs has to Americans being detained in those countries. At the close of 2024, Americans were still being unjustly held in at least 15 countries.

Table 1

WHERE AMERICANS WERE HELD IN 2024

Country	Number of Americans Held
Afghanistan	4
China	8
Egypt	2
Iran	2
Palestinian Territories	3*
Russia	5
Saudi Arabia	3**
Turkey	2

*The remains of four additional Americans killed in the October 7, 2023 attack by Hamas also remain held hostage. **All cases are exit bans.

Note: Countries in which a single, known American is being wrongfully detained are excluded from this table.

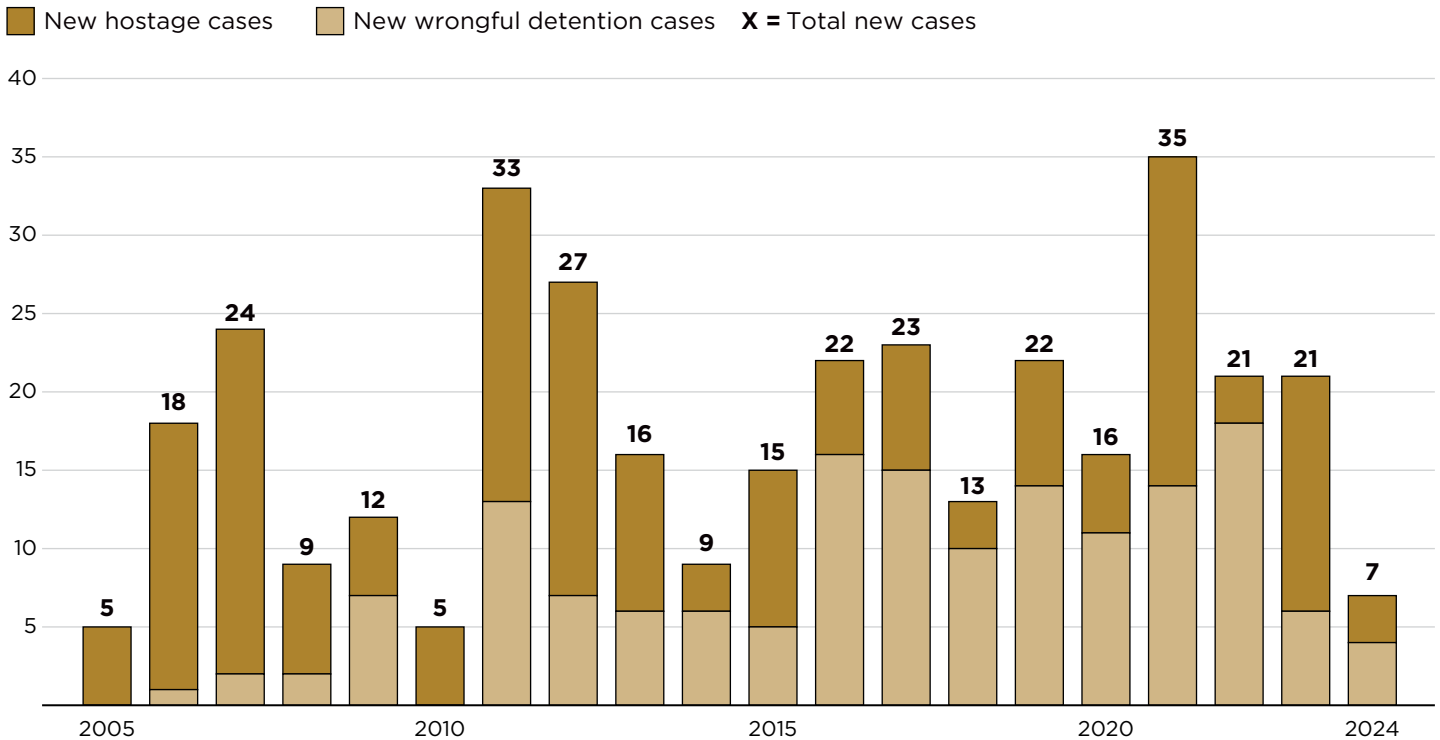
NEW CASES OF AMERICANS TAKEN

The Foley Foundation identified seven new cases (three hostage-takings, four wrongful detentions) in 2024 based on open-source reporting and outreach to

us by families. This number indicates a 66% decrease compared to 21 new cases in 2023 (Figure 5).

Figure 5

NEW CASES OF AMERICANS TAKEN CAPTIVE, BY YEAR



However, the apparent decrease in new cases may be misleading as the number is likely higher. As discussed in the introduction, there is often a delay between when an American is taken and when information sufficient enough to make an assessment about the case becomes available. In 2024, reports of the arrests of up to nine Americans in Venezuela are particularly troubling. The Americans detained in Venezuela had not been acknowledged as wrongfully detained by the U.S. State Department by the end of 2024 and they were not included in the Foley Foundation’s new case count for 2024.²¹

A comparison between the number of new cases pre-Presidential Policy Directive 30 (PPD) (2005-2014) and post-PPD-30 (2015-2024) revealed that there was no statistically significant difference in either overall new casesⁱ or in new hostage cases^j. There was a significant increase in new cases of wrongful detention from 2015-2024 compared to 2005-2014^k. As discussed earlier, this increase may be understood, in part, due to better defining of wrongful detentions and more media attention to the issue.

i An independent *t*-test indicated there was no significant difference between the number of new cases a year from 2015-2024 ($M = 19.50, SD = 7.46$) compared to 2005-2014 ($M = 15.90, SD = 9.50$), $t(18) = -0.23, p = .358, d = -0.42$.

j An independent *t*-test indicated there was no significant difference between the number of new hostage cases a year from 2015-2024 ($M = 8.20, SD = 5.87$) compared to 2005-2014 ($M = 11.40, SD = 7.50$), $t(18) = 1.06, p = .302, d = 0.48$.

k An independent *t*-test indicated there was a significant difference between the number of new wrongful detention cases a year from 2015-2024 ($M = 11.30, SD = 4.92$) compared to 2005-2014 ($M = 4.89, SD = 4.08$), $t(18) = -3.07, p = .007, d = -1.41$.

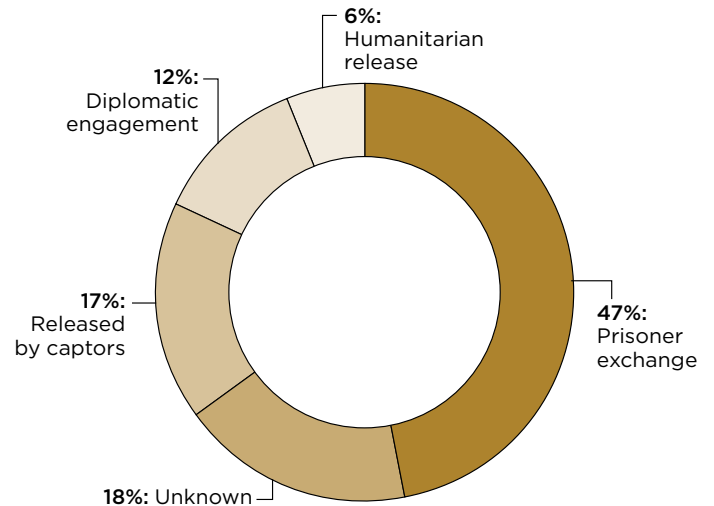
RELEASES FROM CAPTIVITY

As seen in Figure 6, in 2024, 17 Americans were released (3 hostages, 14 wrongful detainees) from six countries — China, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan. The three American hostages were released by their captors without the intervention of the U.S. government.²² Of the wrongful detention cases, eight Americans were released as the result of a prisoner exchange, two were released based on U.S. diplomatic engagement, and one was released on humanitarian grounds. The release mechanism is unknown in the remaining three cases.

Figure 6

HOW AMERICANS HELD CAPTIVE ABROAD WERE RELEASED IN 2024

Of 17 total releases



THE CAMPAIGN BRING OUR FAMILIES HOME

Bring Our Families Home is a campaign comprised of and led by the families of Americans held hostage or wrongfully detained overseas. These families advocate collectively for the freedom of their loved ones. In 2024, the campaign welcomed home four of their family members held captive:

- **Paster David Lin** — China, held 6,681 days
- **Mark Swidan** — China, held 4,397 days
- **Kai Li** — China, held 3,001 days
- **Paul Whelan** — Russia, held 2,043 days



Formed in 2022, the campaign's strong advocacy has successfully reunited 23 of their families. The Foley Foundation serves as the campaign's fiscal sponsor.

AUGUST 1

HISTORIC PRISONER EXCHANGE

The prisoner exchange that took place on August 1, 2024, on the tarmac of the Ankara Esenboga airport in Türkiye brought home four Americans who were wrongfully detained in Russia: Paul Whelan, Vladimir Kara-Murza, Evan Gershkovich, and Alsu Kurmasheva.²³ This exchange was complex, involving more than six countries with a total of 24 people released. The effort was described as a “feat of diplomacy,”²⁴ by the Biden White House and was the largest US-Russia prisoner swap in post-Soviet history.²⁵ The exchange culminated at least 13 months of work by government officials behind the scenes and passionate advocacy by the family members of those held and their advisors.^{26,27}

Central to the exchange was Vladimir Putin’s desire for the release of Vadim Krasikov, a Russian assassin held in Germany for murder since 2019.²⁸ Putin had long sought the release of Krasikov, originally proposing to exchange Whelan for Krasikov in 2022. Initially, the U.S. government did not see a path forward, as Germany held Krasikov. When it became clear that Krasikov was key to securing the release of the wrongfully detained Americans, the U.S. government worked to find a creative solution.

The U.S. sought to enlarge the scope of the potential deal, by leveraging alliances, and by seeking to secure the release of others detained in Russia, including Alexei Navalny, a Russian opposition leader.^{29,30} A critical moment in negotiations occurred in February 2024, when German Chancellor Scholz promised President Biden to support the proposed trade.^{31,32} Then, Navalny died in captivity in February 2024 before the exchange was finalized.³³ However, the U.S. pushed forward, engineering the release of additional political prisoners in Russia so Germany would have the political capital to move forward with the deal.³⁴ After President Biden called the Prime Minister of Slovenia in July 2024, the pieces were in place to execute the exchange.³⁵ Eleven days after that phone call, Whelan, Kara-Murza, Gershkovich, and Kurmasheva were released.



Evan Gershkovich (front row, left), Paul Whelan (front row, second from right) and Alsu Kurmasheva (front row, right) are pictured with government officials a plane following their release. Vladimir Kara-Murza is not pictured.

U.S. Department of State photo

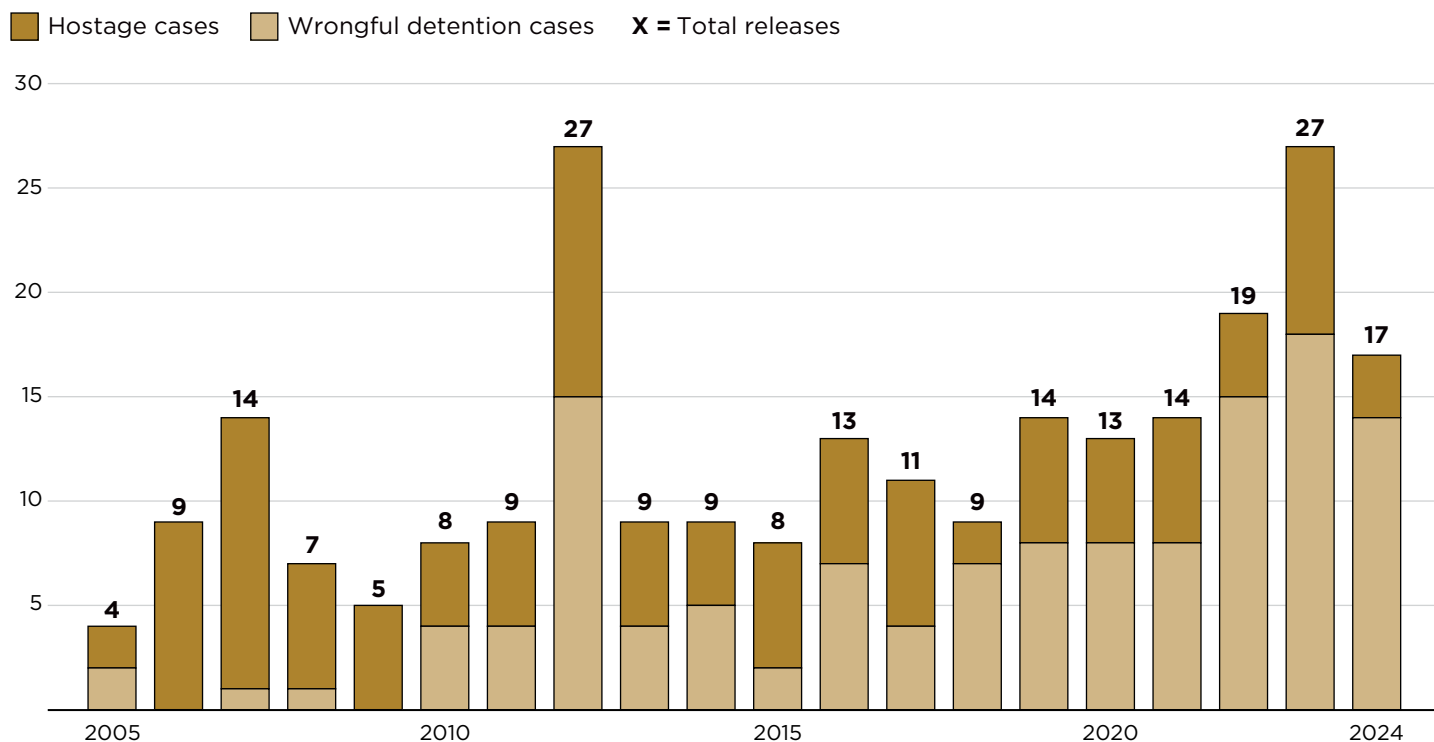
The Americans who came home in 2024 were held on average for just over four years (median: 1.8 years). Their time in captivity ranged from two days to just over 18 years. The total number of returns in 2024 was down by about 38% compared to 2023 (27). See Figure 7.

Since PPD-30, 145 American captives were released. This represents a 30% increase over the number of Americans that came home between 2005 and 2014 (101). There were significantly more known cases of wrongfully detained Americans released in the past 10 years than

compared to 2005-2014^l. This trend may be related to the finding that more Americans were known to have been wrongfully detained during the past 10 years compared to 2005-2014. From 2015-2024, there is a strong, positive relationship between calendar year and number of total returns.^m In other words, as years increased, so did the number of returns. Similarly, there is a strong, positive relationship between calendar year and returns for the reported number of Americans who were wrongfully detained and returned during 2015-2024.ⁿ

Figure 7

RELEASES OF AMERICANS HELD CAPTIVE, BY YEAR



- ^l An independent *t*-test indicated there are significantly more wrongful detainee returns from 2015-2024 ($M = 9.10, SD = 5.02$) compared to 2005-2014 ($M = 3.60, SD = 4.40$), $t(18) = -2.61, p = .018, d = -1.17$.
- ^m A strong, positive correlation was found between year and total returns, $r = 0.78, p = .008$, such that as years increased, so did the number of returns.
- ⁿ A strong, positive correlation was found between year and wrongful detainee returns, $r = 0.89, p < .001$, such that as years increased, so did the number of returns of Americans being wrongfully detained.

DEATHS IN CAPTIVITY

1 THERE WAS AT LEAST ONE KNOWN HOSTAGE DEATH IN 2024.

18 SINCE 2015, 18 AMERICANS HAVE DIED IN CAPTIVITY ABROAD.

18% THIS NUMBER IS DOWN BY ABOUT 18% FROM 2005-2014 (22).



CONCLUSIONS

Since 2005, reported incidents of hostage taking and wrongful detention have grown. Consistent with recent years, the wrongful detention of Americans continued to be a top threat. This finding may be related to greater media attention paid to the detention of Americans by foreign governments and better tracking of metrics. However, more must be done to articulate the threat of wrongful

detention and officially disclose how many Americans are being held hostage and wrongfully detained. Both of these actions would enable greater public understanding of the issue and appropriate oversight of the government's actions to address it. A common thread throughout this report is that the numbers cited here likely underestimate the true scope of the problem.



Families and advocates of Americans held captive abroad at the inaugural raising of the national Hostage & Wrongful Detainee Flag. *Photo courtesy of Charlotte Nazarian, U.S. Department of State*

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the finding that significantly more Americans were wrongfully detained from 2015-2024 compared to the 10 years previous, more work is needed to prevent and deter wrongful detentions. These efforts include better educating the U.S. public on the threat of wrongful detention and

identifying policies and actions to effectively deter captor nations. As the current U.S. hostage enterprise was designed to counter the threat of *hostage-taking* from non-state actors, a study to ensure appropriate strategies are in-place to address and deter wrongful detention is warranted.

PREVENTION

Prevention rests on public understanding.^{36,37} Until the U.S. government is able to articulate clear descriptions of the threat of wrongful detention without use of legal jargon, it will be difficult for the American public to know how to respond. It is notable that the U.S. is the only country that uses the term “wrongful detention.” Most of the international community uses the term “arbitrary detention”³⁸. It is possible that using an easier to understand phrase, like “hostage-taking” to describe unjust detentions by nation states, or “hostage diplomacy,” may help Americans better understand how captor nations target and then leverage Americans for the

captor’s benefit^{39,40}. Research on how the public understands different terms (e.g., “wrongful detention,” “arbitrary detention,” “hostage diplomacy”) may inform what nomenclature the U.S. government and its allies adopt. Additionally, public data on the occurrence of hostage-taking and wrongful detention may also help better educate the public on the threat posed by these gross violations of human rights. Reliable and transparently reported public data can often be a powerful tool in understanding national policy issues and for holding democratic governments accountable for addressing them.

DETERRENCE

Additionally, more must be done to deter captor nations from taking Americans. As discussed here, the majority of Americans being unjustly held today are wrongfully detained by nation states that seek to use them as political pawns. The U.S. government needs to find effective deterrence mechanisms, such as building strong, international alliances to counter hostage-taking and wrongful detention, and more robust use of the authorities granted in Executive Order 14078.^{41, 42,43,44,o}

Any deterrence mechanisms used “must not be on the backs of innocent Americans” still being held.⁴⁵ It must be stressed that the effects of policy concessions and prisoner exchanges were not part of this analysis and outside the scope of this paper. Research that has examined concessions and prisoner exchanges has been inconclusive.⁴⁶ As the threat has shifted toward rogue nations wrongfully detaining individuals for leverage, more research, including case studies on individual exchanges, may provide valuable insights.

THE MORAL ARGUMENT FOR TALKING WITH CAPTORS

What cannot be examined through statistical analyses are the implications of hostage-taking and wrongful detention trends as they relate to the U.S. government’s duty to protect the life and welfare of its citizens held unjustly captive. The persistence of this national security threat calls for action based on moral considerations alone. History has shown repeatedly that inaction in response to hostage-taking and wrongful detention results in demonstrable harm, including the murder of those taken by their

captors.^{47,48,49} At a minimum, the government should engage in dialogue with captors without which the chance of achieving a positive outcome is greatly diminished.

In his seminal work *We Want to Negotiate*, Joel Simon concludes that governments should adopt a no concessions policy only if there is “incontrovertible evidence that many other lives will be saved,” and that “the [U.S.] no concessions policy does not meet that standard.”^{50,51}

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- o Executive Order 14078 establishes the authority to leverage sanctions and visa restrictions on individuals involved in wrongful detention (e.g., jailers, judges, etc.) and organizations.

A PROACTIVE NATIONAL STRATEGY

The U.S. hostage enterprise evolved out of the unmet needs of families and the failure of the U.S. government to protect and secure the release of its citizens in 2014 resulting in several high-profile executions of Americans by their captors. In 2015, PPD-30 established new governmental structures to *respond* to hostage-taking of Americans abroad.^p We emphasize the word “respond” because these structures were designed to be *reactive* not *proactive*. They were not created to *prevent or deter* hostage-taking. Additionally, since 2015, the nature of the threat has shifted substantially, with the bulk of Americans unjustly held captive (over 80%) now imprisoned by nation-states. However, the hostage enterprise

was designed to address *hostage-taking*, not *wrongful detention*. The complexities associated with recovering Americans taken captive by nation states are different than responding to hostage-taking by terrorist organizations. As detailed in the research results described in this report, it is therefore not surprising that more Americans continue to be taken captive over time. While the government has been reacting to the shifting threat, and more American wrongful detainees have been recovered in recent years, to get *ahead of the threat*, a focused, whole of government study is warranted to develop a proactive national strategy and a comprehensive set of policies, tools, and capabilities.

UPCOMING RESEARCH

Later this year, the Foley Foundation will release its seventh annual qualitative *Bringing Americans Home* research report. The findings of this report will reflect interviews with families of Americans unjustly held captive abroad, current and former federal officials, third-party negotiators, and subject matter experts to provide a candid assessment of the U.S. hostage enterprise. Based on this data, the

Foley Foundation will propose policy and legislative recommendations to address the report’s key findings to bring more Americans home more quickly and mitigate future hostage-taking. Finally in 2025, the foundation plans to issue a research paper focused exclusively on the experiences of survivors of hostage-taking and wrongful detention.

^p These structures include the Hostage Response Group at the National Security Council, the Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell, and the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs.

APPENDIX A:

METHODOLOGY

The Foley Foundation database originated out of the Combating Terrorism Center's dataset.⁵² The database is limited to U.S. nationals only (i.e., U.S. citizens, and Legal Permanent Residents). As with any dataset compiled based on publicly available data of sensitive events, there are likely gaps.⁵³ The foundation's database has been continuously updated since 2018. As of December 31, 2024, the database held 491 recorded incidents, including hostage-taking by designated terrorist organizations, such as the hostage-taking of 12 Americans by Hamas on October 7, 2023, and wrongful detentions by nation states. The dataset does not include hostage-taking by criminal organizations. Hostage-taking by criminal organizations does not typically involve demands for political concessions, is often shorter in duration, and private in nature (i.e., not reported to the general public).⁵⁴ As such, criminal hostage-taking is outside the scope of the Foley Foundation's research.

The timeframe for the data used in this report runs from January 1, 2005, to December 31, 2024, to enable comparisons of the hostage and wrongful detention landscape in the 10 years preceding the issuance of PPD-30 and the years following its implementation (2015-2024).⁵⁵ PPD-30 established the U.S. hostage enterprise. Independent *t*-tests^q were conducted to statistically compare the number of Americans held, the number of new cases of Americans taken, the number of Americans released, and the number of Americans who died in captivity. Additionally, Pearson's correlations^r examined the strength of the relationship of time (i.e., calendar years) and the variables cited above, to assess if there were significant changes over time, across the full dataset, 2005-2024. Finally, Pearson's correlations were run only for the post-PPD-30 period to assess if any significant trends emerged. A statistical significance level of $<.05$ was used for all tests.^s

Prior to any analysis, a visual inspection of the data was performed. Four cases marked as not public were removed from the dataset. An additional 25 cases where the outcome was unknown were also removed prior to analysis. There were two cases in the dataset marked as both hostage cases and wrongful detention cases. For the purposes of this analysis, both incidents were recorded as hostage only. A Shapiro-Wilk assumption of normality test was performed on all data, to ensure assumptions of normality were not violated.^t Pearson's correlations and independent *t*-tests were accomplished using JASP.^u

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- q** An independent *t*-test, also known as an independent samples *t*-test or unpaired *t*-test, is a statistical method used to compare the means of two independent groups to determine if there is a significant difference between them. This test is commonly used in research to compare the performance, behavior, or characteristics of two distinct groups.
 - r** Pearson's correlation, also known as the Pearson correlation coefficient or Pearson's *r*, is a measure of the linear relationship between two quantitative variables. It quantifies the strength and direction of this relationship.
 - s** A *p*-value $< .05$ indicates the low probability (less than 5%) of the given results occurring if the null hypothesis were true (i.e., independent *t*-test: there is no difference between the groups; Pearson's *r*: there is no relationship).
 - t** Shapiro-Wilks is a statistical test that checks if the data are normally distributed. The Q-Q plot for all data was visually examined as well. All data was normally distributed except New Cases Hostage, Deaths Total, Deaths Hostage, and Deaths Wrongful Detentions. These findings are likely due to the rare nature of these events.
 - u** JASP is an open-source software for statistical analysis supported by the University of Amsterdam.

APPENDIX B:

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Below are the findings from the statistical tests performed (i.e., independent *t*-tests and Pearson’s correlations) as part of this report. Statistically significant results are indicated in **bold-faced** type.

Table 2
INDEPENDENT *t*-TEST RESULTS

	2005-2014 Mean (Standard Deviation)	2015-2024 Mean (Standard Deviation)	<i>p</i> - value
Held			
Total	16.40 (9.42)	44.90 (8.75)	< .001
Hostage	4.80 (3.99)	5.10 (1.37)	.825
Wrongful Detention	11.60 (6.84)	39.70 (9.84)	< .001
New Cases			
Total	15.90 (9.50)	19.50 (7.46)	.358
Hostage	11.40 (7.50)	8.20 (5.87)	.302
Wrongful Detention	4.89 (4.08)	11.30 (4.92)	.007
Returns			
Total	10.10 (6.52)	14.50 (5.50)	.120
Hostage	6.50 (3.63)	5.50 (2.01)	.413
Wrongful Detention	3.60 (4.40)	9.10 (5.02)	.018
Deaths			
Total	2.20 (2.53)	1.80 (2.25)	.713
Hostage	2.20 (2.53)	1.40 (2.22)	.462
Wrongful Detention	0.10 (0.32)	0.40 (0.70)	.232

Table 3
PEARSON'S CORRELATION RESULTS

	2005-2024 <i>r</i> (<i>p</i> -value)	2015-2024 <i>r</i> (<i>p</i> -value)
Held		
Total	0.88 (<.001)	0.46 (.177)
Hostage	0.64 (.045)	- 0.36 (.305)
Wrongful Detention	0.83 (.003)	0.48 (.161)
New Cases		
Total	0.18 (.620)	-0.71 (.845)
Hostage	-0.09 (.798)	0.08 (.823)
Wrongful Detention	0.54 (.136)	-0.21 (.570)
Returns		
Total	0.39 (.295)	0.78 (.008)
Hostage	-0.10 (.792)	-0.09 (.802)
Wrongful Detention	0.58 (.082)	0.89 (< .001)
Deaths		
Total	-0.19 (.602)	0.16 (.653)
Hostage	-0.19 (.602)	0.23 (.520)
Wrongful Detention	-0.52 (.122)	-0.21 (.560)

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