



**FOLEY
FOUNDATION**

BRINGING AMERICANS HOME

RESEARCH SERIES

**2025 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 August 2014 brutal murder by ISIS of conflict journalist and humanitarian James “Jim” Foley.

With the firm conviction that the United States must prioritize the freedom of Americans unjustly held captive abroad, 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 179 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’ 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 by listening, identifying the resources they need and the obstacles they face while advocating for their loved ones' swift return.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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The Foley Foundation also expresses its gratitude to our partner, Global Reach, whose sustaining commitment makes this research possible. Global Reach is a nonprofit organization with the sole mission of bringing home Americans kidnapped or wrongfully detained abroad at no cost to their families.



A NOTE FROM THE PRESIDENT AND FOUNDER

Dear fellow Americans,

Thank you for your interest in the Foley Foundation's *2025 Bringing Americans Home: Hostage and Wrongful Detainee Landscape Report*. Our talented researcher, Elizabeth Richards, has skillfully summarized 2025 U.S. hostage and wrongful detainee data for all of us who are concerned about U.S. nationals held captive far from home. We are grateful to our partner, Global Reach, and to you—our generous supporters—for making this work possible.

The intentional targeting of our citizens and legal permanent residents abroad has become a national security crisis for those traveling or residing overseas for work, education, or leisure.

We applaud President Trump and his administration for prioritizing the release of Americans held captive abroad, a commitment that has resulted in freedom for an extraordinary 83 U.S. nationals in the past year.

The James W. Foley Legacy Foundation is grateful for our country's progress and leadership on this nonpartisan issue.

We are also encouraged that the FY2026 National Defense Authorization Act mandated a public assessment of the U.S. Hostage Enterprise. To honor the memories of James Foley, Steven Sotloff, Peter Kassig, Kayla Mueller, Warren Weinstein, and Robert Levinson—who were killed or perished in captivity—we must never again abandon Americans taken hostage.

As a nation, we must prioritize their freedom while correcting the inefficiencies that prolong unjust captivity, keep anxious families in the dark, and increase post-release trauma. And we must have the moral courage to stop the targeting of Americans for use by captors as political pawns.

Thank you for standing with us in this vital mission. Together, we will continue to *Bring Them Home!*



Diane Foley



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AMERICANS WERE HELD
HOSTAGE OR WRONGFULLY
DETAINED OVERSEAS
IN 19 COUNTRIES IN 2025.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At least 74 Americans were held hostage (8) or wrongfully detained (66) in 19 countries at some point in 2025. Consistent with past years, wrongful detention continues to account for the majority of Americans unjustly held in captivity for 2025 (89%).

The Foley Foundation identified 14 new cases of hostage taking (1) and wrongful detention (13) in 2025, representing a 48% reduction from the previous year. Additionally, 34 Americans (3 hostages, 31 wrongful detainees) came home in 2025, a 22-year high. The vast majority of these releases were achieved through a prisoner exchange (15) or diplomatic engagement (10). There were no recorded deaths of Americans in captivity in 2025.

The findings of this research indicate that the primary threat continues to come from nation-states wrongfully detaining Americans. Americans continued to be taken by captor countries, including in cases where the U.S. government issued strong warnings (e.g., Iran, Venezuela).

More focus should be directed to prevention messaging, both by the U.S. government and the private sector. Furthermore, as the U.S. hostage enterprise evolves, so



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.

should deterrence options. Given that President Donald Trump signed the Executive Order *Strengthening Efforts to Protect U.S. Nationals from Wrongful Detention Abroad*, Secretary of State Marco Rubio should take advantage of this tool and designate Afghanistan a state sponsor of wrongful detention, especially as the Taliban continues to hold Americans.

Finally, the U.S. government should formally charge deposed Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro with kidnapping. Criminal charges against the ousted leader of a captor state would be the most powerful message the U.S. could send against nation-states engaged in this crime, and would deliver justice and accountability for survivors and their families.

INTRODUCTION

PURPOSE

This paper describes the threat posed by hostage-taking and wrongful detention of Americans abroad in 2025. This information is critical because, aside from limited online profiles of Americans brought home

from captivity abroad, the U.S. government (USG) does not publicly release comprehensive data on these phenomena. This report is not an evaluation of U.S. hostage policy.

DEFINITIONS

Hostage Taking by Non-state Actors

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 government organization to do or abstain from doing any act as a condition for the release of the person detained.”**¹

The Foley Foundation uses this same definition in its count of Americans held hostage abroad. The Foundation also includes Americans held by a foreign government that does not acknowledge detaining them (i.e., unacknowledged detainees) in this category. This definition aligns with the hostage cases handled by the Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell.² The Foley Foundation does not include

Americans kidnapped by criminal organizations primarily motivated by ransom, as such kidnappings are typically private and resolved quickly.³

State-sponsored Hostage Taking & Wrongful Detention

State-sponsored hostage taking, sometimes referred to as “hostage diplomacy,” occurs when state actors detain individuals for political leverage.⁴ The international community uses several terms to describe this practice, including arbitrary detention, hostage diplomacy, and state-to-state hostage taking.⁵ In the United States, the concept is captured in the definition of “wrongful detention,” as codified in the 2020 Robert Levinson Hostage Recovery and Hostage-Taking Accountability Act (“Levinson Act” — See Figure 1, next page).

Figure 1

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.

The U.S. is the only country that uses the term “wrongful detention” to describe the problem of state-sponsored hostage taking.^{6,a} The lack of international consensus on terminology and criteria complicates efforts to study this issue.⁷ To date, the United States is the only country that has codified criteria for wrongful detention.⁸ The Levinson Act identifies 11 factors for the U.S. government to consider when determining whether an American held abroad is wrongfully detained. However, as detailed in *Bringing Americans Home: A Non-Governmental Assessment of U.S. Hostage Policy & Family Engagement 2025*, the U.S. government does not necessarily treat all 11 Levinson factors as mandatory.⁹ The Secretary of State makes the final determination on whether a U.S. national is designated as wrongfully detained.¹⁰ Figure 2 (next page) outlines why these designations matter for Americans held captive abroad, hostage family members, and survivors of unjust captivity.

The Foley Foundation applies the Levinson Act to known detention cases and independently assesses whether a detention is wrongful. The Foundation also includes exit bans—situations in which individuals are not imprisoned but are prohibited from leaving the country—in its count of wrongful detentions, whereas the U.S. government does not. In 2025, exit bans accounted for 15.15% (10) of the wrongful detentions assessed by the Foley Foundation.

Scope of the Problem

Every year, approximately 6,000 Americans are arrested or detained overseas.¹¹ According to the U.S. Department of State (“State Department” or “State”), the majority of these arrests—and the resulting detentions—are justified.¹² However, there are cases in which an American is unjustly held, either by a non-state actor or a nation-state. The prevalence of hostage-taking, both by non-state and state actors, is difficult to quantify because the U.S. government does not publish this information.¹³ The Foley Foundation seeks to fill this gap through its independent research.

Starting in 2025, the U.S. government began publishing limited data, specifically profiles of Americans released from captivity following government action. According to the U.S. government, 83 Americans who were held hostage, wrongfully detained, or detained under concerning circumstances (e.g., harsh or inhumane treatment, extended sentences, lack of due process) were brought back to the United States in 2025.^{14,b} Importantly, most of the cases included in this count were not formally designated as hostages or wrongful detainees. By adopting a broader definition of who merits U.S. assistance, the government has accelerated help for Americans who previously fell into “borderline” or ambiguous categories—cases that in earlier years often languished for months or even years without

a Because this report is focused on U.S. citizens and legal permanent residents held aboard, this report will use the term wrongful detention

b This number also includes remains repatriated from overseas.

Figure 2

WHY WRONGFUL DETENTION DESIGNATION MATTERS

Designation is not just a bureaucratic label—it is a lifeline. It unlocks access to critical services and support mechanisms that Congress intended to be available in cases of wrongful detention. A summary of the differences between how individuals and their families are treated based on designation status—both during and after captivity—appears in the table below.

Category	Designated as Wrongfully Detained	Not Designated
DURING CAPTIVITY		
Lead for the Case	Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs—advocates for the release of the American; case is prioritized for resolution.	In most cases, Consular Affairs ¹ is responsible; however, Consular does not advocate for the individual's release. ²
Travel Assistance	Yes. Families may travel to meet with officials in Washington, D.C. twice per year.	No.
Mental Health Support	Yes. Family members may seek reimbursement for mental health care.	No.
Letters of Wrongful Detention	Yes. Letter from the U.S. government stating the captive is unjustly held. Families often use this letter to resolve practical problems, such as accessing bank accounts and paying bills not in their name.	No.
POST CAPTIVITY		
Return Travel to the U.S.	Yes.	No. Consular Affairs may issue the detained individual a loan if they cannot afford their own ticket, which must be repaid; individual is not typically escorted home by U.S. officials and must navigate travel independently.
Post Isolation Support Activities	Yes. Individuals receive a full physical and mental health evaluation upon return to the U.S. The individual and family gain important coping skills needed to adjust after a long, unjust detention overseas.	No.
Ongoing Physical and Mental Health Support	Yes. Reimbursement for care up to five years post-release.	No.
Letters of Wrongful Detention/Indemnity	Yes. Letter from the U.S. government recognizing the individual was wrongfully detained, which may help the individual rebuild their life as they seek employment and housing.	No.

¹ Consular Affairs often does not have oversight of cases involving a U.S. Legal Permanent Resident (LPR); cases involving LPRs often originate with the political section of the U.S. Embassy, if there is one in country.

² Consular Affairs may—depending on the captive's specific circumstances (e.g., severe health issues)—request the release of an imprisoned U.S. national on humanitarian grounds.

meaningful action. The Foley Foundation welcomes the publication of these data and the more inclusive approach they reflect. However, the absence of clear labeling for those who are held hostage by terrorist organizations or wrongfully detained still limits full understanding of the scope and nature of the problem.

This addition of a new category of cases in which the U.S. government will take action—so-called “cases of concern”—marks a shift from how past administrations quantified hostage taking and wrongful detention.¹⁵ Because the government now publicly reports returns across three groups (hostages, wrongful detainees, and cases of concern), the total number of Americans it counts as having

been brought home in 2025 is not directly comparable to prior years, when only designated hostages and wrongful detainees were included—and when the government generally did not publish quantified data at all, beyond occasional round-number statements by officials (e.g., “twenty to thirty”). To maintain consistency in its methodology, the Foley Foundation reports only on U.S. nationals whose cases meet the definition of hostage taking or satisfy the factors outlined in the Levinson Act for wrongful detention, regardless of whether the U.S. government issued a formal designation. As a result, the number of the returns cited in this report is lower than the U.S. government’s public total for 2025.



Undergraduate Foley Legacy Foundation interns gain real world experience advocating on the Hill to members of Congress and their staff. *Photo by Elizabeth Richards*

LIMITATIONS

The data in this report are based on records maintained by the Foley Foundation. The Foundation's database originated from the Combating Terrorism Center's initial 2015 dataset.¹⁶ The true number of Americans held hostage or wrongfully detained may be higher than what is reported here, as the Foundation's dataset is limited to open-source information and private cases shared by families with a loved one held captive. In both situations, sufficient information may be unavailable, making assessments based on the Levinson Act difficult.

Research by Dr. Danielle Gilbert has identified a media bias in which certain hostage cases receive disproportionate coverage.¹⁷ This bias is likely reflected in the Foley Foundation's dataset, as increased media attention often results in more publicly available information that informs the Foundation's evaluation of potential wrongful detentions under the Levinson Act.

Some families may not come forward or seek support for a variety of reasons (e.g., fear of retribution against their loved one being held, lack of awareness of available resources). Without knowledge of these cases, they cannot be reflected in the dataset. Finally, because the Levinson Act was enacted at the end of 2020, there may be earlier cases that would align with its 11 factors but are missing from this dataset.



Marina Soltani, the mother of Andre Khachatoorian, stands in front of a mural of her son. Khachatoorian has been wrongfully detained in Russia since December 2021. *Photo by Paris Preston for BOFH Campaign*

2025 AT A GLANCE

In total, at least 74 Americans were held hostage (8) or wrongfully detained (66) in 19 countries at some point during 2025 (Figure 3). Consistent with past reporting, wrongful detention cases accounted for the majority of Americans unjustly held in captivity for 2025 (89%).¹⁸

At the start of 2025, there were 58 Americans held hostage (6) or wrongfully detained (52). This number quickly peaked in early January, with the capture of five Americans in Venezuela at the direction of Maduro's government. However, beginning on January 21, with the release of two Americans from Afghanistan, the number of unjustly held Americans began to decline. In total, 34 Americans (3 hostages, 31 wrongful detainees) were freed in 2025, the majority through prisoner exchanges (15) or diplomatic engagement (10). Americans continued to be taken throughout the year, with at least 14 new cases (1 hostage, 13 wrongful detainees).

HOSTAGES

As shown in Figure 3 (next page), there was early progress in 2025 with the release of Americans held hostage by Hamas, culminating in the release of the last living American hostage held in Gaza, Edan Alexander, in May 2025. The apparent plateau in hostage releases for the rest of 2025 reflects



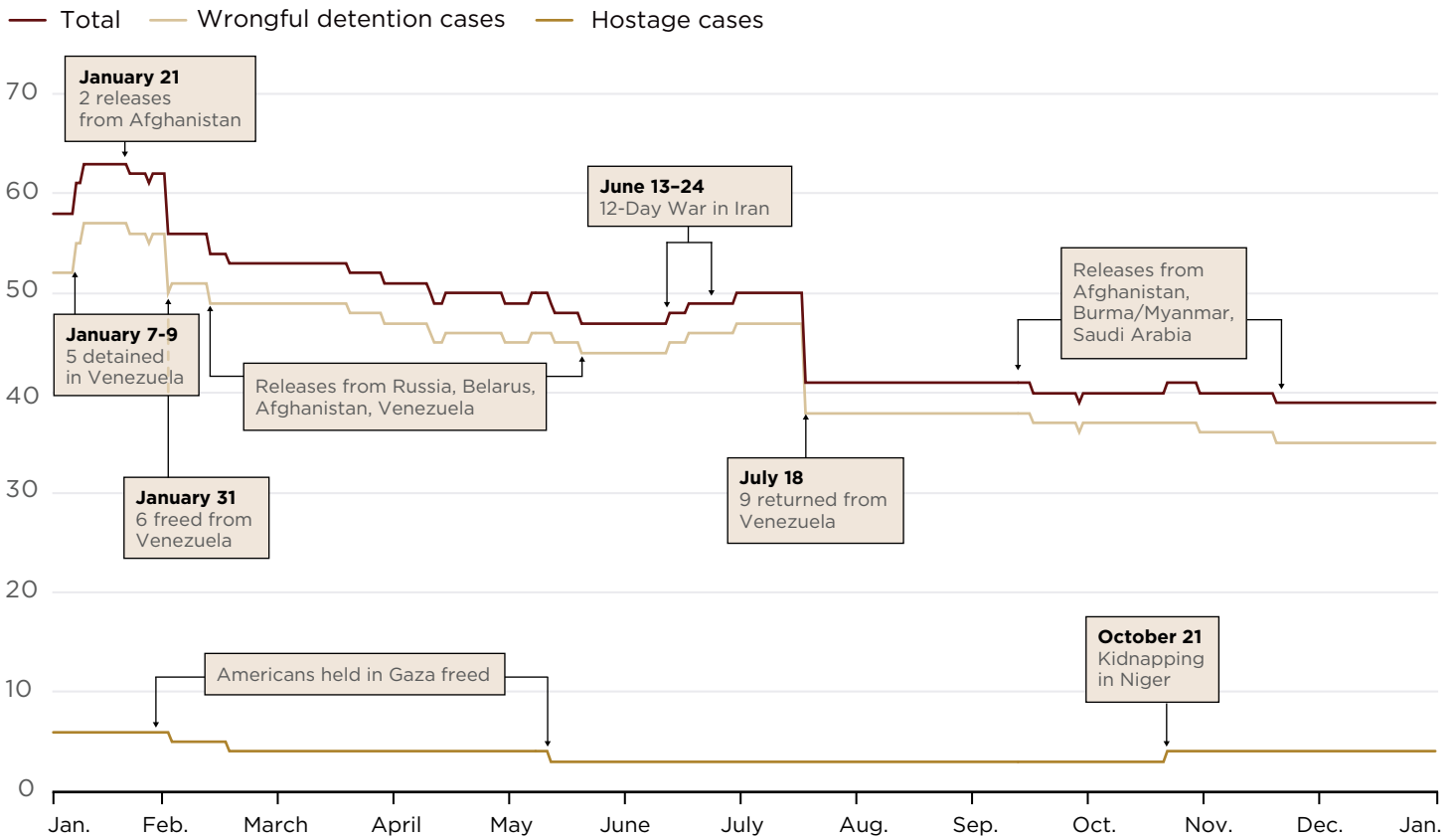
In April 2025, Bring Our Families Home Campaign members held a press conference after dedicating a mural in Washington, D.C. to their loved ones being unjustly held captive abroad. Photo by Paris Preston for BOFH Campaign

By the end of 2025, at least 40 Americans were still held hostage (5) or wrongfully detained (35) in 14 countries. These Americans had been held for an average of 5.9 years (median: 4 years), with durations ranging from 71 days to more than 23 years.

the complexity and difficulty of resolving longstanding hostage and unacknowledged detainee cases (e.g., denial of responsibility by captors), as well as the limited insight to hostage cases. In October 2025, an American was taken hostage in Niger, increasing the hostage count.¹⁹

Figure 3

2025 HOSTAGE AND WRONGFUL DETENTION LANDSCAPE



WRONGFUL DETAINEES

The wrongful detainee landscape peaked in early January after Maduro captured five Americans in Venezuela. Following that sharp increase, the number of Americans wrongfully detained decreased as Americans were freed from Afghanistan, Belarus, Venezuela, and Russia in February and March. This downward trend was interrupted in April, when China placed an American on an exit ban.²⁰ Even as Americans were returning home from other parts of the world, Iran seized two Americans in May and June, and Russia wrongfully detained another American in June.

The largest single release in 2025 occurred on July 18, when nine unjustly detained Americans were freed from Venezuela. Although progress was less apparent during the latter half of the year, the U.S. government secured additional releases from Afghanistan,²¹ Burma/Myanmar,²² and Saudi Arabia.²³ As in prior years, wrongful detention cases made up the majority of Americans unjustly held overseas. As of December 31, 2025, 88% of Americans still held in captivity were categorized as wrongfully detained.

STATISTICAL COMPARISONS

WHERE AMERICANS WERE HELD

In 2025, Americans were held across 19 countries. The top captor countries were Venezuela (16), China (13), Afghanistan (8), Russia (8), and Iran

(6). Together, these five countries accounted for 69% of all Americans unjustly held in 2025. See Table 1.

Table 1

WHERE AMERICANS WERE HELD IN 2025

Captor Country	Total Americans Held in 2025	% of Total Held in 2025	Change from 2024 (+/-)
Venezuela	16	21.62%	+5
China	13	17.57%	+2
Afghanistan	8	10.81%	+1
Russia	8	10.81%	+1
Iran	6	8.11%	+3
Belarus	3	4.05%	0
Palestinian Territory	3	4.05%	0
Saudi Arabia	3	4.05%	0
Egypt	2	2.70%	0
Syria	2	2.70%	0
Turkey	2	2.70%	0

Note: Eight additional Americans were held in countries not listed here for privacy reasons.

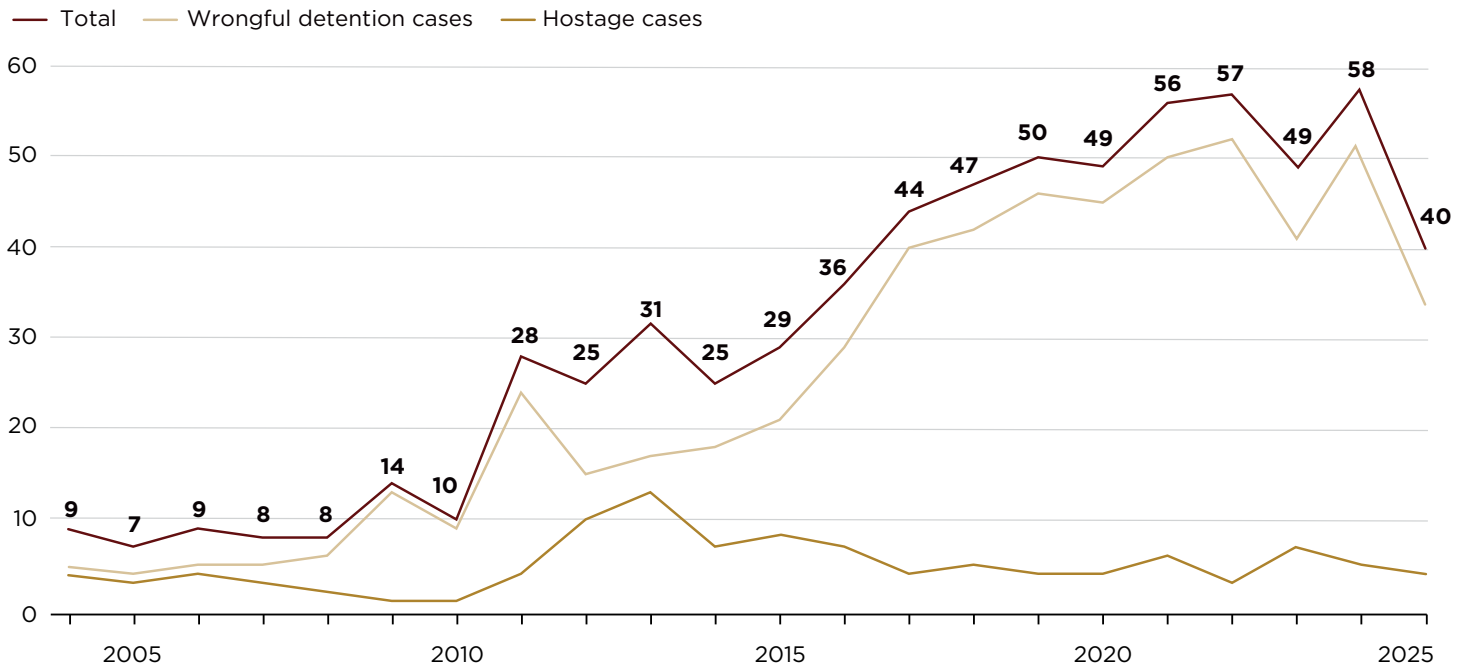
TOTAL HELD, 2004-2025

Consistent with past findings, a review of the last 22 years (2004-2025; Figure 4) indicates a statistically significant increase in reports of Americans being unjustly held overseas. There were also more reported cases of Americans being unjustly held in the 11 years following Presidential Policy Directive-30 (PPD-30) and the

establishment of the Hostage Recovery Enterprise (2015-2025) compared to the 11 years prior (2004-2014). As noted in earlier reports, this increase may reflect improved tracking by nongovernmental organizations²⁴ and/or the codification of the term “wrongful detention in the Levinson Act.”²⁵

Figure 4

TOTAL NUMBER OF AMERICANS HELD HOSTAGE OR WRONGFULLY DETAINED ABROAD, 2004-2025



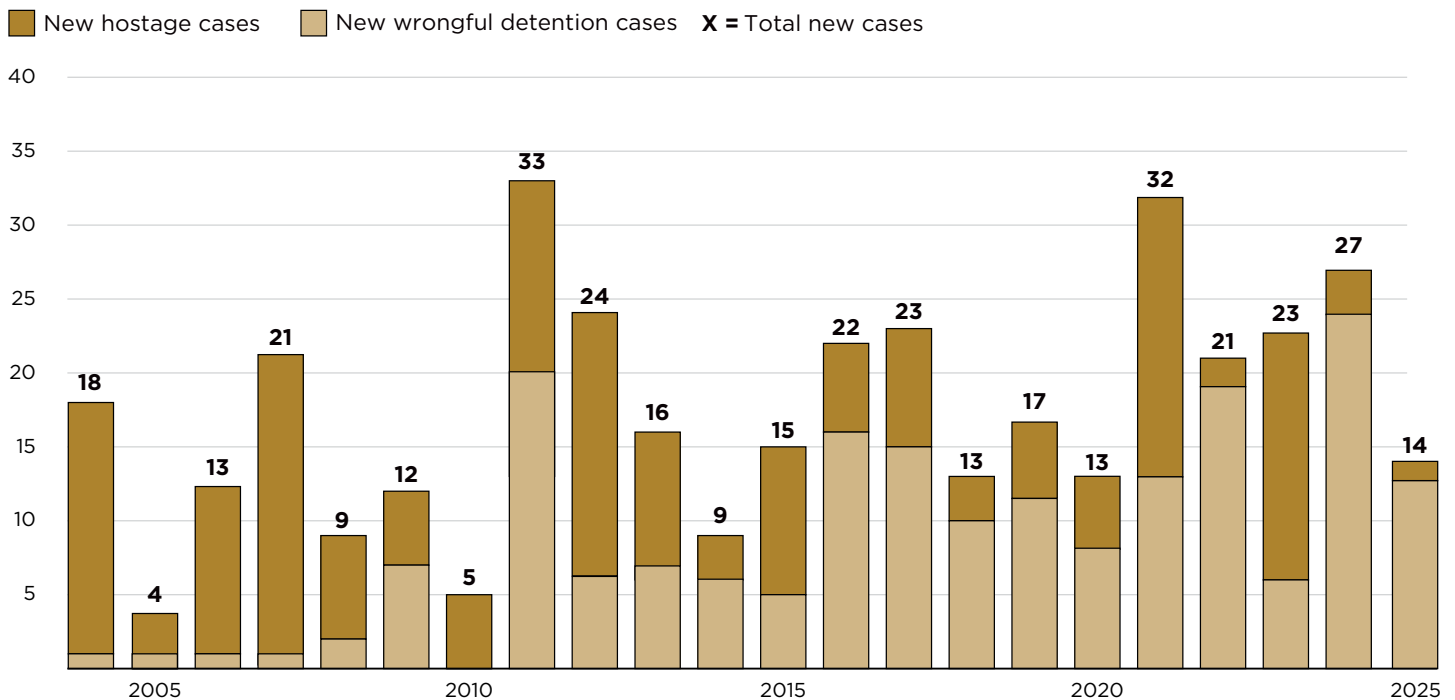
NEW CASES OF AMERICANS TAKEN

The Foley Foundation identified 14 new cases in 2025 (one hostage case, 13 wrongful detentions) based on open-source reporting and outreach to us by families. Five of these new cases originated in Venezuela, followed by

Iran (3), and China (2—both exit ban cases). Based on available information, this represents a 48% decrease in new cases compared to 2024 (27). See Figure 5.

Figure 5

NEW CASES OF AMERICANS TAKEN CAPTIVE, 2004-2025



It is likely that this number underestimates the true total for 2025. There is typically a delay between when an American is taken and when a case is reported to an NGO.²⁶ It also often takes time for the U.S. government to gather information and determine whether a detention is wrongful.^{27,c} At the end of 2025, news outlets reported that additional Americans had been taken in Venezuela during the latter half of the year, including at least two who were being wrongfully detained.²⁸ The Foley Foundation could not independently

verify these accounts before the report's cutoff date, so they are not included in the 2025 case count.

A comparison of new cases pre-PPD-30 and post-PPD-30 shows that significantly more new wrongful detention cases have been reported since PPD-30. Similarly, there is a strong, positive trend over time (2004-2025) in new wrongful detention cases, with more Americans being taken over the years. As noted earlier, this trend may reflect improved tracking and increased media attention.²⁹

RELEASES FROM CAPTIVITY

In 2025, 34 Americans were released from captivity (3 hostages, 31 wrongful detainees) from nine countries (Table 2). Releases from Venezuela (16) represent almost half (47%) of total releases for the year. In addition, of the wrongful detainees released (31), 23 were officially designated as “wrongfully detained” by the Secretary of State (74%).

The Foley Foundation identified six release mechanisms used to bring Americans home in 2025. Three American hostages were released from Gaza as part of a negotiated cease-fire agreement.³⁰ The majority (81%) of wrongfully detained Americans returned home through a prisoner exchange (15) or

Table 2
AMERICANS RELEASED BY COUNTRY IN 2025

Captor Country	Americans Released
Venezuela	16
Afghanistan	5
Belarus	3
Palestinian Territories/Gaza	3
China	2
Russia	2
Burma/Myanmar	1
Saudi Arabia	1
Tunisia	1

diplomatic engagement (10). The release mechanism for three cases remains unknown (Figure 6). A further

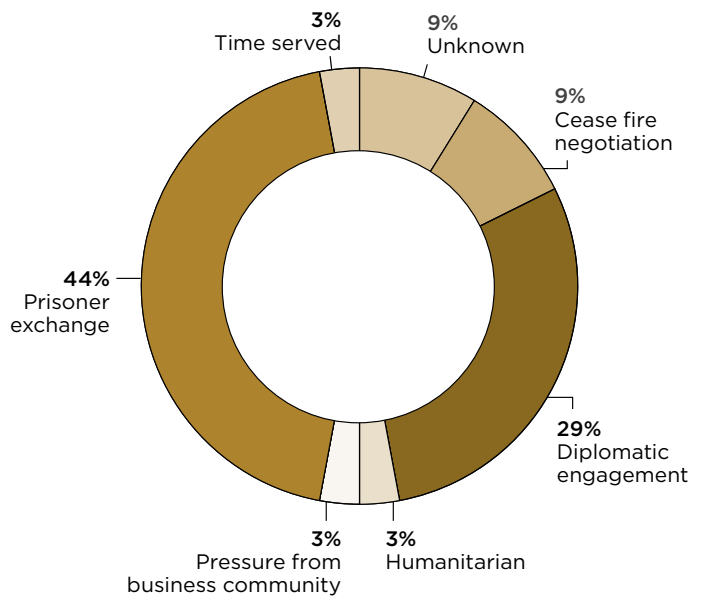
^c For comparison, in our *2024 Hostage & Wrongful Detention* landscape report we cited seven new cases for 2024; we have since revised that number to 27 new cases in 2024 as more information became available and as families approached us for help.

breakdown of release mechanisms by country shows that returns from Venezuela were achieved through a combination of prisoner exchanges (9) and diplomatic engagement (7). Prisoner exchanges also facilitated four releases from Afghanistan and two releases from Russia. Diplomatic engagement appears to have been the primary mechanism for additional releases in Belarus, Tunisia, and Saudi Arabia.

Americans released in 2025 had been held, on average, for approximately 508 days—about 1.4 years (median: 272 days; 0.75 years). Their time in captivity ranged from 22 days to 12 years. A comparison with the past five years reveals, on average, Americans who returned in 2025 did not spend as long in captivity compared to those that returned in the last three years (Table 3). The total number of returns in 2025 represents a 100% increase compared to 2024 (17). See Figure 7. Since PPD-30, 179 American captives have been released—a 58% increase over the number that came home over the same of length time prior to PPD-30 (113).

Figure 6

2025 RELEASE MECHANISMS



These findings align with the statistical analysis, which shows that, on average, significantly more wrongfully detained Americans were released between 2015-2025 compared to 2004-2014. The analysis also indicates a strong positive relationship between calendar year, and the total number of Americans released from 2004-2025.

Table 3

AMERICANS RELEASED TIME IN CAPTIVITY, 2021-2025

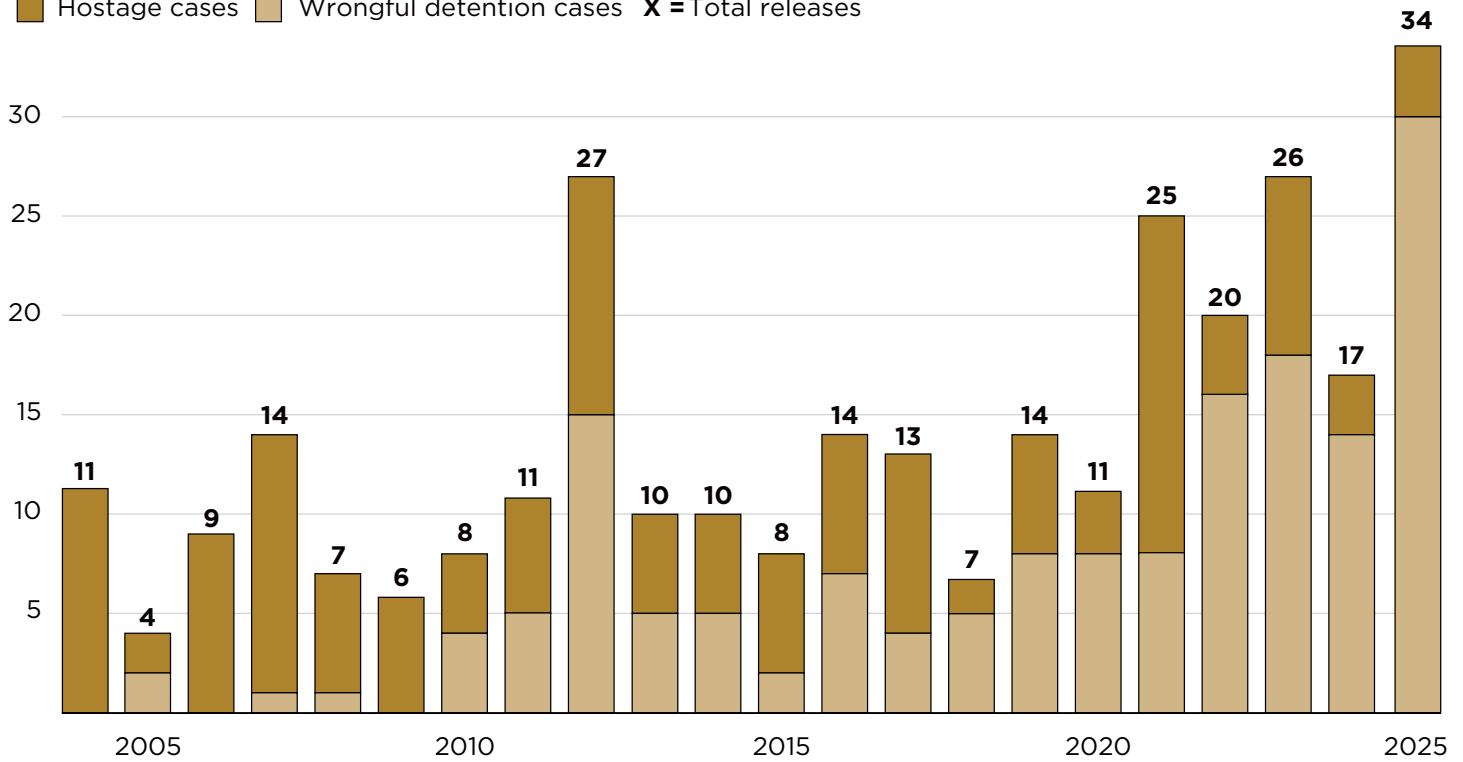
Year	Released	Average Days (Years)	Median Days (Years)	Range in Years (Min., Max.)
2021*	25	260 (0.7)	60 (0.2)	0, 4.3
2022	22	916 (2.5)	857 (2.4)	0.1, 6.6
2023	27	745 (2.0)	475 (1.3)	0, 8.2
2024	17	1,494 (4.1)	843 (2.3)	0, 18.3
2025	34	508 (1.4)	272 (0.7)	0.1, 12.0

Note: In 2021, 11 hostages escaped in Haiti after 60 days of captivity; if they are omitted, the adjusted time in captivity for those released in 2021 is 417 days (1.1 years), or a median of 50 days (0.1 years).

Figure 7

RELEASES OF AMERICANS HELD CAPTIVE, 2004-2025

■ Hostage cases ■ Wrongful detention cases X = Total releases



Saad Almadi and his son, Ibrahim, present a Bring Our Families Home Campaign thank-you gift—a U.S. Hostage and Wrongful Detainee flag intended for President Trump—to White House Senior Director for Counterterrorism Dr. Sebastian Gorka. Mr. Almadi was wrongfully detained in Saudi Arabia for nearly four years before his release in November 2025. *Photo courtesy of the Almadi family.*

VENEZUELA

A CLEAR PATTERN OF ABUSE^d

The systematic use of foreign detainees as political leverage was a defining feature of the Venezuelan regime of Nicolás Maduro.³¹ Over the past 13 years, under Maduro's leadership, Venezuela detained at least 37 Americans to gain foreign policy concessions.^e In 2025, the U.S. government secured the release of 17 Americans held in Venezuela.

This past year continued a fluctuating three-year period for Americans held in Venezuela. At the end of 2023, the Biden administration brought home all wrongfully detained Americans held there at the time.³² However, following Venezuela's July 2024 elections—widely considered to have been stolen by the Maduro regime³³—the Venezuelan state

entered a new cycle of hostage taking. From August 2024 through January 2025, Maduro abducted 16 Americans. Over the first six months of 2025, the U.S. government negotiated three hostage deals for their return.

At the end of 2025, *The New York Times* reported that Maduro may have taken additional Americans hostage, including at least two individuals who were reportedly wrongfully detained.^{34,f} On January 3, 2026, the USG captured Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, and brought them to the United States to face criminal indictments. In the weeks following Maduro's removal from office, at least four Americans held in Venezuela were reportedly freed.³⁵

d Read the full profile at <https://jamesfoleyfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Venezuela-Captor-Profile-final1.pdf>

e This number does not include Dahud Hanid Ortiz, who was convicted of murdering three people in Spain. The Foley Foundation does not include Ortiz in its count of Americans who were wrongfully detained and released in 2025. Ortiz was returned to the United States as part of the releases on July 18, 2025. It is unclear why Spain has not asked for Ortiz's extradition.

f Because the Foley Foundation could not verify this information ahead of data analysis, the case of these two Americans is not reflected in the numbers cited in this report.

ABOUT

BRING OUR FAMILIES HOME

Bring Our Families Home is a campaign comprised of—and led by—families of Americans held hostage or wrongfully detained overseas. These families advocate collectively for the freedom of their loved ones. In 2025, the campaign welcomed home 10 of their family members held captive:



- **Youras Ziankovich** — Belarus, held for 1,480 days
- **Saad Almadi** — Saudi Arabia, held for 1,459 days
- **Marc Fogel** — Russia, held for 1,277 days
- **Ksenia Karelina** — Russia, held for 439 days
- **U Pyinya Zawta** — Burma/Myanmar, held for 351 days
- **Wilbert Castaneda** — Venezuela, held for 325 days
- **Jorge Marcelo Vargas** — Venezuela, held for 304 days
- **Renzo Castillo** — Venezuela, held for 299 days
- **Lucas Hunter** — Venezuela, held for 192 days
- **Joseph St. Clair** — Venezuela, held for 184 days

Formed in 2022, the campaign's strong advocacy has successfully reunited 33 families. The Foley Foundation serves as the campaign's advisor and fiscal sponsor.

DEATHS IN CAPTIVITY

There were no known deaths of Americans held hostage or wrongfully detained in captivity in 2025. Since 2015, there have been 16 known deaths of Americans in captivity (12 hostages,

4 wrongful detainees). This reflects a decrease of approximately 53% from 2004–2014, when 34 Americans died in captivity.

GUEST CONTRIBUTOR ESSAY

OUTLOOK OF HAMAS'S FUTURE AND THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN TO END THE GAZA CONFLICT

by Richard Chasdi, PhD., The George Washington University

It is commonplace in the literature to note that cease-fires are “two-edged swords” that cut both ways for primary stakeholders. Cease-fires can temporarily alleviate bloodletting while simultaneously creating political space for interested third parties to negotiate behind the scenes and exploit potential opportunities for more permanent agreements. Conversely, a cease-fire also gives both sides a chance to rearm and to learn from past mistakes.

In the War in Gaza, that political space has been occupied primarily by the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Egypt, Turkey, and the United States, to craft what R. Harrison Wagner calls potential “agreement points” for both sides to consider.^g The assumption is that each side has rational actors at the helm who use cost-benefit analysis to appraise settlement alternatives. At the epicenter of this cease-fire is the problem of Hamas’s disarmament and its continued dominance in geographical locales ostensibly under Hamas’s control.

At a theoretical level, Thomas Schelling tells us that “compellent” actions—Party A getting Party B to do something Party B would not otherwise do—are much harder to accomplish than deterrence against attack or exploitation.^h In addition to European

“confidence-building measures” (CBMs), Hamas’s disarmament might not happen without coordinated compellent efforts by Middle Eastern nation-state leaders. Equally important is the support of regional intergovernmental organizations, such as the Arab League, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

To date, there has been relative public silence about Hamas’s disarmament from Middle Eastern governments and non-state actors. Notably, there is no viable plan that provides incentives for Hamas to disarm, and there is no publicly released operational plan for disarmament with coherent logistics for doing so.ⁱ This is where Arab and Turkish leadership needs to step up. At present, Hamas struggles to maintain political control by means of assaults against competing criminal gangs or “militias,” some of which are backed by Israel, and often distinguished by familial or group ties.^j

In my judgment, future kidnappings by Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, a Hamas or PIJ splinter group, or conceivably a criminal gang, remain a strong possibility given the range of stakeholders in the political fray, and the political and economic backwater that is Gaza. That risk includes threats to Palestinian and non-Palestinian journalists,

g Rasgon, Adam. 2025. “Hamis Says It’s Ready for a Deal on All Hostages.” *The New York Times*, 5 September, A-6; Rasgon, Adam, David M. Halbfinger, Natan Odenheimer, Ronen Bergman and Luke Broadwater. 2025. “How U.S. and Arab World Teamed Up on Gaza Deal.” *The New York Times*, 15 October, A-1; A-9; Wagner, R. Harrison. 2007. *War and The State: The Theory of International Politics*.

h Schelling, Thomas. 1963. *The Strategy of Conflict*. New York: Oxford University Press; Barash, David P. and Charles P. Webel. 2002. *Peace and Conflict Studies*, Thousand Oaks California, Sage Publications.

i Crowley, Michael. 2026. “Trump Peace Board Declares Billions for Rebuilding Gaza.” *The New York Times*, 20 February, A-9.

j Abuhewila, Iyad, Aaron Boxerman and Sanjana Varhese. 2025. “Hamis Killing Rivals in Gaza Since Truce.” *The New York Times*, 16 October, A-1; A-6; Rasgon, Adam and Natan Odenheimer. 2025. “Anti-Hamis Palestinian Is Killed in Gaza Clash.” *The New York Times*, 5 December, A-11.

GUEST CONTRIBUTOR ESSAY, CONTINUED

particularly if Israel's 2023 ban on international correspondent coverage is overturned. That risk remains medium to high—especially, perhaps, for personnel providing food and medicine from a variety of countries.^k The snail's pace of negotiations, the need for continued elite and grassroots (“bottom-up”) focus on Gaza, and the practical need for ransom monies among terrorist or criminal groups make it likely that terrorism will continue to signal frustrations in Gaza.^l Moreover, such acts would ensure the War in Gaza does not fade from the West's collective memory.

Political science theory supports the foregoing appraisal. Azar, Jureidini, and McLaurin describe a “servo-mechanism” that regulates conflict like a thermostat, keeping the system at an equilibrium of conflict intensity. In such a system, highly cooperative events that reduce conflict intensity can generate highly aggressive events that return the system to its original setting.^m For example, analysts note that the Camp David Accords (1978) elicited the assassination of President Anwar el-Sadat in 1981.

It follows that if political conditions in Gaza during the fledgling Phase II stage of the cease-fire do not provide incentives for Hamas and PIJ to disarm and transition into post-war roles—or if conditions stagnate or deteriorate due to lack of progress—there is potential for “spectacular” kidnappings or related terrorist assaults. Such kidnappings could arise directly from the political and economic conditions at hand as independent events or indirectly as a function of Israeli impatience with the pace of disarmament, coupled with subsequent Israeli military action.

Spillover effects are also possible. Kidnappings could occur within areas controlled by the Palestinian Authority (PA) in response to developments in Gaza, or “proto-groups” of Israeli settlers, unhappy with the progress of Hamas's disarmament, could resort to kidnappings of Palestinian Arabs to pressure the Netanyahu government to eliminate Hamas. The breadth of stakeholders and plausible scenarios make it imperative for U.S. planners to think about “anticipatory self-defense” options to confront those possibilities.

k Halbfinger, David M. and Aaron Boxerman. 2026. “Israel to Reopen Gaza Crossing As Last Hostage Body Is Found.” *The New York Times*. 27 January, A-1; A-5.

l Ramsbotham, Oliver, Tom Woodhouse, and Hugh Miall 2008. *Contemporary Conflict Resolution: The prevention, management and transformations of deadly conflict Second Edition*, Malden, MA; Polity Press; Halbfinger, David M. and Bilal Shbair. 2026. “Gaza Schools Offer Lessons in ‘Peace-Building’” *The New York Times*, 19 February, A-1; A-8.

m Azar, Edward, E., Paul Jureidini, and Ronald McLaurin. 1978. “Protracted Social Conflict Theory and Practices in the Middle East” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 8(1); 41-60. This example illustrates how Azar, Jureidini and McLaurin's conceptualization suggests stagnation or atrophy of a cooperative event (“C”) might also lead to defection (“D”) aggressive action.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Consistent with past reports, the threat of hostage taking continues to be from nation-states.³⁶ Over the last 22 years, there has been a significant increase in reports of Americans being unjustly held overseas, driven primarily by a rise in wrongful detentions. Between 2004 and 2014, at least 54 Americans were wrongfully detained; from 2015 to 2025, that number rose to 142—representing a 163% increase.

Despite the threat from nation-states, Americans are coming home. 2025, in particular, was a strong year for the

release of Americans unjustly held overseas. Across the full timeframe of interest (2004-2025), 2025 stands out as the year with the highest number of reported returns. However, even as Americans were coming home from countries such as Afghanistan and Venezuela, more Americans continued to be taken in those same captor countries. Furthermore, as illustrated in Figure 3, periods of stagnation persist, particularly for longstanding cases. These observations carry implications for bringing Americans home, as well as prevention and deterrence efforts.

BRINGING AMERICANS HOME

President Trump has made bringing Americans home a top priority of his administration.³⁷ This focus resulted in more than 83 Americans—34 of whom the Foley Foundation assesses were unjustly held—reuniting with their families.³⁸ These successes reflect both the administration's sustained attention to hostage and wrongful detention cases and its willingness to prioritize these cases, including those involving non-Americans (e.g., Russian-Israeli researcher Elizabeth Tsurkov,³⁹ all hostages held by Hamas⁴⁰).

Structural changes may also have contributed to the number of Americans released. In early January

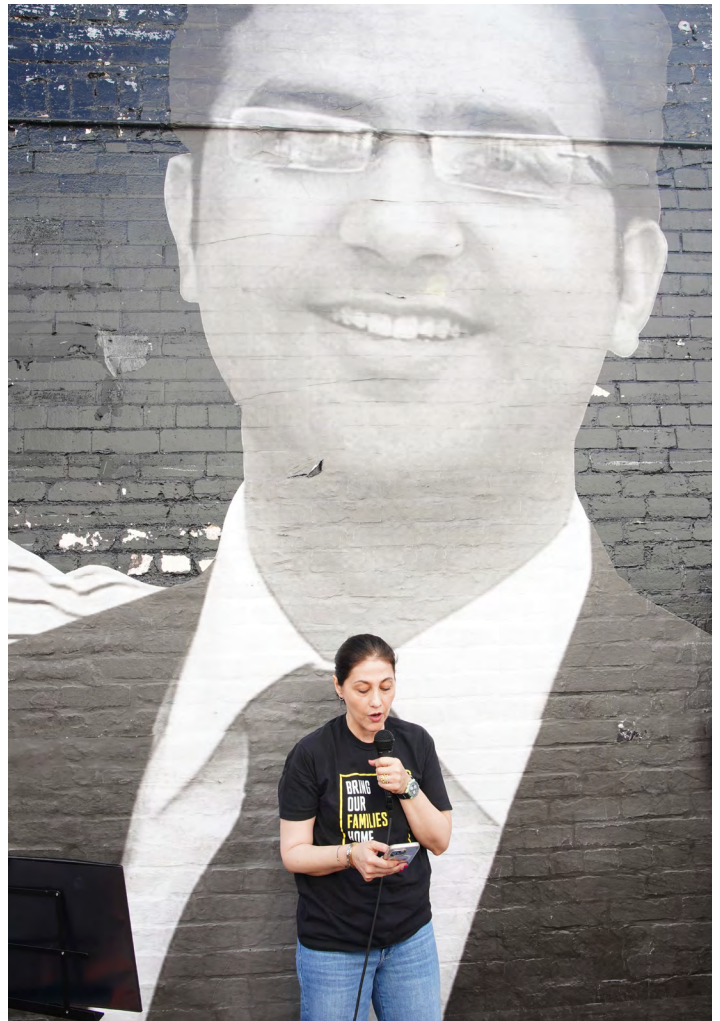
2025, the State Department created the position of Consular Protection Specialist, which oversees all cases of American citizens imprisoned under concerning circumstances.⁴¹ The Consular Protection Specialist has played a key role in liaising with the Office of the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs (SPEHA) and facilitating the return of Americans—particularly in cases that were not formally designated as wrongfully detained by the Secretary of State.

Despite the many successful returns in 2025, longstanding cases, such as those in Russia and Iran, remain unresolved. While two wrongfully

detained Americans came home from Russia last year, at least six Americans remain unjustly held there, with one new case emerging during the year. Additionally, no Americans have been released from Iran since 2023, even as more Americans continue to be taken there. The 12-day war appears to have worsened the situation, with reports of Americans being unjustly detained during that period.⁴² Additionally, hostage cases and cases involving unacknowledged detainees in countries such as Syria and Afghanistan have proven especially difficult to resolve and are among the longest-standing current cases.

Finally, 10 years after its creation, the administration is undertaking a review of the Hostage Recovery Enterprise (HRE) as mandated by the Countering Wrongful Detention Act of 2025.⁴³ As the administration conducts this review, the final report must include a public component.

Publicly sharing information would educate the American people and provide subject-matter experts and nongovernmental organizations with critical data needed to support the HRE. Public reporting could also be used to highlight the risk of travel to captor countries. The U.S. government holds better data and insight into these cases—including where Americans are being unjustly held and the mechanisms for securing their release. As reiterated throughout this report, nongovernmental organizations have only limited their access to USG-held data. While the State Department



Bring Our Families Home campaign advisor and James W. Foley Legacy Foundation board member Neda Sharghi speaks on behalf of the family of Mahmood Habibi, in front of a mural bearing his likeness. Habibi was kidnapped in Afghanistan by the Taliban in 2022. Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, the Taliban deny holding Habibi, leaving his family in limbo. *Photo by Paris Preston for BOFH Campaign*

is already required to submit an annual report to Congress under the Levinson Act, making that report—or a portion of it—public would provide much clearer visibility into the scope and landscape of hostage-taking and wrongful detention.⁴⁴

PREVENTION

Captors—whether state actors or non-state actors—bear full responsibility for their egregious behavior. However, reducing the number of Americans traveling to high-risk countries can also send a powerful, and economic, message to hostage-taking states. It is imperative that Americans—particularly those with family, business, or cultural ties to captor countries—understand the risks and their own vulnerability before deciding to travel. The U.S. government, civil society, and the private sector each have an important role to play in this education.

In 2025, the State Department issued clear warnings about the dangers of travel to countries such as Venezuela and Iran. However, these warnings may not be reaching their intended audiences, as Americans continue to travel to these—and other—captor countries.^{45, 46,47,48} The State Department and other U.S. government agencies should continue exploring ways to connect risk messages with targeted groups (e.g., dual nationals with family in-country, business executives who travel regularly for work) and deliver travel advisories in a way that resonates with their intended audience. The Trump administration has demonstrated a strong capacity to be exceptionally media savvy and adept at harnessing non-traditional media channels,

including influencers, to shape public messages.⁴⁹ The State Department and other Executive Branch agencies may benefit from adopting similar non-traditional communications strategies for travel risk messaging (e.g., influencer partnerships, visually engaging content, or memes that create salient, memorable messages).

Given China’s continued unjust detention of Americans, the U.S. government may also want to consider whether to raise its travel advisory for China from Level 2 (“exercise increased caution”) to Level 3 (“reconsider travel”).⁵⁰

The private sector also has a vested interest in preventing Americans from being taken. Certain professions—such as journalists, aid workers, and business executives—face elevated risk based on where their work requires them to travel or live.^{51, 52,53} These industries have a professional duty to keep employees safe and informed. At a minimum, companies whose employees travel to high-risk regions should require them to review relevant State Department travel advisories, sign-up for the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP), and sign a Privacy Act Waiver prior to travel.⁵⁴ Companies should also encourage employees to establish a power of attorney before undertaking high-risk travel.⁵⁵

DETERRENCE

As the HRE evolves, creative and flexible deterrence options are needed. While deterrence tools—such as sanctions and the new “state sponsor of wrongful detention” designation for perpetrator states—have been strengthened, the top captor countries (i.e., Venezuela, China, Afghanistan, Russia, and Iran) continued to take Americans in 2025. In September 2025, President Trump signed the *Strengthening Efforts to Protect U.S. Nationals from Wrongful Detention Abroad* executive order.⁵⁶ Yet, in the months following that order, no state has been designated under the new authority.^{57, 58}

Afghanistan represents one of the clearest current examples of a state actor engaging in hostage-taking. Between September and December 2025, the Taliban held at least four Americans.^{59, 60} Designating Afghanistan as a state sponsor of

wrongful detention would convey the seriousness with which the U.S. government views the unjust detention of its nationals. Such a designation would provide the U.S. Secretary of State with expanded sanction authorities and the ability to restrict certain forms of support to the country. Taking this step could serve as a powerful deterrent to other nations contemplating hostage diplomacy. Finally, the U.S. government should formally charge Nicolás Maduro with hostage-taking. Since 2013, Maduro has kidnapped and leveraged at least 37 Americans for political concessions.⁶¹ Criminal charges against the deposed leader of a captor state would send a strong message to any government considering hostage diplomacy: *the consequences will be severe*. Such charges would also represent an important step toward accountability and justice for survivors and their families.

“ I think that President Trump’s arrest of President Maduro is brilliant...every other leader in the world has to realize now that they’re at least in danger of something like that happening to them... and I think that [Maduro’s arrest] has done more to prevent future detentions.”

— Former Wrongful Detainee ⁶²

APPENDIX A:

METHODOLOGY

The Foley Foundation dataset grew out of the Combating Terrorism Center's dataset.⁶³ The Foley Foundation's dataset is limited to U.S. nationals (i.e., U.S. citizens, and legal permanent residents). As with any dataset derived from publicly available data of sensitive information, there are likely missing data.⁶⁴ The Foley Foundation's dataset has been continually updated since 2018. As of December 31, 2025, there were 528 unique recorded incidents in the Foley Foundation dataset.

The Foley Foundation dataset does not include kidnappings by criminal organizations because these cases typically do not involve demands for political concessions, are often shorter in duration, and private in nature (i.e., not reported in the news or wider public). As such, criminal kidnappings are outside of the scope of the Foley Foundation's research.

The timeframe for the data used in this report runs from January 1, 2004, to December 31, 2025, to enable comparisons of the hostage and wrongful detention landscape in the years prior to PPD-30 (i.e., 2004-2014), and the years following its implementation (i.e., 2015-2025). Variables of interest were:

- number of Americans held (total/hostage/wrongfully detained)
- new cases of Americans taken each year (total/hostage/wrongfully detained)
- number of Americans released (total/hostage/wrongfully detained)
- number of Americans who died in captivity (total/hostage/wrongfully detained)

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 five cases where the outcome is known (e.g., execution), but the outcome year is not. In those cases, the year of kidnapping was used for the year of outcome. This change mainly affected hostage cases in Iraq in 2006 and 2007 that resulted in an American being executed.

A Shapiro-Wilk assumption of normality test was performed on all data.ⁿ The following data were not normally distributed:

- Total held
- Total hostage held
- Total wrongfully detained held
- New cases, hostages
- Total returns
- Returns, wrongfully detained
- Total deaths
- Hostage deaths
- Wrongfully detained deaths

Independent *t*-tests were conducted to statistically compare the timeframe pre-PPD-30 to post-PPD-30.^o Additionally, Pearson's correlations were also used to examine the strength of the relationship between time (i.e., calendar year) and the variables cited above, assessing whether there were significant changes across the full period of interest (i.e., 2004-2025), and separately, within the decade following PPD-30 (i.e., 2015-2025).^p Because the majority of the data violated assumptions of normality, non-parametric tests (i.e., Mann-Whitney U test and Spearman's rho) were run, alongside the parametric tests (i.e., independent *t*-tests and Pearson's *r*). With one exception, the non-parametric tests were consistent with the parametric results.^q Because of the risk of lower power, particularly with the Mann-Whitney U test, and for consistency of reporting, the parametric test results were used.^{65,66} A statistical significance threshold of $p < .05$ was applied to all tests.^r All statistical analyses were accomplished using JASP.^s

n Shapiro-Wilks is a statistical test that checks if the data are normally distributed.

o 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.

p 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.

q No significant relationship between years (2004-2025) and total hostages held was revealed using Pearson's *r*. However, Spearman's rho did indicate a significant relationship between these two variables. Both are noted in Appendix B.

r 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).

s 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**-face type.

Table 4
INDEPENDENT *t*-TEST COMPARISONS

	2004–2014 Mean (Standard Deviation)	2015–2025 Mean (Standard Deviation)	<i>p</i> - value
Held			
Total	15.82 (9.37)	46.82 (9.06)	< .001
Hostage	4.82 (4.02)	5.46 (1.44)	.627
Wrongful Detention	11.00 (6.78)	41.36 (9.84)	< .001
New Cases			
Total	15.45 (8.85)	20.18 (6.46)	.168
Hostage	10.55 (6.67)	7.27 (6.07)	.243
Wrongful Detention	4.91 (5.75)	12.91 (5.72)	.004
Returns			
Total	9.27 (6.23)	15.27 (8.73)	.078
Hostage	5.91 (3.94)	4.27 (2.37)	.251
Wrongful Detention	3.36 (4.34)	11.00 (8.23)	.013
Deaths			
Total	3.09 (2.95)	1.46 (1.75)	.129
Hostage	3.09 (2.95)	1.09 (1.64)	.063
Wrongful Detention	0.00 (0.00)	0.36 (0.67)	*Not enough variance in the data to allow for comparison

Table 5**PEARSON'S CORRELATIONS RESULTS**

	2004-2025 <i>r</i> (<i>p</i> -value)	2015-2025 <i>r</i> (<i>p</i> -value)
Held		
Total	0.94 (< .001)	0.61 (.045)
Hostage	0.26 (.236) ^t	-0.21 (.537)
Wrongful Detention	0.93 (< .001)	0.59 (.054)
New Cases		
Total	0.34 (.118)	0.21 (.536)
Hostage	-0.31 (.150)	-0.11 (.738)
Wrongful Detention	0.69 (< .001)	0.36 (.279)
Returns		
Total	0.61 (.003)	0.81 (.002)
Hostage	-0.28 (.204)	0.01 (.970)
Wrongful Detention	0.77 (< .001)	0.86 (< .001)
Deaths		
Total	-0.41 (.057)	-0.09 (.801)
Hostage	-0.45 (.034)	0.02 (.957)
Wrongful Detention	0.23 (.294)	-0.27 (.425)

^t Spearman rho indicated a positive, medium relationship, such that, as the years progressed, more Americans were taken hostage over time ($\rho = 0.46, p = .032$). Total hostages over time is the one area where the parametric and non-parametric tests disagreed with each other.

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