

American Journalist, Companions Charged with Espionage

On Nov. 9, 2009, an American freelance journalist and two companions were charged with espionage by Iranian authorities in Tehran after 101 days of imprisonment. The three were reportedly hiking in the Iraqi region of Kurdistan on July 31 when they crossed over the Iranian border and were arrested by border guards.

CNN reported on November 9 that Tehran's prosecutor general, Abbas Jafari Dolatabadi, announced the charges in an interview with the official Iranian news agency IRNA, stating that "the charge against the three U.S. citizens who were arrested on the Iran-Iraq border is espionage."

Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki told Iran's Fars News Agency on December 14 that the three Hikers were to stand trial for espionage, according to a CNN report the same day. The Australian newspaper *HeraldSun* reported December 18 that the trial had begun, but as of press time no verdict had been released.

Shane Bauer, 27, a freelance journalist, Sarah Shourd, 31, and Joshua Fattal, 27, entered Iran accidentally, according to Shon Meckfessel, a friend of the three who spoke with Bauer the morning before he was arrested. In a letter published August 6 in *The Nation*, Meckfessel called his friends' presence in Iran "a simple and very regrettable mistake."

Since their arrest, friends and family of the three American citizens have issued repeated calls for their release, launching Freethehikers.org, an advocacy Web site featuring their story and biographies, and statements to media. After the espionage charges were announced, the hikers' families issued a statement on November 9 saying that "the allegation that our loved ones may have been engaged in espionage is untrue," and is "entirely at odds with the people Shane, Sarah and Josh are and with anything that Iran can have learned about them since they were detained."

On November 25, the mothers of all three hikers released a video appeal to the government of Iran, which was broadcast on television news programs across the United States and, according to a statement on Freethehikers.org, "sent to the Iranian Ambassador to the United Nations in New York, with a request to forward them to the three hikers — Shane Bauer, Sarah Shourd and Josh Fattal — and to the Iranian authorities."

On November 9, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton repeated the Obama administration's call for the hikers' release, asking the Iranian government to "exercise compassion," and saying that the administration believes "strongly that there is no evidence to support any charge whatsoever," according to CNN.com. White House spokesman Robert Gibbs said the same day that the three hikers were "innocent young people who should be released by the Iranian government."

On December 14, Clinton told reporters that "The three young people who were detained by the Iranians have absolutely no connection with any kind of action against the Iranian state or government," according to a report from CNN the same day.

The hikers' arrest came just days before American journalists Laura Ling and Euna Lee were released from custody after nearly four months of imprisonment in North Korea. (See "North Korea Releases American Journalists; Iran Detains Freelancer," in the Summer 2009 issue of the *Silha Bulletin*.)

American journalist Roxana Saberi was released from Iranian custody on May 11, 2009, after being detained for more than four months. She was convicted of espionage and sentenced to eight years in prison, but her sentence was reduced to a two-year suspended sentence prior to her release. (See "Saberi Released from Prison in Iran, Sentence Suspended," in the Spring 2009 issue of the *Silha Bulletin*.)

— Sara Cannon
Silha Center Staff