

Australia's prisoner swap with Iran contrasts with persecution of Julian Assange

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Two Australians imprisoned in Iran for flying a drone near a military installation were freed last week in an apparent prisoner exchange. It seems that, in return for Iran's release of the couple, the Australian government halted the extradition of an Iranian postgraduate student to the US.

Many of the circumstances behind this deal remain shrouded in official secrecy, but one thing is clear. The prisoner release further exposes the denial of basic legal and democratic rights by the Australian, British and US governments in the continued detention and psychological torture of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, an Australian citizen.

To the acclaim of the corporate media, the Australian government boasted on Saturday of having worked "very hard" to secure the release of Jolie King and Mark Firkin. They had been arrested in July, reportedly for flying a video-shooting drone near military installations.

On the same day, Australia's attorney-general announced that he had exercised his legal powers to refuse a US extradition request for University of Queensland doctoral research student, Reza Dehbashi Kivi, who had been held in a Brisbane jail for 13 months on decade-old sanctions-busting allegations.

Both actions by the Liberal-National Coalition government stand in stark contrast to the refusal of successive Australian governments, Coalition and Labor alike, to demand the release of Assange, who remains in serious ill-health in a notorious London prison, and to oppose his extradition to the US to be placed on a show trial on espionage charges that could see him imprisoned for life, or even executed.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison's government has displayed its undoubted legal and diplomatic powers to protect Australian citizens detained in other countries,

and to reject US extradition requests. Obviously, it could also request the British government to exercise similar powers. British governments have effectively detained Assange since 2010 in order to facilitate Washington's unprecedented bid to extradite and imprison a journalist and publisher for exposing its global war crimes, mass surveillance and regime-change operations.

The prisoner swap further highlights the close relationship between the Australian and US governments, which underpins both the pursuit of Assange and the agreement to release the prisoners. It is inconceivable that the Australian government would have stepped in to block Dehbashi Kivi's extradition—after denying him bail for 13 months—without the Trump administration's approval.

The swap deal was unveiled just after Morrison spent more than a week in the US, publicly backing Trump's domestic and foreign policies. While in the United States, Morrison also defended his government's decision, announced in August, to bolster Washington's escalating campaign of crippling economic sanctions and military provocations against Iran by joining a US military mission in the Strait of Hormuz, off Iran's south coast.

Both the Morrison government and the Labor Party opposition have contemptuously ruled out intervening to protect Assange, insisting that he is entitled to nothing more than essentially meaningless "consular assistance." Yet no efforts were spared to secure the release of King and Firkin, who appear to be travel bloggers and "influencers."

According to their blog sites, the couple had left Australia in 2017, documenting their overland travels to London. Many of their videos and photographs posted on YouTube and Instagram appear to have been

shot using a drone. But by flying an unlicensed drone in Jajrood, near military facilities, they apparently defied legal regulations in the middle of an intensifying US-led offensive against Iran.

On its official English-language website, the Iranian government makes it clear that a permit is required to use a drone to take photographs and people must not fly drones over people or large crowds, over the city of Tehran, or over sensitive areas.

Australian Foreign Affairs Minister Marise Payne had met with her counterpart, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, several times to press for the release of the detained Australians. Payne emphasised: “The government has worked very hard through diplomatic channels for some time to secure their release as well to ensure they were treated appropriately while detained.” It was a “source of great relief and joy to everyone” that the couple’s ordeal was over.

Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese joined the celebrations. He congratulated the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade for its work in bringing the couple home. The British government had also demanded the couple’s release, with Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab last month calling the Iranian ambassador to the United Kingdom to “raise serious concerns about the number of dual national citizens detained by Iran and their conditions of detention.”

Attorney-General Christian Porter refused to explain his intervention to free Dehbashi Kivi. But he insisted that his decision “was made in accordance with the requirements of Australian domestic legal processes and is completely consistent with the powers provided to the commonwealth attorney-general under our law.”

Dehbashi Kivi, 38, had never set foot in the US, but faced 20 years’ jail on six charges of allegedly conspiring in 2008, while living in Iran, to help export US-made equipment that could be used to detect stealth planes or missiles launched against Iran. He had been arrested last September and denied bail, even though he was a PhD scholarship student researching the detection of skin cancers. A magistrate had declared that denial of bail was essential because of Australia’s treaty obligations.

The release of the three prisoners, while welcome, is totally opposite to the treatment of Assange. From 2010, Australia’s Labor government vehemently backed the Obama administration’s secret grand jury

indictment to detain him, declaring his activities to be illegal, conducting its own investigation into his supposed offences and amending Australia’s extradition laws to allow him, or anyone else, to be sent to the US on political charges.

The British government, also acting at Washington’s behest, arrested Assange on the pretext of trumped-up Swedish sexual assault allegations in 2010 and then, after he was granted political asylum by Ecuador in 2012, trapped him inside that country’s London embassy for nearly seven years. After Ecuador, in return for Washington’s backing, unlawfully revoked his asylum, British police dragged him off to jail on bogus charges of skipping bail. Still denied bail, despite the expiry of his sentence, he remains confined more than 22 hours a day in a maximum-security prison, and denied almost all contact with his family, friends and co-thinkers.

A multi-award-winning journalist, Assange is incarcerated in violation of repeated UN rulings that he is the victim of illegal and arbitrary detention and “psychological torture.” The US Espionage Act indictments against him are patently unconstitutional, criminalising basic journalistic activity.

In a further gross abuse, former US Army Private Chelsea Manning, who exposed Washington’s war crimes in 2010, has been re-jailed for more than six months, for refusing to testify against Assange before a Grand Jury and is being fined \$1,000 a day.

The political and judicial double standard involved is no less than London Chief Magistrate Emma Arbuthnot’s insistence that Assange must be kept locked away pending extradition to the US while ruling that the wife of a millionaire embezzler should not be extradited to Azerbaijan because she could face an unfair trial.



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