Americans Held Captive Abroad: A Conversation with Senator Tom Cotton on the Global Hostage Act

Discussion… ...

- Senator Tom Cotton, U.S. Senator for Arkansas
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1201 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W., Fourth Floor
Washington, DC 20004
December 5, 2019

TRANSCRIPT

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KENNETH WEINSTEIN: Good afternoon, and welcome to Hudson Institute. I'm Ken Weinstein, president and CEO of Hudson Institute. Delighted to welcome you to today's very special event featuring Senator Tom Cotton of Arkansas. The senator needs no introduction, especially not here at Hudson, where we consider him one of our closest partners in the U.S. Congress. He's a regular here at the Stern Center. The last time he was publicly here was to discuss his very thoughtful and very moving book "Sacred Duty: A Soldier's Tour At Arlington National Cemetery." And today he's here also to touch on a subject that is deeply moving. And that's the issue of Americans held hostage by various governments around the world.

And we have a family with us today - the Kamalmaz family from Arkansas - who are honoring us by their presence. Their brother and uncle is being held against his will in Damascus. And the senator has worked on a very important piece of legislation, the Global Hostage Act that he's introduced with the co-sponsorships of Senators Cruz and Hawley, that takes a new and tougher approach to the challenges of Americans held overseas. After some brief introductory remarks by the senator, he'll engage in a dialogue with Hudson senior fellow Michael Doran. Mike was senior director for Middle East affairs at the National Security Council. He's a leading analyst of the Middle East. And he's focused on numerous issues, including the strategic challenge posed by the Islamic Republic of Iran to the U.S. and its allies. So without any further ado, please welcome Senator Tom Cotton.

(APPLAUSE)

TOM COTTON: Thank you, Ken, for the very kind introduction. And thanks to the Hudson Institute for having me back once again to speak about a very important matter and about my legislation, the Global Hostage Act. I want to thank, especially, as well, the family of hostages who are here today, including the family of Majd Kamalmaz - I just had a chance to visit. Majd was an Arkansan and a humanitarian therapist who disappeared from a Syrian government checkpoint more than two years ago. Majd can take comfort in knowing that his loved ones, just like his government, are advocating so strongly on his behalf. It's appropriate to be discussing the topic and my legislation so soon after the 40th anniversary of one of the worst hostage-taking events in American history - the Iran hostage crisis. Forty years ago last month, a band of Islamic student revolutionaries seized American sovereign soil and held 66 Americans in our embassy in Tehran. They held 52 of those Americans for 444 days, subjecting them to psychological abuse and harsh interrogations.

One of their captors was a woman named Mary Ebtekar, a fierce anti-American who became the bullhorn for student revolutionaries in the press. For 444 days, Mary's denunciations of America as an imperialist power, the Great Satan, were broadcast into our living rooms. When a member of the press asked if Mary was personally willing to pick up a gun and shoot her American hostages, she responded decisively - yes. Forty years later, the Iranian regime hasn't changed its stripes. It came to power while holding Americans hostage, and today it clings to power while holding Americans hostage. And little surprise, Mary, the young mouthpiece of the revolution, has grown up to be the regime's top-ranking woman. She even married one of the lead hostage-takers in 1979. So now you could say they're partners in crime in more than one way. Mary and her husband, however, have faced few consequences for their crimes - for the dozens of Americans they've unjustly detained over the years. Instead, they travel freely. They mix freely with the world's elite.
And just a few years ago, their son studied for a doctorate right here in America - the heart of the Great Satan - whose parents are senior Iranian official and whose citizens they once threatened with summary execution. Unfortunately, the outrageous case of Mary and her family is not an exception. The son of an Iranian hostage-taker didn't just slip through the cracks of our immigration system. Brutal dictators and kidnappers the world over are becoming rich and powerful by preying on Americans. In many cases, though, they enjoy the privileges of the free world while they do so. The regime of Bashar al-Assad has detained several Americans, including Majd and journalist Austin Tice. In Venezuela, Maduro's socialist regime has held, without trial, six American oil workers also for more than two years. These Americans are being held in Venezuela's most notorious prison, wasting away like so many of the normal Venezuelans suffering under Maduro's brutal rule. In China, there are reports of U.S. legal residents being swept up in the concentration camps in Xinjiang, held in the Communist Party's campaign to cleanse the region of supposed threats to its one-party rule.

Elsewhere in China, the Communist Party is denying American citizens the right to leave the country. Sometimes, they use exit bans to trap dissidents. Sometimes, they use them to resolve business disputes in the favor of Chinese firms. But in every case, General Secretary Xi and the Communist Party are using American citizens as bargaining chips. And just like in Iran, China's Communist leaders have exploited our openness even as they've exploited our citizens. In 2014, just a few months before General Secretary Xi called for a policy of, quote, "absolutely no mercy" in Xinjiang, his daughter walked across the stage at Harvard to receive her degree. Around the same time, his nephew graduated from Georgetown's School of Foreign Service after interning, I feel compelled to add, at the Brookings Institute. These princelings promptly returned to China, where they, no doubt, have used their American training and their American connections to strengthen their father and their uncle's rule over the Chinese people.

Tyrants around the world view American citizens as tempting targets, truth be told. They know they can't defeat our military in battle, nor can they imitate the success of our economic system, but they can attempt to weaken us in other ways, trying to seize leverage against us. Hostage-taking is one such tactic. Hostages give outlaw nations a perceived source of leverage over the world's greatest superpower - leverage they aim to turn into concessions. We could respond to this threat in several ways. We could pay ransom to our enemies, accepting their predations as a simple fact of life while encouraging more of it. Or we could impose consequences so severe that hostage-taking and hostage-keeping are no longer tempting schemes, even for the world's most hardened and brutal tyrants. Right now, regrettably, the United States falls something of a middle path. We don't pay ransoms, as a matter of policy and national pride, nor should we. But neither do we impose debilitating consequences on kidnappers. In recent years, the United States has named a special envoy to plead the cause of American hostages. We've also established an interagency team within the FBI to ensure the United States government speaks with one voice regarding hostages.

These steps are welcome, and I commend the many capable individuals and expert negotiators who have worked in these positions. But right now, their hands are, to a degree, tied. They can plead the case of American citizens. They can disrupt criminal networks to some extent. But they can't hold foreign officials accountable in ways that might deter future hostage-taking or affect outcomes at the negotiating table. That should change. We are the world's financial hub and the world's most attractive destination for business tourism. We have, therefore, to quote Liam Neeson's character from the movie "Taken," "a very particular set of skills" - skills that should be the terror of hostage-takers around the
world. It's time that we use those skills to bring our fellow citizens home. And that's where the Global Hostage Act comes in.

My bill would place mandatory sanctions on foreign kidnappers, hostage-takers and their associates. It would revoke and deny visas to any foreign official who is responsible for the abuse of American citizens abroad, and that travel ban would apply also to those official's spouses, children, siblings, grandparents and grandchildren, as well as the officials themselves. No foreign official who abuses American citizens and imposes pain and hardship and loss on American families should have a family who can benefit from our open society. The bill would also block financial transactions for those individuals within the United States, so they can't benefit from the safety and convenience of our banking system. And the Global Hostage Act empowers Congress to order a review of foreign officials suspected of taking American hostages. Within 90 days of that order, the State Department must investigate and, if applicable, impose the sanctions from the legislation. Regrettably, the relatives of American hostages often feel that the government isn't moving swiftly enough to repatriate their loved ones, a sentiment I believe we can all understand. But this congressional trigger would ensure the American hostages have 535 potential advocates in Congress with the power to request sanctions on their captors according to strict and defined time schedules.

The Global Hostage Act would also usher in a world where hostage-takers are treated as outlaws and pariahs, confined to their home countries, barred from the privileges of American life, with their families suffering just a small bit of the deprivation felt by the families of American hostages. It would make the world safer for America's travelers, from businessmen seeking markets overseas to missionaries spreading the light of the Gospel in foreign lands to newcomers visiting their family in the old world. And it would comfort and aid the many Americans who find themselves like Odysseus, trapped in foreign lands far from home. They would know that their jailers also feel the strain of isolation just like they do. More important, they would know that America is not only pleading for their return. We are fighting for it. Hostage-taking may be an ancient practice, but it's not an inevitable fact of life. Pirates and kidnappers prey on nations that are rich but foolish. They prey less often on nations that are rich and strong, that don't pay tribute but rather make their enemies pay for abusing their citizens.

No one knew this better than the author of our Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson, who, as secretary of state and president, was responsible for freeing hundreds of American sailors held hostage by the pirate kings of the Barbary Coast. An easy choice might have been to purchase and plead for their freedom. But Jefferson knew that a better option was to fight back and establish our young nation as a power capable of holding its own in a dangerous world. Respect, Jefferson wrote, is a safeguard to interest. Today, the United States is both rich and strong. We stand upright, and we do not pay tributes to foreign powers. But there is more that we can do to earn the respect and inspire the fear that is a safeguard to our interests. The Global Hostage Act is a good start. Thank you.

(APPLAUSE)

MICHAEL DORAN: Well, hi. I'm Senior Fellow Mike Doran. Senator, thank you. That was beautiful. I think this is an incredibly elegant piece of legislation, both moral and strategic - a perfect blend of interest and morality. I wonder how you came to - how you got the idea for this. Was it from talking to families?

COTTON: Yeah. Thanks for that, Mike. So I have visited frequently with the families of American hostages - Majd's family, just today. The Levinson and the Namazi families were in - earlier this week in
their trip to Washington. And as I studied the problem more carefully, I realized that hostage-taking was a lot more extensive than most Americans would think and also very surprised at the lack of tools that our officials in the State Department and the FBI have available to them to punish and therefore deter hostage-taking - very surprised. I think most Americans would be very surprised at the number of family members of hostage-takers who benefit from the American way of life, whether they're doing business in America or coming to go to school here, as General Secretary Xi's daughter was.

I mean, I don't think anybody would have believed we should have let the family members of Nikita Khrushchev or Leonid Brezhnev into our country to benefit from our way of life in the Cold War. So we certainly shouldn't be doing it to officials who hold American citizens hostage. So the legislation I propose is designed to make American hostages not a precious source of leverage against our country but rather the surest way to one's own destruction, so much so that if, you know, a low-level regime official or terrorist organization's frontline soldiers take someone hostage, get them back to the designated holding facility, and the higher-ups realize that they have an American in their grasp, their reaction is not to celebrate but to immediately release that American out of fear of the consequences that will come next.

DORAN: Of course, it also keeps the names in the news.

COTTON: Yeah, that’s an important - that’s a very important thing to keep in mind, as well. You know, the regime in Iran always says that they're willing to negotiate. They're willing to release Americans being held who they characterize not as hostages but as criminals or spies or what have you. It's important to know that that is a lie. Whether it's the supreme leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, or the president, Hassan Rouhani, or the foreign minister, Javad Zarif, or the head of the Revolutionary Guard Corps, Qasem Soleimani, they lie repeatedly. They are not willing to sit down and negotiate. They view those Americans they’re holding hostage as a valuable source of leverage against the United States. And they are simply spreading propaganda, which, unfortunately, too much of the Western media often accepts on face value and asks American leaders, why aren't you willing to sit down and negotiate with these Iranians? They're not willing to sit down and negotiate. That is a lie. That’s why we have to impose more sanctions on them to increase the pressure they face so they realize, as I said, that keeping an American hostage is not a source of leverage. It's the surest path to one's own destruction.

DORAN: I think I perceive in this - and this is a question - there's a kind of larger project you have, which is to punish, basically as you said in your remarks, countries that are using our openness against us. I think I perceive a theme. And you're concerned about the Chinese - about the Huawei, and ZTE, and the oppression in Xinjiang and the cultural influence that the Chinese have. I think I perceive a theme here. Is that correct? Are you...

COTTON: Yeah. That is correct. I mean, you look at the treatment of Uighurs and Kazakhs and other minorities in the northwestern Chinese province of Xinjiang, they have over a million of their own citizens held in concentration camps. That is a very long way from the United States, but what's happening in Xinjiang is not going to stay there, in part 'cause it's happening using American companies' technology - benefiting from the very openness and the capitalist system that has generated such technology, much of which has legitimate and real uses but shouldn't be used by a communist state against its own citizens. So the techniques they are perfecting there are going to come to places like Hong Kong. And after they come to places like Hong Kong, they're going to come to the West and ultimately be used against us.
To give another example, since I mentioned Hong Kong, look at what happened a few weeks ago when the general manager of the Houston Rockets put out a tweet that was 100% correct that we should stand with the people of Hong Kong who are standing for freedom and for democratic autonomy against tyranny from Beijing. It wasn't enough that he said that on his own account on his own time. Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party, you know, started taking down Houston Rockets games and advertising in China. They expected NBA teams and players to renounce it. Unfortunately, some of them did. Now, ultimately, Adam Silver came around and said that they would not censor players or teams and they all have the right to speak their own mind, as they should, and speak with one voice against the kind of crackdowns you see in Hong Kong. Well, that's an example of the way the Chinese Communist Party and other authoritarian governments try to use our openness against us to get us to kowtow to their line.

DORAN: So you perceive a direct threat to American democracy in these issues.

COTTON: Absolutely. I absolutely do. Not only is it a threat to all the Americans who travel overseas - millions and millions of Americans every year who are travelling overseas or who are living overseas for business or because of their faith or to study or what have you - but the techniques that countries like China use on its own people are techniques they can use in an aggressive fashion against lands in which they've promised autonomous rule, like Hong Kong, or lands they would promise autonomous rule, like Taiwan, or their neighbors who are our allies, like Korea or China or Thailand, for instance - or Japan, I should say.

DORAN: You know, if I could tell you an anecdote - when I worked in the White House in the Bush administration, a rumor started in Washington that we were negotiating in Washington with a high-level Iranian official. And I was in charge of Middle Eastern affairs at the White House. And a bunch of European diplomats came and kept telling me that this was happening. And I kept saying, no, it's not happening; it's not happening. Then one day, a French diplomat came to me who was quite friendly with me, and he said, you're totally losing credibility, Mike, because we've seen the guy, and I personally saw him on the corner of K Street and 17th the other day, so we know he's here.

So I went to my boss and I said, listen; do me a favor. If there's something going on here and I haven't been told, just tell me 'cause I'm looking like an idiot. And in the end, the story was he had a green card, and he came in - he wasn't here for any official reason. He came through Canada, so somehow, they missed it - overland through Canada. And finally, they figured it out. But these guys, they know our system so well. Just like you said, their children are here going to school. They learn us inside and out. And for us, they're still very, very opaque. I think this is the first time I've seen legislation go after this aspect in this way so that we can - you know, in Iran, it's a big deal. Everyone in Iran who's out there protesting, they know that their officials are living the high life in the West. And we should be aware of that. And it would help us both in terms of sending a signal to the Iranian protesters, but also in - to the - signals it to the elite themselves that they can't have it both ways.

COTTON: Yeah. That's exactly right. And, you know, if the wives of these regime officials can no longer go to their apartment in Paris, their kids can no longer go to private school in the U.K., they can't take their mistresses to the Swiss Alps, the French Riviera, life is going to be very different for a lot of them.

DORAN: That's fantastic. You know, I wonder if I could just switch a little bit to this question of Iran, one of the worst hostage-takers that we know. We've seen these protests lately in Iran itself, but then also in
Iraq there's a - these are increasingly obviously anti-Iranian protests. And in Lebanon, as well, it's a protest against a system that's backed up by Iranian power. It seems to me that we've seen an obvious kind of shift here in the balance of power, in terms of the struggle between the U.S. and in Iran, and there are opportunities here to exploit. But I haven't seen the administration yet move in a direction that shows that it's really seizing the opportunity. I wonder what you think about that.

COTTON: Yeah, so first, let me say that the protests we see across the Middle East today are all connected. They all go back to a single root, and that is the instability in Iran caused by American sanctions and pressure against Iran. I know it's easy for Americans to look into the Middle East and say, wow, more chaos everywhere. But the protests you see in Iran and in Iraq and in Lebanon are all a result of the pressure that we have put on the Iranian regime over the last two years. Iran has a lot of mouths to feed, and I mean that literally and figuratively. Literally, their own people - the spark of a lot of these protests was cutting off subsidies for oil and gas products, but also paramilitary forces in Iraq and Hezbollah in Lebanon, and not just in terms of literally feeding them but figuratively feeding them with weapons and materiel and training and so forth.

So the sanctions that we have imposed on Iran over the last two years, the pressure campaign we have imposed on them, is what's driving all of these protests across the country, not just in Iran but in - across the Middle East, as well. There's more we can do to continue to crack down on their efforts to evade the oil export bans, to make sure they're not able to access escrow funds around the world for anything other than humanitarian purposes. I think we should consider eliminating the nuclear civilian waivers that are part of the nuclear deal, and I think our allies should join with us in snapping back the sanctions that were lifted under the Iran nuclear deal as well. Iran has made it clear they're no longer going to comply with it. We aren't either. So those sanctions should go back into place, as well.

DORAN: Can you - are you in a position - do you have to...

COTTON: I think Ken is telling me I may have to go vote.

WEINSTEIN: Sorry to cut you off, Mike. This has been a fascinating conversation. Senator, I want to thank you for your steadfast principled leadership. You've become an incredible star on Capitol Hill in a very brief time. We're really grateful that you chose Hudson as the venue for this very important piece of legislation. All of us hope that it succeeds and can imagine the impact that it will have so other families don't have to suffer in the future, God willing. Thank you very much.

COTTON: Well, thank you, Ken. Thanks for hosting it. And thanks for everyone for coming about this very important topic. I regret that I've got to run off, but we are in the middle of a vote series in the Senate.