



By [Stephen Zunes, Contributor](#), Huffington Post, Aug 13, 2010

Hikers in Iran

It has now been more than a year since Iranian authorities seized three Americans — Shane Bauer, Sarah Shourd, and Josh Fattal — in the mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan and falsely accused them of espionage on behalf of the U.S. government. No formal charges have been filed, and they have been denied their right to see an attorney. All three have suffered from maltreatment, and Sarah is experiencing severe health problems. All three are progressive, anti-imperialist activists, which not only makes the charges against them particularly absurd, but also may also explain why the Obama administration has done so little to free them.

Portrait of Three Activists

Shane, Sarah, and Josh were graduates of the University of California at Berkeley and were well-known in the antiwar movement in the Bay Area. Josh's major passions were sustainable agriculture, food justice, and permaculture, which he pursued at the Aprovecho Research Center in Oregon. Just prior to visiting Shane and Sarah, he had been serving as a teaching fellow with the International Honors Program's Health and Community project, spending time in Switzerland, India, China, and South Africa. While a student at Berkeley, he was a leader in the movement to get military recruiters off campus.

With support from the Investigative Fund of The Nation Institute and the Center for Investigative Reporting, Shane was working as a freelance journalist in various countries in the Middle East, exposing a number of aspects of U.S. policy in the region that Washington would rather keep quiet. Along with his friend Dahr Jamail, he was one of the few independent journalists in Baghdad. His 2009 article "[Iraq's New Death Squad](#)" in *The Nation* magazine revealed how Iraq Special Operations Forces (ISOF), the largest foreign Special Forces outfit ever developed by the United States, was engaged in widespread human rights abuses. [An article](#) he wrote for *Mother Jones* last year revealed how the U.S. government, in an effort to bring temporary stability in Iraq, had funneled billions of dollars to what he referred to as "the country's next generation of strongmen." At the time of his arrest, Shane was finishing [a major investigative article](#) on the illegal use by Israeli occupation forces of "non-lethal" weapons, such as the "long-range teargas canister" (which essentially acts as a missile), against nonviolent protesters. During the past year, such weapons killed Bassem al-Rahmeh, a leading Palestinian nonviolent activist, and have grievously injured scores of others, including Americans Tristan Anderson and Emily Henochowicz.

Sarah was teaching English as a volunteer with the [Iraqi Student Project](#), set up to help refugees whose education had been interrupted by the U.S. invasion and occupation. Among her projects was helping some of the more promising young exiles to obtain scholarships at American universities. Before leaving the United States, Sarah was living in Oakland, where she was an organizer in support of immigrant rights, including the historic May Day marches of 2006. She also facilitated groups to the U.S.-Mexican border to challenge the Minutemen and other nativist vigilantes. Prior to moving to the Middle East, Sarah spent time in the Mexican state of Chiapas doing solidarity work with the Zapatistas. Her [blogs](#) on the ongoing repression by both the Mexican and Israeli governments were well-received by human rights activists.

While in Oakland, both Sarah and Shane were part of the [Midnight Special Law Collective](#), which provides legal and other support for activists around the country. Along with Josh, they were actively involved with Direct Action to Stop the War in organizing nonviolent action campaigns against the U.S. occupation of Iraq.

They also volunteered for the [Common Ground Collective's](#) efforts to support rebuilding poor sections of New Orleans devastated by Hurricane Katrina based upon the principle of “solidarity, not charity.”

On moving to Syria, Sarah and Shane chose to live in a Palestinian refugee camp and engage in Palestine solidarity work. When Israeli occupation forces shot their friend Tristan Anderson in the head during a nonviolent protest in the West Bank, they went to visit him in an Israeli hospital just three weeks before their kidnapping.

In Kurdistan

Iraqi Kurdistan is generally considered to be a safe place for Western tourists. The mountains there are among the most beautiful in the world, so it's not surprising that young Americans familiar with the Middle East would want to explore the area. Unfortunately, the Bush administration had used these same mountains to arm PJAC, a militant separatist group of Iranian Kurds closely aligned with the PKK, the notorious Turkish Kurdish militia. Obama suspended the clandestine effort and appropriately declared PJAC a terrorist group.

The Bush administration may also have sent U.S. Special Forces to the region to infiltrate Iran in preparation of a major U.S. attack, as revealed in a [series of articles](#) by Seymour Hersh, a practice also apparently suspended by the Obama administration. Given this recent history, claims of infiltration by American agents in this border region can appear plausible to many Iranians. In many respects, then, the captivity of Shane, Sarah and Josh is yet another tragic legacy of the Bush administration.

The destination of the three hikers was the Ahmed Awa waterfall, an area popular among Iraqis and a growing number of Western tourists. The spot was highly recommended by locals, but none of the three Americans apparently knew that it was so close to the Iranian border. Though the Iranian regime claims they crossed into Iranian territory, [eyewitnesses say](#) they were seized inside Iraq by Iranian guards who illegally crossed the border and effectively kidnapped them. Indeed, the [Revolutionary Guard officer](#) who apparently ordered their abduction has since been arrested on suspicion of smuggling, kidnapping, and murder. In short, these were hardly “hapless hikers” who naively walked into Iran as some in the media have tried to depict them.

Disparity in Coverage

The fate of these three activists has not received the amount of attention the media gave to Iranian-American journalist Roxanna Suberi, who was detained for three months on espionage charges by the Iranian regime, or of journalists Lisa Ling and Euna Lee, who were freed after four months in captivity by the North Koreans following intervention by former president Bill Clinton. A number of [right-wing bloggers](#) have labeled the hikers as “anti-Israel” and “far-left,” arguing that the State Department should just “let ‘em rot.”

Perhaps as a testament to his own youthful idealism as a community organizer, President [Barack Obama](#) acknowledged their activism in [a statement calling for their release](#), saying, “They are simply open-minded and adventurous young people who represent the best of America, and of the human spirit. They are teachers, artists, and advocates for social and environmental justice.” Overall, however, the Obama administration appears to place freeing them from Iranian captivity as a relatively low priority.

After months of working unsuccessfully through official channels, some of the friends and family members of the detainees have decided to publicize their plight — along with their history of activism — in the hopes that global civil society, particularly the progressive activist community, can take the kind of initiative not yet coming from Washington.

The fear-mongering and saber-rattling that U.S. hawks have directed at the Iranian regime make it difficult for some progressive activists in the United States to speak out against the repression of the right-wing theocratic regime in Tehran. Yet, while the military threat posed by Iran is often greatly exaggerated, the repressive nature of the regime is not. Indeed, the absurd notion that these three progressive anti-imperialist activists would be spying for the U.S. government is but one more demonstration of the moral and political bankruptcy of the Iranian regime. And, given that — despite all the extreme anti-Iranian rhetoric — Washington is not doing much in support of these American captives, it's up the progressive community to organize on their behalf.

Leading progressives such as Noam Chomsky, Cornel West, Angela Davis, Cindy Sheehan, Medea Benjamin, Alex Cockburn, Christian Parenti, and the late Howard Zinn have called for their release. As [Chomsky](#) put it, "These young people represent a segment of the U.S. population that is critical of [U.S.] policies, and often actively opposed to them. Hence their detention is particularly distressing to all of us who are dedicated to shifting U.S. policy to one of mutual respect rather than domination."

For More Information

Please visit www.freethehikers.org, where you can sign the petition, send letters to the U.S. and Iranian officials, and learn how to help organize actions to protest their detention and demand their release. Another web site, which focuses primarily on their activism and includes links to their writings, can be found at: freeourfriends.eu/