

# STRATEGIC, NOT SYMBOLIC: WHY THE UK NEEDS AN EMPOWERED SPECIAL ENVOY FOR HOSTAGE-TAKING

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State hostage-taking, where individuals are arbitrarily detained by foreign governments for diplomatic leverage, involves serious violations of human rights, including torture and ill-treatment. It is widely accepted that the practice of State hostage-taking is increasing internationally.<sup>1</sup>

**British nationals are among the most frequent targets of hostage-taking globally, and face some of the worse outcomes.** There are currently at least seven British nationals detained abroad whose cases the UN has confirmed to be arbitrary, and thus may require diplomatic intervention to resolve. Yet British nationals are more likely than any other nationality to die in captivity or endure detention that lasts over three years.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the risks, the UK lacks a comprehensive strategy to ensure the safe return of British hostages.

The UK Government has committed to appointing a Special Envoy for Complex Consular Detentions, which is a much-needed step. This follows key recommendations from the UK Foreign Affairs Committee<sup>3</sup> and more recently the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, who identified effective government responses to state hostage-taking as essential to preventing serious human rights violations, including torture.<sup>4</sup>

In recent years, high-profile cases have exposed the human cost of this lack of strategy.<sup>5</sup> Survivors taken hostage have suffered in detention for long periods, families have faced uncertainty, while ministers have been forced to respond reactively under intense public and political pressure. A Special Envoy must be suitably empowered to turn this trend around.

This is not only a matter that impacts individuals' human rights, but a national security concern. It is essential that a Special Envoy is equipped with the authority, resources, and mandate needed to drive meaningful change for survivors and their families. Strong leadership on these issues is also crucial to shaping deterrence strategies and reinforcing the UK's position on the global stage.

**To respond to and deter State hostage-taking, the UK Government should introduce a Special Envoy for Complex and Arbitrary Detentions with sufficient authority, mandate, and resources to lead diplomatic responses, while treating families as trusted partners.**

<sup>1</sup> Hostage Aid Worldwide, [2024 Annual Global Hostage Report](#), March 2025, p. 22 and UK Foreign Affairs Committee, [Stolen years: combatting state hostage diplomacy](#), 28 March 2023, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Hostage Aid Worldwide, 2025, pp. 21-24.

<sup>3</sup> UK Foreign Affairs Committee, [Stolen years: combatting state hostage diplomacy](#), 28 March 2023, p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> UN Human Rights Council, [Report of the Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment: Hostage-Taking as Torture](#), A/HRC/58/55, 6 February 2025, p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> REDRESS, [Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe](#).

## WHAT POWERS AND RESOURCES DOES A SPECIAL ENVOY NEED?

What all hostage and complex arbitrary cases have in common is that diplomatic intervention is necessary to bring the British national home. In the case of State hostage-taking, the detaining State treats people as bargaining chips.<sup>6</sup> **That is why it is so important that a Special Envoy has the necessary resources and decision-making authority to drive cross-government action, with dedicated funding, a direct reporting line to the Cabinet Office and a strong voice on the international stage.** This requires a senior-level mandate and clear backing from the highest levels of government. Without these powers, the role risks becoming symbolic rather than strategic.

## COMPARISON TO OTHER STATES

In the US, the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs (SPEHA) leads diplomatic efforts and coordinates across government agencies to secure the release of Americans held abroad. SPEHA is supported by a dedicated secretariat of around 26 staff and has a budget of \$6.6 million.<sup>7</sup> This is reinforced by entities such as the Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell, a multi-agency team based at the FBI, and the Hostage Response Group, which supports the National Security Council, creating a unified response including diplomacy, intelligence, and law enforcement. The US has also prioritised survivor and family engagement, brought in reforms through legislation, and recognised State hostage-taking as a national security threat.<sup>8</sup> The US example shows the level of resourcing needed to successfully deter hostage-taking and secure the return of citizens. As of September 2023, the US had brought home 122 captives following reforms to its hostage approach in 2014.<sup>9</sup>

In 2023, Canada introduced a Senior Official for Hostage Affairs (SOHA) to lead Canada's consular efforts and increase capacity to respond to cases of hostage-taking, with a focus on supporting survivors and their families.<sup>10</sup> One aspect of the SOHA role is to engage in multilateral responses to State hostage-taking, including by promoting Canada's Declaration Against Arbitrary Detention in State-to-State Relations.<sup>11</sup>

## CENTRING SURVIVORS AND THEIR FAMILIES

The UK should take leadership in its response to the growing practice of State hostage-taking. As it stands, families of those taken hostage have little trust in the Government. Families of British nationals currently or formerly detained abroad feel that the FCDO often fails to keep them informed or meaningfully involved, ignoring the valuable insights that they can provide, particularly in relation to their loved ones' conditions and needs. This compounds the trauma they already experience. To be effective, a Special Envoy must treat families as trusted partners.

**For more information, contact Olivia Dehnavi, Advocacy Officer, at [olivia@redress.org](mailto:olivia@redress.org).**

<sup>6</sup> UN Human Rights Council, [Report of the Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment: Hostage-Taking as Torture](#), A/HRC/58/55, 6 February 2025, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> Secretary of State, [Department of State Congressional Budget Justification: Appendix 1 – Diplomatic Engagement, Fiscal Year 2025](#), 2024, p. 87.

<sup>8</sup> The Soufan Center, [Citizens for Leverage: Navigating State Hostage-Taking in a Shifting Geopolitical Landscape](#), September 2023, pp. 17-20.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. 20. Similar figures are not available for the UK.

<sup>10</sup> Government of Canada, [Amplifying the Voice of Canadian Hostages and their Families](#), 16 May 2024.

<sup>11</sup> [Canada Declaration](#), 15 February 2021.