

Bernard Phelan recounts eight months of captivity in Iran's 'Satan's block'



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Arrested in Mashhad in October last year during major anti-regime protests, Bernard Phelan was one of seven French hostages in Iran. He spoke to Le Monde after his release last month.

At first, the scene seemed unreal, like an out-of-body experience: Two men in civilian clothes approached him in front of Imam Reza's sumptuous mosque in Mashhad, a holy city in northeastern Iran. They confiscated his phone and led him to a prayer room. The questions started pouring endlessly. What was he doing there? What photographs had he been taking? Handcuffs were slapped on his wrists, and he was blindfolded. "This is serious stuff this time," thought Bernard Phelan, 64, a French-Irish tourism specialist.

He was transferred to an interrogation center, where he heard a prisoner screaming from beatings all night. Footsteps unceasingly creaked down the corridor. Could it be him they were coming for now? It was October 3, 2022. Phelan had become the seventh French citizen among the 40 or so Europeans arbitrarily detained in Iran, the only country in the world to cultivate this "hostage diplomacy." Each of them has his own particular story, but Phelan, who was released on May 12, had a singularly distinct experience.

In Mashhad, he was sent to the Vakilabad prison. The interrogations continued for weeks and were always filmed. The first questions were precise, but Phelan had trouble deciphering their logic: Why are Europeans demonstrating naked? What's the status of the Yellow Vests movement in France? What is his favorite movie? Opposite him, one of the agents had been specially dispatched from Tehran. He wore a surgical mask, latex gloves and spoke in perfect,

polite French. At the same time, he endeavored to correct the prisoner on his grammar, as a way of intimidating him. Phelan decided to call his interrogator "Henri," and told him of the nickname.

A new round of more direct questions hit: Once again, they were about the photographs found in his phone and computer, particularly of a policeman on a motorcycle. Phelan is a biker and has a thing for two-wheelers, but his explanation failed to convince the investigator. One day, Henri stopped the camera amid an interrogation. "Do you want to work for us?" Phelan thanked him and declined.

On another occasion, while his fingerprints were being taken, Phelan ran his ink-soaked finger over the bridge of his nose, painting it with a black line. "Why?" Henri asked. "Why not?" the inmate replied. For a moment, Henri's imperturbable face blurred. Phelan has a disconcerting mix of ingenuity and audacity. With his very blue eyes and handsome stature, he is quietly impressive.

'You're wasting your time'

This was Phelan's fifth trip to Iran since 2017, when the country opened up to tourism, becoming a fashionable destination for Europeans. He had become so enthusiastic that he took Farsi classes in Paris and organized themed tours with a local agency, Iran Adventure. This time, he had booked his ticket with an arrival scheduled for September 17, 2022. The date fell the day after [22-year-old Mahsa Amini died in police custody](#) because of a "badly worn" headscarf.

Riots immediately broke out in Iran's main cities but were violently repressed. Panicked by the news, Phelan's friends and family in Paris begged him to return. He shrugged his shoulders. On the ground, he was barely aware of the ongoing crisis. He had only come across a protest after lunching in the bazaar of Tabriz, "the most beautiful in the world," he said. He was with Mike, an Iranian from the Iran Adventure agency, who was arrested in Mashhad with him, but quickly released.

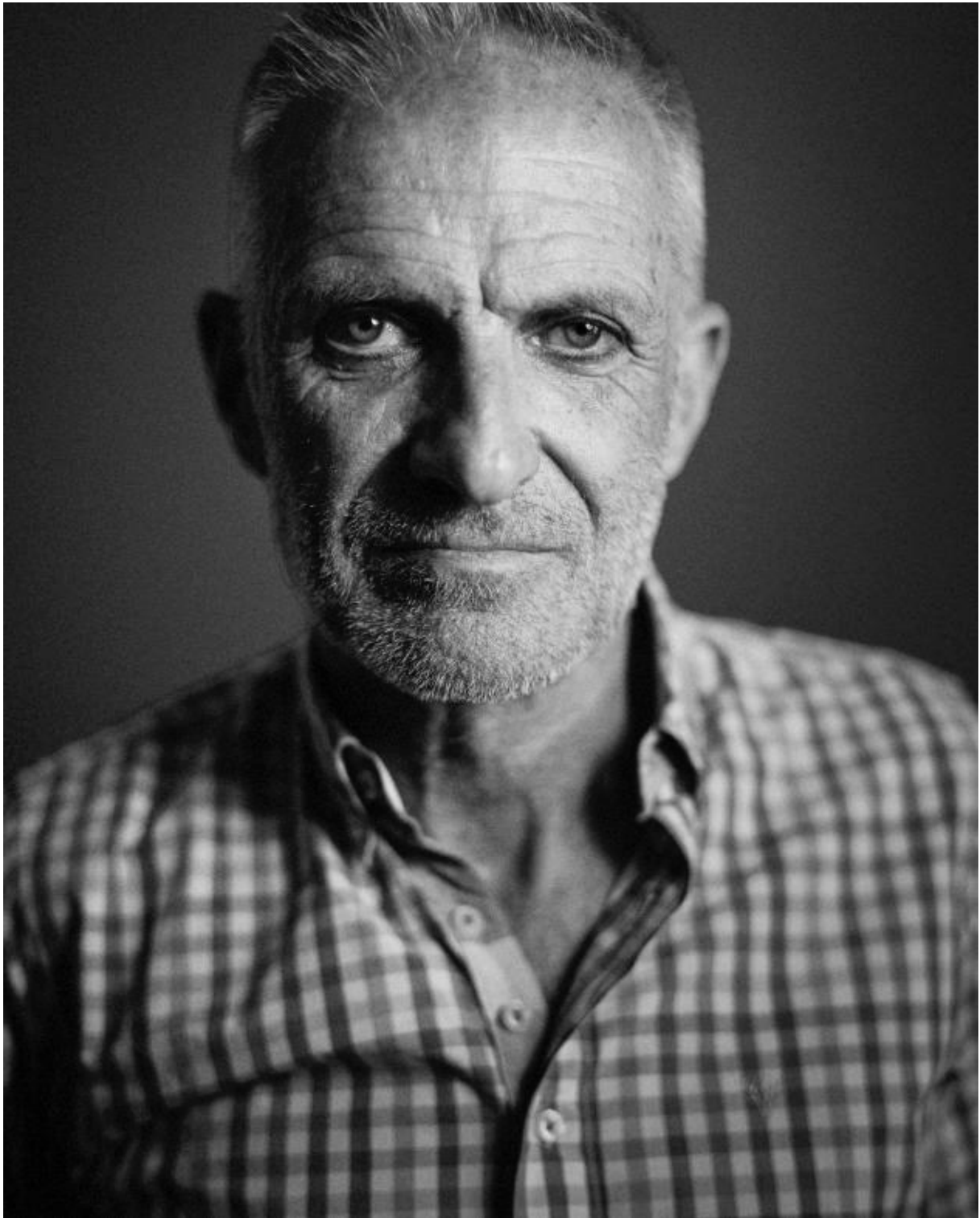
Throughout the interrogation, Phelan told Henri: "You're wasting your time. There's nothing here." The investigator asked him if he was married. He was. Next question: What is your wife's name? The answer: My husband is Roland Bonello, a 62-year-old psychologist. It was a risky gamble. The French-Irish dual citizen knew that intimate relations with a partner of the same sex are punishable by death in Iran. Two men had been executed a few months earlier for sodomy. But Phelan did not hesitate, feeling it was better to reveal what might be discovered later.

At that point, Henri did not bat an eyelid. Instead, he asked why they had not adopted children and talked about "the LGBT lobby, which is very powerful in Europe." Having the possibility to live his homosexuality freely was one of the reasons why Phelan left Ireland in the early 1980s: It was still criminalized in his country back then. In Paris, where he lived, Phelan worked in tourism and became one of the first shareholders of the legendary Le Cox, one of the first gay bars, in the Marais area. He married Bonello in 2014 after 10 years spent together.

At Vakilabad, Phelan was incarcerated in section 6-1, known as the "Satans' block," where political prisoners and foreigners are detained. There were young Iranians arrested during the recent demonstrations who were not yet 20 years old, and many Afghan, Pakistani, Bahraini, and Turkish drug traffickers, a local specificity – the Mashhad region borders Afghanistan, a hub for both legal and illegal trade. There were 15 of them in Phelan's cell, including Benjamin Brière, 38, another Frenchman, arrested and sentenced in 2020 to 104 months in prison for taking photographs with an amateur drone in a nature reserve.

Terrible and burlesque

Each prison in Iran follows its own rules, with various detention conditions, even within different sections. In the Satans' block, inmates have access to a hairdresser, books, and a small grocery store, in a more lenient setting than in Evin, the large penitentiary center near Tehran, known for its torture and ill-treatment. Most Westerners are held in Valikabad. But the Satans' block is also where those sentenced to death are taken for their last night before their group execution in the early morning hours. Phelan glimpsed their shadows from his cell, noticing the final meal slipped through a hatch, and heard their cries at nightfall. It was as if this torture of others warned the living that death is never far away.



Bernard Phelan, at his home in Paris, on June 4, 2023. EDOUARD CAUPEIL FOR LE MONDE

In November 2022, Phelan was allowed his first phone call in prison: He reached out to his husband. The two of them burst out laughing at the very sound of each other's voices. Phelan cheerfully proposed an idea for a campaign seeking his release: Why not make headlines about the "gay bar owner detained in Iran?" And so began a terrible and burlesque conversation, in which the hostage of the mullahs spoke without restraint while his husband,

in Paris, got bogged down in cryptic formulas. "This is not the path we are exploring," ventured Bonello tentatively.

To be safe, French diplomats had advised Bonello never to mention their marriage. The Act Up activist had to hide his homosexuality for the first time. He introduced himself as a friend to the support committee for the hostages in Iran, and it was Phelan's sister, Caroline, who took center stage. At Le Cox, the community supported Bonello, who enraged at being unable to do so publicly.

Phelan's trial began in Mashhad in early 2023 on charges of "undermining state security," with a regime-appointed lawyer. Before the hearing, he refused to sign a final document, written in Farsi without a translation. "You will die in prison," the magistrate hissed at him. Today, Phelan finds it hard to remember the hearings during which the same stories about photographs kept coming up. The prosecutor demanded three and a half years imprisonment and pledged to seek a pardon. The room was filled with relief and embraces. A few days later, Phelan, still in chains but beaming with confidence, returned to court for the verdict: The pardon was refused, and the sentence increased to six and a half years. Authorities had played out hope, then despair, one after the other, as part of a violent, yet subtle, combination.

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"Will we ever get out?" Phelan asked his French cellmate. Brière reassured him. The end of Brière's sentence was announced ahead of schedule, in February. He bade a moving farewell, distributing his belongings to other prisoners following prison tradition. One by one, he passed through the successive checks. When he reached the last door to freedom, he was sent back to his cell. The mill of desolation started turning again, exhausting bodies and minds. What is true? What is false?

Phelan counted the days and hours but realized his calculations were never correct when he came across a clock in a judge's or doctor's office. Yet he relied on mealtimes and calls to prayer. What if they, too, had been tampered with to deceive inmates? In the cell, television continuously spun news about foreigners accused of "organizing protests." Brière and Phelan went on hunger strike one after the other.

Atypical cases

The support campaign and intense diplomatic dealings in France highlighted Phelan and Brière's declining health. This was the Iranian regime's greatest fear: Detention may be harsh and cruel, but no Westerner should die in prison. Phelan suffers a long list of illnesses: Heart problems, high blood pressure, risk of stroke, and HIV. The Iranian administration had made it a point of honor to treat him at a hospital or with a private specialist whenever necessary.

On May 11, the two prisoners were told they would be released "on humanitarian grounds." They could not believe it, not even at the clinic where they were sent to recover, not even at the Iranian foreign minister's residence where the French ambassador came to collect them, not even at Tehran's airport where they were served caviar in the VIP lounge. It was only once out of Iranian airspace, after a 28-minute flight on May 12, that joy, and tears, finally erupted.

Today, experts in Paris dissect every stage of the "Phelan affair," in light of Iran's infernal game of chess against the West, with secret strategies and tricks. Hypotheses abound. "It cannot be ruled out that Tehran is building up a 'pool' of hostages in anticipation, as a deterrent to any possible involvement of Iranians in operations abroad," said David Rigoulet-Roze, an associate researcher at the Institut Français d'Analyse Stratégique (IFAS), a think tank, and an editor at the journal *Orients stratégiques*. The fact that he was stopped by government agents – and not by the far more dreaded Revolutionary Guards – may have spared Phelan the worst.

Paris and Tehran claim no compensation was paid for Phelan and Brière's releases. This is unusual: Iran normally makes its demands known financially or by exchanging prisoners. This time, however, Tehran may wish to reduce international pressure and improve its image. The internal workings of the Iranian regime, rife with rivalries, should also be considered: Phelan's arrest or release, or both, could have been engineered by one service to harm another. Five French nationals are still "state hostages" in Iran.

In his Paris apartment, Phelan brought back the blue plastic flip-flops he wore in Valikabad. He gave Taj Mohammad Khormali, a political prisoner who became his friend, his most precious possession: A notebook, a pencil, and an eraser.