

NEWS REVIEW

Sitting in solitary confinement in Iran in October 2022, Bernard Phelan decided that when he got out he would do two things: write a book, and get a labrador.

The labrador is lolling about the Dubliner's French holiday home as the Irish tourism consultant discusses his seven-month ordeal with The Sunday Times.

Wiry and tanned, Phelan's extrovert side is tempered by a newer fragility caused by spending 222 days in prison, unsure whether he would ever be released.

His fateful trip to Iran was his fifth. Phelan was travelling with a local friend, Mike, with whom he was planning to develop a rail version of the Silk Road for tourists. Their visit happened to coincide with the death in police custody of a young woman, Mahsa Amini, which sparked a wave of anti-government protests. Phelan took some careful photographs of things he encountered – though not of demonstrators – to show friends on his return.

When they reached the city of Mashhad, on the evening of October 3, 2022, Mike wandered around the Imam Reza shrine complex, taking photographs, while Phelan reflected on his connection to the “amazing” Iran. Afterwards, the pair went to find food.

On their way, they were approached by two men whom Phelan likens in his book to the early Hollywood comedy duo Laurel and Hardy. Mike whispered to his friend that the strangers were from a state security organisation. Soon Phelan and Mike were being asked to produce their identity documents. Next, they were brought to a building for questioning.

Their phones were taken, and Phelan was asked about the images on his device, why he was in Iran, and details about his family in Ireland and France. He is a dual citizen of both countries and has lived in France for more than three decades.

Things escalated quickly. “We were separated, put in the car in a blindfold; then I knew, this is not normal,” Phelan says. For the first few days he presumed someone would discover he was Irish and involved in promoting Iran abroad, and set him free.

Instead, he was taken to solitary confinement, and after that to Vakilabad prison in Mashhad. “When I was in interrogation, the guy in the next cell was beaten. It was then I realised I was in trouble.”

He has not seen Mike since – his friend was not sent to prison, but Phelan was warned not to make contact with him.

Phelan was charged with providing information to an enemy country, which he denied. He spent seven months inside the Mashhad prison, finally being released on humanitarian grounds on May 12 last year. Also freed was his French cellmate, Benjamin Brière, who had been incarcerated for more than two years.

As Phelan has French and Irish citizenship, representatives from both countries worked on his case, including Micheál Martin, the tanaiste and foreign affairs minister, and Catherine Colonna, the French foreign minister.

Among those calling for Phelan's release was Amnesty International, with the campaign group describing his detention as “arbitrary” and releasing a statement saying that it “remains deeply concerned about the Iranian authorities’ practice of using detained dual and foreign nationals as leverage”.

Writing about his experience in his book, *You Will Die in Prison: My Time as a State Hostage in Iran*, published by Eriu last Thursday, was therapeutic for Phelan – but recording the audio book was quite traumatic, he says, because he knew what terrible things were coming on each page.

He used codes to “smuggle” out information in French by phone – he was given access to a phone card in prison. “Memorising the details I felt was important, because so few people have ever been able to describe the inside of an Iranian prison in the 21st century,” he says.

Putting together his notes after his return, he was able to understand some of the stranger things he had experienced behind bars, like the time his blood pressure was taken and he noticed two strange men in suits.

“A few hours later, somebody came to the trapdoor in the cell and opened it and pointed to me, [saying] ‘Bernard Phelan,’” he recalls. He found out later that it was the same day a vigil was held for him outside the Iranian embassy in Dublin. “That news went all the way to Mashhad prison on the same day. So it shows how getting publicity out about prisoners is important.”

Indeed, a key element of *You Will Die in Prison* – the title quotes a judge Phelan appeared before – is that he maintains cases like his should be loudly publicised rather than kept out of the public eye. He writes about meeting the family of Johan Floderus, a Swedish diplomat whose imprisonment in Iran did not become public knowledge until 500 days after he was detained. Floderus was freed in June this year in exchange for an Iranian man imprisoned in Sweden.

While Phelan was in prison, he was one of seven French nationals being held in Iran. His visa had been issued on his French passport.

“Ireland has a very good relationship with Iran. I met lots of Iranian officials in the past [who would say], ‘Ireland, oh, yeah, are you from the north or the south?’ They know the history of Ireland,” Phelan says.

In prison, he was visited by Sonya McGuinness, then the Irish ambassador to Iran, and now to Israel, and Justin Ryan, Ireland's chargé d'affaires in Tehran. He was given a mobile phone number for Ryan. “They were so human on

the phone,” says Phelan, adding later that several “very good people” helped him in Iran who could not be named.

While he praises Ireland's approach, in the book he is less enamoured with some elements of the French style – he did not get a mobile phone number from them, for example. “The French were great with the logistics, but the Irish were brilliant for negotiating and getting things sorted out quickly,” he says.

In chapters about his life in prison, Phelan paints a picture of a community dealing with incarceration as best it can. Unlike in Irish institutions, the inmates had access to a kitchen, and food was one way for Phelan to find normality and bond with his fellow prisoners. Conditions were extremely difficult, particularly in the winter. The lights were on in the cells 24 hours a day.

At one point he was told his sentence was being increased from three and a half years to six and a half years because he would not co-operate. “I’m not going to make that,” he remembers thinking.

“In a prison in the West, normally you know roughly when you’re going to get out. There, you have not a clue, because they don’t respect their own law.”

Yet Phelan took a strategic but undoubtedly risky approach to spurring his release. Believing that Iran would not want him to be injured or die in custody, he stopped taking his medications, which included blood pressure tablets and antidepressants.

“I immediately decided: I have to make myself more ill. In solitary confinement I spit the tablets down the toilet and didn’t take them when I was in prison. I knew I was running a terrible risk,” says Phelan, who is also HIV positive.

He thought a heart attack might get his story into the press. At one point he even planned to attempt to take his own life. He also went on hunger strike, but ended it over concerns for the health of his father, who was 97 at the time.

Did it feel brave to do this? “No, it didn’t. I mean, it felt for me so obvious. A sick hostage is not going to be good for

their image. The Iranians are so worried about their image,” Phelan says.

Another part of his approach was encouraging his family to make it public that he is gay, with a French husband, Roland Bonello. “The idea of them persecuting women, and now they’ve locked up a gay Irish man in prison? They would hate that,” he says of Iran's concern about its international image.

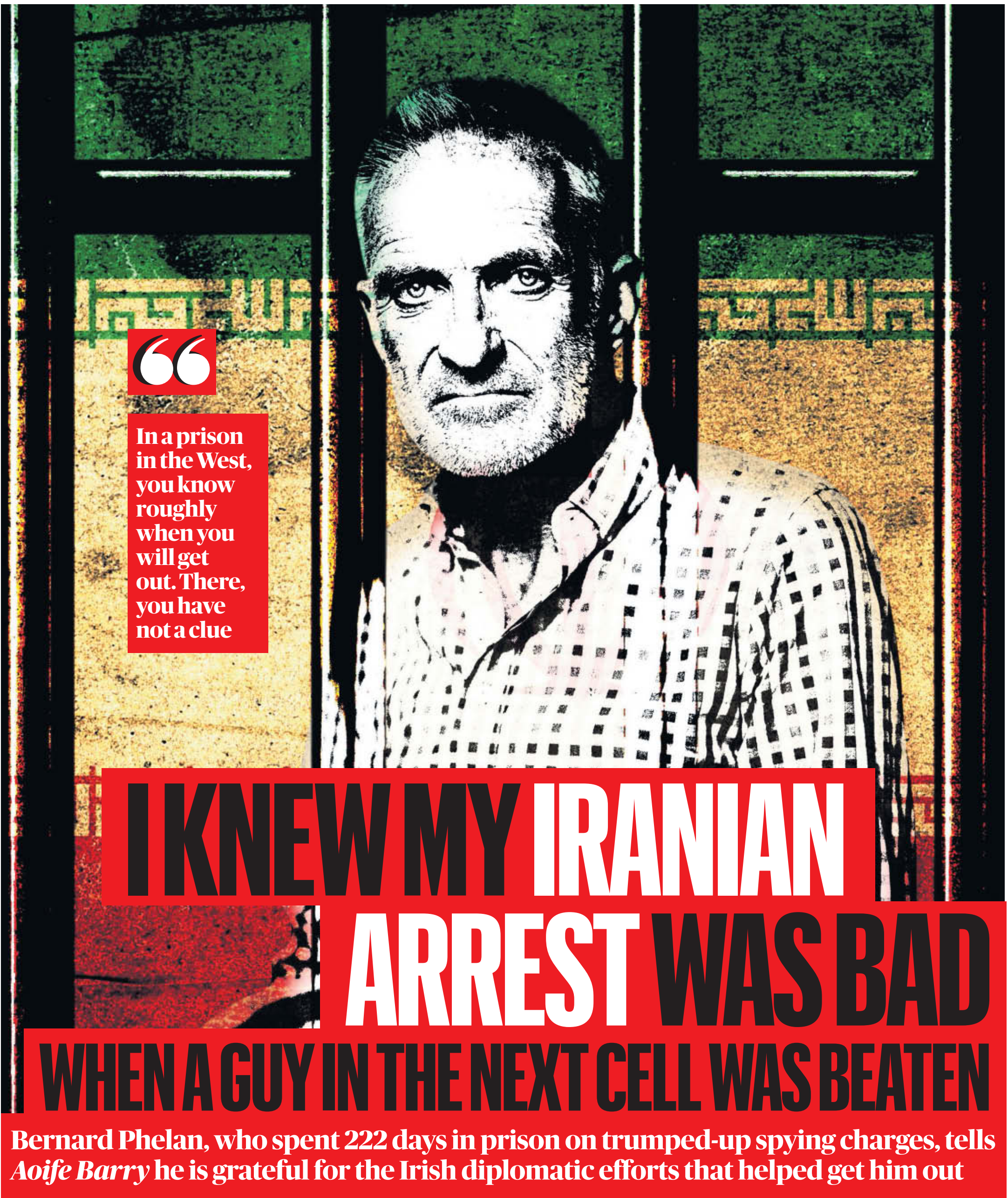
Among those working tirelessly to keep Phelan's story in the media was his sister Caroline Massé-Phelan. Phelan learnt the extent of the support for him only after his release, such as the vigil held in March last year and a subsequent concert in his honour at the Centre Culturel Irlandais in Paris.

President Higgins wrote a letter to Phelan's father, Vincent, which is reproduced in the book. Regarding the controversy over Higgins writing a letter to Masoud Pezeshkian on the latter's appointment as president of Iran, Phelan says: “I think he was dead right to do it.”

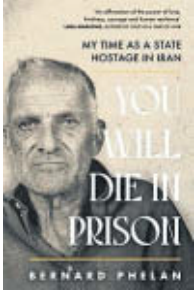
He adds that Ireland is good at “putting down statements”, pointing out: “The fact that the Irish ambassador to Iran was an Irish woman, that’s a statement, and Ireland is good at that.”

Now 65, Phelan suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder since his imprisonment. He visibly shudders when he recounts being at the cinema and seeing a trailer that included the distinctive striped Iranian prison uniform. He doesn't listen to much radio news any more, particularly given the current conflicts in the Middle East, and skips over those sections of the newspaper. Violent scenes “make me shiver down my back”, he says.

Physically he is dealing with several issues, including a stress fracture in his knee, the removal of a benign tumour from his leg, and regaining weight. “Globally, I’m OK. I mean, I am not complaining,” he says. “The psychological side is pretty fragile. There’s up and down days. I’ve got a very good psychiatrist.” His husband has said that when Phe-



Bernard Phelan, who spent 222 days in prison on trumped-up spying charges, tells Aoife Barry he is grateful for the Irish diplomatic efforts that helped get him out



Bernard Phelan's imprisonment was indicative of an Iran on the edge, below left, and inspired his new book – along with a determination to enjoy his life of freedom more

lan was taken hostage, his family and loved ones were taken hostage too. “Don’t forget the families, what they’re living through,” Phelan says. He didn’t cry in jail often. “But some of the times I’d cry were birthdays and Christmas. That was rough.”

He wanted to be a nuisance in the prison so the authorities would want him off their back. Now, on the outside, he wants to be a nuisance when it comes to certain issues. This includes pressing for a reaction team to be established to provide practical support for released EU hostages: “There’s nothing organised for us. And this is a big, big problem.” He says a bag containing information, clothes and a smartphone should be given to hostages on their return.

He is also working with a lawyer and Brière to take a court case against the Iranian state over their treatment. He remains seriously concerned about a former cellmate named Taj and is trying to raise his case with authorities.

Though he lives under the shadow of the impact of his imprisonment, Phelan says he wants to enjoy life. “If I have a little money, I’ll spend more to be a bit more comfortable. Or do things I wanted to do that I can financially afford, but not put things off.”

But he gets angry when people take their democratic freedom for granted. “We’re lucky, when people are being executed in Iran for freedom.”

As part of his own return to freedom, he was able to get back the property taken from him when he was in prison. His credit cards, computer, iPad, passports and phone were all returned. When he looked at his phone, he discovered that the photos he took in Iran in October 2022 were still on it.

You Will Die in Prison: My Time as a State Hostage in Iran (Eriu €14.99/£14.99) by Bernard Phelan is available to purchase from The Times Bookshop; timesbookshop.co.uk/you-will-die-in-prison-9781804189061/

HOSSEIN BERIS/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

