

## Key Takeaways

### ***Panel 2: When Journalists are Held Hostage: What We Know, What We Share***

**Panelists:** Jason Rezaian, *The Washington Post*

Paul Beckett, *The Atlantic*

**Moderator:** Jon B. Alterman, CSIS

#### **Evan Gershkovich's Case**

- The first 24 hours following Evan Gershkovich's disappearance were critical.
  - *The Wall Street Journal* immediately worked with the U.S. government to make clear that Gershkovich had no U.S. government role whatsoever.
  - Silence would have allowed Russia's "spy" narrative to take hold.
- Colleagues at the *Journal* emphasized being loud and coordinated about his wrongful detention early on.
- Then, the *Journal* divided efforts three parallel channels:
  - Reporters focused on coverage and storytelling.
  - Editors and staff managed advocacy and awareness.
  - Lawyers (internal and external) coordinated working with the U.S. government.
- Friction arose between the urgency of the newsroom and the pacing of the U.S. government bureaucracy. The WSJ often found itself moving faster than official channels.
- The case was largely handled at senior levels of the National Security Council.
  - The Office of the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs (SPEHA) principally supported Gershkovich's family and provided updates.
  - A key lesson from this case is that hostages are released when their continued detention becomes a political liability, both for the U.S. and detaining government, so maintaining public pressure and media attention are important.

#### **Coalition Building**

- A strong network of journalists, lawyers, and NGOs has emerged over the past decade to bring attention to wrongful detention cases.
  - Institutions like the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Reporters Without Borders (RSF), the Foley Foundation, and the National Press Club (NPC) quickly provided critical advocacy support in this case.
  - Lessons learned from earlier detentions, such as Jason Rezaian's imprisonment in Iran, have significantly improved the speed and sophistication of advocacy efforts in wrongful detention cases.

### **Risk Calculations for Journalists**

- News organizations are reassessing their risk tolerance for deploying correspondents in high-risk states. They must weigh the value of on-the-ground reporting versus the potential for detention.
- Foreign news coverage from countries like Iran has grown limited, and many outlets choose to rely heavily on state media feeds or wire services. That raises concerns about accuracy.

### **Disciplined and Ethical Reporting**

- Managing information during sensitive moments requires restraint and top-level editorial oversight.
- Accuracy should take precedence over speed. Premature or speculative reporting could endanger lives or derail negotiations.
- The Gershkovich release coverage illustrated how even credible sources (e.g., Turkish intelligence) can produce confusion and misreporting during real-time developments.

### **The Role of Social Media**

- Social media both amplifies advocacy and can complicate situations.
- Governments holding Americans can weaponize even seemingly innocuous posts about prisoners, so messaging needs to be carefully weighed.
- Expanding public engagement across diverse outlets, including nontraditional platforms, can broaden awareness and emphasize that wrongful detention is not a partisan issue but a growing geopolitical challenge that affects all American citizens.