

# HFPA in Conversation

Podcast | Episode LAPFW 4

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Silvia: HELLO, THIS IS A SPECIAL SERIES IN THE HOLLYWOOD FOREIGN PRESS ASSOCIATION “IN CONVERSATION” PODCAST, IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE LOS ANGELES FREEDOM EVENTS THIS MONTH, THAT THE HFPA AND THE LOS ANGELES TIMES ARE PRESENTING. I’M SILVIA BIZIO, FILM CORRESPONDENT OF THE ITALIAN DAILY NEWSPAPER LA PUBBLICA AND A MEMBER OF THE HOLLYWOOD FOREIGN PRESS ASSOCIATION. AND TODAY WE ARE TALKING WITH IRANIAN AMERICAN JOURNALIST JASON REZAIAN. JASON IS A GLOBAL OPINIONS WRITER FOR THE WASHINGTON POST AND AUTHOR OF THE BOOK “PRISONER.” HE SERVED AS THE POST CORRESPONDENT IN TEHRAN FROM 2012 TO 2016. HE WAS CONVICTED OF ESPIONAGE IN A CLOSED-DOOR TRIAL IN IRAN IN 2015 AND SPENT A YEAR AND A HALF IN CUSTODY AT EVIN PRISON, A DETENTION CENTER IN TEHRAN, KNOWN FOR HOUSING POLITICAL PRISONERS AND INTELLECTUALS. HIS BOOK “PRISONER, MY 440 DAYS IN AN IRANIAN PRISON,” DESCRIBES HIS DAYS HE SPENT IN CAPTIVITY. REZAIAN WAS THE 2016 RECIPIENT OF THE MCGILL MEDAL FOR JOURNALISTIC COURAGE FOR THE GRADY COLLEGE OF JOURNALISM AND MASS COMMUNICATIONS. JASON, THANK YOU FOR TALKING TO US TODAY, AND IT’S AN HONOR TO BE SPEAKING WITH YOU.

Thank you, Silvia, thanks for taking the time to speak with me.

Silvia: MY FIRST QUESTION REALLY IS TO INTRODUCE AUDIENCES AND LISTENERS TO THE COMMITTEE TO PROTECT JOURNALISTS, WHICH IS THE ASSOCIATION THAT WE ARE DOING THIS IN CONJUNCTION WITH. AND SO, I WANTED TO ASK YOU, FIRST OF ALL YOUR CONNECTION WITH CPJ.

Well, CPJ was among the many organizations that lined up in support of me while I was in prison. And I had heard of the work that they did in the past but never had the opportunity or the need to be highly involved. And as I unpacked the story of my arrest and my detention, I saw what an important component CPJ and other members of the Press Freedom Community were in raising awareness around my case. I am one hundred percent convinced that without that sort of awareness raising and those campaigns that really draw light to the fact that there are journalists in trouble, whether they are being targeted, harassed, imprisoned, murdered, without those organizations like CPJ, people don’t know those stories and the situation of free expression and Press freedom will only deteriorate. So, I’ve become a vocal friend and ally of the organization and like to think of myself as part of the extended family.



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**Silvia: SO, LET'S TALK ABOUT YOUR HISTORY AND IT BROUGHT IN FACT THE RELATIONSHIP WITH CPJ. YOU WERE BORN IN AMERICA AND THEN AT SOME POINT FROM AN IRANIAN FATHER AND THEN AT SOME POINT DECIDED TO, WHEN YOU WERE WORKING ALREADY FOR THE WASHINGTON POST, TO MOVE TO TEHRAN AND BECOME THE TEHRAN CHIEF THERE. TELL US WHAT BROUGHT TO THAT?**

Well actually I wasn't working at the Post when I moved there, I was freelancing for the Post. I had traveled to Iran as a young man who was very excited about visiting other parts of the world. My mother is American, from Chicago, her ancestors were Slovenian and Italian actually. And I had the great opportunity to visit both of those countries, I visited many other countries in Europe and Central America, Southeast Asia, but Iran was not a place that I could access till I was a bit older. And when I finally got there, when I was 25 years old, I realized that my desire to get into journalism and to write about different cultures would really be well served if I were able to work in Iran. And so, I tried to figure out how I was going to go about doing that. It's not a country that allows a lot of foreign journalists in, those who do come have to be vetted and receive working permits from the Government. And so, in 2003 I started seeking those permissions and I was able to get one with my relationship with The San Francisco Chronicle. And I wrote for them from time to time for several years. I also worked in my family's Persian rug business which is a very stereotypical thing for an Iranian American. But one that helped me afford the life of a freelancer. So I would spend several months each year in Iran and the rest of the time back in San Francisco area working in the family business until 2009, when I decided you know what, I am going to go for it, I am trying to become a foreign correspondent full time. And that's what I did. So, I moved there right in the Spring of 2009, right at the height of the Presidential campaign that ultimately led to a contested election and green movement and all the street protests that followed. And following those protests, for the next five years, I never had to look for work, people always sought me out,

**Silvia: AND WHAT WERE THE BIGGEST SURPRISES WHEN YOU GOT THERE IN TERMS OF WHAT KIND OF FREEDOM THAT YOU HAD TO WRITE AND REPORT WHAT YOU WERE SEEING?**

So Iran is a very complex society in a lot of different ways. And I think that the way we reported in the West is really unfortunate sometimes, because although it's an authoritarian society and although expression is greatly limited, people find ways to not only express themselves, but to live the kinds of lives that they want to live, maybe not 100 percent, but to a great degree. So, I saw a country of people that were proud, educated, ambitious, curious, but also resistant to the forces within the Iranian regime that helped to oppress them and really wanted to engage with the rest of the world. So, what it was, I mean if I were to put it in one sentence, was very different than what we in the West are told it is like. And I think if you have ever been there or have met people who have visited Iran, everybody comes home with that same perception, wow, this place is different, it's fascinating and it's not at all what I expected.

**Silvia: BUT IN THOSE YEARS YOU NEVER HAD THEREFORE ANY SUSPICION OF WHAT WAS TO COME, UNTIL TOWARDS THE END RIGHT?**

Not really. I mean I and other journalists always had to deal with having our working credentials taken from us or revoked temporarily, and that's a strong-arm practice of authoritarian regimes who don't want to be seen as openly censoring foreign media. This is a much more subtle and passive aggressive way of censoring people and it works. But no, I was never threatened in the way that I worried about my safety or my liberty.



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Silvia: **AND IN FACT, FROM WHAT I UNDERSTAND, WHEN PRESIDENT ROUHANI CAME TO POWER IN 2013, ONE OF HIS PLEDGES WAS TO IN FACT ROLL BACK ON THE OPPRESSIVE POLICIES OF THE MEDIA.**

Completely. And it's now six years and a few days since he was inaugurated, and people are still waiting. (*laughter*)

Silvia: **SO NOT MANY CHANGES.**

It's actually gotten worse in some ways, especially for local media. And I think even for foreign media that is based there, what they have done is placate international media, is allow more journalists to come in for short periods of time and made it more restrictive for the people who are working there on a permanent basis. And so, this is a function of our industry. When major news television organizations send a correspondent with a big team, it's going to get a lot more attention than the person who is writing or reporting from there on a daily basis. So, everybody's happy, when I saw everybody, I mean the Iranian regime and international media outlets. But the people of Iran don't get a fair shake in how they are covered, and the audience readerships in the West are deprived of real access into understanding what that society is all about.

Silvia: **AND YET IN YOUR REPORTING IN THOSE YEARS, WERE YOU ABLE TO REVEAL TO YOUR READERS WHAT YOU WERE OBSERVING IN FULL?**

I hope so. And I think the recipe that I came up with and I think it's one that is translatable into any society and into covering any society that is being represented by forces or Governments that don't necessarily represent the full face and complexity of those societies, I focused on the stories of actual Iranians and how the policies of their Government, and specifically also the policies of the US Government towards Iran, were affecting their lives. So, I wrote about the effect that sanctions had on communities, I wrote about women's rights or lack of rights in Iran and their quest to improve their lives, I wrote about ethnic minorities. But I also wrote about sports and food and initiatives to try to be more like the rest of the world. And yeah, I think if you were to take my many hundreds of reports from Iran as a whole, you would see a much more complex and layered and representation of it, than you would if you just read the wires or watch cable news.

Silvia: **IT'S INTERESTING, I DID LISTEN TO THE PART WHEN YOU WERE TALKING ABOUT, HOW WRITING ABOUT FOOD SEEMS TO BE SORT OF A UNIVERSAL ATTRACTION AND IN FACT YOU MET ANTHONY BOURDAIN, WHO CAME TO INTERVIEW YOU AND YOUR WIFE. FOOD IS A CULTURAL VENUE MAYBE?**

Yeah, look, I think, since his death, I've written several times about what I think is his most enduring legacy, is as a foreign correspondent. And through food and through the relationship that people and societies have with their food, he was really able to open our eyes to different places and it's a very disarming way of introducing societies that we think are very different than our own, and he did that very successfully. And so for us, for my wife and I, when we sat down with Tony, I think it felt like really the culmination of a lot of years of hard work, because we were now sitting down with the person who was best known in the world for doing exactly what it was that we wanted to do.



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**Silvia: JUST NOT THAT MUCH LONGER LATER, YOU WERE ARRESTED, YOU STARTED BEING SUSPICIOUS ABOUT THE STRANGE EMAILS, BUT THEN STILL, WHEN YOU AND YOUR WIFE WERE ARRESTED, IT WAS LIKE A SHOCK. CAN YOU TELL US, THEN OF COURSE YOU WERE SEPARATED FROM YOUR WIFE AND IN SOLITARY DETENTION AND WITH HARDSHIP FOR A VERY LONG TIME? WHAT WAS IT LIKE FOR YOU WHEN YOU WERE ARRESTED? DID YOU FEEL THAT AS A JOURNALIST, WAS IT FOR THAT, THAT FREEDOM TAKEN AWAY, OF REPORTING?**

I was very confused when we were first arrested. As you mentioned, there were some emails and other indications that we were being tailed and watched, but I never thought that it would culminate in us being arrested in our home in the real violent way that we were, blindfolded and handcuffed and then thrown into solitary confinement. And so right off the bat, I thought that this was a mistake and one that would be corrected quickly. It took some time for it to set in that I was part of this longer history of Islamic Republic of Iran hostage taking. We talk about the hostage crisis and the taking of the US Embassy in 1979 and that in a lot of ways is I think what has defined for a lot of Americans especially, Iran in our public consciousness. And the Islamic Republic has not done anything to change that perception, if anything, they have doubled down and done it over and over and over again, to the extent that there are people that are being arrested even right now for similar purposes. I just thought that at that moment of such important outreach for their regime of engagement with the world powers, including the United States, that it wasn't beneficial to anybody to have new Americans put in prison. What I did not fully comprehend, and I don't think anybody did, was that there were forces within the regime that didn't want to see those negotiations come to a positive conclusion. And the perception at the time was, the supreme leader of Iran, the ultimate decider of all matters of state policy, had agreed to these negotiations, understanding that it would be in the country's best interests to come to agreement about its nuclear activities with foreign powers. But as it turns out, Iran is a country with politics just like any other country, and there are competing factions and the ones who took us believe that the nuclear negotiations should be destroyed before they were able to come to a positive outcome. And they thought that by taking me hostage and another activity that they were doing, they would succeed in that. Ultimately, they were wrong.

**Silvia: AND IN FACT, AFTER A FEW MONTHS OF CAPTIVITY, YOU WENT THROUGH A TRIAL, I THINK SOMEBODY DESCRIBED IT AS A MOCK TRIAL. TELL US, WHAT WAS THE TRIAL LIKE?**

You know, I wouldn't call it a mock trial because generally in a mock trial, you go in and charges are read against you and you have a moment or two to say whether you are guilty or not and then the judge hands down a very strict verdict. In my trial, it was four different sessions, spread out over a three-month period. Each one of those sessions was closely aligned in time with major moments on the nuclear negotiation calendar. And I was put through grueling, hours long questioning, in front of a judge without the benefit of a lawyer advising me. I did have a lawyer, but she was not allowed to talk to me, and also in front of state media cameras. So, I understood that what was going on was that they were filming this with the intent ultimately of using it as propaganda, they were waiting for me to break down and say I was guilty of a crime. And I never did that. But I also understood that there were larger pieces of the puzzle that I could see in the room. And my quest to prove myself innocent was only part of the equation, because whether or not I did that effectively this court, they had decided that I was guilty before I was ever arrested. I think it's difficult for people living in the West sometimes to understand that, but their detention of me was completely premeditated. And ultimately, in the end, I understood that it was going to be public awareness and the court of public opinion, that would be the one



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that either sent me free or forget about me and make it so I was destined to spend much longer in prison.

Silvia: **AND IS THAT IN FACT WHAT HAPPENED, THE PUBLIC OPINION, THE FIGHT THAT YOUR MOTHER, YOUR WIFE, YOUR BROTHER, THE WASHINGTON POST CARRIED ON?** I believe so. I mean I think the Post was integral, my family was incredibly integral in this fight. But then also, you had the rest of the media and remember Silvia, I had spent years freelancing so I had relationships with all sorts of different media organizations, they knew exactly who I was. The Press Freedom Community, led by CPJ, was so important in getting that message out there and as that trickles out, other people come to your aid. So, Muhammad Ali made a statement asking for my release. Edward Snowden, someone who has many millions of followers on Twitter, tweeted that in a closed-door trial, there is no justice, you have to free this man because he hasn't done anything wrong. Noam Chomsky and dozens of other leading American scholars wrote a letter to the Iranian regime demanding my release. And I think all of that, the culmination of all of that, forced the US Government's hand to take my imprisonment very, very seriously. So it's, I don't begrudge anybody anything, the regime in Iran did this to me, it wasn't the US Administration's time at the fault that I was arrested, but they need some encouragement sometimes to get behind individual cases and I definitely believe to my core that it was because of all of these public efforts that ultimately they could no longer, I don't say they were ever ignoring my fate, but they had to take it very seriously.

Silvia: **AND YOU OF COURSE, YOUR STORY THEN EVENTUALLY, YOU WERE FREED AND YOU ARE HERE IN AMERICA NOW, BUT HOW MANY OTHERS, JOURNALISTS LIKE YOU, FACE A SIMILAR FATE AND PERHAPS THEY WERE NOT RELEASED YET?**

Well certainly I think there's the question of other journalists, Western journalists, as far as I know, there are none being held in Iran now, but there are some who haven't been allowed to leave the country, who are not allowed to work, there are many domestic Iranian journalists who are imprisoned, Iran has become known as one of the leading jailers of journalists in the world. There are also many other foreign nationals, especially dual nationals like myself, who are currently being held. The estimate is that 30 of them have been arrested since 2015, some of them released, most of them still in captivity. And I'll tell you Silvia, I spent a lot of my time writing about those journalists in jail in Iran and those foreign nationals in jail in Iran because I hope you will forgive me, but it's something that I take very personally.

Silvia: **OBVIOUSLY IN FREEDOM, IN READING YOUR BOOK, I THINK ABOUT THE BASIC FREEDOM, THERE IS A CHAPTER IN WHICH YOU DESCRIBE A (INAUDIBLE – 23:57) THAT WAS GIVEN TO YOU AS YOU WERE ENTERING THE TRIAL BY THREE YOUNG GUYS, WHO YOU LATER FOUND OUT WERE MUSICIANS WHO WERE THERE AND WERE ACTUALLY SPENDING THREE YEARS IN PRISON FOR GIVING OUT UNDERGROUND MUSIC?**

For giving out underground music which essentially is a thought to undermine the authority's power. Fortunately, I heard recently that those three men have been released and they went back to their lives. But it was one of those moments, very rare moments of solidarity. I was kept in extreme isolation the entire time that I was there, and it was only during those moments of being taken to court or the few times that I was taken for medical treatment that I counted anybody that wasn't part of the team that was repressed me, that was holding me. And so, when I could see that oh my gosh, there are other people and people who know who I am, and not everybody is against me, well that's a pretty good feeling.



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**Silvia: YEAH, I CAN IMAGINE. WHAT IS YOUR RELATIONSHIP NOW WITH IRAN? YOU SAID WHO KNOWS IF YOU WILL GO BACK OR IF YOU EVER CAN? HOW DO YOU NOW, AS A JOURNALIST AND AS AN IRANIAN-AMERICAN AND WHAT YOU WENT THROUGH, HOW DO YOU SEE THE COUNTRY?**

Look, I love Iran, I love the people, the culture, the history of that place, I love the experiences that I had there, leading up to my arrest. My wife and I married there and she's from there, we both have a lot of family and history there. I am an optimistic person and I believe firmly that I will go back, I know I will. But in the current circumstances, it's not possible. So, I was always somebody who said if you can't feel and touch this place, you probably shouldn't be reporting on it. Now I have been away from there for several years and if you look at the people who write about Iran and report on it, very few of them have been there any more recently than I have. So, I will continue to do this as long as I think that my views and my observations are relevant and helpful. But I am very aware of the fact that it's difficult to talk about a place that you aren't physically present in.

**Silvia: WHAT IS IT DO YOU THINK, AS A POLITICAL JOURNALIST, THE SITUATION OF THE FREEDOM OF THE PRESS, JUST IN GENERAL? I MEAN WE'RE LOOKING AFTER, UNDER THE CURRENT ADMINISTRATION HERE IN AMERICA ALSO, WE ARE LOOKING AT SOME RISKS, SO IT'S IN DIFFERENT PLACES OF THE WORLD.**

Well I think that the United States and I don't want to be, especially for this audience, belligerently nationalistic in this regard, but I think it's fair to say that (INAUDIBLE – 27:43), the people of the world have looked to the US as the guiding light when it comes to free expression. And specifically, the President of the United States has always had an important role in holding up this ideal, that people should be allowed to express themselves, whether we are talking about the situation towards the end of the Soviet Union or Apartheid South Africa, or any other number of flashpoint places in the world over the last 100 years, you could reliably count on the American leader, President, to stand up and say hey, let the people say their grievances and express themselves how they want. Whether or not we lived up to supporting that is a different question, but rhetorically and symbolically, it was important to have the so-called leader of the free world standing up for your right to express yourself. We don't have that now.

**Silvia: WHAT ABOUT IN THE REST OF THE WORLD, HOW DO YOU SEE THE FREEDOM OF THE PRESS?**

So I think that it's gotten markedly worse over the last few years and I don't think that President Trump created this situation but I think he's a symptom of it. We have similar problems in other countries that have been traditionally reliable democracies, look at India. Prime Minister Modi has been very tough on all groups that are in opposition to him, they have troll armies on the social media that go after people who are critical of his policies, and we have created an environment where, it's difficult not only to know the truth, but specifically targeting journalists. So, in India, the largest democracy in the world, a country that has more newspaper readers than the United States has citizens, we have seen over a dozen journalists murdered over the last two years for the jobs that they do. That's unacceptable. Right around the corner from where you're from in Malta, Malta obviously has lots and lots of issues of its own around corruption, but an investigative journalist was murdered there in front of her own home just two years ago, the same thing in Slovakia. So, we are having a moment where Press freedom is not being honored, but it's also an ideal that I think has come under greater threat than it ever has. And I hope that the US becomes a leader on this subject again because without our leadership and the leadership of Western democracies, this notion of free expression could just disappear.



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Silvia: **CAN YOU TELL US WHAT IS YOUR LIFE LIKE NOW? YOU LIVE IN WASHINGTON WITH YOUR WIFE, HOW IS YOUR LIFE NOW AFTER THIS ORDEAL AND HOW ARE YOU SETTLING BACK IN AMERICA?**

Well thanks for asking. I think to be honest, to be very honest, it's not the life that we chose right? We had hoped to live a life between the US and Iran for years to come and that's not available to us anymore. So, by definition it's a little bit limited. But despite those limitations, I think we've done a really good job of creating a new situation for ourselves that works really well. We live in the Capitol of Washington DC; we have a home that we hope we can live in for many years and fill with memories and objects that remind us of our best days. And you know, it's a challenge because as a foreign correspondent, you have a very clear mandate of what you are doing, you are covering the news from a specific place or region. Now it's a little bit less clear and I end up writing as I said, a lot about Iran and people who are victimized by the Iranian regime and US/Iran policy, but I also write a lot about Press freedom. And I think ultimately, it's been very good for me personally, to be able to take this difficult thing that happened to my wife and me and try and create some positive outcomes from it. And if I can help people in that quest, then that's probably the most positive thing I can do.

Silvia: **AND AS WE ARE COMING TO AN END, I WANTED TO ASK YOU HOW ACTIVE YOU AND YOUR WIFE ARE IN THAT? DO YOU GO OUT AND TALK TO STUDENTS? HOW IMPORTANT IS IT TO GET THIS INFORMATION OUT AND WHAT IS THE BEST WAY?**

Well it's incredibly important. So, we both go out whenever we can, to talk about both Press freedom issues, but also Iranian issues. I also, in addition to writing for the Post, I contribute to CNN, who asked me to come on and talk about these issues regularly. I go around the county to talk about different experiences that I've had, but also trends in Press freedom. My wife does the same and another way she also teaches cooking classes of Iran food here in Washington DC, because we just find that it's a great way to share our culture with people who wouldn't know it otherwise, so we are quite active and I think that for both of us, at a time where we were looking for direction, has given us great meaning in our lives.

Silvia: **YOUR WIFE, WHO YOU TALK SO MUCH ABOUT IN THE BOOK, I SHOULD ACTUALLY FINISH WITH HER BECAUSE SHE SEEMS TO BE LIKE SUCH A GUIDING LIGHT ALSO IN YOUR LIFE AND A JOURNALIST HERSELF AND STRONG RIGHT?**

She's incredibly strong and I think she is a great role model but also a symbol of her generation of women of Iran, women who despite limitations put on them by, not only by their Government, but also by history and their social upbringing, have really pushed the envelope and become educated, so much so that the average Iranian woman is much more educated than the average Iranian man. And she's incredibly determined, if she puts her mind to something, she will get it done. And for me, while I was in prison, not only was she my biggest supporter, she was also sort of a compass for me on how to manage the situation and to stand up for myself. And now, now that we are free, we are able to really able to have a relationship again where we can support each other in our endeavors, and she is the best and I can't imagine if she wasn't in my life.



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Silvia: **ONE LAST THING I WANTED TO ASK YOU, IT'S ABOUT THE LEGAL ISSUES. HOW IMPORTANT IS IT, WE SAW IT IN YOUR TRIAL, BUT HOW IMPORTANT IS IT TO TAKE A LEGAL STAND AGAINST THE SUPPRESSION OF THE FREEDOM OF THE PRESS? IF I AM NOT MISTAKEN, YOU ARE SUING THE IRANIAN GOVERNMENT, BUT HOW, IN GENERAL, CAN THE LAW HELP?**

I think we have to hold people and in this case Governments, accountable, when they trample upon your rights. So, for me, Iran had put me on trial under false accusations in a very ridiculous quasi-judicial manner. And until I sued Iran, that was the only official state version of events. And I had an opportunity here in the United States to take a counteraction, to take action in a US court, and tell my version of events, which is exactly what happened to me. And I think when you have those judicial levers available to you, it's a responsibility to take them, otherwise the likelihood of what happened to us or what is happening to other people, becomes much higher of being repeated.

Silvia: **JASON, THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR TALKING TO US. I ENCOURAGE EVERYBODY TO READ YOUR BOOK "PRISONER: MY 544 DAYS IN AN IRANIAN PRISON." AND I'M LOOKING FORWARD TO KEEP READING YOUR ARTICLES.**

Thank you so much Silvia.

Silvia: **YOU CAN GIVE US LESSONS ONE DAY MAYBE.**

Yes, we would love that.

Silvia: **THANK YOU.**

Take care.



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