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**FAMILIES AND FRIENDS OF DETAINED US HIKERS
LAUNCH WEBSITE; PARENTS URGE IRAN TO GRANT
CONSULAR ACCESS**

www.freethehikers.org carries news updates and background about the three young Americans, as well information about efforts to secure their release

Travelers accidentally strayed across an unmarked border while hiking in Iraqi Kurdistan

The families and friends of Shane Bauer, Sarah Shourd and Josh Fattal, the three young American hikers detained in Iran on July 31, today launched www.freethehikers.org, a web resource to inform the world about their detention.

The families also appealed to Iranian authorities to grant consular access to their children, who were detained when they accidentally strayed into Iran across an unmarked border during a five-day hiking trip in Iraqi Kurdistan.

“We still know nothing about how our children are and where they are being held. We respectfully urge the Iranian authorities to grant them their right to consular access so we at least can know they are safe and well,” the families said in statement. “If our children had known the border was there, they wouldn’t have crossed it. We continue to hope and believe that the Iranian authorities will realize that our children entered their country by accident and will return them to us.”

Freethehikers.org provides up-to-date news about the hikers’ detention, as well as background materials about the three Americans and their case. The site links to a Facebook group

formed for the hikers soon after they were detained. Almost 1,400 friends, relatives and well-wishers have already joined the Facebook group.

Shane Bauer, Josh Fattal and Sarah Shourd were detained while hiking in the mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan near the Ahmed Awa waterfall, a popular local tourist spot. The three, all graduates of the University of California at Berkeley and experienced world travelers, were in a peaceful region of northern Iraq that is increasingly popular with Western tourists for its natural beauty, culture and history.

While the Iranian government has confirmed it is holding the three hikers, it has not charged them with a crime and has not allowed them to contact their families. Swiss diplomats, who represent U.S. interests in Iran, have been seeking consular access.

BACKGROUND ON THE DETAINED HIKERS

Shane Bauer, 27, has been living in Damascus, Syria with Sarah Shourd since late 2008 and is a student of Arabic, which he speaks fluently. He is a freelance journalist whose writing and award-winning photographs have been published in the US, UK, Middle East, and Canada. Shane, who has two younger sisters, grew up in Onamia, Minnesota and graduated from UC Berkeley with a degree in Peace and Conflict Studies in 2007.

Shane has reported from Syria, Iraq, Darfur in Sudan, Yemen and Ethiopia but has never reported from Iran, nor expressed any interest in doing so. He had hoped to offer photographs and story on the aftermath of recent elections in Kurdistan to the online news network New America Media, but was not on a formal news assignment.

Josh Fattal, 27, is an environmentalist who worked for three years at the Aprovecho Research Center in Cottage Grove, Oregon, which teaches sustainable living skills. From January to June 2009, Josh was a Teaching Fellow with the International Honors Program (IHP) “Health and Community” study abroad program in Switzerland, India, China, and South Africa.

Josh and his elder brother grew up in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania. He spent his junior college year on an IHP study abroad program in the UK, India, the Philippines, New Zealand, and Mexico and graduated from UC Berkeley in 2004 with a degree in Environmental Economics and Policy from the College of Natural Resources. Josh was visiting Sarah and Shane in Damascus when they went on their trip.

Sarah Shourd, 31, has been living with Shane in Damascus, where she teaches English and is learning Arabic. She previously taught as part of the Iraqi Student Project, a program which gives Iraqi students living in Damascus the skills to continue their education in US schools. She was on a break from her teaching responsibilities for a week, and she and Shane decided to take a hiking trip.

Sarah has written articles on travel and social issues reflecting her time in Syria, Ethiopia, Yemen and Mexico. Sarah, who has an older brother and sister, was born in Chicago, Illinois, grew up in Los Angeles, California and recently moved to the San Francisco Bay Area.

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