

Meet three men whose connected lives contextualize the American-Iranian relationship through the primal grit of wrestling and the ancient quest to live free.

**Reza Abedi**, a Gold Medal Wrestler and National Wrestling Hall of Fame Coach, whose shocking defection in 1982 made international news and propelled him to face three life-or-death journeys to finally find freedom.



Reza (left) w/broken nose in a Iranian Championship match

**Reza's childhood friend Ardeshir** (son of a high ranking officer in the Revolutionary Guard) also escaped and, poised to represent America in the 1996 Olympics was falsely imprisoned by LAPD; however, his successful multimillion dollar lawsuit launched him to become the President of the Nicaraguan Wrestling Federation.



Ardeshir ( right). President Noriega in the center.

**The third young man in this trilogy is Reza's younger brother Houshang.** Arrested at age 15 for political activity, Houshang survived two years in an Iranian Prison only to be recaptured and sent to a Pakistan Prison for 6 months before his release to a Pakistan Refugee Camp. Houshang describes the Refugee camp as "hell on earth" and the "worst place I've ever been."



Pakistan Refugee Camp. BBC News.

Their incredible trilogy does more than propel us through the 1979 Revolution and blast stereotypes--it connects us.

Their lives pierce the darkness surrounding the travel ban.

Their inspiring stories redefine the "immigration" crisis.

Their steadfast desire for freedom is as ancient as the sport of wrestling itself.

Beyond the images of the blindfolded American hostages and the bearded cleric Ayatollah Khomeini there are millions of men, women and children who desire to live with freedom and dignity.



Getty Images

I knew this story had to be told.

At a Little League game in 2004, I sat next to Reza. I knew Reza to be a World Champion Wrestler and had heard rumors that he was an assassin for Shah.



In 1982, Four wrestlers in this photo make International news by defecting at the Military World Championship

Through our conversations, Reza shared not only the heroic journey of his life, but also that of his brother Houshang and best friend, Ardeshir.

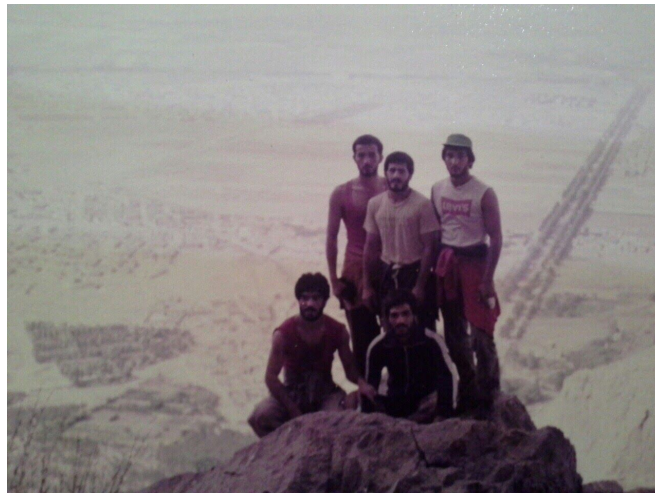
Men dream. More than the cliché of the American dream, it is the dream that drives millions to reach for the freedom to live their best life. Reza's dream is simple—to attend a university and become a teacher. When Ayatollah Khomeini comes to power in 1979, that dream dies. On the last night of the Military World Wrestling Championships in Venezuela 1982, Reza grips his gold medal and makes a choice.



The night Reza escaped, he had only this gold medal and the clothes on his back.

More than just choosing to risk his own life by defecting, he risks the revenge killing of his 15 year old brother, Houshang, locked in an Iranian prison. He must also trust his best friend Ardeshir, whose father is a high ranking officer of the Elite Revolutionary Guard, will not betray his trust.

The value of Reza's story redefines, perhaps the most critically misunderstood contemporary Revolution, the 1979 Iranian Revolution.



Reza (bottom left) training with his teammates.

Reza fights bloody battles in the Revolution before enlisting into the Iranian Air Force, where he witnesses the carnage of the Iran-Iraq War. His only chance to escape is to make the Elite Iranian Military Wrestling Team and escape when they travel to compete internationally.



In Iran, wrestling is the sport of warriors where champions are heralded as heroes--The Pahlavan. Reza understands his defection will humiliate Ayatollah Khomeini. He also understands how dearly his family will suffer for his freedom.



Iranian Press Conference praising the wrestlers as the “Pride of Iran” & Reza defeating another opponent

At the International Military World Wrestling Tournament in Venezuela in 1982, Reza and two of his teammates use stolen moments in corners of the the gym to plan an impossible escape with the help of American wrestlers.

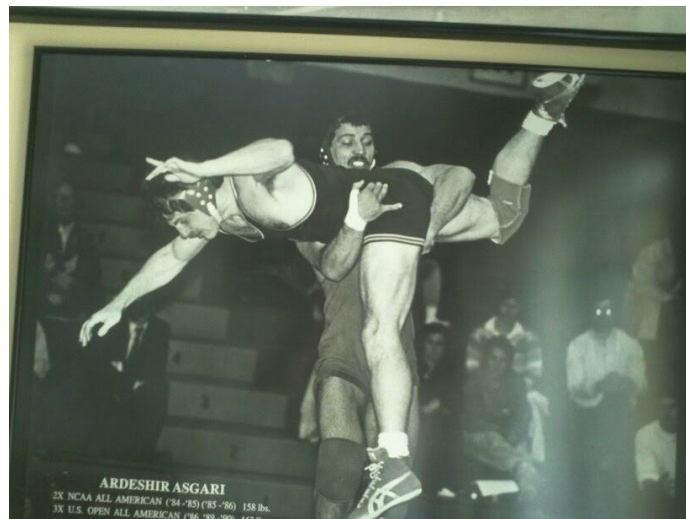
All the while, Reza also knows his 15 year-old brother Houshang, locked away in Khomeini’s notorious prison, will probably pay painfully with his life for this humiliation.



Rare photo of teams lined up at the tournament

It is 2 a.m. on the final night. With thoughts of his little brother in prison, Reza wraps his clothes around his gold medal and pushes them through the bars from the fourth floor bathroom window. In only his underwear, he approaches the guard and asks to go downstairs for a drink of water. Reza escapes to join the others in the van driven by the American wrestlers. At the last minute, Ardeshir joins them and the four are driven a safe house.

Reza and the other wrestlers realize their families will be interrogated by SAVAK, possibly tortured and maybe killed. The wrestlers also know they will be hunted by the Revolutionary Guard.



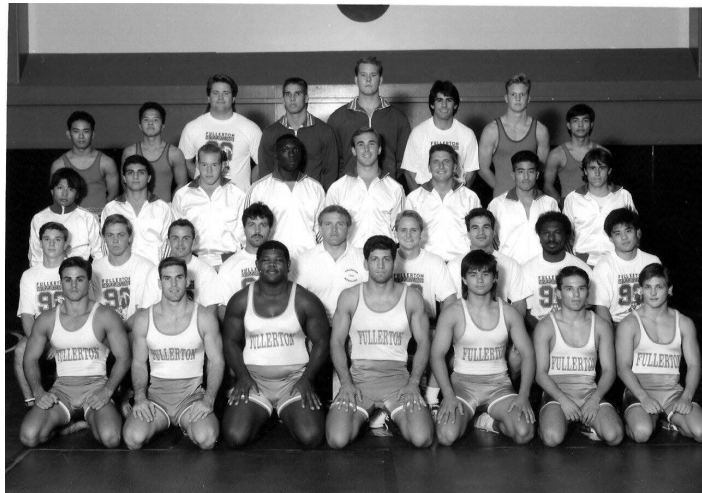
Ardeshir should have represented the U.S in the 1996 Olympics

To further complicate matters, the father of Reza's childhood friend and teammate, Ardeshir, is a personal bodyguard for Khomeini. Ardeshir chooses to the unforgivable humiliation of his family and defects. His father will later tell Ardeshir "I do not have a son."

The wrestlers survive on handouts and food from trash cans. Desperate to leave Venezuela, they conceive a plan wherein they turn themselves into the Iranian Embassy and say they were stupid kids and now they want to come home. Without money, this is

the only way they will get a plane ticket and paperwork to leave Venezuela. Knowing there is no direct flight from Venezuela to Iran, they plan to escape in the international airport of Madrid before boarding the second plane. Reza hides a sharpened can opener in his pocket; if they are caught in Madrid, he plans to slit his wrists.

The plane has an unexpected delay in the Canary Islands which throws off the Revolutionary Guards waiting for them in Madrid. They elude capture by hiding in a bathroom and find an Iranian Mujahideen who is selling newspapers in Farsi. In exchange for doing an international press conference exposing the terrors of Ayatollah Khomeini's regime, the four wrestlers are given food, clothes and a guarded apartment in Madrid.



Reza( 2nd row. 3rd from right).

Reza proudly shares that even though English is his third language, he earned a Master's Degree

After a time in Europe, Reza and Ardeshir are granted Visas to come to America where they attend college on wrestling scholarships.

**The journeys of Ardeshir, Houshang and Reza were far from over.**

**Ardeshir** is on track to represent America in the 1996 Olympics when he is falsely arrested and accused of having a pound of heroine. CNN's 1998 story [Legal Hardships](#)

[make Iranian wrestler a multimillionaire](#) highlights that length to which the Iranian regime would go to prevent the humiliation of a defected Iranian wrestler competing as an American.

In the June 2017 article by Stephen Patrick, [A Conversation with Mark Schultz](#) of *Fox Catcher* fame, Schultz comments on the opportunity of wrestling to bridge American-Iranian relationship and references Ardeshir. “Ardeshir Asgari, whom Mark considers one of his "first really good Iranian friends" is an example of the path wrestling provides for American-Iranian connections.

Ardeshir left America soon after his release and is currently The President of the [Nicaraguan Wrestling Association](#).



Months after Reza defected, **Houshang’s** freedom is bought and he is quickly smuggled out of Iran and into Pakistan. He’s barely 17 and trying to find the safe house, when he is tricked by a taxi driver and arrested. After spending nearly a year in a Pakistan prison, he pleads his case and is sent to an Refugee camp. Houshang told me “That was hell on earth. The absolute worst place I have ever been in my life.”





Houshang and Reza traveling to see family

Determined, Houshang makes his way to America and joins his brother Reza at Cal.State Fullerton College. Houshang meets his wife at CSUF, together they have two sons and live in Northern California.



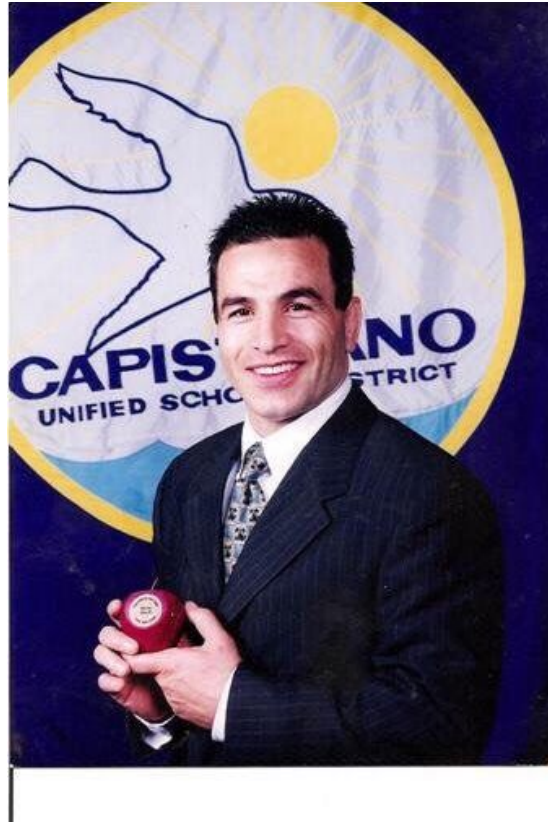
Reza and Houshang at Cal State Fullerton

**Reza's** story picks up in late 1980s when he is on his way to earning his college degree. Just as his American dream is about to come true, he receives a call from his aging father and 3 teenage sisters: they have been smuggled from Tehran to Istanbul--but their money has been stolen and they were helpless. "Reza," said his sister. "We cannot be 3 girls without money here. We will be sold."

Twice Reza risked his life for his freedom and just as his dream was within his grasp, he risked it again--but this time to rescue his family.

When Reza carries his father and younger sisters through the snow covered smugglers trails of the German mountains, his training becomes more than what secures gold medals, it determines life or death.

In 2000, Reza was nominated by his colleagues as the Teacher of the Year award.



in 2018, Reza Abedi was inducted into the National Wrestling Hall of Fame alongside U.S. Presidents. When Reza gave his acceptance speech, the crowd gave an extended standing ovation.



Reza being inducted into the National Wrestling Hall of Fame in 2018

Reza's story has been featured in [The Iranian](#), [Kayhan Life's Inspiring Iranians](#), and the cover story [Reza Abedi's Greatest Escape](#).

At these tender ages, **Reza, Ardeshir and Houshang** mourn the loss of a country they no longer recognize; yet, are driven to control their fate. The truth of everything they've ever known—pride, honor, loyalty and love—lay shattered in Iran.

Although this is a story about becoming a champion, it is first and foremost the story of young men who, oppressed and terrorized, embark on a journey of courage.

It is a story as old as time, but as new as your sunrise.



This story is also captured in the nonfiction narrative *American Wings, Iranian Roots* and the work is well received.

On behalf of Reza, Ardeshir, Houshang, I thank you for your time and attention.

I look forward to hearing from you.

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Wrestling is the oldest sport known to mankind, first referenced in the Old Testament.

Prologue from *American Wings, Iranian Roots*

### **Genesis 32:22-32**

*So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.*

*When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man.*

*Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."*

*But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."*

*The man asked him, "What is your name?"*

*"Jacob," he answered.*

*Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome."*

Reza, Ardeshir and Houshang would not know this story.

**They would live it**

