

# France's Impenetrable Administrative State

By Theodore Dalrymple

In 2020, a young Frenchman, Benjamin Brière, was sentenced to eight years' imprisonment in Iran for espionage. No doubt it was imprudent of him to have flown a drone to take photographs of the landscape near Iran's border with Turkmenistan for his travel blog; he provided a golden opportunity for the regime to take a hostage, and the regime seized it.

Brière was released after three years, but his travails were not over. His name had been removed from the French social security system because they had had no news of



him for so long. When he returned to France, a free man, he tried to reinscribe himself, because without such inscription, he might as well not exist. He found himself in the position of an illegal immigrant. He could not get a job legally.

But his reinsertion into French society posed a problem: the tax authorities found that he had not filed a tax return for four years. When he explained that he had been imprisoned abroad, the authorities replied that his family could have filed his form for him. That he was able to speak to his family by telephone for only 15 minutes every six weeks wasn't considered sufficient reason for his failure to file.

French commentary suggests that this absurdity—this complete inflexibility of the administration and inability to admit exceptions on its own initiative—is both typical of, and unique to, France. But of course, it is not: it could happen in any country with an oversized government and administration, where following procedure is the main business of life and fear of departing from it pervades existence.

Situations such as Brière's now have a proposed remedy: a special tax regime for people kept hostage in foreign countries. Every bureaucratic problem has, naturally, a bureaucratic solution—requiring a special department to decide when it should be applied. Another problem solved!

*First published in [City Journal](#)*