

The Iran Deal Produced Nothing for Imprisoned Christian Pastor

While the White House and Congress prepare for a final showdown over the controversial Iran nuclear deal, three American prisoners and one missing American in Iran are awaiting their own fate. One of the prisoners is Pastor Saeed Abedini, an Iranian-American Christian pastor who has been detained in Iran since 2012. He has become the international face of the brutal persecution of Christians by the Islamic Republic. Abedini was arrested by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps while visiting relatives and building an orphanage in the city of Rasht. Initially placed under house arrest, he was transferred to Iran's notorious Evin Prison and later to Rajai Shahr Prison. "[Evin Prison is] known to be one of the most brutal prisons inside of Iran and has one of the highest execution rates. Traditionally it was the place they kept their highest-security prisoners," Tiffany Barrans—international legal director at the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ), a law firm and social activism organization that has represented Abedini and his family since shortly after his arrest—told . "Originally, he was housed with those convicted of murder. Now he is housed with the political prisoners." "Saeed is anything but political. He really truly was there building an orphanage and doing humanitarian work," Barrans added. According to the ACLJ, Rajai Shahr Prison is "even more dangerous" than Evin Prison. In addition to Abedini, three other American citizens are believed to be held in Iran. This includes former U.S. Marine Amir Hekmati, 32, who was arrested by Iran during a purported family visit in 2011 and is serving a 10-year prison sentence; Jason Rezaian, 39, the *Washington Post's* Tehran correspondent, who is currently on trial for espionage and hostile acts; and

Robert Levinson, 67, a Jewish former FBI agent who disappeared on Iran's Kish island eight years ago. According to Barrans, Abedini has been forced to live in horrid conditions inside of the Iranian prison. "Physically, this is about as bad as you can imagine," she said. "He has been given no protein, no clean water, sanitary issues, and lives in extremely overcrowded conditions in a room built for 20 people that houses 80 people. ... He described how they all share one toilet and that it is difficult to clean because feces and urine leak from the ceiling above." Barrans added that Abedini is suffering from two medical conditions that doctors have said he needs surgery for, but Iran has refused treatment. In early June, the families of the four American prisoners testified on behalf of Abedini in front of the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee. Naghmeh Abedini, Saeed's wife, described how her husband is suffering in an Iranian jail because of the fact that he is a former Muslim who converted to Christianity, which is illegal under Iranian law. "The Iranian government has repeatedly told Saeed he holds the key to his freedom—but this key would be to deny his faith and return to Islam," Naghmeh said. "Yet, Saeed has refused to deny his faith in Jesus Christ in the face of torture and abuse." While Abedini's case has drawn considerable attention in the U.S., many Christian converts in Iran have faced extreme persecution as part of a Iranian government crackdown on the fledgling underground house-church movement. According to Open Doors USA, a non-profit Christian human rights group, Iran ranks seventh on the list of countries "where Christians face the most persecution," and the magnitude of that persecution rates as "extreme." "According to the Iranian state, only Armenians and Assyrians can be Christian. Ethnic Persians are by definition Muslim, and ethnic Persian Christians are considered apostates," Open Doors USA said. "This makes almost all Christian activity illegal, especially when it occurs in Persian languages, from evangelism to bible training, to publishing scripture and Christian books, or preaching in Farsi," the group added. "In 2014, at least 75 Christians were

arrested. More Christians were sentenced to prison and pressure on those detained increased, including physical and mental abuse.” David Brog—executive director of Christians United For Israel (CUFI), the largest pro-Israel organization in the U.S. with more than 2 million members—said that while CUFI normally focuses on building Christian support for Israel, the group is increasingly prioritizing the plight of Mideast Christians and sees the situation as “one of the greatest human rights tragedies of our day.” “With Pastor Abedini, what we are trying to stress is that it’s not about one man. It is a reflection of the [Iranian] regime, a regime that will hang people just because they are gay, a regime that will put people in prison just because they are Christian,” Brog told . “We can use the example of Pastor Abedini to shine a light on the true nature of this regime and how it makes it clear how futile it is to try to reason with them,” he added, referencing the Iran nuclear deal. President Barack Obama, meanwhile, has defended his administration’s decision to separate the nuclear deal from the cases of American prisoners, arguing that Iran would use the prisoners as bargaining chips. “Now, if the question is why we did not tie the negotiations to their release, think about the logic that that creates,” Obama said in a July 15 press conference. “Suddenly, Iran realizes, ‘You know what, maybe we can get additional concessions out of the Americans by holding these individuals.’” CUFI’s Brog rejected that argument, saying the “administration’s excuse for not insisting on the freedom of all the prisoners is pathetic.” While the White House does not want to link the nuclear deal to “extraneous issues like the prisoners,” it allowed Iran “to do exactly that,” he said. “Iran is getting relief from its embargo, it’s allowed to pursue its ballistic missile program, and they don’t even have to stop their support for terrorism. So the fact is that these issues are already linked. We should have insisted on the freedom of our prisoners just like we should have insisted on the end of terror,” Brog told . Barrans said the ACLJ’s position has always been that the release of the American

prisoners should be a “precondition before even sitting down” for negotiations with Iran, yet at the same time, the group “never asked that their release should be written into the deal.” She expressed disappointment, however, that the U.S. did not use the limited leverage it had with Iran during the nuclear talks to secure the release of prisoners. During her own testimony to the House Foreign Affairs Committee in June, Sarah Hekmati— sister of Amir Hekmati, the former U.S. Marine imprisoned in Iran—said, “It does not make sense to our family how previous American prisoners in Iran have been released when the United States had no diplomatic relations with Iran and were not sitting across from them at a negotiating table much sooner than Amir.” “The only conclusion [Sarah Hekmati] came to, and frankly a lot of the families do, [is] that the nuclear talks themselves were such a high priority that the hostages were pushed to the back burner,” Barrans told . Obama did meet with Naghmeh Abedini and her two children earlier this year, calling Saeed’s freedom a “top priority” for his administration. Secretary of State John Kerry told *MSNBC* following the Iran deal, “There was not a meeting that took place [during the nuclear talks]—not one meeting that took place, believe me, that’s not an exaggeration—where we did not raise the issue of our American citizens being held.” Amid those verbal assurances that the Obama administration is working towards the release of the Iranian detainees, Barrans said the ACLJ has focused its current efforts on Congress, which is in the midst of a 60-day period to review the Iran deal and might be able to exert some of its influence to help bring about the release of the prisoners. “Now we realize that Congress holds the key in their review of this deal to really put the pressure both on the U.S. government and those inside of Iran, who want the deal and a reduction of sanctions, to release the Americans with the threat that they would vote the deal down,” Barrans said. Meanwhile, as post-deal tensions heat up in Iran between hardliners and pragmatists, some observers fear that the hardliners may decide against releasing Abedini to show that they haven’t completely

capitulated to the West. Pragmatists, in order to secure as much sanctions relief as possible for Iran, would presumably be more inclined to consider Abedini's freedom. "There has definitely been increased violence inside of the prison by inmates towards Saeed, and tensions dramatically increased when the deal was signed. Certainly, his safety is compromised," Barrans said. "Whether those holding the authority to release Saeed decide to make things more complicated and not release him, that is definitely a possibility," she said. "The internal politics inside of Iran is always difficult because they don't always take rational steps." *Reprinted from* .