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U.N. Chief Makes Secret Bid to Win Release of American Detainee in Iran

Can Antonio Guterres succeed where the Obama and Trump Administrations Have Failed?

By Colum Lynch and Dan De Luce

U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres is making a quiet appeal to Iran's leaders to release an elderly American citizen detained on what the U.S. claims are trumped up charges of espionage, according to several officials.

Guterres, a former Portuguese prime minister and U.N. refugee chief, wrote a highly confidential letter a week ago to the Iranian president, Hassan Rouhani, to ask for the release on humanitarian grounds of Baqer Namazi, an 81-year-old retired UNICEF official.

The U.N. chief's secret diplomacy provides a powerful illustration of how his much-maligned institution often provides unnoticed benefits to the United States. It also presents the U.N. chief with an opportunity to prove the U.N.'s value to skeptics at a time when he is seeking to bolster his relationship with the Trump administration, which wants to radically slash the U.N.'s budget.

Namazi, a dual U.S.-Iranian citizen, was imprisoned in February 2016, after traveling to Tehran to secure the release of his son Siamak, an American-Iranian businessman, who was detained in October 2015. They were both charged with espionage and collaborating with a foreign government and sentenced to 10 years in prison.

The plight of the Namazis has garnered greater international attention in the wake of the death earlier this month of Otto Warmbier, a 22-year-old University of Virginia student who fell into a

coma after he was detained by North Korean authorities in January 2016. Warmbier died June 19, just six days after he was returned to the United States.

Babak Namazi, Siamak's brother, told Foreign Policy that he fears his father, who is ill with a heart ailment, could die in prison. But he has also expressed concern about the well-being of his brother, who has been subject to beatings, interrogations, solitary confinement, and other cruel treatment, according to lawyers seeking his release.

According to a petition filed to the United Nations Human Rights Council, Siamak Namazi has often been held in a solitary cell in a notorious wing of Evin prison in Tehran, where many political prisoners are incarcerated. He was initially given no bed and forced to sleep on a concrete floor. Namazi "has been tortured by the IRGC [Revolutionary Guards] and has been beaten, tased, and forced to watch government propaganda attacking him and showing his father in prison."

The U.N. chief's outreach follows appeals by Nikki Haley, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, and Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.), the former chair of the House Foreign Relations Committee, and other U.S. officials to the U.N. chief to help secure the Namazis' freedom.

White House officials told FP that the administration is putting a high priority on securing the release of the Namazis as well as other Americans held abroad. And officials said the White House has discussed possible options and strategies with the Namazi family.

One senior administration official said Siamak Namazi's "situation is just unbearable."

"Detaining political prisoners is one of the worst human rights abuses a country can do," Haley said in a statement posted on Facebook, following a meeting with Babak. "If [the Iranians] want to have any credibility in the world, they will let Baquer and Siamak come home."

United Nations officials insist that Guterres is acting out of humanitarian concern for an elderly former U.N. staffer, and not at the instruction of the United States or any other member state.

Indeed, much of the pressure to act has come from a group of UNICEF retirees, who had been urging the U.N. leadership for more than a year to approach the Iranian government on behalf of Baquer, and at one stage paid a visit to the Iranian Mission to the United Nations to make their case.

Anthony Lake, the executive director of UNICEF who served in the Carter administration during the Iranian hostage crisis, has also been pressing for a strong U.N. role in seeking Baquer's release.

Jared Genser, a lawyer representing the Namazis, said the U.N. interest in the case is “crucial” to ensuring the Iranians understand that securing their release “is not merely a top concern of the United States but ... is also an important priority for Secretary-General Guterres as well.”

The detention standoff comes at a time when relations between Tehran and Washington have been rapidly deteriorating, potentially complicating U.S. efforts to free the Namazis. The current administration has made containing Iran’s influence in the Middle East a foreign-policy priority.

The effort to harness the support of the U.N. leader had drawn skepticism from critics, who say the only way to secure a deal with the Iranians is by dealing directly with Tehran.

“I would be the first to say, ‘use every avenue available,’” said one senior congressional aide, “but I think the best way to help the Namazis would be to negotiate with the Iranians directly.”

With U.S.-Iran relations in a deep freeze, the Trump White House, unlike the previous administration, lacks a direct channel to negotiate with Tehran. With President Barack Obama’s blessing, former U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry forged a rapport with Iran’s foreign minister, Javad Zarif, during negotiations on the Iran nuclear deal and the two spoke frequently.

It’s also unclear if Washington is ready or able to enlist a third government to act as a mediator. Oman, which maintains friendly ties with Tehran and Washington, played a pivotal role in securing the release of several Americans held in Iran over the past decade, and also helped pave the way for the multilateral accord with Iran on its nuclear program.

Freeing the Namazis has long proven a tough challenge for the United States, which carried out a prisoner swap with Iran in January 2016. The deal, which Obama characterized as a “one-time gesture,” involved the release of four Americans of Iranian descent, including Washington Post reporter Jason Rezaian, in exchange for one Iranian and six dual U.S.-Iranian citizens.

But the arrangement didn’t include the release of Siamak Namazi (Baquer had yet to be imprisoned).

U.S. officials say that Kerry had extracted a pledge from Iran’s Zarif, to release Siamak Namazi just weeks after the Iran nuclear negotiations were concluded, but the Iranians failed to deliver. One former U.S. official said Zarif may have underestimated the degree of opposition within the Tehran regime to releasing the Namazis.

Frustrated by the lack of progress, the United States turned in mid-2016 to then-U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to take up the case.

Ban instructed his deputy, Jan Eliasson, a former Swedish foreign Minister who had a long-standing relationship with the Iranians, to take the lead.

At the same time, Ban wrote to the supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, on behalf of Baquer. But the U.N. did not make a similar effort on behalf of Siamak, who is not associated with the United Nations, fearing it might undermine their effort to seek Baquer's release. Still, that effort went nowhere.

During their final week in office, Obama administration officials sought to enlist the support of Guterres, the newly elected secretary-general, according to the former U.S. official.

"We were trying to get him to raise it in his first communication with the Supreme Leader," said one former U.S. official. "He didn't want his first communication with the Supreme Leader to be on this issue."

Guterres, the official added, wanted to wait until he had a number of issues he could raise with the Iranians at the same time.

The U.S. effort to secure the Namazis release then lost momentum during the transition, after the special envoy for hostages, Jim O'Brien, stepped down, leaving an opening that has yet been filled by the Trump administration.

During a recent phone conversation, Rep. Ros-Lehtinen appealed to Guterres to use his influence with the Iranian government to help secure the Namazis' release. Guterres promised to try his best.

"I refuse to say there is no hope," Lake told FP. "We have been doing everything we thought would produce the result that we want. But we have not yet succeeded."