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Trump Administration Presses Iran to Free the Namazis

By Barbara Slavin

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani met on July 24 with the top brass of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), reportedly seeking to end a spate of disagreements that have been aired in public since Rouhani's re-election.

Presumably, topics such as Syria and Rouhani's efforts to reduce IRGC involvement in the Iranian economy were discussed. Hopefully, another issue Rouhani raised was the need to release Iranian-American businessman Siamak Namazi and his father, Baquer, who were sentenced to 10-year prison terms last year on bogus charges of spying and who are languishing in the IRGC wing of Tehran's dreaded Evin prison.

Babak Namazi, Siamak's brother, and family lawyer Jared Genser told a group of reporters, including this analyst, on Tuesday in Washington that they are cautiously optimistic that Siamak and Baquer will be freed soon on humanitarian grounds.

Baquer, 81, a respected former UNICEF officer, has spent both his 80th birthday and his 50th wedding anniversary in prison. A survivor of triple bypass surgery, Baquer has lost 30 pounds since he was arrested in February 2016 after flying into Tehran from Dubai – lured by a false promise of being able to see his jailed son. Baquer suffers from headaches, dizziness, shortness of breath and fatigue, Babak said, and has been hospitalized at least twice.

Siamak, prevented from leaving Iran since July 2015 and sent to Evin in October of that year, is wracked with guilt that he was used to entrap his father. Kept for months in solitary confinement, Siamak has become “more and more despondent,” Babak said, and is continuing to be “tormented” by interrogators even after his conviction and sentencing.

However, Babak and Genser said they were encouraged that the Trump administration has made the Namazis' prompt release a top priority. They have met with senior officials and the White House has issued several statements including a tough demand on July 21. “President Trump is prepared to impose new and serious consequences on Iran unless all unjustly imprisoned American citizens are released and returned,” the statement said.

Trump pushed privately for the freedom of an American NGO worker jailed in Egypt and invited her to the White House after she was released. His administration also secured an American student imprisoned in North Korea. The student, in a coma from a still undetermined cause, died shortly after he was sent home.

“It would be a big win for the president to get these Americans out,” Genser said of the Namazis. He also praised UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres and unnamed US allies with ties to Iran for urging the Islamic Republic to free the Namazis.

“Everyone is telling them, this is a losing hand for Iran,” Genser said. “If God forbid, one of them dies on your watch, there will be hell to pay.”

Iranian officials, including Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, have indicated a desire to resolve the case, perhaps through swapping the Namazis for Iranians detained in the United States or abroad at US request. The Obama administration carried out a prisoner exchange in tandem with final implementation of the Iran nuclear deal but Siamak was not included and several other dual nationals and a Chinese American were subsequently detained.

In New York last week, Zarif told journalists including this analyst that the US has a number of Iranians still in custody and has been responsible for the arrest of Iranians in third countries on charges of violating US sanctions.

Zarif also told CBS News that Baquer had been released from Evin prison to house arrest. That is false, according to Babak Namazi. Still, Zarif’s comments may reflect growing pressure the Iranian government feels about the case.

Zarif and other Iranian officials staunchly maintain that their judiciary is independent. But it was the intelligence branch of the IRGC that arrested the Namazis and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei – Iran’s commander in chief and final arbiter on all key matters -- has the power to order the IRGC and the judiciary to let them go.

Such an action would be a sorely needed confidence building measure.

Relations between the United States and Iran – estranged for 40 years – are at a particularly tense stage. The Trump administration, while so far renewing the necessary certifications and waivers required by the nuclear agreement, has done so only grudgingly.

The administration has imposed new sanctions on Iranian individuals and entities, many of them working on a ballistic missile program that is outside the boundaries of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Congress is voting on another batch of sanctions this week.

Members of the Trump administration, including the secretaries of State and Defense, have also spoken rather cavalierly of the need for “regime change” in Iran and discouraged foreign investment in Iran, in violation of the JCPOA. There have been reports that the president – angered by his top advisers’ recommendation to continue to certify Iranian compliance with the agreement – has directed several Iran hawks in his White House to come up with a case for

leaving the accord when certification is next required in October.

The nuclear deal, however, is working. Iran has kept the strict limits mandated on its nuclear activities and has received in return billions of dollars in frozen oil revenues. Foreign companies are returning to Iran and the Boeing Corp. has concluded a contract to sell \$20 billion worth of airplanes to Iran Air and other Iranian carriers -- sales that will boost American jobs.

The Trump administration should continue to implement the accord. At the same time, Iran should free the Namazis now. At a time of growing instability in the Middle East, there is no need to increase tensions by undermining the JCPOA or continuing to punish innocent Americans whose only "crime" was visiting their birthplace.

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