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## **Prominent US Human Rights Lawyer Takes Up Case of Jailed Kazakh Businessman**

*Jared Genser's firm described Iskander Yerimbetov as "a hostage" of the Kazakh state who had been subjected to torture.*

By Catherine Putz

U.S. based human rights lawyer, Jared Genser, announced this week that his firm would be taking up the defense of jailed Kazakh businessman Iskander Yerimbetov. Yerimbetov was arrested in November 2017, detained in an Almaty shopping center parking lot and charged alongside three associates with embezzlement and money laundering.

As Kazakh authorities put it, Yerimbetov is accused of embezzling about \$3 million through a company he controls but also is implicated in the much larger network Astana says branches out from fugitive ex-banker Mukhtar Ablyazov.

Yerimbetov, as Eurasianet outlined recently, made a fortune in telecoms before branching out to a candy factory and an Almaty civil aviation company. The latter two businesses and a network of offshore companies, Kazakh authorities claim, are how Ablyazov laundered his money.

Kazakh authorities also link Yerimbetov to Ablyazov via Yerimbetov's sister, Bota Jardemalie. Jardemalie, a Harvard-trained lawyer, has been granted political asylum in Belgium. As one of Ablyazov's lawyers, she has been pursued by Astana, also accused of corruption.

In 2013, Ablyazov was arrested in France and extradition was requested by Russian and Ukrainian authorities (France and Kazakhstan do not have a mutual extradition treaty in place). An extradition order issued in 2015 was overturned in December 2016, with a French court saying the Russian and Ukrainian requests were political motivated and therefore invalid.

Ablyazov was convicted in absentia in June 2017 by a court in Astana.

Astana has gone to extreme lengths to pursue those tied to Ablyazov, including his wife and daughter being spirited away from their villa in Rome by masked men and deported back to Kazakhstan, only to have Italy rescind the deportation order after international outcry. In 2016, cybersecurity researchers released a report claiming that Astana allegedly ran a phishing and malware campaign targeting journalists, dissidents, their family, and their lawyers — many linked back to Ablyazov.

Given this background, it's no surprise that Yerimbetov's family describes him as a "hostage." This language is also used in the statement issued by Genser's firm, Perseus Strategies: "Yerimbetov is now a hostage of Nazarbayev's regime, seized in a brazen reprisal against Jardemalie for her human rights work."

In an op-ed for U.S. News ahead of President Nursultan Nazarbayev's visit to the United States earlier this month, Jardemalie said the charges against her brother were fabricated and politically motivated. "Nazarbayev is angry that he has been unable to get his hands on or eliminate his nemesis," Jardemalie wrote in reference to Ablyazov.

Jardemalie also claimed her brother has been subject to torture while in custody, describing it in great detail:

Iskander was later taken into detention, under the control of Kazakhstan's political police, and he has been subjected to horrific physical and psychological torture. Other prisoners are ordered to beat him with a stick wrapped in a wet towel so bruises aren't as visible. He has survived multiple strangulation attempts. He has been locked up in solitary in a freezing cell without sufficient clothing. He has been threatened with injections of HIV-infected blood. On top of it all, he has been told that his son and our elderly father will also be arrested if he doesn't cooperate.

Kazakhstan's anti-corruption service denies the torture accusation.

It's unclear (though unlikely) whether Yerimbetov's case came up in discussions between Nazarbayev and U.S. President Donald Trump. The two issued friendly and upbeat statements from the White House, with no mention of human rights.

According to RFE/RL, Jardemalie asked Genser to take on her brother's case.

Genser has taken on a wide range of human rights cases both through his firm and Freedom Now, an NGO aimed at freeing prisoners of conscience, which he founded. His client list, both past and current, hosts a range of notable characters, including Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi, Malaysia's Anwar Ibrahim, and China's late Liu Xiaobo and now his wife Liu Xia.

Genser said in the Perseus Strategies statement that they would "act in Washington and around the world to expose the injustice of both [Yerimbetov's] arbitrary detention and the horrific

conditions of his ongoing torture in detention.” He went on said the firm would “urge the U.S., Canada, EU, and other countries to impose targeted sanctions under Global Magnitsky laws against those responsible for the most severe abuses in Kazakhstan against Iskander and other political prisoners.”