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Will Trump Keep His Word?

President Trump Should Make Good on His Vow to Negotiate the Release of Americans Held by Iran.

By Babak Namazi

Of the many issues President Donald Trump has to confront, relations with Iran are among the thorniest. In recent months, Iran has been testing its ballistic missiles and has conducted a number of military drills. Meanwhile, Trump's travel ban on Iranian nationals has angered the Iranian government, and the Trump administration has already imposed new sanctions on individuals and companies in response to Iran's missile testing and human rights abuses. Moreover, the U.S. and Iran are also on opposite sides of the war in Syria.

On April 25, talks on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, otherwise known as the nuclear deal, will take place in Vienna, and the two governments will meet face-to-face for the first time along with other partners. The world will be watching as U.S. and Iranian officials come to discuss implementation of what Trump has previously referred to as "the worst deal ever negotiated." The international community will be following the talks closely to discern the nascent Trump administration's policy towards Iran. The stakes are high, and tensions between our governments are even higher.

Irrespective of the geopolitics, for me the high-stakes political drama that is about to unfold is deeply personal. The fate and lives of my father and brother, who are both American hostages in Iran, could well be determined by how the U.S.-Iran relationship develops from these meetings.

To my family's horror, in October 2015, following three months of relentless interrogations after preventing his departure from a weekend family visit, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps unjustly arrested my brother, Siamak Namazi, a business consultant and U.S.-educated scholar. He was taken to the notorious Evin Prison and subject to relentless interrogations about his scholarly affiliations with Western institutions and his efforts in enabling lifesaving medicine to reach the Iranian people. We would eventually come to understand that Siamak was a hostage as

none of the allegations make sense by any standard: He was in prison because he was an American and to be used as a bargaining chip as evidenced by the video of his arrest that was released and how it was used as propaganda by the Iranian government.

On Jan. 16, 2016, the nuclear deal came into effect and Iran released five American hostages. Inexplicably, Siamak was not among them – a fact that devastated my family. I was told that by the previous administration that Secretary of State John Kerry had obtained a promise from his Iranian counterpart Foreign Minister Mohammad Zarif that Siamak would be released within weeks of the release of the other hostages.

That promise was broken. Far from releasing my brother, the IRGC increased my family's suffering exponentially by then imprisoning my father, Baquer Namazi, in February 2016. My father is an 80-year-old retired UNICEF officer who, like Siamak, has never committed a crime in his life. To the contrary, my father dedicated his entire life helping improve the lives of the most vulnerable in the most challenging parts of the world and did the same in Iran upon his retirement from UNICEF.

Yet, in October 2016, in a perversion of justice, my father and brother were each unjustly convicted of "collaboration with a hostile government" – code, in this case, for the U.S. – and sentenced to 10 years in prison.

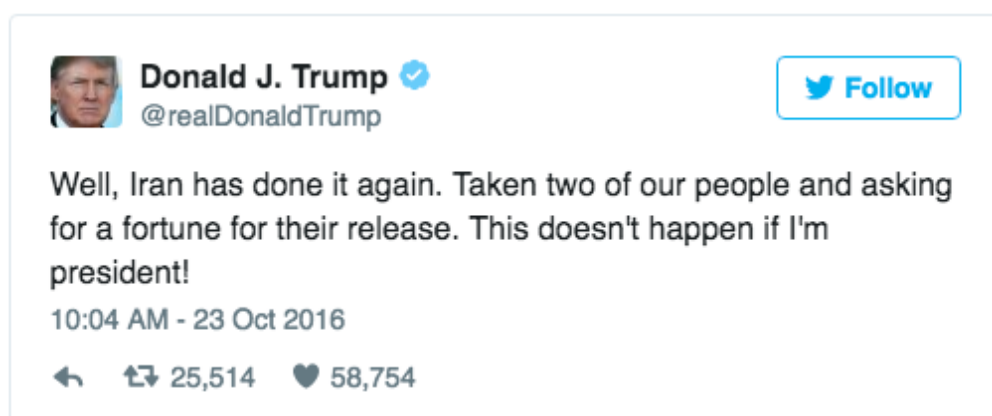
While terrible prison conditions and inhumane treatment by the IRGC had already been wearing away at my father and brother for months, their conditions have rapidly deteriorated in the wake of their wrongful convictions. They had been sustained by hope, and suddenly that hope was gone. My father has serious heart conditions, suffers from heart arrhythmia and may require a pacemaker at any time. In a highly unusual move that evidences the severity of his condition and further elevating my desperation for his well-being, the IRGC has twice rushed him to an intensive care unit outside of the prison for treatment. I fear every second of every day that the worst will happen.

Even still, my father insists it is Siamak for whom we should be most concerned. Siamak has undergone physical and psychological mistreatment and has been denied even a bed to sleep on, and he's spending much of his detention in solitary confinement. Threats and interrogations continue even after the unjust convictions. Facing daily and mounting pressures, he began talking of "taking things into his own hands." Siamak feels he has nothing left to lose. I am terrified for Siamak's well-being.

Iran's continuing detention and mistreatment of my family represents the worst of human cruelty, but it also represents a diplomatic failure of the Obama administration: The Iranian government was never forced to deliver on its promises.

It is my great hope and expectation that where the Obama administration failed, the Trump administration will succeed. I am in Vienna because I know that my brother and father's case will be raised at the nuclear talks. The U.S. administration should be adamant in demanding Siamak and Baquer's release – and Iran should see the wisdom in releasing them on humanitarian grounds, before it is too late.

Trump has proven himself to be a great deal-maker in the business world. I urge him to use those negotiating abilities to reach a deal that will bring my family home. Even in my darkest moments, I'm emboldened by the fact that, when my father and brother's sentences were first reported in October 2016, then candidate Donald Trump took to Twitter and vowed:



I cling to those words, and I pray and desperately need for my father and brother's sake that the president will be good to his word; otherwise, I may never see them again.

Babak Namazi is the son and brother, respectively, of Baquer and Siamak Namazi, American hostages in Iran. He lives in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.