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U.S. Sanctions Brother of Iranian Military Commander

By Jay Solomon

WASHINGTON—The Trump administration on Thursday sanctioned the brother of Iran’s top spy master and military strategist for alleged human-rights violations, amid growing calls by Congress for the White House to confront Tehran and bring home U.S. citizens still imprisoned in the country.

Successive U.S. administrations have fixated on curtailing the activities of Maj. Gen. Qasem Soleimani, commander of international operations of Iran’s elite military unit, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

U.S. intelligence agencies believe Gen. Soleimani is overseeing Iran’s military operations in Syria, which are designed to prop up the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. The U.S. and its Middle East allies also said they have seen Gen. Soleimani’s hand in Revolutionary Guard military activities in Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories.

On Thursday, the U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned Gen. Soleimani’s brother, Sohrab Soleimani, who has been accused of committing human-rights violations as head of the Tehran Prisons Organization.

Human-rights groups have alleged Mr. Soleimani helped violently suppress a prison uprising in Tehran’s Evin prison in 2014. Many of Iran’s top political dissidents are jailed in Evin, as are U.S. and European citizens accused of espionage and other offenses.

The Treasury Department also sanctioned the Tehran Prisons Organization, which it said “is responsible for or complicit in the committing of serious human rights abuses against political prisoners housed in Evin Prison.”

“Sohrab Soleimani was the head of the Tehran Prisons Organization during this violent event,” the Treasury Department said in a statement.

The Iranian Mission at the United Nations couldn't immediately be reached for comment.

The U.S., Iran and five other global powers reached a landmark nuclear agreement in 2015 that curtailed Tehran's nuclear capabilities in return for the lifting of most international sanctions.

The U.S., however, said it maintains the right to sanction Iran for nonnuclear activities, such as human-rights violations and its support for Mideast-based militant groups. Iranian officials in the past have challenged this interpretation of the deal.

The Trump administration said Thursday the sanctioning of Mr. Soleimani was in compliance with the nuclear deal.

U.S. lawmakers have been calling in recent week for the U.S. to further impose sanctions on Iran for its nonnuclear activities. They specifically cited Iran's continued detention of four U.S. nationals and two U.S. green-card holders as justification for more penalties. Iran has accused most of these Americans of espionage, a charge they have denied.

A bipartisan group of U.S. lawmakers wrote Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin last week and noted that Iran hadn't been sanctioned for any human-rights violations since the nuclear agreement was reached in July 2015.

"Failing to sanction individuals and entities committing flagrant abuses of human rights against the Iranian people not only goes against our most cherished values and principles but also undermines the credibility of our government," they wrote.

White House spokesman Sean Spicer called for the release of the American citizens and residents on Thursday. He specifically cited Siamak Namazi and his father, Baquer Namazi, who are both imprisoned in Evin. Members of their family say the men are facing serious health issues.

The Obama administration secured the release of four Iranian-Americans in January 2016 in exchange for more than a dozen Iranians convicted of crimes in the U.S. It also released \$1.7 billion in frozen Iranian funds at the time of the prison release, stoking charges from Republicans in Congress that the U.S. paid ransom.

President Donald Trump's administration has had no direct dealings with Iran since he took office in January. American and Iranian diplomats are scheduled to take part in talks focused on implementing the nuclear deal later this month in Vienna.