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Trump Promised to Not Let Iran Jail Americans. When Will He Help Free My Father and Brother?

By Babak Namazi

On Oct. 23, 2016, during the height of the American presidential campaign, then-candidate Donald Trump made a promise to the American people that I hope he can keep. He tweeted, “Well, Iran has done it again. Taken two of our people and asking for a fortune for their release. This doesn’t happen if I’m president.” He was talking about my father, Baquer Namazi, and my brother, Siamak Namazi, who had each been sentenced to 10 years in prison days earlier for allegedly “collaborating with the enemy,” the United States. A month into the new administration, I was in Washington to tell President Trump that I am counting on him to make good on his word.

Both my father and my brother are dual Iranian American citizens who have committed no crimes. My family had remained silent for close to a year about this injustice, hoping that Baquer and Siamak would be quietly released once Iran acknowledged their obvious innocence. In fact, in private negotiations with the Obama administration, Iran had actually promised to release Siamak, but instead arrested my father, too. Our hopes were crushed when, in a perversion of justice, both were given extraordinary sentences. Their baseless convictions and the horrific conditions of detention force me to speak out on their behalf.

My father is a retired UNICEF official who devoted his career to under-served populations around the world. Upon retirement, he returned to Iran to dedicate his remaining years to volunteering with projects on poverty eradication. Siamak worked globally as a business consultant. In 2013, he devoted several months to researching the humanitarian impact of sanctions on Iran and presented his report at the Woodrow Wilson Center. His report contributed to targeted changes in U.S. policies to allow for more lifesaving medical supplies to reach the people of Iran.

There is no rational explanation for why the Iranian authorities targeted Siamak and Baquer — their humanitarian work only stood to benefit the Iranian people. Yet on July 18, 2015, after a weekend visit to see our parents, Siamak was stopped at Tehran Airport by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and his passport was confiscated. Over the next three months, Siamak was interrogated daily. Then on Oct. 13, 2015, Siamak was arrested and taken to the notorious Evin prison in Tehran. My father was arrested a few months later by the IRGC on Feb. 22, 2016, and also brought to Evin Prison. There were never any formal charges, though the authorities and some media outlets have spawned lies accusing them of being saboteurs. The allegations are not true.

On the day they were summarily convicted, the trial was over in just a few hours, and they were allowed to meet with a defense lawyer once in preparation. We still have not been informed of the precise charges or the evidence against them — and I suspect we never will.

It causes me great anguish knowing of their suffering in prison. Both have been subjected to periods of extended solitary confinement and, despite the proximity of their prison cells, have never been allowed to see each other. Siamak sleeps on the concrete floor because he has no bed, and his cell is freezing cold. He continues to be interrogated even after his conviction. My father is in fragile health with a serious heart condition, and he has been hospitalized twice without explanation. I worry every day that he is not getting access to vital medications. Both have lost considerable weight, and I am increasingly concerned for their mental health. Iranian officials seem to be trying to break their will to live.

This ordeal has been hard for my family, especially my mother, who remains in Iran. We have no answers, no comfort, and soon, I fear, no hope. My father's 10-year conviction at age 80 is a death sentence, and Siamak's daily abuse by prison officials threatens to push him over the edge.

On behalf of my family, I urge Iranian authorities to immediately release Baquer and Siamak on humanitarian grounds. UNICEF, U.N. human rights experts and even former U.N. secretary general Ban Ki-moon have made similar humanitarian appeals. It is not too late for the Iranian authorities to show compassion.

I am deeply concerned about what the deteriorating relationship between the Iranian government and the new U.S. administration means for Americans held in Iran. The cases of my father and brother are not political, but humanitarian, and thus, they should not have to suffer the repercussions of two feuding nations. Regardless of the challenging relationship, I implore Trump to deliver upon his campaign promise and do what is necessary to free my father and brother.

Baquer and Siamak were relentless advocates for the vulnerable and the voiceless. Now that they are the ones without a voice, let us be relentless advocates for them.

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