



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on January 28, 2013

Iranian Court Sentences U.S. Pastor to Eight-Year Prison Term

An American Christian pastor who was detained by authorities in his native Iran has been sentenced to eight years in prison by an Islamic court. According to the [American Center for Law and Justice](#) (ACLJ), a Washington, D.C.-based legal advocacy group that was lobbying for his release, 32-year-old Saeed Abedini, who has been imprisoned in Iran since he was taken into custody back in September, was convicted by Judge Pir-Abassi of Iran's Revolutionary Court — known throughout the country as the “hanging judge” for his legal brutality toward non-Muslims who face him — for supposedly threatening Iran's national security because of his leadership in Iran's underground church movement.



“This is a real travesty, a mockery of justice,” said ACLJ's executive director Jordan Sekulow. “From the very beginning Iranian authorities have lied about all aspects of this case, even releasing rumors of his expected release. Iran has not only abused its own laws, it has trampled on the fundamentals of human rights.”

According to Sekulow, Abedini and his attorney were allowed to attend only one day of the trial, which began January 21, and were prohibited from participating directly in any trial proceedings. In a letter written last month from his jail cell, Abedini said that he has been beaten and tortured throughout his imprisonment, which has led to speculation about his well-being.

Sekulow said it is deeply troubling that “we have a U.S. citizen who has been beaten and tortured since his imprisonment last fall, now facing eight years in Evin Prison, one of the most brutal prisons in Iran.” He added that the pastor, whose wife Naghmeh and their two small children remain in the United States, will most likely continue to face “life-threatening torture and abuse at the hands of the Iranian regime — simply because of his Christian faith.”

On January 21, the first day of Abedini's trial, Iran's state news agency reported that the American pastor, who was in the country to help establish a non-sectarian orphanage, was set to be freed. But Naghmeh said that the report turned out to be a cruel lie. “We should not trust the empty words or promises put out by the Iranian government,” she said after receiving word of her husband's sentence. “These false hopes amount to psychological torture. You don't want to trust them, but they build a glimmer of hope before the crushing blow.” She said that the latest news was devastating for her and her children. “We must now pursue every effort, turn every rock, and not stop until Saeed is safely on American soil,” she said.

As reported earlier in [The New American](#), the Muslim-born Abedini became a Christian after training to be a suicide bomber in his native Iran. The American-born Naghmeh, whom he married in 2005, related that Abedini had become very depressed as a result of the training, and that “Christianity saved his



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life." Following his Christian conversion, Abedini ultimately became a leader in Iran's underground church, and before leaving the country, oversaw about 100 churches and 2,000 members in 30 Iranian cities.

Naghmeh said her husband's role as a Christian leader drew the ire of Muslim authorities in the country. "They see the underground churches as a threat and they see Christianity as a tool from the West to undermine them," she told Fox News. "They think if the country becomes more Christian, they are no longer under Islamic authority. That's why it's a threat."

Observers have noted that the Obama administration has remained strangely detached from the case, given the fact that a U.S. citizen has been imprisoned without due process. The National Security Council managed a brief statement following Abedini's sentencing, claiming that the Obama administration is "deeply disappointed that Saeed Abedini has been sentenced to eight years in prison in Iran on a charge related to his religious beliefs. We condemn Iran's continued violation of the universal right of freedom of religion and we call on the Iranian authorities to release Mr. Abedini." However, there has been no formal statement from the State Department throughout the ordeal. "It's as though we are letting the Iranian government lead with their interpretation of what he's done wrong instead of protecting our American ideals," said Naghmeh. [Fox News](#) reported that days prior to the trial "50 members of the House of Representatives signed and delivered a letter to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's office urging her to leave 'no stone unturned' in her efforts to bring Pastor Saeed back home."

One concerned congressman, Trent Franks (R-Ariz.), who heads the House Bipartisan International Religious Freedom Caucus, said that "if our own State Department fails to advocate for a U.S. citizen who faces injustice in a country that is widely regarded as one of the most egregious human rights abusers, then I believe they have failed in one of their most fundamental responsibilities to American citizens. Every U.S. citizen should have the assurance that the U.S. government will come vigorously to their defense in a time of need, especially when they are unjustly tried in a foreign country. At the very least, Secretary Clinton should publicly call for the unequivocal release of Saeed Abedini."

Tiffany Barrans, ACLJ's international legal director, also wondered "why there hasn't been a statement from the Secretary of State. Why are they waiting? Why didn't begin advocating on his behalf from the moment they found out he was arrested?"

In late December, as the news media began to widely report Abedini's plight, the State Department deftly handed off questions about the imprisoned American to the National Security Council (NSC), which mouthed a generic concern for Abedini's well-being. "We remain troubled by the case of U.S. citizen Saeed Abedini, who was arrested by Iranian officials more than three months ago on charges relating to his religious beliefs," sounded NSC spokesman Tommy Vietor. "We call upon Iranian authorities to release him immediately."

For her part, the American pastor's wife continues to question the government's apparently passive response. "Imagine your own husband or father taken from you for so long," Naghmeh said. "What would you do? You would do everything in your power. I want the State Department to do everything in their power to get him out and bring him home."

In an e-mail alert following news of Abedini's harsh prison sentence, the ACLJ's Jordan Sekulow asked Americans to "continue to pray for Pastor Saeed and his family." He added that his group would "continue to utilize all of our efforts to see that justice is served and Pastor Saeed is safely in the arms of his loving wife and two children back home in the United States."



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