



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on September 3, 2013

Sec. of State Kerry Calls on Iran to Release American Pastor

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry [released a statement](#) on August 28 calling on the government of Iran to aid in the return of three U.S. citizens to their families, including Iranian-American pastor Saeed Abedini, who has been held in an Iranian prison for nearly a year. The request came the same week that an [Iranian court denied an appeal](#) by Abedini to revisit his conviction and eight-year sentence for supposedly threatening Iran's national security because of his humanitarian work and leadership role in the nation's underground church movement.



"The United States respectfully asks the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran to work cooperatively with us in our efforts to help U.S. citizens Robert Levinson, Amir Hekmati, and Saeed Abedini to return to their families after lengthy detentions," Kerry said in the statement.

Levinson has been missing in Iran since 2007, and Hekmati has been held by Iran on espionage charges for the past two years. Kerry appealed to new Iranian president Hassan Rouhani (shown on right), whose political posture has suggested a more open attitude by Iran's government in international relations. "President Rouhani has shared in his speeches and interviews over the past few months his hope and vision to improve the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran's relationship with the world," said Kerry's statement. "We urge the Iranian Government to release Mr. Hekmati and Mr. Abedini and to help us locate Mr. Levinson so that they may be reunited with their families as safely and as soon as possible. These men belong at home with those who love them and miss them."

Abedini's wife, Naghmeh, has expressed frustration over the Obama administration's lack of involvement in securing her husband's release. In March she testified before Congress in an attempt to persuade the State Department to take a more proactive role in the case, and has been blunt in voicing her disappointment in the president's apparent lack of interest in her husband's plight. "I am disappointed that as a country founded on religious freedom, our government has been awkwardly silent as an American citizen is wasting away in an Iranian prison because he chose to practice his God-given right to choose his religion," Naghmeh said.

The pastor's wife followed up Kerry's statement with one of her own, saying that while she was grateful for the State Department's involvement, "I still expect my president, President Obama, who has remained silent thus far, to speak out on this very critical human rights issue and let the Iranian government and the world know that religious freedom is still a top priority for our government." She insisted that Obama "must demonstrate that America will not stay silent in the face of religious persecution, nor will it let an American citizen waste away in an Iranian prison simply because he chose to follow Jesus."



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Naghmeh pointed out that even as her husband faces beatings and daily threats because of his faith in Christ, Obama “has not spoken a word about him. As we commemorate the 50th anniversary of the historic speech defending freedom by Dr. Martin Luther King ... I am extremely disappointed that President Obama has chosen to remain silent on this critical human and religious rights case of an American imprisoned in Iran.”

During his nearly 12 months of imprisonment, Abedini has twice been in solitary confinement, and was refused medical treatment for months for internal bleeding that resulted from beatings he received by prison guards trying to force him to deny his faith.

From prison Abedini has penned letters that emphasize his continued faith in Christ in the midst of intense persecution. “The reality of Christian living is that difficulties or problems do arise in our lives,” Abedini wrote in a rare letter allowed out of the country. “Persecution and difficulties are not new occurrences, but are seen often in the Christian life. It is through the suffering and tribulations that we are to enter the Kingdom of God.”

Photo of Hassan Rouhani: AP Images



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