



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on August 27, 2013

Iranian Court Denies Appeal by Imprisoned U.S. Pastor

A court in Iran has denied the appeal of a U.S. pastor who was sentenced in January to eight years in an Iranian prison because of his church and humanitarian work among his native Iranian people. As reported previously by [The New American](#), in March 33-year-old Saeed Abedini, a U.S. citizen from Idaho, was given the eight-year sentence by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Court for supposedly threatening the country's national security because of his leadership in Iran's underground church movement. The decision to deny Abedini's appeal was made by a two-judge panel of the Tehran Court of Appeals, which made its ruling on August 25 but has thus far refused to provide the U.S. pastor's attorney with a copy of the ruling.



Abedini's wife, Naghmeh, expressed the extreme disappointment she and her children felt over the decision of the Iranian officials. "The news out of Iran is devastating to our family," said Naghmeh in a statement released by the Washington, D.C.-based [American Center for Law and Justice](#) (ACLJ), which is representing her family in the international case. She said that she and ACLJ planned to consult with legal counsel in Iran to consider their options going forward. "The family could appeal the case to the Supreme Court in Tehran or plead for the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, to intervene and pardon Pastor Saeed," she said. "From past cases, we know that the decision to release my husband lies solely at the mercy of the Supreme Leader."

ACLJ Executive Director Jordan Sekulow said that while his group had been hopeful of a positive outcome to the appeal, ultimately the judges "demonstrated an utter disregard for the fundamentals of human rights.... The decision is deeply troubling and underscores Iran's continued violation of principles of freedom of religion, association, peaceful assembly, and expression." He added that the decision "signals a new level of concern for Pastor Saeed's safety. By keeping the eight-year prison sentence in place, Pastor Saeed now potentially faces additional beatings and abuse inside Evin Prison (shown) — treatment that has significantly weakened him during his first year in prison."

Naghmeh, who in March testified to the U.S. Congress in an attempt to prod the State Department into taking a more active role in the case, said the Obama administration continues to show little interest in her husband's dire circumstances. "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," the pastor's wife said.

She noted that as her imprisoned husband faces daily threats because of his refusal to deny his Christian faith, President 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



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disappointed that President Obama has chosen to remain silent on this critical human and religious rights case of an American imprisoned in Iran."

The Rev. Abedini was taken into custody in Iran last September after making several previous trips there to work with churches he had helped establish, as well as to distribute humanitarian aid. 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 life." Following his Christian conversion, Abedini ultimately became a leader in Iran's underground church, and before leaving the country to become a U.S. citizen oversaw about 100 churches and 2,000 members in 30 Iranian cities.

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

Over his past year of imprisonment, Abedini has faced solitary confinement at least twice, and has been beaten repeatedly by prison officials who continue to try to force him to deny his faith in Christ. He was reportedly refused medical treatment for months for internal bleeding that resulted from the beatings.

From prison the pastor 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."

Meanwhile, across the nation and the world, prayer vigils are being planned to mark the one-year anniversary of Abedini's was arrest on September 26, 2012, and to intercede for his release. Thus far an international [petition calling for his release](#) has reached nearly 620,000 signatures. The petition — addressed to the United Nations, the European Union, and the Council of Europe — reads: "Violating its treaty obligations and its own constitution, the Islamic Republic of Iran has sentenced an American pastor, Saeed Abedini, to prison for eight years for merely exercising his fundamental human right to religious freedom." The petition asks the three bodies to take "all available diplomatic action to press Iran to respect human rights and release Pastor Saeed."

While Iran's Islamic judges have a deserved reputation for dealing harshly with Christians convicted by their courts, there are occasions of apparent mercy. In 2012 Iranian pastor [Youcef Nadarkhani was freed](#) after spending three years in an Iranian prison for trying to convert Muslims to his faith. For several months religious authorities in the country had threatened to execute Nadarkhani unless he renounced his faith — something he steadfastly refused to do.

Photo of Evin Prison in Evin, Iran



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