



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on February 24, 2012

State Department, White House Demand Release of Iranian Pastor

As Christians around the world pray and wait for word about the fate of Iranian pastor Youcef Nadarkhani (left), the Obama administration has added its voice to those demanding that the Iranian government release the Christian minister, who was sentenced to death last year for refusing to renounce his faith.



On February 23, the U.S. State Department said that it was “deeply concerned” over the death sentence that Iran’s Islamic government had issued against the pastor because he had refused repeated demands to deny his Christian faith. “Such government persecution for simply following one’s faith is common in Iran, where followers of many religious traditions face harsh treatment and severe violations of their religious freedom,” said State Department Deputy Spokesman Mark Toner. “We stand with religious and political leaders from around the world in condemning Youcef Nadarkhani’s conviction and call for his immediate release.”

On February 21 Jordan Sekulow of the [American Center for Law and Justice](#) (ACLJ), a conservative legal group working to secure Nadarkhani’s freedom, said that his group had received news out of the country that Iran may have issued an execution order for Nadarkhani, who has been imprisoned since October 2009.

“As of today, we cannot confirm that Pastor Youcef is alive,” said Sekulow. “The news out of Iran is not encouraging. With Iran now dominating international headlines because of its military actions, it’s clear Iran may have decided to move forward by issuing an execution order, knowing that the world’s attention is focused elsewhere right now.”

Sekulow said that Iran’s judiciary chief, Ayatollah Sadegh Larijani, would have to approve publicly held executions, but noted that the majority of executions in the country are done in secret. “Iran’s legal system is not like any [other] legal system in the world,” said Sekulow, adding that “even his legal team might not find out about the execution until the body is delivered to the family.”

Sekulow said that Iranian officials could also reject the execution order and release Nadarkhani if they desired. He emphasized that his and other groups had been working behind the scenes to negotiate a release for the Christian minister.



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As reported by [The New American](#), Nadarkhani, who is married and the father of two young sons, has refused repeated demands from Iranian religious leaders to renounce his faith. If the country follows through with its death sentence, it would be the first time in 20 years that the Iranian government has executed someone for apostasy against Islam.

Writing in the [Washington Post](#) late last year, Sekulow explained that the “11th branch of Iran’s Gilan Provincial Court has determined that Nadarkhani has Islamic ancestry and therefore must recant his faith in Jesus Christ.”

In his latest statement Sekulow said that “Pastor Youcef’s situation — an innocent man convicted and sentenced to death for becoming a Christian — has not been this dire since we first brought his case to your attention last year.” He added that there has been “a disturbing increase in the number of executions conducted by the Iranian regime in the last month.”

A separate organization, [Christian Solidarity Worldwide](#), issued a statement saying they had “grave concerns that the death sentence could be carried out at any time without prior notification and that the authorities will merely announce it later, a practice that is not uncommon in Iran.”

On February 23 the White House also [issued a statement](#) condemning Iran for its treatment of Nadarkhani. “This action is yet another shocking breach of Iran’s international obligations, its own constitution, and stated religious values,” said the statement. The White House declared that the United States “stands in solidarity with Pastor Nadarkhani, his family, and all those who seek to practice their religion without fear of persecution ... [and] calls upon the Iranian authorities to immediately lift the sentence, release Pastor Nadarkhani, and demonstrate a commitment to basic, universal human rights, including freedom of religion.”

According to [CBN News](#), some members of the U.S. Congress have added their collective voice to those calling for the release of Nadarkhani, with at least seven of them introducing a House resolution on February 17 condemning the Iranian government for its “persecution, imprisonment and sentencing” of the 34-year-old Iranian pastor.

“Iran has become more isolated because of their drive for nuclear weapons, and the fundamentalist government has stepped up persecution of religious minorities to deflect criticism,” one of the congressmen, Rep. Joe Pitts (R-Penn.), told [FoxNews.com](#). “The persecuted are their own citizens whose only crime is practicing their faith.”

Iran’s religious authorities have been infuriated that Nadarkhani, who pastored a congregation of some 400 believers in northwest Iran, has refused to bend to their will. As *The New American* reported last September, when Iran’s Islamic judges demanded that he repent of his Christian faith, Nadarkhani responded: “Repent means to return. What should I return to? To the blasphemy that I had before my faith in Christ?” The judges clarified: “To the religion of your ancestors, Islam.” To which Nadarkhani replied, “I cannot.”

Even in the uncertainty over Nadarkhani’s present fate, Sekulow is urging people of all faiths to pray, [share the Iranian pastor’s story](#) with others, and to join in the [call for his release](#).



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