



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on February 18, 2013

U.S. Lawmakers Pressure for Release of American Pastor Imprisoned in Iran

More than 80 senators and representatives sent a [letter](#) February 12 to new U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, urging him to step up U.S. efforts to gain the release of 32-year-old American pastor Saeed Abedini, who was [sentenced last month](#) to eight years in an Iranian prison for his pastoral leadership of Iran's underground church. Abedini, who was born and raised in Iran, had recently been making regular trips back to Iran with his American-born wife and children. He was taken into custody last September while in Iran to help start a non-sectarian orphanage and was subjected to severe torture and beatings in Iran's notorious Evin Prison before being convicted and sentenced last month by one of Iran's most ruthless religious court judges.

In late January, Kerry told U.S. Senator Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) that he was "deeply concerned about the fairness and transparency" of Abedini's trial and conviction. Kerry emphasized that he and the Obama administration "condemn Iran's continued violation of the universal right of freedom of religion and call on the Iranian authorities to respect Mr. Abedini's human rights and release him."

While thanking Kerry for his public statement on the diplomatic issue, the group of bipartisan lawmakers urged the new secretary of state to go a step further and "exhaust every possible option to secure Mr. Abedini's immediate release." They counseled that although "there are countless important issues that come before you, few are more sacred than defending the most fundamental rights. It is even more incumbent upon us to stand against persecution when it is levied against our own citizens. As an American citizen, Mr. Abedini deserves nothing less than the exercising of every diplomatic tool of the U.S. government to defend his basic human rights."

The lawmakers noted that the sentencing judge in the case — known as the "hanging judge" for his disregard of justice and penchant for meting out outlandishly severe sentences on political defendants — has been condemned by the European Union for his actions against Iranian human rights activists following the country's 2009 elections. "It is deeply disturbing that the human rights of an American citizen were decided by an Iranian judge of this repute," wrote the legislators.

"Every American citizen traveling abroad should have the assurance that the U.S. government will come vigorously to his or her defense if they are unjustly detained or imprisoned," the lawmakers concluded. "We respectfully request that you continue to use every diplomatic avenue possible ... to secure Mr. Abedini's unconditional release and personally and publicly condemn his arbitrary detention in a statement."

Among the high-profile lawmakers signing the letter were Senators Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.), Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.), and Barbara Mikulski (D-Md.), and Representatives Trent Franks (R-Ariz.), Henry





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Waxman (D-Calif.), and Michele Bachmann (R- Minn.).

Jordan Sekulow of the [American Center for Law and Justice](#) (ACLJ), which has taken the lead in seeking Abedini's release, applauded the bipartisan effort on the Iranian-American pastor's behalf, emphasizing that "Pastor Saeed's life hangs in the balance. Secretary Kerry's personal involvement in this case is critical to securing the freedom of this American."

An [international petition](#) launched by ACLJ has thus far garnered over 225,000 signatures from individuals demanding that Iran release Abedini. Additionally, the ACLJ's European arm has called on the United Nations Human Rights Council to become involved. "We know that international pressure works," said Sekulow. "We saw that with the case of [Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani](#), who was released for a second time earlier this year after being sentenced to execution for apostasy (converting to Christianity). His freedom is the direct result of immense international pressure."

As a result of Abedini's conviction, following a closed trial that not even his attorney could attend, the pastor's American-born wife, Naghmeh, fears that the Iranian government may not allow her husband to see her or their two young children for the next eight years. She expressed her frustration over the U.S. government's less-than-aggressive response to Abedini's plight. "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."

Naghmeh recalled her last conversation with her husband after his conviction, telling the ACLJ that he expressed apprehension over his future at the hands of his brutal Iranian captors. "When I heard this from my husband, I cried," she said. "It broke my heart. Behind those walls he feels helpless and relies on us to be his voice. It is so easy to feel forgotten in the walls of the prison."

In an interview with [Asia Harvest](#), a U.S.-based missions organization, Naghmeh appealed to fellow Christians to intercede in prayer on behalf of her husband. "Our greatest source of strength and need is prayer," she said. "In all other ways God will provide." She added that her husband "wants nothing more than God's kingdom to come to the Middle East. If the church draws close to God in prayer during suffering, then there will be amazing blessing in revival. Prayer encourages the one in prison to endure suffering and to be a joy and a light to those around him."



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