

On A Triumphant Day For American Diplomacy, Republicans Criticize Obama

BY RYAN KORONOWSKI JAN 16, 2016 4:17 PM (DOC A)

Iran said Saturday it released four Americans it had detained, in exchange for seven Iranians charged or held in the United States, according to state media.

Later on Saturday, the Washington Post reported that Iran had re-entered the global economy after its sanctions were officially lifted following the confirmation it had met its responsibilities to disable its nuclear infrastructure.

Washington Post reporter Jason Rezaian, former Marine Amir Hekmati and pastor Saeed Abidini were reportedly among the group to be flown from Tehran to Switzerland, and from there to the U.S. military base in Landstuhl, Germany to receive medical care, according to the AP. Separately, Iran also agreed to release American student Matthew Trevithick, who had recently been detained. The seven Iranians would be offered clemency over charges of violating sanctions on their country.

Rezaian, the Post's Tehran bureau chief, was arrested in 2014 and convicted of spying in a closed trial. Hekmati was visiting family in Iran in 2011 when he was arrested and convicted of espionage and sentenced to death. That sentence was overturned and then he was re-convicted on a different charge of aiding the enemy and sentenced to 10 years. Abidini was convicted of threatening Iranian national security by setting up a network of churches in people's homes.

This breakthrough elicited praise from many around the globe, including press freedom groups like the Committee to Protect Journalists.

Prominent Republicans, however, reacted with statements of outrage and frustration, directed at the Obama administration.

Donald Trump, campaigning in New Hampshire, said that the prisoners should have been released years ago, according to MSNBC.

"Doesn't sound too good. Doesn't sound too good," the Republican frontrunner said. "But we have to see because I just heard about this an hour ago. But — and I'm happy they're coming back — but I will tell you it's a disgrace that they've been there for so long. It's a disgrace, remember that. A total disgrace."

Trump did not specify by what means the prisoners should have been made to return prior to now.

The real estate mogul also expressed dismay at the implementation of the nuclear deal next week. "They're getting seven people, so essentially they get \$150 billion plus seven, and we get four," he said, glossing over the fact that the United States is not paying Iran \$150 billion, but releasing \$150 billion in frozen Iranian assets.

His main rival for the nomination, Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX), offered "prayers of thanksgiving" at the news, but then turned his ire to the administration.

"We don't know the details of the deal that is bringing them home and it may well be that there are some very problematic aspects to this deal," he told reporters in South Carolina Saturday. "But at least this morning I am giving thanks that Pastor Saeed is coming home. It's far later than it should have been but we will be glad to welcome him home."

Fox and Friends reported the news "begrudgingly," as this Crooks and Liars clip suggests, after months of criticizing the administration for pursuing the nuclear deal without securing the release of the prisoners

GOP presidential candidate Marco Rubio tweeted that he was thankful prayers had been answered for the return of the detainees. He then attacked the administration.

"Governments are taking Americans hostage because they believe they can gain concessions from this government under Barack Obama," Rubio said in Iowa. "It's created an incentive for more people to do this in the future."

The candidates may attack the administration for being too soft, but the hard line taken by the George W. Bush administration on Iran (one of three in Bush's "Axis of Evil") did not prevent the country from detaining Americans.

Rubio said he would cancel the Iran nuclear deal on Day One if elected president. The deal is scheduled to be implemented next week.

Chris Christie also said he would not take the "disrespect" Obama has taken from Iran were he to be elected president.

Ben Carson said in a statement he was "overjoyed" at the prisoners' release, though he also criticized the nuclear deal.

Sen. Rand Paul (R-KY) expressed relief at the news, saying "I am pleased that our government did not sit idly by while an American citizen was persecuted abroad due to religious intolerance" in a statement.

Former Gov. Mike Huckabee (R-AR) said that while "it's great" they are being released, "they should've been released before we ever sat down at the negotiating table."

"This good news shows that diplomacy can work even in this volatile region of the world," said Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders in a statement praising the deal.

This week, two U.S. Navy patrol boats briefly strayed into Iranian territorial waters and their crews were briefly detained. Despite the outrage from conservative politicians, the sailors were returned safely. Experts credited the warming relations between the U.S. and Iran following the nuclear deal that could allow such a potentially explosive conflict to be resolved.

While many were undoubtedly praying for the return of those detained, the executive branch put in months of difficult work that helped secure their release through hard diplomacy. Huffington Post's Ryan Grim confirms that the negotiations took place alongside those focused on the nuclear deal, and for a time it seemed as though the prisoner swap may not happen at all.

For all the tough talk against the "Evil Empire" in the 80's by the Reagan administration, it made a deal to return home journalist Nicholas Daniloff, who had been detained by the U.S.S.R. which was very similar to the deal the Obama administration made with Saturday's swap.