GOP presidential candidates say Iran prisoner swap makes U.S. look weak

By Anne Gearan January 16 (DOC B)

The leading Republican presidential candidates accused President Obama on Saturday of catering to a dangerous theocracy by swapping Iranian prisoners for Washington Post reporter Jason Rezaian and other Americans imprisoned in Iran.

Even as some of those candidates welcomed the release of the Americans, they said the deal encourages hostage-taking or took far too long to arrange.

"This should have been done three, four years ago, when the deal was struck," Republican front-runner Donald Trump said at a New Hampshire campaign rally. "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."

Rezaian; Saeed Abedini, of Boise, Idaho; Amir Hekmati, of Flint, Mich.; and Nosratollah Khosravi-Roodsari were freed Saturday. A fifth American, student Matthew Trevithick, was freed separately.

U.S. and Iranian officials said the releases were in exchange for seven people imprisoned or charged in the United States, and both nations linked the prisoner trade to the landmark nuclear deal between Tehran and six world powers.

Trump indicated that he did not agree with the decision to swap seven Iranian prisoners for four American prisoners. He accused the Obama administration of further capitulating to Iranian demands by giving Iran $150 billion in sanctions relief under the nuclear deal.

"So essentially they get -$150 billion plus seven, and we get four," Trump said. "Doesn't sound too good. Doesn't sound too good."

Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Tex.), running second to Trump in major polls and a strong contender to defeat Trump in the Iowa caucus vote two weeks away, thanked God for the release but added a caveat about the terms of the arrangement.

"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," Cruz told reporters in Fort Mill, S.C.

"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."

Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) said the deal to grant clemency to seven Iranians charged in the United States in exchange for the Americans' release opens the door for other regimes to try to use captured Americans as bargaining chips.

"The fact of the matter is that this tells us everything we need to know about the Iranian regime. That they take people hostage in order to gain concessions," Rubio said while campaigning in Iowa. "And the fact that they can get away with it with this administration, I think, has created an incentive for more governments to do this around the world."

Rubio has previously expressed support for Rezaian by wearing a "Free Jason" pin, but like other Republican critics of the Obama administration, Rubio maintains that the jailed Americans should have been freed without conditions.

"They shouldn't have been in jail," Rubio said. "This is hostage-taking."

The prisoner exchange came just as the United States and other world powers lift many international sanctions on Iran as part of the deal struck last year to curb Iran's nuclear program. The Obama administration has previously maintained that while Secretary of State John F. Kerry and other officials raised the Rezaian case and others at their meetings and negotiations with Iranian officials, prisoner releases would not be part of the nuclear deal.

The releases follow Obama administration prisoner-exchange deals to win the release of an American from Cuba and an American soldier captured in Afghanistan by the Taliban.

Republicans, including some running for president, have said both those deals reveal a fundamental weakness and naivete in Obama's dealings with autocrats and terrorists. The Republicans have also roundly criticized the Iran nuclear deal as a risky gamble that endangers U.S. ally Israel. In all cases, the Obama administration counters that the deals are triumphs of diplomacy and statecraft, and were made with clear-eyed knowledge of the trade-offs.

"You are incentivizing people to take Americans hostage and prisoner even if they've done nothing wrong," Rubio said. "Governments are taking Americans hostage because they believe they can gain concessions from this government under Barack Obama. It's created an incentive for more people to do this in the future."

Rubio also repeated his pledge to scrap the international nuclear deal on his "first day in office."

Trump railed against Iran, raising questions about its commitment to peace and the administration's grasp of the situation. Referring to the high-profile temporary detention of 10 U.S Navy sailors by Iranian military officials last week, Trump panned the country for its response.

"I don't know what happened. I guess it sounded like they took a little shortcut through a big body of water. Okay, big deal. And they got locked in, and they dropped to their knees in a begging position. Hands up, guns to their heads," Trump said, describing photos showing the sailors surrendering to Iranians.

"And this is supposed to be our ally?" he added.

Presumptive Democratic front-runner Hillary Clinton was secretary of state in Obama's first term, service she touts as preparation for real-world crises that none of her challengers, Democratic or Republican, possess. She participated in the initial outreach to Iran that led to the nuclear discussions, but the deal was struck after she left office. She supports the agreement but regularly says she would seek to strengthen it and would enforce it rigorously as president. She has said it is in the Iranian "nature" to try to cheat.

Clinton welcomed the releases and implementation of the nuclear deal in a statement late Saturday.

"But we shouldn't thank Iran for the prisoners or for following through on its obligations. These prisoners were held unjustly by a regime that continues to threaten the peace and security of the Middle East," she said.

Clinton's surging competitor, Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders, was the first 2016 candidate to issue a statement on the Americans' release.

"This good news shows that diplomacy can work even in this volatile region of the world," Sanders said.

Clinton's campaign did not immediately react to the news.

Some Republicans also welcomed the releases while criticizing the terms. Former Florida governor Jeb Bush suggested he would have threatened Iran.

"I would say . . . 'If you do not release them, that there's going to be military action, that that's an act of provocation, an act of war,'" Bush said in Amherst, N.H., according to CNN. "What I would do in January is recognize that Iran is not an ally. That's how the Obama administration views this."

New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie said he wants to know more about "the other side of the deal."

"We shouldn't have to swap prisoners. These folks were taken illegally in violation of international law, and they should have been released without condition. But you know, the Iranians have treated this president with disrespect for years, and he continues to take it," Christie said. "I would not take it as president."

Speaking to reporters at a tea party convention in Myrtle Beach, S.C., low-polling Republican candidate Mike Huckabee said the Americans "should have been released before we ever sat down at the negotiating table."

Retired neurosurgeon Ben Carson applauded the Americans' release but added that the nuclear deal presents a danger to U.S. national security interests.

"The fact remains that President Obama's nuclear agreement with Iran is fatally flawed and gravely jeopardizes the national security interests of the American people, our ally Israel and other peaceful nations in the Middle East and around the world," Carson said.

But Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) praised the decision to try to free the Americans, even at a cost.

"Even though Iran is a country with very limited freedom, we were willing to negotiate," Paul said. "It goes to temperament. All the other Republicans are telling you — rip up that agreement. I say: 'Really?' Don't we want to see if it works first?"