

**THE WOODROW WILSON INTERNATIONAL
CENTER FOR SCHOLARS**

**PRESS BRIEFING WITH LEE HAMILTON,
PRESIDENT AND DIRECTOR,
THE WOODROW WILSON INTERNATIONAL CENTER
FOR SCHOLARS**

**REGARDING THE DETAINMENT OF
HALEH ESFANDIARI,
DIRECTOR,
THE WOODROW WILSON CENTER'S
MIDDLE EAST PROGRAM**

MAY 22, 2007

*Transcript by:
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LEE HAMILTON: Good afternoon, and thank you very much for coming. We certainly appreciate the interest that you are showing with regard to Haleh Esfandiari. As we meet here, Haleh Esfandiari, who is the director of the Wilson Center's Middle East program and a cherished friend and colleague, and a beloved wife, mother and grandmother, is detained, as I think you all know, in Iran's notorious Evin prison.

Yesterday, Iranian state television reported that Haleh is being charged with seeking to overthrow the Islamic establishment. Beyond this television report, we cannot confirm that formal charges have been filed by the Iranian government. Haleh has been prevented from leaving Iran since December. She has been interrogated for over 60 hours. She has been in prison at the Evin prison for 14 days now. During that time she has had about 10 or 12 phone conversations with her mother, all extremely brief – no more than two minutes. Her cousin sought visitation rights and was denied. Nobody has seen Haleh since her imprisonment.

The Iranian government has said that she is being investigated for crimes against national security. Haleh's work at the Wilson Center has been characterized as a part of a U.S.-backed plot to foment soft revolution in Iran.

There is of course not a shred, not a scintilla of truth to the allegations against her. Iran is trying to turn a scholar into a spy. Haleh is a scholar. She has never been a spy. The work she does here at the Wilson Center is open and nonpartisan. Her work has been on behalf of dialogue and understanding between the United States and the Middle East, between the United States and Iran.

The Wilson Center's plea to the Iranian government is simple: Let Haleh go. Let her return to her husband, her family, and her work. We have been supported in that plea by scores of people, institutions and associations of good will. A working group, including Haleh's husband, Shaul Bakash, is acting in close coordination with the Wilson Center on behalf of her release. Members of Congress have issued statements, written letters, and introduced resolutions demanding the same. Governments in Europe, Asia and the Middle East have offered to help. And a number of human rights groups, higher education groups, and grassroots movements, have also mobilized on her behalf. And in addition, of course, scores, if not thousands, of individuals have spoken up.

We'd be happy to detail these efforts for you in the questions that follow. Right now we're focused on bringing more attention to Haleh's case to ensure she is in good condition and to speed her release. It is time for Haleh to come home.

I would be happy now to take your questions. If you'll rise and identify yourself, it would be helpful to me.

Q: Hi. I'm Kristen Wilson with NBC. You wrote a letter to the Iranians regarding this. Have you heard anything in response to your letter?

MR. HAMILTON: I did write to the president on February the 20th. I have had no response.

Q: (Off mike) – CNN. If you read that statement by the Iranian News Agency, they have a lot of allegations about several organizations that provide funding for democracy programs, and the allegations are that all of those are a front for this so-called soft revolution. Can you give us your explanation as to what kind of funding you are receiving, whether it does come from those organizations, and whether there could be any use of that money for any purpose described in the statement?

MR. HAMILTON: We have not, at the Wilson Center, in any of our programs, including the Middle East program, received any money from the so-called democracy funds. Haleh did not have any of those monies, nor has any other activity at the center. The funds for Haleh's program have been supported by general funding from the center, but also specific funding that she has raised from several different foundations, including the Harari (sp) Foundation, the Joseph and Alma Gildenhorn Foundation – Mr. Gildenhorn is the chairman of the board here at the center and he's with us this afternoon – the Educational Ventures Foundation, the Safadi Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and the Plowshares Fund have also contributed. Likewise, the United States Department of State and the United States Institute for Peace has provided some funding, but none of that has been identified as the so-called democracy fund.

I think I omitted mentioning the Soros; that's been in the press. The Soros Fund has given us, over a period of about five years, 114,000 – almost \$115,000. That was used for a Washington-based program on Iran.

Yes, here.

Q: Jason Ryan with ABC News. Have you been in touch with the Iranian U.N. ambassador at all, and have you received any assurances on her condition or her safety?

MR. HAMILTON: I've had a number of conversations with Ambassador Zarif at the U.N. We sent the letter to the president through him. He has indicated to me that very high-ranking officials in Iran know about Haleh's case. That goes back several weeks; they certainly know about it now. And I think Ambassador Zarif has been helpful to us in trying to convey the depth of our frustration and the depth of our feeling about Haleh's release.

Now, one of the difficulties here of course is that it's just very, very hard to understand the motives of Iran, very hard to know or understand the key players in Iran, and we have to work through intermediaries, and Ambassador Zarif has been our contact at the United Nations.

Yes, there is a question back here.

Q: I'm Michele Keleman with National Public Radio. I've seen that the lawyer hasn't been able to reach her. Can you tell us anything about what the Wilson Center is doing to get a lawyer involved in this? And judging from the 50 hours of questioning up until this, what have you heard; what sort of case is being built against her? What sort of questions were being raised by the Iranians to Haleh?

MR. HAMILTON: Well, during the four-month period from about the first of January until the middle of May or so – more than four months, Haleh was subject to a great deal of questioning. That questioning began soon after she was detained, and began on January the 4th, as I recall, and continued until the middle of February, and then the interrogations stopped.

It was after the interrogations had stopped that I wrote to the president of Iran, and I indicated had not had an answer from them. On May the 7th, she was incarcerated, and at that date she was summoned to the Ministry of Intelligence, and when she arrived for her appointment on Tuesday morning, the 8th of May, she was put in a car and taken to prison.

During the interrogation, the premise of the questions seemed to be that Haleh was an agent of the American government to overthrow Iran and that the Wilson Center, as an organization, was engaged in a similar activity. And Haleh of course denied all of that. We sent from here a large amount of material about the Wilson Center to the Iranian authorities, most of all of which I think is available on our website, and tried to be supportive of what Haleh was saying in response to the interrogations.

Let me emphasize what I said in my opening statement: There simply is no evidence of any kind or any description, not one bit of evidence, that suggests Haleh had anything to do with efforts to overthrow the Iranian government. That is a totally trumped up charge. It has nothing to do with the facts. Haleh is a scholar, a renowned scholar, and has spent much of her life trying to enhance conversation and dialogue between this country and countries in the Middle East, including Iran.

Q: (Off mike.)

MR. HAMILTON: I'm sorry?

Q: (Off mike) – lawyer.

MR. HAMILTON: Her lawyer was hired by her family, not by the Wilson Center. She is a Nobel Prize winner, of course, Ms. Ebadi, and she has been in this country – she is today I think in Atlanta. We are in close touch with her, and her firm has been trying to make contact with Haleh but has not been able to do so successfully, at least to my knowledge.

Yes?

Q: (Off mike.)

MR. HAMILTON: I'm sorry. Here.

Q: Are you saying her lawyer has never been in touch with her through this whole process?

MR. HAMILTON: Her lawyer, since – her lawyer is the Nobel Peace Laureate, Shirin Ebadi, and she has been in this country I think since – or almost since at least Haleh was put into prison. She has not been in touch with Haleh personally. She has a law firm, and the law firm is in Tehran, and I'm told that the law firm tried to make some contacts. As far as I know, they have not been successful.

Q: Arshad Mohammed, Reuters. Do you have any reason to suspect that she is being badly treated in prison, and do you have any information about the status of her health?

MR. HAMILTON: Haleh was subjected to long hours of interrogation. Some of those hours extended six or seven hours at a time, and they followed day after day. During the time of those interrogations there were threats made on her. If she did not say what they wanted to hear, adverse consequences would follow.

I do not think she was physically mistreated; that is, beaten at any point, to my knowledge. On one occasion she was with her mother at her mother's residence, taking a nap. Three men appeared at her door, one of whom had a video camera, and of course she was very startled with that kind of action. They left. We do not know anything about her treatment in prison except I think she has said to her mother on one and maybe more occasions that she is okay. Nobody has seen her that we know of that could convey to us accurately what kind of treatment she is receiving and what her condition is. Her mother was permitted to deliver to the prison some medicines for her, but her mother or her cousin have not seen Haleh and we don't – the Swiss, who represent our interests there, as you know, have not been able to see here, at least so far as I know, up to this point.

Robin?

Q: Robin Wright, the Washington Post. Can you tell us what the United States government is doing if you want the U.S. to play a role, and what some of the governments you mentioned in the Middle East, Europe and Asia are trying to do on her behalf?

MR. HAMILTON: The United States State Department has been helpful and have done what they can. There was a period of time during the four and a half months when it was our judgment, in close consultation with Haleh's husband, Shaul, and he, in

turn, in conversation with Haleh herself, felt that it was best not to elevate this matter to a government-to-government status.

Once the Iranian authorities put her into jail, that changed, and permission was subsequently given by Shaul to the United States State Department to contact the Swiss and see if the Swiss could check on Haleh's well being. That occurred I think last week.

Q: So the Swiss have asked the Iranian government formally for a consular access?

MR. HAMILTON: That is my understanding, yes.

Q: And they've obviously been turned down.

MR. HAMILTON: And they denied that, so far as we know.

Now, you asked about other governments. There are a number of other governments that have been contacted. Some have come forth themselves. I don't think it's appropriate for me to identify those governments; they can speak for themselves, but there are a number of them, and of course we appreciate all of the efforts being made. And I might say that there are a large number of contacts I think are being made that we don't really have knowledge of here – people that have just acted on their institutions and associations that have acted on their own, which we appreciate but we don't always know exactly what they have done.

Q: Sir, Chris Gordon, NBC4 – in the back. You said that Haleh's husband is working on this problem, but does he also work for the Wilson Center?

MR. HAMILTON: Her husband does not work for the Wilson Center. He is a historian of the Middle East, and he is employed by George Mason University.

Q: Is he here today?

MR. HAMILTON: I don't think so. I have not seen him today.

Q: And in terms of Haleh's work, how would you describe it in layman's terms? Does she arrange seminars, exchange programs? I mean, what is the director of Middle East studies' responsibilities?

MR. HAMILTON: Haleh is the director of our Middle East program, and in that responsibility, she acts as a convener of meetings and conferences where they assess the situation in Iran and in the Middle East, where they talk about policy, where they try to bring a long-term perspective on the political, social, economic developments in that country and in the Middle East generally.

They talk about American interests of course in the region. They talk about the threat of terrorism and the strategic threats to the United States. They try to understand Iran better. And so they've had a series of meetings. I think we have had, over a period of several years, over 100 meetings on Iran, and all kinds of things were explored during those meetings. Haleh has been a very energetic and enthusiastic scholar and has been very successful in bringing together all points of view with regard to Iran, and making sure there is an open dialogue here, I think, as well as anyplace in this city or perhaps in the country.

Q: Sir, while she was in Iran, did she have opportunity to pursue the dialogue, as you outlined it? You know, it has several parts and it includes American interests in the region. Did she get into any serious discussions with Iranians, academics, whatever? In other words, did she sort of carry her portfolio with her to Iran and open it and engage it?

MR. HAMILTON: Iran – went to Tehran I think on December 20th, and she went on a personal visit to see her mother. Her mother is 93, in frail health, and Haleh had gone to Iran twice a year for some time. Those were personal visits, not professional, and she was planning to come back the night of December 30th when she was apprehended.

Q: Jill Dougherty from CNN. I just wanted to be very sure that whether you believe the charges actually have been made against her formally – because if you look at that statement, it doesn't really say she did this; it says, as is known, she is with the Woodrow Wilson Center, et cetera, and there are also some indications that she may have cooperated. There is a reference to information about the men working for the Soros Institute in Iran who was apparently arrested. How are we to interpret this? Is this actually saying those charges have formally been presented, or are we – is it something else?

MR. HAMILTON: What we know is that the Iranian television has reported that Haleh is being charged. Beyond that report, we cannot confirm it.

Any further questions? If not, thank you very much. We appreciate your interest in Haleh Esfandiari.

(END)