

**THE WOODROW WILSON INTERNATIONAL
CENTER FOR SCHOLARS**

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

**WITH SHAUL BAKHASH,
HUSBAND OF HALEH ESFANDIARI**

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SHARON MCCARTER: Good afternoon. I'm Sharon McCarter, Director of Outreach and Communications here at the Center. Thank you all very much for coming and for covering this story. I would ask, if you would, please turn off your cell phones and pagers at this time. We are about to get started as soon as Mr. Hamilton and Mr. Bakhsh come to the table.

(Pause.)

What we'll do this afternoon is Mr. Hamilton will make some remarks followed by some remarks from Mr. Bakhsh, and then we'll open the floor to Q&A. We will have people on each side of the room to bring a microphone to you. If you would please make sure that you give your name and also your affiliation when the mike is handed to you. Thank you.

LEE H. HAMILTON: Thank you Sharon. Good morning. Thank you all for coming and for your interest in Haleh. Today is the twenty-fifth day that Haleh Esfandiari has spent in a small cell in Iran's notorious Evin prison. In a few moments, we will hear from her husband, Shaul Bakhsh, who will give more details about contacts with Haleh.

No one has seen her. We can only imagine what she is going through. As you all know, Haleh is the Director of the Wilson Center's Middle East Program. Media reports indicate that she has been charged with espionage against Iran and "endangering the national security through propaganda against the system." According to an Iranian spokesman, the Ministry of Intelligence is the complainant in this case. We know nothing further about the state of the charges, only what's been reported in the media.

Here's what we do know: Haleh is innocent. The work she does at the center is open, non-partisan and includes a broad range of views. Her program receives zero funding from the United States government's Democracy Fund. Her life has been dedicated to scholarship and to dialogue. Her detention is an affront to the rule of law and to common decency. Haleh is a cherished friend and colleague to those of us at the Wilson Center. Staff and scholars here feel great frustration and anguish, and our message to the Iranian government is simple: Haleh must be released. Let her return to her family and to her work.

We are trying every avenue we can to secure her release. We are grateful to all who are working to free Haleh. At the center we have a small internal group, coordinating daily with an external group of roughly a dozen people. This effort is coordinated by Sharon McCarter, and includes Haleh's husband and several other members are also with us here today.

The United States government has worked through the Swiss government to reach Haleh, and the United States officials have made comments demanding her release. The president and the secretary of state have spoken for her release. Members of Congress have raised their voices, written letters and introduced resolutions. We hope that the United States government continues its efforts to free Haleh and, of course, we hope that this will be an immediate and a top priority.

We have also contacted nearly a dozen European countries, several Asian countries, Middle Eastern contacts, the United Nations and particular countries known to have close ties with Iran. Human rights groups, political action committees, associations of academics and writers, and former students of Haleh's are among the outside groups that have launched efforts on her behalf. There are well over a dozen letter-writing campaigns and petitions. These efforts go beyond our ability to keep track of them. A website, FreeHaleh.org, has been set up as a focal point for these efforts.

Several other Iranian Americans have been detained in Iran. We are concerned for their wellbeing and we urge their release. However, we do not know the particulars of their cases, and we have no way of knowing if their detentions are linked in any way to Haleh's.

I will not speculate as to the Iranian government's motives in detaining Haleh. We have had exceedingly sparse contacts in that country for over twenty-five years. The United States has no diplomatic presence there. Thus, we are left to deliver our message through the media and intermediaries however and wherever we can. Haleh is innocent. She should be set free.

Shaul.

SHAUL BAKHASH: Thank you, Lee. As Congressman Hamilton just said, Haleh has been in Evin prison now since May the 8th, and in that entire period, the family has had no contact with her except for the extremely brief telephone calls she's allowed to make, not every day but most days, to her mother. These telephone calls last barely a minute. When they last a minute and a half, her mother in Iran is ecstatic. She hangs on them so much. And aside from an exchange of "Mother, how are you? How are the grandchildren? I'm okay," nothing of substance is exchanged in these calls, and clearly not allowed to be exchanged. There are some days which are missed, and that leaves Haleh's mother distraught. I should also say that when her mother tries to continue the conversation a little bit, Haleh always says "Goodnight" or "Goodbye, Mother" and puts the phone down. So clearly, I would assume there's a minder standing right next to her.

Aside from these very brief telephone calls, attempts by her mother or members of the family speaking on her mother's behalf to visit her have been rejected. Such a request was made on May 13th, a second one on May 20th or 21st and then again on the 28th and on the 30th, and in each case, no rights of visit were allowed. In fact, on the last two occasions, one a request put in person by Haleh's cousin and a second one by

telephone two days later, the answer was more or less don't call us, we'll call you. The people at the judiciary said that when she's allowed to visit, we will let you know.

I should also say that her lawyers asked for visiting rights and they were not given those either. I spoke to one of Haleh's lawyers in Tehran Wednesday night. He stated the obvious – that Iran's constitution as well as its laws require that any person arrested be informed of the reasons for the arrest within twenty-four hours, an equivalent to a writ of habeas corpus, and as far as we know that was not done and that several articles of the law require the detainee to be informed not only of the causes for his or her arrest but the reasons for this; that is, the charge has to be explained. We do not know whether this procedure was followed in the case of Haleh, and we are not even certain that there are formal charges against her or merely – I shouldn't say merely – or what the judiciary explained as a case in which the complainant is the Ministry of Intelligence which has filed these very serious charges of espionage and working against national security and propaganda against the Islamic republic and against Haleh.

The lawyer also reminded me that, I believe it was on May 13th, when the lawyers went to the branch of the revolutionary court which was handling her case, the judge first said she doesn't need a lawyer, she hasn't asked for one, which was not accurate since Haleh had asked for a lawyer and, in fact, named the lawyer she wanted to represent her. He refused the power of attorney the lawyers were carrying. He therefore refused to give the lawyers any standing in the case or to allow them to see the file.

That really represents all we know in terms of family contact and attempts of her lawyers to represent her, to see her file or to visit her. Thank you.

MR HAMILTON: We'll take questions if there are any. Yes, sir?

Q: (Off mike) -- Pat McGrath, Fox Channel 5 in Washington. Professor, what has it been like for you during this period with no contact? And do you know much about the Iranian prisons and what she might be going through?

MR. BAKHASH: Well, clearly it has been very difficult for the family, I think, for us here and particularly for my mother-in-law in Tehran. I have found, since my wife's arrest, that I am being forced to do some things in public which we don't normally do. We are a private family. We don't like to talk about health conditions of members of the family and private matters in public, but of course we've been forced to do that. And it has been a very difficult period. I am concerned about Haleh's both mental and physical health because of what we know of interrogation methods at Evin prison. So clearly, our level of concern and anxiety is very high, and it seems to me inexcusable that after twenty-four days in prison she's not even allowed a visit from her mother.

Q: Can you tell us something about those interrogation methods that you refer to?

SHAUL BAKHASH: Well, I can only – obviously I cannot speak of what Haleh herself has experienced, but I can tell you from the experience of others who've been

interrogated at Evin prison in the Ward 209 where she finds herself now, that this can involve solitary confinement, blindfolding, interrogations that take place at night, intimidation, threats and fabrications which are clearly designed to disorient the detainee.

MR. HAMILTON: Question in the back.

Q: Thanks. Michele Kelemen, National Public Radio. I wonder, first of all Dr. Bakhash, if you could talk about the financial difficulties your family seems to be having now, as we read in the Washington Post today. And also, Lee Hamilton, you mentioned that she didn't take any money – her programs were not funded by this U.S. Democracy Fund. Why did you feel the need to make that clear?

MR. BAKHASH: I'm sorry, what –

MR. HAMILTON: Well, as you know from this morning's Post, we had a problem with our CitiBank accounts. They decided that my wife being in prison in Tehran was a resident in Iran, and they applied part of the Treasury regulations to these accounts. I'm glad to say that after I got on the phone, very senior officials at CitiBank got to work on this, and by the end of the day they had resolved it to my satisfaction. And I did also get, I should say, even though very angry initially at CitiBank, I did get calls from two very senior officials at the bank, both apologizing and explaining that they had done their best and they had solved the issue by the end of the day.

MR. HAMILTON: It was very difficult for me to understand why the bank would consider Haleh a resident of Iran, as they stated in their letter. She's being held in Tehran against her will. She's clearly a resident of Washington, the Washington community, and I do not see how the bank could possibly consider Haleh a resident of Iran when she is being held there against her wishes.

With regard to the Democracy Fund, I think the premise of a lot of the questions that were addressed to Haleh during the period of intense interrogation were based on the fact that the Iranian government considered her an agent of the United States government. And I think specifically they mentioned the seventy-five million dollar fund which had been, of course, published in our papers and our media fairly extensively, so that was the reason I referred to it.

Yes, here.

Q: (Off mike) -- Mathel Farib (ph) from Radio Fardo (ph). I interviewed you, Mr. Hamilton, and – (inaudible) -- said you've been keeping the detainment of Ms. Espandiari since December and you didn't want that to make it public. Why did you wait months to make that public?

MR. HAMILTON: We waited a considerable period of time because that was the wish of Haleh and her husband. We thought during that period of time that it was best

not to elevate the case, not to make it more visible, not to get it to the level of government-to-government dialogue.

Once she was put into prison, we changed our mind on it because obviously we had not been successful in the preceding approach. You may have an additional comment, Shaul.

MR. BAKHASH: Well, let me also say that for families in such a situation, this is always a difficult decision, and you always believe, I think, maybe wrongly, that by being quiet, by not aggravating the authorities in Iran further, you can solve this quietly and by private probing. This did not turn out to be the case.

I should also add it really wasn't we who made this public, it was the Iranian government by arresting and incarcerating my wife, and once the story leaked, we obviously had to speak about it. I should also say that the astonishing media attention, which is very gratifying to all of us, was not of our making. It was the making of the story itself, and it happened really by itself without a great deal of effort on our part.

Q: Robin Wright, The Washington Post. Lee, could you tell us specifically what governments have been involved, who has offered to do something and has there been any response from the Iranian government?

MR. HAMILTON: I think it would not be appropriate for me to list all of the governments that have been contacted, so I choose not to do that. We really do not have the permission of the governments to do it. There's quite a long list of them that have been contacted.

Q: (Off mike) -- can I just follow up and ask, what kinds of things have you asked them to do?

MR. HAMILTON: Well, it varies from government to government, but first and foremost, of course, we just want to get some kind of information about her wellbeing, and I think there it might be appropriate for me to say that the United States government has been in touch with our representative in Tehran, the Swiss government, and they have tried to see Haleh. To my knowledge, they have not succeeded. But in addition to the Swiss government, which does represent our interests there, we've been in touch with a large number of other governments to see if they can be helpful, and at some point, I suppose, we can make that public, but I don't think I can do that this morning.

Q: Jill Doherty, CNN. You could make a comparison or contrast, what is happening to Ms. Espandiari to what happened to the British sailors who were taken by the Iranians not so long ago. Granted, they are quite different cases, but could you explain if you can why the difference in the level of reaction and especially in the level of reaction by governments around the world?

MR. HAMILTON: I'm not sure, Jill, what you have in mind there. You mean there's been so much more interest in Haleh's case? Is that what –

Q: Actually the reverse.

MR. HAMILTON: The reverse. You thought there – much more --

Q: I would say, well I would say there was more reaction – intense reaction – after the arrest of the sailors. But if you had any –

MR. HAMILTON: Well, I don't know that I can make a judgment about that. We have been pleased, as we suggested, with the amount of reaction in the media – the American media and the international media – about Haleh. I had not, at least, made any comparisons in my mind with regard to the five military persons that were apprehended, so I don't think I have a response to your question. There's another question back there.

Q: Thank you, James Rosen with Fox News Channel. In asking this, I don't want you to think that I subscribe to this point of view, but it's something I would like you both to address for the purposes of the record.

One look at Ms. Esfandiari's background and her resume shows that she is an intellectual, someone who has advocated strongly for the rights of women in the Muslim world, someone who has advocated for democracy and for open dialogue and so forth. If one is running a regime that is brutal and repressive, effectively fascist, theocratic, regardless of whether or not Ms. Esfandiari is receiving any direct funds from the United States government or not, why wouldn't a regime like that consider someone like Ms. Esfandiari a subversive, a danger, a threat, an enemy of that kind of regime? And why wouldn't they, in fact, proceed along these lines?

MR. HAMILTON: I have no desire to speak for the Iranian government.

Q: Hisham Melhem (ph), Al Arabiya Al Nahar (?), Beirut. Professor Bakhash, could you talk a little bit about the meaning of these charges? I mean, do you see them as a prelude to formal trial? I mean, what do they mean in the context of Iranian law, and what are the usual sentences for – do we know of past incidents where intellectuals were subjected to these charges and these charges led to formal trials and then other measures? I mean what do you feel, quote, unquote, that would be the next step?

MR. BAKHASH: Well, let me say first of all, we don't know. And even her lawyers don't know. As far as we know, on the basis of Iranian law, the charges have not been formally made. Now whether these charges were read to Haleh and explained in prison or not, we do not know. In addition, her lawyer told me until charges are submitted in writing to the accused, they have no formal basis. So the first answer is we simply do not know.

But in addition to that, I should say, since, on the basis of such vague and unfounded charges some of these cases have gone to trial, clearly this is a source of great concern to us, especially given the seriousness of these accusations or allegations that have been made against Haleh and others.

MR. HAMILTON: Question all the way in the back.

Q: Levi Sa'un (ph), Alhurra TV. Professor Bakhash, do you plan on traveling to Tehran? Do you think it could be helpful, or your work here is enough? Thank you.

MR. BAKHASH: Well, one's work is never enough. But clearly, I'm much more useful to her here than I would be there, and given the way my wife was treated, obviously it raised concerns for me as well.

I should point out that both the Middle East Studies Association and the International Society for Iranian Studies, as well as a society of Iranian Americans, have all reflected and pointed out that this arrest and that of others, to use their words, places a chill on any Iranian American that is thinking of returning to his or her country, as many of them do all the time.

MR. HAMILTON: Question here.

Q: Thank you very much, Congressman. Guy Dimble (ph) from the Financial Times.

Going back to my colleague's question on the \$75 million requested by the State Department for this year on pro-democracy funding, while it's clear that Woodrow Wilson Center and others are quite open and transparent in the work they do regarding Iran, there is also this issue that the State Department is funding groups for pro-democracy projects inside Iran which are not transparent. And the State Department does not always disclose to whom they give this money. A lot of my Iranian friends who are involved in NGOs and doing such work say in Iran now that they are being tarnished, in a sense, by these rather secretive confidential funding activities of the U.S. government. And their work is being compromised by this.

Do you agree with these views? Do you think the seventy-five dollar (sic) project by the State Department, which I think is going up to over a hundred million dollars next year because this is what they requested, is a useful way for America to go about promoting dialogue with Iran?

MR. HAMILTON: Well, I think, first of all, that the United States government has the right to promote democracy around the world. I think the context in which the United States government does that makes a very big difference. If the policy of the United States government is to overthrow the government, then the Democracy Fund obviously would be viewed with a great deal of suspicion and hostility by the target government. If the policy of the United States government is not to overthrow but to

change the behavior of the government, then I think the Democracy Fund represents an opportunity for constructive change.

With regard to Iran specifically, I think that debate as to what the purpose of the U.S. government is has not been clearly settled. I think the public record would show that there are public statements made both ways, and that has muddied the waters.

To pick up on your comment, I think that the activities of the Democracy Fund, from my point of view, should be an open book. They should be public, they should be transparent. And, if that's the case, I think there would then be no pretext for calling the activities espionage or subversion.

Q: (Off mike.)

MR. HAMILTON: I'll call on this lady here, please.

Q: Hello. Michelle Moghtader (sp) from World Security Institute. Mr. Bokhash, I was wondering, how has the Iranian-American community responded to Haleh's arrest? Have they been supportive, or otherwise?

MR. BAKHASH: Well, there have been staples of support from one association of Iranian Americans. This has been such a busy time for me, I have not followed all of these in detail, and certainly from the messages I have received personally from Iranian Americans all over this country, I would say they have been very supportive and very sympathetic.

MR. HAMILTON: And the question in the back?

Q: Congressman Hamilton, the Iranian Intelligence Ministry claims the interrogation from Dr. Esfandiari has led to the arrest of Dr. Kian Tajbakhsh. The question I have is has there been any cooperation between Wilson Center and OSI, Open Society Institute?

MS. : Can you identify yourself, please?

Q: Siamak Dehampur (ph) with Voice of America Persian Service.

MR. BAKHASH: May I just comment on that before you?

MR. HAMILTON: Yes, excuse me.

MR. BAKHASH: You're quite right that the Ministry of Intelligence issued a statement last Monday in which they claimed -- and let us not forget Haleh has not spoken for herself -- that with her help or her cooperation they were able to identify the representative of the Soros Foundation or the Open Society Institute in Iran. That is clearly an inaccurate statement, even if it was made under coercion, because the

representative of the Soros Foundation in Iran is well-known to everyone, and as the Soros Foundation has pointed out, they have many programs in Iran with entities of the Iranian government, with the full agreement and knowledge of the Iranian government. So it is simply not correct to say that my wife identified for the interrogators something that was publicly known.

MR. HAMILTON: Let me state that the Middle East Program had a grant of \$114, 950 from the Open Society Institute, and those funds from that institute were intended to sponsor a Washington-based programming on Iran. To my knowledge, they have not – the Middle East Program has not received any funding from the Open Society Institute for the year 2007.

Now, of course, the Middle East Program receives grants from a variety of sources, and the one program that I referred to was held here at the Center several years ago in conjunction with the National Security Archives. There are a number of foundations, of course, which give to the Middle East Program, but that was the only grant that I am aware of from the Open Society Institute.

Yes, here.

Q: Millar Sager (ph) from Voice of America. Professor Bakhash, you suggested that you were concerned about your wife's mental and physical health. When was the last time you spoke with her, and what was the substance of that conversation?

MR. BAKHASH: She was arrested on May 8th. We had spoken on the telephone and exchanged emails regularly before that, but I do not recall whether our last telephone conversation was on May 7th or May 6th.

The substance of our emails and telephone conversations in this entire period, since she was prevented from leaving Iran and was put under interrogation, has been almost obsessively with the interrogation and what was going to happen to her. And I can share with you that in that period when the interrogations ended on February 14th and before her arrest on May 8th, obviously there was a period of reprieve, and I was able to share with her some news stories that might have amused her, or on subjects in which she was interested, but in fact, I haven't spoken with her since May 7th or May 6th.

MR. HAMILTON: A question here –

Q: Kate Winston with the Washington Examiner. On the same topic, I noticed that her mother was able to deliver some medicine on May 10. Is there any reason to believe she hasn't been able to access this medicine, was that enough supplies to last until now, and if you don't think there was access to this medicine, will there be long-term effects?

MR. BAKHASH: Well, let me say that Haleh, even at sixty-seven, was a woman in good health, was far more regular in going to the gym than I, and the medication she

took was partly for an eye condition she has and partly for, you know, her arthritis and bones.

So far, her mother has been able to deliver two packages of – both a change of clothing and medication to her. I believe the first package -- at least, she said she received it. When her mother asked her about the most recent delivery, which I believe was just a few days ago, Haleh did not answer, so I cannot really tell you. Her mother tried to deliver some pills at Evin prison this morning, and at the gate, the gatekeeper called into the prison and the answer was we have the pills she needs right here in the prison infirmary, and they didn't accept the delivery on this occasion.

Let me stress, I am not suggesting that she doesn't get her packages. I am only saying we don't know. They give us no real access to her.

MR. HAMILTON: There was a question here.

Q: Zainab Al-Suwaij (sp) from the American Islamic Congress. My question is if there is any future initiatives that the center is considering to free Haleh – whether there is negotiation with the Iranian government or any of the representatives at the U.N. Thank you.

MR HAMILTON: Your question is –

Q: Any future initiatives to free Haleh? Like starting from today and on, like contacting the U.N. representative, the Iranian mission of the U.N. or any other outlet to the government there.

MR. HAMILTON: Well, we hope that any discussions that take place between the United States government and the Iranian government will include Haleh's situation. It is my understanding that the meeting that occurred this weekend was confined to Iraq. It did not go beyond that so far as I know. There may be additional meetings coming up in the future, and if there are, we certainly hope that Haleh's situation is on the agenda.

Okay, a question here.

Q: Yes, hi. Creighton Jones with Executive Intelligence Review. Mr. Hamilton, generally speaking, do you have any fears that we may be in the midst of some sort of a escalating propaganda campaign by networks associated with, say, Vice President Cheney, who wished to move towards military escalation with Iran?

MR. HAMILTON: I'm really not going to get into any further discussion on policy with Iran today.

This woman here.

Q: Hi, thank you. Heather Yamour, Kuwait News Agency. Now, Mr. Bakhsh, have you been in contact with any other family members of the other Iranian American detainees, and are there any plans to help with advocacy for the other families of the Iranian Americans charged?

MR. BAKHASH: I'm not in direct contact but, you know, we all support one another. I think as Congressman Hamilton said in his opening remarks, not only Haleh but all the Iranian Americans who are being unjustly detained should be freed, and we're obviously fully supportive of these efforts that each family and many organizations are making separately to get Haleh and the others freed from prison.

MR. HAMILTON: Okay, we'll conclude here in just a moment. Pat –

Q: Thank you. For the professor and for Congressman Hamilton – since you say the charges are without merit, do you think the fate of your wife is tied to some other issue like Iraq or some other issue that you have to deal with?

MR. BAKHASH: Well, I really think it's not, kind of, profitable for us to speculate on what the Iranian government's motives and intentions are. We know, with confidence, that these charges are totally unfounded and that any case they are trying to make against Haleh would really be fabricated, and I think, you know, the wisest course for the Iranian government is to drop the charges and let her go.

The question raised earlier about the British sailors, it seems to me, provides a very good model of how the Iranian government should treat cases like this. Rather than causing an international problem by false charges and then allowing it to escalate so that a solution becomes very difficult, in the case of the British sailors, the Iranian government, I think, acted with considerable acumen. It brought the issue to an end fairly quickly. It let the British sailors go. International ascension (?) disappeared, the problem was solved, and it seems to me, here too, the Iranian government should act towards its own nationals in the same way it acted towards the British sailors and treat them with the same regard and consideration and let them go in exactly the same way.

MR. : Okay, thank you very much.

(END)