

**WOODROW WILSON INTERNATIONAL CENTER  
FOR SCHOLARS**

**PRESS CONFERENCE WITH HALEH ESFANDIARI,  
DIRECTOR, MIDDLE EAST PROGRAM**

**MODERATED BY:  
MICHAEL VAN DUSEN,  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

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MIKE VAN DUSEN: I'm Mike Van Dusen, deputy director of the center. I want to thank you all for being here. It's a distinct privilege to welcome back Dr. Haleh Esfandiari. She's been directing the Middle East program for close to nine years at the Woodrow Wilson Center.

And it's wonderful to have her after her 8-month ordeal. I might just say, as a prelude, that I guess over a period of time, just about every member of the staff over those eight months did something to help in this process; and must have had 30 to 40 initiatives. We had a group inside the center coordinating efforts here. We had an outside group that was marvelous in giving time and energy to the process of trying to help Haleh win her relief. We know of many of these international initiatives; we do not know of all of them. But from the center's viewpoint, we thank everyone, including the role of many members of the staff in helping in this process.

Haleh is going to speak for up to 10 minutes, I think. And then, we'll answer your questions. Thank you very much for being here. Haleh?

HALEH ESFANDIARI: Thank you very much, Mike. I usually sit here at this table and chair meetings and say only a few words. So this is going to be a first for me to speak a bit longer and take some questions, and answer those questions – because usually I direct the questions to our speakers.

I tried for eight months to control myself and not to shed any tear, whether in private or in front of my interrogators. But today, first in the morning when I went to our senior staff meeting, I was truly moved, and again now. I said, okay, you managed in jail; you are going to manage here not to shed any tears either. So it's wonderful to see my colleagues, my friends from the center, and from outside the center.

I'm really elated to be back with my family, friends, and colleagues. I would like really to thank most fully the director and president of the Woodrow Wilson Center, Lee Hamilton, the chairman of the board, Ambassador Joseph Gildenhorn, the executive director, Mike Van Dusen, and my colleagues and the entire Woodrow Wilson Center staff for their unflinching support and their hard work on my behalf.

I would like also to thank the dozens of organizations, as Mike said, and the hundreds and thousands of individuals around the world who worked and called for my freedom, and how expressed their support for me. I owe a special thanks to the media for their focus on continued coverage of my case. I also would like to thank my lawyer, Shirin Ebadi, although we never met while I was in prison. She was denied access to come and see me.

And a great number of diplomats from many countries, I'm told, interceded on my behalf, especially the Austrian ambassador in Iran, Michael Postle who was an especially good friend of the family and source of support to my mother. I owe a special thanks to my family and friends in Iran, and especially to my extraordinary 93-year old

mother who was relentless in both her efforts and her unyielding optimism that eventually I would be freed. And she was my only link to the outside world through the telephone calls I would make to her.

The last eight months – four of them in solitary confinement at Evin prison – have not been easy. For eight months, I was denied my freedom to leave the country. And to lose eight months of your life at any age, but more particularly when you are in your 60s, is a large loss. No one of us would choose prison over liberty, especially if you are not a political activist like myself.

However, once in prison, I decided I was not going to fall apart. And if I was going to avoid succumbing to despair, I had to make the best of the conditions that was put at my disposal. And to maintain my mental and physical well-being, I imposed a strict discipline on myself, a daily schedule of exercise, reading, and also writing projects I carried on in my head – all this within the confines of a prison room and a prison courtyard where I was allowed to spend part of each day. Not knowing what was going on in the outside world, at least until I was given access to newspapers and television, was quite difficult.

There were, of course, periods of despair, the loneliness. The isolation was the hardest to bear. And my friends and the colleagues at the center know what a sociable person I am. So to be cut off completely from the outside world was very tough. But I believe that really my self-imposed daily routine and the faith – my confidence – that my family, Lee Hamilton, and the Wilson Center staff and friends and supporters in Iran and abroad would not abandon me, and that I would eventually be released is what helped me survive this ordeal.

I should also say that prison being prison is never pleasant. But I was not physically mistreated, and I never feared that I would be mistreated physically. And within the confines of prison and prison rules, my jailers made accommodations that made life tolerable while I was dreaming each day of freedom.

MR. VAN DUSEN: Thank you very much. Haleh. That's her opening remarks. And the floor is open; please identify yourself and the floor is open. Yes?

MS. ESFANDIARI: Just wait for the – you see? I'm back, because I want you to wait for the mike. (Laughter.)

Q: Thank you. I'm Gita Orien (ph) with the Persian News Network of the Voice of America. It's very good to have you back, Ms. Esfandiari. If you were to draw one conclusion from this ordeal, what would that be? And would you still – do you still advocate talk with the Iranian regime?

MS. EFANDIARI: I always have and will advocate talks between governments, be it the Iranian government and the United States or any other government. I think governments should talk to each other.

What did I sort of conclude from this ordeal? In order to survive such an ordeal, you have to be a very disciplined person and have a routine discipline program every day, and that helped me, as I said, to survive physically and mentally.

Q: Hi, Debbie Charles with Reuters News Agency. Can you give us more details of what you did during the day? Like what your cell was like and how you would spend your day?

MS. ESFANDIARI: I really didn't have a cell; I had a room with two relatively large windows. So I had daylight. And during the summer, this meant you had daylight from 5:00 in the morning until 8:00 at night, and then it became 7:30, and 7:00, and so on. So I really had, as I said, a relatively large room; I mean, large enough for me to be able to pace it up and down. If I couldn't go outside, I could walk in the room for several hours a day.

I would wake up around 7:00 in the morning. And from 7:30 to 8:30, for those of you who are familiar with Pilates and exercise, I would exercise on the floor; 8:30 I would shower; and then I would have breakfast. And around 9:00, I would start a rigorous routine of exercising. And this included, sometimes, three to four hours of walking, either outside my room or inside the room.

And I would have a break for lunch. I mean, this was when I was not called in for interrogation. If I was called in for interrogation, I would stop the exercising, change, and go for interrogation. I would come back, continue my exercise until 6:00 in the afternoon.

I would shower again, change, and I always remembered my friends who went to English boarding schools who told me that in the evening, you change for dinner. And I said, okay, I'm going to do that. So I changed around 6:00, and then started reading. I have an eye condition – macular degeneration – so I had to be very careful of how much reading I will do. So between 6:00 and 10:00, I read. And there was half an hour for dinner; they would bring in dinner in the room.

And at 10:00, I would read the newspaper, because I had access to the newspaper. So I would read an evening paper between 10:00 and 11:00. And again, 11:00 to 12:00, I would do more floor exercise. And at midnight – I can't say I closed the light, because there was 24 hours a day the life was on – but I would put sort of a mask on my eyes, and I would just sleep until 7:00. So that was my routine.

But I never saw anybody. And it was isolation; I was in solitary confinement. So I mean, didn't speak to people except the guard. Occasionally, I would discuss something with them. But I was –

MR. VAN DUSEN: Let the record show that in Washington, D.C., she gets up earlier than she did in prison. (Laughter.) Question, back, next to last row.

Q: Thank you. Michelle Kellerman with National Public Radio. Welcome back. I wondered if you've seen the letters that were exchanged on your behalf with the supreme leader of Iran, whether you were surprised that it reached that level, your case? And another question, you said you were cut off from what was happening in the world, but what about what was happening at the prison? Did you know about the other Americans who were being held there?

MS. ESFANDIARI: Do you want to take the first part of the question, Mike?

MR. VAN DUSEN: No, no, go ahead, and I'll finish up.

MS. ESFANDIARI: Okay. At one stage, I was told that Mr. Hamilton had written a letter to the leader, and that – I never saw the letters. To this day, I have not seen the content of the letter. I wasn't even told that the leader had replied to this letter. All I knew was that Mr. Hamilton had written a letter. So that's as far as I know about the letter.

But I think the letter of Mr. Hamilton and the leader's reply to the letter, and his intercession on my behalf, was the main reason for my being with you today. Mr. Hamilton is very much respected in Iran, and he has a special stature. And I think once he stepped in, it really helped my cause.

I was not aware of Mr. Shakeri's being in prison until I came out of prison. But I knew Mr. Tajbakhsh was there, because he would send me English books. Mr. Tajbakhsh lives in Iran, so he had all these books with him, while I was just there for a visit.

So one day – and I suppose we must have shared the same interrogator – I saw the interrogator carrying five, six books. And sort of my eyes lit; I said, ooh, English books. I said, whose are these? And he said, Mr. Tajbakhsh. And I didn't say, wow, is he in here? Have you taken him in – (laughter) – nothing. I said, do you think you can talk to him and see whether he can lend me occasionally these books? He said, okay, I'll ask him. And that same night, around 11:00, one of the guards came and said, we have three books for you. And that was the beginning of me receiving books from Kian Tajbakhsh. But that was all I knew about him.

You know, you develop also an approach for yourself. And I decided I'm not going to ask about Mr. Tajbakhsh, because I knew they were not going to answer me. So why ask a question and not receive an answer? But he did send me; it was a one-way road. He sent me books, and I read them, and I sent it back to him.

MR. VAN DUSEN: During the course of the eight months, President Hamilton sent four letters to Iranian officials, the last one being the letter to the supreme leader in late June. The ground rules for that correspondence and his conversations in the letter

and in his conversations with the permanent representative of Iran to the United Nations were that it would not be made public, either incoming or outgoing.

Yeah, Towell, and then she's next.

Q: Timothy Towell, a retired Foreign Service officer and a friend of the Wilson Center. Welcome home. I was very enthusiastic to hear you say that talks between the governments are very important; not only between our government and Iran, but all governments. And of course, institutions like the Wilson Center, scholars like yourself, free press, other people should be dialoguing with the people around the world. And of course, Chairman Hamilton and former Secretary of State Baker put that in a report that some say, observing this town, people downtown are beginning to pay attention to.

Now, that to me is optimistic. And you said you were optimistic. Do you view this process that you were part of – that Mike is part of, and Chairman Hamilton is part of – do you view this process with the United States and Iraq leading this amelioration of difficulties and a better world in the region?

MS. ESFANDIARI: You meant Iran, correct? (Laughter.) Talking, dialogue between people or institutions, research in two countries has been what I have been doing, I mean, ever since I came to the Wilson Center and we started the Middle East program. And don't forget that Iran is part of the Middle East program. I mean, it took me a long time to convince my interrogator that there is a large Middle East; and Iran is not the whole Middle East. So Iran is a small part of it; and they were just focusing on what we did on my Iran program.

Of course I think it helps. Of course in all these years, while we have had these conferences, the Wilson Center was a place where you could have discussions between the people who were pro and con dialogue. And it helps. But I think, at this stage, the Iranian government is probably a little bit hesitant, whether this dialogue is helpful to them or not, or it's harmful. So we just have to wait and see. But personally, I think it does help, because it exposes the views of the Islamic Republic to a wider audience in a city like Washington.

Q: Greta Kreuz, WJLA-TV. Sort of related to that, tomorrow, of course, is the anniversary of 9/11. What is your take on the rise of hardline Islam, and how should we deal with this?

MS. ESFANDIARI: Tomorrow is the anniversary of 9/11. I mean, it came as a shock to all of us, you know. And as you know, there was not a single Iranian involved in that. And even some young people, quite a substantial number, that evening in Tehran, went and held a candlelight vigil.

To be very honest with you, for the last eight months, I did not think about political issues, nor issues related to radical Islam or how we should deal with these problems. For me, I mean, what was in my mind was how to get out prison, to get my

passport, to get out of the country the first four months – and the second four months, get out of prison.

But we have had a number of meetings in the past at the Wilson Center regarding radical Islam, hardline Islam. And we will continue doing so. And I'm gradually trying to get into that.

Mike, you want to say something?

MR. VAN DUSEN: No, that's fine. Two questions there? The lady first and then the –

Q: Hi, I'm Mathia Javic (ph) from Radio Farda. And my question is in light of what happened to you and the time you spent in prison, do you plan to do anything differently now? Are you planning to continue your work at Woodrow Wilson, or do you plan to go back to Iran? What is your plans now?

MS. ESFANDIARI: Regarding whether I would like to – I would continue at the Woodrow Wilson, it depends on – depends on my – whether they are going to keep me at the Wilson Center.

MR. VAN DUSEN: Let the record show she runs the Middle East program.  
(Laughter.)

MS. ESFANDIARI: Well, you see, we have it on record. So sure I will continue running the Middle East program as I did before I came here. Maybe in the initial stage we won't have as many meetings on Iran, but I will be, you know – we have to see how things will develop. This is my first day at work at the center so I haven't had time to think, to plan, and to see what my colleagues have planned for the future.

Regarding my going back to Iran, I have just returned, you know, from eight months in Iran, and for the time being, I want to enjoy my family and grandchildren and take up my work again, and I don't want to really speculate of what I will do in the future.

Q: Ah, yeah, David – (inaudible) – with The Washington Times. Welcome back.

MS. ESFANDIARI: Thank you.

Q: From the – can you – have you gotten any sense, a larger sense of what sparked this whole incident, what the Iranian government – what happened, what the interrogators were looking for?

MS. ESFANDIARI: You mean –

Q: Obviously it was very bad publicity for them worldwide. What –

MS. ESFANDIARI: I really never understood why I was stopped from leaving Iran or why I was arrested. But after several months of exchanges with my interrogators, it became clear to me that elements in the Iran's – in Iran's intelligence ministry believed what they have said publicly, namely, that the U.S. government entangled in Iraq and elsewhere no longer contemplate a military attack on Iran and that they aim at the – then this revolution in Iran like the ones in Georgia and the Ukraine, and the instruments for this goal are think tanks and foundations, so therefore arresting me and talking about what the Wilson Center does and what foundations in general do.

Q: Welcome back. I'm Christine Chen from Foreign Policy Magazine.

I wanted to ask you what kind of questions were they asking during your interrogation, both before you were brought into prison as well as afterwards. And currently, are there still charges outstanding against you. And the other question I wanted to ask you is how is your mother and how is her health?

MS. ESFANDIARI: I was never – regarding the second part of your question, I was never told that there would be a court case or charges against me. So this was never brought up. So I hope there won't be any charges and any court cases because otherwise they would have mentioned it. So that is hopefully –

The kind of questions they asked me outside the prison and once I went to prison really since I had spoken to these people for a period of four months, sometimes eight hours a day, although I could – you know, I would go back home, but, you know, I would go at 9:00 in the morning and talk to these people or answer questions until 5:00 in the afternoon. There was not much left to discuss in prison. (Laughter.) I mean, we had a number of, you know, sessions together, but maybe going over the stuff that I had discussed with them earlier.

They were interested first and foremost in the work of the Wilson Center, what the Wilson Center does, what the Middle East program does, and what we discussed in each meeting. And I convinced them that what we were – or I hope I did; I tried to convince them that, you know, the Wilson Center is a transparent institution, so whatever we did is on our website. So you could easily find out about the meetings by reading our website than – rather than asking me.

So they were asking questions about the Wilson Center, the Middle East program, and then also about other foundations and other think tanks. And I answered them the extent I knew. I didn't know how other foundations functioned, and so on. So that was it. Basically, my questioning was focused on think tanks, foundations in Washington.

MR. VAN DUSEN: Christine, I just want to thank you. I remember the letter you and your editor sent to us early on offering to help and expressing your concern about Haleh's detention. I appreciate that very much.



I must say that during the early part of Haleh's interrogation in January and February, we sent so much paper to Iran on the Middle East program that I don't think there was anything else that could be sent – (chuckles) – to help us verify certain things about funding and programming.

MS. ESFANDIARI: And I had to translate it into Farsi. (Laughter.)

MR. VAN DUSEN: That is the hard part I guess. Questions? Yes, in the back again. NPR.

Q: Yeah, Michelle from NPR again.

Just to follow up on something you said earlier that you might not have as many programs on Iran, do you think your detention and the detentions of others has put a chill on these exchanges, scholarly exchanges with Iran?

MS. ESFANDIARI: You know, it's too early – it's too early to say. You know, I have just been asked (?) and there has been a lot of – in the initial stage of my arrest, there was a lot of focus on this business of scholar exchange, giving fellowship to Iranian scholars and so on. And then I'm told – and I haven't seen the clipping of the Persian papers. I have them with me. My colleagues here have a whole stack of them for me, so I have to read them. I was told that then there was a total silence in the Persian papers regarding my case and also this exchange of scholars.

I was also told that the ministry of intelligence sent a circular around to other ministries and universities, and I'm not sure about it – I was told; this is hearsay – that if scholars are invited to conferences and meetings, they should check either with their – you know, with their supervisor, or with the ministry of intelligence. We just have to wait and see, and in the next few months to see what is going to happen, whether – if we invite scholars from Iran will they come or not come.

MR. VAN DUSEN: We will want scholars from Iran if we can.

Q: Hi. Greta Creuz, again, Channel 7. What were your lowest moments and how did you get through them, and how has this whole thing changed you?

MS. ESFANDIARI: Of course they were – you know, a prison is prison, that is, you don't – you feel the loss of your freedom. And there were, you know, lowest moments where – when suddenly you have a sense of despair that you will stay here and nobody would care for you. I would ask myself – because I didn't know what was going on in the outside world. I didn't know there was so much activity.

I somehow – on the one hand I knew that my family was going to – was very active. The Wilson Center was very active. But I didn't know, for example, that Iraqi women had signed a petition for me. I didn't know that Arab women, women that I had

been in touch with all of these years in conferences and so on had signed petitions for me. And these petitions would be sent to Iran.

So I didn't know any of these things. So of course there were moments where you sat there and thought, what is going to happen; is anybody caring for me? And then I would speak to my mother on the average every other day. Sometimes I wouldn't speak to her for three days, but on the phone. And then she would say, everybody is doing what they can, you know, that was for your case. But that was it. I mean, she couldn't – we were not supposed to elaborate more.

But then at some stage, we were allowed to – my mother is Austrian – we were allowed to speak in German, and I sense that, that may be a turning point, you know. So they were – there was one occasion where I was walking in the terrace, you know, and there was a white – I saw a white butterfly. And I thought to myself, okay, I'm here; I'm stuck here; what are you doing here? (Laughter.)

MR. VAN DUSEN: Very good. Tim.

Q: Timothy Towell, a retired diplomat, again. I would like to follow up on questions about interrogation. In this city, there is a lot of dialogue about U.S. interrogation, especially in the U.S. press. And some of us old Cold Warriors remember we cut our teeth reading Arthur Koestler's "Darkness at Noon" about Soviet interrogation techniques, psychological, physical, and whether that reveals truth and information or you just tell them what you want to hear.

Would you, without causing trouble, tell us a little more about your dialogue with your interrogator and whether he was behaving him or herself, and whether truth was obtained in that dialogue and process, and whether it was more of a gulag Arthur Koestler environment, or what was the environment like?

MS. ESFANDIARI: Well, particular I'm telling you about the condition in prison, and is my own experience. I don't generalize at all. I don't know what is going on with other inmates and so on.

They treated me with utmost respect. In the Persian language, like in the French language, there is the vous and the tu, the plural you and the more intimate you. We were always on the plural you. It was always vous; it was always either Dr. Esfandiari, or Mrs. Esfandiari. I tried to keep a barrier, you know, between me and my interrogator, and I think they respected that.

Before I was – when I went to prison, there were tough days, you know, long hours of questioning. And I remember at one stage – and this was outside prison, the guy who was questioning me raised his voice. And I turned around and I said, don't you ever raise your voice, and that was it really. (Laughter.) But I was really always very polite with them, and as a result, they were very polite with me.

So it wasn't that – and in prison, you know, they would always say when we have questioned you for two hours, if you are tired, would you like to go back to your room? And I wanted to get it over – I would say, no; please continue because, you know, I just thought that they probably have a certain number of questions – let's get it over. Or whenever we would finish, I would ask them, when would I see you again, and they would say, let's say, in three day's time. And if they couldn't make it, they would always send a message for me telling we are not coming today, or something like that.

This Q&A was always done in writing. You know, so they would put their questions in writing. I would put my answers in writing. So of course this dragged out a bit longer. But as I said in my opening statement, I really was not neither, you know, mentally mistreated or physically. But I'm talking about myself. I don't know how the other inmates were treated.

MR. VAN DUSEN: And part of that is that Haleh had these long hours of interrogation between January and February whereas I think some of the others that are in prison weren't interrogated until they go to prison. In the back. Yes. Right, yeah.

Q: Again, Mathia Javic (ph) with Radio Farda.

In regards to your so-called confessions that were aired on Iranian TV, have you seen it and what is your thoughts on that now?

MS. ESFANDIARI: I wouldn't refer to it – I haven't seen the program. To this day, as I'm talking to you, I haven't. And I saw a transcript of – and I'm told it was an edited transcript.

When I first was taken into prison, I was asked whether I would appear on TV, and I said, sure; the Wilson Center doesn't have anything to hide. Our job is very transparent; my program is very transparent, so whatever I'm telling you now in this room when you question me, I'm willing to say publicly.

And so when they asked me whether I would talk on camera, I prepared the statement, and it wasn't a Q&A. I spoke for an hour talking about the Wilson Center, the other foundations, and the think tank as far as I knew. You know, and I gave my own biography. And once I left the prison, I was chastised – why did I say I'm a 67-year-old grandmother. A lot of my former classmates said you made our age also known – (laughter) – and we were not interested. Why did you do that?

But I never saw it. They, I'm told, you know, edited the one-hour statement and took out bits and pieces of it. And, you know, they cut and sliced. So I suppose they took out bits and pieces that they liked. But as I said, since I always insist that our job is transparent, I didn't have any problem with talking on camera.

MR. VAN DUSEN: Yes, on the side.

Q: Welcome back. Holly Libilese (ph) from NBC.

I just wanted to know, you said you were treated with the upmost respect in prison, but what are your feelings towards the Iranian government right now. And if you had a chance to talk to them and ask them what their motivations are, what would your conversation be like?

MS. ESFANDIARI: That is really speculating. I haven't had the chance to think what I would – I'm really disappointed that this happened to me. I can't – I don't bear any grudges. I'm not – of course there were moments where I was very angry, but I'm back home. I'm with my family. I'm back at work. So I feel a great sense of disappointment. It is as if all of your efforts all of these years were not appreciated and were misunderstood.

So I suppose I would continue explaining what we do at the center if I come to face with a member of the Iranian government. But I'm sure they have read my transcript at length, and so they are probably not interested in talking to me.

MR. VAN DUSEN: Yes.

Q: Debbie Charles again from Reuters.

Can you tell me what – maybe you can't answer, but Mr. Van Dusen – what efforts the U.S. government made to help secure your release?

MS. ESFANDIARI: Mike will answer that.

MR. VAN DUSEN: The U.S. government was constrained by the fact that we – as you know, we have no representation in Iran. We operate through the Swiss government, and in turn the Swiss government was constrained by the fact that they do not consider Hale, for the purposes of what went on in Iran, I guess to be an American citizen; they consider her to be an Iranian citizen.

And so the U.S. government was constrained. We had several conversations with the State Department. And they – I'm told that they worked with several governments in Europe and elsewhere to try and help on these cases.

Q: Gita Kreuz again.

For all of us here who are also looking at the local angle, can you just share with us how you spent the weekend – (laughter) – and what things did you find new appreciation for having not had them for so long, or what things should we Americans appreciate more?

MS. ESFANDIARI: I left Tehran on Monday, so I spent three days in Vienna, Austria, with my husband who met me in Vienna, and my sister who lives there and who

was really organizing the European sort of support that I got from different European country. And since I studied in Vienna, I met with some of my former classmates and friends; we went to the cafes, to restaurants, and I did all the nice things that I was not able to do in Iran.

And the problem was that when I was set free from jail, there was such a visibility for me and everywhere I went, people recognized me, so it was quite embarrassing. So, I tried to keep a very low profile and stay mostly at home in Tehran. Going to Vienna was really a sense of freedom; I could walk in the street; I could walk into a café and nobody would know who I am.

Coming back to the States was amazing. I walked into our house and I started going from room to room. I had blocked, you know, thinking about my husband, my daughter, my grandchildren, the house; I blocked all that out because that would have led me to despair. So, for eight months, or for the four months in prison, I didn't think about it.

I dreamt of my first staff meeting at the Wilson Center. (Laughter.) I seriously did. I really did that, I said, okay, I would tell anybody I'm in town; I didn't know what was going on that everybody would know. I said, okay, I would open the door Monday morning at 9:00, walk in to the staff meeting and everybody said, she's here! So, you know, that I dreamt of, or I planned my comeback to the Wilson Center, and where I would go open the door up at Lee Hamilton's office or Mike's office or Rob's office and say, here I am, back.

But the house, I arrived and, you know, we were met by two friends at the airport. I had asked our daughter not to bring my grandchildren to the airport because I didn't want to get emotional. I knew if I see her, I'll get very emotional; I'll see the children. So we went to the house and I started going from room to room, and I sort of not knowing that I was away for eight months, I turned around to my husband, I said, why is this pot here? And he said, oh, she's back! (Laughter.)

You know, so she's back, okay. Then our daughter came with the grandchildren and it was amazing, you know, to see them and our oldest granddaughter is only six years old, and she told me – she calls me Mama-June (ph), which is German and Persian, and she said, don't you ever go away. And I thought it was very cute. And then they asked me to cook for them a dish they like very much, a Persian dish. So the next morning, I woke up at 4:30 and the first thing I did, I put together that dish for them because I knew they were coming.

The weekend was a family weekend. My cousins came from California; another cousin came from New York. So, we met with some very close friends, some friends. I had two interviews, one CNN and one NBC, so they came to the house. And I walked for the first time after eight months, Sunday morning – I walked in our neighborhood and I said hello to a lot of our neighbors.

And I came to the center Friday morning to see Mr. Hamilton and some of my colleagues and then they said, will you take some time out? I said, no, the best therapy for me is going to be back to work and I'm here. And also when I came on Friday, I found out how much my colleague, Sharon McCarter, and her team and my assistant Azucena have done for me while I was gone. I really didn't know, so it was trying to take in a normal life.

MR. VAN DUSEN: But I think anybody who dreams about a 9:00 a.m. Monday morning staff meeting has gone a little bit too far in the center.

Q: Thank you. The Voice of America again, Gita. You said that once you were released from the prison, you were – the public recognized you. How did they feel towards what had happened to you? Were they sympathetic or –

MS. ESFANDIARI: They would really, I mean, they would say, are you so-and-so? And I would say, yes. And they would say, we are glad you are, you know, you are home; you are out and that was it. We didn't into a conversation. There was a funny incident; I had gone, you know, all my papers were stolen, so I had to get a copy of my birth certificate. You know, you are Iranian, you know – (in Persian) – so I went to the relevant office and there was – a man walked up to me and said, you are so-and-so. I said, yes. Can I take a picture with you? I said, no, thank you!

Everybody, you know, has a cell phone with a camera. And there was another incident, same office the next day. A young woman came up to me and she said, are you so-and-so, or are you her mother? And I said, I'm so-and-so; I'm not the mother. (Laughter.) And she said, well, I thought you were dead. I said, no, as you see I'm alive.

So there were these funny incidents or I would get into a cab and the guy would say, I recognize your face, are you so-and-so; I would say yes and that was that, no other further conversation with them.

MR. VAN DUSEN: Yes?

Q: May I continue? So your case was given a lot of coverage in the Iranian media itself, right?

MS. ESFANDIARI: I don't know. I didn't see the Iranian media when I was first arrested. And when I started reading the paper, which was I think June, already by then I was not at all in the media; they didn't write about me, so I didn't know. And I never saw that TV program when they broadcast it; I didn't watch TV, it really – I would put on the sound and blacken the screen, I just wanted the sound while I was walking in the room or exercising. So I even missed my own program.

MR. VAN DUSEN: Any other questions? Yeah?

Q: One thing you said, I think, is worth commending you for and recommending that you repeat it and repeat it and repeat it. That you explained to everyone, including Iranian interrogators, of the transparency of the work of the Center because there's a very negative tendency in the world now to take a negative view of scholarly centers, NGOs, think tanks, and international non-state entities.

President Putin of the Soviet Union is leaning on NGOs and licensing and punishing them. President Chavez in Venezuela is doing that. So there's a tendency now to look upon you guys as the bad guys and move against you; it's like everyone thinking in the Kennedy administration the Peace Corps was a hideout for the CIA. So it's very important – this open, transparent mission of this center and other important entities. And that's really wonderful what you're doing.

MS. ESFANDIARI: Thank you. You know, I tried to explain to them; whether I convinced them, I'm not sure.

MR. VAN DUSEN: That's very true, Tim. The problem is authoritarian governments do not like things they cannot control.

Yes?

Q: You mentioned that they wanted mainly to know about Woodrow Wilson Center and other think tanks. And in your answers to them, you told them that, at least Woodrow Wilson Center is transparent and they can obtain any kind of information they want on the website, as is true with any other center, as such. Do you think there was another motive behind this whole experience for you on their part?

MS. ESFANDIARI: I really don't know. I don't know, and I don't want to speculate.

MR. VAN DUSEN: Anything else? Thank you all for coming; have a good day.

(Applause.)

(END)