

Iran Releases U.S. Prisoner In Exchange

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Body

SCOTT SIMON: An American graduate student imprisoned in Iran on espionage charges has been freed, just as an Iranian scientist was granted early release from a U.S. prison. Iran's foreign minister tweeted about the exchange. President Trump has confirmed the release by Iran of American student Xiyue Wang. NPR's Peter Kenyon is following the story from Istanbul. Peter, thanks so much for being with us.

PETER KENYON: Hi, Scott.

SCOTT SIMON: And what do we know about this prisoner exchange?

PETER KENYON: Well, the first word came from a Mohammad Javad Zarif. That's the Iranian foreign minister. And he wrote that this Chinese American scholar Xiyue Wang, who'd been arrested in 2016, will be joining his family soon. That's what Zarif wrote. He also posted about the Iranian scientist Masoud Soleimani. He'd been arrested in Chicago last year. Zarif thanked everyone involved, especially the Swiss government for acting on behalf of the U.S., as it frequently does in matters involving Iran. President Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo also weighed in, announcing Wang's coming return to the United States. There'd been some speculation for some time that a prisoner exchange might be possible. And that heated up in recent days. And now it appears to have transpired.

SCOTT SIMON: Tell us about this U.S. grad student. He's been detained on charges that the U.S. says were groundless.

PETER KENYON: Exactly. Xiyue Wang was a graduate student at Princeton. He specialized in Eurasian history. He's married, has a wife and a young son. His wife released a statement saying the family is complete once again, expressing their excitement at the prospect of seeing Wang again. He had been in Iran doing language studies and research for a doctoral dissertation when he was detained. He was charged with espionage - two counts - sentenced to 10 years in Iran's Evin Prison. U.S. officials have always said the charges were bogus, that Wang never engaged in any spying activities. They also denied Iran's assertion that Wang had been sent to Iran by the government.

SCOTT SIMON: And what about the Iranian scientist who can go home?

PETER KENYON: Yes. Forty-nine-year-old Dr. Masoud Soleimani - he was working in Iran. He left on sabbatical, came to the U.S. and was arrested in Chicago on charges of violating trade sanctions against Iran. He was imprisoned. He was apparently nearing release under a plea agreement when this exchange was just announced. Foreign Minister Zarif posted photos of himself with Soleimani flying back to Iran.

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SCOTT SIMON: Obviously, relations between the United States and Iran have been a bit of - tense point for some time now. Does this prisoner exchange signal something larger, some kind of rapprochement between the two countries?

PETER KENYON: I would be a bit cautious to predict anything like that. There's no question this prisoner swap stands in huge contrast to the generally negative bilateral relations U.S. and Iran have had. Ever since the U.S. pulled out of the 2015 nuclear deal, reimposed sanctions, the government of Hassan Rouhani in Iran has been under heavy attack from hard-liners, accused him of making a bad deal and letting Iran down. There are also other people, we should note - other Americans being held - businessman Siamak Namazi, his octogenarian father Baquer, who was imprisoned when he went to Iran to try and get his son released. But, you know, this exchange does show that Iran and the Trump administration can agree on something. And in this case, I'd say the families of Xiyue Wang and Masoud Soleimani are the primary beneficiaries.

SCOTT SIMON: NPR's Peter Kenyon in Istanbul, thanks so much for being with us.

PETER KENYON: Thanks, Scott.

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