

Iranian News Media Reports Pending Released of Americans Detained in Iran; Nuclear Deal with Iran to be Implemented; U.S. Possibly Swapping Iranian Prisoners in U.S. for Release of Americans Held in Iran. Aired 10-11a ET

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Guests: Thomas Erdbrink, Reza Marashi

Highlight: Iranian news media reports the pending release of four Americans detained in Iran. The nuclear deal with Iran is soon to be implemented. The U.S. possibly swapping Iranian prisoners in U.S. for release of Americans held in Iran.

Body

[10:00:00] FREDERIK PLEITGEN, CNN INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENT: But I am assuming that if he is released, it will be pretty quickly he will be out of the country.

MICHAEL SMERCONISH, CNN ANCHOR: Frederik Pleitgen, thank you for your report from Germany. More CNN coverage of this breaking news right now.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: This is CNN breaking news.

CHRISTI PAUL, CNN ANCHOR: We do have some breaking news. We're so glad to have you with us. I'm Christi Paul.

VICTOR BLACKWELL, CNN ANCHOR: I'm Victor Blackwell. Good to be with you. We are welcoming our viewers in the U.S. and around the world.

And the breaking news this hour, out of Iran. After nearly 18 months in prison in an Iranian jail, American journalist Jason Rezaian has been freed. That news being reported by Iran's semiofficial Fars news agency.

PAUL: Rezaian has been reportedly released as part of a prisoner swap, along with Marine veteran Amir Hekmati, Christian Pastor Saeed Abedini, and a third who is still unidentified at this hour.

BLACKWELL: All of this is happening as Iranian officials are in Vienna preparing for the end of sanctions that have crippled their economy for more than three decades related to that nuclear deal. Global affairs correspondent Elise Labott is on the phone with us. Elise tell us what we know about how this deal was reached.

ELISE LABOTT, CNN GLOBAL AFFAIRS CORRESPONDENT (via telephone): Well, Victor know really no details at this point. And I have to be clear that the United States government has not said anything. Often we hear something from Iran about whether someone has been charged, the arrest of Jason Rezaian, but very little details

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of release. All we know right now is, as you said, Iran's semi-official news agency Fars has said that Iran has freed Jason Rezaian and three others Americans as part of a prisoner swap.

Now, we know that there are roughly a dozen Iranian nationals in the U.S. custody for a variety of offenses, a lot of them related to violation of economic sanctions that the U.S. has upon Iran. But we know today is the implementation of the Iran nuclear deal between Iran and nuclear powers. Those sanctions have been lifted today.

And you have heard in recent officials, Iranian officials, Iran's president Rouhani say he would be open to a swap for Jason Rezaian and other Americans if the U.S. was willing to release those Iranian nationals. U.S. officials have been very cagey in recent months, not saying anything about any kind of deal. When I spoke to Secretary Kerry in September, he said that he acknowledged for the first time that there were such talks going on. But this morning U.S. officials are not saying anything about any potential deal, saying that any discussions that they may or may not be having with the Iranians would jeopardize any efforts to free them.

PAUL: Is this, in your opinion, Elise, as you have seen this conversation continue. When we look back at the president just the past week with the State of the Union, he was heavily criticized for not mentioning the 10 sailors who were detained by Iran. And a lot of people have been heavily critical of this Iran deal because Rezaian was not part of it. What do you make of the fact of the timing of this now as we are waiting for the IAEA to lift these sanctions and all of the sudden these four are released.

LABOTT: This is all coming together today. The IAEA is in Vienna right now. Later today those nuclear sanctions are expected to be lifted. It is certified that Iran has completed its obligations as part of the deal. And so obviously any talks reflect between the U.S. and Iran. You saw recently last week that those 10 U.S. sailors were detained by Iran but quickly released. And why is that? Because of this intense diplomacy between Secretary of State John Kerry and the Iranian foreign minister.

So yes, the president has been criticized that he has not tied that nuclear deal to the release of any prisoners, but we do know that there has been this improvement in relations over the last year as a result of this deal. And so if those prisoners are released today, it certainly reflects an improvement and possibly some kind of diplomacy that's gone on behind the scenes that we don't know about.

BLACKWELL: Elise, again, the reporting here coming from the semiofficial agency there in Iran, Fars. And we're still, as you said, waiting for confirmation from U.S. authorities. But this is not a simple release that is being reported. This is a swap. What more do we know of the reporting about who the U.S. gave up in exchange on these citizens?

LABOTT: We have to be clear. We just know that Iran's semiofficial news agency has talked about a deal. We have not heard anything from the U.S. confirming any type of deal. And so obviously we don't know what Iranians were released, but there are roughly about a dozen Iranian nationals most of them either charged or serving time in jail for violation of U.S. sanctions.

[10:05:10] One of the more controversial Iranians being held in U.S. custody is the Iranian national that was accused of plotting to kill the Saudi ambassador here in Washington at a Washington restaurant. If the deal took place, whether that person was part of the swap we don't know. But we saw with what happened with Alan Gross and the Cuban five, several prisoners that were released. They were released accused of some very serious crimes. Here most of those nationals, as I said, were accused of violating economic sanctions. So there certainly are a few that Iran wants to get back in their custody that have been charged with some very serious crimes.

BLACKWELL: All right, CNN's Elise Labbot, stay with us. I want to bring in CNN chief national security correspondent Jim Sciutto to join this conversation. Again, this is being reported by Iran's semiofficial news agency Fars that Jason Rezaian and three other U.S. and Iranian dual citizens are being released in a prisoner swap reportedly. My question to you, this is a swap, and it's happening on implementation day. Jim, is this something that would have been part of the initial deal, the initial negotiations, or is this a gesture of good faith on this day?

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JIM SCIUTTO, CNN CHIEF NA. SECURITY CORRESPONDENT: The fact is the administration has said from the beginning that they negotiated the nuclear deal by itself, that other issues, whether it is Iran's support for terrorism, its role in the region, support for Bashar al Assad in Syria, or the detention of these four Americans in Iran plus the missing American, Robert Levinson, that those were separate issues. They were not negotiated as part of the deal, which basically is the argument the administration made to critics who said you made this enormous deal with Iran. How could you not get the Americans freed as well? Here, you had your leverage. There was your chance.

So they have always made the argument, those were separate issues, while saying they have always waived the cases in any context with the Iranian side. So what's interesting here, it would be truly a remarkable event if confirmed that on the day of this implementation of the deal they are released, which does tie the two together even if they were separate to have the prisoners released on the day the deal is actually implemented. And it is truly a remarkable development.

I have to tell you, we were all talking a couple days ago about the detention of the U.S. sailors by Iran and just what horrendous timing that was with implementation coming and the president's State of the Union speech. And then today, on the day of implementation, to have these Americans held by Iran for far longer, I mean, we are talking a number of years for some of them, if this is confirmed, it would be truly remarkable development.

PAUL: Jim, stay with us here. We have Thomas Erdbrink. He is the Tehran bureau chief for us here. Thomas, you are there in Tehran. What are you hearing?

THOMAS ERDBRINK, TEHRAN BUREAU CHIEF, "NEW YORK TIMES": I'm the Tehran bureau chief for "The New York Times." I am helping you guys out. But I'm very happy to be here.

What we are hearing is that Jason Rezaian, Amir Hekmati, and possibly two others might be released. The Iranian judiciary has said that four Iranian-Americans are released, but they have not given the names of these Iranian-Americans. Several Iranian news agencies have reported that Jason Rezaian, the reporter that has been here for over 500 years -- 500 days held in prison, is also one of them. But until now, we are not sure who exactly is released, if they are being transported to the United States right now, if they are being brought to their families. These are all questions that remain open.

But the fact, itself, is really, truly, as Jim also said, remarkable. These negotiators must have been going on the sidelines. In Iran, you're not only negotiating with the government, you're not only negotiating with the foreign ministry, also Iran's judiciary has to talk about that. Security, intelligence agencies have to give their say. So this must have been an incredibly complicated process. And until these four people are really clearly released, we have to wait and see if this is for 100 percent confirmed.

BLACKWELL: So Thomas, the follow-up then is, is there any announcement on timing on when this could happen?

ERDBRINK: Well, I assume that by later today we must know more. As you can see, it is already dark here in Tehran. And people are also waiting for the implementation of the nuclear deal, something that a lot of people had expected way earlier in the day. So, clearly, there are still some negotiations going on.

[10:10:00] I mean, some loose ends are being fixed, if you will. But it's taking quite a while. And at the same time this news about Jason Rezaian and possibly the U.S. marine Hekmati and the two other Iranian-Americans is just added to the tensions, if you will, to see how this day will end here. Will there be a nuclear deal? Will this nuclear deal be implemented? I must say, will the sanctions be lifted? Those are very important questions for the Iranian people.

PAUL: And they're questions that are being batted back and forth right now in Vienna where we want to go with CNN's international diplomatic editor Nic Robertson. Thomas Erdbrink, thank you so much, and do stay with us. But I want to get to you, Nic. What are you hearing? Are you hearing any sort of reaction to this out of Vienna at this hour?

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NIC ROBERTSON, CNN INTERNATIONAL DIPLOMATIC EDITOR: Certainly when you look at the Iranian journalists, there is a degree of excitement. We are at the International Atomic Agency's headquarters here, and this is where the Iranian foreign minister is due to turn up in the next half an hour to an hour. That is when he is expected. It has been sort of a moving target when he will show up all day. And we didn't understand why. But now with this announcement, it becomes clearer. He has just wrapped up a meeting with Secretary of State John Kerry. He is expected to come here. He is expected to hear the IAEA, the International Atomic Agency's secretary general make an announcement about Iran's compliance with the first steps of the nuclear deal that it signed up to last summer.

What has gone in in the background to making this happen? We can begin to read better some of what we heard from the Iranian foreign minister this morning. When he showed up in Vienna, he talked about this being an important day. He talked about the issue of Iran's compliance, this would help their economy with the lifting of sanctions. But he said beyond that this is an important day for diplomacy. This shows, he said, shows that sanctions and threats don't work. Of course a lot of people believe it's the sanctions that brought Iran to the negotiating table of the nuclear issue. But I think we can begin to see clearer here that what he is talking about is this prisoner swap deal that has been going on in the background that he's talking about. It appears now the diplomatic relations, strong diplomatic ties that he has had with Secretary of State John Kerry. When Zarif, the Iranian foreign minister, arrives here as expected in a little less than an hour, we may begin to hear from him in the first time to explain what has gone on into this.

BLACKWELL: So a historic, Nic, no question, but in some respects before this announcement of the release of these prisoners or the prisoner swap, this was a bit anti-climactic. People understood what was going to happen with the announcement from the IAEA. But now with this announcement of this prisoner swap and the release of Rezaian and several others, how does this change? This specific element changes Iran's reality on the international stage.

ROBERTSON: When we were here through the negotiations last summer, there was a lot of campaigning on the margins from families like Amir Hekmati, the former U.S. marine, whose family came to petition and said it is so important his release, that he is put into this nuclear bargaining on the table. Secretary Kerry of course taking an awful lot of criticism for not doing more for the release of these prisoners.

At this time, it is very difficult to really begin to gauge how this changes the relationship. And it is too soon to say how much it may change it. But let's just look at the immediate effect. It is, if you will, a verification of what Secretary Kerry has been trying to do with the Iranian foreign minister, which is improve relations. This is a bonus that no one was expecting. It is a game changer. But let's look at it in the context of a week from now when Secretary Kerry, or U.S. representatives go to talk in Geneva to talk about peace in Syria. Does he have a stronger partner across the table in Iran who is on the opposite side of the negotiating when it comes to finding peace in Syria? What does this do to the Saudi component that is opposed to Iran position on finding peace in Syria? It really changes the playing field in many different ways, and it really too soon to say. But in terms of today this is far bigger, far greater than anyone expected.

PAUL: Nic Robertson, thank you so much. We appreciate it. And again, just to button this up here, when you look at where we were just a couple of months ago, November 22nd, Jason Rezaian, "Washington Post" reporter, was found guilty, we were told, convicted of crimes in Iran and sentenced to prison without any real indication of how long he would be imprisoned.

[10:15:02] And now just a few months later here in January, we are hearing that he is going to be released. We do not have any indication that he has yet been released, but he will be released, we are told, from the semiofficial Fars news agency. The U.S. has not confirmed this yet. We are going to take a quick break and we'll get right back to it on the other side of the break. Stay close.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: This is CNN breaking news.

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BLACKWELL: And the breaking news this morning coming to us out of Tehran where we have received a report from the Iranian semiofficial news agency that "Washington Post" journalist Jason Rezaian and several others have been freed as part of a prisoner swap, or will be freed. Details still coming in here. He has been in prison for more than 500 days. Let's bring in CNN senior media correspondent Brian Stelter, whose been following this for that entire period. First, let's just get your reaction to the reports coming out of Iran.

BRIAN STELTER, CNN SENIOR MEDIA CORRESPONDENT: The past 18 months have been tortuous for Jason Rezaian's family, for his colleagues at the "Washington Post" as well. And as both of you know, journalists around the world have been united in calling for his release. His case has gotten a lot of attention, and I think because of his situation, we have also thankfully heard more about the other Americans, others with dual nationality citizenship, that are being held in Iran as well.

So as we hear more information about each of these cases today, I just want to mention Jason's brother, Ali. He has not gotten any independent confirmation of this news yet, but he essentially put his entire life on hold, put his work on hold, put his family on hold to advocate for his brother's release. You can imagine and try to put yourself in some like that's shoes what only one day would be like. He has been going through this for 18 months.

Two points we should make, I think, Victor and Christie. One is that the "Washington Post" has not yet been able to confirm these reports. I can put on the screen the statements that they have released at the moment. They only thing that they are saying right now is that they hopeful but they don't have any confirmation at this time that Jason has, in fact, been released. It is very possible this is ongoing, that this processing is happening, that this may be confirmed the next few hours, but they don't know for sure yet.

But they have been waiting for 18 months to put the headline on their homepage, the "Washington Post" homepage, and right now it does say according to the Iranian news agencies that he is being freed.

BLACKWELL: There has been in unity across the industry to try to secure the release of Jason Rezaian.

[10:20:04] And just a couple of days ago there was a letter submitted to Secretary of State John Kerry from news editor across the industry appealing for more work to get him out.

STELTER: That's right. The lead editors, these leaders were urging the State Department to do more to secure Rezaian's release. This is a rare show of solidarity from competing news outlets like CNN, NPR, the BBC, the AP, Reuters, NBC, CBS. And I can show part of the letter on screen what they were saying. And this touches on why this case is so important. It says "We depend on the United States and other democratic countries to stand behind the values that Jason represents. Independent journalism is recognized as a fundamental human right. Iran should recognize this too and free Jason."

That letter was signed by 25 head of news organizations all across the country, a show of solidarity for Jason Rezaian. His case, itself, has been going on longer than the Iranian hostage crisis of the late 1970s. When that milestone passed, frankly, his family wondered, what other milestones will there be, and how much longer could this go on for?

And as we show this video on screen, we should point out where this video is from. It's actually from Anthony Bourdain's show here on CNN. That's why you are seeing photographs of him with Jason Rezaian and his wife. Anthony Bourdain happened to be in Iran several months before Jason was detained. He spent time with Jason because Jason was a star correspondent in Iran. He is the kind guy you would go to get more information about the country. Hopefully these reports are correct that he is on the way home.

PAUL: Yes, hopefully. We hope the same thing. But again, we are still waiting for U.S. confirmation of that. Brian Stelter, thank you. He is going to stay with us as well. We are going to take a quick break and we'll be right back.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: This is CNN breaking news.

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WOLF BLITZER, CNN ANCHOR: I'm Wolf Blitzer in Washington. We want to welcome our viewers in the United States and around the world. We are following major breaking news here on CNN. There are reports, significant reports that four American prisoners in Iran have been released, including Jason Rezaian, the "Washington Post" reporter, Amir Hekmati, a former U.S. marine, Saeed Abedini, an American cleric Christian pastor who has been in jail, in prison in Iran now for several years, and a fourth American still unidentified.

[10:25:02] In exchange, we are told according to the Iranian news agency Fars, the semiofficial Iranian news agency, that the United States has agreed to release Iranian prisoners being held in the United States. We are joined now by Thomas Erdbrink who is "The New York Times" Tehran bureau chief. He is joining us now live from Tehran. We know that Fars, the semiofficial news agency, has been reporting this, Thomas. You are getting more information. Tell our viewers here in the United States and around the world what you are learning.

ERDBRINK: Well, Wolf, as far as what we know as the "New York Times" Tehran bureau, we have seen on Iranian state TV that they are quoting unknown sources, senior officials they say, as indeed confirming that these four Iranian Americans have been released.

You mentioned their names, right. Jason Rezaian, "The Washington Post" correspondent, also a dear friend of mine, then Amir Hekmati, the U.S. marine who was arrested in 2012, Saeed Abedini, the American pastor, and then this fourth unknown person who they refer to as Nosratollah Khosrawi. I should check out his exact name. At the same time they are saying that in exchange for this prisoner swap, seven Iranians held probably held in the United States have been released. And they are also adding that another 14 Iranians have been taken off a certain Interpol watch list.

Now, we don't know who these people are, we haven't given the names. And I am expecting these names will come out in the coming hours at least on the American side of this story. But what is seemingly clear is that there has been a prisoner swap that has been very long in the making that must have involved the Iranian foreign ministry, of course, Minister Zarif, then of course Secretary of State John Kerry, but also a lot of other actors mainly here in Iran. All these people are held by the Iranian judiciary. This is a hard line organization, not very friendly to the United States. So they must have been into this as well.

This is a state effort by the Iranian leadership to, as this nuclear deal will be implemented tonight, which will mean that the sanctions will be lifted. They will start off on a clean slate with at least this level of relations with the United States, Wolf.

BLITZER: Thomas, you have been reporting from Tehran for a long time. You have been doing an excellent job for the readers of "The New York Times." In Tehran, in Iran, the Iranian prisoners being held by the United States, has the official or semi-official news media, the government, the various factions in the government, have they made a big deal in Iran about the Iranians held by the United States? Certainly here in the United States, everyone has made a major effort to win the release of the Americans in Iran.

ERDBRINK: Well, of course, Wolf, they have been much more covert than the effort we have seen in the United States and even in Europe to get, for instance, Jason Rezaian released, because the people they want to get released are the people that helped them bust the sanctions over the past six years. These are people that are referred to in Iranian media as those who have helped us. And of course, Iran is to be expected that when it was faced with this enormous sanctions, the restrictions on selling oil, the restrictions on foreign transactions, that is, of course, were trying to keep the country going. In order to keep the country going, it used middle men, people that would buy certain equipment, people that would buy food stuffs, and it's especially those people that I am hearing that the Iranians want to have released. And of course, we don't have names, but I think we will have those in the coming hours.

BLITZER: We certainly will. And we will see what follows. And obviously as you correctly point out all this happening on this day that the Iran nuclear deal is about to be implemented. That will free up tens of billions of dollars right away for Iran sanctions, Iranian sanctions, funds that have been held up. The money will start flowing back to Iran, all sorts of other restrictions on Iran, trade restrictions, et cetera, will be lifted as well. Thomas Erdbrink

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of "The New York Times," I want you to stand by with us, because our senior international correspondent Fred Pleitgen has been to Iran on several occasions in recent years is getting more information. Fred, you are in Berlin for us. What else are you learning. PLEITGEN: One of the interesting things the Fars news agency, Wolf, also said is they say this was a decision by Iran's National Security Council for the benefit of the Islamic Republic. So as Thomas was saying, clearly this appears to be some sort of larger effort not just on part of the Iranian government, not just on the part of Iranian diplomacy, but certainly some hard line organizations, like, for instance, the Iranian judiciary, must have played their part in all of this as well.

And we have to keep in mind just how hard line these people are when we talk about this. If you look at the trial of Jason Rezaian, there was virtually no information coming out of that trial.

[10:30:02] Jason Rezaian was able to see his lawyer probably on less than half a dozen occasions during the time that he was on trial. He didn't even know what he was being tried for for a long time. That's how secretive this judiciary operates, and that's how little accountability they have to people like Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, to people like Hassan Rouhani, the country's president.

And so therefore this certainly is a very remarkable development that apparently for some time there must have been some sort of back channel negotiations going on between the U.S. and various people within the Iranian power structure to get this release organized. So it is certainly something that is very, very remarkable.

Also in light of the fact that you still had a sort of struggle going in within Iran as well where you had the moderates around Hassan Rouhani who want better relations with the U.S. and on the other hand more hard line factions like, for instance, the Revolutionary Guard in the military, like for instance a lot of the clergy, the Supreme leader, who want to maintain confrontation towards the U.S. To get a deal like this going certainly is something that very, very remarkable not just for Jason Rezaian but also Amir Hekmati in detention for more than four years, or Saeed Abedini, in detention for more than three years, for them to finally be able to come home certainly is a big achievement on this very historic day, Wolf.

BLITZER: Fred, like all of us, we have been covering this story now for a long time, these Americans. We are now getting from the Iranian media the name of the fourth American about to be freed as part of this prisoner swap with the United States. His name is Nosratollah Khosrawi. Do we know anything about Nosratollah Khosrawi? We know a lot about the other three. What do we know about this fourth American that the Iranian say will be part of this prisoner swap?

PLEITGEN: Very, very little. I was trying to find out some information when the Iranian news agency there put the name out of Nosratollah Khosrawi. But it really is very difficult to find anything on who this person is, what exactly might have happened to him, why he was in Iran, why he was detained. At this point in time it is pretty unclear.

There were some other names floating around various Iranian news agencies because of course there are other dual citizen American- Iranians who are still in detention. One American businessman who was just detained a couple of months ago, Siamak Namazi, was one who was speculated might be released as well because he was also a pretty high-profile case that actually happened around the time that the Iranians for the first time were engaged in Syrian peace talks in Vienna. And actually both the Iranian foreign minister and the U.S. secretary of state were there as well.

This name that came up on that list on the Fars news agency list, unclear who that is at this point. But we are going to keep digging on that as well.

BLITZER: Because we have been familiar with two other citizens being held by Iran. They are not on this list. Robert Levinson, another American, a former FBI agent who was picked up in Iran several years ago. The Iranians have never even acknowledged, correct me if I'm wrong, that he is in their custody although the U.S. believes he is in their custody.

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PLEITGEN: Absolutely. That was one on the things where the U.S. believes that Robert Levinson, who was picked up on Kish Island, which is obviously very close to the shores of Iran, that he is in Iranian detention as well. There was a video that surfaced of him having been captured. The Iranians, as you said, have not ever acknowledged that they are actually holding him. There are many in the U.S. of course who believe that they are. He is certainly one of the people they believe might have been on this list as well.

So we are going to keep digging who is the fourth person on the list might actually be. But certainly, if you look at what happened today to people that are being released that is certainly a big diplomatic achievement, Wolf. Looking towards, also, the larger structure, if you will, of the nuclear agreements which will probably be implemented in a couple of hours as well, it certainly is the case, it seems that the diplomacy between Iran and the United States has not been at the level that it has been in the past couple of days for a very, very long time.

BLITZER: Fred, I want you to stand by. The two other names of American citizens who had been reportedly held by the Iranians apparently not on this list of the Iranians who are about to be freed, Siamak Namazi and Nazar Zaka, their names have been well known. This fourth name that we just received from the Iranian media, Nosratollah Khosrawi, that is a new name at least to me. I have been covering this story. The other three well known certainly to an American audience, Jason Rezaian of "The Washington Post," Amir Hekmati, who is from Michigan, a former U.S. marine, Saeed Abedini, Christian pastor who has been held by the Iranians as well.

[10:35:00] Our senior media correspondent Brian Stelter is working this story. Obviously, Brian, all of us in the news media, all of us journalists here in the United States, indeed, I should say many around the world, we have worked very hard to make sure our colleague Jason Rezaian is freed. What are you hearing from "The Washington Post"? They have been working feverishly for 500 days to try to get their man in Tehran released.

STELTER: That's right. This has been an exceptional case. We know, Wolf, there are journalists in perilous circumstances all around the world. There are journalists held by other countries in prison. But this is an exceptional case because he has been held for more than a year and a half and because he works for "The Washington Post." Jason Rezaian, one of the best-known Tehran correspondents before he was detained, and of course "The Post" a worldwide news organization that is now a part of the news itself.

What I can tell you is "The Post" believes that Rezaian will leave Iranian airspace in the next few minutes. I heard from "The Post" about 15 minutes ago that he would clear Iranian airspace in 30 minutes. So if you do the math, about 15 minutes from now he should be leaving that air space. The headline there is that he is now on the way home. We haven't heard officially from Rezaian's family yet or anything more from "The Post," but they are gathering more information as we are. It would indicate that there is some flight, perhaps the others are on the same flight, perhaps not. We don't know yet.

BLITZER: It would suggest to me, Brian, that if, in fact, Jason Rezaian and the other Americans are imminently about to be released, they are about to get on a plane and fly out of Iran, that the Iranian prisoners being held in the United States, presumably simultaneously, would be about to get on a plane to fly out of the United States, out of U.S. custody. Usually these kinds of prisoner swaps are negotiated over very long periods of time, meticulous detail. The Iranians don't want to release the Americans until they know for sure the Americans are releasing the Iranians. Usually there's a third party involved to coordinate to make sure it all happens very simultaneously. I assume that's what's going on right now.

STELTER: And that may be why we have not heard from the State Department. Everyone trying to reach out of the State Department now for confirmation from the U.S. side. That may be why we have heard nothing from the U.S. yet. You're absolutely right. This would have been taking months behind the scenes. This would have been a confidential process. I would presume that "The Washington Post" might now something about it. I don't know that for sure. But this is something that would go on for many months. And of course this is something that government officials would not be able to talk about.

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So in the short-term, as we hear criticism of the administration, including, frankly, from news agencies urging the administration to do more to free Rezaian, in the long term these negotiations would have been happening in a very confidential way.

BLITZER: Brian, stand by with us. I know you are working your sources. We'll get more information.

I also want to bring in the host of "Smerconish," Michael Smerconish. Michael, as you know, this has been a huge issue that not only many members of Congress but Republican presidential candidates have been very critical of the president for not demanding that the Iranians release these American citizens as part of this nuclear deal. Donald Trump, of course, has made a major issue out of this. Ted Cruz is the first presidential candidate to react to the news. I want you to listen to what Ted Cruz, one of the Republican presidential frontrunners, has just said.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

SEN. TED CRUZ, (R) PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE: We have just gotten the news that Pastor Saeed Abedini and three other Americans are apparently coming home from Iran. I say praise God. Millions of us have been lifting up Pastor Saeed and have been lifting up Amir Hekmati, have been lifting Jason Rezaian. I hope he is among them. We have yet to get full details.

But at this point we are giving prayers of thanksgiving that they are coming home. Pastor Saeed's wife is someone I have been blessed to get to know. She is a wonderful woman. Their two little kids have been praying and longing for their daddy to come home for a long, long time. 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. But at least this morning, I am giving thanks that Pastor Saeed is coming home. It is far later than it should have been, but we will be glad to welcome him home with open arms.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

BLITZER: Michael, the good news, these Americans, four American citizens, are about to be freed from Iran. You know the criticism that will develop. The price the United States will pay is the release of Iranian prisoners being held here in the United States over the past several months when we have discussed the possibility of a swap. And I'm sure you have as well. Many members have said, yes, we want the Americans home, we want the pastor, the journalist, the marine, all of them to come home. On the other hand, they are reluctant to give up Iranian prisoners, saying this merely encourages more Americans being taken down the road to be used for prisoner swaps. You have heard that argument many times, I'm sure.

[10:40:01] SMERCONISH: I'm mindful of the fact, Wolf that we were together on Tuesday night for the State of the Union address. And the fact that at that moment 10 United States sailors were being held by the Iranians was a focal point of debate because many Republicans believe that the president should have said something in his remarks that night about that situation. And by the following day, they had been released.

And then Thursday night in the Republican debate, Senator Cruz, whom you just referred to, went out of his way on the first question posed to him to make reference to the photograph that showed the 10 sailors on their knees and with their hands in the air.

And so my point is that the political ramifications of this are significant and yet to be unraveled. As I was listening to Senator Cruz and the sound bite that you just played, the name that popped into my mind was Bowe Bergdahl. And it popped into my mind because you know that the Taliban prisoners that were given up in exchange for Bergdahl became a focal point. We don't know too much about the six who have been released or are about to be released by the United States other than they are being held on sanctions-related charges. But you can rest assured that Cruz and company will be paying very close attention to who they are, what they did, and why they were being held to begin with. So we celebrate the release of Jason Rezaian which appears to be imminent and the others. But we'll have to watch the political ramifications of this against the backdrop of 2016 might be.

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And one other thought, Wolf, that occurs to me, if you'll indulge me. You know that the Obama administration was criticized widely and Secretary Kerry in particular for not negotiating the release of Jason Rezaian and the others as part of the Iranian nuclear deal. It makes me wonder perhaps there was a negotiation that for whatever reason needed to be delayed until now. Maybe the Iranians needed to save face with their hard right influences. I don't know. But I would be thinking it would be unfair to say they didn't negotiate it as part of the deal. Maybe it was very much on the table.

BLITZER: This has been a huge issue obviously here in the United States, dare I say around the world, the release of these Americans. And I know, Michael Smerconish, you have been reporting on this for a long time. Three of the Americans who we are about to be released are well-known. We know a lot about the pastor, the marine, the journalist. This fourth American, we don't know much about him. I don't know anything. It is the first time I have heard his name, Nosratollah Khosrawi. Do you know anything about him or why he was being held by the Iranians?

SMERCONISH: : I'm sorry, I don't. What I was referring to are those being held by the United States. I'm saying that the Republican scrutiny will be on those that we have released in return for the response of the four. And about them, I know absolutely nothing.

BLITZER: We know that several of them, and there could be six or seven according to the Iranian news media, have been arrested in the United States for violations of the U.S. and international sanctions that have been imposed against Iran for trying to smuggle sensitive information, sensitive technology, into Iran. That's why they were being held here in the United States. Those names will be released, I assume, very, very quickly as a result of the American names being released.

The other point, Michael, if these four Americans are released, and we hope, of course, they will be, there are at least two, probably three if you include Robert Levinson, the former FBI agent, who are still suspected, believed to be held by the Iranians. At least two confirmed held by Iranians. And I assume we will hear some criticism that why weren't all the Americans released?

SMERCONISH: No doubt. You know that on one side of the political equation, we are going to hear this regarded as a win for diplomacy. Here is what conversation can do. Here is what having dialogue with a prior enemy, for lack of a better description, can yield. But the Republican and more conservative perspective of this is going to be the glass remains half empty because not all of the Americans have been released. And until they are, it would be premature for the Obama administration to say this was a victory for diplomacy. BLITZER: Michael Smerconish, I want you to stand by as well. Our Christiane Amanpour, who has spent a lot of time in Iran, knows this subject very well, she is standing by to join us.

Let's take a quick break. Much more on the major breaking news we are following. A huge prisoner swap between the United States and Iran on this very sensitive day, the day the Iran nuclear deal is about to be implemented. We'll be right back.

[10:47:30] UNIDENTIFIED MALE: This is CNN breaking news.

BLITZER: I'm Wolf Blitzer in Washington. Once again we want to welcome our visitors in the United States and around the world. We are following breaking news of a prisoner swap about to be implemented between the United States and Iran.

Four American citizens being held in Iran are about to be freed in exchange for six, maybe seven Iranians being held here in the United States. It is about to be implemented. This is a very, very sensitive moment, but the Iranian news media has reported of the swap, the four Americans who are being freed include Jason Rezaian, "The Washington Post" reporter, Amir Hekmati, a marine from Michigan, and Saeed Abedini, a Christian pastor who has been held in Iran for several years, and Nosratollah Khosrawi. We don't know much about Nosratollah Khosrawi, but maybe we will learn more about him.

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We do know there are still other American citizens being held in Iran, apparently not part of this deal, including Siamak Namazi and Nazar Zaka as well as Robert Levinson, Robert Levinson being held for many years, a former FBI agent.

Joining us on the phone is Reza Marashi, research director for the National Iranian-American Council. First of all, Reza, thank you very much for joining us. What, if anything, can you tell us about this fourth American? His name is new to me, Nosratollah Khosrawi.

REZA MARASHI, RESEARCH DIRECTOR, NATIONAL IRANIAN-AMERICAN COUNCIL: Wolf, that's a great question. I was surprised to see that name myself, and I do this for a living. I've never heard of this individual before. But if he has gotten his freedom today, then that's obviously a good thing.

We are working to confirm still whether or not Siamak Namazi has in fact been released. We are still hoping that he has been. So we haven't quite shut the door on that yet. And regarding Nazar Zaka and Robert Levinson, those cases are a bit more unique. I think you have seen the U.S. government come out and say multiple times recently that they are asking Iran to help locate Robert Levinson because they actually believe he might not be in Iran anymore. So we need to get more confirmation about that.

And Nazar Zaka might have traveled to Iran when he was detained on his Lebanese passport. So that adds complications as well. Nevertheless, that doesn't change the fact that Bob Levinson and Nazar Zaka should be released by the Iranian government immediately.

BLITZER: I know you have been following this, Reza, very, very closely. What can you tell us about the six or seven Iranians that will be part of this prisoner swap that the United States will free in exchange for the Americans?

[10:50:06] MARASHI: Another great question, Wolf. We are not entirely sure the specific names of these individuals. But what I can tell you is that they were put into American prisons for violating U.S. sanctions on Iran. And it was actually a timely prisoner swap for these particular individuals because their prison terms were closely coming to an end. And once the sanctions are waved or lifted, it makes it very difficult to keep the individuals in jail because the premise of them being in jail has changed.

BLITZER: And the other part of the deal apparently, according to our Fred Pleitgen and other sources that we're getting is that several Iranians on an international Interpol watch list, if you will, their names are about to be removed as part of this deal. I don't know if you have heard about that. Have you?

MARASHI: I have not heard that. But I do know that in order to get your name removed from the Interpol list, that's not politically a decision. Once Interpol lists become politicized, it is much harder for western countries to actually enforce the law according to the names that are on that list. So the Iranians would have had to provide some kind of evidence to reassure western countries that those names should be removed if that is in fact the case.

BLITZER: It is all connected to the start of the implementation of the Iran nuclear deal, Reza. That implementation process begins today now that the International Atomic Energy Agency has ruled that Iran is, in fact, complying with the demands to suspend or end various aspects of their nuclear program. The sanctions are about to be lifted. What's your reaction that all of this dramatic development as far as the prisoner swap is taking place on the very day the Iran nuclear deal is being implemented?

MARASHI: Well, Wolf, I think it is a triumph of diplomacy. It shows that the United States has approached this issue together with our international partners from a position of strength without having to fire a single bullet or drop a single bomb. And that sends a very powerful message not just to the Iranian government but to the rest of the world as well that when we work together we can accomplish goals to get governments to do things that they might not otherwise do. And that's what diplomacy is all about. It's about talking to your enemies, not to your friends.

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BLITZER: Reza Marashi, I want you to help us appreciate what's going on during the course of the day as the research director for the National Iranian-American Council. We are following the breaking news. We will take a quick break. Much more right after this.

[10:55:47] BLITZER: We want to update you on the breaking news that's unfolding right now, a historic prisoner exchange between the United States and Iran. This on the day that the Iran nuclear deal that is being implemented, a deal that requires Iran to suspend or give up so many parts of its nuclear program in exchange for the lifting of sanctions. Tens of billions of dollars are about to flow into Iran.

Four Americans according to the Iranian semiofficial state media are being freed right now, including Jason Rezaian, a "Washington Post" reporter, Amir Hekmati, a former U.S. marine from Michigan, Saeed Abedini, a Christian pastor who has been held in Iran for several years, and a fourth individual, we don't know, at least I don't know anything about him. His name is new to me, new to most experts who have been following this story, an American by the name of Nosratollah Khosrawi. We'll learn more about him in the coming days.

At least two, maybe three other Americans still are not being released as part of this exchange. The U.S. has agreed to release six Iranians, Iranian-Americans being held on various sanctions related charges in the United States, convicted of violating those sanctions, the technical and trade sanctions that have been imposed against Iran. Many of those sanctions obviously today are about to go away.

We are watching all of this and getting reaction from around the world. U.S. officials have not publicly spoken about this yet. Apparently it's a very sensitive moment. The four Americans have still apparently not left Iranian airspace. The American prisoners, the Iranians being held in the United States, they will leave, we are told, simultaneously. Our special coverage will continue right after a very quick break.

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