

## **Former Princeton professor detained in Iran; may face death sentence**

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### **Body**

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After months of virtual house arrest and detention in Iran, a former Princeton Near Eastern studies professor was arrested in Tehran last week on charges that could carry the death sentence.

Haleh Esfandiari, who taught Persian classes at the University from 1980 to 1994, stands accused of "crimes against national security." She is under suspicion because of her affiliation with the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, a Washington think tank where she directs the Middle East Program. Iranian officials say the organization advocates regime change in Iran.

Wilson School and Near Eastern studies professor Robert Finn, a former United States ambassador to Afghanistan, said Esfandiari's plight reflects broader political turmoil.

"She's a pawn in these games. It's not her personally. It's very bad of Iran in its efforts to present itself as a normal country to do this kind of thing," he said.

Esfandiari's troubles began in December when she was visiting her 93-year-old mother in Tehran. While in a taxi to the airport to catch a flight back to the United States, where she has lived for more than 25 years, Esfandiari was robbed at knifepoint by three men, who stole both her Iranian and American passports.

On applying for a replacement passport, Esfandiari found herself in the clutches of Iran's Ministry of Intelligence, which has interrogated her repeatedly since December. The military finally incarcerated her at Evin Prison last week.

Throughout her detention, Esfandiari has been pressured by the ministry to make false confessions or inaccurately acknowledge that the Wilson Center has been advocating regime change in Iran, Wilson Center President Lee Hamilton said. She has consistently refused to do either.

Since the Bush administration unveiled its \$75 million program to promote democracy in Iran, the Iranian government has increased its efforts to counter "subversive elements."

Esfandiari is one of several "soft hostages" in Iran, who cannot leave the country because the government has confiscated their passports.

Ironically, Esfandiari is "the kind of person who was working to present all sides of Iran," Finn said. "She is the kind of person [the Iranian government] should be encouraging." He added that, in her work at the Wilson Center, Esfandiari was often criticized for inviting scholars who were sympathetic to Tehran.

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The Wilson Center, along with Esfandiari's family and friends, originally avoided the international spotlight and pursued back channels to secure Esfandiari's release. But with her formal arrest, this strategy has become unfeasible.

Esfandiari's situation has also sparked numerous other efforts to lobby for her release, and several of her **former** students are trying to raise awareness of their **former professor's** predicament.

"We, as her **former** students, know how proud she was of Iranian history and culture," said Cherrie Daniels, who was a student of Esfandiari's during her sophomore and senior years. She is attempting to organize a student/teacher petition drive to supplement existing campaigns.

Efforts are under way on a national level, as well. Freehaleh.org asks concerned members of the international community to sign a petition on Esfandiari's behalf, while Amnesty International describes Esfandiari as a "prisoner of conscience" and created a webpage that lets visitors contact Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad or judiciary head Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi on her behalf.

Prominent U.S. politicians have joined the movement to lobby for Esfandiari's freedom, including senators Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.), Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.) and Barack Obama (D-Ill.). So far, though, the Iranian government has not responded to pressure.

Daniels described her **former** professor in glowing terms and recalled that during her years teaching at the University, Esfandiari "would focus on modern spoken Persian through folk tales," adding that "[her teaching] was not political and not focused on anything controversial."

"[She is] an amazing, gifted and sweet woman," Daniels said. "I hope they let her out."

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