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White House won't rule out nuclear deal with Iran while the Islamic regime holds American citizens captive without criminal charges

- **Obama press secretary says nuclear talks are on a 'separate track' from efforts to free Americans held by Tehran**
- **Iranian-American Jason Rezaian, a Washington Post correspondent, is being tried by Iran's Revolutionary Court but the government won't say what he is charged with**
- **Josh Earnest told reporters that efforts to free him and other Americans, 'while important, are separate' from nuclear negotiations**
- **Iran also holds Saeed Abedini and Amir Hekmati; Robert Levinson is believed to be held but Tehran won't confirm it**
- **White House calls the problem one of America's 'more vexing and far-reaching policy challenges' but won't demand hostage releases in trade for normalized relations and relaxed sanctions as it did with Cuba**

By [David Martosko](#), Us Political Editor For [Dailymail.com](#)

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President Obama's chief spokesman refused on Thursday to rule out the possibility that the U.S. will strike a nuclear deal with Iran while the Islamic Republic holds several Americans captive – including a Washington Post journalist being tried by the mullahs' Revolutionary Court without public notice of the charges.

The case is the mirror opposite of Cuba, where the White House announced steps toward normalizing diplomatic relations on the condition that President Raul Castro release American Alan Gross and a Cuban citizen who had been a U.S. intelligence asset.

White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest said efforts to slow down Tehran's ability to create fissionable nuclear material that could be used in long-range weapons remain unrelated to the administration's attempts to free four Americans.

'These two priorities have been raised on two separate tracks, but they are priorities nonetheless,' he said.



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NOT RULING IT OUT: White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest said the U.S. isn't linking the releas of prisoners in Iran to a nuclear deal with the Islamic republic



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CHUMMY: U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry (left) and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif (right) discussed the cases of Americans held by Tehran this week but no resolution was reached

Earnest did reiterate the Obama administration's call for their release, but said balancing the intertwined hostage and nuclear talks is 'one of the more vexing and far-reaching policy challenges' facing the West Wing and the State Department.

The captives include Washington Post correspondent and Iranian-American Jason Rezaian, and Americans Amir Hekmati, Saeed Abedini and Robert Levinson.

Levinson is officially considered 'missing' because Iran hasn't acknowledged holding him.

Hekmati has been detained in Iran since August 2011 'on false espionage charges while visiting his family in Iran,' according to the U.S. State Department.

Abedini has been held since September 2012 and was sentenced to eight years in prison for 'undermining national security' – in reality a prosecution for helping Christians operate 'home churches' that provide places for Iran's estimated 700,000 non-Muslims to worship.

At the time of his arrest, Abedini was building a state-approved orphanage.

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Levinson went missing in March 2007 on Kish Island, a place that foreigners can visit without visas. Oran hasn't denied holding him.

Rezaian was scheduled to appear before a Revolutionary Court tribunal on Thursday.

'The White House is certainly aware of Iranian press reports stating that Jason Rezaian's case has been referred to a court,' Earnest told reporters.

'We continue to monitor the situation closely and to seek further information,' and 'call for his immediate release.'

He said Secretary John Kerry had raised the Rezaian case during a meeting this week with his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif

'Secretary Kerry raised Mr. Rezaian's case,' Earnest said. 'That is an indication of how seriously the United States takes this case.'

Kerry, he said, also called for the release of the other three captives.

But 'at the same time,' Earnest insisted, 'we've also been explicit about the fact that these conversations, while

important, are separate' from negotiations over Iran's nuclear program.



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ON TRIAL BUT NO PUBLIC CHARGES: Jason Rezaian, an Iranian-American correspondent for the Washington Post, has been indicted on unspecified charges and faces trial by a Revolutionary Court – a process usually reserved for national security crimes



HELD: Saaed Abedini (left) and Amir Hekmati (center) are definitely being detained by Iran's Islamic government, while Bob Levinson (right) is officially missing but assumed to be a captive

'These two priorities have been raised on two separate tracks, but they are priorities nonetheless.'

'We believe these American citizens should be released,' Earnest told reporters. "And we also believe the Iranian regime should take the steps that are necessary' to end crippling economic sanctions and bring transparency to its nuclear ambitions.

He dismissed concerns that President Obama has treated Iran with kid gloves, compared with his insistence that Cuba release prisoners before a diplomatic deal could move forward.

Even with an agreement on the hostages, Earnest said, 'the relations between the U.S. and Iran would fall far

from normal.'

He cited 'their rhetoric and treatment of Israel,' and said 'there are a whole host of concerns we have with the Iranians.'

'Our concerns with Iran,' he said, 'are part of a much longer list.'

The U.S. remains opposed to Iran's nuclear program. According to the White House, Obama told Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Monday that America 'is focused on reaching a comprehensive deal with Iran that prevents Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon and verifiably assures the international community of the exclusively peaceful nature of its nuclear program.'



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[Ernest](#), Izu, Japan, about 2 hours ago

They are staying specific, not getting embroiled in petty repercussionary politics, good. More results and less horse trading is fine by me.

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[tavistock](#), berwick, United States, about 6 hours ago

So apparently Iran has their own version of Guantanamo Bay?

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[NotNews](#), Waco, United States, about 7 hours ago

Sociopaths run the US government. Always have been for decades.

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[Smurfet](#), Midwest, United States, about 9 hours ago

I hate Obama

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[ComteDeLaFere](#), Midwest, United States, 25 minutes ago

Who cares?? Show of hands.

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[MW](#), Orange County - CA, United States, about 16 hours ago

Obama warned everyone he was going to fundamentally change this country. Nothing he does is in the best interests of the American people who love this country.

[Chamragging](#), Park Rapids MN, United States, about 5 hours ago

So why vote him in for a second term. One would think the electorate does not have the best interests of America at heart.

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[rosswill](#), annandale, about 20 hours ago

This idiot is going to sell us out. He has spent the last 6 years appeasing the Mullahs and now he is going to give them nuclear weapons.

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[Chamragging](#), Park Rapids MN, United States, about 5 hours ago

And what does that tell you - connect the dots.

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[EJMcG](#), Florida, United States, about 21 hours ago

Be afraid. Be very afraid if Obama is brokering this type of deal with Iran.

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[vanna](#), United States, about 21 hours ago

's anyone who believes an Iranian nuclear deal brokered by Obama would be in America's or the Worlds best interest I've got a bridge in Brooklyn I'll sell you cheap.

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[mmalabama](#), Montgomery, about 22 hours ago

Anyone discussing nuclear anything with Iran should be tried for treason.

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[Jack](#), Atlanta, about 16 hours ago

I thought all you republicans knuckleheads were going to impeach him. Don't keep talking, do something. You need to stop that madman!

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[Chamragging](#), Park Rapids MN, United States, about 5 hours ago

Oh I see, it's the Republican's fault that Obama is President now is it. Typical socialist - oops I screwed it up, your fault.

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[Astonmartin man](#), North, United States, about 24 hours ago

It's funny hearing people talk about getting rid of sanctions on Iran. Their leader talks about destroying the west daily.

[wah07](#), Mancs, about 16 hours ago

The west actually destroys. Talk is talk, and stop exaggerating.

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[peace](#), Oxford, United Kingdom, a day ago

re're either allies of the Sunnis or the Shias, they both have something in common!

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[HPL2007](#), London, United Kingdom, about 21 hours ago

The same thing as all major religions?

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[wah07](#), Mancs, about 17 hours ago

And what is that? Idiot.

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