

IRAN SENTENCES BELGIAN NATIONAL TO 40 YEARS IN PRISON

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An Iranian court ruled that Vandecasteele had

engaged in spying for the U.S. government, currency smuggling, and money laundering; charges which he and his government deny.

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A Belgian national has been sentenced to [40 years in prison by an Iranian court](#), *Tasnim* reported on Wednesday, January 11th. Before serving time for a total of four crimes, Olivier Vandecasteele (41), is to receive 74 floggings.

The full ruling, issued on Tuesday, states that while in Iran, Vandecasteele had engaged in spying in collusion with the U.S. government, currency smuggling, and money laundering.

Iran has long viewed the U.S. as its nemesis and frequently accuses the U.S. of trying to destabilize its government.

For his “espionage against the Islamic Republic of Iran for the benefit of foreign intelligence services,” Vandecasteele was given a 12-and-a-half-year prison sentence; another 18 months were for “cooperation with the hostile government of the U.S.,” and another 18 months for “money laundering.”

For “professional currency smuggling to the amount of \$500,000,” he was given an additional two-and-a-half years, for which he will be punished with an additional 74 floggings as well.

According to a Tuesday, January 3rd report by *Tasnim*, [“an informed source” told them](#) that the Belgian national “had come to Iran under the guise of philanthropic activities with

the purpose of spying for the U.S. government and distributing money among groups active in the anti-security spheres.”

Vandecasteele, together with the Belgian government, has denied these allegations. He has been confined to an Iranian cell since February 2022 in what are reportedly dire conditions. Until recently, it was not clear what exactly he was being accused of.

Last December, Belgian authorities were informed that Vandecasteele ‘only’ needed to serve 28 years. Upon hearing the latest news of his long sentence and that he would be lashed as well, Belgian Foreign Minister Hadja Lahbib (MR) summoned the Iranian ambassador to Belgium to urgently address the issue.

On Twitter, the minister stressed that Belgium

continues to condemn this arbitrary detention and is doing everything possible to put an end to it and to improve the conditions of his detention.

<https://twitter.com/hadjalahbib/status/1612840709442109441>

Iran has not shared any ‘official information’ about Vandecasteele's charges or his trial.

Belgian authorities suspect that Vandecasteele’s wrongful imprisonment is being used by Iranian authorities as a bargaining chip to make Belgium free Assadollah Assadi, an Iranian diplomat from the country’s embassy in Austria. On February 4th, 2021, a Belgian court convicted Assadi of planning an attack on a gathering of critics of the Iranian government in Paris.

Assadi, who has also been linked to Iran's secret service, has served five years of his 20-year sentence.

Initially, there was a plan to trade Assadi for Vandecasteele, but last December, the Belgian Constitutional Court overturned it. Various political parties, and the Flemish N-VA in particular, were vehemently against the idea of a prisoner swap, as they felt that by doing so, Belgium would make itself a target for blackmail.

Also in December, Belgium's justice minister Vincent Van Quickenborne said that the espionage charges were fabricated and that Vandecasteele had been sentenced as retribution for Assadi.

Given what appears to be an impasse, Vandecasteele's future remains bleak.

To Reuters, Olivier Van Steirtegem, Vandecasteele's best friend and the family's spokesperson, said that they were ["devastated by the news."](#) Van Steirtegem stressed that his friend "is a victim, a hostage," and urged the Belgian government to do everything possible to free Vandecasteele and condemn Iran's "hostage diplomacy."

Olivier Vandecasteele comes from a family of entrepreneurs. His father started his own business by operating large garages in the Tournai area.

Since 2006, Vandecasteele has worked for various international NGOs including Médecins du Monde, Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), and Relief International. In 2015, he became the director of NRC's Iran operations, and later, in 2020, took on the same role within the country for Relief International.

Before his arrest, Vandecasteele frequently traveled between Tehran and Belgium. In late February, he was in Iran's capital to handle some practical affairs when Iranian authorities arrested him.