

Opening Statement of Subcommittee Chairman Matt Salmon
Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere
“Sergeant Andrew Tahmooressi: Our Marine in Mexican Custody”
Wednesday, October 1, 2014

Welcome, everyone, to this important hearing on Marine Sgt. Andrew Tahmooressi, our Marine in Custody in Mexico. I want to thank Chairman Royce and all my colleagues who have come back to Washington to take part in this hearing. And I want to thank our witnesses, particularly Mrs. Tahmooressi, who has been a steadfast and strong advocate on behalf of her son. Montel Williams and Pete Hegseth, your work on behalf of veterans is noble and important and it is a pleasure to have you hear speaking on behalf of Andrew. And finally, retired Marine Sergeant Robert Buchanan, who served with Andrew in Afghanistan, we sincerely appreciate you appearing on behalf of your friend, and I would like to personally thank you for your service to our nation.

Not long after the VA scandal story broke in my hometown of Phoenix, Arizona, exposing widespread mismanagement of veteran care on the part of the VA, I first traveled down to Tijuana, Mexico to visit Sgt. Tahmooressi in prison. I had been following his story—how he had served with distinction in the U.S. Marine Corps on the battlefields of Afghanistan, returning to the United States with the physical and psychological scars of war. How he made his way to Southern California, where he was diagnosed with PTSD, living mostly out of his truck where he carried all of his belongings, including his three registered guns. And how he got turned around and found himself at the Mexican border where it is illegal to carry guns.

By the time I visited Andrew back in late May and again in June with Chairman Royce, he had been through a lot; he had attempted to escape and take his own life—haunted by the hyper-vigilance that is the hallmark of his PTSD. Even so, he was polite and soft-spoken; a brave American who had defended this country and now needed our help to return home.

Interesting anecdote: on my way back from visiting Andrew the first time, just as I was crossing the border back into the United States, I learned of the news that the Obama administration had negotiated with the Taliban for the release of Army Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl. Sgt Tahmooressi's circumstances are obviously very different than Sgt. Bergdahl's. But it still struck me then that Sgt. Tahmooressi had served his country with honor twice in Afghanistan, and now finds himself in a Mexican prison after getting turned around, probably in great part, due to his PTSD. Clearly, President Obama couldn't find time between negotiating with terrorists to call our ally, the Mexican President, to appeal to him on behalf of our Marine. If we in Congress don't do everything in our power to try to get Sgt. Tahmooressi, an injured war hero, back to the States for treatment, then what are we doing here? Making sure that our combat veterans are taken care of when they return is one of our most important obligations.

As Chairman of this Subcommittee, I have been consistently supportive of our bilateral relationship with Mexico, committed to our security partnership, and to helping Mexico reform

and improve its justice system. Our commercial relationship with Mexico is strong and vital. Today, I feel the same way. I am optimistic about Mexico's energy reforms, the growth of its middle class, and the increasingly close trade and diplomatic relationship we share.

But our significant and growing bilateral cooperation must also come with the ability to resolve important issues, particularly along our shared border. I firmly believe that Sgt. Tahmooressi meant no harm, nor did he willfully violate Mexican law when he crossed the border. Now, he has spent over 6 months in prison for what amounts to a wrong turn. I'm disappointed that more could not be done to address this situation in a more timely manner. The fact is that Mexican citizens violate U.S. law on a regular and continuing basis, illegally crossing our Southern border. Mexican officials respond by asking the U.S. for compassion and amnesty for their citizens to remain in the U.S. But frankly, compassion goes both ways. Mexico does not have the ability to provide Sgt. Tahmooressi with the care he needs. Our war hero needs to come home.

Last week, I spoke with the Mexican Attorney General who explained that while Sgt. Tahmooressi had broken Mexican law by approaching the border with weapons, his combat-related PTSD could not be adequately treated in Mexico. The good news is, the Attorney General explained to me, and, I understand, to Chairman Royce separately, that he has the authority within Mexican law to dismiss Sgt. Tahmooressi's case on humanitarian grounds once he has expert testimony that verifies his combat-specific PTSD diagnosis. Chairman Royce and I obtained the appropriate expert medical reports and forwarded them to the Mexican Attorney General's desk this past Friday.

In addition, at the court hearing yesterday, a Mexican psychologist submitted his official diagnosis confirming Andrew's PTSD. Now with all the information available to him, I am confident that Attorney General Murillo Karam will very soon order the release of Andrew so that he can begin his treatment and move forward with his life back home with his family and friends.

Once again, we are asking our men and women in uniform to embark on the mission of fighting on behalf of our nation in our war against the terrorist organization, ISIS. Making sure that Sgt. Tahmooressi is brought home and provided the treatment he needs demonstrates to our military men and women who are in harm's way that America stands up for their soldiers and Marines. That is how it should be.

I look forward to hearing from all the witnesses and thank you all again for being here.