

Christine Levinson: Written Testimony for House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa and International Terrorism Hearing “The Status of American Hostages in Iran”

March 7th, 2019

Mister Chairman, Ranking Members, and distinguished members of this committee,

My name is Christine Levinson. I am the wife of Robert “Bob” Levinson, an American held by the Iranian government. My husband is the longest held hostage in American history.

If I had my choice, I would not be sitting before you to give the testimony I am about to give. I would be sitting at home, with my husband by my side. I am only here out of necessity. My husband Bob has been a hostage for twelve years, and, despite trying to get him home by every means possible, I am absolutely no closer than I was when he first went missing on March 9, 2007. I hold the Iranian government responsible, but I believe the US government is at fault as well.

Bob was taken nearly 12 years to this day, on Kish Island, Iran. Since that time, my family and I have had no direct contact with him. In the past twelve years, we have received a video of him as a hostage pleading for the help of the United States government, and photos of him wearing an orange jumpsuit. We have been unable to obtain any information on what needs to be done to return Bob home.

My family and I believe that the government of Iran is responsible for my husband’s disappearance and continued detention. All the facts of the case indicate they kidnapped my husband. I have been to Kish Island. I believe that it would be impossible for the Iranian government not to know what happened to Bob. The hotel and flight manifests show that he made it to his hotel on Kish on March 8th, 2007. By seeing his distinct signature on the hotel registry, I know he left the hotel on March 9th, but flight manifests back to Dubai do not have his name on them. Additionally, the FBI assessment of the video and photos that we received years later concluded that the Iranian government had to have developed them and sent them to our family. The FBI also has a five million dollar reward that remains unclaimed.

The evidence has been so conclusive that the United Nations released an opinion in 2016 holding Iran responsible for Bob’s “continued deprivation of liberty.”

It is clear to me from multiple conversations with Iranian officials that this is a government to government case. Over the past twelve years, we have received no meaningful assistance from the Iranian government other than allowing us to go to Iran to retrace Bob’s steps on Kish Island. Iran has been allowed to feign ignorance over and over again – with absolutely no repercussions from the US.

My family’s dreams of re-uniting with Bob continue to remain just dreams. We believe he is alive, and we continue to receive reports that he is alive. At the same time, there is mounting urgency for his health and well-being. Every moment is of the essence for Bob, who turns 71 this Sunday.

After three very different US presidential administrations, we are no closer to bringing Bob home than we were when we started. We have nothing.

Time and time again, Bob has been left behind, deprioritized, or seemingly forgotten. This has not been the fault of a single person or administration in our government, but instead has become a systemic failure of this government's ability to uphold our nation's values.

There have been some dedicated people from various government agencies on the front lines of Bob's case, working hard to get him home. We are deeply grateful to them. At the same time, we have experienced shocking dysfunction from our officials at multiple points over the past twelve years, from the very first days Bob was taken. In the first years of his disappearance, it became clear to me that major government bodies were not even talking to each other regarding his case. Some past statements and misstatements to the media by US officials about Bob's case, questioning if he is alive or in Iran, have severely undercut the efforts to hold Iran accountable. We know this because Iranian authorities have thrown these wrong statements back in our faces. The Iranians still regularly point to a statement made in error by the White House three years ago that Bob is not in Iran. That was wrong, but the US government gave Iran an excuse to not send Bob home.

In Jason Rezaian's new book about his own experience as an Iranian hostage, he cites a source in the Iranian Supreme Leader's office. That source states that, in discussions with members of the Obama administration regarding the release of then-hostages, "the issue of Bob Levinson had initially been a point of contention throughout the negotiations (between Iran and the United States)...and that, initially, Levinson—or a complete accounting of what happened to him—was to be a part of the deal, but the Rouhani administration decided there was no political value at that time in acknowledging, after eight years, that, yes, Iran had been responsible for his disappearance."

And, in January 2016 when these other American hostages were released and Bob was left behind, the United States government let Iran get away with it.

My husband served this country tirelessly for decades; he deserves better from all of us and from our government. He deserves our endless pursuit to bring him home, to fight day and night and leave no stone unturned. He deserves to be **the** priority, not just among our top priorities.

In addition to being a patriot, Bob is an incredible husband and father. We have raised seven children together. These were the years that Bob and I expected to especially enjoy. Our youngest daughter will be getting married in just two months. This will be the last daughter he has the opportunity to walk down the aisle. And everyone here knows how important that is to a dad.

Not a day or week goes by that I don't get a phone call from one of my children saying how much they miss Bob and struggle without him. We are all suffering a living nightmare. My children and I have trouble sleeping. We wonder endlessly what kind of conditions my husband is living through. We know how deeply he must ache, physically and spiritually, by being away from us for so long. By being away from anyone he knows or loves, with absolutely no human rights. Does he have any human touch? Any access to sunlight? What kind of hell must he be living in, that both our government and the Iranian authorities have allowed him to live in for so long?

Even today after twelve years, people just don't know about Bob. They do not recognize the name Bob Levinson or have any idea of his struggle.

I want to close my testimony by asking each of you to imagine how devastated you would feel to be ripped away from your family, with no way to contact your loved ones, no human rights and no contact

with the outside world. My husband has been held captive for 4,381 days. That's 12 years this Saturday without his family. Imagine how alone he must feel.

It is clear that no matter how hard we try as a family, we can't get there alone. We need your help. Today, Congressman Deutch and Senators Menendez and Rubio introduced the Robert Levinson Hostage Recovery and Hostage-Taking Accountability Act. I hope this will do something to bring Bob home. But when Saturday's anniversary passes, and the media attention inevitably shifts, a different issue will take priority, and we will again feel like we have to take on this immense burden virtually alone. Without you we won't succeed. Please help my family to get Bob home.

Thank you.

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