

Opening Statement
AGH/MENA Joint Subcommittee Hearing entitled:
Iran's Persecution of American Pastor Abedini Worsens
Thursday, December 12, 2013

I'd like to thank Mrs. Abedini for joining us today. Our thoughts and prayers are with you, your family and your husband, and we commend you for your determination and perseverance to obtain his release.

Last month our Middle East and North Africa subcommittee, and then the full Foreign Affairs committee, unanimously passed H. Res. 147, calling on the Iranian regime to immediately release Pastor Saeed and condemning the regime's ongoing persecution of religious minorities. This resolution sends a strong message on behalf of Pastor Saeed, his family, and the Iranian people whose human rights suffer under this brutal and this bill states that we stand with them in solidarity and will continue to press for his release, and calls upon the government of Iran to respect the rights of its citizens.

Although we are here to discuss in particular the plight of Pastor Saeed, we must also highlight that there are other Americans languishing in Iran's prisons or being held captive by the regime, like South Florida resident and constituent of Congressman Ted Deutch – Bob Levinson. Last month Bob became the longest-held American hostage in history, now in captivity in Iran for over six years. Earlier this week, I joined as cosponsor of H. Res. 435, introduced by Ranking Member Deutch, which calls for Iran's cooperation and immediate return of Bob Levinson.

So we're here today because Rouhani's empty promises aren't only about Iran's nuclear program, but about the reforms that he promised which have gone unfulfilled as the regime continues its policy of systematic and widespread suppression of human rights. On the campaign, Rouhani's charming words indicated that the regime will ease its repression of social freedoms and human rights. However, we must judge this regime not by its words, but by its actions, and in this regard, it has utterly failed.

Since Rouhani took office, the rate of executions in Iran has sharply accelerated, with more than 300 executions carried out since August alone. And on September 2012, Pastor Saeed Abedini, an American citizen, was convicted on bogus charges and imprisoned after being accused by the regime of undermining national security.

But what were his so-called crimes? Working to establish an orphanage and practicing his Christian faith. He was supporting and ministering to churches in private homes – one of the only places in Iran where Christians and other religious minorities can practice their faith despite the fear of state persecution. In August, Pastor Saeed's unjust eight-year sentence was upheld, and last month, as we know, he was transferred to a brutal prison reserved for Iran's most violent criminals, where his life is in constant danger.

Sadly, the plight of Pastor Saeed is not an isolated incident, but it's symptomatic of the Iranian regime's hostility toward religious minorities. In October, four Iranian Christians were sentenced

to 80 lashes for drinking sacramental wine during communion, and this past summer an Iranian Christian convert was sentenced to 10 years in prison for distributing Bibles.

And it's not just Christians who are persecuted, but others – including Muslim minorities and reformers – who also suffer for their beliefs. For example, the Baha'i community is systematically targeted and persecuted by the regime, and more than 100 members of this community and its leadership are imprisoned. In fact, under Iranian law, Baha'i members can be killed with impunity. For these flagrant violations, the U.S. has designated Iran as Country of Particular Concern since 1999.

A regime that does not respect the fundamental human right of religious freedom – for many persons this is a central aspect of their identity and of their life – is a country that won't respect other freedoms. We saw this when the regime crushed the freedoms of speech and assembly during the Green Revolution of 2009, when the Administration missed a critical opportunity to express support for the Iranian people.

I was a lead sponsor of the Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act that was signed into law last August, which expanded sanctions related to human rights abuses in Iran, and though the Administration has selectively applied some of these sanctions, more needs to be done.

We must enforce all of the sanctions, including travel bans and asset freezes on regime officials responsible for committing human rights abuses. If the international community doesn't hold this regime accountable, no one will.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses how we can help bring Pastor Saeed home, reunite him with his wife and his children, where he belongs.