

PREPARED TESTIMONY OF

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Wife of Imprisoned American Pastor in Iran

Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations; Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa

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“Iran’s Persecution of American Pastor Abedini Worsens”

My name is Naghmeh Abedini. My husband, Saeed Abedini, who is a U.S. citizen and pastor, has been sentenced to 8 years in prison in Iran because he chose to follow Christianity rather than Islam.

After he endured more than a year in one of the world’s worst prisons, Evin Prison in Tehran, on November 3, 2013, the Iranian regime transferred my husband to Iran’s most deadly prison, Rajai Shahr. The Iranian regime sends prisoners to Rajai Shahr to disappear. It sends prisoners to Rajai Shahr to defy them their human rights. It sends prisoners to Rajai Shahr to die.

While he was in Evin prison, I feared for his life because he was brutally beaten by guards and interrogators, which resulted in internal injuries. But, at least in Evin Prison, he was in a ward with fellow prisoners of conscience. When Iranian officials transferred him to Rajai Shahr, he was surrounded by some of Iran’s most violent criminals, rapists and murderers.

Since he arrived at Rajai Shahr, he has been repeatedly threatened and robbed at knifepoint. At times he has awoken to find a knife-wielding prisoner standing over him at his bed.

Prisoners have murdered other prisoners, while prison officials stood by and did nothing. In that place, nothing but the hand of God keeps him from being killed. Each day he remains in that dreadful place could mean a death sentence; any day could be execution day.

He has been beaten until the pain was so great he could not stand. For months he suffered from symptoms of internal bleeding. A few months ago he was given medication, and he had been improving. His father, who is still in Iran, was able to visit Saeed about once a week. Saeed’s dad would take pictures of our kids in to the prison and press them up against the glass. Saeed would just stare at the pictures the entire time for the few short minutes they were able to talk. Once, Saeed was able to write a letter to our kids. He wrote, “It is so hard and so heart breaking for me to see these pictures and to know that I am not there beside you as you grow. I came here to help the kids that did not have mommies and daddies, but my own kids lost their daddy. This

breaks my heart so much. I want you to know that I did not want to put so much pressure on your little shoulders, my precious children.”

Now that he has transferred prisons, he is again being denied his medication. The pain has returned. He has faced almost daily threats to his life. He is malnourished, losing weight, and covered from head to toe in lice because of deplorable prison conditions.

I fear the worst for Saeed. Even worse, I fear that our children, Rebekka Grace, who is 7 years old, and Jacob Cyrus, who is 5 years old, may never see their daddy again.

I fear that without a miracle to bring their father home, my husband home, he will die in that awful place.

444 days ago, the government of Iran imprisoned my husband because of his Christian faith. In July 2012, Saeed travelled to Iran – something he had done numerous times without incident – to finalize work on a government-endorsed orphanage we had been building in northwest Iran.

Without warning, members of the Revolutionary Guard pulled him off of a bus and put him under house arrest in his parents’ home in Tehran.

On September 26, 2012, members of the Guard came to the home and took him away – in chains – to Evin Prison.

This is when our family’s true nightmare began. For days we did not know where he had been taken. Though we were relieved to hear of his whereabouts, to learn he had been put in Evin Prison brought flashbacks of family members and friends who had been executed, raped, and tortured in Evin.

In prison, Saeed has endured periods of solitary confinement, beatings, internal bleeding, death threats, and continued psychological torture, all because he would not deny his Christian faith. I found out on January 27, 2013, that after a sham trial Saeed was sentenced to spend 8 years in prison – all because his Christian faith and peaceful religious gatherings are allegedly a threat to Iran.

But what had he done to threaten the government? According to the court, his leadership in Christian churches from 2000 to 2005 was a threat to the security of Iran.

Yet in 2009, Saeed had been assured by the Iranian Intelligence Ministry that he could come and go freely in Iran, and that he would not be prosecuted for his earlier leadership in Christian churches. The intelligence officials stipulated that Saeed had to stop serving as a pastor for a network of Christian churches in Iran.

My husband agreed to the terms and was encouraged by Iran to focus his energy on humanitarian efforts, such as the orphanage. He did just that, caring for the poor, the fatherless, those children who had no home in his native land. Saeed had upheld his promise not to act as a pastor and was instead simply completing work on the orphanage when he was taken into custody. He violated no law. He threatened no one. He only sought to care for the fatherless. And now his own children have been fatherless for almost a year and a half.

Iran’s constitution declares that Christians are free to worship and that Iran will protect this freedom and adhere to the country’s obligations under international law. Article 13 of the Iranian Constitution states, “Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian Iranians are the only recognized religious

minorities, who, within the limits of the law, are free to perform their religious rites and ceremonies, and to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education.”

But how little do these commitments mean if peaceful gatherings of Christians solely for religious purposes are treated as threats to the security of Iran and used as a justification for imprisonment and abuse – even many years after they took place?

Saeed holds to his beliefs and will not give in under any pressure from the Revolutionary Guards. He is standing up for religious freedom in a country that has no respect for human rights.

But my question here today is, are we going to stand with him? Are we going to stand up as a country and protect an American citizen whose human right of religious freedom is so clearly violated? Not all Americans are Christians; but *every American* – regardless of their beliefs – needs to be reassured and know that our government will take decisive action to protect us if someone uses force to try to make us abandon or change our beliefs.

There is no country that celebrates religious freedom more than we do in America. I have experienced this first-hand. After coming to America in 1986, I got my first taste of what religious freedom really was. I experienced the freedom to choose my own religion. And in 1987, I chose to convert from Islam to Christianity – something I would never have been allowed to do in Iran. America has given me the most amazing gift of allowing *me* religious freedom. I am proud to be an American because of this religious freedom.

I only hope and pray that our country will continue to stand up for what is right. That our country would continue to stand up for religious liberty and be a world leader and a leading voice in this world for religious liberty.

It is unfortunate that Christians are the number one persecuted people in the world, but not much attention and effort is taken to protect their religious liberty.

I am standing here before you today because religious persecution is real. And until we stand up as one – as Americans, as political leaders, and government officials, as people who have been endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable rights – we will not truly embrace the responsibility that comes with that freedom.

I cannot express how grateful I am to the Members of Congress who have refused to let my husband be forgotten.

While I am thankful for President Obama’s willingness to express concern about my husband and the other imprisoned Americans in Iran during his recent phone conversation with Iran’s new president, Hassan Rouhani, I was devastated to learn that the Administration didn’t even ask for my husband’s release when directly seated across the table from the leaders of the government that holds him captive.

My husband is suffering because he is a Christian. He is suffering because he is an American. Yet, his own government, at least the Executive and diplomatic representatives, has abandoned him. Don’t we owe it to him as a nation to stand up for his human rights, for his freedom?

As I have said, I am very thankful for the actions our government has taken for Saeed. I am thankful that the Senate unanimously passed a bipartisan resolution just last month calling for my husband's freedom. I understand that there is a similar resolution being considered here in the House of Representatives. I urge you to pass this resolution quickly.

We must bring my husband, a U.S. citizen, home.

As Christmas quickly approaches, it is just another painful reminder of life without Saeed for our family. When I ask my children what they want for Christmas, their answer is simple. It's the same thing they wanted for their birthdays this year. It's the same thing they want every day. They just want daddy. They want daddy home. They want daddy to be able to tuck them into bed, to sing them a song, to hold them in his embrace.

Most nights they cry themselves to sleep, wanting daddy home. I have not had the heart to tell them of the 8-year sentence. I am hoping that I will not have to tell them of the 8-year sentence. I am hoping that we can bring Saeed home soon.

If we don't do everything within our power as a nation to bring him home now – I fear he will be left to die. I fear my children will never see their father again.

I only ask one thing of my country – of our country: Please continue to speak up. Don't let my husband be forgotten. Please urge President Obama and the State Department to re-engage diplomatically for Saeed's release. Please don't let his case be discussed on the margins. Please make his case a priority. Please urge your counterparts in other nations around the world to speak out for the persecuted and to urge Iran to free Saeed.

I cannot imagine the horrors that my husband is enduring at this very moment. I do not know if he will survive.

He deserves to be surrounded by his family. Please help me bring him home.