



PREPARED WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF

Jordan Sekulow, J.D., LL.M.

Executive Director, American Center for Law and Justice

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

December 12, 2013

“Iran’s Persecution of American Pastor Abedini Worsens”

Chairman Smith, Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Bass, Ranking Member Deutch, and Members of the Joint Subcommittees, I am deeply honored to present this report on behalf of Pastor Saeed and Naghmeh Abedini, and their two children, Rebekka and Jacob. My primary purpose for submitting this testimony is to impress upon Congress the desperate need for greater urgency as Pastor Saeed is in a dire predicament. I hope together we can work for his immediate release. First, let me begin by thanking all of you and your staffs for holding this hearing to raise the case of a U.S. citizen wrongfully imprisoned in Iran.

Religious liberty is not a partisan issue, so I want to recognize the great bipartisan efforts taken up in Congress for Pastor Saeed. I am hopeful that today’s hearing will highlight the commitment to this case that so many of you have shown, and that the world will hear the U.S. government speaking with one voice in strong defense of our fellow citizen, Pastor Saeed Abedini. At such a critical juncture with the U.S. government sitting across the table from Iran in diplomatic talks for the first time in 34 years, we need to ensure that Pastor Saeed and other Americans wrongfully detained are seen as an essential part of those ongoing diplomatic talks.

Pastor Saeed Abedini, a dual U.S.-Iranian citizen, has been unnecessarily separated from his wife and two children for 17 months. The Islamic Republic of Iran has arbitrarily detained and imprisoned Pastor Saeed – subjecting him to violence and abuse. Violating both Iranian law and international norms, his trial lacked transparency and due process,

and yet, the appeals court in Tehran upheld his conviction and eight-year prison sentence. Pastor Saeed has exhausted all legal remedies in Iran to appeal this arbitrary conviction and detention – his freedom now rests solely on the success of diplomatic efforts by the U.S. government and world leaders dedicated to human rights.

Pastor Saeed is a 33-year-old husband and father from Idaho, who is currently imprisoned in Iran's most deadly prison. Pastor Saeed is a dual U.S.-Iranian citizen who was born in Iran. In July 2012, Pastor Saeed was traveling to Iran to visit family and to finalize the Iranian government's approval of the last board member for an orphanage he was building in Northwest Iran, an orphanage for which he had received approval from the Iranian government to construct. This was Pastor Saeed's ninth trip to Iran since 2009, and there was no indication that this particular trip would end up differently than any of the others which had proceeded without issue.

On July 28, 2012, however, members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard took Pastor Saeed into custody, asserting that he had to face criminal charges for his Christian activities. After intense interrogations, Pastor Saeed was placed under house arrest and told to wait for a court summons. On September 26, 2012, instead of receiving a summons informing him where to appear for court, five members of the Revolutionary Guard raided Pastor Saeed's parents' home in Tehran, confiscated many of his belongings, told him to pack a bag, and took him to an unknown location. After four days without word of Pastor Saeed's whereabouts, the Revolutionary Guard informed his family that he was in solitary confinement in Evin Prison.

Pastor Saeed remained in solitary confinement for approximately four weeks. While incarcerated in Evin Prison, Pastor Saeed was beaten and threatened with death because of his faith. Pastor Saeed reported that he suffered "intense pains after beatings in interrogations." Also, in a letter Pastor Saeed penned from prison on January 10, 2013, he wrote that he had been "told I will hang for my faith in Jesus."

Pastor Saeed first learned of the official charges against him less than one week before his trial. The sole charge against him was that he intended to undermine the security of Iran by gathering with Christians in private homes. The Iranian government denied Pastor Saeed access to his attorney until less than 24 hours before his trial began. As such, Pastor Saeed's attorney was unable to adequately provide effective assistance of counsel and present a complete defense to the charges against Pastor Saeed. Lacking any semblance of due process, Pastor Saeed's trial began on January 21, 2013. Pastor Saeed's trial lasted two days – the second of which both Pastor Saeed and his attorney were barred from attending. On the first day of trial, Pastor Saeed's attorney argued that Pastor Saeed's intention in gathering with fellow Christian believers – a lawful activity in Iran – was motivated solely by his faith and that he had no intent to undermine the government of Iran. Pastor Saeed, motivated by his faith to gather peacefully with other Christians and to build an orphanage for the parentless children of Iran, has never taken any action against or verbalized disagreement with the government of Iran.

Despite the peaceful and humanitarian character of his activities, on January 27, 2013, Judge Pir-Abassi of the Tehran revolutionary court convicted and sentenced Saeed to eight years in prison. In rendering the guilty verdict, the court relied heavily on the evidence presented of Pastor Saeed's activities with the Christian house churches between 2000 and 2005, despite the fact that in 2009 he had reached an agreement with Iranian authorities whereby he would refrain from working with the house churches and Iran would not bring charges against him – an agreement he upheld. In August 2013, Pastor Saeed exhausted his legal remedies in Iran when the appeals court in Tehran upheld his conviction and sentence.

Judge Pir-Abassi, who presided over Pastor Saeed's trial, has a reputation for sending non-violent student protestors and human rights activists to the gallows and/or issuing long, arbitrary prison sentences, and as such was nicknamed the "hanging judge."¹ Despite the fact that Judge Pir-Abassi has been individually sanctioned by the European Union² and that the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has repeatedly made a similar recommendation to the U.S. Department of State,³ to date, the United States has failed to place any sanctions on Judge Pir-Abassi.

Since his conviction, Saeed has endured numerous beatings along with other abuses. For months, Pastor Saeed was denied necessary medical treatment for injuries that resulted from several beatings. On one occasion, the prison doctor and nurse refused to treat him because, as a Christian, he was considered "unclean" and an infidel. After months of being refused medical care, Pastor Saeed was allowed to see a doctor and was prescribed medication. As a result of that medication, his physical condition had begun to improve and his pain had dramatically decreased. But recently, Pastor Saeed's health has greatly deteriorated.

On November 3, 2013, coinciding with anti-American sentiment marking the anniversary of the takeover of the U.S. Embassy, the Iranian regime transferred Pastor Saeed to a prison meant for Iran's most violent criminals – Rajai Shahr, in Karaj, Iran. Rajai Shahr ranks as Iran's most deadly prison, where inmates murder inmates, drug dealers create an environment of chaos and violence with psychedelic drugs, and louse and communicable diseases are rampant. These conditions and lack of oversight are to be expected in a prison that was built for 5000 inmates, but is currently housing roughly 22,000 inmates.

In 2005, a Diplomat from the Dutch Embassy in Tehran described Rajai Shahr prison:

Rajai Shahr is the place where political prisoners who are seen as a nuisance, are stowed away. Going to Karaj is a severe punishment. Once

¹Press Release, *Iran: USCIRF Uncovers Testimony Alleging that Three "Hanging Judges" are Responsible*, U.S. COMM'N ON INT'L RELIGIOUS FREEDOM (May 26, 2010), <http://www.uscirf.gov/news-room/press-releases/3059-52610-iran-uscirf-uncovers-testimony-alleging-that-three-qhanging-judgesq-are-responsible.html>.

²2011 O.J. (L 100/1) 359, available at <http://eurlex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2011:100:0001:0011:EN:PDF>.

³U.S. COMM'N ON INT'L RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ANN. REP. 93–94 (2012), available at [http://www.uscirf.gov/images/Annual%20Report%20of%20USCIRF%202012\(2\).pdf](http://www.uscirf.gov/images/Annual%20Report%20of%20USCIRF%202012(2).pdf).

in there one stops to be a human being. One is put out of sight, even of human rights activists and the press. In Rajai Shahr, political prisoners have to share cells with dangerous criminals like murderers, rapists and drug addicts who don't hesitate to attack their cell mates. They have nothing to lose: many of them are condemned to death anyway. Murders or unexplained deaths are a regular occurrence.

Rajai Shahr's prison conditions and lack of basic hygiene have led to Pastor Saeed's body being covered head to toe in lice. Because of the lice and increased pain, Pastor Saeed has been having trouble sleeping. He is also experiencing symptoms of recurring urinary tract infections. He is being denied basic medication to stop the infections. His family reports that Pastor Saeed is now also experiencing significant joint pain and that he has also noticeably lost weight in the new prison from lack of proper nutrition.

Upon arrival at Rajai Shahr, Pastor Saeed faced repeated threats to his life from the murderers with whom he shared a prison ward. The Iranian government moved Pastor Saeed from a political prisoner ward in Evin where the prisoners' weapons were eloquent words, to a new prison ward full of Iran's most violent criminals who wielded knives. Pastor Saeed described to his family how he watched prisoners murder and maim other inmates inside his ward. He explained that, because his "cell" was only closed by a curtain, there have been several nights where he has awoken to men standing over him with knives.

In addition to the horrific abuse and torture Pastor Saeed has faced at the hands of his brutal Iranian captors, Pastor Saeed has not had the full backing of his own government. When the Iranian government initially detained Pastor Saeed, the U.S. government excused its lack of assistance because the United States lacked diplomatic ties with Iran. But even now, when the U.S. has historically communicated with and sat across the table from the Iranian government, the U.S. government has still failed to secure the release of Pastor Saeed and the other imprisoned Americans.

We are grateful that President Obama expressed his concern about the Americans imprisoned in Iran on his historic phone call with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani back in September. And though we are grateful that Pastor Saeed has been raised on the margins of discussions in Geneva, it falls far short because Pastor Saeed is still suffering solely for exercising his fundamental human rights. It is beyond comprehension that the U.S. is prepared to relax sanctions on and release humanitarian aid for Iran at the same time that an innocent U.S. citizen remains imprisoned for his faith and threatened with death. In fact, it was while our government sat across the table from the Iranians disbursing humanitarian aid that Iranian guards transferred Pastor Saeed to a more deadly prison and denied him his necessary medications. It is upon this backdrop that I come before you today expressing my concern about the level of support that this U.S. citizen has received from his own government.

It is my hope that, through the continued interest of Congress, Pastor Saeed's case will be elevated to the highest levels of priority for our Executive Branch, that he will no longer

be discussed on the margins, but rather that our government would truly do everything within its power to bring this U.S. citizen home to his wife and children. I view today's hearing as representative of your commitment to that cause, and I ask all Members of Congress to encourage our President and Secretary of State to elevate the priority of Pastor Saeed's case. As Americans, we call on our government to do everything within its power to bring this husband and father home to his children.

In closing, I want to again express my gratitude to both Subcommittees for taking an active role in Pastor Saeed's case. Your leadership on this life-or-death case is critical, and we urge the Administration to follow your lead. It is time for our government to exhaust every option for bringing Pastor Saeed home to his wife and children. Let us not miss the valuable opportunity we have as our government continues to sit across the table from representatives of the Iranian government. Let us ensure that this loving husband and father is home with his family without delay.