

Sarah Hekmati
Sister of imprisoned American and Marine veteran Amir Hekmati
House Committee on Foreign Affairs
June 2, 2015
Subject: Americans Detained in Iran

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Members, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for giving me the opportunity today to testify about the arbitrary imprisonment of my brother, Amir Hekmati, and with your permission, I'd like the opportunity to submit additional material for the record. This is the first such opportunity our family has received in nearly four years of my brother's imprisonment in Iran and we appreciate the time and effort that went into making it possible for me to appear today on Amir's behalf.

For over three years, our family has been living a nightmare. Every day we wake up hoping that it is the day we find out Amir will finally be released and is returning home. We are in constant fear for his health, his safety, and his life. The fact that Amir is the first American to be sentenced to death by Iran since 1979 adds to our fears. The fact that he has been held in Evin prison longer than any other American in history is emotionally draining. We are physically and emotionally exhausted. We are sleepless. We are full of fear and anxiety. We need this nightmare to end.

My parents came to this country not because they had to, but because they saw opportunities here that they wanted for their future children. My dad has a Ph.D in Microbiology and was a College Professor and my mother an accountant, and it is in gratitude for the opportunities afforded to us as Americans that my brother Amir was proud to serve in the Marine Corps. My hope, as the mother of two young children, was always to one day take my children to visit Iran to meet family, and learn about their heritage. It breaks my heart that my children's only frame of reference for Iran is that the Iranians hurt the uncle they love and that they badly want to see again. I want to be very clear – while our family takes issue with the actions of a certain faction of the Iranian Regime, We know this is not a reflection of the government as a whole nor of its people. Iran is the Country of my parent's birth, and as a family we were always raised to be proud of our Iranian heritage.

My brother, Amir, was born in Flagstaff, Arizona. Our family later settled in Michigan, where Amir attended high school, played ice hockey, and soccer. By many standards, our childhood was that of a typical American family, with one exception: my parents came to America from Iran and my siblings and I are first generation Americans. We were taught to be proud Americans while still embracing our Muslim faith and our Iranian heritage. Our parents instilled into us a sense of duty – to our family, to our community, and to our country.

It is this pride in our Iranian heritage and importance of family that led Amir to make his first trip to Iran in August of 2011. It is a trip that thousands of Iranian-Americans make. I, myself,

have made this trip twice. Amir had last seen our grandmother when he was a young child when she visited America. He felt it was his duty to visit her after all these years because she was too elderly to come to the US anymore. On August 29, 2011, only days away from his return home to Michigan, Amir was preparing himself to attend a family holiday celebration. However, Amir never made it. When our family in Iran went to the cousin's apartment he was staying at, they could see the apartment had been broken into and a struggle had taken place. Amir was missing. Also gone were his phone, computer, camera, and passport. Our relatives in Iran spent every day contacting officials, visiting prisons, and searching Tehran for Amir hoping to find out who took him, where they took him, and why.

Two and a half months later, we found out that Amir had been imprisoned. At that time, both the Iranian and the United States governments urged us not to go public with Amir's imprisonment, asking that his imprisonment instead be handled behind-the-scenes. They both suggested that by going to the media, Amir would be put in more danger and his case would become highly politicized. Our family learned later that our silence allowed Amir to suffer the worst torture imaginable.

In 2001, Amir joined the United States Marines. He served until 2005, leaving the Marine Corps as a decorated combat veteran for his service during Operation Iraqi Freedom. After his service in the Marine Corps was complete, he went on to serve his country as a military contractor, focusing on translation, language, and cultural education. Amir felt this work was in service of his country and that it would benefit both enlisted soldiers and ordinary citizens in combat zones. Amir decided it was time to move onto the next chapter of his life and applied for and was accepted into the University of Michigan's graduate program in economics. He was only weeks away from starting when he was arrested.

As a sign of respect for both Iran and the United States, Amir offered nothing but honesty and transparency when applying for his tourist visa at the Iranian Interest Section in Washington D.C. Amir could have denied his military history. He did not. Amir could have lied about the work he did once he left the military. He did not. He was assured that his past experience in the military would not be an issue. By the Supreme Leader's own laws, it is not considered illegal for dual-nationals to serve in a foreign military. This honesty and transparency are the actions of an ordinary citizen wanting to connect with his parents' homeland, desiring to learn more about his heritage, and meeting many members of his family for the very first time. They are not the actions of a spy.

However, that is exactly what Amir was called when on December 2011, Iran reported that they had caught an American spy for the CIA and my brother's face appeared on television in a forced confession on Iranian state television. Our family received no warning of this by Iranian officials and instead were faced with having to witness our brother being wrongfully accused before being allowed to defend himself in court. Days later, in January of 2012, Amir was tried by Judge Salavati in the Revolutionary Court. Amir did not meet his court-appointed defense

attorney until five minutes before his trial started. Relatives were not allowed to attend his trial and it was held behind closed doors. Amir's trial lasted only 15 minutes. At the end of those 15 minutes, Amir was charged with espionage, corrupting the earth, and waging war against God. By the end of the week it was announced in the media without prior notification to our family that Amir was sentenced to death. He became the first American to receive the death sentence since the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

In March of 2012, an appeals court overturned the charges against Amir and annulled his death sentence, stating that there was insufficient evidence to let the conviction stand. A new trial took place in December of 2013. This trial was held in secret, behind closed doors, without the presentation of a defense. In fact, it was not until April of 2014 that Amir knew this trial had even taken place. That was when he found out he had been sentenced to 10 years in prison for cooperating with a hostile government, presumably because of his military service. The conviction of this crime confuses us. As stated before, even based on the Supreme Leader's own mandate, service in a foreign military for a dual national is not illegal. Relations between the US and Iran are at a historic point. Even according to Amir's Iranian attorney, how can the US still be considered a hostile country to Iran when we sit across from them at the negotiating table for the first time in decades?

For the past three years, Iran has been promoting their tourism industry. Western media has reported that more tourist visas were being issued by Iranian officials. However as a tourist, Amir was kidnapped from the home of his family by agents for the Ministry of Intelligence and taken to Evin prison. As a tourist, Amir was held in a 1m x 1m cell, allowed out only 10 minutes a week to stretch his legs, he was beaten on his feet with cables, was tasered repeatedly in the kidneys. Amir has been held for months in solitary confinement, not allowed visits from his attorney or family, and not allowed to make phone calls. Interrogators drugged Amir with Lithium, and forced him to suffer painful withdraws.

This is how Amir, a man proud of his Iranian heritage, duty bound to his family, and loyal to the country of his birth – America – is treated by Iran, yet Iran wants to promote and encourage tourism?

Iran wants to rejoin the international community, expand their tourism industry, and help their economy grow. What message does it send to Iranians that live abroad when an ordinary, private American citizen sits behind the walls of Evin prison for committing no crime?

During much of Amir's imprisonment, our family has felt that we were fighting for his freedom alone. When Amir was first imprisoned, the State Department urged us to remain quiet about his imprisonment and to not speak to the media. In doing this, it allowed for Iran to control the message of Amir's imprisonment and their message was that Amir is a spy. It is a message that sentenced him to death. In speaking with Americans and other Westerners formerly imprisoned in Iran and their families, we know what the administration - the White House and the State Department - can do. While we appreciate the efforts that have been made thus far, we know that

they can do more. It was not until April of this year, days after Amir's story first received widespread attention on cable news, that we got our first call from the White House.

After nearly four years in prison, they should be doing more, or, in the very least, directing us on how to do more.

To date our family feels as though we have exhausted every option, we have reached out to the UN, Human Rights Groups, Islamic organizations, Ambassadors from other nations that have bilateral relationships with Iran and the US, we have engaged with high level officials from the US and Iran privately and have utilized the media publicly to no avail. Our only reassurance is being told by the US that Amir's case is being raised on the sidelines of the negotiations and our reassurance from Iran is silence, only to be told that Amir is an Iranian and that his case will be dealt with according to Iranian law.

We thank Congressman Kildee and Senator Stabenow for their efforts on our behalf, particularly arranging a meeting for our family with Vice President Biden. This meeting happened only a month ago. It was the first meeting of this kind. For the first time, we felt like we got some concrete and direct information, and we could not be more grateful for his time, and the compassion he showed our children who are 5 and 7 years old. After our meeting tweets concerning Amir appeared from Vice President Biden's official Twitter account. This is the first time such public mentions of Amir have been made. We thank Vice President Biden for that simple act of kindness. After nearly four years, it meant a great deal to our family and to Amir to finally feel like we were being heard. It was not until Congressman Kildee was elected and began advocating for our case that we feel our family and Amir's case was heard. Even with Congressman Kildee's hard work, we have questions.

We are under no illusions that there are things we cannot be told about the effort the Government is undertaking on Amir's behalf, but it does not make sense to our family how previous American prisoners in Iran have been released when the United States had NO diplomatic relations with Iran and were not sitting across from them at a negotiating table much sooner than Amir? This is a historic time. It is a time for the first time in decades that the United States and Iran are having conversations with each other instead of conversations through third parties. Now is the time that this issue could and should be resolved, and yet, August will mark four years Amir has been taken from our family.

And that brings me to my final points. Our father has terminal brain cancer. Within the last year, he has suffered several strokes. Our father now requires 24 hour care. His memories are being stolen from him as freedom is being stolen from Amir. As the eldest son, Amir is needed at home, not only for the care of our father, but for the care of our mother, too. Our father holds on, hoping to hold Amir in his arms again, but fearful that he will not. We have received messages from all over the country of former students of my father, telling us he was an important man in their lives. That man is no longer able to stand in front of a classroom and teach microbiology, something he is passionate about. He now resides in a wheelchair, needing assistance for

everyday things you and I take for granted. The father Amir left behind to visit his relatives in Iran is no longer the same man now.

Putting aside the political differences of our two political parties and these two countries, we share common experiences that tie us together through our shared humanity. One of our common bonds is family. Imagine for a moment that Amir is your brother or your son. Imagine giving up your entire life to fight for the freedom of a man who committed no crime, who sacrificed for your country, and who is locked behind the doors of Evin prison. Imagine knowing that he has been tortured, mistreated, and abused. Imagine the birthdays and holidays that pass with an empty chair at the table. This has been our life for nearly four years.

We ask you to please do all that you can to help fill that chair and bring Amir back home.