

**HEARING BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE
ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS**

June 2, 2015

Written Testimony of Ali Rezaian
Brother of *Washington Post* Reporter Jason Rezaian

Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Engel, and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to be here today. My name is Ali Rezaian and I am here on behalf of my brother Jason Rezaian, who has been detained in Iran for almost a year for offenses he did not commit. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you about my brother and the efforts to secure his release and bring him home. On behalf of my entire family and Jason's loved ones, I want to express our deepest gratitude to the leadership of *The Washington Post*, Reporters Without Borders, and the broader community of journalists and their families around the world. We are also incredibly grateful for the efforts of this Committee, the Congress, President Obama, the Administration, and so many good people around the world. Jason is not yet free and our work is not yet done. But I am convinced that our efforts will soon lead to his release, as well as the release of other Americans who have been unjustly held.

My brother Jason has always been a passionate storyteller. Before he became the Tehran Bureau Chief for *The Washington Post* in 2012, he worked as a freelance journalist reporting for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *GlobalPost* and *Slate*, among others. Jason enjoys writing on topics ranging from everyday life in Tehran to baseball's growing popularity with the people of Iran. Jason's goal has always been to move his readers beyond the stereotypes and into the rich and complex fabric of Iranian society. Despite the fact that he has always sought to present a balanced and fair view of Iran, Jason was arrested along with his wife without warning in July 2014 and he has been detained in Tehran's notorious Evin Prison for the past 315 days. I want to talk about the details of my brother's wrongful arrest and detention, but first I want to talk about who he is as an individual.

Jason and Our Family

While many people know Jason as a journalist who was arrested for doing the job he loved, I know Jason primarily as a brother, son, husband, and devoted uncle. Jason is my little brother. In fact, when he was born, my parents turned to me for ideas about what to name him, and I suggested the name Jason because that was my best friend's name. Today, Jason is my best friend. Jason and I grew up in a loving home in Marin County, California. Our father moved from Iran to live in America in 1958. Our mother, his bride, grew up in Chicago. Like a lot of kids in our neighborhood, Jason grew up infatuated with Star Wars, and he has been a lifelong Oakland A's and Golden State Warriors fan. I can remember him in his room as a child, which of course had the requisite Star Wars comforter on the bed, wearing his A's hat as he combed through his prized collection of baseball cards.

I proudly watched as Jason grew up to become a truly remarkable man. Jason is the extrovert in the family, always engaging with others and drawing people together. His intellect, endless

curiosity, joy for life, and ability to tell a story led him to journalism, where he has excelled. But above all, Jason is a loving brother, son, husband, and family member.

In 2011, my wife and I suffered the tragic death of our five-year-old son Walker. Jason was working in Iran when I called him with the terrible news in the middle of the night on the other side of the world. Without a second thought, Jason got on a plane to come to California to be with us, and to comfort and support us. I cannot express how much his love and care was critical to my family and our parents at that time.

Jason has always been utterly devoted to our family. When my father passed away, Jason again dropped everything while abroad and returned to the U.S., providing much-needed support to my mother and me. He is a faithful and loving son to my mother, and even shared an apartment with her in Tehran in recent years when she wanted to spend time with family in Iran. My mother would like to be here in person to tell you all about Jason. But she is currently in Iran so that she can be near Jason and follow his situation as closely as possible.

In addition to being a devoted son and brother, Jason became a husband two years ago when he married Yeganeh Salehi, also a journalist, in Iran. Sadly, Jason has spent nearly half of their young marriage in a Tehran prison. Jason is also a devoted uncle to my seven-year-old son Paxton, who asks daily when Jason will be released from prison. Our entire family wants nothing more than to be reunited with Jason. In fact, just before Jason and Yeganeh were arrested last year, they were planning a trip to visit us in California. My son Paxton was looking forward to going to his first A's game with his Uncle Jason. With the help of this Committee and others around the world, I believe Uncle Jason and Paxton can still see an A's game in Oakland together this summer.

Jason's Arrest, Detention, and Trial

Let me turn now to the circumstances of Jason's arrest, detention, and trial. On the night of July 22, 2014, Jason and his wife Yeganeh were taken from their home in Tehran by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. They were detained without charges, and confined to separate cells in Evin Prison, a cold and intimidating place with a dark history, where they were relentlessly interrogated by Iranian intelligence and security agents and allowed virtually no contact with each other or the outside world. Yeganeh was released on bail after 72 days in prison—much of it filled with frightening interrogations and isolation—but she is now prohibited from leaving Iran and banned from working as a journalist. My brother remained in prison, where he continued to be repeatedly interrogated without access to counsel. Although he became ill and suffered from infections, he was deprived of medical care for long stretches of time.

For roughly five months after Jason's arrest, the Iranian government refused to fully disclose the basis for his detention or to bring formal charges against him. Jason was formally charged on December 7, 2014 in a ten-hour long court proceeding that was closed to the public. My brother was again denied legal representation at this proceeding and was permitted to be accompanied only by the Revolutionary Court's translator, even though our family had repeatedly attempted to hire an independent lawyer to represent him. After formally charging him, the Revolutionary Court refused to allow Jason to be represented by an attorney for nearly three more months, and

then prevented us from engaging several attorneys who were not deemed “acceptable” to the Revolutionary Court. Prior to his trial, Jason was only permitted one 90-minute meeting with his attorney Leila Ahsan in the presence of an official translator. We are incredibly grateful for her support and tireless efforts, but we are incredibly frustrated by the draconian limitations that have been placed on her and on us as we seek to defend my brother. Obviously, a single meeting with counsel is not adequate time to prepare for trial.

Jason’s trial began one week ago today on May 26, 2015, with a two-hour hearing that was closed to the public, over the objections of his attorney. The proceedings were then halted and have been suspended indefinitely. While the Revolutionary Court has made it clear to Jason’s attorney and our family that it is generally illegal to reveal certain information about the closed proceedings, the Iranian press has printed what they claim to be detailed descriptions of the hearings, and several of these accounts contain details that we know to be blatantly false.

To date, the Revolutionary Court has yet to disclose with any specificity the charges and evidence against my brother or the factual allegations on which they are based. We believe the charges may include espionage based upon alleged collecting and distributing information about internal and foreign policies, collaborating with hostile governments, gathering information under the devious disguise of journalism, and conducting propaganda against the establishment.

Let me be very clear. Jason is innocent of all the charges against him. Indeed, the notion that my brother Jason has committed such offenses is absurd. Jason is a dedicated journalist, who was committed to closely following the established rules about reporting in Iran and was licensed by the Iranian government to do so. It is true that Jason wrote from time to time about Iran’s domestic and foreign policy, but this is perfectly lawful conduct that is typical of many credentialed journalists in Iran. As White House Correspondents’ Association President Christi Parsons recently put it, what Jason did is recognized the world over as simply “practicing journalism.”¹

The So-Called “Evidence” Against Jason

There appear to be two key pieces of “evidence” that the Iranian government has relied on in the proceedings so far. The first is an online job application that Jason submitted in 2008 following President Obama’s election. Jason wrote: “In all my journeys to Iran and the work that has come out of them, the underlying theme has always been bridging gaps between the United States and Iran, most importantly between the people of these two nations.” This is not evidence of wrongdoing. This is the work of a proud Iranian-American seeking to express his personal desire for improved relations between the two countries he loves most by opening a cultural exchange. Jason never interacted with the transition team and was never hired by the government. Instead, he continued working as a freelance journalist until, four years later, he started working for *The Washington Post*.

¹ See Obama says he will not rest until Post reporter in Iran is freed (Apr. 25, 2015), available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-vows-to-get-post-reporter-freed-from-iran/2015/04/25/ac8a9988-a190-474b-8c31-6b46db296b0e_story.html?tid=sm_tw_st

The second piece of supposed evidence is correspondence between Jason and immigration officials in connection with an American visa application Jason prepared in June 2013 for his wife Yeganeh that asked for expedited treatment, citing the precarious nature of working as a journalist in Iran and ongoing safety concerns due to the upcoming Iranian elections. This request in no way supports the charges against Jason. All it shows is that Jason was concerned—justifiably, as events later proved—about his wife’s safety and freedom, and that he communicated with immigration officials about the possibility of expediting her visa application. My brother lived in Iran during the 2009 Iranian elections, a period of upheaval and uncertainty for journalists. Many reporters were arrested, detained, or deported. As a newlywed, his wife’s welfare was of paramount importance. Trying to protect someone you love is not a crime; nor is communicating with immigration officials in an effort to expedite a loved one’s visa application.

Iran’s mistreatment of Jason violates international human rights laws that Iran has ratified and repeatedly promised to uphold. Iran’s own laws require that Iran abide by the international treaties to which it is a party. Yet despite being a party to treaties that protect free speech and due process, Iran has afforded Jason neither of these fundamental rights during his ten months of baseless imprisonment and spurious trial. To the contrary, Iran has flouted these rights and detained Jason in clear violation of law.

Now more than ever I am concerned about Jason’s health and welfare. While in prison, Jason has suffered painful and debilitating infections, and he has lost more than forty pounds. He also has chronic high blood pressure and a respiratory condition that is exacerbated during the hot summer months in Tehran. He is often kept in solitary confinement, and allowed only minimal human interaction. My brother has been in prison for offenses that he did not commit for nearly a year. Releasing Jason is the humane thing to do and the right thing to do, and I hope Iran will do so immediately.

Public Support for Jason

The outpouring of public support for Jason’s cause has been overwhelming and very meaningful to our family. Throughout this ordeal, *The Washington Post* has been there by our side, actively working every available channel for Jason’s release. As *The Washington Post* Executive Editor Martin Baron noted recently, the *Post* is “completely focused on getting [Jason] released, getting him the freedom he deserves,”² and views the charges as “ludicrous,” “absurd,” and “transparently baseless.”³ I cannot imagine a more supportive and committed partner in obtaining Jason’s release. And the *Post* is not alone in supporting Jason. Reporters Without Borders, Human Rights Watch, the *BBC*, *The New York Times*, *Al Jazeera*, Amnesty International, and the Committee to Protect Journalists, among countless others, have all called for Jason’s release. What all of these groups have recognized is that the freedom of the press is of paramount importance—and that the imprisonment of law-abiding journalists anywhere is a threat to freedom everywhere.

² See WaPo’s Martin Baron on Rezaian case (May 28, 2015), available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/erik-wemple/wp/2015/05/28/wapos-martin-baron-on-rezaian-case-we-cant-snap-our-fingers-and-just-get-him-released/>.

³ See Full Statement on Jason Rezaian from *Post*’s Executive Editor Martin Baron (Apr. 20, 2015), available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/full-statement-on-jason-rezaian-from-posts-executive-editor-martin-baron/2015/04/20/1fbb97b2-e771-11e4-9767-6276fc9b0ada_story.html.

The support of the U.S. government, from the President and the Administration to this Committee and the Congress, has also been extremely encouraging to my family during this difficult time. We were particularly grateful when President Obama stated on behalf of Jason: “For nine months, Jason has been in prison for nothing more than writing about the hopes and fears of the Iranian people...[W]e will not rest until we bring him home to his family, safe and sound.”⁴

Bringing Jason and Other Americans Home

We realize that Jason is not the only American being held in Iran. Sitting beside me today are other families that are also suffering because their family members are detained there, too. I know that Nagameh Abedini, wife of Saeed Abedini, Sarah Hekmati, sister of Amir Hekmati, and Daniel Levinson, son of Robert Levinson, are also worried for their loved ones just like my family is worried for Jason. I ask for your continued support in securing their release as well. It is time to bring my brother home. It is time to bring all of our families back together again. Iran has the power to make these families whole again. And it should do so without any further delay.

⁴ See Obama says he will not rest until Post reporter in Iran is freed (Apr. 25, 2015), available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-vows-to-get-post-reporter-freed-from-iran/2015/04/25/ac8a9988-a190-474b-8c31-6b46db296b0e_story.html?tid=sm_tw_st