

**Prepared Remarks of Mr. Omar Zakka Before the United States Congress
House Foreign Affairs Committee
Subcommittee on Middle East & North Africa
2172 Rayburn House Office Building**

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Prepared Remarks – Check Against Delivery

Good afternoon. My name is Omar Zakka. I am youngest of Nizar Zakka's three sons. We have a home in Washington, DC. I also have an uncle who lives in Texas.

My father wanted me to be sure to, first and foremost, to thank all of you, ladies and gentlemen of the Congress. You are the representatives of the American people. Thank you for defending human rights and calling attention to my father's plight and, as my father has reminded me and our family many times before, the plight of other fellow innocent people, Americans and from many other countries, being held hostage in Iran.

Our family appreciates all the efforts of Chairwoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Ted Deutch, indeed, all members of this Committee including Chairman Ed Royce and Ranking Member Eliot Engel, as well as Senators who have supported my dad such as Senator Ted Cruz, for standing for the defense of fundamental liberties around the world. I know that my dad appreciates how you have stressed the "**particular obligation**" that the United States has in securing his release, as well as the release of other U.S. persons held hostage in Iran.

When the Iranians abducted my father, I had not even graduated high school. At the time, I was following in my father's footsteps. I was a cadet second lieutenant, at my father's alma mater, the Riverside Military Academy in Gainesville, Georgia. Like other cadets, I was trying to learn accountability, by working and leading my peers during a challenging time in my life.

I had hopes and dreams, and still do. I thought I'd be in some state college right now doing what any 19 year old would be doing. Sitting here in the Congress was the farthest thing from my mind. However, my dad's close to two-year ordeal has taught me so much about the importance of life, family, and friends. My dad's ordeal, is a reminder that we must prepare for life challenges, because from one day to the next, things can and, will, change.

I have thought a lot lately about Riverside's motto, **Sound Mind in a Sound Body**. It did not really mean all that much to me back then. It does now. For while my dad is of a strong and sound mind, he is fighting for his liberty, indeed, his life. This week marks five weeks of hunger strike. His body may be weak, but his will, as I said, as strong as ever. My dad is innocent and, as he says, will not be forced to do things against his will, including signing forced confessions.

Even though I was hardly aware, or really appreciated the scope of my father's work at the time, I knew enough to be a very proud son. All of my brothers are very proud of him. Our dad is truly a great man, maybe a better man than I'll ever be. My dad has devoted his life for humanitarian and development work. In other words, helping others. My dad used his Computer Science and Mathematics degree from the University of Texas, and his talents, to do that, help others in the ICT field.

My father believes in the power of information as well as technology, and how it can help communities that the world has neglected and left behind. I have never known him to even have a political standpoint as he proclaimed to be a law-abiding citizen of the world, and does not become a part of any party, group, or government. To help advance his mission, he founded and managed a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization, IJMA3 USA, with offices right here in Washington, DC.

My father, Nizar Zakka, was invited by Iranian Vice President Mrs. Shahindokht Molaverdi to attend the 2nd International Conference & Exhibition on Women in Sustainable Development "Entrepreneurship & Employment" in Tehran from the 14th to the 18th September of 2015. I have submitted a copy of the invitation letter for legislative record.

I'll repeat it because it is so important: My dad had an official invitation from a senior Iranian official. In her invitation letter to my dad, Mrs. Molaverdi said that she wanted my dad to speak in Iran because of his "**countless knowledge, valuable experiences and deep creativeness & innovations...for enriching this significant event and transferring**" as well as my dad's "**achievements and experiences to this Conference.**" Yet despite these seemingly nice-sounding words, after the Conference, my father was kidnapped on his way to the airport and has been detained and held against his will at the notorious Evin prison. This is why my dad has insisted throughout this ordeal that he was "**invited and kidnapped.**"

I was not alive, of course, the first time Iranians took Americans hostage in 1979. So this is the first time in my short years that I have heard anything like this. So I decided to research about it, I found nothing. This is baffling. It seems as if this is the first time, that an ICT expert, someone is invited by a government, as a guest, then gets kidnapped by that same government. To my knowledge, this has not even been done, by any party, or organization let alone a government.

Governments may have disagreements, but treating people as hostages, a centuries old but uncivilized practice, is not acceptable among civilized nations. Which is why we have repeatedly urged the unconditional release of my dad. And I do so again today: please let my dad go! My dad went to Iran, as he has to other countries in the Middle East, to help the Iranian people learn more about the Internet.

It has been 2 years since my father was stolen away from our family. It has been a tough time. In addition to the bad things that have been done to him in Evin, his mother, our grandmother died last year and my dad was not able to say goodbye to her. We talked about these things since I've had the privilege to speak to him on the phone for

the past few months. His voice and tone alone have made me feel the suffering he has had to endure to this point. These two years have done so much damage to him physically, that I would never wish this upon anyone in the world. To the government of Iran: is this how you treat a guest?

All of this pain and suffering has led my dad to this ongoing hunger strike; he told me the other day that ***we do not put our heads down for anyone***. My dad said that he would rather die for his cause than live with injustice and what they are doing to him. In fact, he said this phrase to us, in Arabic, that translates to ***“liberty or death.”***

My dad did not say whether he was quoting the famous American Patrick Henry, but he has been inspired throughout his whole life about the American experience of liberty and freedom. A liberty and freedom that he believes will help the people all over the world make better lives for themselves and their families. He believes so much in this that, despite the things that are being done to him, for his steadfast position about the importance of information and the Internet, as well as his refusal to give in to Iranian pressures, my father has been called a prisoner of conscience.

I believe these ideas help sustain my dad as his body weakens. This is very difficult for me to say but as my dad has said, again, he would rather die, than succumb to his captors. Even in Evin prison, in his own way, my dad thinks of other prisoners and what they are going through, including some who have family here today. To these families, I know my dad, and if he can, I know that he will do all he can in his power to help your loved ones get out as well.

This is his 30th day on hunger strike, I fear for his life and safety. Please, I plead with you, the American people, the people from our ancestral homeland, Lebanon, please not to let my father die in Iran. We ask anyone in a position to do so, to please help my brothers and I be reunited with our dad.

Thank you very much for this special opportunity.