

**Testimony of Mr. Omar Zakka before the House Foreign Affairs Committee
Subcommittee: Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism**

**The Status of American Hostages in Iran
*Thursday, March 7, 2019***

Good Afternoon,

My name is Omar Zakka. I am youngest of Nizar Zakka's three sons and I am speaking on behalf of us all today.

Foremost, I want to thank you all, ladies and gentlemen of the Congress and the representatives of the American people, for the opportunity to speak to you today, and for the attention you give to my father's Kidnapping.

This is my second time here. I was first here in July 25, 2017. At that time my father had been detained in Iran for nearly 2 years. It is now nearly 4 years since I have seen my father.

My father was last seen leaving his hotel on 18 September 2015. On the way to the airport he was kidnapped and taken hostage by the Revolutionary Guard.

My father was in Iran on the official invitation of the Iranian Vice President for Women and Family Affairs, Mrs Molaverdi, who had invited my father to speak at the 2nd International Conference and Exhibition on Women and Sustainable Development.

I repeat: He was officially invited to Iran by the Vice President of Iran.

My father is an internet freedom advocate. He is the president of IJMA3, an international NGO that specializes in information technology for development, based in Washington DC.

He has spent most of his career working on bridging the digital divide between different communities around the world.

In September 2018, three years after my father had been taken, his host, Mrs Molaverdi admitted to the Associated Press that Iran had 'failed' my father. And yet my father remains a hostage of the Revolutionary Guard.

Since I last appeared before Congress in July 2017, our life became much, much harder. The last four years, and especially in the two years since the last hearing, life has been

very difficult for us. Time and again, our hopes that our father will be released have been shattered.

My father has been subjected to physical and mental torture and ill treatment by his captors who continue to exert pressure on him to make false confessions to his supposed 'crimes'. Sometimes my father has been promised that if he confesses, he will be released. But my father continues to bravely refuse to do so despite the insufferable pressure put on him.

My father is a man of honor and integrity. He will not confess to a crime he has not committed.

Somehow, my father sustains his mental strength. He has just stopped a hunger strike a few days ago – the only means available to him to protest against his treatment. That hunger strike lasted 23 days. He stopped because we – his family and his friends - pleaded him to. His body cannot handle such a long hunger strike.

My father has been denied his human rights. He has been denied the most basic and fundamental guarantees to a fair trial, he has been denied the right to be treated humanely and with dignity, he has been denied medical treatment, he has been arbitrarily denied his freedom.

When the Foreign Minister of Iran, Mr Zarif was once asked by the media about my father's case, his reply was that my father's case "is a problem between the US and Iran".

What problem between the US and Iran could justify kidnapping my father?

There is no justification for his treatment, for this flagrant disregard of his rights.

Knowing what my father is suffering, my family and I try not to mention our own hardship.

I was 17 years old when he was kidnapped. A few days ago, I turned 21.

Not a single day of those 4 years has past that my family and I do not fear for my father's safety.

The feeling of dread we experience if we miss my father's call or if we do not hear from him for three days is unbearable. We are tormented by the fear that something terrible has happened to him, will happen to him.

In December last year he was taken into incommunicado solitary confinement for approximately 40 days. We did not know where he was, if he was alive or dead.

After four years of not seeing my father, I saw him on film released by the Iranian TV, while being arrested. The film was shamelessly broadcast by the Iranian state news network IRIB. The film – part of a smear-campaign against my father and other dual national and foreign detainees - was broadcast four times on primetime television. It shows my father in his high school uniform, and claims he was a CIA officer. My father went to Riverside Military Academy in Gainesville, Georgia, the same high school I and my brothers attended. The film claims, amongst other things, that my father was trying to over-throw the Iranian government.

There is no truth whatsoever in these allegations. My father is innocent.

The only thing that has kept us strong in the face of this terror is the support of the American people and the people of my father's native country, Lebanon, for which we are very grateful. We thank Secretary of State, Mr. Pompeo for the following statement he made about my father in mid-September 2016 when he was in Congress, and hope he will try to help us:

Open Quote: "This week marks one year the Iranian government has been holding hostage Nizar Zakka: a US legal permanent resident and international internet development expert. Mr. Zakka this week was sentenced to 10 years in prison and millions of dollars in fines. His only crime was to bring greater internet access to the women of Iran." Close Quote.

Our family has suffered too much. It is becoming intolerable.

My father is currently held underground, sharing four crowded cells between 50 of them. About 17 men to each cell.

The air in my father's cell is rank with the smell of sewage. It is infested with rats and bed bugs. There is no designated place for him to eat. My father spends 16 hours of each and every day in a coffin-size space, where he sleeps and keeps all his clothes and his few possessions.

They cannot see the sunlight or breath fresh air at any time except for two hours a day during lunch time. They have to choose: to have lunch and miss the sun, or to see the sun and miss lunch.

We ask you, we implore you, to help our family and save our father.

My father's kidnapping is an act of state terrorism. We know of no other occasion in history when a government has extended an official invitation to a person, only to kidnap them and hold them hostage.

Iran has conducted this practice of hostage-taking for 40 years. We believe it will continue if you, the representatives of American people, do not help to put an end to it.

We have done everything possible in our capacity to put an end to this misery.

We have reached out to the UN and other international human rights organizations, we have launched petitions, we have campaigned for my father's cause in the media, and we have issued countless press releases done by my brothers and I, about my father's case.

The international community has taken notice.

In December 2018, the UN General Assembly urged Iran to cease the 'widespread and systematic use of arbitrary detention, including the use of this practice to target dual and foreign nationals'.

In his latest report the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran the Special Rapporteur, mentioning my father's case, concluded there is a pattern involving the arbitrary detention of dual and foreign nationals in Iran.

These statements and acknowledgements of my father's and others' plight are welcome. But we feel like we are facing obstacles we do not understand.

For our family and the families of other hostages, it is important to know and to see that the US government acknowledges the gravity and supports us.

We are looking forward to seeing senior officials of the US government, and we hope President Trump, condemning the arbitrary detention of my father namely, and to condemn the violation of fundamental human rights by Iran.

For my father and the other hostages, such a statement will help him to sustain the pain and suffering he is experiencing, knowing he is not forgotten, and that he is on the minds of senior and top officials of this government.

We ask this government to take all available legal and diplomatic measures to reunite us with our father.

We ask this government to do the same for all the families of the other hostages.

Help us reunite with our father.

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank you, again, the representatives of American people, for this opportunity, and for your continuous support. Your support has helped, and continues to help, us to sustain our strength until our beloved ones come back.

Thank you.