



PREPARED ORAL TESTIMONY OF

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“The Worsening Plight of Religious Minorities in Iran”

Good morning. Chairman Wolf, Chairman McGovern, Members of the Commission, I am deeply honored to be here today on behalf of Pastor Saeed and Naghmeh Abedini, and their two children, Rebekka and Jacob. My primary purpose for appearing before you today is to give the Members of this Commission the opportunity to hear Pastor Saeed’s story directly from his wife, Naghmeh, and to impress upon the Commission the desperate need for greater urgency from our U.S. government in working for his immediate release.

I would be remiss to begin my remarks without acknowledging the strong bipartisan congressional support that Pastor Saeed has received. More than 100 Members of the House and Senate – including more than 20 Members of this Commission, both Republican and Democrat – have publically condemned Iran for detaining Pastor Saeed, and have called for his immediate release. This includes both of the co-chairs of this Commission. Religious liberty is not a partisan issue. It is an issue involving the fundamental rights of one our own, a U.S. citizen. I’m encouraged by the fact that dozens of Members from both parties are standing together for Pastor Saeed. I’m 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.

Pastor Saeed was convicted by the Islamic Republic of Iran for his religious beliefs after what can only be described as a sham trial. He has been beaten, tortured, and told he will hang for his Christian faith. He was sentenced to eight years in one of Iran’s most notoriously brutal and deadly prisons. He is currently suffering innumerable human rights abuses as Iran violates its own constitution and numerous international treaties to which it has willingly bound itself, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

You have just heard Pastor Saeed's story directly from his wife, Naghmeh. It is a story that is impossible to listen to without asking the questions: "What if it was me?" "What if it was my family that was left without a husband and a father?" "What if it was me that desperately needed my government to fight for my freedom if I was to ever see my wife and children again?" Unfortunately, while Congress's response has been strong, we do not believe that the White House or the State Department's engagement has been sufficient.

The ACLJ first became involved in Pastor Saeed's case and began representing the Abedini family on July 30, 2012, less than 48 hours after Pastor Saeed was first detained on July 28, 2012. Our first conversation with the State Department was the following day, July 31, 2012. We have remained in contact with the State Department on a regular basis since that day. We are grateful that they have called for Pastor Saeed's release -- the first such call occurring on January 25, 2013. However, we remain deeply concerned that this case does not appear to have received the prioritization of similar cases where an American has been wrongfully detained. Many will recall the story of the American hikers who mistakenly wandered into Iran, or the current story of the retired FBI agent who is missing in Iran. In both of these cases, those involved received presidential level support and engagement -- and rightfully so, I might add. It is discouraging, however, that Pastor Saeed's case is not being addressed at that level.

We believe that there is a great deal more that our White House and State Department can and should do for Pastor Saeed. To date, there has been minimal involvement from the White House press secretary and a State Department spokesperson. Their brief statements have come only as responses to questions asked by reporters. There is no formal written statement from either the White House or the State Department condemning Iran and calling for Pastor Saeed's release. And while we appreciate the acknowledgement of Pastor Saeed's plight, we are disappointed with the level of engagement. Our President and Secretary of State should lend their voices personally to the growing chorus calling for Pastor Saeed's release. The leader of our country, our highest foreign diplomat, and even our mission to the United Nations remains silent, even given that numerous world leaders -- including most recently the European Union's United Nations representative -- have come to Pastor Saeed's public defense. It is time for the highest levels of our government to do the same.

Behind the scenes, we remained concerned that the diplomatic efforts to free Pastor Saeed are significantly underwhelming. While the U.S. does not have direct diplomatic relations with Iran, we have been frustrated by a lack of desire from our State Department to aggressively engage with intermediary nations, those that do have relations with Iran. We believe that some of this engagement is occurring, but have no reason to believe these are more than token efforts. We have been specifically frustrated that the State Department has not even been willing to share with Naghmeh specifics about the efforts they are taking behind the scenes. The question remains: What is the State Department really doing to free Pastor Saeed? Given the State Department's low level of public engagement on this case, coupled with the vague generalities that we are told about the private efforts that are ongoing, we are left with significant doubt that that our government is doing everything it can to free Pastor Saeed.

By detaining, convicting, and imprisoning Pastor Saeed, Iran has violated numerous international obligations, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam. Iran has also violated its own laws by denying one of its citizens the freedom to choose his belief.

In closing, I want to again express my gratitude to this Commission for taking an active role in Pastor Saeed's case. Your leadership on this life-or-death case is critical, and we urge the State Department to follow your lead. It is time for our government to exhaust every option for bringing Pastor Saeed home to his wife and children. I view today's hearing as this Commission's commitment to that cause, and I ask all Members of the Commission to encourage our President and Secretary of State to lend their voices as well.