

**IRAN'S PERSECUTION OF AMERICAN PASTOR  
ABEDINI WORSENS**

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**JOINT HEARING**  
BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON AFRICA, GLOBAL HEALTH,  
GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS, AND  
INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS  
AND THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON  
THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA  
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## IRAN'S PERSECUTION OF AMERICAN PASTOR ABEDINI WORSENS

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2013

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON AFRICA, GLOBAL HEALTH,  
GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS, AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS  
AND SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA,  
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,  
*Washington, DC.*

The committees met, pursuant to notice, at 9:30 a.m., in room 2172 Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Christopher H. Smith (chairman of the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations) presiding.

Mr. SMITH. The subcommittees will come to order. This is an important meeting of two subcommittees, the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations and the Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa. We are joined by our very distinguished chairman of that committee who is also chairman emeritus of the full committee and who has been absolutely, with a laser beam focus, looking at issues pertaining to and relating to Iran for the entirety of the last decade or more, so I want to thank her for her leadership.

At our full committee hearing on Tuesday, the full Foreign Affairs Committee, I asked Secretary of State John Kerry whether he had raised Pastor Saeed Abedini's release during the Iranian nuclear talks. I read him the following advance excerpt of the testimony of Naghmeh Abedini, wife of Pastor Saeed Abedini, who is our very distinguished witness this morning, and as we all know, who remains imprisoned and subject to torture in Iran. And this is what she will say in pertinent part and this is what I had read to the Secretary of State: "While I am thankful for President Obama's willingness to express concern about my husband and the other imprisoned Americans in Iran," she said, "during his recent phone conversation with Iran's President, Hassan Rouhani, I was devastated to learn that the administration didn't even ask for my husband's release when directly seated across the table from the leaders of the government that holds him captive."

She went on to say, "My husband is suffering because he is a Christian. He is suffering because he is an American. Yet, his own government, at least the executive and diplomatic representatives, has abandoned him. Don't we owe it to him as a nation to stand up for his human rights, for his freedom?"

Secretary Kerry acknowledged that he had not done that, he had not raised in the negotiations with the Iranians on the nuclear issue, confirming the awful report that Naghmeh had already heard.

So as we speak, Pastor Abedini remains imprisoned in Iran, sharing a cell with violent criminals who have more than once surrounded Pastor Abedini as he tried to sleep, wielding knives and threatening his life. Pastor Saeed Abedini is an American citizen. He went to Iran last year to build an orphanage for Iranian children. He had been arrested in Iran before, but released and told he could enter and exit the country for humanitarian aid work if he agreed to cease pastoring house churches.

As Pastor Abedini's wife, Naghmeh, will testify today, he accepted that proposal, but Iran did not uphold its end of the agreement. Pastor Abedini was arrested in July 2012, imprisoned, and tried for sharing his religious beliefs and thereby supposedly undermining the security of Iran. Imagine that, you share the good news of the Gospel and you threaten the security of Iran. But he was there to establish an orphanage.

He was denied contact with his attorney until just before the trial. The trial was not public, and he and his attorney were barred from participating in key portions of the trial, following which a judge sentenced him to 8 years in prison. His appeals have been denied.

In prison, he has been repeatedly beaten, denied medical care, and held in solitary confinement. While nuclear talks played out on the world stage, Iran moved Pastor Abedini to a prison notorious for housing the worst criminals in Iran. It is called Rajai Shahr. The very fact that Pastor Abedini was moved to a dangerous prison than the one he was at previously was certainly dangerous itself, in the middle of negotiations confirms that the Iranians recognized him as a potential factor in the negotiations.

Since August 2012, the United States has reportedly released four Iranians, including most recently a high-ranking scientist, who were imprisoned in the U.S. for sanctions violations. Speaking for myself, I question whether these releases are unrelated to the nuclear talks. Were they allowed out in order to create a better atmosphere so the talks could go forward? And yet, American citizen Saeed Abedini remains in a hellhole prison in Iran.

The U.S. Government must not waste another opportunity to secure the release of this brave and courageous father of two and devoted husband and a great pastor. His case needs to be front and center in the next round of U.S.-Iranian negotiations. Time is running out. Naghmeh, Rebecca, and Jacob need their husband and father home and they need him home now.

I would like to yield to the distinguished gentlelady, the chairman of the other subcommittee, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Well, thank you so much, Mr. Smith. We are blessed in Congress to have a leader of human rights with the passion, the intelligence of Chris Smith. We thank him for his ongoing and relentless pursuit of liberty throughout the world and respect for human rights. And we are so honored also to look upon this beautiful portrait of our former Chairman Tom Lantos. And Chris Smith and Chairman Lantos were a great team. But he is

still with us and we are so fortunate to have one of his daughters carrying on his work.

And I would like to thank Ms. Abedini for joining us today. Our thoughts and our prayers are with you. They are with your family, your husband. And we commend you for your determination and perseverance to obtain his release.

Last month our Middle East and North Africa Subcommittee, and then the full Foreign Affairs Committee, as you know, unanimously passed House Resolution 147, calling on the Iranian regime to immediately release Pastor Saeed and condemning the regime's ongoing persecution of religious minorities. This resolution sends a strong message on behalf of Pastor Saeed, his family, and the Iranian people whose human rights suffer under this brutal and this bill states that we stand with them in solidarity and we will continue to press for Pastor Saeed's release, and it calls upon the Government of Iran to respect the rights of its citizens.

Although we are here to discuss in particular the plight of Pastor Saeed, we must also highlight that there are other Americans languishing in Iran's prisons or being held captive by the regime, like South Florida resident and constituent of Congressman Ted Deutch, the ranking member of our subcommittee, and that is Bob Levinson. Last month, Bob became the longest-held American hostage in history, now in captivity in Iran for over 6 years. Earlier this week, I joined as a co-sponsor of House Resolution 435, introduced by Ranking Member Deutch, which calls for Iran's cooperation and immediate return of Bob Levinson.

So we are here today because Rouhani's empty promises aren't only about Iran's nuclear programs, but about the reforms that he promised which have gone unfulfilled as the regime continues its policy of systematic and widespread suppression of human rights. On the campaign, Rouhani's charming words indicated that the regime will ease its repression of social freedoms and human rights. However, we must judge this regime not by its words, but by its actions, and in this regard, it has utterly failed.

Since Rouhani took office, the rate of executions in Iran has sharply accelerated, with more than 300 executions carried out since August alone. And on September 2012, Pastor Saeed Abedini, an American citizen, was convicted on bogus charges and imprisoned after being accused by the regime of undermining national security. But his only so-called crimes were what? Working to establish an orphanage and practicing his Christian faith. He was supporting and ministering to churches in private homes, one of the only places in Iran where Christians and other religious minorities can practice their faith despite the fear of state persecution. In August, Pastor Saeed's unjust 8-year sentence was upheld, and last month, as we know, he was transferred to a brutal prison reserved for Iran's most violent criminals, where his life is in constant danger.

Sadly, the plight of Pastor Saeed is not an isolated incident, but it is symptomatic of the Iranian regime's hostility toward religious minorities. In October, four Iranian Christians were sentenced to 80 lashes for drinking sacramental wine during communion, and this past summer an Iranian Christian convert was sentenced to 10 years in prison for distributing Bibles. And it is not just Christians

who are persecuted, but others including Muslim minorities and reformers, who also suffer for their beliefs. For example, the Baha'i community is systematically targeted and persecuted by the regime, and more than 100 members of this community and its leadership are imprisoned. In fact, under Iranian law, Baha'i members can be killed with impunity. For these flagrant violations, the U.S. has designated Iran as Country of Particular Concern since 1999, a regime that does not respect the fundamental human rights of religious freedom. For many persons this is a central aspect of their identity and of their life. This a country that won't respect other freedoms. We saw this when the regime crushed the freedoms of speech and assembly during the Green Revolution of 2009, when the administration sadly missed a critical opportunity to express support for the Iranian people.

I was a lead sponsor of the Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act that was signed into law last August, which expanded sanctions related to human rights abuses in Iran, and though the administration has selectively applied some of these sanctions, more needs to be done. We must enforce all of the sanctions, including travel bans and asset freezes on regime officials responsible for committing human rights abuses. If the international community doesn't hold this regime accountable, no one will.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses on how we can help bring Pastor Saeed home, reunite him with his wife and his children, where he belongs. I thank the chairman again for holding this important hearing.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you very much, Chairwoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen for your very eloquent statement and again for your leadership on all things pertaining to Iran.

Mr. Meadows?

Mr. MEADOWS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Madam Chairman for calling this hearing and I thank each of you for being here. And for some of you who we have had here before, thank you for fighting for those who many times don't have a voice. And so I have got an opening statement, but I am going to speak probably more from the heart instead of going to that.

Right now, we are in a critical time. We have negotiations going on with a country that quite frankly is not built on a foundation of trust. We don't trust them. They don't trust us. And yet, here we are fundamentally dealing with an issue with Pastor Saeed Abedini and his detainment and imprisonment in a situation that we would find just deplorable. But more importantly, the message is not getting out because so many times when we think of people in prison, we think of them there for just cause and I had the opportunity to look into this in detail. And yet, here is a man who agreed with the intelligence ministry not to conduct a particular activity for many years ago, would be granted to be able to come back and forth and work to establish an orphanage that was sanctioned by the Iranian Government. And so here he was supposedly working with the government under their approval and yet, he is tried and convicted and put in prison, but really not even with due process.

So we are embarking right now on a situation where we are working with a nation on something far greater than that with re-

gards to a nuclear agreement. That can only be negotiated based on mutual respect and trust and yet the foundation of trust has been violated with this particular situation and it is not being rectified. Over 440 days without a husband and a father. How many more Christmases are going to come and pass where this injustice is not rectified? If there is any message that Foreign Minister Zarif and the Iranian Government, if they want to have a message of trust and mutual trust, this request of releasing this individual at a minimum would say we are trying to negotiate in good faith and it would send messages to the entire nation that they want to operate in good faith.

And so I think the message needs to be that if they cannot release this individual and others held without due process, then how are we to trust them on much greater positions that have national and international consequences? I would ask Mr. Chairman that my full opening statement be submitted for the record, if possible.

Mr. SMITH. Mr. Meadows, thank you very much. The chair recognizes Mr. Chabot, the chairman of the Asia and Pacific Subcommittee. We have four subcommittee chairmen here today, again, a testament to the concern that is shared across the aisle and throughout the entire House of Representatives.

Mr. Chabot.

Mr. CHABOT. Thank you. I will be brief. I commend Chairmen Smith and Ros-Lehtinen for holding this timely hearing today. In light of recent developments in U.S.-Iranian relations, the case of Pastor Saeed Abedini and his imprisonment raises very grave concerns. If Iran expects to engage in a more transparent and honest relationship with the U.S. and other members of the global community, it must cease its egregious human rights abuses and adopt standards practiced by most of the civilized world.

I think my colleagues would agree that the imprisonment of Pastor Abedini is a prime example of Iran's use of abhorrent practices to deny human rights protections to its religious minorities. If the Obama administration is going to negotiate with Iran concerning economic sanctions, the release of Pastor Abedini must be a priority. It should have been a precondition of negotiations from the start. I yield back.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you, Chairman Chabot. Ranking Member Deutch.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate it. Thanks for hosting this hearing on Pastor Abedini, detained American citizens, and the broader human rights situation in Iran. I also want to thank our witnesses, especially Ms. Abedini for being here today. Please know that Congress is committed to bringing your husband and all three detained Americans home as soon as possible.

Our legislature is divided on many issues, but I am proud to say that Congress has been and always will be united in its support for international religious freedom and for protecting Americans overseas. That is why I am proud to support legislation from Mr. Cassidy, that calls for the release of Pastor Abedini and condemns the Government of Iran for its persecution of religious minorities.

At a time when Iran is seeking to reengage with the international community, its ongoing persecution of Pastor Abedini is utterly deplorable. His arbitrary arrest and the complete lack of

due process is bad enough, but his transfer to a more dangerous prison that is filled with Iran's most violent criminals demonstrates why the United States must do everything in our power to end his continued and unjust imprisonment. Unfortunately, Pastor Abedini's persecution is just the latest in a string of appalling actions the Iranian regime has taken against American citizens.

Mr. Amir Hekmati has also been unfairly detained in Iran for more than 2 years. And Iran is also suspected of having significant knowledge about the whereabouts of my constituent, Robert Levinson. As many of you know, in March 2007, Mr. Levinson was taken hostage while visiting Iran's Kish Island. A retired FBI agent, husband, father to seven children, and grandfather of two, Mr. Levinson has missed 6 years worth of birthdays, anniversaries, weddings, and other milestones. November 26th was this 2,455th day in captivity, making him the longest held American hostage in our history. In response to his situation, this week my colleague and friend, Ms. Ros-Lehtinen and I introduced H. Res. 435 urging Iran's Government to cooperate in his case and return Mr. Levinson home to his family as soon as possible.

Yet, Iran's egregious human rights record is not limited to American citizens, nor is its vile mistreatment of its people new. Iran routinely imposes severe restrictions on expression, association, and assembly. Political activists and human rights defenders are routinely and arbitrarily arrested. Torture is common and is committed with impunity. Women, religious and ethnic minorities and members of the LGBT community are all routinely persecuted.

Since taking office, President Rouhani has spoken about the need to repair Iran's relationship with the world and to ensure the rights of his people. Unfortunately, this rhetoric has not been matched with action. Hundreds of political prisoners remain in prison including former presidential candidates, Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, who recently spent their 1,000th day under house arrest. This year alone, more than 500 Iranians have been executed, yielding Iran's highest number of executions ever in a rate that doubles Ahmadinejad's last year in office. And in the past few months, there has been a stunning wave of repression targeting the media and civil society that included banning of a prominent reformist daily and the arrests of a number of prominent political actors.

All of this shows that Iran continues to flagrantly violate basic human rights and is doing nothing to uphold Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of which it is a signatory, that guarantees the right to freedom, religion, conscience, and thought. While most of the world is focused on the nuclear deal with Iran, today provides a timely opportunity to remind the people of Iran that we stand with them in their quest for dignity and for freedom. Preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons capabilities is our paramount objective, but it must not, it must not impact our support for human rights in Iran. We must continue to press Iran to treat their people with due process and we must act to ensure the release of all political prisoners including Pastor Abedini, Amir Hekmati, and Robert Levinson. This hearing is an important step in this process, Mr. Chairman, and I yield back.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you very much, Mr. Deutch. Ms. Walorski, Congressman.

Ms. WALORSKI. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and Chairman Ros-Lehtinen for allowing me to sit in on our committee today. I appreciate it. It is a very gracious offer.

This case is one of great personal importance to me and I am grateful to all the witnesses for being here today. Ms. Abedini, my family and I pray for you every day and for your husband. My husband and I spent 4 years as missionaries in Eastern Europe involved in orphanage ministry as well and we appreciate your heart and can relate to your heart and we appreciate that.

I am a co-sponsor of the resolution calling for your husband's release. I have signed on to multiple letters in his behalf and frankly, I am deeply embarrassed which is why I wanted to be able to come and sit in on this hearing today. Congress should not have to urge the administration to act in a case like this which involves the state sponsor of terrorism imprisoning an American citizen and I am deeply disappointed that the release was not a prerequisite for any Iranian peace deal.

Once again, I would like to publicly urge our President and Secretary Kerry to do everything they can to secure the release of not only your husband, but the other Americans being held as well. I would also say that I am deeply, profoundly impacted by the increase in religious persecution under President Rouhani as we in this country so deeply value religious freedom and believe in religions free of persecution around the world that people should be able to hold their beliefs and be able to express their religious opinions as well. So I would just like to thank you for being here today and offer my support and thank you, Mr. Chairman, for allowing me to graciously sit on your committee.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you, Ms. Walorski. The chair recognizes the gentlelady from New York, Ms. Meng.

Ms. MENG. I would like to thank our subcommittee chairs and ranking members for calling today's important hearing. We must keep our attention on the persecution of Pastor Abedini and insist that our Government officials demand his release in all meetings they have with their Iranian counterparts. Each and every human life is precious and as Members of Congress, we have a particular duty to look out for our citizens who are persecuted and wrongly jailed in distant lands. The Ayatollahs in Iran must know where we stand and must know that we view their continued mistreatment of Pastor Abedini as indicative of a lack of good faith on a range of other issues.

Here in Congress, we will do whatever is in our power to bring back your husband, Ms. Abedini, Amir Hekmati, and Robert Levinson back home to their families here in America. Thank you and I yield back.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you very much, Ms. Meng. I would like to recognize Chairman Frank Wolf, and just before I do, note that last March, Chairman Wolf as chairman of the Lantos Commission welcomed Ms. Abedini to the Congress and she made a point at that hearing that the State Department had said, "There is nothing that they could do." Chairman Wolf's hearing was a catalyst for at least some engagement and some high-level response and I want to

thank the chairman for that. And I would also note parenthetically that Dr. Swett is the vice chair of the Commission on International Religious Freedom. That commission was created by Mr. Wolf's bill, the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 and so we do have an expert here and a man who really made a huge difference and I recognize the chairman.

Mr. WOLF. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I have no comments. I just wanted to welcome the witnesses and say hello to Ms. Abedini. Thank you very much.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you very much. I would like to now welcome our very distinguished witnesses, beginning first with Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett who is the vice chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent U.S. Government commission that monitors the universal rights to freedom of religion or belief abroad. She established the Lantos Foundation for Human Rights and Justice in 2008 and serves as its president and chief executive officer. This organization is proudly carrying on the unique legacy of her dad, the late Congressman Tom Lantos with whom many of us served and we are very, very honored to call him friend. She currently teaches human rights and foreign policy at Tufts University and has also worked on Capitol Hill as a consultant.

We will then hear from Naghmeh Abedini, wife of Pastor Saeed Abedini. She is a U.S. citizen and was born in Iran and moved to the United States with her family when she was nine. Her husband Pastor Saeed Abedini, as we all know, is currently serving an 8-year sentence in the brutal Rajai Shahr prison in Iran. In 2002, in a visit to Tehran, Naghmeh met Saeed and began assisting him in his ministry to house churches in Tehran and they were married in 2004. She has been apart from her husband for more than a year as he remains imprisoned. They have two young children, Rebecca and Jacob, and no one has done more on behalf of any imprisoned person that I have ever seen, and I have been here 33 years, than this very devoted, and very articulate wife of Saeed Abedini.

We will then hear from Mr. Jordan Seulow who is Pastor Abedini's attorney. He is the executive director of the American Center for Law and Justice. He is also the host of radio and television programs featuring elected officials. He oversees much of ACLJ's international work, engaging with government officials and international leaders on human rights issues around the world, including, and especially, religious freedom.

We will then hear from Daniel Calingaert who is executive vice president at Freedom House where he oversees contributions to policy debate on democracy and human rights issues and outreach. He previously supervised Freedom House's civil society and media programs worldwide and contributes frequently to policy and media discussions on Internet freedom. Prior to joining Freedom House, Dr. Calingaert was associate director of the American University Center for Democracy and Election Management and associate director of the Commission on Federal Election Reform. He also served as director for Asia and as deputy director of Eastern Europe at the International Republican Institute.

Dr. Swett, if you could begin.

**STATEMENT OF KATRINA LANTOS SWETT, PH.D., VICE CHAIR,  
U.S. COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM**

Ms. LANTOS SWETT. Thank you so much. It is always a great honor for me to appear before this committee and to have the chance to speak with some of the very distinguished colleagues of my late father, and of course, I am always mindful when I am here that I am testifying under his watchful eye and so I will try to be on good behavior. I also want to just say briefly what a privilege it is to testify with Ms. Abedini. She is a towering example of love and devotion and courage. And I just want to say to you that you will prevail in your wonderful mission to free your husband. I remember another beautiful young wife, Avital Sharansky, from another generation who tirelessly worked walking the halls of Congress and meeting with the media to press for freedom for her husband, Natan Sharansky, and she was ultimately successful. You will be as well and we are all standing with you and behind you and next to you.

I want to thank Representatives Smith and Ros-Lehtinen and your subcommittees for holding this hearing and inviting USCIRF to testify. With your approval, I will submit my written testimony for the record.

Mr. SMITH. Without objection, so ordered.

Ms. LANTOS SWETT. Thank you. I commend your focus on the continued deterioration of religious freedom conditions in Iran, most notably for Christians and other religious minorities and for highlighting the egregious treatment of Pastor Saeed Abedini. USCIRF stands with Ms. Abedini and her family, has called repeatedly for the Pastor's release, and urges the U.S. Government at the highest levels to demand his release.

Unfortunately, the appalling treatment of Pastor Abedini reflects the dismal reality of religious freedom and human rights in Iran today. The rights and beliefs defining the Iranian dictatorship's character remains self-consciously religious and inescapably theocratic. Any Iranian dissenting from the government's interpretation of Shia Islam may be considered the state's enemy and a potential target for abuse. Because religion matters significantly to Iran's Government, we must look at how the government treats the right to religious freedom to assess the overall status or direction of human rights. That lends also as necessary to evaluate Iran's current President, Hassan Rouhani. The number of Christians and Baha'is jailed during his short tenure has increased and a crackdown on Protestant Christians has brought numerous arrests.

In June 2009, Iran reached a watershed moment when after a national election, citizens protested the legitimacy of its outcome. Tehran responded with brutal repression. Since then, human rights and religious freedom conditions have worsened to levels unseen since the early years after the '79 revolution.

The United States, since 1999, annually, has designated Iran a Country of Particular Concern or CPC. Its government continues to rank among the world's worst religious freedom abusers engaging in and tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations. Members of religious minorities, including Baha'is or Zoroastrians, Christians, Jews, Muslims belonging to minority Sufi and Sunni

sects, and even Muslims part of Iran's Shia majority have had their fundamental rights abused.

Among Iran's minority religious communities, the Baha'is long have been subject to particularly severe religious freedom abuses. Besides its severe mistreatment of Baha'is, Iran's Government discriminates against and represses Christians. While all of Iran's Christians face the regime that restricts their rights, Tehran reserves particularly harsh treatment for Protestant Christians. Next to Baha'is authorities view the Protestant community as the most serious competitor of the theocratic government for Iranians' hearts and minds.

Iranian Christians, including Protestants, constitute less than 1 percent of Iran's 75 million citizens and it reflects the fundamental weakness and insecurity of the regime that they should consider them such a threat. Unlike Iran's ethnic Christian population, the vast majority of Iran's Protestants are converts from Islam. While conversion is a fundamental freedom that international law and covenants guarantee, Iran's Government views conversion from Islam as an act against Islam and Iran's character as an Islamic state, in other words, as an act of apostasy, punishable by death.

Revolutionary Courts also charge converts with political crimes such as acting against national security or contact with a foreign enemy. Hundreds of Christians, mostly Protestants, have been arbitrarily arrested and detained. The U.N. special rapporteur's October report found that since 2010 more than 300 Christians have been arrested and detained. As of July, at least 20 Christians were detained or imprisoned. In a particularly outrageous miscarriage of justice, Judge Pir-Abassi, notorious for perpetrating religious freedom violations sentenced Saeed Abedini, an Iranian-born American pastor on January 27, 2013 to 8 years in prison for "threatening the national security of Iran." His crimes? Participating in Iran's house church movement and raising money for an orphanage. Human rights groups view his trial, like those of other condemned, as unfair and the legal process deeply flawed. He spent many weeks in solitary confinement and suffered mental and physical abuse while at Evin Prison. Last month, Pastor Abedini was transferred to the Gohardasht Prison outside Tehran which is known for its harsh and unsanitary conditions.

Below are selected USCIRF recommendations. Others and more detailed ones can be found in our written testimony. First, the U.S. Government should continue to designate Iran as a Country of Particular Concern. Second, Congress should reauthorize for multiple years, and the President should sign into law, the Lautenberg amendment which has provided a lifeline for Iranian religious minorities. Third, the U.S. at the highest level should call on the Iranian Government to release all prisoners who have been jailed due to their religion or belief and drop all charges against those with pending cases, including, and I hope you will bear with me as I show the pictures of these individuals, because we must never forget, these are real flesh and blood human beings who are being persecuted.

So those we call upon to be released are Saeed Abedini, Farshid Fathi, Benham Irani, Vahid Hakkani, and there are too many others of these Christians, but some of them are noted in my written

testimony. Among the Shia Muslims who are persecuted, Ayatollah Hossein Kazemini Boroujerdi, the Baha'i Seven including Fariba Kamalabadi and Mahvash Sabet, the Baha'i educators, Faran Hesami and Riaz Sobhani; and finally, the Sufi activist, Hamid-Reza Moradi.

USCIRF encourages representatives and this is really directed at each one of you, to join the Defending Freedoms Project, an initiative of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission in conjunction with USCIRF and Amnesty International. Members adopt a prisoner of conscience and advocate on their behalf and shine a light on the conditions in the country and the government that imprisons them. The U.S. Government should continue to identify Iranian Government agencies and officials responsible for particularly severe violations of religious freedom, bar them from entry into the U.S. and freeze their assets.

My written testimony notes nine individuals, including the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Just last week, national security advisor, Susan Rice, reaffirmed the administration's commitment to continue to sanction Iran's human rights abusers. We welcome further action by the Treasury and State Departments, especially given that the European Union has far outpaced the United States in identifying and sanctioning these violators.

Iran's religious freedom abuses demand the world's attention and action, especially given that the Iranian Government may use efforts to resolve the nuclear issue to divert attention from the increasing mistreatment of Christians and other religious minorities. We cannot let that happen. If Pastor Abedini and religious minorities in Iran ever needed a voice to condemn Iran's abusive practices it is now. The Obama administration and Members of Congress should insist that Iran demonstrate its commitment to peaceful intentions abroad by ceasing its war at home against its own people and their fundamental rights including the right of freedom of religion or belief. Thank you and I look forward to answering your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Lantos Swett follows:]

TESTIMONY OF

DR. KATRINA LANTOS SWETT

VICE CHAIR

U.S. COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON AFRICA, GLOBAL HEALTH, GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS,  
AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

AND THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

OF THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

ON

IRAN'S PERSECUTION OF AMERICAN PASTOR ABEDINI WORSENS

DECEMBER 12, 2013

I want to thank the Members of the House Subcommittees on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations and on the Middle East and North Africa of the Committee on Foreign Affairs for holding this hearing and inviting me to testify today on behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). With your approval, I would like to submit my written testimony for the record.

I commend these subcommittees for providing this opportunity to spotlight the continued deterioration of religious freedom conditions in Iran, most notably for Christians and other religious minorities. I also commend the subcommittees for highlighting the egregious treatment of Pastor Saeed Abedini, an Iranian-born American citizen. USCIRF has called repeatedly for the Pastor's release, continues to urge the U.S. government at the highest levels to demand his release, and stands with Mrs. Abedini and her family. USCIRF is saddened and outraged that an Iranian appeals court in September upheld Pastor Abedini's eight-year prison term, and is further outraged that he never was afforded any semblance of due process, and his trial was both a sham and a miscarriage of justice. Unfortunately, the appalling treatment of Pastor Abedini reflects the dismal reality regarding religious freedom and human rights in Iran today and is representative of how the government treats Iranian Christians and other religious minority communities.

#### **Introduction**

While the United States and other democracies seek peace with Iran, as evidenced by ongoing efforts to resolve the nuclear issue, Iran's government remains a dictatorship which continues to wage war against its own people and their fundamental rights. The regime uses its power to maintain monopoly status in the public square for its own exclusionary ideas and beliefs, while banning or severely restricting alternative views and brutally punishing dissenting groups and individuals.

Importantly, since the start of the Islamic Revolution that swept it into power, the ideas and beliefs that define the Iranian dictatorship's nature and character remain self-consciously religious and inescapably theocratic. It is precisely because religion matters significantly to Iran's government that to assess the overall status or direction of human rights in Iran we first and foremost must look at how the government treats the right to religious freedom.

We also must bear this treatment in mind when evaluating the statements and actions of Iran's current president, Hassan Rouhani. Since his election in June, he has made no discernible efforts to improve freedom of religion or belief in Iran. While taking steps to free a mere handful of dissidents, Rouhani has not released Pastor Saeed Abedini, an American citizen who was given an eight-year sentence last September for participating in the underground house church movement.

In fact, during Rouhani's short tenure the number of Christian and Baha'i prisoners jailed for practicing their faith has increased, with a renewed crackdown on Protestant Christians that has

resulted in numerous arrests, and a Baha'i was murdered for his faith for the first time in many years.

While elected presidents like Rouhani have obvious influence in Iran, ultimate power rests with the unelected head of state, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution. Khamenei directly controls Iran's armed forces, its internal security forces, and the judiciary. In addition, the Supreme Leader appoints six of the 12 members of the Guardian Council which reviews all parliamentary legislation for adherence to Islamic and constitutional principles. The Guardian Council also decides who can or cannot run for elective office, including the presidency, by a process of screening and disqualifying candidates based on their allegiance to the Islamic Revolution and the Supreme Leader. In other words, every candidate for Iran's presidency, including Rouhani, had to have met the approval of Iran's leading mullahs.

Since the Revolution, any Iranian who has dissented from the government's own interpretation of Shi'a Islam, whether by word, deed, or affiliation, may be considered an enemy of the state and a potential target for abuse by authorities.

It is for good reason that the United States has designated Iran a Country of Particular Concern, or CPC, for each year since 1999. Its government continues to rank among the world's worst religious freedom abusers, engaging in and tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of this foundational human right. These violations have ranged from daily acts of discrimination to severe punishments including prolonged detention, torture, and executions based primarily or entirely upon the religion of the accused. Those whose fundamental rights have been abused include members of religious minorities, from Baha'is and Zoroastrians to Christians and Jews, as well as Muslims belonging to minority Sufi and Sunni sects in Iran and even Muslims who are part of Iran's Shi'a majority.

In June 2009, Iran arrived at a watershed moment when, in the aftermath of a national election, citizens rose in protest over the legitimacy of its outcome. Tehran responded with brutal repression, triggering the rise of the Green Movement and, with it, a stunning display of the breadth of opposition to the government on political, ideological, human rights, and religious freedom grounds. Since that time, human rights and religious freedom conditions in Iran have worsened, reaching levels not seen since the years after the 1979 Revolution.

Today I will discuss Iran's religious freedom abuses in this post-2009 landscape, with a specific focus on Christians. While Iranians of all religions and beliefs, and those who reject every religion, have been deeply impacted by repression, there is no question that religious minority communities continue to bear the brunt of their government's relentless campaign against freedom. I also will summarize USCIRF's recommendations to the United States government on how best to respond to their worsening situation.

#### **Decline in Freedom Since 2009**

The disputed June 2009 elections marked a tipping point in the human rights and religious freedom environment in Iran.

The Iranian people experienced the dramatic unleashing of security and paramilitary forces which used brutal force against the hundreds of thousands of Iranians who protested in the streets in the months after the elections, as well as after the uprisings which enveloped the Arab world in early 2011. Dozens of Iranians were killed and thousands arrested, convicted, and given lengthy prison terms. The Iranian government leveled unsubstantiated charges and used trial procedures for national security cases against members of religious minority communities and individuals for alleged crimes such as “confronting the regime” and apostasy. More than a dozen dissidents were executed on charges such as “waging war against God,” “spreading corruption on earth,” and “moral corruption.”

#### **Violations against Sunni and Sufi Muslim Minorities**

Among Iran’s minorities are members of its Sunni Muslim population, whose leaders are harassed by intelligence and security services and report widespread official discrimination. Sunnis also are discriminated against in government employment.

Sunni leaders have been unable to build a mosque in Tehran and have reported widespread abuses and restrictions on their religious practice, including detentions and abuse of clerics and bans on Sunni teachings in public schools, and Sunni religious literature and mosques have been destroyed in eastern Iran. In recent years, dozens of Sunni clerics reportedly were arrested for spreading Sunni teachings.

Iran’s government also has been stepping up its harassment and arrests of its Sufi Muslim minority, including prominent leaders from the Nematollahi Gonabadi Order, while increasing restrictions on places of worship and destroying Sufi prayer centers and *hussainiyas* (or meeting halls).

In recent years, authorities have detained hundreds of Sufis, sentencing many to imprisonment, fines, and floggings. According to the UN Special rapporteur on human rights in Iran, more than a dozen Sufi activists were in custody or in prison as of July 2013. Iranian state television regularly airs programs demonizing Sufism.

#### **Treatment of Non-Muslim Minorities**

Under Iran’s theocratic government, the primacy of Islam and Islamic laws and institutions diminishes the rights and status of non-Muslims, meaning that these religious minorities effectively live as second-class citizens. Religious minorities are subject to various forms of discrimination, particularly in education, government jobs and services, and the armed services. In addition, their places of worship and photos of their religious leaders frequently are defaced with graffiti. Their private schools are administered by Iran’s Ministry of Education, which imposes a state-approved religious curriculum.

Under Iranian law, non-Muslims may not engage with Muslims in public religious expression or persuasion; some also face restrictions on publishing their religious material in Persian. According to Iranian law, Baha'i blood is *mobah*, which means members of the Baha'i faith can be killed with impunity.

Since the June 2009 elections, Iran's government has intensified its campaign against non-Muslims. A consistent stream of virulent and inflammatory statements by political and religious leaders and an increase in harassment and imprisonment of, and physical attacks against, these groups have returned the nation to levels of oppression not seen since the early 1980s. In recent years, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei publicly stated that "enemies of Islam" are using the spread of Sufism, the Baha'i faith, and Christian house churches to weaken the faith in society of Iran's young people. Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, head of the Guardian Council, publicly referred to non-Muslims as "sinful animals" and "corrupt."

In addition, members of the Zoroastrian community, numbering between 30,000 and 35,000 people, have experienced increasing repression and discrimination. The unrecognized Sabean Mandaean religious community, numbering between 5,000 and 10,000 people, also has been facing intensifying official harassment. Reports continue about Sabean Mandaeans facing societal discrimination and pressure to convert to Islam, and being denied access to higher education.

In recent years, official anti-Semitism has risen sharply in Iran, and members of the Jewish community have been targeted on the basis of real or perceived ties to Israel. Government discrimination against Jews continues to be pervasive, fostering a threatening climate for the approximately 20,000-25,000-member Jewish community. Policies promoting anti-Semitism have risen sharply and numerous programs broadcast anti-Semitic messages on state-run TV.

### **Baha'is**

Among Iran's religious minority communities, the Baha'is long have been subject to particularly severe religious freedom abuses. Iranian authorities view Baha'is, the largest non-Muslim religious minority community numbering about 300,000 people, as "heretics" who may be repressed on the grounds of apostasy.

Since 1979, these authorities have killed more than 200 Baha'i leaders and dismissed more than 10,000 from government and university jobs.

Baha'is may not establish places of worship, schools, or any independent religious associations in Iran. They are barred from the military and are denied government jobs and pensions as well as the right to inherit property. Their marriages and divorces are not recognized, and they have difficulty obtaining death certificates. Baha'i cemeteries, holy places, and community properties often are seized or desecrated, and many of their religious sites have been destroyed.

More than 700 Baha'is have been arrested since 2005. Today, at least 115 Baha'is are being held in prison solely due to their religious beliefs, ten times the number incarcerated in 2005. In August, an unknown assailant killed a Baha'i who had received months of threatening phone calls and been harassed by intelligence agents. No known investigation has taken place.

Since 2008, seven Baha'i leaders—"the Baha'i Seven"—have been jailed by the government on an assortment of dubious charges ranging from espionage to "corruption on the earth." Their attorneys, including Nobel Laureate Shirin Ebadi, reiterate that the charges are baseless.

### **Status of Christians**

Besides its severe mistreatment of Baha'is, Iran's government continues to discriminate against and repress Christians, both ethnic Christians and Evangelicals and other Protestants, in a sustained and systematic fashion. While ethnic Christians, mostly Armenians and Assyrians, are allowed to conduct their own religious services, they are barred from holding them in Persian. In addition, many of their churches have been subject to close surveillance and compelled to report their activities to the Iranian government.

The government also imposes onerous restrictions on renewal of their licenses, and on renovating, buying, or selling their churches or property. In fact, since the 1979 Revolution, the government has refused to allow a single new church in the country to be constructed.

Ethnic Christians frequently face legal discrimination such as harsher penalties than Muslims in criminal cases, restrictions on marriages with Muslims, the favoring of Muslim family members in inheritance rights, and the setting aside of certain political or judicial leadership positions for Muslims.

While all of Iran's Christians face a regime that restricts their rights, Tehran reserves particularly harsh treatment for Protestant Christians, egregiously violating their right to religious freedom and related human rights.

Over the past generation, and particularly in recent years, Iran's Protestants have experienced significant growth in numbers. This growth has been manifested through the proliferation of house churches, which the government refuses to recognize, with services conducted in Persian, in defiance of the dictates of the regime. According to the October 2013 report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Iran, Ahmed Shaheed, authorities continue to force licensed Protestant churches to restrict Persian-speaking and Muslim-born Iranians from participating in services.

While estimates of the number of Iranian Christians, including Protestants, vary widely, none allege that they constitute more than a fraction of one percent of Iran's population of nearly 75 million. Yet next to the Baha'is, authorities view the Protestant church community as the most serious competitor of the theocratic government for the hearts and minds of Iranians. Unlike Iran's ethnic Christian population, the vast majority of Iran's Protestants are converts from

Islam. Moreover, by all accounts, Iran's Protestants have experienced most of their growth through conversion.

While the right to change one's religion is a fundamental freedom guaranteed by international law and covenants, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Iran's government clearly views conversion from Islam as not only an act against Islam, but against the character of Iran as an Islamic state. Iran's Supreme leader deems it an act of apostasy. While not formally a part of Iran's criminal code, Iranian courts typically treat apostasy as a capital crime, drawing upon Iran's constitution which allows them to invoke Islamic jurisprudence.

While Christians often have been charged with either apostasy or blasphemy as a result of conversion from Islam, converts also can be charged by Revolutionary Courts with political crimes such as acting against national security or contact with a foreign enemy. Such baseless charges may be triggered by a number of innocent religious activities ranging from meetings with Christians from other countries, to associating with Christian organizations that are based abroad, to attending Christian seminars outside of Iran.

In recent years, hundreds of Christians, mostly Protestants, have been arbitrarily arrested and detained throughout the country. In cases involving offenses based on religious belief, Iranian authorities typically release prisoners, but leave in place the charges against them or their convictions in order to be able to threaten them with re-imprisonment at any future time.

The UN Special Rapporteur's October report found that since 2010 more than 300 Christians have been arrested and detained arbitrarily and as of July, at least 20 Christians were detained or in prison.

In January 2013, the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran released an unprecedented report, *The Cost of Faith: Persecution of Christian Protestants and Converts in Iran*. The report, through numerous interviews with Iranian converts to Christianity, lawyers, activists, and journalists, meticulously documents a pattern of abuse that extends to all Protestants in Iran. The report concluded that Christian converts face severe restrictions on religious practice and association, arbitrary arrests and detentions for practicing their faith, and violations of the right to life through state execution for apostasy and extrajudicial killings.

In a particularly outrageous miscarriage of justice, Saeed Abedini, an Iranian-born American pastor, was sentenced on January 27, 2013 by Judge Pir-Abassi, a jurist notorious for perpetrating religious freedom violations, to eight years in prison for "threatening the national security of Iran." His "crimes" apparently included his participation since 2000 in Iran's house church movement and his more recent efforts to raise money for an orphanage. Human rights groups have stated that his trial was unfair and the whole legal process was deeply flawed. He has spent many weeks in solitary confinement and suffered mental and physical abuse by authorities while in Evin prison. Just last month, Pastor Abedini was transferred to the notorious Gohardasht prison outside Tehran which is known for its harsh and unsanitary conditions.

Earlier this year, five Iranians who converted to Christianity went on trial in Iran's Revolutionary

Court. They were arrested in October 2012 on “evangelism” and other charges after security forces raided a house church in the city of Shiraz during a prayer session. The five men are members of the Church of Iran denomination, one of the country’s largest house church movements.

In July 2013, eight members of the Church of Iran in Shiraz were sentenced to prison after being found guilty of the bogus charges of “action against the national security” and “propaganda against the order of the system”. Mohammad Roghangir was sentenced to six years, Massoud Rezaie to five years, Mehdi Ameruni and Bijan Farokhpour Haghighi to three years, Shahin Lahooti and Suroush Saraie to two and half years each, and Eskandar Rezaie and Roxana Foroughi were both sentenced to one year in prison. Seven of them were arrested in October 2012 during an evening raid by the security services during a prayer gathering at a house in Shiraz. Massoud Rezaie was arrested six days later.

On February 8, 2012, Iranian authorities raided a house church gathering in Shiraz, confiscated religious materials, and arrested 10 Christian converts. Four remain in detention without charge – Mojtaba Hosseini, Homayoon Shokoohi, Vahid Hakkani, and Mohammad-Reza Partoei. Hakkani was sentenced to three years and eight months and is reported to be in poor health.

In January 2011, Behnam Irani, a pastor from Karaj was convicted of crimes against national security and sentenced to one year in prison. He started serving his sentence in May 2011 and learned in October 2011 that he would have to serve an additional five years in connection with a previous conviction. He is reported to be in poor health and has not received proper medical attention. Farshid Fathi, a Christian convert arrested in Tehran in December 2010, was sentenced to a six-year prison term in February 2012. Part of the evidence offered at trial was that Fathi possessed and unlawfully distributed Farsi language Bibles and Christian literature. He has spent a number of months in solitary confinement and remains in prison.

Christian pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, who had been jailed since October 2009, was sentenced to death for apostasy in November 2010 by a court in Gilan province. Prosecutors acknowledged he had never been a Muslim as an adult but said the apostasy law still applies because he has Islamic ancestry. Rejecting his appeal in June 2011, the court suspended the sentence contingent upon his recanting his faith, which he refused to do during hearings in September. Facing mounting international pressure over his plight, officials released Nadarkhani in 2012, only to rearrest him on Christmas, and then release him again in January 2013.

Meanwhile, rhetoric from political and religious leaders demonizing and insulting the Christian community has escalated alarmingly. In 2011, some 6,500 Bibles were confiscated as they were being transported between the cities of Zanjan and Ahbar in the northwestern province. Commenting on the confiscation, a high-level government official said that Christian missionaries were attempting to deceive people, especially the youth, with an expensive propaganda campaign. In 2011, the governor of Tehran, Morteza Tamaddon, publicly referred to detained Christians as “deviant” and “corrupt” and vowed to identify and detain more. He likened Evangelical Christians to the Taliban and accused them of placing “themselves within

the religion of Islam like a pest and under the cover of Christianity and with the support of England they have designed a movement.”

### **Recommendations**

Below are some of USCIRF’s recommendations for U.S. policy.

- In response to the systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, and the repressive policies and practices the Iranian government repeatedly and routinely imposes, the U.S. government should continue to designate Iran as a “Country of Particular Concern” or CPC.
- The United States should continue to work closely with its allies to apply pressure on the Iranian government through a combination of advocacy, diplomacy, and targeted sanctions with the aim of halting the government’s human rights and religious freedom violations.
- Congress should reauthorize, and the President sign into law, the Lautenberg Amendment, a lifeline for religious minorities in Iran. The Amendment establishes a presumption of eligibility and allows fast track processing to prevent undue backlogs in countries that host their processing. Congress also needs to reauthorize the Lautenberg Amendment for multiple years, thereby eliminating the disruptions and uncertainties that result from single year authorizations.
- The United States should call on the Iranian government to release all prisoners who have been jailed on account of their religion or belief, and drop all charges against those who have cases pending against them. These prisoners range from a Shi’a cleric and his followers, to a number of Sufi activists, Baha’i and Christian leaders whose sole crime is exercising their internationally guaranteed right to freedom of religion or belief.
- Since it is important to shine the light on these prisoners, here are some of their names:
  - Christian leaders and advocates -- Saeed Abedini, Farshid Fathi, Behnam Irani, Mojtaba Hosseini, Homayoun Shokoohi, Vahid Hakkani, Mohammed-Reza Partoei, Massoud Rezaie, Mehdi Ameruni, Mohammed Roghangir, Soroush Saraie, Eskandar Rezaie, Shahin Lahooti., Bijan Farokhpour Haghighi, and Roxana Forughi;
  - Shi’a Muslim cleric Ayatollah Hossein Kazemini Boroujerdi;
  - The Baha’i Seven -- Fariba Kamalabadi, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, Saeid Rezaie, Mahvash Sabet, Behrouz Tavakkoli, Vahid Tizfahm;
  - Baha’i Educators -- Mahmoud Badavam, Faran Hesami, Nooshin Khadem, Kamran Mortezaie, Shahin Negari, Kamran Rahimian, Kayvan Rahimian, Farhad Sedghi, Riaz Sobhani, and Ramin Zibaie; and

- Sufi activists from the Nematollahi Gonabadi Order -- Hamid-Reza Moradi, Reza Entesari, Amir Eslami, Afshin Karampour, Farshid Yadollahi, Omid Behrouzi, and Mostafa Daneshjoo.

USCIRF encourages Members of Congress to join the Defending Freedoms Project. Through this project, an initiative of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission in conjunction with USCIRF and Amnesty International, Members of Congress can adopt a prisoner of conscience and advocate on their behalf, while shining a light on the conditions in the country and the government that imprisons them.

- The United States should call on Iran to rescind laws that permit members of the Baha'i faith to be killed with impunity, allow members of the Baha'i community to practice their faith in Iran, and grant full access for Baha'is to study in public universities without discrimination.
- The United States also should call on Iran to cease all messages of hatred and intolerance, particularly against religious minorities, in the government-controlled media; halt state-sponsored acts of anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial promotion campaigns; and counteract anti-Semitic rhetoric and other organized anti-Semitic activities by the President and other high-level government officials.
- The United States government should continue to identify Iranian government agencies and officials responsible for particularly severe violations of religious freedom, including but not limited to:
  - Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei;
  - Former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad;
  - Sadegh Ardeshir Larijani, Head of the Judiciary;
  - Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, Chair, Guardian Council;
  - Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi, Assembly of Experts
  - Hossein Shariatmadari, Managing Editor, Kayhan
  - Mohammad Moghiseh, Presiding Judge of Branch 28 of the Islamic Revolutionary Courts;
  - Abbas Pir-Abbassi, Presiding Judge of Branch 26 of the Islamic Revolutionary Courts; and

- Abolghassem Salavati, Presiding Judge of Branch 15 of the Islamic Revolutionary Courts.
- The United States should continue to bar from entry into the United States and freeze the assets of Iranian government officials identified as having engaged in particularly severe religious freedom violations, including but not limited to those listed above, and, where appropriate, their immediate family members. Just last week, White House National Security Advisor Susan Rice stated, “Our sanctions on Iran’s human rights abusers will continue and so will our support for the fundamental rights of all Iranians.”
- The United States should continue to support an annual UN General Assembly resolution condemning severe violations of human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, in Iran, and calling for officials responsible for such violations to be held accountable.
- The United States should press for a resolution condemning severe violations of human rights in Iran, including freedom of religion or belief, at the UNHRC.
- The United States should call on Iran to cooperate fully with the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights Situation in Iran.
- Finally, the United States government should encourage the UNHRC to continue to use its existing procedures to maintain oversight of conditions for freedom of religion or belief in Iran, including continued visits and reporting by the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, and other relevant special rapporteurs and working groups, to which Iran has issued a standing invitation.

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Iran’s abuses against religious freedom and its unrelenting crackdown on religious minorities are deplorable and demand the world’s attention and action. This is a matter of great urgency. We are concerned that the Iranian government may use the current interim agreement with the United States and other western nations on the nuclear issue to divert the world’s attention from the increasing mistreatment of Christians and other religious minorities throughout the nation.

We urge Members of Congress, the Administration, and the international community to pay increased attention in the coming weeks and months, particularly to the fate of Iranian religious prisoners such as Pastor Saeed Abedini, whom President Rouhani has failed to free despite the outrageous miscarriage of justice perpetrated on this innocent American citizen.

If religious minorities in Iran ever needed a voice to condemn Iran’s abusive practices, it is now. We hope that in his continued talks with Iranian President Rouhani, President Obama will lend his voice to the continued plight of Christians and other religious minorities, insisting that Iran

demonstrate its commitment to peaceful intentions abroad by ceasing its war at home against its own people and their fundamental rights, including the right of freedom of religion or belief.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify, and I look forward to any questions you might have.

Mr. SMITH. Dr. Swett, I just want to thank you very much for your testimony and for bringing additional focus on all of the other imprisoned individuals who are there because of their faith.

Ms. Abedini, it is a high honor and privilege to welcome you to the two subcommittees.

**STATEMENT OF MS. NAGHMEH ABEDINI, WIFE OF PASTOR  
SAEED ABEDINI**

Ms. ABEDINI. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and members of the subcommittees. My name is Naghmeh Abedini. I have submitted my full statement for the record and I would like to use this time to tell the story of our family and ask for your assistance.

Mr. SMITH. Without objection, your and all the witnesses' full statements and any papers you would like to attach to the record will be made a part of the record.

Ms. ABEDINI. Thank you. When I spoke in front of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission in March of this year, I had anticipated that I would battle the Iranian Government for my husband's freedom. I never anticipated that I would also have to battle my own Government and that the journey would become even much more difficult than it had been.

My husband is suffering because he is a Christian. He is suffering because he is an American. Yet, his own government did not fight for him when his captors were across the table from them. Saeed converted from Islam to Christianity in the year 2000 after having a radical encounter with Jesus and in that encounter Jesus Christ told Saeed that he was coming back soon and to go preach the Gospel. And from there his life was transformed and if he would sit here to testify today, he would say he found true joy, love, and peace that he could not find in his former religion.

So today, Saeed sits in that Iranian prison being tortured for his faith. He will not deny the faith that has saved him, that has given him life. He refuses to deny his faith in Jesus and return to Islam. When the Iranian Government sentenced him to 8 years in prison in January of this year, they went back to the years 2000 and 2005, the year of his conversion and the year where the house churches were started and he was working under a more moderate government. Khatami was the name of the President previous before President Ahmadinejad. And at that time, he was working under the supervision of a government-approved building church. The Iranian Government was well aware of the house church movement and was allowing it. So for them to have arrested him in the year 2012 when he was working with the Iranian Government on a government-approved orphanage and to say that his crime dated back to 13 years earlier when he was working under a different administration, under a different President, was unbelievable. And to say that he was undermining the national security of Iran by having started those house churches, Christian gatherings, and in the court hearing, they actually said he conducted soft war. It is unbelievable that they would consider peaceful gatherings of Christians an act of war.

As many of you who have mentioned today, Saeed has been tortured. He has been beaten, abused, and told to deny his Christian faith and that if he would return to Islam, he would be freed. He

has been in that prison, and the kids and I have not seen him since June of last year, but he has been sitting in Evin Prison since September. And recently last month, he was moved to Rajad Shahr Prison where his condition has worsened and the kids and I fear for his life.

I want to share a little bit of a personal story here. This is the first day of school. It was a very painful time. I am trying to smile. But tears were streaming down my face as I got my two kids ready for school, knowing that their dad was missing. And as I took them to school, I could see their wandering eyes looking at other daddies holding their kids and putting them to school. And I was trying to distract them, but it was a painful time for them to know that their daddy was missing and it was a painful time for me. It has been hard. It has been a struggle as a mom watching as my 7-year-old and my 5-year-old cry themselves to sleep every single night for the last 444 days. And knowing that unless we get Saeed out quickly, he might serve the 8 years, or even more, or he might not even survive that prison sentence.

He wrote a recent letter to my daughter on her seventh birthday and he had seen a picture of her and his parents when they visit him in prison, they say that when they hold the pictures of the kids in front of him, he just cries. And he wrote in a letter, he said,

“It is so hard and so heartbreaking for me to see these pictures and to know that I am not there beside you as you grow. I came here to help the kids that did not have mommies and daddies, but my own kids lost their daddy. This breaks my heart so much. I want you to know that I did not want to put so my pressure on your little shoulders, my precious children.”

While I am grateful for the official declaration to national media and public acknowledgment from our Government, it is not enough. We need to see action to back our rhetoric in the living breathing form of Saeed Abedini, alive and well, having been immediately released to the reuniting embrace of our family. Not all Americans are Christians, but every American regardless of their belief, needs to be reassured and know that our Government will take decisive action to protect us if our fundamental rights are violated.

An American President who has taken his oath of office with honorable intention and is attuned to the international issues will recognize Iran’s treatment of Saeed for the assault that it is on our national security. For Iran’s treatment of Saeed Abedini is not about one American citizen experiencing a living nightmare for his religious belief. Iran’s treatment of Saeed Abedini is an experiment. Iran is curious. How strong is our American President? How serious is he about American security? Would he act immediately with firm resolve to protect and to defend?

Time is of the essence. Iran’s experiment for evaluating the integrity of Americans’ response to assault on her security is almost complete. And Iran is not the only country watching our reaction. Even if our President can’t see the reality, the rest of the world can. In the interest of Americans’ confidence in the competency of her government officials, her national security and international standing, Saeed Abedini needs to be released now.

I want to say that I can't express how grateful I am to the Members of Congress who have refused to let my husband be forgotten. And I would like to end with as we approach Christmas, it is a joyful time of the year, but it is a painful time for our family to celebrate another year without my husband.

I want to end with this, Saeed is in that prison because he believes "unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder. His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." And this season, I not only pray for the release of my husband, but I hope and I pray that our Government would realize where we have fallen from and how far we have fallen and that we would return to the source of blessing. May God bless America, the land that I love. Thank you. God bless you.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Abedini follows:]

PREPARED TESTIMONY OF

**Naghmeh Abedini**

Wife of Imprisoned American Pastor in Iran

**Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations; Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa**

December 12, 2013

**“Iran’s Persecution of American Pastor Abedini Worsens”**

My name is Naghmeh Abedini. My husband, Saeed Abedini, who is a U.S. citizen and pastor, has been sentenced to 8 years in prison in Iran because he chose to follow Christianity rather than Islam.

After he endured more than a year in one of the world’s worst prisons, Evin Prison in Tehran, on November 3, 2013, the Iranian regime transferred my husband to Iran’s most deadly prison, Rajai Shahr. The Iranian regime sends prisoners to Rajai Shahr to disappear. It sends prisoners to Rajai Shahr to defy them their human rights. It sends prisoners to Rajai Shahr to die.

While he was in Evin prison, I feared for his life because he was brutally beaten by guards and interrogators, which resulted in internal injuries. But, at least in Evin Prison, he was in a ward with fellow prisoners of conscience. When Iranian officials transferred him to Rajai Shahr, he was surrounded by some of Iran’s most violent criminals, rapists and murderers.

Since he arrived at Rajai Shahr, he has been repeatedly threatened and robbed at knifepoint. At times he has awoken to find a knife-wielding prisoner standing over him at his bed.

Prisoners have murdered other prisoners, while prison officials stood by and did nothing. In that place, nothing but the hand of God keeps him from being killed. Each day he remains in that dreadful place could mean a death sentence; any day could be execution day.

He has been beaten until the pain was so great he could not stand. For months he suffered from symptoms of internal bleeding. A few months ago he was given medication, and he had been improving. His father, who is still in Iran, was able to visit Saeed about once a week. Saeed’s dad would take pictures of our kids in to the prison and press them up against the glass. Saeed would just stare at the pictures the entire time for the few short minutes they were able to talk. Once, Saeed was able to write a letter to our kids. He wrote, “It is so hard and so heart breaking for me to see these pictures and to know that I am not there beside you as you grow. I came here to help the kids that did not have mommies and daddies, but my own kids lost their daddy. This

breaks my heart so much. I want you to know that I did not want to put so much pressure on your little shoulders, my precious children.”

Now that he has transferred prisons, he is again being denied his medication. The pain has returned. He has faced almost daily threats to his life. He is malnourished, losing weight, and covered from head to toe in lice because of deplorable prison conditions.

I fear the worst for Saeed. Even worse, I fear that our children, Rebekka Grace, who is 7 years old, and Jacob Cyrus, who is 5 years old, may never see their daddy again.

I fear that without a miracle to bring their father home, my husband home, he will die in that awful place.

444 days ago, the government of Iran imprisoned my husband because of his Christian faith. In July 2012, Saeed travelled to Iran – something he had done numerous times without incident – to finalize work on a government-endorsed orphanage we had been building in northwest Iran.

Without warning, members of the Revolutionary Guard pulled him off of a bus and put him under house arrest in his parents’ home in Tehran.

On September 26, 2012, members of the Guard came to the home and took him away – in chains – to Evin Prison.

This is when our family’s true nightmare began. For days we did not know where he had been taken. Though we were relieved to hear of his whereabouts, to learn he had been put in Evin Prison brought flashbacks of family members and friends who had been executed, raped, and tortured in Evin.

In prison, Saeed has endured periods of solitary confinement, beatings, internal bleeding, death threats, and continued psychological torture, all because he would not deny his Christian faith. I found out on January 27, 2013, that after a sham trial Saeed was sentenced to spend 8 years in prison – all because his Christian faith and peaceful religious gatherings are allegedly a threat to Iran.

But what had he done to threaten the government? According to the court, his leadership in Christian churches from 2000 to 2005 was a threat to the security of Iran.

Yet in 2009, Saeed had been assured by the Iranian Intelligence Ministry that he could come and go freely in Iran, and that he would not be prosecuted for his earlier leadership in Christian churches. The intelligence officials stipulated that Saeed had to stop serving as a pastor for a network of Christian churches in Iran.

My husband agreed to the terms and was encouraged by Iran to focus his energy on humanitarian efforts, such as the orphanage. He did just that, caring for the poor, the fatherless, those children who had no home in his native land. Saeed had upheld his promise not to act as a pastor and was instead simply completing work on the orphanage when he was taken into custody. He violated no law. He threatened no one. He only sought to care for the fatherless. And now his own children have been fatherless for almost a year and a half.

Iran’s constitution declares that Christians are free to worship and that Iran will protect this freedom and adhere to the country’s obligations under international law. Article 13 of the Iranian Constitution states, “Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian Iranians are the only recognized religious

minorities, who, within the limits of the law, are free to perform their religious rites and ceremonies, and to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education.”

But how little do these commitments mean if peaceful gatherings of Christians solely for religious purposes are treated as threats to the security of Iran and used as a justification for imprisonment and abuse – even many years after they took place?

Saeed holds to his beliefs and will not give in under any pressure from the Revolutionary Guards. He is standing up for religious freedom in a country that has no respect for human rights.

But my question here today is, are we going to stand with him? Are we going to stand up as a country and protect an American citizen whose human right of religious freedom is so clearly violated? Not all Americans are Christians; but *every American* – regardless of their beliefs – needs to be reassured and know that our government will take decisive action to protect us if someone uses force to try to make us abandon or change our beliefs.

There is no country that celebrates religious freedom more than we do in America. I have experienced this first-hand. After coming to America in 1986, I got my first taste of what religious freedom really was. I experienced the freedom to choose my own religion. And in 1987, I chose to convert from Islam to Christianity – something I would never have been allowed to do in Iran. America has given me the most amazing gift of allowing *me* religious freedom. I am proud to be an American because of this religious freedom.

I only hope and pray that our country will continue to stand up for what is right. That our country would continue to stand up for religious liberty and be a world leader and a leading voice in this world for religious liberty.

It is unfortunate that Christians are the number one persecuted people in the world, but not much attention and effort is taken to protect their religious liberty.

I am standing here before you today because religious persecution is real. And until we stand up as one – as Americans, as political leaders, and government officials, as people who have been endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable rights – we will not truly embrace the responsibility that comes with that freedom.

I cannot express how grateful I am to the Members of Congress who have refused to let my husband be forgotten.

While I am thankful for President Obama’s willingness to express concern about my husband and the other imprisoned Americans in Iran during his recent phone conversation with Iran’s new president, Hassan Rouhani, I was devastated to learn that the Administration didn’t even ask for my husband’s release when directly seated across the table from the leaders of the government that holds him captive.

My husband is suffering because he is a Christian. He is suffering because he is an American. Yet, his own government, at least the Executive and diplomatic representatives, has abandoned him. Don’t we owe it to him as a nation to stand up for his human rights, for his freedom?

As I have said, I am very thankful for the actions our government has taken for Saeed. I am thankful that the Senate unanimously passed a bipartisan resolution just last month calling for my husband's freedom. I understand that there is a similar resolution being considered here in the House of Representatives. I urge you to pass this resolution quickly.

We must bring my husband, a U.S. citizen, home.

As Christmas quickly approaches, it is just another painful reminder of life without Saeed for our family. When I ask my children what they want for Christmas, their answer is simple. It's the same thing they wanted for their birthdays this year. It's the same thing they want every day. They just want daddy. They want daddy home. They want daddy to be able to tuck them into bed, to sing them a song, to hold them in his embrace.

Most nights they cry themselves to sleep, wanting daddy home. I have not had the heart to tell them of the 8-year sentence. I am hoping that I will not have to tell them of the 8-year sentence. I am hoping that we can bring Saeed home soon.

If we don't do everything within our power as a nation to bring him home now – I fear he will be left to die. I fear my children will never see their father again.

I only ask one thing of my country – of our country: Please continue to speak up. Don't let my husband be forgotten. Please urge President Obama and the State Department to re-engage diplomatically for Saeed's release. Please don't let his case be discussed on the margins. Please make his case a priority. Please urge your counterparts in other nations around the world to speak out for the persecuted and to urge Iran to free Saeed.

I cannot imagine the horrors that my husband is enduring at this very moment. I do not know if he will survive.

He deserves to be surrounded by his family. Please help me bring him home.

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Mr. SMITH. Ms. Abedini, thank you so very much for those powerful words and that testimony causes every one of us to redouble our efforts to do everything possible to ensure that your husband is released immediately, so thank you so very much.

Mr. Sekulow.

**STATEMENT OF MR. JORDAN SEKULOW, EXECUTIVE  
DIRECTOR, AMERICAN CENTER FOR LAW AND JUSTICE**

Mr. SEKULOW. Chairman Smith and Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, the ranking member Deutch, the other co-chairs and chairs of subcommittees that are here today, and members of the subcommittees, I am deeply honored to present this report on behalf of Pastor Saeed and Naghmeh Abedini as their attorney, as an organization that represents them and their two children. They are American children, Rebecca and Jacob. My primary purpose for submitting this testimony is to impress upon Congress the desperate need for great urgency as Pastor Saeed is in a dire predicament. Congress has done more than any branch of government. Congress has been there. And it has been bipartisan.

First, let me begin by thanking you and your staffs for having this hearing and we started back in March at the Lantos Commission and now here. Months later, the United States, in an unprecedented move that we did not predict or could not predict then, is now sitting with Iran. And it is important for us to point out right now that we don't see this religious liberty at all as a partisan issue. So I want to recognize that the unbelievable bipartisan efforts that have occurred within this Congress on behalf of Pastor Saeed Abedini we don't forget that and when we speak out on Saeed's behalf and if we are critical of the administration, we always make sure to mention that there has been that bipartisan support.

I am hopeful that today's hearing will highlight the commitment to this case that so many of you have shown and the world will hear the U.S. Government speaking with one voice. It is so clear, one voice, in strong defense of our fellow citizen Pastor Saeed Abedini, at such a critical juncture with the U.S. Government literally sitting across the table from Iran. We could never have imagined that would occur when we first testified before the Lantos Commission in March. At the table, for the first time in 34 years. We need to ensure that Pastor Saeed and the other Americans mentioned here today, wrongfully detained, are seen as not a marginal issue, but an essential, of those ongoing diplomatic talks. Pastor Saeed Abedini, a U.S. citizen, has been unnecessarily separated from his wife, Naghmeh and two children for 17 months, 444 days.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has arbitrarily detained and imprisoned Pastor Saeed, subjecting him to violence and abuse, violating both Iranian law and international norms. His trial lacked transparency and due process and yet appeals courts in Tehran upheld his conviction, an 8-year prison sentence. Pastor Saeed has exhausted all legal remedies in Iran to appeal this arbitrary conviction and his detention. His freedom now rests solely on the success of diplomatic efforts by the United States Government and world leaders dedicated to human rights. Now Naghmeh has outlined the

time line of Saeed's case in a more detailed outline as in my submitted remarks.

Allow me to briefly highlight just a couple of more egregious facts about the legal proceedings. First, Saeed was detained arbitrarily and while conducting humanitarian work with the full approval of the Iranian Government. Next, Saeed was imprisoned and subjected to solitary confinement, without even being informed about the charges against him. Third, Saeed was informed of the official charges against him less than a week before his sham trial and denied access to his attorney until less than 24 hours before that trial. Finally, Saeed and his attorney were barred from attending the second half of the trial. The half in which "key witness testimony" was taken, thereby denying his legal team the ability to question or even know who those witnesses were. Predictably, this resulted in Saeed's conviction, an 8-year prison sentence on January 27, 2013.

Judge Pir-Abassi, who presided over Pastor Saeed's trial, has earned the nickname the hanging judge. Despite the fact that Judge Pir-Abassi has been individually sanctioned by the European Union and that the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom under the chair of Ms. Swett and also now vice chair, has repeatedly made a similar recommendation to the United States Department of State. To date, the U.S. has failed to place any sanctions on Judge Pir-Abassi. The EU has acted. The United States has not.

You heard from Naghmeh about the horrific prison conditions that Saeed is enduring, that he is being denied basic medical care and that he has been transferred to a much more difficult prison than Evin Prison. See, this is Rajai Shahr Prison, built for 5,000 violent criminals, real criminals, murderers, rapists, drug dealers, people convicted and sentenced to death or life in prison. Built for 5,000 inmates, it is currently housing approximately 22,000. It is a prison out of control with violence. To define the situation as inhumane would be a gross understatement. In addition to the horrific abuse and torture Pastor Saeed has faced at the hands of his own brutal Iranian captors, Pastor Saeed has not always had the full backing of his own government. And I want to be clear here, I mean the executive branch. Members of Congress have been with us on both sides, Republican and Democrat, since the beginning.

When the Iranian Government initially detained Pastor Saeed, the U.S. State Department excused its lack of assistance on the fact that the U.S. lacked any diplomatic ties with Iran. That doesn't work any more. So now when the U.S. has historically communicated with, sits across from the table of the Iranian Government, the U.S. Government has still failed to secure the release of Pastor Saeed and the other Americans in prison.

As Naghmeh pointed out, this Congress has spoken with strength and unity on behalf of Pastor Saeed and we are grateful that President Obama expressed his concern about the Americans imprisoned in Iran on his historic phone call with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani back in September. But as you all know, as Members of Congress, as principals, if there is no follow up to your discussion, little gets done. Everyone has a lot to do. And you have staff, you have staff that you rely to make sure what you have

agreed to on phone calls or said you will do is done. Yet, 2 days ago, Secretary of State Kerry sat at this table and to you Chairman Smith, he said that this matter is a priority for him. But numerous statements from his Department claim that Saeed was either not brought or only discussed on the margins. For us, you can understand the incompetence. Was he brought up? Was he on the margins?

If you look at Secretary Kerry's statements to you, Chairman Smith, it is very difficult to tell. He made a pretty broad statement of no. But you have had others including those who were even going before their hearings in the Senate for confirmation yesterday tell Senator Rubio that he was brought up on the margins of the P5+1. So who is telling the truth? We were told he was by the State Department. But then when Secretary Kerry testified and there are other statements we can point to as well, the Deputy National Security Advisory Tony Blinken said on CNN to Wolf Blitzer, no, it was not, it was not part of the agenda. But yet, the National Security Council spokesperson Ben Rhodes later that day on CNN said it was on the margins. On the margins is bad enough, not at all is even worse. We don't know which one of those to believe.

And that is why we believe, Mr. Chairman, that that offer from Secretary Kerry to hold that classified briefing for Members of Congress should be absolutely acted upon and we would welcome the opportunity to provide you with the kind of questions and information that we have received from the State Department so that you can get the answers and we can hear back from you at least to know whether you are satisfied with what we believe is our Government's incompetence.

Let me just close by expressing my gratitude to both subcommittees for taking an active role in Pastor Saeed's case. And just to highlight again that while our Government sat across the table from the Iranian delegation, Saeed was transferred to a worse prison. Was it on the margins or was it not on the agenda? That is an answer we need from the United States executive branch and from the Obama administration. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Sekulow follows:]



PREPARED WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF

**Jordan Sekulow, J.D., LL.M.**

Executive Director, American Center for Law and Justice

**Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations; Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa**

December 12, 2013

**“Iran’s Persecution of American Pastor Abedini Worsens”**

Chairman Smith, Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Bass, Ranking Member Deutch, and Members of the Joint Subcommittees, I am deeply honored to present this report on behalf of Pastor Saeed and Naghmeh Abedini, and their two children, Rebekka and Jacob. My primary purpose for submitting this testimony is to impress upon Congress the desperate need for greater urgency as Pastor Saeed is in a dire predicament. I hope together we can work for his immediate release. First, let me begin by thanking all of you and your staffs for holding this hearing to raise the case of a U.S. citizen wrongfully imprisoned in Iran.

Religious liberty is not a partisan issue, so I want to recognize the great bipartisan efforts taken up in Congress for Pastor Saeed. I am 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. At such a critical juncture with the U.S. government sitting across the table from Iran in diplomatic talks for the first time in 34 years, we need to ensure that Pastor Saeed and other Americans wrongfully detained are seen as an essential part of those ongoing diplomatic talks.

Pastor Saeed Abedini, a dual U.S.-Iranian citizen, has been unnecessarily separated from his wife and two children for 17 months. The Islamic Republic of Iran has arbitrarily detained and imprisoned Pastor Saeed – subjecting him to violence and abuse. Violating both Iranian law and international norms, his trial lacked transparency and due process,

and yet, the appeals court in Tehran upheld his conviction and eight-year prison sentence. Pastor Saeed has exhausted all legal remedies in Iran to appeal this arbitrary conviction and detention – his freedom now rests solely on the success of diplomatic efforts by the U.S. government and world leaders dedicated to human rights.

Pastor Saeed is a 33-year-old husband and father from Idaho, who is currently imprisoned in Iran's most deadly prison. Pastor Saeed is a dual U.S.-Iranian citizen who was born in Iran. In July 2012, Pastor Saeed was traveling to Iran to visit family and to finalize the Iranian government's approval of the last board member for an orphanage he was building in Northwest Iran, an orphanage for which he had received approval from the Iranian government to construct. This was Pastor Saeed's ninth trip to Iran since 2009, and there was no indication that this particular trip would end up differently than any of the others which had proceeded without issue.

On July 28, 2012, however, members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard took Pastor Saeed into custody, asserting that he had to face criminal charges for his Christian activities. After intense interrogations, Pastor Saeed was placed under house arrest and told to wait for a court summons. On September 26, 2012, instead of receiving a summons informing him where to appear for court, five members of the Revolutionary Guard raided Pastor Saeed's parents' home in Tehran, confiscated many of his belongings, told him to pack a bag, and took him to an unknown location. After four days without word of Pastor Saeed's whereabouts, the Revolutionary Guard informed his family that he was in solitary confinement in Evin Prison.

Pastor Saeed remained in solitary confinement for approximately four weeks. While incarcerated in Evin Prison, Pastor Saeed was beaten and threatened with death because of his faith. Pastor Saeed reported that he suffered "intense pains after beatings in interrogations." Also, in a letter Pastor Saeed penned from prison on January 10, 2013, he wrote that he had been "told I will hang for my faith in Jesus."

Pastor Saeed first learned of the official charges against him less than one week before his trial. The sole charge against him was that he intended to undermine the security of Iran by gathering with Christians in private homes. The Iranian government denied Pastor Saeed access to his attorney until less than 24 hours before his trial began. As such, Pastor Saeed's attorney was unable to adequately provide effective assistance of counsel and present a complete defense to the charges against Pastor Saeed. Lacking any semblance of due process, Pastor Saeed's trial began on January 21, 2013. Pastor Saeed's trial lasted two days – the second of which both Pastor Saeed and his attorney were barred from attending. On the first day of trial, Pastor Saeed's attorney argued that Pastor Saeed's intention in gathering with fellow Christian believers – a lawful activity in Iran – was motivated solely by his faith and that he had no intent to undermine the government of Iran. Pastor Saeed, motivated by his faith to gather peacefully with other Christians and to build an orphanage for the parentless children of Iran, has never taken any action against or verbalized disagreement with the government of Iran.

Despite the peaceful and humanitarian character of his activities, on January 27, 2013, Judge Pir-Abassi of the Tehran revolutionary court convicted and sentenced Saeed to eight years in prison. In rendering the guilty verdict, the court relied heavily on the evidence presented of Pastor Saeed's activities with the Christian house churches between 2000 and 2005, despite the fact that in 2009 he had reached an agreement with Iranian authorities whereby he would refrain from working with the house churches and Iran would not bring charges against him – an agreement he upheld. In August 2013, Pastor Saeed exhausted his legal remedies in Iran when the appeals court in Tehran upheld his conviction and sentence.

Judge Pir-Abassi, who presided over Pastor Saeed's trial, has a reputation for sending non-violent student protestors and human rights activists to the gallows and/or issuing long, arbitrary prison sentences, and as such was nicknamed the "hanging judge."<sup>1</sup> Despite the fact that Judge Pir-Abassi has been individually sanctioned by the European Union<sup>2</sup> and that the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has repeatedly made a similar recommendation to the U.S. Department of State,<sup>3</sup> to date, the United States has failed to place any sanctions on Judge Pir-Abassi.

Since his conviction, Saeed has endured numerous beatings along with other abuses. For months, Pastor Saeed was denied necessary medical treatment for injuries that resulted from several beatings. On one occasion, the prison doctor and nurse refused to treat him because, as a Christian, he was considered "unclean" and an infidel. After months of being refused medical care, Pastor Saeed was allowed to see a doctor and was prescribed medication. As a result of that medication, his physical condition had begun to improve and his pain had dramatically decreased. But recently, Pastor Saeed's health has greatly deteriorated.

On November 3, 2013, coinciding with anti-American sentiment marking the anniversary of the takeover of the U.S. Embassy, the Iranian regime transferred Pastor Saeed to a prison meant for Iran's most violent criminals – Rajai Shahr, in Karaj, Iran. Rajai Shahr ranks as Iran's most deadly prison, where inmates murder inmates, drug dealers create an environment of chaos and violence with psychedelic drugs, and louse and communicable diseases are rampant. These conditions and lack of oversight are to be expected in a prison that was built for 5000 inmates, but is currently housing roughly 22,000 inmates.

In 2005, a Diplomat from the Dutch Embassy in Tehran described Rajai Shahr prison:

Rajai Shahr is the place where political prisoners who are seen as a nuisance, are stowed away. Going to Karaj is a severe punishment. Once

<sup>1</sup>Press Release, *Iran: USCIRF Uncovers Testimony Alleging that Three "Hanging Judges" are Responsible*, U.S. COMM'N ON INT'L RELIGIOUS FREEDOM (May 26, 2010), <http://www.uscirtf.gov/newsroom/press-releases/3059-52610-iran-uscirtf-uncovers-testimony-alleging-that-three-hanging-judgesq-are-responsible.html>.

<sup>2</sup>2011 O.J. (L 100/1) 359, available at <http://eurlex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2011:100:0001:0011:EN:PDF>.

<sup>3</sup>U.S. COMM'N ON INT'L RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ANN. REP. 93-94 (2012), available at [http://www.uscirtf.gov/images/Annual%20Report%20of%20USCIRF%202012\(2\).pdf](http://www.uscirtf.gov/images/Annual%20Report%20of%20USCIRF%202012(2).pdf).

in there one stops to be a human being. One is put out of sight, even of human rights activists and the press. In Rajaī Shahr, political prisoners have to share cells with dangerous criminals like murderers, rapists and drug addicts who don't hesitate to attack their cell mates. They have nothing to lose: many of them are condemned to death anyway. Murders or unexplained deaths are a regular occurrence.

Rajaī Shahr's prison conditions and lack of basic hygiene have led to Pastor Saeed's body being covered head to toe in lice. Because of the lice and increased pain, Pastor Saeed has been having trouble sleeping. He is also experiencing symptoms of recurring urinary tract infections. He is being denied basic medication to stop the infections. His family reports that Pastor Saeed is now also experiencing significant joint pain and that he has also noticeably lost weight in the new prison from lack of proper nutrition.

Upon arrival at Rajaī Shahr, Pastor Saeed faced repeated threats to his life from the murderers with whom he shared a prison ward. The Iranian government moved Pastor Saeed from a political prisoner ward in Evin where the prisoners' weapons were eloquent words, to a new prison ward full of Iran's most violent criminals who wielded knives. Pastor Saeed described to his family how he watched prisoners murder and maim other inmates inside his ward. He explained that, because his "cell" was only closed by a curtain, there have been several nights where he has awoken to men standing over him with knives.

In addition to the horrific abuse and torture Pastor Saeed has faced at the hands of his brutal Iranian captors, Pastor Saeed has not had the full backing of his own government. When the Iranian government initially detained Pastor Saeed, the U.S. government excused its lack of assistance because the United States lacked diplomatic ties with Iran. But even now, when the U.S. has historically communicated with and sat across the table from the Iranian government, the U.S. government has still failed to secure the release of Pastor Saeed and the other imprisoned Americans.

We are grateful that President Obama expressed his concern about the Americans imprisoned in Iran on his historic phone call with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani back in September. And though we are grateful that Pastor Saeed has been raised on the margins of discussions in Geneva, it falls far short because Pastor Saeed is still suffering solely for exercising his fundamental human rights. It is beyond comprehension that the U.S. is prepared to relax sanctions on and release humanitarian aid for Iran at the same time that an innocent U.S. citizen remains imprisoned for his faith and threatened with death. In fact, it was while our government sat across the table from the Iranians disbursing humanitarian aid that Iranian guards transferred Pastor Saeed to a more deadly prison and denied him his necessary medications. It is upon this backdrop that I come before you today expressing my concern about the level of support that this U.S. citizen has received from his own government.

It is my hope that, through the continued interest of Congress, Pastor Saeed's case will be elevated to the highest levels of priority for our Executive Branch, that he will no longer

be discussed on the margins, but rather that our government would truly do everything within its power to bring this U.S. citizen home to his wife and children. I view today's hearing as representative of your commitment to that cause, and I ask all Members of Congress to encourage our President and Secretary of State to elevate the priority of Pastor Saeed's case. As Americans, we call on our government to do everything within its power to bring this husband and father home to his children.

In closing, I want to again express my gratitude to both Subcommittees for taking an active role in Pastor Saeed's case. Your leadership on this life-or-death case is critical, and we urge the Administration to follow your lead. It is time for our government to exhaust every option for bringing Pastor Saeed home to his wife and children. Let us not miss the valuable opportunity we have as our government continues to sit across the table from representatives of the Iranian government. Let us ensure that this loving husband and father is home with his family without delay.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you, Mr. Sekulow, and we will indeed follow up with that classified briefing. I, and I know everyone else who is concerned about Pastor Abedini, will be raising this issue repeatedly going forward at every venue where we have an interface with the administration because there was a sense of conflicting information even as the Secretary of State spoke. So thank you for your testimony and for being an excellent lawyer on behalf of Mr. Abedini.

Mr. Calingaert.

**STATEMENT OF DANIEL CALINGAERT, PH.D., EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT, FREEDOM HOUSE**

Mr. CALINGAERT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Madam Chairman, honorable members. I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you today. I want to thank you for your leadership in championing the case of Pastor Abedini and pressing for his release. Sadly, the kinds of abuses that he suffers are all too common in Iran. During the campaign for the Presidency of Iran, Hassan Rouhani repeatedly promised to release all political prisoners and to make a change in favor of free speech and media freedom. The record of his first 4 months in office shows otherwise. He has yet to live up to these promises.

Fifteen prominent political prisoners were released in September, but approximately 800 dissidents including human rights defenders, journalists, and political activists remain unjustly detained in Iran. The leaders of the Green Movement, Mir-Hossein Mousavi, Mehdi Karroubi, and Zahra Rahnavard are still under house arrest. While some limited space has opened up for women's rights activists, the overall situation for human rights in Iran is as grim under President Rouhani as it was before.

In the past few weeks, Iran's Interior Ministry and Revolutionary Guards have carried out a new wave of arrests to stifle free expression. At least 38 people were arrested, including editors and staff of a technology Web site, Narenji, and activists in the Province of Kerman who were accused of receiving foreign assistance to produce online content that undermines the Islamic regime. These arrests come on the heels of a December 3rd court ruling that exonerated government officials accused of murdering Sattar Beheshti, a blogger who was detained by the Iranian cyber police, and was later found dead in his jail cell with bruises on his body.

Iran is second only to China in the number of executions it carries out. This year, 668 reported executions have already taken place. Virtually all capital cases lack internationally recognized standards of due process and death sentences are often imposed for relatively minor crimes such as drug possession. The Iranian regime, dominated by Shiite clerics and Revolutionary Guard commanders is highly repressive. It systematically tramples political and civil rights. In Freedom House's annual report on freedom in the world, Iran receives a rating of six on a scale of one to seven, where seven is the lowest score.

The election of Rouhani was welcomed by some in Iran and abroad because he was the least conservative of the candidates, but his election was anything but fair. Over 600 candidates had registered to run in that election, but only 6 names appeared on the

ballot and who made that decision? The Guardian Council, 12 Islamic clerics and jurists, not the voters.

The media environment in Iran is among the most restrictive in the world. Iran ranks 191st out of 197 countries in Freedom House's annual ratings on media freedom. The government directly controls all television and radio broadcasting and print media, blogs, and news Web site are severely censored. Restrictions on on-line space are equally, if not more severe. In the latest edition of Freedom House's rankings on Internet freedom which covered 60 countries, Iran came in the very last place.

With all that is at stake in the negotiations with Iran on its nuclear program, there is a temptation to put aside human rights issues because they might complicate the negotiations. But that would be a mistake. Speaking out for human rights in Iran as elsewhere both reflects U.S. values and serves U.S. interests and it can be done at the same time as we negotiate on nuclear matters.

The Iranian people's aspirations for greater freedom are abundantly clear. They were expressed in the votes for Rouhani and his promises for change and they were seen in a recent Zogby poll that showed issues of political reform trumped other concerns. The Iranian regime stifles free expression because the citizens are expressing a desire for political change. They want to modernize their country, to exchange opinions freely, and to become open to the rest of the world. An Iranian Government that is more attuned to the views of its own citizens will be less hostile toward the United States and more constructive in its foreign relations.

When faced with international criticism of its human rights abuses, the Iranian Government invariably is defiant, but it does listen. International pressure has, for example, led to the release of former political prisoners such as Maziar Bahari, Roxana Saberi, and most recently in September Nasrin Sotoudeh. One thing is certain, the Iranian Government's record on human rights does not improve when the United States stays silent. The United States can put human rights high on the agenda with its adversaries at the same time as it addresses other sensitive and complex issues. The Reagan administration kept human rights on the agenda while negotiating nuclear arms treaties with the Soviet Union.

President Clinton spoke out about the struggle for individual freedom at Beijing University during a state visit in 1998 and still held constructive talks with Chinese Government leaders on a range of security and economic issues.

Iranians who want to change their country for the better understand that the struggle for freedom is their struggle. They have to stand up for their rights and demand that their government listen to them. But Iranians notice what we in the United States say and don't say. When we stay silent, we send the message that we don't care about their struggle for freedom and that message is disheartening for Iranians today and it will hurt our credibility with them for a long time to come. The United States needs to put human rights on its agenda with the Government of Iran. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Calingaert follows:]



**Testimony by Daniel Calingaert  
Executive Vice President of Freedom House**

**Joint Hearing of the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and  
International Organizations and Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa,  
U.S. House of Representatives**

**“The Human Rights Situation in Iran”**

**December 12, 2013**

Mr. Chairman, Madam Chairwoman, Honorable Ranking Members and Committee Members, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about human rights in Iran.

In his campaign for the presidency of Iran, Hassan Rouhani repeatedly promised to release all political prisoners and to make a change “in favor of free speech and media freedom.” The record of his first four months in office shows otherwise. He has yet to live up to these promises.

Fifteen prominent political prisoners were released in September, including human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh, a recipient of the European Parliament’s Sakharov Prize. But approximately 800 dissidents, including human rights defenders, journalists, and political activists, remain unjustly detained in Iran. Leaders of the Green Movement—the 2009 presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi, his wife, Zahra Rahnavard, and Mehdi Karroubi—are still under house arrest.

While some limited space has opened up for women’s rights activists, the overall situation for human rights in Iran is as grim under President Rouhani as it was before.

In the past few weeks, Iran’s Interior Ministry and Revolutionary Guards have carried out a new wave of arrests to stifle free expression. At least 38 people were arrested, including editors and staff of a technology website, Narenji, and activists in the province of Kerman, who were accused of receiving foreign assistance to produce online content that undermines the Islamic regime.

These arrests come on the heels of a December 3 court ruling that exonerated government officials accused of murdering Sattar Beheshti, a blogger who was detained by the Iranian Cyber-Police and was later found dead in his jail cell with bruises on his body.

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The Iranian regime, dominated by Shiite clerics and Revolutionary Guard commanders, is highly repressive. It systematically tramples political and civil rights. In Freedom House's annual report on *Freedom in the World*, Iran receives a rating of 6 on a scale of 1 to 7, where 7 is the lowest score.

The election of Rouhani was welcomed in Iran and abroad, because he was the least conservative of the candidates, but his election was anything but fair. Over 600 candidates had registered to run in the election, but only six names appeared on the ballot. Who made that decision? The Guardian Council, which is composed of twelve Islamic clerics and jurists, not the voters.

The media environment in Iran is among the most restrictive in the world. Iran ranks 191 out of 197 countries in Freedom House's annual report on media freedom. The government directly controls all television and radio broadcasting. Print media, blogs, and news websites are subject to strict censorship. The Association of Journalists remains closed, despite Rouhani's promise to re-open it.

Restrictions on online space are equally if not more severe. In the latest Freedom House rankings for internet freedom, which covered 60 countries, Iran came in last place, after China, Cuba, and Syria. Iranian authorities continue to deny access to tens of thousands of websites, particularly those of international news sources, the Green Movement, ethnic and religious minorities, and human rights groups. And the government has applied sophisticated instruments to block text messages, filter online content, and prevent the use of circumvention tools.

With all that is at stake in the negotiations with Iran on its nuclear program, there is a temptation to put aside human rights issues, lest they complicate the nuclear negotiations and derail an agreement. That would be a mistake. Speaking out for human rights in Iran, as elsewhere, both reflects U.S. values and serves U.S. interests, and it can be done at the same time as the nuclear negotiations take place.

The Iranian people's aspirations for greater freedom are abundantly clear. They were expressed in the votes for Rouhani and his promises for change, and they were seen in a Zogby poll released this September that showed reform issues trump other concerns. When asked to rank their highest priorities, poll respondents put employment first on their list, but all of their other top-tier priorities related to greater liberty—advancing democracy, protecting personal and civil rights, increasing rights for women, ending corruption and nepotism, and political reform.

The systematic abuses of human rights in Iran serve to repress the democratic aspirations of the Iranian people. The Iranian regime stifles free expression because citizens are expressing a desire for political change. They want to modernize their country, exchange opinions freely, and become open to the rest of the world. An Iranian government that is more attuned to the views

of its citizens will be less hostile toward the United States and other democratic countries and more constructive in its foreign relations.

Human rights should be on the agenda for future discussions of Secretary of State John Kerry, European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs Catherine Ashton, and European foreign ministers with their Iranian counterpart. They are a legitimate topic of discussion, as they concern Iran's international commitments, such as its commitments under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

When faced with international criticism of its human rights abuses, the Iranian government invariably is defiant, but it listens. International pressure has, for example, led to the release of political prisoners, such as Maziar Bahari, Roxana Saberi, and most recently, Nasrin Sotoudeh. One thing is certain: the Iranian government's record on human rights does not improve when the United States stays silent.

The United States can put human rights high on the agenda with its adversaries at the same time as it addresses other sensitive and complex issues. The Reagan Administration kept human rights on the agenda while negotiating nuclear arms treaties with the Soviet Union. President Clinton spoke about the struggle for individual freedom at Beijing University during a state visit in 1998 and still held constructive talks with Chinese government leaders on a range of security and economic issues.

Iranians who want to change their country for the better understand that the struggle for freedom is their struggle. They have to stand up for their rights and demand that their government listen to them. But Iranians notice what we in the United States say and don't say. When we stay silent, we send the message that we don't care about their struggle for freedom. That message is disheartening for Iranians today and will hurt our credibility with them for a long time to come.

The United States needs to put human rights on its agenda with the government of Iran.

Thank you.

Mr. SMITH. Mr. Calingaert, thank you very much for your testimony and for your historical perspective as well. As you were speaking, it called to mind the point Dr. Lantos Swett made about Natan Sharansky and his wife who worked tirelessly for his release. Chairman Wolf and I were actually in Perm Camp 35, the infamous prison where Sharansky had been incarcerated, just a few months after he was released. Obviously, many other political prisoners were still there, but the lesson learned from the way we handled human rights with the Soviet Union was that you integrate them, you never stovepipe them. We risked superpower confrontation with a country that was wrestling with nuclear weapons aimed at the United States because we put human rights and the value of human life at such a high level. When Secretary Schultz would visit Moscow, and my first trip to the Soviet Union was in '82 on behalf of Soviet Jewish refusniks, he would always meet with all the dissidents and then meet with the Soviets as well. There was never this stovepiping, this separation, this doing something in another room. And I think you are a reminder of that, Mr. Calingaert. And you did it was well, Mr. Sekulow, you all did, frankly. Because I am very concerned, especially of the response to the question I asked of the Secretary just 2 days ago that and the different versions that we have gotten from other people within the administration. Was it discussed or not? And it would seem if it was discussed at all, it was on the margins, but it should have been center stage.

Every conversation we had with the Iranians should have begun with Saeed Abedini and ended with Saeed Abedini. How can we trust the Iranians' signature on a piece of paper if they so callously mistreat not only their own human rights defenders, but if they take pastors like Saeed Abedini, an American, and not only incarcerate him, but as you pointed out, Mr. Sekulow, at the very time when these negotiations are happening, transfer him from one terrible prison to an infamous prison where he is even at greater risk. That was a message sender that seemed to have been missed by the U.S. Department of State and by the administration.

And I would agree with all of you who made it very clear, there is no partisanship here. I can tell you having been here 33 years, when we unite in human rights in Congress, no matter who is in the White House, it is all about standing up for the victims and others, their families, like Ms. Abedini and making sure we speak out very loudly and very clearly. We are not in those negotiations face-to-face with, in this case, the Iranians, so again I think your message here today that this has to be integrated, mainstreamed, and not stovepiped is very clear because I, too, like others on this panel, think about and pray about Pastor Abedini every single day. So thank you for reminding us just how important that this is. So the integration issue is very important.

If I could ask very quickly, Dr. Lantos Swett, you have asked as a commission that under Section 105 of the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions and Disinvestment Act that certain Iranian officials be censured because of their mistreatment based on religious persecution. If I could also just ask, when you said, Mr. Sekulow, that Pastor Saeed has exhausted all legal remedies, who now makes the decision? It really does come down to a negotiation with the United

States, doesn't it? They have to know that the value is sufficiently high that the relationship with Iran hinges, the tipping point, is how well or how poorly going forward they treat Pastor Abedini.

And finally, your statement, Ms. Abedini, was very bold, when you called on the President to reengage, when you called on the Secretary of State to reengage and when you said "please don't let this case be discussed on the margins and please make his case a priority." There will be more negotiations and I think the sooner that reengagement occurs, the better. If you would want to elaborate on that as well.

Dr. Lantos Swett?

Ms. LANTOS SWETT. Well, we think that the application of sanctions directed at specific people implicated in human rights and religious freedom abuses is incredibly important. It is part of a long tradition, successful tradition of the human rights movement in general to name and shame and blame, to identify, to pin responsibility on those responsible. And so it really is critically important and the fact is there has been a lot of discussion about President Rouhani's charm offensive, but when we look at what is actually going on in Iran under his leadership, it is actually more offensive than it is charming, particularly again as it relates to religious freedom violations.

And so we feel very, very strongly that that step of our Government officially saying you are not welcome here, if you have assets here, they will be frozen, they will be put beyond your reach, those sorts of concrete steps. Send that message, that you are not a political leader, engaging in respectful and appropriate sort of leadership in your country. You are someone who is personally implicated in vile abuses of the human rights of your citizens. We know it. We are saying it and by doing so the rest of the world knows it as well.

Ms. ABEDINI. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. In my statement when I discussed that Saeed cannot be left in the margins, I believe that if we do not speak out, if we do not put him at the center stage, then we are sending the world the wrong message about where we stand in terms of human rights issues. We are sending it to Iran, but especially in the Middle East, with the high increase of persecution of the Christians and religious minorities, I believe by putting Saeed as just not a person, it is where we stand, where we put our value in terms of human rights issues. And I think it is very dangerous. Americans are watching our Government to see what we will do and the world is watching to see where we stand in terms of important human rights issues such as religious freedom which has been an important value since this country was founded. So I believe that leaving it at the margins is very dangerous and is sending a very dangerous message to the world.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you.

Mr. SEKULOW. Mr. Chairman, I would assert again as in my opening statement, the ineptness of the State Department's relationship with Ms. Abedini. She is represented not just by us but ultimately by the U.S. Government who is sitting at that table. And I will tell you that in conversations with them, they ask us to keep confidential and they ask us to—what updates they are doing around the world. For instance, I will point out something that was news to us. I don't know if Secretary Kerry misspoke

when he mentioned the Swedish, but they have never been mentioned to us on any phone calls and there are countries that have. That is not one of them. He may have misspoke, but that would be something to clear up.

We have also been told on those phone calls, now this is by lower-level staff, mostly NEA, so the Near East Affairs Department of State, it was absolutely being brought up on the margins. So why would Secretary Kerry have been so broad in that statement that it was not? And then third and finally, the idea that bringing them up would make them hostages or pawns, I would beg to differ and state that Mr. Abedini as well as Mr. Hekmati and Mr. Levinson already are pawns and they already are hostages of Iran. They are American citizens being held by a foreign government. We are sitting at the table with them. Some have been hostages for nearly 7 years, 2 years, or 444 days. They are already at that point. Thank you.

Mr. SMITH. I would just conclude before yielding to Mr. Deutch that 2 days ago on December 10th, along with Congressman, Chairman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, I chaired a hearing on Coptic Christians and for me it was my fourth hearing in 2 years on Coptic Christians. And many of us fought very hard to get language into the foreign operations appropriations bill that conditioned United States aid, it is properly conditioned on the Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement at Camp David, but we said that on religious freedom, there ought to be conditionality there as well.

We got into the foreign operations bill. Mrs. Clinton waived it as the Coptic Christians were being slaughtered, churches decimated, monasteries, many of them hundreds of years old. We looked askance and embraced Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood. It was appalling. And one of the issues that I raised repeatedly again, I think what Ms. Abedini is doing, one of the side issues that will help all others, is pointing out a huge deficiency. Many Coptic Christian girls have been abducted and forced into Islamic marriages. We had a woman who actually did the reporting on it, she is a noted human rights investigator, bring this information forward. And the administration did nothing on it. And that is very disturbing. So there is a larger backdrop issue of disregard for religious freedom issues that has to change and it has to start with Pastor Abedini.

Mr. Deutch?

Mr. DEUTCH. I thank the chairman. I have a couple of questions for Dr. Lantos Swett and Dr. Calingaert. Let me start by just telling Ms. Abedini that there is a real commitment by Congress to bring your husband home and there is a real commitment by the entire Government, including the administration to bring your husband home. I didn't come to this hearing this morning to apologize or come to the defense of the administration, but I would respectfully suggest that as we address these human rights issues, the best way for us to address them, starting with your husband and his release is to work in a unified fashion to do it.

I don't believe, Mr. Sekulow, that it is helpful for us in this hearing for the hearing to turn on allegations of incompetence and ineptitude by the administration. I just wanted to make that point. I look forward to the classified briefing that we are going to have

with Secretary Kerry and others. I can only speak to the briefings with respect to my constituent and I know discussions that we have had on a broader level about human rights, I would just respectfully suggest that there is a real commitment to bringing home—I am sympathetic. I understand your frustration. I don't blame you 1 minute for the immense difficulty and the sadness that you feel every day that your husband is not with you and your family. That commitment as we have all expressed here is very real.

Let me just ask Dr. Lantos Swett and Dr. Calingaert a question about not just what happens here in the United States and in this Congress and the administration, but more broadly internationally. First, the Lautenberg amendment here saved the lives of many religious minorities in Iran. But multi-laterally, since—well, every year since 2002, we have worked with the Canadians on the U.N. resolution condemning Iran's human rights record. In 2011, we successfully led an effort to create a Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran. But regardless of what happens and this is the frustration a lot of us feel, regardless of what happens on the nuclear profile, it appears that human rights, since the human rights situation doesn't change, and my question is, even as we are working tirelessly focused on individual cases, starting with Pastor Abedini, how do we expand this? What is the next big step that we can take either domestically or through the United Nations to raise awareness of human rights?

Dr. Calingaert, you talked about making human rights matter in Iran for the United States. What is the next big step we can take for the United States to lead, for this Congress to lead, to make human rights really matter internationally?

Dr. Lantos Swett, please.

MS. LANTOS SWETT. Well, it is a critical question, one that I think those involved in the human rights movement grapple with on an on-going basis. But I do think a central part of the answer to that question is that human rights, religious freedom have to be elevated in the public discourse. At the end of the day, we have limited ability to force other governments to do things that we want them to do, but we do have the power still as the world's indispensable nation to raise the profile of their wrongdoing, to make it extraordinarily uncomfortable and unpleasant and unwelcoming for them in the community of civilized nations. And we have to do that.

I do think the whole situation with the efforts to reach agreement on Iran's nuclear program is an extraordinary window of opportunity and shame on us if we miss it. I think a lot of people have observed that with sanctions crippling, painful biting sanctions that ultimately brought Iran to the table. Undoubtedly, it was the unspoken threat of military action whether on the part of Israel or other players that have also brought them to the table. So it is vulnerability to some degree on Iran's part that has broken ground in that arena. That vulnerability needs to be exploited, not merely to achieve progress on the nuclear front, but to achieve progress on the human rights front. That vulnerability speaks to the internal situation in Iran specifically.

We know that the Iranian people are chafing under the regime that they are living under. And so I very, very strongly believe that we should not let this moment of opportunity slip by. It is as if you had somebody in your neighborhood, as it were, who was a notorious drug dealer, as well as a notorious abuser of their children and their spouse. Well, the drug dealing sort of involves spreading a poison and danger out into the broader community. That would sort of be the nuclear side of what worries us about Iran. The abuse within their home would relate to the human rights issues that are of concern to us.

I don't think any of us would be content to say well, for the moment they stopped dealing drugs, so we are good. We are done, you know? Mission accomplished. We would insist that we pursue, in whatever avenues were appropriate, stopping that abuse within the house and I think that that needs to be the approach that we take as a government.

Mr. DEUTCH. Dr. Calingaert, do you have thoughts on how to elevate the issue?

Mr. CALINGAERT. Yes, Mr. Deutch. I very much agree that it is important to address these issues multi-laterally. And I like your starting point, the U.N. Special Rapporteur, his efforts and the resolutions that Canada and the U.S. have pushed are very significant because first of all they put all countries on record where they stand in regard to Iran's human rights abuses and in that process they show that the concern about Iran's human rights record extends far beyond the United States and Western Europe, that there are countries around the world that think that Iran's record is shameful.

I think there are many steps that can be taken by the U.S. in cooperation with other democratic governments. I don't think there is any sort of big breakthrough to be had, but I think it is important to push this issue in all these ways on a consistent basis. So even starting with the U.N. Special Rapporteur, he has been trying simply to get access to the country, to be able to have an official visit. I think it is important to keep pushing for that.

His mandate will come up and it is important to renew that mandate so that he can continue his important work. The collaboration with the European Union is important from the examples of sanctions that Dr. Lantos Swett mentioned and also bringing attention to individual cases.

One of the political prisoners that was released in September, Nasrin Sotoudeh, was a recipient of the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize. I don't think that is a coincidence. The fact that there was major attention given to her case put pressure on the Iranian Government to release her. And that is why I think it is important to push on individual cases. It seems like a tough slog, obviously, even the releases are pretty few when you consider there are still 800 dissidents in detention. And many of them aren't known. But for even the few that are released, it sends an important signal to those who are still struggling for human rights on the ground, that there is hope and especially that the outside world cares about their efforts.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you.

Mr. SEKULOW. If I could, Mr. Chairman, respond to one of Congressman Deutch's statements. The incompetence has not been at the level of Republicans and Democrats in Congress. It has been at a bureaucratic level and it is clear because on television, members of the administration of the White House, on the National Security Council say one thing happens in the negotiation. And the Deputy National Security Advisor said something else happens. Secretary Kerry then says something else. And I would add for the Congressman with all due respect, I know he represents his constituent, Robert Levinson. Seven years missing? I don't want to be here 6 years from now. I would say that is incompetent, especially when we have an opportunity.

Mr. DEUTCH. Mr. Sekulow, excuse me. First of all, again, we are here today to focus on human rights in a country that has absolutely no respect for them. And we are focusing on human rights in a country that has immense respect for them. And to bring discredit on the men and women who have spent the last 7 years trying to bring Bob Levinson home, to advance some agenda, unknown agenda that I can't fathom, when we are all trying to work together to focus on human rights and to bring Pastor Abedini home, it is not right.

Mr. SEKULOW. Congressman, things have significantly changed and as you are walking out, in the last month we are now in negotiations with Iran. That didn't happen 6 years ago, so whatever efforts you are talking about before, it was different. But in the last 6 weeks, we have a new relationship with Iran. We can't think about Iran as, and we still hear this from the State Department: "We have no diplomatic ties." Well, depending on how you define that when you are sitting down at the table regularly, I think the whole situation is fundamentally changed. So to accept what was previously done as satisfactory is no longer satisfactory, that is what I am saying.

Mr. DEUTCH. Mr. Sekulow, since my time has expired and you have claimed some of the time that I no longer had, I would simply tell you that the commitment that exists to bring Pastor Abedini home and Mr. Hekmati home and to bring home my constituent is real. And have things changed? Absolutely they have. And does every one of us here believe that this is an issue that should be raised at every single meeting? Yes. I have said it. We have all said it and we all need to ensure that it happens.

Mr. SEKULOW. But we all know that it hasn't happened.

Mr. SMITH. Will the gentleman yield? The reason why I wanted to chair and put together this hearing, along with my distinguished colleague from Florida, Ms. Ros-Lehtinen, was precisely because of our concern that it was not being raised, it had not been integrated in a place where it could have made all the difference in the world. And just by way of historical fact, it was Ms. Abedini at Frank Wolf's hearing who was told "There is nothing we can do" by the State Department.

I have worked human rights issues for 33 years. There is absolutely everything they can do and I would say parenthetically that on Jacob Ostreicher, and I know you have helped us on that as has Congressman Ros-Lehtinen. Jacob Ostreicher is an American being held now under house arrest, but 18 months in Palmasola Prison

in Bolivia. Never charged with anything. His rice farm was fleeced from him, taken away. The prosecutors, the rogue prosecutors, many of them are now in prison themselves, but he is still under house arrest. I have tried repeatedly and asked Secretary Kerry himself to intervene. It has not happened yet. We can't get above the level of Assistant Secretary to raise the issue and that man, Jacob Ostreicher, a Jewish man and there is anti-Semitism involved here. I had three hearings to bring this to the attention of the administration and it dropped the ball like a ton of bricks on human rights with an American just like with this American pastor. For the first year they did nothing. As a matter of fact, they were admonished by the administration to gag themselves and say nothing. Absolutely the wrong way to go about it. He at least got out of prison and he is under house arrest, so he is not facing the daily threats that he faced in Palmasola.

So I see parallels, that the State Department goes the path of least resistance. Human rights is sidetracked. When we did the International Religious Freedom Act back in 1998, and I don't care who is in the White House, this has been a problem. Religious freedom is always given the back seat. And we put into the legislation, not only the establishment of Dr. Lantos Swett's commission to hold the administration to account with independent verification of what is going on, great reports that they do, particularly on recommendations for CPC countries, but the training of Foreign Service officers who are often clueless, and they are good people, but clueless about the nuances that often occur in countries relative to religious freedom the lack of it, and the persecution of believers.

So there has been a backdrop of dropping the ball. I asked Secretary of State John Kerry if it was a mainstream issue and he said it was not part of the negotiation. That is a serious miss. And so I agree. We are working together on this. But we are hoping the administration will take the cue from the wife, Ms. Abedini, and from those who are concerned, including both sides of the aisle to step up, to do more, and especially when you are sitting right across from Iranian interlocutors who can make the difference. They could say free Abedini today and he is on a plane back to his wife and children.

Mr. DEUTCH. Mr. Chairman, I agree wholeheartedly with you that on every occasion we should do as much as we can to bring home Pastor Abedini and to bring home Mr. Hekmati and Jacob and my constituent and that we should do everything we can to make this issue paramount. I agree with you. I simply point out that our goal in addition to bringing home those who have been persecuted and held hostage, that our goal, as well, more broadly, is to elevate human rights. In this debate, here, to elevate human rights in this Congress, to make sure that this, and every administration, of either party, puts human rights squarely, not only on the table, but right up front. That is what we are all striving for. I am simply making the point that as we strive to elevate human rights I just hate to see our efforts to do that amount to a round attack on the administration. And I don't disagree. I think the administration, well, let me just finish. I think the administration needs to be, as I said, the administration needs to be pushed to

make sure that human rights matters every single day. That is our job. And we do it well. And we need to continue to do it.

And Mr. Chairman, you have been a leader on these issues, as long as you have been in this House. And I am grateful for it. But I respectfully suggest that it becomes more difficult for us to make human rights the fundamental focus that it needs to be internationally if it appears that somehow this has turned into some sort of round of political squabble. And this is the only point I am trying to make.

Mr. SMITH. Just one very brief point and then I think Ms. Abedini wants to speak and then we will go to the chair.

When there is a deficiency, I believe we have a duty to speak out. Mrs. Abedini said at Frank Wolf's hearing that she was told that there was nothing they can do. Chairman Wolf got on the phone, talked to Secretary Kerry. I think he talked to him personally and a statement went out immediately. We applauded the Secretary of State, all of us, and thanked him profusely for doing that.

Now several months later, sitting across from the Iranians again, and the issue is not raised and the wife of Pastor Abedini, I think wisely, says "What is going on here?" It needs to be integrated. It needs to be part of that discussion and then he will be released. Otherwise, they take their cue by our lack of prioritization. The Iranian issue is over here on nuclear matters, but the issue of human rights is somewhere and we are not sure where. So that was the reason for the hearing.

Chairman Ros-Lehtinen.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman. Ms. Abedini, our prayers to you and to your children and may our Lord continue to give you, your husband, and your children the strength you need to carry on with this important, important case. It is not a case. It is your husband. It is the children's father. But hearings like this one are important because that is the way we can push the administration, whatever administration is in power, to do all that it can, to do more, to ensure that your husband's release is immediate. And you may feel that certain individuals in power have abandoned your husband and we can have disagreements about that, but the members here are united in a bipartisan manner to make sure that we will not remain silent and we will continue to push. We are going to continue to raise your husband's case so that we can pressure all who can have a say in this to make Pastor Saeed's release a higher priority.

Dr. Lantos Swett, USCIRF has made recommendations to the U.S. Government regarding religious freedom in Iran, several of which you outlined at a hearing on this same issue in March. What is your assessment of the administration's response to these recommendations? Do you believe that the U.S. has focused so much attention on the nuclear negotiations that it has ignored the abysmal human rights record of Iran out of fear of angering the regime?

Also, in October 2010, the Ayatollah Khamenei publicly called non-Muslims, religious minorities, enemies of Islam and accused them of weakening the faith of Iran's Muslim youth. Another leading Ayatollah referred to non-Muslims as sinful animals. Statements like these, they incite violence against religious minorities. Would you agree with that? Have you observed increased violence

against these groups following these kinds of provocative statements by so-called leaders? And despite the recommendations of USCIRF and the European Union's decision to individually sanction the judge who gave Pastor Saeed this outrageous 8-year sentence, the U.S. has yet to sanction this judge and it is not a partisan attack, it is a reality. What message does this lack of action send to religious minorities and human rights advocates in Iran? The Iranian regime's human rights record doesn't improve when the U.S. remains silent. It is an issue that doesn't get much attention because of the nuclear topic, but whatever the administration is in power, do you believe that the administration has been silent about Pastor Saeed's case? Do you believe it is spoken enough about this case and the case of others? I have asked a lot of questions and you can just pick whichever one you would like to answer. Otherwise, we would be here forever. So we will start with Dr. Lantos Swett.

Ms. LANTOS SWETT. Well, I think it would be an overstatement to say that they have ignored the human rights situation in Iran. And one of the things that I referenced in my testimony was a relatively recent statement by the National Security Advisor, Dr. Susan Rice. That is a very high-level person within the administration and she said, "Our sanctions on Iran's human rights abusers will continue and so will our support for the fundamental rights of all Iranians." So ignore, I think, would be too strong of a term. But I would also be remiss if I were not to say that we certainly at USCIRF feel that more needs to be done and more can be done.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you. I am going to cut you off just so that we can hear from the others.

Ms. LANTOS SWETT. Absolutely.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you.

Ms. LANTOS SWETT. Thank you.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Ms. Abedini or Mr. Sekulow, whoever would like.

Mr. SEKULOW. Thank you, Madam Chairman. And I would say, because I do want to clear this up, and Congressman Deutch is no longer with us, but my opening statement was all about this bipartisan support we have had in Congress which has been unprecedented. And it is not an attack, or a Republican or Democrat issue. It is an administration that I think Congress has also got to deal with. Are you being told what is accurate? I hope that briefing, that classified briefing clears what has been so difficult for the administration to communicate to us which is what is actually being done? And what is not. And when is it being done and I would add to that we have been told a number of times well Iran has been told this Iranian official, that Iranian official, from the President on down. What answer have we gotten? We have never been told an answer by Iran.

This idea that we may be asking sometimes on the margins, in a phone call. That is wonderful. What is the response?

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. He must not become an asterisk or a footnote.

Mr. SEKULOW. Exactly right.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you. Yes, Ms. Abedini.

Ms. ABEDINI. I wanted to make sure Mr. Deutch was here to discuss that, but I don't have an agenda. And there is nothing more than I would like to see my country united on an important issue such as human rights. I have been fighting tirelessly for my husband's release for over a year. It has been a lonely road for me and the kids as well. I haven't seen my kids most of this 444 days as well and they haven't had a mom in the last year. But for me, as an American citizen, it was unbelievable. I felt abandoned when we had the chance to not necessarily discuss it at the nuclear, but as a precondition, as a good-faith effort which we have done for the Iranian Government with the easing of the sanctions and the monetary and prisoners and so on.

I would have expected my Government as we have done good-faith efforts for Iran to have—I like that example of a drug dealer and he is abusing his wife and kids. But what if he is abusing your child? You don't demand him to release your child before negotiating about the drug dealing? And I expected my Government before shaking hands with the world's number one violator of human rights issues and support of terrorism, that put aside, they have an American citizen—

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Don't get me started about shaking hands.

Ms. ABEDINI. Before shaking hands, before negotiating, we have done good faith effort. I expected our Government to have Iran show a good-faith effort, that they want to work with us. This would have been a perfect opportunity for Iran to release the three Americans. And again, I don't have an agenda. I am not a political person. I am a mom. I am a wife. And as an American citizen and millions of American citizens who are behind me in this, we do not understand what happened. We do not understand. And we are very much upset by it and I very much feel abandoned and I feel my husband has been abandoned. I do hope he survives that prison and we can bring him home quickly.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you. And the last word to the good doctor.

Mr. CALINGAERT. Every authoritarian government will push back when we bring up human rights. They will fuss. They will make excuses. They will say it complicates everything else we want to do. That is their instinctive reaction. We should know better. The one thing that is clear is that if we don't bring something up, they get the message. They get the message that we don't care. And I would also again point back to specific cases like Maziar Bahari. In 2009, by his own account he felt sort of lost in prison and once then Secretary Clinton raised his case publicly, his treatment in prison immediately improved and that led to his release. So it is critical that we raise these cases.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you very much to all of you. Thank you, Mr. Smith. I am sorry, I am going to have to depart. Thank you.

Mr. SMITH. Mr. Meadows.

Mr. MEADOWS. Thank you so much for being here for your testimony. I want to ask just a few clarifying questions.

Ms. Abedini, if your husband were to be released today, he does not have an intention to go back to Iran and work against the government, is that correct?

Ms. ABEDINI. He does not.

Mr. MEADOWS. I knew the answer to that because you had shared that, but I think it is important to the American people that they realize that this was a pastor working on behalf of an orphanage, of those who were really ministering the Iranian people and that he was convicted and held for a trespass that happened many years prior to that. It was not like he was there violating a law at that particular time. To put it in very mild terms, it is like me speeding 12 years ago and then somebody coming in and changing the speeding law and saying that you actually were going above the speed limit and now we are going to convict you and throw you in jail. And so that is the injustice of it.

The other part I guess that I would ask if I know that you have been working with a number of officials in the State Department, in Congress, and throughout. You have expressed appreciation to me personally for many of them working and so I don't want it to get lost today. You do have an appreciation for those that are continuing to work on your behalf, whether it is behind the scenes or out front, is that correct?

Ms. ABEDINI. Yes, very much so.

Mr. MEADOWS. Dr. Lantos Swett, I want to come back to you. We have had a number of hearings where you have been here and you have raised this issue and there has been a number of times I have said, "Who are the Bonhoeffers, who are the Wilberforces of today?" and I think that you continue to champion those causes and I just want to say thank you. By raising the issue that we have talked about and raising the issue here today, what more can we do in a bipartisan congressional way to raise the issue, not only of Pastor Saeed Abedini, but of the other families, the pictures of whom you showed us, how can we come alongside the executive branch, the State Department, and encourage them to keep it at the forefront so it is not a picture that happens on one hearing, on 1 day, and doesn't get raised again. How can we best help you in that in a bipartisan manner?

Ms. LANTOS SWETT. Well, I will bring up again the Defending Freedoms Project which is a specific, concrete initiative of Amnesty International, USCIRF, and the Lantos Human Rights Commission which I think would be a wonderful means of engaging more Members of Congress in sort of embracing this work themselves directly. But I would like to say something about the role of the Congress, in general, and I am very sorry that my good friend Congressman Deutch isn't still here because I think Congress has an extraordinary role, has had an extraordinary role historically in being the conscience of our nation when it comes to human rights. It is simply a fact. I actually wrote my Ph.D. dissertation on this subject, so it is something very near and dear to my heart. But if you look at the history of human rights being legislatively enshrined as a principal goal of U.S. foreign policy, it was the work of Congress that brought that about in opposition to many administrations, one after the other, because every administration, every State Department, this isn't a criticism, this is the reality, they are balancing many, many different items on a big plate and sometimes there is a tendency to put human rights in that small box in the corner of the room where it can occasionally get a tip of the hat, but it is

not centrally enshrined. And Congress really has historically played that role, going back to the 1970s and saying, "No, this isn't optional. This is essential." This is going to be part of our official policy that the promotion of human rights should be a central and principal goal of American foreign policy. And it is so important because that above all plays to our strengths. It is when we advocate for our deepest values that we are playing to our strengths and playing from our strengths.

And so I would say that Congress has an indispensable role. Administrations will always resist and will always push back because there will always be other things on the agenda, whether it is our economic interest or nuclear concerns.

Mr. MEADOWS. Should we tie that to human rights to have an economic element to it? I mean because so many times we negotiate on economics and we negotiate on human rights and they don't come together. Should we tie those together?

Ms. LANTOS SWETT. Well, I am a big believer in the school of linkage and not decoupling of human rights from our other essential foreign policy goals. They are all important, but I think that when we link human rights to our other foreign policy goals we strengthen our position. And I would say just in general and I don't have a specific proposal to put in front of you although we obviously talked about the Lautenberg amendment and the need to reauthorize that on a multi-year basis, but that is an example of Congress acting legislatively to, if you will, force any administration's hand. So Congress is the legislative body in our Government. You are the ones that propose and adopt laws. So I would say a robust human rights legislative agenda so that it is beyond resolutions and statements and hearings, but as with the Sergei Magnitsky bill which again, it was passed over opposition from the State Department, opposition from the administration, not because they don't share the goals, but they never want their hands tied.

Well, Congress isn't trying to tie any particular administration's hands, but sometimes they are trying to force our Government's hand in a positive way, to do what we should do, to pursue the goals that the administration shares, but there are always countervailing arguments. So I would say a robust legislative agenda. And most recently, the Sergei Magnitsky Act is a really good example of Congress standing firm, against very bipartisan. Democrats and Republicans were side by side in pushing that forward in the face of opposition. It is now the law and that is, I think, a good example of when Congress is at its best.

You have a lot of power when it comes to leading the human rights agenda. It is one area of foreign policy where Congress usually leads and the administration follows. So in the spirit of a tripartite government and co-equal branches of government, I would say do not fail to lead in the human rights sector because you can pass laws and you can help our Government do what it should already be doing.

Mr. MEADOWS. I know and I will finish up with this, Mr. Chairman, I know that Ambassador Power tweeted out about Saeed Abedini and that seemed to have an impact. I know at least some of my constituents who picked up on it as a very high profile, so would you say the higher the profile that we continue, whether it

is in tweets or Facebook, or the higher we continue to do that in terms of whether it be in the administration or chairmen of committees, does that make a real impact, not just with Iran, but with China, with a number of others where there are human rights violations that occur on a daily basis?

Ms. LANTOS SWETT. I absolutely believe that it does and I believe my colleague, Dr. Calingaert said earlier, but we have heard so much personal eyewitness testimony to this effect. Not only does it have an impact at the policy level, but it does have an impact at the level of the lives of the people who are being persecuted, who are imprisoned, who are suffering. They see it almost immediately that when somebody prominent brings up their name, when an article appears, when there is a press report, their circumstances improve for the better. There is no longer the sense of impunity. Impunity is the worst message that abusers can get. We can get away with this because yeah, nobody is really paying that much attention.

Mr. MEADOWS. Well, for those that are listening, let the name of Pastor Saeed Abedini echo through these halls of Congress today and each day until he is released and let that message be there.

I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you very much, Mr. Meadows. Mr. Weber.

Mr. WEBER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Abedini, I am sorry that you have to be here. I appreciate your tenacity and your bravery and your commitment to your husband and I just wish that I could have had a chance to meet you under other circumstances.

The Secretary of State came Tuesday and testified and sat right there at that table. I didn't get a chance to ask questions. We ran out of time, but he made the comment that we didn't want to tie the hostages, if you will, to the nuclear negotiations. We didn't want to prejudice them. I was outraged. We should be the ones prejudiced? They should be afraid of what we might do to them and not the other way around, to not tie these human rights violations to that regime over there.

And Dr. Lantos Swett, I want to pick up something you said. The administration doesn't want its hands tied and Congress doesn't seek to tie the administration's hands. There's one administration we would like to tie up, probably more than just the hands of and that is the regime in Iran. They should be afraid of how we will react, not the other way around. So for this administration to take the posture that somehow we can't bring human rights violations to the forefront in these negotiations, I am told the Iranian people are crying out for relief. They want out from underneath this regime.

The sanctions are working. Why would we give them up now? We have people that they have held, our own Americans that they have held. We should make this in the forefront. We should hold their feet to the fire and make this the absolute hallmark of our negotiations. If they want to show us they want out from underneath the sanctions, if they want to be a better world neighbor, then they better start by acting like it. So I would encourage you, and I am sure you have, to put the pressure on the State Department and this administration to say that we are no longer going

to be concerned with some political correctness that somehow we are going to prejudice the Iranian regime. Are they kidding me? We need to take them to task in a major way. I am sorry, I had to get that off of my chest. Now I have a question.

Mr. SEKULOW, am I pronouncing that correctly?

Mr. SEKULOW. That is correct, Congressman.

Mr. WEBER. Your dad is Jay Sekulow. I have followed you all for a number of years and I appreciate your all's work. Are you getting the sense that we are being able to elevate the discussion, as my colleague, Mr. Meadows said, and to bring up Pastor Saeed's name in circles and to make it clear and evident that we will not let this die. Are the Iranian people getting that message? Are we getting any kind of help from inside? Are you aware of that? Or maybe that is a question for all of you. What say you?

Mr. SEKULOW. Sure. I would say because I know Congressman Deutch did not like the word "incompetent" used. But as Congressman Meadows and as you just brought up as well, Congressman Weber, it is the idea that people's good work inside our Government, inside our Government, even inside possibly the Iranian Government is at some point being undermined by higher officials. So it would be someone like an Under Secretary or a Secretary of State or a Foreign Minister who says, eh, we are not going to—I have got the info, I have got the briefing, but we are not going to talk about this at these meetings. And so when Secretary Kerry was so clear and left nothing—he said he has more to tell you about what their efforts are, non-nuclear related. We believe if the sanctions fall, Saeed is lost.

Mr. WEBER. We lose our leverage.

Mr. SEKULOW. So I want to make clear that as representing the Abedini family that we support a new sanctions regime if Iran were to violate any of the agreements. We support those efforts by the House and I believe we missed one major opportunity, the precondition. But they are already hostages. They are already pawns and so though the administration did miss that opportunity as a precondition to economic relief for Iran.

Mr. WEBER. They don't want their people to suffer while they have our people held in suffering.

Mr. SEKULOW. They have three Americans held hostage. Our U.S. Government believes that Iran knows where Robert Levinson is. Thank you, Congressman.

Mr. WEBER. Thank you. Dr. Lantos Swett, are we getting help from inside the Iranian nation? Are they rallying? Are they paying attention or are they taking heart from what is happening over here?

Ms. LANTOS SWETT. I don't know that I have the answer to that question. I think that the reports would certainly indicate that the Iranian people, as you said, are desperate for relief from the sanctions regime, but something else that has been infrequently reported on is that they are desperate for relief from being perceived as a pariah nation. Obviously, 75 million people, a lot of those people, the majority of those people are very good people, just like you and me. They want to be part of a legitimate country and they are chafing not just under the economic bite of these sanctions, but

under the terrible and well-deserved reputation that their nation has earned through its horrible abuses.

I would make one point about the importance of aggressively raising the release, in particular, of these three Americans and we are all very focused on Pastor Abedini today. And that is that it is easy. That is something that Iran can do with utter and total ease. That is simply a matter of saying done. It is like the old easy button. I can't remember which store it was that used to feature that.

Mr. WEBER. It is Staples, but don't remember.

Ms. LANTOS SWETT. If they are unwilling to do something so easy, so easy, then I think we have to be concerned about their willingness to do something very hard which is unwind a very elaborate and deceptive and deeply embedded nuclear program.

Mr. WEBER. You said it well. Our values, our country's values of individual freedom and religious freedom and after all, that is why you all are involved, we are all involved here, should be the absolute, as I said, hallmark of any of our negotiations. And to think that anything else can be different is naive. And I don't mean to get you off, but I want to go to the good doctor down here. Do we have any information from inside Iran—I am coming back to you, Ms. Abedini, in just a second—that we are getting support, our actions over here. Are we making a difference?

Mr. CALINGAERT. Mr. Weber, unfortunately, I don't have specific information, but I would just reiterate one of the points Dr. Lantos Swett made which is that the Iranian people have made clear when they have the opportunity, for instance, in this recent Zogby poll, that they want to change their country. When they are asked what is most important for them, they say advancing democracy, protecting civil rights, protecting and advancing the rights of women, political reform, and obviously, in that kind of context it would improve the situation for Pastor Abedini and for all the Iranians, the 800 dissidents that are still in detention and all the Iranians who simply want to speak their mind.

Mr. WEBER. Okay, thank you. And Ms. Abedini, you may or may not choose to answer this. You may check with your counselor here, but do you still have family in Iran?

Ms. ABEDINI. Yes. I have actually been on Iranian media quite a number of times. A lot of the news media, Voice of America, BBC, and so on, and the feedback that I get, you know, the Iranian people were very much devastated when they were fighting for their human rights in 2009 and they didn't get some kind of support. The Iranian people are like the abused family, really are hoping that America and the world would stand up and would speak out against all these human rights violations. The Iranian people are very much in support of that. I can add that.

Mr. WEBER. I am glad to hear that and I want to associate myself with my colleagues' remarks. We are going to talk about the Pastor Saeed and you and your efforts, Ms. Abedini, and your children, and we are going to continue to bring this to the forefront. And much to our colleague on the other side of the aisle, when there is a failure of the administration, I will not be shy about pointing that out. And right now, they have a colossal failure in my

opinion in trying to relieve some of these sanctions without making this in the forefront. I have said my piece and I will yield back.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you very much, Mr. Weber. Mr. DeSantis.

Mr. DESANTIS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for having this hearing and bringing more attention to this. We must bring back Pastor Saeed Abedini. I think that many people have spoken eloquently about human rights, religious freedom, and all of that is absolutely true, but even if none of those issues were at stake, he is an American citizen. This is an attack not just against him and his family, but an attack against all of us, this from a regime since its very inception has exhibited abuse after abuse, attack after attack against the U.S. and our citizens. They detained over 400 Embassy personnel after the initial Islamic revolution. They were complicit in the Beirut bombing of 1983 which killed over 200 U.S. Marines. And of course, they were coordinating and perpetrating attacks against our service members in Iraq, not to mention, of course, the citizens of the United States, not just Pastor Saeed Abedini, but Bob Levinson, Amir Hekmati. This is something that is going to the heart of all of us. And so I want this to be an issue that is dealt with at the highest levels. And I was very discouraged when Secretary Kerry said that they had not raised the issue in the context of these nuclear negotiations, which obviously many people on both sides of the aisle had some serious concerns about.

But let me ask you, Ms. Abedini, you had mentioned that when you initially talked to the State Department they said there was nothing they could do. Who was it at the State Department that basically said there was nothing they could do?

Ms. ABEDINI. I don't think I can mention names, but I think it was at the lower—

Mr. SEKULOW. It is a desk officer who was the first to state that they could not offer any assistance. Again, this is the staff level. They are getting direction from others.

Mr. DESANTIS. And Secretary Kerry, to his credit, when he found out he immediately put out a statement, but the idea that the bureaucracy would be that dismissive when you have a U.S. citizen in jeopardy like that that has been essentially kidnapped by a totalitarian regime, there are some major, major issues going on there. So I was very discouraged to read your testimony and to be reminded of the fact that you had actually gone and I just think our bureaucracy has got to be very responsive to that. That is a very important issue.

Mr. Sekulow, I guess part of this is in 2009, there was this Green Movement that was very, very promising. So some of the countries like Egypt, you don't know what is going to end up happening. There is pluses and minuses to people like Hosni Mubarak, but when you are in Iran, it can't get any worse. So any speaking out against the regime is something that I think the U.S. should support. The administration purposely did not back that, did not provide any even rhetorical support and I think the reason is that the President was looking to have better relations with the regime and he thought that that would jeopardize that. So I am wondering is there a concern that this zest for a deal on paper may cause the

administration to not put forth as much effort on some of these human rights cases that could, quite frankly, complicate the “deal”?

Mr. SEKULOW. Congressman DeSantis, I would say the administration did just that. They missed the preconditions to negotiations where they could have handled this with Iran before sitting down on the nuclear issue and economic relief and say hey, you know, you have got three of ours. I mean we were talking about broader human rights in Iran. That is a long-term strategy. Why we are here today is because of one American of three who are being held. As you said, that is egregious enough. We didn't have to have that whole agreement on a new human rights scheme inside Iran for Iranian citizens to get to the next step. We needed to get three Americans home. And the administration missed that opportunity.

Then Secretary Kerry came before the Foreign Affairs Committee of which this subcommittee is a part of and said it will not be part of the nuclear negotiations. Some have said it is on the margins. But he was not really clear if that is even the case or if he is informed of that being the case. So what we are concerned about is that this administration is so focused on appeasing Iran who is threatening even this Congress, if you enact sanctions, new sanctions to pull out of these agreements that we miss the best opportunity.

Iran is hurting from the sanctions. We know that. The regime hurts because of that. And yet, we did not demand the return of three Americans. Not a new human rights scheme in Iran. That is a long-term plan that Dr. Lantos Swett and others would need to work on. But this was the return of three Americans and the administration, I do believe has sacrificed them and has betrayed them. We have used that word because we know they had an opportunity that did not exist. I was trying to make that clear to Congressman Deutch. That opportunity didn't exist before, Congressman DeSantis, we know that. We weren't sitting down at the table with the Foreign Minister of Iran. Our President wasn't on the phone. But now we are and we are still, and this has been a problem with the State Department, our bureaucracy. We are still living in 2012 mindset, that we have no diplomatic relations when we all can read a newspaper. You don't have to have a security clearance to know that these meetings are occurring.

So yes, we are very concerned that if we don't continue to speak out and Congress doesn't make it clear as it has throughout this process, the only time we have gotten a response back from this administration, I will close with this, it has never been proactive. It is reactive. When President Obama made the phone call and then they said well, he also brought up Saeed, it was the day after the 1-day anniversary of Saeed's imprisonment. I was at a prayer vigil outside the White House. Naghmeh was at a prayer vigil and they were having them around the country.

Secretary of State Clinton never spoke out even with the media attention, congressional support. And then Secretary Kerry basically promised during his confirmation hearings to Senator Rubio that he would, but he didn't until after the Lantos Commission hearing. And by the way, none of that has been vocal. These have been two written statements from Secretary Kerry. Even when asked about it directly, he will never use the name. And then

President Obama has also not spoken out. And so at a time—and then we are told well, because they become pawns and hostages. But Congressman Deutch used the word himself. He already called them, they already are hostages. And so we are extremely concerned that we missed one huge opportunity and that again we would just hope that in this confidential briefing, classified briefing to learn so that we know from you that it is not just reactive, the public, but that there is proactive work being done, because that is not clear to us. Thank you, Congressman.

Mr. DESANTIS. Thank you and before I yield back I just want to say I think this needs to be a proactive priority, of course, for the Congress, but also for the administration. And I am skeptical whether you could ever deal with this Iranian regime, but the notion that you are going to get a nuclear agreement with a regime who will not even return a pastor who is wrongly imprisoned, give me a break.

So thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this hearing. I yield back.

Mr. SMITH. Well put, Mr. DeSantis, and thank you, Mr. Weber for your very strong intervention as well.

If you have any further questions, I will yield to you, but just one final couple of thoughts. Mr. Levinson is an elderly 65-year-old man, suffers from diabetes and as I think all of you have said, we are talking about three individuals. The primary focus today obviously is on Pastor Abedini. There was a great fear for his life and it seems to me what happens to the nuclear negotiations if he is killed? I hate to be so blunt, but what happens? The whole bright light of scrutiny will be brought to bear on one missed opportunity after another and frankly, if Frank Wolf had not held that hearing in March, there would have been no statement of concern even then.

And again, Ms. Abedini, when we all heard you testify at Mr. Wolf's hearing, it was powerful. And we all thought, give it time. The administration, give them time.

Just parenthetically, last week I held a hearing on human rights abuses in China. It was my 45th hearing on human rights abuses in China. We had five daughters of political prisoners testifying on behalf of their dads. They were eloquent beyond words, compassionate, and they love their dads who are in prison being tortured in Beijing. Vice President Biden was there at the time and we repeatedly asked him to raise their names. Hasn't happened. That is the kind of thing, human rights cannot be put somewhere in the back if we expect to see progress on it. If we prioritize it, they will prioritize it and as you said, Dr. Lantos Swett, this is a very easy thing for the Iranians to do. Pastor Abedini can be on the plane home tonight if they make that decision. And we are admonishing the administration. And we have been doing, all of us, quietly after the hearing that was held by Frank Wolf and we are saying just do it. We are with you. I couldn't have been and the others including Congressman Wolf, couldn't have been more outspoken in thanking Secretary Kerry for raising the case, but now do it in a way that is most likely to lead to a positive outcome and that is his release because we are all deeply worried and concerned about his well being and his health.

Mr. Weber, anything you want to say? I would like to give all four of you the opportunity if you would like to say any final comments before we close down the hearing.

Thank you so very much and we will continue on and thankfully it will be done in a bipartisan way. The hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:43 a.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

# APPENDIX

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MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

**JOINT SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING NOTICE**  
**COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS**  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6128

**Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations**  
**Christopher H. Smith (R-NJ), Chairman**

**Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa**  
**Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), Chairman**

December 11, 2013

**TO: MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS**

You are respectfully requested to attend an OPEN hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, to be held jointly by the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations and the Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa in Room 2172 of the Rayburn House Office Building (and available live on the Committee website at [www.foreignaffairs.house.gov](http://www.foreignaffairs.house.gov)):

**DATE:** Thursday, December 12, 2013

**TIME:** 9:30 a.m.

**SUBJECT:** Iran's Persecution of American Pastor Abedini Worsens

**WITNESSES:** Katrina Lantos Swett, Ph.D.  
Vice Chair  
U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom

Ms. Naghmeh Abedini  
Wife of Pastor Saeed Abedini

Mr. Jordan Sekulow  
Executive Director  
American Center for Law and Justice

Daniel Calingaert, Ph.D.  
Executive Vice President  
Freedom House

**By Direction of the Chairman**

*The Committee on Foreign Affairs seeks to make its facilities accessible to persons with disabilities. If you are in need of special accommodations, please call 202/225-5931 at least four business days in advance of the event, whenever practicable. Questions with regard to special accommodations in general (including availability of Committee materials in alternative formats and assistive listening devices) may be directed to the Committee.*



## COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

MINUTES OF SUBCOMMITTEE ON Office, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations  
or Middle East and North Africa HEARINGDay Thursday Date December 12, 2013 Room 2172 Rayburn HOBStarting Time 9:30 a.m. Ending Time 11:44 a.m.Recesses 0 (\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_)( \_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_)

## Presiding Member(s)

*Rep. Chris Smith*

Check all of the following that apply:

Open Session Electronically Recorded (taped) Executive (closed) Session Stenographic Record Televised 

## TITLE OF HEARING:

*Iran's Persecution of American Pastor Abedini Worsens*

## SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

*AGH: Rep. Weber, Rep. Meadows**ME/NA: Rep. Ros-Lehtinen, Rep. Chabot, Rep. Higgins, Rep. Deutch, Rep. Meng, Rep. Cotton, Rep. DeSantis, Rep. Collins (GA),  
Rep. Kinsinger, Rep. Connolly*NON-SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT: *(Mark with an \* if they are not members of full committee.)**Rep. Walorski\*, Rep. Wolf\*, Rep. Cassidy\**HEARING WITNESSES: Same as meeting notice attached? Yes  No   
*(If "no", please list below and include title, agency, department, or organization.)*STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD: *(List any statements submitted for the record.)**Photograph of Naghmeh Abedini and her children submitted by Chairman Smith**Statement for the record by Rep. Meadows**Statement for the record by Rep. Cassidy**Statement from the American Jewish Committee, submitted by Chairman Ros-Lehtinen*

TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE \_\_\_\_\_

or

TIME ADJOURNED 11:44 a.m.*Caryn B. Szapiro*  
Subcommittee Staff Director

PHOTOGRAPH OF NAGHMEH ABEDINI AND HER CHILDREN SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD BY THE HONORABLE CHRISTOPHER H. SMITH, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF NEW JERSEY, AND CHAIRMAN, SUBCOMMITTEE ON AFRICA, GLOBAL HEALTH, GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS, AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS



STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD FROM THE HONORABLE BILL CASSIDY, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF LOUISIANA, SUBMITTED BY THE HONORABLE CHRISTOPHER H. SMITH, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF NEW JERSEY, AND CHAIRMAN, SUBCOMMITTEE ON AFRICA, GLOBAL HEALTH, GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS, AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

**"Iran's Persecution of American Pastor Abedini Worsens"**  
*Thursday, December 12<sup>th</sup>, 2013*

**Congressman Bill Cassidy, M.D.**  
*Statement for the Record*

I'd like to thank Representative Smith and Representative Ros-Lehtinen for hosting this joint subcommittee hearing and inviting me to attend. I appreciate the work the Foreign Affairs committee has done on his behalf.

I'd also like to thank Dr. Sekulow for the work he and the American Center for Law and Justice has done on behalf of Pastor Abedini, and Dr. Swett and Dr. Calingaert for their work on advocating for religious freedom worldwide.

It was an honor to meet Mrs. Naghmeh Abedini before the start of today's hearing. I'm disappointed our government hasn't fought harder for Mr. Abedini's release from Iran but was encouraged to meet this inspiring woman who is working so hard for her husband's freedom.

Pastor Abedini's situation was brought to my attention by a constituent of mine who stopped me after church one Sunday in February to inform me of Pastor Abedini's plight. It was from our conversation that I introduced House Resolution 147, which has quickly taken hold in the House. This is evidence that although he has not been given proper concern by our government, in churches and homes across the country people are concerned about and are praying for Pastor Abedini's freedom.

Again, I thank the committee for their commitment to this issue and I urge my colleagues and the State Department to work swiftly to bring Pastor Abedini home to his wife and children.



MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD BY THE HONORABLE ILEANA ROS-LEHTINEN,  
A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF FLORIDA, AND CHAIRMAN,  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA



**Global Jewish  
Advocacy**

**E. Robert Goodkind**  
Chair

**Felice D. Gaer**  
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FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF HUMAN RIGHTS

[www.ajc.org](http://www.ajc.org)

**Statement of  
Felice D. Gaer, Director of the Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement  
of Human Rights  
Richard T. Foltin, Director of National and Legislative Affairs  
American Jewish Committee (AJC)**

**Submitted on behalf of AJC and its Jacob Blaustein Institute to  
The House Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights,  
and International Organizations, and  
The House Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa**

**Hearing on  
“Iran’s Persecution of American Pastor Abedini Worsens”**

**December 12, 2013**

**T: (212) 891-1315 (Gaer), (202) 785-5463 (Foltin)  
Email: [gaerf@ajc.org](mailto:gaerf@ajc.org), [foltinr@ajc.org](mailto:foltinr@ajc.org)**

Iran's systemic pattern of convicting prisoners of conscience on account of their religious or political beliefs is demonstrated through the unjust imprisonment of hundreds of individuals. AJC, the global Jewish advocacy organization, and its Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights (Jacob Blaustein Institute) are actively campaigning for the immediate unconditional release of all prisoners of conscience unjustly detained in Iran, including Iranian-American Pastor Saeed Abedini.

Pastor Abedini has been imprisoned since September 2012. According to the U.S. Department of State, he was sentenced in January 2013 to eight years in prison based on charges related to his religious beliefs. Pastor Abedini has reportedly suffered physical and psychological abuse in prison, and was recently moved from Evin prison to a violent criminal ward in Rajai Shahr prison. It has also been alleged that Abedini has been robbed and threatened at knifepoint in this new prison and his health is deteriorating.

Sadly, Abedini's case is not an isolated one. According to the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran, legal discrimination against religious minorities in that country increased in 2013. More than 300 Christians have been arrested in Iran since 2010, and at least 20 were detained as of July 2013. Religious discrimination in Iran is far from limited to Christians. Iran routinely discriminates against members of nearly all non-Shia Islam minority groups, including Baha'is, Sufi Muslims, Christians and Jews.

During the 1970s, U.S. government officials involved in negotiations with the Soviet Union, whether on arms control or environmental pollution or trade policy, routinely raised individual cases of Soviet *refuseniks*. These actions produced results and should be a guiding principle for U.S. policy makers today. We urge all U.S. government officials in their communications with Iran to press for the immediate unconditional release of all Iranian prisoners of conscience, and for President Rouhani to fulfill his campaign pledge to restore and expand freedoms for all Iranians. Iran must firmly implement extensive measures to end its ongoing assault on the freedoms of expression, assembly, association, religion and the equal rights of women, and to stop the widespread use of torture, arbitrary arrests, detentions and unfair trials, including extensive due process violations. Iran should further be urged to implement comprehensive accountability measures for alleged perpetrators of human rights abuses, and end the systematic targeting and harassment of human rights defenders, media professionals, lawyers and opposition activists, and ethnic and religious minorities.

Although President Obama raised Abedini's case during his phone call with Iranian President Rouhani in September 2013, more is needed. Key human rights issues and cases of individual prisoners of conscience should be routinely raised by U.S. officials at the highest levels in their communications with Iran.

AJC and its Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights appreciate the opportunity to submit this statement and welcome your questions and comments.



**Statement of Rep. Mark Meadows**  
**“Iran’s Persecution of American Pastor Abedini Worsens”**  
**Thursday, December 12, 2013**

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Madame Chairman, for calling this hearing to bring Pastor Saeed Abedini’s imprisonment in Iran to the forefront of our nation’s consciousness. I am grateful to the witnesses before the Committee today, especially Pastor Saeed’s wife, Naghmeh. Thank you for your bravery in continually speaking out on your husband’s behalf and for being here to share your testimony with us.

Naghmeh and her two children have now been without their husband and father for 444 days. Pastor Saeed was assured by the Iranian Intelligence Ministry in 2009 that he could come and go freely in Iran if he agreed to stop leading Christian house churches – an agreement he upheld. But in September 2012, he was arrested while in the country building an orphanage approved by the Government of Iran. He experienced no due process in his trial, even being barred from the room during one of the days of testimony, and was convicted of undermining the national security of Iran.

Due to his Christian faith, he was sentenced to eight years in prison. Now, Pastor Saeed has been transferred to Iran’s deadliest prison. He is being held in the same ward as Iran’s most violent criminals – murderers and rapists. His health is quickly deteriorating, he is covered in lice, and he has been repeatedly threatened and robbed at knifepoint. Some nights he even awakes to prisoners standing over his bed wielding knives. Our government must do everything possible to bring Pastor Saeed, a naturalized U.S. citizen, home to his wife and children. Secretary Kerry and leaders of other world powers recently negotiated a deal with Iran which provides \$6 billion in sanction relief and access to billions more assets, while simply requiring a temporary, 6 month pause in Iran’s nuclear development.

The United States should not be loosening sanctions on Iran while Americans such as Pastor Saeed continue to be unjustly imprisoned, suffer beatings, and be separated from their families. In negotiations with Iranian leaders, the release of Pastor Saeed and other detained Americans must be a priority. I hope the testimonies in today’s hearing will shed light on the urgency of Pastor Saeed’s case and empower our nation’s leaders, both in Congress and the Executive branch, with a renewed commitment to bringing our fellow citizen home.