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One Hundred and Thirteenth Congress  
**Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

**Statement of Rep. James P. McGovern**  
**Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing**  
**“Defending Freedoms Project: Highlighting the Plight of Prisoners of**  
**Conscience around the World”**  
**HVC-201 – Thursday, January 16<sup>th</sup>, 2014 – 10:00 AM-12PM**

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Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the hearing on the *Defending Freedoms Project: Highlighting the Plight of Prisoners of Conscience around the World*. I want to thank the staff of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for organizing this hearing. I would like to extend a very special welcome to all our panelists today – thank you for your courage and for your advocacy on behalf of prisoners of conscience and for your tireless efforts to highlight their plight. I would like to specifically acknowledge the presence of Mr. Natan Sharansky, a prominent defender of human rights for Soviet Jewry, who has experienced the cruelty of the Soviet state-led oppression firsthand. Further, I know that in the audience today we have several relatives of currently imprisoned activists from around the world; they came here hoping to hear us state our commitment to help them fight for the release of their loved ones. I thank you for your presence here today, for your courage, and resolve to see your family members freed.

We could not have chosen a better topic for the first Commission hearing of 2014. In every nation or region facing violations of human rights, behind every issue the Commission has sought to highlight over the years, stand individuals who risk their lives and freedom to fight for truth, justice and transparency in their countries, for freedom and equality for all, for simple human dignity. They dare to stand up to brutal regimes that do not tolerate dissent and often pay a heavy price for their work to promote and defend human rights. These individuals go to great lengths to have their voices heard, and it is very important that they are not forgotten behind the bars of oppression, that they are not left to suffer alone for the sacrifices they had made for many. Today, we are only able to highlight a few of these cases in the ocean of many. Just as they were and are untiring in their work, so we should be now in our advocacy on their behalf, in our efforts for their release. Those in the world who prefer silence should hear our united voices loud and clear.

So, today, like many times before, I raise my voice on behalf of Nabeel Rajab, a prominent Bahraini human rights activist, who is currently serving two years in jail simply for engaging in nonviolent political protest. As I have repeatedly indicated since

his conviction, it is my belief that the charges against him were politically motivated to thwart Mr. Rajab's non-violent advocacy for political reform in Bahrain and that his conviction has violated his internationally recognized rights to freedom of expression and assembly.

Nabeel provides a critical voice to those working peacefully for democracy and respect for human rights and the rule of law in Bahrain. Releasing him would send an important signal that the Bahrain government is serious about political stability and reform. Therefore, I strongly urge the Government of Bahrain to unconditionally release Nabeel and to cease further threats against all non-violent human rights activists and leaders of Bahrain's peaceful opposition.

The U.S. Congress has a long history of standing up for the disenfranchised and the abused. It has stood on the side of immigrants and championed the rights of those whose governments forbid them to emigrate. It has worked on behalf of the disappeared and the tortured in Chile and the gulags of the Soviet Union. It has stood up for the rights of workers, journalists and other human rights defenders. I hope this Congress and future Congresses will not abandon that history, but will continue to stand up for the rights of the disenfranchised, both at home and abroad.

And this is why this project – the Defending Freedoms Project – is so important. This is a collaborative bipartisan initiative spearheaded by the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission that invites Members of Congress to adopt cases of individual prisoners of conscience around the world, take an active stance on their behalf, generate attention to their plight, and raise support for human rights. With an adoption of a prisoner, Members of Congress could contribute to the release or reduction of their prison sentence, or, at the very least, raise awareness about the unjust laws and policies of the country where these prisoners are detained. Today I invite my colleagues to take part in this important non-partisan opportunity: our voice can make a difference in the release of these prisoners.

Only action and courage, the ability to see outside the prescribed narrative and the *inability* to stay passive in the face of injustice, can lead humanity toward a positive change. This hope for a better future rests on the shoulders of those who dare to challenge the status quo, to break out of the chains of fear imposed by repressive societies, and to accept immense risks for exercising their basic human rights. Let us not leave them alone in their struggle – let us make their names a part of every conversation with the governments that restrict their freedom, and let us send these prisoners of conscience a message: you are not alone, we stand with you, and we are fighting for your freedom.

Thank you, and I am looking forward to a fruitful discussion here today.