

PREPARED TESTIMONY OF

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Wife of Imprisoned American Pastor in Iran

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

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“The Worsening Plight of Religious Minorities in Iran”

My name is Naghmeh Abedini. My husband, Saeed Abedini, who is an American citizen has been sentenced to 8 years in prison inside of Iran because of his conversion from Islam to Christianity. We have two kids, Rebekka Grace who is 6 years old, and Jacob Cyrus who is 4 years old. A day does not go by that they do not ask for their daddy. A day does not go by that they do not long for him. 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.

I came to the USA in March of 1986 due to the Iran and Iraq war. I converted from Islam to Christianity a year later in 1987. I have been so blessed to be an American. 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 would have never been given this freedom if I had lived in Iran. 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 was first faced with this harsh reality of being persecuted for my Christian faith when I decided to visit Iran in November of 2001. I felt called to go back to Iran as a young Christian girl, in order to share the love and saving Grace of Jesus Christ. My hope was that I could offer the same hope, peace, and love to those in Iran that I had found in Jesus.

I met Saeed in the year 2002, two years after he had converted from Islam to Christianity and we were married in June of 2004. Because of our conversions to Christianity and the persecution of converts in Iran, Saeed and I ministered to a network of Christians in house churches all over Iran. But from day one, we were continually harassed and threatened because of our Christian faith. After Ahmadinejad became president in June of 2004, he vowed to root out Christianity in Iran. Saeed and I were forced to leave Iran in November of 2005 because of increased persecution and imprisonment of Christians.

Saeed loved America and the American people from day one of his arrival. Saeed became a US citizen in the year 2010. I remember Saeed saying it was one of the best days of his life and he was so proud to be an American. He was so excited, he announced it on his social media and soon after, a flag was sent to him from Senator Carl Levin's office for the occasion of Saeed becoming a citizen (*see attached*). He was so proud!

Although Saeed enjoyed being in the US very much, he continued to have a heart for the people of Iran and those he had left behind. So, in the summer of 2009 we decided to go to Iran as a family and for the kids to be able to see their grandparents. As we were leaving the country 3 weeks later, Saeed was taken by the Intelligence Police at the airport while I and his two children were sent back to the US. After months of interrogations, the Intelligence Police allowed Saeed to return to the US, and agreed he could freely come and go from Iran, so long as he promised not to continue leading Christians in the house churches. Saeed agreed. But because of his love for the Iranian people, including the least of these – the orphans and the widows – Saeed sought new ways to serve the people of Iran. Before Saeed returned to the US, the Iranian government encouraged Saeed to do humanitarian efforts and promised that he would be free to travel back and forth to Iran in order to work on an orphanage and to visit his parents, siblings and other relatives. To this day, Saeed has fulfilled his promise.

Although Saeed fulfilled his promise, the Iranian government did not. Saeed visited Iran in July of 2012 in the hopes of completing the orphanage building and necessary paperwork. On July 28, 2012, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard took Saeed off of a bus and took his passport. He was told he was being put under house arrest and was not allowed to travel back to our family in the US. The Revolutionary Guard told him he was to wait for a court date to face charges for his Christian activities. But what activities? He had kept his agreement. They would not give Saeed clear answers. Finally, on September 26, 2012, early in the morning as Saeed waited for his court hearing, 5 revolutionary guards raided the house where he was staying and took Saeed.

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 his whereabouts, to learn he had been put in Evin prison brought flashbacks of family members and friends who were executed, raped, and tortured in Evin.

In Evin, Saeed has endured beatings, internal bleeding, death threats, and continued psychological torture all because he will not deny his Christian faith. I found out on January 27, 2013, that Saeed was sentenced to spend 8 years in this prison – all because his Christian faith and peaceful religious gathering are allegedly a threat to Iran.

Saeed holds to what he believes 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. Are we going to stand with him? Are we going to stand up as country and protect a citizen whose human right of religious freedom is so clearly violated? Americans are not all Christians; but **every American** – regardless of their beliefs – wants 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.

I must tell you that I am disappointed with my government. I am disappointed that our President and our State Department have not fully engaged this case – disappointed that this great country is not doing more to free my husband, a U.S. citizen. Yes, we are both proud to be American citizens. And I expect more from our government.

As Dietrick Bonhoeffer said, “Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.” Let the answer ring out that we will stand up proudly for this right on which our country was founded.

Saeed is a husband and amazing father. The kids and I miss him terribly. Our kids hold onto the hope of seeing their daddy very soon. The truth is we do not know if we will ever speak to him or see him again. Many mornings they wake up and start running around the house and in the yard. I ask them what they are doing and they say very disappointed “it must have been a dream. We saw daddy was home and he was going to twirl us around.” I hold back my tears as I tell them that it was a dream. I still do not have the heart to tell them that if we don’t do anything, that daddy might never survive the horrific Evin prison. I do not have the heart to tell them of the 8 year sentence. I do hope we can work together to bring Saeed home and I will never have to tell my kids of the dire situation their father is in.