



September 20, 2018

The Honorable Michael R. Pompeo
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Mr. Secretary,

On behalf of the World Information Technology and Services Alliance (WITSA), we respectfully request your intervention to help secure the release of Mr. Nizar Zakka, a U.S. permanent resident of Lebanese citizenship held hostage in Tehran, Iran since September 18, 2018. Mr. Zakka, an ICT technology consultant, has led ICT for development projects funded from organizations and corporations like Cisco and Microsoft, among many other private and public entities.

Prior to his unlawful imprisonment, Mr. Zakka served on WITSA's Board of Directors and was our Vice Chairman for the Middle East and Northern Africa region. Mr Zakka did not return from Tehran after participating in the Second International Conference & Exhibition on Women in Sustainable Development on September 18, 2015, a conference that he attended at the invitation of then-Vice President for Women's Affairs, Shahindokht Molaverdi. Ms. Molaverdi recently told the Associated Press (see attached) that Iran made mistakes in Nizar's case (see attached).

WITSA is the leading consortium of ICT industry associations from 83 countries and economies around the world/ Our members represent over 90 percent of the ICT industry worldwide. Mr. Zakka is also one of the founding members of The Arab ICT Organization – IJMA3, which was formed to represent a regional alliance of ICT organizations across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Today, the member organizations represent 18 ICT organizations, across 14 countries. In addition to being an advocate for the ICT industry, IJMA3 works on projects in the field of ICT for Development (ICT4D), which aim to promote income generating opportunities and improved livelihoods for people across the MENA region, particularly youth.

WITSA is very concerned about Mr. Zakka's personal safety, his family and-well-being. It is very important that this matter be resolved as quickly as possible. WITSA has previously reached out to many relevant parties, including the Department of State in an April 28, 2016 letter as well as to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, and the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights. Furthermore, we also attempted in 2016 to meet with His Excellency Gholamali Khoshroo, Ambassador of the Republic of Iran to the United Nations to no avail.

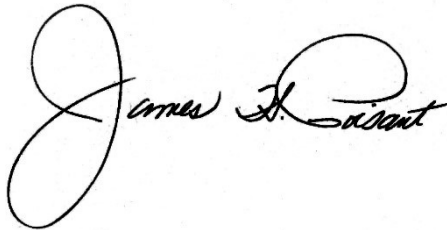
Recently, we have been encouraged by several positive developments, including U.S. Senate 245 of August 3, 2017 calling on the Government of Iran to release unjustly detained United States citizens and legal permanent resident aliens, and H.R. 4744 of January 9, 2018 (“Iran Human Rights and Hostage-Taking Accountability Act.”). We also note that, on September 5, 2018, Ms. Shahindokht Molaverdi, Special Assistant to the President for Citizenship rights, became the first Iranian government official to distance herself from Nizar’s false imprisonment by stating that “this is in no way approved by the government,” and acknowledging that she had personally invited Mr. Zakka to attend the fateful conference in 2015¹.

WITSA believes it is in Iran’s interest to release Mr. Zakka as his arrest will undoubtedly chill and discourage future travel, business opportunities and investment in Iran. Any unstable business environment, most particularly subjecting business leaders to the risk of arrest, will most certainly curtail and discourage business. Unfortunately, our call for a meeting with the Ambassador has been repeatedly ignored.

WITSA kindly requests that you intervene personally with the Iranian leadership to obtain Nizar’s freedom, both as a humanitarian and a moral issue. We also encourage your Administration to condemn the imprisonment of Mr. Zakka and other U.S. citizens and permanent residents in the strongest possible terms at the upcoming U.N. Security Council and General Assembly meetings.

In conclusion, we know you have been an early champion for Nizar dating to your days in the Congress, as a Member of the U.S. Congress. On October 16, 2016, you made a statement on the floor of the House in support of Nizar.² Thank you Mr. Secretary. We would greatly appreciate your ongoing assistance in this important matter and welcome any feedback from your Office.

Respectfully yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James H. Poisant". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "J".

Dr James H Poisant
Secretary General
WITSA

¹ Washington Post, September 14, 2018: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/ap-interview-adviser-says-iran-failed-detained-us-resident/2018/09/14/d8a5df92-b7e5-11e8-ae4f-2c1439c96d79_story.html?utm_term=.84d7c5148ae7

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P0qbEujJTm0>

The Washington Post

The Americas

AP Interview: Adviser says Iran failed detained US resident

By Jon Gambrell|AP

September 14

TEHRAN, Iran — A top adviser to Iran’s president on human rights said that the government “failed” to help a U.S. permanent resident imprisoned over spying allegations that she personally invited to the country for a conference.

In a wide-ranging interview with The Associated Press, Shahindokht Molaverdi acknowledged the limits a civilian government faces when challenging the actions of the judiciary in the Islamic Republic, especially when dealing with cases involving the imprisonment of foreigners and activists.

She cited the case of Nizar Zakka, a Lebanese-born internet freedom advocate living in the U.S., who she invited to a conference in September 2015. The hard-line Revolutionary Guard later arrested Zakka on his way to the airport, and he was later sentenced to 10 years in prison on spying charges in a closed-door trial before a Revolutionary Court.

ADVERTISING

The advertisement features a blue glass bottle of BOSS Bottled Tonic on the left. The bottle has a silver cap and the words 'BOSS' and 'HUGO BOSS TONIC' embossed on it. To the right is a black rectangular area with the 'BOSS HUGO BOSS' logo in white. Below these elements is a dark grey banner with the BOSS logo, the text 'BOSS BOTTLED TONIC #MANOFTODAY', and a 'SHOP NOW' button. The background of the banner shows a cityscape.

“This is in no way approved by the government,” Molaverdi said. “We did all we could to stop this from happening, but we are seeing that we have failed to make a significant impact.”

Molaverdi is an outspoken official within the government of elected President Hassan Rouhani, a relatively moderate cleric within Iran’s Shiite theocracy. In Rouhani’s first term, she served as his vice president for women and family affairs, and in his second term become his special assistant on citizenship rights.

Political analysts within Iran saw Molaverdi’s reassignment as Rouhani responding to hard-liners’ criticism of her comments on women’s rights and other issues.

She’s condemned police overreach in dealing with women loosely wearing their mandatory headscarves and demanded access for women to sporting events. She gave an interview in 2016 in which she said all the men in a single, unnamed village in Iran’s eastern Sistan and Baluchistan province had been executed for drug offenses.

Molaverdi said she has friends working on women’s rights issues who have been arrested by Iranian security forces. She blamed a “complete miscoordination” between Iran’s civilian government and its judiciary, which like its state media and security forces is believed to be controlled by hard-liners.

“Actions by one branch can ignore or neutralize efforts by another branch,” she said. “This is an art and a very delicate job and sometimes the situation gets out of our hands, but anyway the goal of all of us is to stop this from happening and to minimize this.”

Iran’s executive branch under both hard-liners and more-moderate presidents has had difficulty freeing prisoners, especially foreigners. That can happen both from the hard-line judiciary exerting its power and disputes between Iran’s Intelligence Ministry, answerable to the president, and the county’s paramilitary Revolutionary Guard, answerable only the supreme leader.

“The executive branch is clearly aware of the limitations it operates under and will pick its battles with the judiciary carefully,” said Ellie Geranmayeh, deputy director of the Middle East program at the European Council on Foreign Relations.

Zakka's appears to be one of the cases where it got out of hand.

Zakka lives in Washington and holds permanent resident status in the U.S. He leads the Arab ICT Organization, or IJMA3, an industry consortium from 13 countries that advocates for information technology in the region.

It's unclear what prompted Iranian authorities to detain Zakka, though Iran in the past has used prisoners with Western ties as bargaining chips in negotiations.

The AP reported in May 2016 that Zakka's IJMA3 organization had received at least \$730,000 in contracts and grants since 2009 from both the State Department and USAID, the lead American government agency fighting poverty and promoting democracy across the world.

Zakka's supporters say he traveled to Iran "with the knowledge and approval" of the State Department, something the AP has been unable to confirm.

Molaverdi acknowledged being the Iranian official who granted him permission to enter the country and remembered eating dinner with him at a conference and posing for a group photograph.

"I was later informed that he didn't go back to his country and on his way to the airport he had been arrested," she said. "He's still in prison and a heavy sentence has been issued against him."

She added: "Such incidents definitely harm how Iran's domestic security is viewed from the outside for investment, although in reality it is not like that, but a false image is presented of our country."

Jason Poblete, a Washington-based lawyer representing Zakka, said that while he appreciated Molaverdi's comments, they didn't change the fact "Nizar was kidnapped and thrown in jail, not treated as a guest."

"While a welcome sign that you seem to agree with Nizar that he was falsely accused, Nizar is going on three years in Evin" prison, Poblete told the AP. "This injustice has caused great and some unspeakable stresses on Nizar and his family. There are humanitarian and other grounds for Nizar's release and all the parties in interest — they know who they are — need to work expeditiously to right this injustice."

Molaverdi acknowledged a recent spate of arrests of lawyers working on human rights issues, something criticized by Amnesty International as an “intensifying crackdown on civil society.” She also said Rouhani’s government was working to help release imprisoned students and so-called “starred” students — those blocked by security agencies from attending classes.

Asked about nationwide demonstrations in December and January sparked by Iran’s economic woes that saw thousands arrested, Molaverdi stressed there was a difference between protests and “rioting.”

Still, Molaverdi said change was possible and even necessary in Iran some 40 years after its Islamic Revolution.

“If we rethink our experiences, definitely, we’ll come to the conclusion that we have other options available that are more effective,” she said.

Associated Press television producer Mehdi Fattahi in Tehran, Iran, contributed to this report.

Follow Jon Gambrell on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/jongambrellAP> . His work can be found at <http://apne.ws/2galNpz> .

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