



Media update from www.freethelikers.org – September 25, 2011

Shane Bauer and Josh Fattal, the two Americans released by Iran after more than two years in detention, returned to the United States today after a three-day layover in Muscat, Oman with their families. They made the following statements in New York.

JOSH FATTAL:

Good afternoon and thank you for coming here today. My name is Josh Fattal.

After 781 days of prison, Shane and I are now free men.

Last Wednesday, we had just finished our brief daily exercise in the open air room of Evin Prison when something totally unexpected happened. On any other day, we would have been blindfolded and led down the hallway to our eight foot by 13 foot cell. But on that day, the guards took us downstairs. They finger printed us and gave us street clothes. They did not tell us where we were going. Instead, they took us to another part of the prison where we saw Dr. Salem Al Ismaily, the envoy of His Majesty, Sultan Qaboos of Oman. The first thing Salem said to us was, "Let's go home."

What followed was the most incredible experience of our lives. We were held in captivity in almost complete isolation for more than two years. But for the past few, precious days we have been experiencing free life anew with our families in Muscat.

In all the time we spent in detention, we had a total of 15 minutes of telephone calls with our families and one, short visit from our mothers. We had to go on hunger strike repeatedly just to receive letters from our loved ones. Many times, too many times, we heard the screams of other prisoners being beaten and there was nothing we could do to help them. Solitary confinement was the worst experience of our lives and it was a nightmare that Sarah had to endure for 14 months. Sarah's strength

during the one-hour meetings we were allowed with her lifted our spirits daily. One year ago, when Sarah was released, our world shrank.

We lived in a world of lies and false hope. The investigators lied that Ambassador Leu from the Swiss Embassy in Tehran did not want to see us. They told us, again falsely, that we would be given due process and access to our lawyer, the courageous and persistent Mr. Masoud Shafii. Most infuriatingly, they even told us that our families had stopped writing us letters.

Releasing us is a good gesture, and no positive step should go unnoticed. We applaud the Iranian authorities for finally making the right decision regarding our case. But we want to be clear that they do not deserve undue credit for ending what they had no right and no justification to start in the first place. From the very start, the only reason we have been held hostage is because we are American. Sarah was held for 410 days. The two of us were held for 781 days. That is far longer than the American hostages at the U.S. embassy in Tehran in 1979.

It was clear to us from the very beginning that we were hostages. This is the most accurate term because, despite certain knowledge of our innocence, Iran has always tied our case to its political disputes with the US. Thank you. I would like to hand over now to Shane. He helped me through the worst days of my life. I cannot imagine how I would have made it through these two years without you, Shane.

SHANE BAUER:

Thank you, Josh, and thank you everyone for being here.

We will always regret the grief and anxiety that our fateful hiking trip led to, above all for our families. But we would like to be very clear. This was never about crossing the unmarked border between Iran and Iraq. We were held because of our nationality. Indeed, there are many other cases of unauthorized entry to Iran in which people were simply fined or deported after a short time. We do not know if we crossed the border. We will probably never know. But even if we did enter Iran, that has never been the reason why the Iranian authorities kept us in prison for so long.

The only explanation for our prolonged detention is the 32 years of mutual hostility between America and Iran. The irony is that Sarah, Josh and I oppose U.S. policies towards Iran which perpetuate this hostility. We were convicted of espionage because we are American. It's that simple. No evidence was ever presented against us. That is because there is no evidence and because we are completely innocent. The two court sessions we attended were a total sham. They were made up of ridiculous lies that depicted us as being involved in an elaborate American-Israeli conspiracy to undermine Iran.

Sarah, Josh and I have experienced a taste of the Iranian regime's brutality. We have been held in almost total isolation from the world and everything we love, stripped of our rights and freedom. You may ask us, "Now that you are free can you forgive the Iranian government for what it has done to you?"

Our answer is this. How can we forgive the Iranian government when it continues to imprison so many other innocent people and prisoners of conscience? It is the Iranian people who bear the brunt of this government's cruelty and disregard for human rights. There are people in Iran who are imprisoned for years for simply attending a protest, for writing a pro-democracy blog or for worshipping an unpopular faith.

Journalists remain behind bars and innocent people have been executed. If the Iranian government wants to change its image in the world, and ease international pressure, it should release all political prisoners and prisoners of conscience immediately. They deserve their freedom just as much as we do.

In prison, every time we complained about our conditions, the guards would immediately remind us of comparable conditions at Guantanamo Bay. They would remind us of CIA prisons in other parts of the world, and the conditions that Iranians and others experience in prisons in the U.S. We do not believe that such human rights violations on the part of our government justify what has been done to us. Not for a moment. However, we do believe that these actions on the part of the U.S. provide an excuse for other governments, including the government of Iran, to act in kind. Thank you. Josh and I now want to express our thanks to everyone who helped make today happen.

JOSH FATTAL:

When our mothers were allowed to visit us in May of 2010, they told us about the campaign to win our freedom. We owe a lifelong debt of gratitude to so many people. Their efforts mean we are free and we will never be able to thank them enough.

Our thanks go first and foremost to our wonderful families, who have done more for us than we can ever repay. This has been their ordeal as much as our ordeal and they have sacrificed so much for us to be here today. That includes Sarah, who joined them as soon as she was free in their tireless work to help achieve our freedom. We owe all of you a great debt and our love for you is unqualified and eternal.

They include all of our friends, here at home and overseas. Like our families, many of our friends put their own lives on hold to fight for our freedom. Like our families, they did so while coping with their own pain over our detention. You are true friends and always will be.

And they include tens of thousands of people in America and all over the world, including in Iran. They have expressed their support for us, donated to the Free the Hikers campaign, and prayed for us, each in his or her own way. We will never know most of those people but we want them to know that we love them and always will. Thank you all for the energy and comfort that you sent to us in our hours of darkness.

Our lawyer Mr. Masoud Shafii took on our case at the end of 2009 and has been a determined and brave advocate ever since. He was never allowed to represent us properly, but he never gave up. We will always stand by him, as he stood by us for so long.

His Majesty, Sultan Qaboos of Oman and his envoy Dr. Salem Al Ismaili worked ceaselessly to bring us home. We are humbled by their humanity and their unswerving commitment to justice. We are eternally grateful for the kindness and hospitality they and the people of Oman have shown to us and our families.

The Swiss Ambassador to Iran, Livia Leu Agosti, and her colleagues never stopped trying to gain consular access to us and to resolve our case. We were denied our rights to their visits but we know that Livia and her colleagues would show up time and again at Evin Prison to try to see us. Thank you for your unstinting dedication to us.

SHANE BAUER:

We also want to express our great thanks to the many world leaders and individuals who championed our cause. They include the U.N. Secretary General Ban ki-Moon, President Jalal Talabani of Iraq and President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela and the governments of Turkey and Brazil. They were certain of our innocence and their certainty made a difference.

They include the actor Sean Penn, the great Muhammad Ali, Noam Chomsky, the singer Yusuf Islam, Cindy Sheehan and the Nobel Laureates Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Mairead Maguire. We will always remember that you stood by us.

There were also U.S. government officials who worked for our release, and some of them found creative ways to try and lessen the tension between the US and Iran. Consular officials at the State Department supported our families throughout. Our Members of Congress spoke up for us, publicly and privately. Ambassador Richard Schmierer, his wife Sandy and the staff of the U.S. embassy in Oman were most gracious with their time and hospitality twice now. They have our gratitude for their support and kindness.

The sympathy and support of many Muslim and other religious leaders in America, the Iranian people and the elements within the Iranian government that worked for our freedom were also all invaluable. Thank you.

Finally, we want to thank the media, in the United States and around the world, for keeping our case in the public eye. It means a lot to us. And now that we are home, we know you will give us the time we need to reconnect with our families and rebuild our lives.

When Sarah was about to walk out of Evin Prison last year, we vowed to each other that none of us would be entirely free until all of us were free. That moment has now thankfully come. Sarah, Josh and I can now finally leave prison behind us. We want more than anything to begin our lives anew and with a new appreciation for the sweet taste of freedom.

Thank you everyone.

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