

Congresswoman Abigail Spanberger (D-VA)

Good morning, everyone. Thank you for inviting me. It's wonderful to see so many familiar faces. Thank you for representing Iranian Americans across the country and across Virginia. Thank you for advocating for the people of Iran who need our support now more than ever, who need to know that on the other side of the world there are people who are proud of them, who are excited by the strength and the resilience that they are showing as they advocate for their freedom, for their democracy, and for a belief that tomorrow can be better than it has been.

Iranians have been struggling under violence and repression of the ayatollah's clerical regime for over 40 years now. It's a struggle that has drawn renewed worldwide attention in the light of nationwide protests sparked by the murder of a young woman, Mahsa Amini, at the hands of the regime's morality police. And I know I'm not telling you all anything you don't know, but I think it's important that we acknowledge how she died and the fact that her death has brought forth advocacy unlike anything I ever anticipated seeing. In the two months since her death, Iranian security forces have killed hundreds and arrested thousands more, many of whom are now being sentenced to death for the alleged crimes against God. Yet in the face of international condemnation, the regime has responded not by offering any serious reforms but by blaming some vast western conspiracy and by escalating violence. They've targeted students and other youth who have formed the core of the protest movement. And from here in the United States from the halls of Congress, the idea that there are students in the streets who believe that by being out there, by risking their lives, their own safety, and their security, that they can make change in the country they love and the country they want to make better is incredibly inspiring.

The regime hopes that through its brutality it can force protesters to submit to the ayatollah's brutality. Yet instead of leaving the streets, the escalating violence and murder has only added to their outrage, and it has become a rallying cry for Iranians demanding their rights. **And so I wanted to express my steadfast support and commend the bravery, the courage, the resolve of these young women and men as they demand their basic freedoms and stand up to the regime in the face of appalling intimidation, violence, and detentions.** We know that since its inception, the Iranian regime has persecuted and enacted illegal discrimination against women through misogynistic criminal statutes, which make it nearly impossible to seek justice for domestic violence or they lead to long criminal sentences for women who post unveiled images of themselves to social media sites.

In addressing you today, I want to make clear that my condemnation of the Iranian regime's suppression against women and its use of violence against those who have taken peaceful action to their resistance to this totalitarianism, my clear condemnation of their efforts is also one of support for people who are taking a stand for their own freedom. And in response, I have supported two resolutions in the House of Representatives because here in the halls of Congress we have the ability to use our voices to make clear for those who are struggling that they have the support of people who believe in them. And so I've supported two resolutions in the house speaking out against the regime's silence and its violations against the basic human rights, including the freedom of expression, and I commend the administration for vocally supporting the protesters and sanctioning the morality police and other officials responsible for the violence. New sanctions on Iranian entities responsible for manufacturing and supplying drones to Russia adds to the pressure on the regime and pressure that will not be lifted any time soon, given that the nuclear deal is off the table for the foreseeable future.

I'm also working on legislation that will be introduced shortly that would expand investment in internet freedom programs that allow repressed populations in Iran and throughout the world to bypass the Internet and mobile communication blackouts implemented by the regime to censor speech, block coordination, and prevent the rest of the world from seeing the reality of their violent repression because their repression is violent, and it is something that the rest of the world needs to see. The images that have come out of Iran of the violence have been shocking but the images of people standing up for themselves and their belief in a better tomorrow has been absolutely inspiring. And I think that we have all seen the three young girls walking through the streets twirling their hijabs. It has been one of the most remarkable videos I think I've ever seen, and I say that as the mother of three daughters about those girls' age. And I think about their mothers being worried, but I think about the strength that those girls have.

And I want to make sure that information continues...sorry. So with this legislation, we will make sure that those inspiring beautiful videos that bring me to tears can continue to get out and that people who are coordinating on the ground are able to do so.

And finally, I want to highlight the role that you all play in advocating for basic human rights and self-determination on behalf of the Iranian people. Some of you are very familiar to me because I sit on the Foreign Affairs Committee and any time there is a hearing, there are advocates who sit in our hearing to make themselves known who ensure that we never forget that on the other side of the world, there is a repressive totalitarian regime. And your presence matters in the halls of Congress and your presence in our communities across the United States matter. And ensuring that our neighbors, our friends, our community members, people who may not ever have known much about Iran can still be inspired by the strength of those who were advocating and demonstrating for freedom. And we can bring, through your advocacy, to the forefront of people's knowledge and experience the reality that change is possible on the ground, that the Iranian people who will make it so, and that through our attention and through our encouragement and frankly, through our honoring the risks that they are taking, that we can let them know that they are not alone in that.

So thank you for calling on members of Congress to impose true costs on the regime for its reprehensible action. Thank you for making sure that the plight of Iranians in Iran is not forgotten or unseen and thank you for the opportunity to address you all today. Thank you for your advocacy in hosting this event. Thank you for your support of the protesters whose participation and sacrifice has inspired the world and thank you for wanting to see true democratic change in Iran. Thank you for having me. Thank you.