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Andrei Sakharov Prize Talk: Prisoners of Conscience in Iran (Presented on behalf of Narges Mohammadi by Nayereh Tohidi)

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For me, as a prisoner of conscience, it is uplifting and great honor to be recognized by esteemed scientists like yourselves and to be awarded the Andrei Sakharov Prize. I was filled with joy when studying quantum physics at the university as a means to understand the universe. However, at the same time, I was preoccupied with the oppressive conditions in my country and the tyranny suffered by our universities, intellectuals, and the media. What we experience in Iran is a tyranny that in the name of religion restricts and punishes science, intellect, and even love. It labels as a threat to national security and toxic to society whatever is not compatible with its political and economic interests. The power-holders who believe they stand above the law and who disregard justice and the urgent demands of the human conscience, use white torture on political prisoners; keeping suspects in solitary confinement is a routine and prevalent procedure. I am one of the thousands of the victims of such horrible tortures in solitary confinement. You are not hearing here some random ideas of a distressed prisoner, but reflections rooted in the experience of a woman physicist and a mother of two kids who happens to have also advocated for equal rights and human rights by being active in eleven civil society organizations in the last 25 years. As a result, I have been subjected to threats, deprivation, arrests, continuous prosecutions, and finally sentenced to a total of 23 years of imprisonment, 16 years of which has to be served based on the IRIs ruling laws. The harsh treatment and excessive sentence were not due to any underground violent or terrorist activity on my part, but— as admitted by the judges of this very system— because of my insistence on the rights of civil society and on human rights. Iran is an oil and gas-rich country, but millions of Iranians are deprived of decent living standards. Mismanagement and corruption result in high rates of unemployment, widespread poverty and denial of peoples economic rights. I still hope and deeply believe that path to democracy in Iran lies not through violence, war, or military action by a foreign government, but through organizing and strengthening civil society institutions. Sitting here in my prison cell, I am humbled by the honor you have bestowed on me and I will continue my efforts until we achieve peace, tolerance for a plurality of views, and human rights.