



Farah Mawani and the hikers
Photo: Free the Hikers

Fight for freedom

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For most of us, taking action against injustice typically involves fundraising, donating money perhaps, or at the very most starting a Facebook group. When Farah Naaz Mawani experienced a particularly traumatic injustice, those avenues were not enough. Her friend and colleague Josh Fattal was arrested, along with his friends Shane Bauer and Sarah Shourd, by Iranian authorities while hiking in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2009. The incident made global news and Mawani knew she had to act on their behalf. Before their arrest, Bauer and his fiancée Shourd had been living in Damascus, Syria. Fattal was visiting friends on vacation.

Advocating for social justice, Mawani worked closely with the hikers' families and friends, and garnered the support of major international organizations and notable figures (including Reverend

Desmond Tutu and Noam Chomsky) to mobilize a community in order to free her friends and call foul on their treatment. She recounts the days of the campaign saying: "During the heart-wrenching two years and two months Fattal was detained by the Iranian regime, I never doubted, for even a second, what I was giving to fight for their freedom."

Mawani used the Internet to develop and lead the social media component of the Free The Hikers campaign. Her efforts helped build community support and enabled dialogue between high-level government officials. Alongside Fattal's brother, Alex, Mawani's social media campaign included presence on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and a community blog integrated with a website featuring regular updates on the hikers. When asked about the response to the campaign, she says, "The growing community of concerned and compassionate global citizens warmed the hikers' families' hearts and gave them the strength to continue to fight. In my greatest moments of despair, I would issue a cry for help on Twitter. I always received numerous instant responses from people around the world, expressing concern, encouraging me and supporting me. It's amazing how much power a tweet can hold at such indescribable times."

Almost two months after an Iranian judge imposed an eight-year sentence for espionage and illegal entry, Fattal and Bauer were released on \$1 million bail; Shourd had been released a year earlier on \$500,000 bail on humanitarian grounds.

Mawani is inspired by "people and organizations living and working by their principles. In my experience, that is quite rare. It is far more common to express noble principles without applying them to one's actions, the latter requiring much deeper understanding and commitment." Referring to Fattal, she says: "He lives his commitment to non-violence in every word and action, within his personal as well as professional life."

Though her friends are free, Mawani continues to dedicate herself to human rights and social justice, using her experience to advise other campaigns and organizations around the world.

Mawani encourages others to work towards social justice in their communities: "I strongly believe that *every* word expressed and action taken towards peace and justice makes a difference. I encourage others to use this power they hold and to use their voices to amplify those of people who are silenced." ♦