

Robert Pether — Dublin Airport Homecoming Statement

I'm sorry, this won't be long. I'm really overwhelmed right now, and I'm not sure I can find the words to properly express what this moment means.

There are some people we can't even begin to thank. Without them, I genuinely don't know where myself and my family would be today. They have literally saved us over and over.

For more than five and a half years, this has consumed our lives completely.

I was taken on 7th April 2021 after travelling to Baghdad for what was supposed to be a meeting with the Governor of the Central Bank of Iraq. I was an engineer. I was an employee doing my job. I had a wife and children waiting for me at home.

I was there because I made a choice to help a war-torn country rebuild.

I never came home.

The United Nations subsequently found repeatedly that my detention was arbitrary and documented serious violations of international human rights law in what happened to Khaled and me.

It documented what happened during those first days of detention — the isolation, severe dehydration, the loss of 15 kilograms in 12 days, the lack of medical treatment, and the circumstances surrounding the pre-written incriminating statements I was forced to sign in Arabic, a language I could neither read nor understand without translation.

But today I don't want to spend too much time talking about courts or governments or everything that was done to us.

I do need to say something about the injustice of what happened, because coming home today should never be mistaken for that injustice somehow having been corrected.

It wasn't. Not even close.

There have now been three United Nations interventions concerning what happened to us. The International Chamber of Commerce arbitration ruled against the Central Bank of Iraq in its dispute with my employer, and that award has subsequently been recognised and enforced through international court proceedings.

Iraq is a party to international human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention against Torture. Yet despite those obligations, the UN findings, the arbitration outcome and the evidence repeatedly placed before the Iraqi authorities, this ordeal was allowed to continue.

For more than three years, Khaled and I have also been subjected to a money laundering investigation involving threats, coercion, repeated questioning and even attempts to implicate my family. The latest Iraqi court documents identified the complete lack of any evidence, yet it has still not been formally closed.

Our convictions have not been overturned. Neither of us has been exonerated.

We were innocent when we were taken on 7th April 2021, and we remain innocent today.

What is the point of a country accepting international human rights obligations if its authorities can simply disregard them when they become inconvenient?

Coming home is not exoneration. And being allowed to leave is not justice.

I was released from prison on 5th June 2025, months after my imposed five-year sentence had already expired.

But I was not free.

I was released from prison hours away from death, my body shutting down, after months of critical illness and excruciating pain, but I remained trapped in Iraq.

I didn't have my passport, visa or identity documents, and I had no ability to move around freely or safely, leave the country or even go to a hospital. Travel bans prevented me from returning to my family and from accessing the medical treatment I desperately needed outside Iraq.

And even after everything that had already happened — after the years in prison, after my sentence had expired, after multiple United Nations interventions, after my health had deteriorated so badly — there was still one final coercive act on the way out the door.

BEFORE the two travel bans preventing me from leaving Iraq would finally be cancelled, I was required to sign a waiver.

I signed it because I wanted to go home. There was no choice.

After more than five years, with my health deteriorating and my family waiting for me, there was no meaningful choice between signing a document and remaining trapped in Iraq.

So, I want to be very clear about something. I am incredibly grateful to be standing here. I am overwhelmed to finally be home.

But gratitude for being home does not erase what happened to me for even one second.

Freedom should never have been something that had to be bargained for.

Justice would have been not trapping and taking us in the first place.

Justice would have been accepting and recognising the evidence, respecting our rights and allowing us to return to our families.

Justice would have been ending this when the United Nations found our detention arbitrary.

And at the absolute minimum, justice would have meant that when the sentence imposed on me expired, I was free to leave.

None of those things happened.

There will be time to talk about that. There will be time to talk about what happened, why it happened, who was responsible and why nobody should ever be allowed to do this to another person or another family ever again.

But today, more than anything, I want to talk about the people who carried us through it.

My wife and my children have lived this every single day with me.

Our children lost years with their dad. They watched their mum fight every day to try to bring me home. They grew up with uncertainty, fear and circumstances no child should ever have to carry.

I am so thankful for my wife Desree, always fighting for me, while at the same time holding our family together, all while dealing with a situation that took an enormous toll on her too.

She truly is incredible!

When I was taken, my son Flynn was in his final year at Clongowes Wood College and preparing for his final examinations. My son Oscar was 15.

Throughout everything that followed, Clongowes and the wider Clongowes community were extraordinary. The support they gave, not only to Flynn and Oscar, but to my wife, to myself and to our whole family went far beyond anything we could ever reasonably have expected from a school community.

And the same must be said of St George's in Baghdad. The support, compassion and understanding they showed me and my family throughout this ordeal meant an enormous amount to us.

They literally picked me up when a homeless shelter was my only option, when I was gravely ill and out of funds and gave me shelter, support, kindness and friendship.

They saved my life and I will be forever thankful.

These communities did far more than educate our children. At one of the darkest times of our lives, they wrapped themselves around our family. We will never forget it.

There are old friends and new; lawyers — Peter, you are an absolute legend! Your family is our family — journalists, human rights advocates, diplomats, politicians and complete strangers who refused to forget about us.

Some worked publicly. Others did things quietly that most people will probably never know about.

I also want to acknowledge in particular Hostage International and Hostage Aid Worldwide.

Organisations like these understand that arbitrary detention and hostage situations do not affect only the person being held. The whole family lives it. Their support, expertise and humanity helped us through many periods when we simply did not know what was going to happen next.

And there are people in Ireland in particular who decided that whether I held an Irish passport or not was beside the point.

My wife and children are Australian, but they are also Irish citizens. We live in Ireland.

They saw a family in desperate trouble and decided to help because it was the right and humane thing to do.

That humanity mattered more than I can ever explain.

I also want to acknowledge the Australian Government, the Australian Embassy in Baghdad, and the officials and diplomats who have worked on my case over these extraordinarily difficult years.

There have been many people within government who have advocated for me, checked on my welfare and worked, sometimes very quietly, towards getting me home. I know that some of those people are here today, and I am genuinely grateful for the efforts they have made for me.

I owe a very sincere thank you to the Government of Egypt and the Egyptian Embassy in Baghdad, and especially Ahmed.

Their support for Khaled and I, and the humanity, persistence and friendship shown to us throughout this ordeal, have meant an enormous amount. They saved my life more than once.

There were times when people went well beyond what could reasonably have been expected of them, simply because they saw two men and two families who needed help. I will never forget that.

One of the things this experience has taught me is that governments are ultimately made up of people.

And sometimes an individual deciding to care, to pick up a telephone, to keep asking a question or simply refusing to give up can change the course of somebody else's life.

There are some people who went so far beyond anything we could ever have asked of them that saying thank you seems completely inadequate.

They know who they are, and I will talk more about them and name them after the dust has settled and I have their permission.

Some of you quite literally saved my life.

So, when we speak about finally coming home, that distinction matters.

5th June 2025 was not the end.

Walking out of prison was not freedom.

Finally coming home is freedom.

And standing here now, after everything that has happened, I am incredibly conscious that there are people who made this possible.

Today is about getting home and seeing most of my family and being a husband and a dad again.

And it is about saying thank you.

From me, from my wife and from our children: thank you to every person who stood beside us, spoke for us, fought for us, checked on us, supported our children, challenged what was happening, or simply refused to let us disappear.

I don't think there are words big enough for what you have done for us.

Thank you.