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The Iranian government should follow through on President Hassan Rouhani's promises to improve access to human rights for religious minorities, Human Rights Watch said today. That should include allowing Sunni Muslims, a minority in Shia-dominated Iran, to gather and pray freely in their own mosques in Tehran and other areas of the country.

Rouhani's special adviser on ethnic and religious minorities recently met with a Sunni leader to discuss the rights of the Sunni minority and work toward removing barriers preventing Sunnis from achieving full equality under the law. The meeting followed incidents in which security forces in Tehran prevented Sunnis from gathering and praying in designated sites to commemorate holy days, Sunni activists told Human Rights Watch. Local activists say that in recent years security forces have restricted Sunnis from praying in mosques during Eid holidays.

"Iran's Sunnis should be allowed to practice their faith freely, as do their Shia counterparts," said Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. "Ending religious discrimination should be among President Rouhani's top priorities."

During the early morning hours of October 16, 2013, dozens of uniformed and plain-clothes security agents surrounded Sadeghiyeh Mosque in northwest Tehran, one of the largest and most important Sunni prayer sites in Tehran province, and prevented Sunni worshipers from entering the building to mark Eid-e Ghorban, the Feast of Sacrifice, a Sunni worshipper and former member of parliament told Human Rights Watch. Sunni activists also reported that security forces prevented worshipers from entering another prayer site, in Saadatabad, in northern Tehran. Worshipers in other parts of the capital apparently entered prayer sites freely and worshiped without hindrance.

Jalal Jalalizadeh, a Tehran resident who represented the northwestern, Kurdish-majority city of Sanandaj in parliament during Mohammad Khatami's presidency, said that security forces prevented him and other Sunni worshipers from entering Sadeghiyeh Mosque, refusing to give a reason.

The Persian-language site Islah Web, the website of the Gathering to Call and Reform Iran, a Sunni group, reported that on October 15, Tehran police had summoned a board member of Sadeghiyeh Mosque and informed him that Sunnis could not use the site for prayers during Eid-e Ghorban (known as Eid al-Adha in Arab countries). Eid-e Ghorban commemorates the willingness of the prophet Ibrahim to sacrifice his first-born son, Ismail, as an act of submission to God.

Previously, on August 4, the day after Rouhani took office, local police had summoned another Sadeghiyeh board member, warning him that security forces would not allow Sunni worshippers to conduct Eid-e Fetr prayers there, according to Islah Web and a member of the Gathering to Call and Reform Iran. Eid-e Fetr (known as Eid al-Fitr in Arab countries) is a feast to mark the end of the Ramadan fast.

Sadeghiyeh Mosque board members complained to government officials, who gave verbal assurances that they would inform the local police to lift the restrictions on Sunni worship, Islah Web reported. Yet on August 9, security forces demanded written proof that the prayers had official approval, and ultimately prevented worshippers from entering Sadeghiyeh Mosque and several other places of worship in Tehran and its suburbs on Eid-e Fetr, the website said.

Luqman Sotudeh, a member of the Gathering to Call and Reform Iran who is also on the board of Sadeghiyeh Mosque, told Human Rights Watch that since 2010, local police in Tehran have routinely summoned board members of prayer sites, especially Sadeghiyeh Mosque, to inform them that they would not be allowed to gather and conduct prayers during Eid. Police officers have told the board members that the Tehran Provincial Council ordered the restrictions, and that in at least one case the order allegedly came from the Supreme Council of National Security, Sotudeh said.

Since the founding of the Islamic Republic in 1979, the government has denied Sunnis in Tehran province permission to construct and operate Sunni mosques, according to Sunni activists. More than a decade ago, the Sunni Mosques Affairs Council of Tehran, which operates under the supervision of the Gathering to Call and Reform Iran, helped establish a system of namazkhanehs, or provisional prayer sites, to accommodate Sunni worshippers in Tehran province during Friday prayers and Eid holidays, Sotudeh said.

The council manages 10 namazkhanehs. Only one of these rented sites, just outside of Tehran city, is architecturally a mosque, while the others, including Sadeghiyeh Mosque, are generally rented rooms, halls, and other spaces. Other Sunni groups and independent operators run another 20 or so namazkhanehs in Tehran province, Sotudeh said.

The restrictions on namazkhanehs in recent years have forced some worshipers to perform their Eid prayers at undesignated sites, including people's homes or other private spaces, another prominent Iranian Sunni activist and cleric, Sheikh Hassan Amini, told Human Rights Watch.

Some government officials have responded to criticism from Sunni activists regarding restrictions on prayer and worship during Eid by saying that mosques in Iran are open to all Muslims regardless of sect. They have called on Sunnis to show their "unity" with their Shia counterparts and join them in prayer, despite significant differences in ritual.

In September, Rouhani appointed a former intelligence minister, Ali Younesi, as his senior adviser on ethnic and religious minorities. In an interview published on the Entekhab website on October 31, Younesi said that his government should do everything in its power to "prevent extremist and pressure groups" from targeting religious minorities, including Iran's Sunnis.

Although no one keeps exact figures, about 9 percent of Iran's 75 million people are believed to be Sunni Muslims. In regions where Sunnis constitute the majority, including areas inhabited primarily by ethnic Kurds, Turkmen, and Baluch, Sunnis face fewer restrictions on accessing houses of worship, Iranian Sunni activists told Human Rights Watch.

Sheikh Hassan Amini, a cleric and Sunni leader from the city of Sanandaj in Kurdistan province, said that to his knowledge Eid ceremonies took place without any interference in most Kurdish areas this year. He said that in a few cities, including Bukan in Kurdistan province, security forces prevented some worshipers from conducting Eid ceremonies.

In an August 1 letter to Rouhani, who was then the president-elect, Human Rights Watch said, "Millions of people among Iran's ethnic and religious minorities are subjected to legal or effective discrimination in their political participation, employment, and the exercise of their social and cultural rights," and specifically called on Rouhani to lift restrictions faced by Iran's Sunni population.

Sotudeh told Human Rights Watch that Abdolrahman Pirani, the secretary-general of the Gathering to Call and Reform Iran, who met with Younesi on October 29, emerged optimistic that the government would soon lift restrictions on worship for Sunnis in Tehran, and generally improve the situation for Sunnis. During his electoral campaign, Rouhani issued a 10-point statement guaranteeing equal protection of the law to all Iranians, regardless of ethnicity and religion.

Article 12 of Iran's constitution accords Sunni Muslims "full respect, and their followers are free to act in accordance with their own jurisprudence in performing their religious rites." Iranian law gives Muslims following the Hanafi, Shafii, Maliki, and Hanbali schools of Sunni Islam "official status in matters pertaining to religious education, affairs of personal status (marriage, divorce, inheritance, and wills) and related litigation in courts of law."

"Rouhani promises to win the trust of religious minorities, but those promises don't mean much if security agents are stopping Sunni Muslims from praying in their own mosques," Whitson said.

Correction: In the following sentence the word "Supreme" should be dropped and the words "of the Interior Ministry" added. The corrected text should thus read: Police officers have told the board members that the Tehran Provincial Council ordered the restrictions, and that in at least one case the order allegedly came from the National Security Council of the Interior Ministry, Sotudeh said.

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