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Key Findings

Poor religious freedom conditions continued to deteriorate in 2014, particularly for religious minorities, especially Baha'is, Christian converts, and Sunni Muslims. Sufi Muslims and dissenting Shi'a Muslims also faced harassment, arrests, and imprisonment. Since President Hassan Rouhani assumed office in August 2013, the number of individuals from religious minority communities who are in prison because of their beliefs has increased. The government of Iran continues to engage in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, including prolonged detention, torture, and executions based primarily or entirely upon the religion of the accused. While Iran's clerical establishment continued to express anti-Semitic sentiments, the level of anti-Semitic rhetoric from government officials has diminished over the past year. Since 1999, the State Department has designated Iran as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), most recently in July 2014. USCIRF again recommends in 2015 that Iran be designated a CPC.

Background

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a constitutional, theocratic republic that proclaims the Twelver (Shi'a) Jaafari School of Islam to be the official religion of the country. The constitution recognizes Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians as protected religious minorities, and five seats in the parliament are reserved for these groups (two for Armenian Christians, one for Assyrian Christians, and one each for Jews and Zoroastrians). Nevertheless, the government of Iran discriminates against its citizens on the basis of religion or belief, as all laws and regulations are based on unique Shi'a Islamic criteria. Since the 1979 revolution, many members of minority religious communities have fled in fear of persecution. Killings, arrests, and physical abuse of detainees have increased in recent years, including for religious minorities and Muslims who dissent or express views perceived as threatening the government's legitimacy. The government continues to use its religious laws to silence reformers, including human rights defenders and journalists, for exercising their internationally-protected rights to freedom of expression and religion or belief.

Since his June 2013 election, President Hassan Rouhani has not delivered on his campaign promises to strengthen civil liberties for religious minorities. Physical attacks, harassment, detention, arrests, and imprisonment continued. Even some of the constitutionally-recognized non-Muslim minorities – Jews, Armenian and Assyrian Christians, and Zoroastrians – face harassment, intimidation, discrimination, arrests, and imprisonment. Some majority Shi'a and minority Sunni Muslims, including clerics who dissent, were intimidated, harassed, and detained. Dissidents and human rights defenders were increasingly subject to abuse and several were sentenced to death and even executed for the capital crime of "enmity against God."

Religious Freedom Conditions 2014-2015

Muslims

Over the past few years, the Iranian government has imposed harsh prison sentences on prominent reformers from the Shi'a majority community. Authorities charged many of these reformers with "insulting Islam," criticizing the Islamic Republic, and publishing materials that allegedly deviate from Islamic standards. Dissident Shi'a cleric Ayatollah Mohammad Kazemini Boroujerdi continued to serve an 11-year prison sentence, and the government has banned him from practicing his clerical duties and confiscated his home and belongings. He has suffered physical and mental abuse while in prison. According to an October 2014 UN report on human rights in Iran, some 150 Sunni Muslims are in prison on charges related to their beliefs and religious activities. More than 30 are on death row after having been convicted of "enmity against God" in unfair judicial proceedings. Leaders from the Sunni community have been unable to build a mosque in Tehran and have reported widespread abuses and restrictions on their religious practice, including detentions and harassment of clerics and bans on Sunni teachings in public schools. Iranian authorities have destroyed Sunni religious literature and mosques in eastern Iran.

Iran's government also continued to harass and arrest members of the Sufi Muslim community, including prominent leaders from the Nematollahi Gonabadi Order, while increasing restrictions on places of worship and destroying Sufi prayer centers and hussainiyas (meeting halls). Over the past year, authorities have detained hundreds of Sufis, sentencing many to imprisonment, fines, and floggings. In May 2014, approximately 35 Sufis were convicted on trumped-up charges related to their religious activities and given sentences ranging from three months to four years in prison. Another 10 Sufi activists were either serving prison terms or had cases pending against them. Iranian state television regularly airs programs demonizing Sufism.

Baha'is

The Baha'i community, the largest non-Muslim religious minority in Iran, long has been subject to particularly severe religious freedom violations. The government views Baha'is, who number at least 300,000, as "heretics" and consequently they face repression on the grounds of apostasy. Since 1979, authorities have killed or executed more than 200 Baha'i leaders, and more than 10,000 have been dismissed from government and university jobs. Although the Iranian government maintains publicly that Baha'is are free to attend university, the de facto policy of preventing Baha'is from obtaining higher education remains in effect. Approximately 750 Baha'is have been arbitrarily arrested since 2005.

As of February 2015, there are more than 100 Baha'is being held in prison solely because of their religious beliefs. These include seven Baha'i leaders – Fariba Kamalabadi, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naemi, Saeid Rezaie, Mahvash Sabet, Behrouz Tavakkoli, and Vahid Tizfahm – as well as Baha'i educators and administrators affiliated with the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education. Over the past year, dozens of Baha'is were arrested throughout the country, including in Tehran, Isfahan, Mashhad, and Shiraz. Violent incidents targeting Baha'is and their property continued. In February 2014, three Baha'is were stabbed and nearly killed in a religious hate crime. No one has

been charged. In April 2014, Iranian authorities began destroying a historic Baha'i cemetery in Shiraz. In October 2014, nearly 80 Baha'i-owned shops in Kerman Province were forcibly closed. In 2014, pro-government print and online media outlets published nearly 4,000 anti-Baha'i articles, a significant increase from recent years. The government's draft Citizens' Rights Charter, released in November 2013, includes protections for the recognized minorities but excludes Baha'is from any legal protections.

Christians

Over the past year, there were numerous incidents of Iranian authorities raiding church services, threatening church members, and arresting and imprisoning worshipers and church leaders, particularly Evangelical Christian converts. Since 2010, authorities arbitrarily arrested and detained more than 500 Christians throughout the country. As of February 2015, approximately 90 Christians were either in prison, detained, or awaiting trial because of their religious beliefs and activities.

During the reporting period, human rights groups inside Iran reported a significant increase in the number of physical assaults and beatings of Christians in prison. Some activists believe the assaults, which have been directed against converts who are leaders of underground house churches, are meant to intimidate others who may wish to convert to Christianity. In December 2014, authorities raided a number of private Christmas services and arrested more than a dozen church members in Tehran. In October 2014, three Christian converts – Silas Rabbani, Abdolreza Haghnejad, and Behnam Irani – were sentenced to six years in prison in remote parts of the country for bogus charges of "action against national security" and "creating a network to overthrow the system." In December, the sentences were dropped against the three and Rabbani and Haghnejad were released. Irani continues to serve a separate six year sentence. Christian convert Farshid Fathi, who was arrested in 2010 and sentenced in 2012 to six years in prison for his religious activities, was beaten by security officials and injured during a April 2014 raid at Evin Prison. In August, he was transferred to Rajai Shahr Prison outside Tehran and in December he was given an additional one-year prison sentence in connection with the April prison raid.

Iranian-born American pastor Saeed Abedini continues to serve an eight-year prison term after being convicted in 2013 for "threatening the national security of Iran" for his activity in the Christian house church movement. While in Evin Prison since September 2012, Pastor Abedini spent several weeks in solitary confinement and was physically and psychologically abused. In November 2013, he was transferred to the Rajai Shahr Prison, which is known for its harsh and unsanitary conditions. In March 2014, prison authorities beat Pastor Abedini after which he was hospitalized for nearly two months to receive treatment for the injuries sustained from the beatings. In May 2014, Pastor Abedini was beaten a second time when he was released from the hospital and returned to prison.

Jews and Zoroastrians

Although not as pronounced as in previous years, the government continued to propagate anti-Semitism and target members of the Jewish community on the basis of real or perceived "ties to Israel." In 2014, high-level clerics continued to make anti-Semitic remarks in mosques, and the government reinstated a Holocaust denial conference, which had been cancelled in 2013. Numerous programs broadcast on state-run television advance anti-Semitic messages. Official government discrimination against Jews continues to be pervasive, fostering a threatening atmosphere for the approximately 20,000 member Jewish community. In a positive development, as of February 2015, the government no longer requires Jewish students to attend classes on the Sabbath. In recent years, members of the Zoroastrian community – numbering between 30,000 and 35,000 people – have come under increasing repression and discrimination. At least four

Zoroastrians convicted in 2011 for propaganda of their faith, blasphemy, and other trumped-up charges remain in prison.

Human Rights Defenders and Journalists

Iranian authorities regularly detain and harass journalists, bloggers, and human rights defenders who say or write anything critical of the Islamic revolution or the Iranian government. In the past year, an increasing number of human rights lawyers who defended Baha'is and Christians in court were imprisoned or fled the country.

U.S. Policy

The U.S. government has not had formal diplomatic relations with the government of Iran since 1980, although the United States has participated in negotiations with Iran over the country's nuclear program as part of the group of countries known as the P5+1 (China, France, Russia, United Kingdom, United States and Germany). U.S. law prohibits nearly all trade with Iran. The United States has imposed sanctions on Iran because of its sponsorship of terrorism, refusal to comply with International Atomic Energy Agency regulations regarding its nuclear program, and for severe human rights and religious freedom violations. According to the State Department, these sanctions are intended to target the Iranian government, not the people of Iran.

On July 1, 2010, President Barack Obama signed into law CISADA, the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act (P.L. 111-195), which highlights Iran's serious human rights violations, including suppression of religious freedom. CISADA requires the President to submit to Congress a list of Iranian government officials or persons acting on their behalf responsible for human rights and religious freedom abuses, bars their entry into the United States, and freezes their assets. In August 2012, the President signed into law the Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act of 2012 (H.R. 1905 / P.L. 112-239), which enhances the scope of human rights-related sanctions contained in CISADA. Issuing its first sanction for human rights abuses since President Rouhani's election in June 2013, the U.S. Treasury Department on May 23, 2014 announced sanctions against the former governor of Tehran and current head of the Tehran Provincial Public Security Council, Morteza Tamaddon, for being involved in censorship and other activities limiting the freedoms of expression and assembly. During his tenure as governor, Tamaddon orchestrated in 2011 a series of coordinated arrests and abuses against Christian converts.

During the past year, U.S. policy on human rights and religious freedom in Iran included a combination of public statements, multilateral activity, and the imposition of unilateral sanctions on Iranian government officials and entities for human rights violations. During the reporting period, high-level U.S. officials in multilateral fora and through public statements urged the Iranian government to respect its citizens' human rights, including the right to religious freedom. In December 2014, for the 12th year in a row, the U.S. government co-sponsored and supported a successful UN General Assembly resolution on human rights in Iran, which passed 78 to 35, with 69 abstentions. The resolution condemned the Iranian government's poor human rights record, including its religious freedom violations and continued abuses targeting religious minorities.

During the year, President Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry used public occasions to call for the release of Iranian-American pastor Saeed Abedini. In early February 2015, the President called for Mr. Abedini's release at the National Prayer Breakfast. In January, President Obama met with Naghmeh Abedini, Mr. Abedini's wife, and stated that securing her husband's release was a "top priority."

On July 28, 2014, the Secretary of State re-designated Iran as a country of particular concern. The Secretary designated the following Presidential Action for Iran: "the existing ongoing travel

restrictions based on serious human rights abuses under section 221(a) (1)(C) of the Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act of 2012, pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act." The previous designation made in 2011 cited a provision under CISADA as the Presidential Action. The Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act does not contain a specific provision citing religious freedom violations as CISADA does.

Recommendations

In addition to recommending that the U.S. government should continue to designate Iran as a CPC, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government should:

- Ensure that violations of freedom of religion or belief and related human rights are part of multilateral or bilateral discussions with the Iranian government whenever possible, and continue to work closely with European and other allies to apply pressure through a combination of advocacy, diplomacy, and targeted sanctions;
- Continue to speak out publicly and frequently at the highest levels about the severe religious freedom abuses in Iran, press for and work to secure the release of all prisoners of conscience, and highlight the need for the international community to hold authorities accountable in specific cases;
- Continue to identify Iranian government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom, freeze those individuals' assets, and bar their entry into the United States, as delineated under the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act of 2010 (CISADA);
- Call on Iran to cooperate fully with the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights Situation in Iran, including allowing the Special Rapporteur – as well as the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief – to visit, and continue to support an annual UN General Assembly resolution condemning severe violations of human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, in Iran and calling for officials responsible for such violations to be held accountable; and
- Use appropriated funds to advance Internet freedom and protect Iranian activists by supporting the development and accessibility of new technologies and programs to counter censorship and to facilitate the free flow of information in and out of Iran.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Reauthorize the Lautenberg Amendment, which aids persecuted Iranian religious minorities and other specified groups seeking refugee status in the United States, and work to provide the President with permanent authority to designate as refugees specifically-defined groups based on shared characteristics identifying them as targets for persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.

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