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Key Findings

Religious freedom conditions continued to deteriorate over the past year, 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 was elected president in 2013, the number of individuals from religious minority communities who are in prison because of their beliefs has increased, despite the government releasing some prisoners during the reporting period, including Iranian-American pastor Saeed Abedini. 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 in recent years. 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 2016 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 and one each for Assyrian Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians). With an overall population of just over 80 million, Iran is approximately 99 percent Muslim – 90 percent Shi'a and nine percent Sunni. According to recent estimates, religious minority communities constitute about one percent of the population and include Baha'is

(more than 300,000), various Christian denominations (nearly 300,000), Zoroastrians (30,000 to 35,000), and Jews (20,000).

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 2013 election, President Hassan Rouhani has not delivered on his campaign promises to strengthen civil liberties for religious minorities. Government actions continued to result in physical attacks, harassment, detention, arrests, and imprisonment. 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 2015-2016

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 human rights groups and the United Nations, some 150 Sunni Muslims are in prison on charges related to their beliefs and religious activities. In October 2015, an Iranian court sentenced to death a Sunni cleric, Shahram Ahadi, who was arrested in 2009 on unfounded security related charges. More than 30 Sunnis 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. Additionally, 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 dozens of Sufis, sentencing many to imprisonment, fines, and floggings. In June 2015, a criminal court sentenced Abbas Salehian to 74 lashes for "committing a *haram* act through advocating Gonabadi Dervish beliefs." 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. Over the past 10 years, approximately 850 Baha'is have been arbitrarily arrested.

As of February 2016, at least 80 Baha'is were 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, some of whom were released during the reporting period. During the past year, dozens of Baha'is were arrested throughout the country. In January 2016, in the Golestan province, 24 Baha'is were sentenced to prison terms ranging from six to 11 years after being convicted for membership in the Baha'i community and engaging in religious activities. In November 2015, at least 20 Baha'is were arrested in three cities – Tehran, Isfahan, and Mashhad – after their homes were raided and materials confiscated. As part of the crackdown, nearly 30 Baha'i-owned shops were closed following the observance of two Baha'i religious holy days. In April and May, authorities closed 35 Baha'i-owned shops in an effort to force Baha'is not to observe their holy days. In April, in Hamadan, at least 13 Baha'is were arrested over a two-week period for allegedly "engaging in propaganda against the regime." They have not been formally charged. During the 2015-2016 school year, many Baha'i youth who scored very high on standardized tests were either denied entry into university or expelled during the academic year once their religious identity became known to education officials.

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 550 Christians throughout the country. As of February 2016, approximately 90 Christians were either in prison, detained, or awaiting trial because of their religious beliefs and activities.

Some Christians were released from jail during the year, including two long-serving prisoners of conscience, Saeed Abedini (released in January 2016) and Farshid Fathi (released in December 2015). Abedini's early release was part of a prisoner swap between the United States and Iran. He had been serving an eight-year prison sentence for "threatening the national security of Iran" for his activity in the Christian house church movement. Fathi had been serving an extended prison term on trumped-up security charges related to his religious 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 2015, authorities raided a number of private Christmas services and arrested nearly a dozen church members in Tehran. In April 2015, a revolutionary court upheld a one-year prison sentence and two-year travel bans on 13 Christian converts arrested in 2013.

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 2015, high-level clerics continued to make anti-Semitic remarks in mosques. Numerous programs broadcast on state-run television advance anti-Semitic messages. Official discrimination against Jews continues to be pervasive, fostering a threatening atmosphere for the Jewish community. In a positive development, the government no longer requires Jewish students to attend classes on the Sabbath. In recent years, members of the Zoroastrian community have come under increasing repression and discrimination. At least four Zoroastrians were convicted in 2011 for propaganda of their faith, blasphemy, and other trumped-up charges remain in prison.

Human Rights Defenders, Journalists, and Others

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. Over the past couple of years, a number of human rights lawyers who defended Baha'is and Christians in court were imprisoned or fled the country. In addition, in August 2015, a revolutionary court sentenced to death Mohammad Ali Taheri, a university professor and founder of a spiritual movement (*Erfan Halgheh* or Spiritual Circle), for the capital crime of "corruption on earth." In October 2011, Taheri had been convicted and sentenced to five years in prison and 74 lashes for "insulting religious sanctities" for publishing several books on spirituality; reportedly, he has been held in solitary confinement since his conviction. Some of Taheri's followers also have been convicted on similar charges and sentenced to prison terms ranging from one to five years. In December, the Iranian Supreme Court overturned Taheri's death sentence. At the end of the reporting period, he and some of his followers remained in prison.

U.S. Policy

The U.S. government has not had formal diplomatic relations with the government of Iran since 1980, although the United States 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). In July 2015, the P5+1, the European Union, and Iran announced they had reached the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to ensure that Iran's nuclear program would be exclusively peaceful. On January 16, "Implementation Day" of the JCPOA, the United States and European Union began lifting nuclear-related sanctions on Iran. Notwithstanding the JCPOA, the United States continues to keep in place and enforce sanctions for Iran's human rights violations, its support for terrorism, and its ballistic missile program. 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, or ITRSHRA (H.R. 1905 / P.L. 112-239), which enhances the scope of human rights-related sanctions contained in CISADA. Over the past five years, as a consequence of Iran's human rights violations, the United States has imposed visa restrictions and asset freezes on 19 Iranian officials and 18 Iranian entities pursuant to CISADA, ITRSHRA, and various Executive Orders.

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 2015, for the 13th 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 76 to 35, with 68 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. On January 16, 2016, the Obama Administration announced it had secured the release from jail of pastor Abedini, and three other Americans, in exchange for the release of seven Iranians in prison in the United States. Abedini returned to the United States later that month.

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. Unlike CISADA, ITRSHRA does not contain a specific provision citing religious freedom violations.

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:

- Notwithstanding the P5+1 nuclear agreement, 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) citing specific religious freedom violations;
- 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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