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Key Findings

Despite the June 2013 election of a new and purportedly moderate president, the already-poor religious freedom conditions in Iran continued to deteriorate, particularly for religious minorities, especially Baha'is and Christian converts. Sufi and Sunni Muslims and dissenting Shi'a Muslims also faced harassment, arrests, and imprisonment. 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. Since 1999, the State Department has designated Iran as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). USCIRF again recommends in 2014 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. While the constitution recognizes Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians as protected religious minorities, it discriminates against its citizens on the basis of religion or belief, as all laws and regulations are based on unique Shi'a Islamic criteria. Five seats in the parliament are reserved for recognized religious minorities, two for Armenian Christians, one for Assyrian Christians, and one each for Jews and Zoroastrians. Since the 1979 revolution, many members of minority religious communities have fled for 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 of strengthening civil liberties for religious minorities. The numbers of Baha'is and Christians in prison for their faith increased over the past year. Physical attacks, harassment, detention, arrests, and imprisonment intensified. Even some of the recognized non-Muslim religious minorities protected under Iran's constitution – Jews, Armenian and Assyrian Christians, and Zoroastrians – face harassment, intimidation, discrimination, arrests, and imprisonment.

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 "waging war against God." While anti-Semitic sentiment continued among Iran's clerical establishment, the level of anti-Semitic rhetoric among government officials has diminished since the election of President Rouhani.

Religious Freedom Conditions 2013-2014

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. Leaders from the minority 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 abuse 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 has been stepping up its harassment and arrests of its Sufi Muslim minority, including prominent leaders from the Nematollahi Gonabadi Order, while increasing restrictions on places of worship and destroying Sufi prayer centers and *hussainiyas* (or meeting halls). In recent years, authorities have detained hundreds of Sufis, sentencing many to imprisonment, fines, and floggings. As of February 2014, more than a dozen 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. More than 700 Baha'is have been arbitrarily arrested since 2005. As of February 2014, at least 135 Baha'is, nearly twice the number than in 2011, are being held in prison solely because of their religious beliefs, including seven Baha'i leaders – Fariba Kamalabadi, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naemi, Saeid Rezaie, Mahvash Sabet, Behrouz Tavakkoli, and Vahid Tizfahm – and Baha'i educators and administrators affiliated with the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education. Over the past year, violent incidents targeting Baha'is and their property increased. In August 2013, after months of harassment and government interrogation, a local Baha'i leader, Ataollah Rezvani, was murdered for his faith, the first such killing in several years. At the end of the reporting period, no one has been charged with Mr. Rezvani's death. 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 worshippers and church leaders. Since 2010, authorities arbitrarily arrested and detained about 400 Christians throughout the country. As of February 2014, at least 40 Christians were either in prison, detained, or awaiting trial because of their religious beliefs and activities. In January 2013, Saeed Abedini, an Iranian-born American pastor, was sentenced in a trial without due process to eight years in prison for "threatening the national security of Iran" for his activity in the Christian house church movement. Pastor Abedini had been in Iran since June 2012 to establish an orphanage and was arrested and imprisoned in September 2012. While in Evin prison, Pastor Abedini spent several weeks in solitary

confinement and was physically and psychologically abused. In November, he was transferred to the notorious Gohardasht, or Rajai Shahr, prison outside Tehran which is known for its harsh and unsanitary conditions.

Jews and Zoroastrians

Although not as pronounced as in previous years, the government continues to propagate anti-Semitism and target members of the Jewish community on the basis of real or perceived "ties to Israel." 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 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.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

During the past year, U.S. policy on human rights 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. For example, President Obama used public and private occasions – including an unprecedented phone conversation with President Rouhani in September 2013 – to call for the release of Iranian-American pastor Saeed Abedini, among other things.

In addition to recommending that the U.S. government 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 (see list of known religious prisoners in appendix), 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 Internet freedom funds to develop free, secure email access for use in Iran; facilitate the provision of high-speed internet access via satellite; and distribute immediately proven and field-tested counter-censorship programs in order to prevent the arrest and harassment of religious freedom and human rights activists and help them maintain their freedom of expression and legitimate expectations of privacy.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Reauthorize and make permanent the Lautenberg Amendment, which aids persecuted Iranian religious minorities and others seeking refugee status in the United States by establishing a presumption of eligibility and allowing fast-track processing to prevent backlogs in the countries that host their processing.

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