

“The Shame of Iranian Human Rights”

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Statement before the

U.S. House of Representative Committee on Foreign Affairs

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Chairman Royce, Chairman Smith, Chairman Ros-Lethinen, honorable members of the Subcommittees:

It is truly an honor to appear before you today to discuss the human rights situation in Iran under the Islamic regime and the nature of the terrorist regime in Iran. It is an important issue that has unfortunately been overlooked by the international community in light of current negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 since the election of Hassan Rouhani as president of Iran in 2013.

Since that time, the Iranian regime, its supporters and lobbyists have tried vigorously to convince the international community in general and the U.S. administration in particular that something has fundamentally changed for the better in Iran. Rouhani’s administration, they argue, is a moderate one, and one that will make the Islamic Republic into a more open, transparent and above all, a normal regime which can be trusted.. Unfortunately, however, the regime’s actions speak louder than its words.

Following China, Iran currently has the highest number of executions in the world¹, and since Rouhani's election there has not been a reduction in these statistics. To the contrary, there has been a significant increase. As the most recent report of United Nations Special Rapporteur Ahmad Shaheed notes, "Between July 2013 and June 2014, at least 852 individuals were reportedly executed, representing an alarming increase in the number of executions in relation to the already-high rates of previous years." According to the report, the Iranian government "also continues to execute juvenile offenders. In 2014 alone, eight individuals believed to be under 18 years of age at the time of their alleged crimes were reportedly executed."² Human Rights activists in Iran put the total number of executions for 2013 and 2014 at 1181 people.³

The execution of juveniles is not the only crime committed by the Islamic Republic. The Iranian regime systematically tries to brainwash its children. In 2007, the Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education, IMPACT-se, a remarkable research institute that I have had the honor of cooperating with briefly, published a detailed and thorough study of Iranian school curriculums. It concluded that the Islamic Republic uses schoolbooks to systematically indoctrinate children and to prepare them for war against America and other "non-believers." It furthermore found that Iran's school curriculum systematically encourages a hostile attitude towards non-Muslims, with children instructed to not to take "unbelievers", "Jews" and "Christians" as friends.⁴

Not surprisingly, the books have not changed much. Here is a quote from an 8th grade book, the form the upcoming IMPAC-SE 2015 report that covered the Iranian curriculum of 2012 – 2014: "Jihad means effort and combat (*talash va mobarezeh*) in God's way and defense of Muslims and oppressed (*mazluman*) in order to maintain the right and the true (*haqq va haqiqat*), unity and justice, to eliminate transgression and plunder (*tajavoz va chapavol*), torture and intimidation, occupation and colonialism, and in general, sedition and corruption in the world."⁵

Iranian text books proudly admit that "During the eight years of Holy Defense [that is, the war with Iraq] more than 500,000 school students were sent to the fronts. 36,000 martyrs, thousands of missing-in-action, invalids, and liberated [prisoners-of-war] of this sacrificing section were offered to the Islamic Revolution".⁶ This is the role model Iranian children are to emulate - and Iranian children are thus brainwashed to follow their examples.

Islamic Republic violates the United Nations Convention on The Rights of the Child which states, "The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom

¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2011/mar/29/death-penalty-countries-world>

² <http://shaheedoniran.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/A-69-356-SR-Report-Iran.pdf>

³ <https://hra-news.org/fa/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/hra-annual-report-2014-farsi.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.impact-se.org/research/iran/index.html>

⁵ *Ahkam (Religious Rulings): Acquaintance with the Rulings, Grade 8, 1391, P.12*

⁶ *Defense Readiness, Grade 11 (2012-3), p. 11*

to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice. United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (article 13).”⁷

Iran is demographically a very young country. Approximately 70 to 75 percent of Iran’s population is under the age of 40. This means that nearly 60 million Iranians have gone through Iran’s educational system and have been exposed to this systematic brainwashing. Fortunately, it can be said that this effort has failed; the overwhelming majority of Iranian youth are anti-regime and have a positive views of America. However, the Islamic Republic does not need to be 100% successful to pose a grave danger. Even a very small percentage of school age children successfully indoctrinated translate into tens or even hundreds of thousands of radicals who are brainwashed to view America and adherents of religions other than Islam as enemies.

Despite his moderate posture and diplomatic language, Mr. Rouhani is part of the problem. As a member of Iran’s National Security Council, not only is he aware of the contents of Iran’s curriculum; he helped to approve them. Against this background, is it any surprise that almost all religious minority in Iran: Baha’is, Christians, Sufi’s or Dervish Muslims, Sunnis and Ahle-Hagh suffer officially sanctioned discrimination?

Baha’is, one of the largest non-Muslim religious minorities, are considered by the Islamic Republic not as a religious minority but as a “subversive sect,” or “Fergheh-e-zalleh.” As such, they are subject to widespread discrimination. Baha’is are banned from all government positions. They are not allowed to have places of worship and are banned from teaching the faith. Young members of the Bahai faith are barred from universities and higher education.

The “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” states clearly that “Everyone has the right to education.” Yet the Iranian regime systematically seeks to deprive Bahais of this right. Any student who is found to be Baha’i is immediately expelled.

For example, Paniz Fazl-Ali, a talented civil engineering student at Iran’s University of Science and Technology (IUST) in Tehran, was expelled for no other reason than adhering to the Baha’i faith.⁸ Baha’i World News Services also reports that Islamic regime has also “sought to close down Baha’i efforts to establish their own educational initiatives, including the Baha’i Institute for Higher education”.⁹

Anyone involved with educating Baha’is will also be arrested. Ahmad Shaheed’s report to the UN indicates that “at least 126 Baha’is were held in detention as of August 2014”.¹⁰ The Islamic

⁷ http://www.impact-se.org/docs/articles/State_Sponsored_Child_Abuse_in_Iran%207.11.07.pdf

⁸ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/feb/27/bahai-student-expelled-iranian-university>

⁹ <http://news.bahai.org/human-rights/iran/education/>

¹⁰ <http://shaheedoniran.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/A-69-356-SR-Report-Iran.pdf>

Republic also systematically destroys Baha'i cemeteries. As recently as May 2014, officials from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps demolished a Baha'i cemetery in Shiraz.¹¹

In some cases, Bahai's are even denied burial sites. Last November we heard about a twelve-year-old, Mahna Samandari who passed away and for weeks her parents were not able to bury her because the local authorities denied them the right to bury their child in the local cemetery of Tabriz.

In another case Narges Khatounbargi, an 85-year old Bahai woman was barred from being buried in the general cemetery in Tabriz as well. Both Mahna and Narges had to be taken to another town, Miandoab, for burial.¹² Islamic regime's pressure on Baha'is has intensified and several Baha'i families have been forced to sell their shops.¹³ The pattern is clear; Iranian authorities are systematically trying to close all doors to Baha'is so they will have no choice but to leave Iran.

Evangelical Christians are also under enormous pressure. Iranian-American Pastor Saeed Abedini has been imprisoned since 2012. Mr. Abedini was arrested and charged with "enmity against God", "spreading corruption on earth" and "actions against national security". He was tortured and sentenced to eight years in prison.¹⁴

Islamic Republic considers converts to Christianity as apostates and apostasy under Islamic penal code is punishable by death. Although the number of Christian converts executed by the Iranian regime is not as high as those of the Baha'i faith, it nevertheless underscores that Iranians are not free to choose their own religion- a state of affairs that is contrary to article 18 of the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," which states: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."¹⁵

Baha'is and Christians are not the only groups who face apostasy charges under the Islamic Republic's penal code. Even Muslims who do not conform to the official interpretation of Islam face heresy charges.

Last September, a 37-year-old man, Mr. Mohsen Amir-Aslani, was executed for insulting the Prophet Jonah by declaring that his story in the Quran was symbolic rather than factual.¹⁶ His case is important since up until few weeks prior to his execution; his family had refrained from publicizing his case in hopes of his release. They apparently could not believe that he will be executed for such a ridiculous charge.

¹¹ <http://news.bahai.org/story/993>

¹² <https://hra-news.org/en/tag/mahna-samandari>

¹³ <http://news.bahai.org/story/1027>

¹⁴ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2015/january/obama-to-imprisoned-pastors-wife-save-saeed-abedini-naghme.html?paging=off>

¹⁵ <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml#a18>

¹⁶ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/29/iran-executes-man-heresy-mohsen-amir-aslani>

Even traditional Shiite clerics who reject the official interpretation of Islam are persecuted. Ayatollah Hossein Kazemini Boroujerdi, a traditional Shiite cleric who openly and unapologetically questions the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic and advocates a secular regime with a total separation of religion from the government has been imprisoned since 2007. He has been tortured repeatedly with his properties confiscated. He has not changed his views despite the enormous pressure exerted on him and his family by the regime.¹⁷

Followers of Ahle-Hagh religion, a peaceful, ancient non-Muslim minority who live primarily in Kurdish province are also under enormous pressure and are subject to systematic discrimination. Several members of the Ahle- Hagh community have self-immolated in recent years to protest religious persecution in Iran.¹⁸

Another group under pressure with their rights denied are the Nematollahi Gonabadi Suifs: a peaceful religious order with deep roots in Iran. Many members of this Sufi order are presently imprisoned and several places of their worships in Isfahan and other cities have been demolished by the Iranian authorities.^{19 20}

Muhammad Ali Taheri, founder of a spiritual group with different interpretation of Islam, was arrested in May 2011. He has been kept in solitary confinement and will go on trial this year. In Nov 2014, he embarked on a hunger strike for 25 days to protest 3.5 years of solitary confinement.²¹ Political activists, student activists, human rights activists, worker's right activists, and even lawyers who represent dissidents suffer as well.

The Islamic Republic of Iran is of the few countries in the world that prosecutes lawyers for representing their clients. Ms. Nassrin Sotudeh, a human rights lawyer who represented imprisoned Iranian opposition activists and politicians after the 2009 uprising was arrested in 2010 on charges of spreading propaganda and conspiring to harm state security. She spent months in solitary confinement. She was recently released but has a three-year ban from practicing law.

In another case, imprisoned Iranian lawyer Abdolfattah Soltani, a leading human rights lawyer has even been denied medical attention despite a letter written by prison doctors recommending that he be treated outside the prison.²² He will go on trial on "corruption on earth" charges.²³

¹⁷ http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/jailed-iranian-ayatollah-calls-regime-worse-and-more-evil-isis-or-taliban_818523.html

¹⁸ <http://blog.iranrights.org/third-dervish-self-immolates-to-protest-religious-persecution-in-iran/>

¹⁹ http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/d-ir/dv/hr_violations_dervish/hr_violations_dervishes.pdf

²⁰ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/stephen-schwartz/iran-continues-crackdown-on-sufis_b_3181642.html

²¹ <http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2015/02/mohammad-ali-taheri-2/>

²² <http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2014/12/abolfattah-soltani/>

²³ <http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2015/02/mohammad-ali-taheri-2/>

Students are not in better shape.

Last March, Maryam Shafipour, 29, was sentenced to seven years in prison for participating in a peaceful protest.²⁴ Many student activists such as Majid Tavakkoli,²⁵ Bahareh Hedayat,²⁶ Seyed Zia Nabavi,²⁷ Majid Dori²⁸ and Navid Khanjani²⁹ have spent years in prison for no crime other than exercising their right to peaceful protest.

The 32-year-old brilliant physicist, Mr. Omid Kokabee, has been incarcerated in Evin prison since January 2011. He was charged with espionage for refusing to work on military research projects. He was awarded the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) in 2014.³⁰ 31 Nobel Physics laureates signed a petition, and called for his release.³¹ He is still in jail.

Not only student activists, but children rights and civil rights activists are also under pressure. Atena Farghadani, a children's right and civil rights activist was arrested³². She was later moved to Gharchak prison, a notoriously substandard women's prison. She is currently on a hunger strike

Political activists such as Heshmatollah Tabarzadi have spent years in prison for their peaceful activities. Just a few days ago, Masoud Arab Chubdar, Saeed Shirzad, Hamid Babaei, a PhD student from Belgium who refused to spy for the regime and was sentenced to six years in prison,³³ were exiled from Evin prison to the Rajaei Shahr Prison, a notoriously unsafe prison in Karaj. Another Baha'i Prisoner Shahram Chinian was beaten so severely that his face was unrecognizable by his friends. Arash Moghadam was also severely beaten.

Last July Amnesty International reported that Iranian writer Arzhang Davoodi was sentenced to death after spending nearly 11 years in prison on new charges of "enmity against God" in relation to his peaceful political activism and writings in support of secularism.³⁴

Journalists are another group that suffers under the Islamic Republic. According to "Committee to Protect Journalists" currently there are 30 Journalists in Iranian prisons.³⁵

²⁴ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2014/mar/03/iran-sentences-student-activist-seven-years-prison-maryam-shafipour>

²⁵ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/22/political-prisoner-majid-tavakoli-bail>

²⁶ <https://tavaana.org/en/content/bahareh-hedayat-womens-rights-defender>

²⁷ <http://iran.usembassy.gov/zianabavi.html>

²⁸ <http://iran.usembassy.gov/dorimajid.html>

²⁹ <https://tavaana.org/en/content/iran-violation-rights-education-navid-khanjani%E2%80%99s-testimony>

³⁰ <http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2015/02/omid-kokabee-3/>

³¹ <http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2014/10/31-nobel-laureates/>

³² <https://hra-news.org/en/atenafarghadani-childrens-rights-activist-arrested>

³³ <http://www.iranhrc.org/?p=968>

³⁴ *Iranian prisoner of conscience Arzhang Davoodi, already in prison for nearly 11 years, has now been sentenced to death on a new charge of "enmity against God", in relation to his peaceful political activism and writings.*

Unfortunately, there is nothing unique or new about the above mentioned cases. They are simply a reflection of the Iranian regime's repressive domestic practices. The main question, then, is whether those practices are changing – and whether Iran's new president, Hassan Rouhani, can be considered a reformer?

To understand Mr. Rouhani's relationship to the state, it is necessary to review his background. Iran's new president has been a member of Islamic regime's leadership for the past 36 years. He was the head of the executive committee of the country's Defense Council from 1982 to 1988. The end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988 was followed by the creation of the Supreme National Security Council, and since that time Rouhani has been the representative of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, in that forum. From 1991 until now, he has also been a member of the Expediency Council, the most powerful governing body in Iran charged with mediating disputes between the parliament and the Guardian Council,³⁶ where he heads its Political, Defense, and Security Committee.

These dates are important, since they make clear that Mr. Rouhani has been an integral part of every aggressive move the Islamic Republic has made since 1982.

These include the 1982 decision to continue the conflict with Iraq for another six years at the cost of hundreds of thousands of Iranian lives; the establishment of a base in the Syrian controlled Bekaa Valley the same year, and the subsequent creation and training of proxy terror group Hezbollah; the 1983 attacks on U.S. and French military forces in Lebanon; the assassination of nearly 200 Iranian dissidents and prominent opposition leaders during the 1980s and 1990s, The 1994 AMIA bombing in Buenos Aires, and more recently, the Iranian asymmetric campaigns targeting U.S. and Coalition soldiers in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

Is it possible to believe that Mr. Rouhani, who has served in the upper echelons of the Islamic Republic for all these years, had no knowledge of these actions? Are these the “reform” that emerges under his watch? ? Is it possible to think of him as a peacemaker? Is it possible to think of him as a person who cares about human rights in Iran? And above all, is it possible to trust him on these issues? Rouhani's cabinet choice for the post of Justice Minister, Mostafa Pour-Muhammadi, may give an indication on his judgment.

Pour-Muhammadi is indeed a pursuer of “Justice.” “Human Rights Watch, in a 2005 report titled “Ministers of Murder,”³⁷ documented Pour-Mohammadi's direct role in the extrajudicial executions of thousands of political prisoners.”³⁸

For me, a member of Iran's democratic opposition, the answer to these questions and many others is a resounding “NO”.

³⁵ <https://www.cpj.org/imprisoned/2014.php#iran>

³⁶ <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/tehran/inside/govt.html>

³⁷ <http://www.hrw.org/legacy/backgrounders/mena/iran1205/iran1205.pdf>

³⁸ <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/08/08/iran-withdraw-cabinet-nominee-implicated-abuses>