



BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES

Testimony of
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Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass, Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Deutch and Members of the Subcommittee, I would like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify on the situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran. I would like to request that my written statement be included in the record.

I am the Director of Public Affairs for the [Bahá'ís of the United States](#). The Bahá'í Faith is an independent world religion with over five million followers in over 200 countries and territories, representing virtually every racial, ethnic, and national group on the planet.

[The Bahá'í Faith](#) originated in Persia, modern-day Iran, and Bahá'ís in that country have been persecuted since the inception of the Faith in the mid-nineteenth century. With roughly 300,000 members, the Bahá'í community in Iran is the largest non-Muslim religious minority in the country. The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, has stated that the plight of the Bahá'ís in Iran is [one of the clearest cases](#) of state-sponsored persecution.

The primary reason that Bahá'ís are persecuted is theological. The Islamic clergy in Iran subscribes to an orthodox view that Islam is the final religion of God and that there can be no religion after it. The Bahá'í Faith, a religion that arose after Islam, is therefore viewed by most of Iran's clergy as heresy and blasphemy, and Bahá'ís are viewed as apostates.

In the early years after the founding of the Faith, the religion spread quickly, gaining many adherents among all classes of society, including respected and powerful Muslim clergymen. The clerical establishment thus perceived the movement as a threat and reacted violently to it, exerting its influence to suppress or eliminate early Bahá'í communities. In the first two decades of the Faith, some 20,000 Bahá'ís were killed by the forces of the Shah and by mobs, instigated by members of the clergy. The authorities also carried out massacres and public executions, as well as widespread imprisonment and torture.

Bahá'ís have also been persecuted for social reasons. Certain teachings of the Bahá'í Faith are viewed as threatening by the clerical establishment in Iran. For instance, the Bahá'í Faith does not have a clergy and holds that each individual has the duty to investigate spiritual truth and arrive at his or her own beliefs. In addition, Bahá'ís believe strongly in the equality of women and men.

Finally, Bahá'ís have, in some sense, been targeted simply for being a minority. The treatment of Bahá'ís in Iran is a prime example of scapegoating, a phenomenon that has occurred in many societies throughout history, in which ethnic or religious minorities are targeted in times of societal difficulties and are irrationally and unfairly blamed for all manner of political, economic, and social problems.

While the intense brutality against Bahá'ís began to subside toward the end of the nineteenth century, unequal treatment continued. During much of the twentieth century, when Iran witnessed a fairly rapid period of development, the pressure on the Bahá'ís lessened. However, Bahá'ís still faced discrimination and were often denied opportunities. They were also subject to social hostilities, such as interpersonal violence, acts of arson, and the desecration of cemeteries, which usually went unaddressed by authorities. For instance, in one notable incident in 1955, a prominent cleric, with the knowledge and consent of the Shah, took to the radio and incited mobs to attack Bahá'í places of worship, which resulted in the destruction of the Bahá'í community's National Center in Tehran.

With the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the clerical establishment came to power and Iran became a theocracy. The relative calm that the Bahá'ís had enjoyed throughout much of the twentieth century, in which they could, for the most part, make a living and raise their children in peace, was shattered. Bahá'ís again became the target of severe and systematic state-sponsored persecution, and it became [official government policy](#) to oppress Bahá'ís. During the Revolution and in the early years afterward, over 200 Bahá'ís were killed, the majority by execution. Thousands were imprisoned, many of them tortured. Bahá'í holy places were destroyed and Bahá'í cemeteries have repeatedly been attacked and desecrated, including the current ongoing excavation of the large Baha'i cemetery in Shiraz.

The government has made concerted efforts to impoverish and quietly suffocate the Bahá'í community. After the Revolution, Bahá'ís were dismissed from government jobs and denied pensions and private employers have been pressured not to hire Bahá'ís. Bahá'ís still suffer frequent raids on their homes and businesses, including a recent spate of shop closures, and their property is routinely seized with compensation. Bahá'ís were also dismissed from university positions after the Revolution, and Bahá'í students continue to be excluded from the nation's universities.

Even the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education – the informal, volunteer-run network of university-level courses that the Bahá'í community created in the 1980s as an alternative system for its youth – has been the subject of raids and arrests, and [twelve educators](#) who volunteered with the Institute are now in prison. Also imprisoned are the “[Bahá'í seven](#)” – the seven members of the former ad hoc leadership group of the Bahá'í community, who are now serving 20-year sentences, the longest of any prisoners of conscience in Iran. In total, there are 100 Bahá'ís now imprisoned in Iran, nearly twice the number in 2010. Meanwhile, Bahá'ís continue to be arbitrarily arrested and detained and are often brought up on false charges related to national security and espionage – common charges levelled against anyone who does not hold the same views as the regime.

The clerical establishment in Iran has continued to incite hatred and violence against Bahá'ís. They have long promoted the view that Bahá'ís are [ritually unclean](#). As recently as last month, Hojattul-Islam Reza Karamipour, the Friday prayer leader in the town of Jiroft, [stated](#) that, if one shakes hands with a Bahá'í while his hand is damp, he must wash his hands, as they have become ritually unclean – and he exhorted all Muslims to avoid business transactions with Bahá'ís. In 2013, on the eve of the inauguration of President Hassan Rouhani, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei [re-issued a religious decree](#) prohibiting Iranian Muslims from associating with members of the “deviant sect,” a well-known reference to Bahá'ís.

All religious minorities in Iran face discrimination and persecution. Unlike Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians, however, Bahá'ís are not recognized in the Iranian constitution and therefore have no legal status as persons. Under Iranian law, the [blood of Bahá'ís is mobah](#), meaning that it can be spilled with impunity. In other words, Bahá'ís can obtain no redress for violent attacks, arson or other types of crimes against them, whether committed by the authorities or by fellow citizens. In August of 2013, [Ataollah Rezvani](#), a Bahá'í in Bandar Abbas was found dead, shot in the head in his car on the outskirts of town. In February of 2014, a [Bahá'í family in Birjand](#) was attacked by a masked intruder in their home; all three of

them were stabbed, though they fortunately survived. The authorities have not pursued suspects in either case.

In the last several months, there has been a surge in anti-Bahá'í propaganda in state-sponsored media outlets. In 2010 and 2011, approximately 22 anti-Bahá'í pieces were appearing every month. In 2014, the number of anti-Bahá'í pieces rose to approximately 401 per month – eighteen times [the previous level](#).

Next month, Iran will again appear before the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva to follow up on the Universal Periodic Review of its human rights record that was conducted in October of 2014. The October session revealed that [Iran has failed to live up to dozens of promises](#) to improve human rights that it had made during its last Review in 2010. Eight of these commitments pertained to protecting religious freedom, and four of these eight specifically mentioned the Bahá'ís – including an undertaking to ensure fair trails for the Bahá'í seven, and to fully respect the rights of Bahá'ís. [None of these commitments have been honored](#). On the contrary the human rights situation in Iran has [deteriorated](#) in recent years, [including for the Bahá'ís](#). Indeed, the situation has [worsened](#) during the year and a half since Iran's new and self-described reformist President, Hassan Rouhani, took office.

Meanwhile, the Iranian government's written response to the October session of the Human Rights Council [declared](#) that “[m]inorities, including Baha'is, enjoyed a full range of opportunities and privileges” in Iran. This statement echoes one made last April by the Head of the Iranian Judiciary's Human Rights Council, in which he [asserted](#) that “the authorities never target Baha'is just because they are followers of this faith.” These statements are, as this document attests, completely contradicted by facts.

The United States government has shown clear leadership in promoting the rights of Bahá'ís and condemning injustice. Since the 1980s, U.S. presidents and other officials have spoken out against the persecution of the Bahá'í community in Iran, and both houses of the U.S. Congress have consistently passed resolutions denouncing the treatment of the Bahá'ís and calling for an end to these continuing abuses. These resolutions and statements, and those that come from other governments around the world, are vital tools in keeping the spotlight on the persecution and raising public awareness of the treatment of Bahá'ís and others in Iran. Because the Iranian government, despite its protestations to the contrary, is quite sensitive to its international image, many observers believe that these efforts have, to some extent, stayed the hand of the Iranian government, and have thereby prevented a bad situation from becoming much worse. In both the domestic and the international arena, the United States government is an essential voice in preventing the escalation of human rights abuses in Iran.

It is our hope that, at the March session of the UN Human Rights Council, the United States and other responsible nations will emphasize the persecution of the Bahá'ís – and the oppression of countless other Iranians – and will hold the Iranian government to account for its gross violations of the human rights of its citizens.