



**Testimony by Daniel Calingaert
Executive Vice President of Freedom House**

**Joint Hearing of the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and
International Organizations and Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa,
U.S. House of Representatives**

“The Human Rights Situation in Iran”

December 12, 2013

Mr. Chairman, Madam Chairwoman, Honorable Ranking Members and Committee Members, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about human rights in Iran.

In his campaign for the presidency of Iran, Hassan Rouhani repeatedly promised to release all political prisoners and to make a change “in favor of free speech and media freedom.” The record of his first four months in office shows otherwise. He has yet to live up to these promises.

Fifteen prominent political prisoners were released in September, including human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh, a recipient of the European Parliament’s Sakharov Prize. But approximately 800 dissidents, including human rights defenders, journalists, and political activists, remain unjustly detained in Iran. Leaders of the Green Movement—the 2009 presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi, his wife, Zahra Rahnava, and Mehdi Karubi—are still under house arrest.

While some limited space has opened up for women’s rights activists, the overall situation for human rights in Iran is as grim under President Rouhani as it was before.

In the past few weeks, Iran’s Interior Ministry and Revolutionary Guards have carried out a new wave of arrests to stifle free expression. At least 38 people were arrested, including editors and staff of a technology website, Narenji, and activists in the province of Kerman, who were accused of receiving foreign assistance to produce online content that undermines the Islamic regime.

These arrests come on the heels of a December 3 court ruling that exonerated government officials accused of murdering Sattar Beheshti, a blogger who was detained by the Iranian Cyber-Police and was later found dead in his jail cell with bruises on his body.

Iran is second only to China in the number of executions it carries out. This year, 668 reported executions have already taken place. Virtually all capital cases lack internationally-recognized standards of due process, and death sentences are often imposed for relatively minor crimes such as drug possession.

The Iranian regime, dominated by Shiite clerics and Revolutionary Guard commanders, is highly repressive. It systematically tramples political and civil rights. In Freedom House's annual report on *Freedom in the World*, Iran receives a rating of 6 on a scale of 1 to 7, where 7 is the lowest score.

The election of Rouhani was welcomed in Iran and abroad, because he was the least conservative of the candidates, but his election was anything but fair. Over 600 candidates had registered to run in the election, but only six names appeared on the ballot. Who made that decision? The Guardian Council, which is composed of twelve Islamic clerics and jurists, not the voters.

The media environment in Iran is among the most restrictive in the world. Iran ranks 191 out of 197 countries in Freedom House's annual report on media freedom. The government directly controls all television and radio broadcasting. Print media, blogs, and news websites are subject to strict censorship. The Association of Journalists remains closed, despite Rouhani's promise to re-open it.

Restrictions on online space are equally if not more severe. In the latest Freedom House rankings for internet freedom, which covered 60 countries, Iran came in last place, after China, Cuba, and Syria. Iranian authorities continue to deny access to tens of thousands of websites, particularly those of international news sources, the Green Movement, ethnic and religious minorities, and human rights groups. And the government has applied sophisticated instruments to block text messages, filter online content, and prevent the use of circumvention tools.

With all that is at stake in the negotiations with Iran on its nuclear program, there is a temptation to put aside human rights issues, lest they complicate the nuclear negotiations and derail an agreement. That would be a mistake. Speaking out for human rights in Iran, as elsewhere, both reflects U.S. values and serves U.S. interests, and it can be done at the same time as the nuclear negotiations take place.

The Iranian people's aspirations for greater freedom are abundantly clear. They were expressed in the votes for Rouhani and his promises for change, and they were seen in a Zogby poll released this September that showed reform issues trump other concerns. When asked to rank their highest priorities, poll respondents put employment first on their list, but all of their other top-tier priorities related to greater liberty—advancing democracy, protecting personal and civil rights, increasing rights for women, ending corruption and nepotism, and political reform.

The systematic abuses of human rights in Iran serve to repress the democratic aspirations of the Iranian people. The Iranian regime stifles free expression because citizens are expressing a desire for political change. They want to modernize their country, exchange opinions freely, and become open to the rest of the world. An Iranian government that is more attuned to the views

of its citizens will be less hostile toward the United States and other democratic countries and more constructive in its foreign relations.

Human rights should be on the agenda for future discussions of Secretary of State John Kerry, European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs Catherine Ashton, and European foreign ministers with their Iranian counterpart. They are a legitimate topic of discussion, as they concern Iran's international commitments, such as its commitments under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

When faced with international criticism of its human rights abuses, the Iranian government invariably is defiant, but it listens. International pressure has, for example, led to the release of political prisoners, such as Maziar Bahari, Roxana Saberi, and most recently, Nasrin Sotoudeh. One thing is certain: the Iranian government's record on human rights does not improve when the United States stays silent.

The United States can put human rights high on the agenda with its adversaries at the same time as it addresses other sensitive and complex issues. The Reagan Administration kept human rights on the agenda while negotiating nuclear arms treaties with the Soviet Union. President Clinton spoke about the struggle for individual freedom at Beijing University during a state visit in 1998 and still held constructive talks with Chinese government leaders on a range of security and economic issues.

Iranians who want to change their country for the better understand that the struggle for freedom is their struggle. They have to stand up for their rights and demand that their government listen to them. But Iranians notice what we in the United States say and don't say. When we stay silent, we send the message that we don't care about their struggle for freedom. That message is disheartening for Iranians today and will hurt our credibility with them for a long time to come.

The United States needs to put human rights on its agenda with the government of Iran.

Thank you.