

**TESTIMONY OF**

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**BEFORE THE**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON AFRICA, GLOBAL HEALTH, GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS,  
AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS**

**AND THE**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA**

**OF THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS**

**ON**

**IRAN'S PERSECUTION OF AMERICAN PASTOR ABEDINI WORSENS**

**DECEMBER 12, 2013**

I want to thank the Members of the House Subcommittees on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations and on the Middle East and North Africa of the Committee on Foreign Affairs for holding this hearing and inviting me to testify today on behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). With your approval, I would like to submit my written testimony for the record.

I commend these subcommittees for providing this opportunity to spotlight the continued deterioration of religious freedom conditions in Iran, most notably for Christians and other religious minorities. I also commend the subcommittees for highlighting the egregious treatment of Pastor Saeed Abedini, an Iranian-born American citizen. USCIRF has called repeatedly for the Pastor's release, continues to urge the U.S. government at the highest levels to demand his release, and stands with Mrs. Abedini and her family. USCIRF is saddened and outraged that an Iranian appeals court in September upheld Pastor Abedini's eight-year prison term, and is further outraged that he never was afforded any semblance of due process, and his trial was both a sham and a miscarriage of justice. Unfortunately, the appalling treatment of Pastor Abedini reflects the dismal reality regarding religious freedom and human rights in Iran today and is representative of how the government treats Iranian Christians and other religious minority communities.

### **Introduction**

While the United States and other democracies seek peace with Iran, as evidenced by ongoing efforts to resolve the nuclear issue, Iran's government remains a dictatorship which continues to wage war against its own people and their fundamental rights. The regime uses its power to maintain monopoly status in the public square for its own exclusionary ideas and beliefs, while banning or severely restricting alternative views and brutally punishing dissenting groups and individuals.

Importantly, since the start of the Islamic Revolution that swept it into power, the ideas and beliefs that define the Iranian dictatorship's nature and character remain self-consciously religious and inescapably theocratic. It is precisely because religion matters significantly to Iran's government that to assess the overall status or direction of human rights in Iran we first and foremost must look at how the government treats the right to religious freedom.

We also must bear this treatment in mind when evaluating the statements and actions of Iran's current president, Hassan Rouhani. Since his election in June, he has made no discernible efforts to improve freedom of religion or belief in Iran. While taking steps to free a mere handful of dissidents, Rouhani has not released Pastor Saeed Abedini, an American citizen who was given an eight-year sentence last September for participating in the underground house church movement.

In fact, during Rouhani's short tenure the number of Christian and Baha'i prisoners jailed for practicing their faith has increased, with a renewed crackdown on Protestant Christians that has

resulted in numerous arrests, and a Baha'i was murdered for his faith for the first time in many years.

While elected presidents like Rouhani have obvious influence in Iran, ultimate power rests with the unelected head of state, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution. Khamenei directly controls Iran's armed forces, its internal security forces, and the judiciary. In addition, the Supreme Leader appoints six of the 12 members of the Guardian Council which reviews all parliamentary legislation for adherence to Islamic and constitutional principles. The Guardian Council also decides who can or cannot run for elective office, including the presidency, by a process of screening and disqualifying candidates based on their allegiance to the Islamic Revolution and the Supreme Leader. In other words, every candidate for Iran's presidency, including Rouhani, had to have met the approval of Iran's leading mullahs.

Since the Revolution, any Iranian who has dissented from the government's own interpretation of Shi'a Islam, whether by word, deed, or affiliation, may be considered an enemy of the state and a potential target for abuse by authorities.

It is for good reason that the United States has designated Iran a Country of Particular Concern, or CPC, for each year since 1999. Its government continues to rank among the world's worst religious freedom abusers, engaging in and tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of this foundational human right. These violations have ranged from daily acts of discrimination to severe punishments including prolonged detention, torture, and executions based primarily or entirely upon the religion of the accused. Those whose fundamental rights have been abused include members of religious minorities, from Baha'is and Zoroastrians to Christians and Jews, as well as Muslims belonging to minority Sufi and Sunni sects in Iran and even Muslims who are part of Iran's Shi'a majority.

In June 2009, Iran arrived at a watershed moment when, in the aftermath of a national election, citizens rose in protest over the legitimacy of its outcome. Tehran responded with brutal repression, triggering the rise of the Green Movement and, with it, a stunning display of the breadth of opposition to the government on political, ideological, human rights, and religious freedom grounds. Since that time, human rights and religious freedom conditions in Iran have worsened, reaching levels not seen since the years after the 1979 Revolution.

Today I will discuss Iran's religious freedom abuses in this post-2009 landscape, with a specific focus on Christians. While Iranians of all religions and beliefs, and those who reject every religion, have been deeply impacted by repression, there is no question that religious minority communities continue to bear the brunt of their government's relentless campaign against freedom. I also will summarize USCIRF's recommendations to the United States government on how best to respond to their worsening situation.

### **Decline in Freedom Since 2009**

The disputed June 2009 elections marked a tipping point in the human rights and religious freedom environment in Iran.

The Iranian people experienced the dramatic unleashing of security and paramilitary forces which used brutal force against the hundreds of thousands of Iranians who protested in the streets in the months after the elections, as well as after the uprisings which enveloped the Arab world in early 2011. Dozens of Iranians were killed and thousands arrested, convicted, and given lengthy prison terms. The Iranian government leveled unsubstantiated charges and used trial procedures for national security cases against members of religious minority communities and individuals for alleged crimes such as “confronting the regime” and apostasy. More than a dozen dissidents were executed on charges such as “waging war against God,” “spreading corruption on earth,” and “moral corruption.”

### **Violations against Sunni and Sufi Muslim Minorities**

Among Iran’s minorities are members of its Sunni Muslim population, whose leaders are harassed by intelligence and security services and report widespread official discrimination. Sunnis also are discriminated against in government employment.

Sunni leaders 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, and Sunni religious literature and mosques have been destroyed in eastern Iran. In recent years, dozens of Sunni clerics reportedly were arrested for spreading Sunni teachings.

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. According to the UN Special rapporteur on human rights in Iran, more than a dozen Sufi activists were in custody or in prison as of July 2013. Iranian state television regularly airs programs demonizing Sufism.

### **Treatment of Non-Muslim Minorities**

Under Iran’s theocratic government, the primacy of Islam and Islamic laws and institutions diminishes the rights and status of non-Muslims, meaning that these religious minorities effectively live as second-class citizens. Religious minorities are subject to various forms of discrimination, particularly in education, government jobs and services, and the armed services. In addition, their places of worship and photos of their religious leaders frequently are defaced with graffiti. Their private schools are administered by Iran’s Ministry of Education, which imposes a state-approved religious curriculum.

Under Iranian law, non-Muslims may not engage with Muslims in public religious expression or persuasion; some also face restrictions on publishing their religious material in Persian. According to Iranian law, Baha'i blood is *mobah*, which means members of the Baha'i faith can be killed with impunity.

Since the June 2009 elections, Iran's government has intensified its campaign against non-Muslims. A consistent stream of virulent and inflammatory statements by political and religious leaders and an increase in harassment and imprisonment of, and physical attacks against, these groups have returned the nation to levels of oppression not seen since the early 1980s. In recent years, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei publicly stated that "enemies of Islam" are using the spread of Sufism, the Baha'i faith, and Christian house churches to weaken the faith in society of Iran's young people. Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, head of the Guardian Council, publicly referred to non-Muslims as "sinful animals" and "corrupt."

In addition, members of the Zoroastrian community, numbering between 30,000 and 35,000 people, have experienced increasing repression and discrimination. The unrecognized Sabean Mandaean religious community, numbering between 5,000 and 10,000 people, also has been facing intensifying official harassment. Reports continue about Sabean Mandaeans facing societal discrimination and pressure to convert to Islam, and being denied access to higher education.

In recent years, official anti-Semitism has risen sharply in Iran, and members of the Jewish community have been targeted on the basis of real or perceived ties to Israel. Government discrimination against Jews continues to be pervasive, fostering a threatening climate for the approximately 20,000-25,000-member Jewish community. Policies promoting anti-Semitism have risen sharply and numerous programs broadcast anti-Semitic messages on state-run TV.

### **Baha'is**

Among Iran's religious minority communities, the Baha'is long have been subject to particularly severe religious freedom abuses. Iranian authorities view Baha'is, the largest non-Muslim religious minority community numbering about 300,000 people, as "heretics" who may be repressed on the grounds of apostasy.

Since 1979, these authorities have killed more than 200 Baha'i leaders and dismissed more than 10,000 from government and university jobs.

Baha'is may not establish places of worship, schools, or any independent religious associations in Iran. They are barred from the military and are denied government jobs and pensions as well as the right to inherit property. Their marriages and divorces are not recognized, and they have difficulty obtaining death certificates. Baha'i cemeteries, holy places, and community properties often are seized or desecrated, and many of their religious sites have been destroyed.

More than 700 Baha'is have been arrested since 2005. Today, at least 115 Baha'is are being held in prison solely due to their religious beliefs, ten times the number incarcerated in 2005. In August, an unknown assailant killed a Baha'i who had received months of threatening phone calls and been harassed by intelligence agents. No known investigation has taken place.

Since 2008, seven Baha'i leaders—"the Baha'i Seven"—have been jailed by the government on an assortment of dubious charges ranging from espionage to "corruption on the earth." Their attorneys, including Nobel Laureate Shirin Ebadi, reiterate that the charges are baseless.

### **Status of Christians**

Besides its severe mistreatment of Baha'is, Iran's government continues to discriminate against and repress Christians, both ethnic Christians and Evangelicals and other Protestants, in a sustained and systematic fashion. While ethnic Christians, mostly Armenians and Assyrians, are allowed to conduct their own religious services, they are barred from holding them in Persian. In addition, many of their churches have been subject to close surveillance and compelled to report their activities to the Iranian government.

The government also imposes onerous restrictions on renewal of their licenses, and on renovating, buying, or selling their churches or property. In fact, since the 1979 Revolution, the government has refused to allow a single new church in the country to be constructed.

Ethnic Christians frequently face legal discrimination such as harsher penalties than Muslims in criminal cases, restrictions on marriages with Muslims, the favoring of Muslim family members in inheritance rights, and the setting aside of certain political or judicial leadership positions for Muslims.

While all of Iran's Christians face a regime that restricts their rights, Tehran reserves particularly harsh treatment for Protestant Christians, egregiously violating their right to religious freedom and related human rights.

Over the past generation, and particularly in recent years, Iran's Protestants have experienced significant growth in numbers. This growth has been manifested through the proliferation of house churches, which the government refuses to recognize, with services conducted in Persian, in defiance of the dictates of the regime. According to the October 2013 report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Iran, Ahmed Shaheed, authorities continue to force licensed Protestant churches to restrict Persian-speaking and Muslim-born Iranians from participating in services.

While estimates of the number of Iranian Christians, including Protestants, vary widely, none allege that they constitute more than a fraction of one percent of Iran's population of nearly 75 million. Yet next to the Baha'is, authorities view the Protestant church community as the most serious competitor of the theocratic government for the hearts and minds of Iranians. Unlike Iran's ethnic Christian population, the vast majority of Iran's Protestants are converts from

Islam. Moreover, by all accounts, Iran's Protestants have experienced most of their growth through conversion.

While the right to change one's religion is a fundamental freedom guaranteed by international law and covenants, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Iran's government clearly views conversion from Islam as not only an act against Islam, but against the character of Iran as an Islamic state. Iran's Supreme leader deems it an act of apostasy. While not formally a part of Iran's criminal code, Iranian courts typically treat apostasy as a capital crime, drawing upon Iran's constitution which allows them to invoke Islamic jurisprudence.

While Christians often have been charged with either apostasy or blasphemy as a result of conversion from Islam, converts also can be charged by Revolutionary Courts with political crimes such as acting against national security or contact with a foreign enemy. Such baseless charges may be triggered by a number of innocent religious activities ranging from meetings with Christians from other countries, to associating with Christian organizations that are based abroad, to attending Christian seminars outside of Iran.

In recent years, hundreds of Christians, mostly Protestants, have been arbitrarily arrested and detained throughout the country. In cases involving offenses based on religious belief, Iranian authorities typically release prisoners, but leave in place the charges against them or their convictions in order to be able to threaten them with re-imprisonment at any future time.

The UN Special Rapporteur's October report found that since 2010 more than 300 Christians have been arrested and detained arbitrarily and as of July, at least 20 Christians were detained or in prison.

In January 2013, the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran released an unprecedented report, *The Cost of Faith: Persecution of Christian Protestants and Converts in Iran*. The report, through numerous interviews with Iranian converts to Christianity, lawyers, activists, and journalists, meticulously documents a pattern of abuse that extends to all Protestants in Iran. The report concluded that Christian converts face severe restrictions on religious practice and association, arbitrary arrests and detentions for practicing their faith, and violations of the right to life through state execution for apostasy and extrajudicial killings.

In a particularly outrageous miscarriage of justice, Saeed Abedini, an Iranian-born American pastor, was sentenced on January 27, 2013 by Judge Pir-Abassi, a jurist notorious for perpetrating religious freedom violations, to eight years in prison for "threatening the national security of Iran." His "crimes" apparently included his participation since 2000 in Iran's house church movement and his more recent efforts to raise money for an orphanage. Human rights groups have stated that his trial was unfair and the whole legal process was deeply flawed. He has spent many weeks in solitary confinement and suffered mental and physical abuse by authorities while in Evin prison. Just last month, Pastor Abedini was transferred to the notorious Gohardasht prison outside Tehran which is known for its harsh and unsanitary conditions.

Earlier this year, five Iranians who converted to Christianity went on trial in Iran's Revolutionary

Court. They were arrested in October 2012 on “evangelism” and other charges after security forces raided a house church in the city of Shiraz during a prayer session. The five men are members of the Church of Iran denomination, one of the country’s largest house church movements.

In July 2013, eight members of the Church of Iran in Shiraz were sentenced to prison after being found guilty of the bogus charges of “action against the national security” and “propaganda against the order of the system”. Mohammad Roghangir was sentenced to six years, Massoud Rezaie to five years, Mehdi Ameruni and Bijan Farokhpour Haghghi to three years, Shahin Lahooti and Suroush Saraie to two and half years each, and Eskandar Rezaie and Roxana Foroughi were both sentenced to one year in prison. Seven of them were arrested in October 2012 during an evening raid by the security services during a prayer gathering at a house in Shiraz. Massoud Rezaie was arrested six days later.

On February 8, 2012, Iranian authorities raided a house church gathering in Shiraz, confiscated religious materials, and arrested 10 Christian converts. Four remain in detention without charge – Mojtaba Hosseini, Homayoon Shokoohi, Vahid Hakkani, and Mohammad-Reza Partoei. Hakkani was sentenced to three years and eight months and is reported to be in poor health.

In January 2011, Behnam Irani, a pastor from Karaj was convicted of crimes against national security and sentenced to one year in prison. He started serving his sentence in May 2011 and learned in October 2011 that he would have to serve an additional five years in connection with a previous conviction. He is reported to be in poor health and has not received proper medical attention. Farshid Fathi, a Christian convert arrested in Tehran in December 2010, was sentenced to a six-year prison term in February 2012. Part of the evidence offered at trial was that Fathi possessed and unlawfully distributed Farsi language Bibles and Christian literature. He has spent a number of months in solitary confinement and remains in prison.

Christian pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, who had been jailed since October 2009, was sentenced to death for apostasy in November 2010 by a court in Gilan province. Prosecutors acknowledged he had never been a Muslim as an adult but said the apostasy law still applies because he has Islamic ancestry. Rejecting his appeal in June 2011, the court suspended the sentence contingent upon his recanting his faith, which he refused to do during hearings in September. Facing mounting international pressure over his plight, officials released Nadarkhani in 2012, only to rearrest him on Christmas, and then release him again in January 2013.

Meanwhile, rhetoric from political and religious leaders demonizing and insulting the Christian community has escalated alarmingly. In 2011, some 6,500 Bibles were confiscated as they were being transported between the cities of Zanjan and Ahbar in the northwestern province. Commenting on the confiscation, a high-level government official said that Christian missionaries were attempting to deceive people, especially the youth, with an expensive propaganda campaign. In 2011, the governor of Tehran, Morteza Tamaddon, publicly referred to detained Christians as “deviant” and “corrupt” and vowed to identify and detain more. He likened Evangelical Christians to the Taliban and accused them of placing “themselves within



the religion of Islam like a pest and under the cover of Christianity and with the support of England they have designed a movement.”

## **Recommendations**

Below are some of USCIRF’s recommendations for U.S. policy.

- In response to the systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, and the repressive policies and practices the Iranian government repeatedly and routinely imposes, the U.S. government should continue to designate Iran as a “Country of Particular Concern” or CPC.
- The United States should continue to work closely with its allies to apply pressure on the Iranian government through a combination of advocacy, diplomacy, and targeted sanctions with the aim of halting the government’s human rights and religious freedom violations.
- Congress should reauthorize, and the President sign into law, the Lautenberg Amendment, a lifeline for religious minorities in Iran. The Amendment establishes a presumption of eligibility and allows fast track processing to prevent undue backlogs in countries that host their processing. Congress also needs to reauthorize the Lautenberg Amendment for multiple years, thereby eliminating the disruptions and uncertainties that result from single year authorizations.
- The United States should call on the Iranian government to release all prisoners who have been jailed on account of their religion or belief, and drop all charges against those who have cases pending against them. These prisoners range from a Shi’a cleric and his followers, to a number of Sufi activists, Baha’i and Christian leaders whose sole crime is exercising their internationally guaranteed right to freedom of religion or belief.
- Since it is important to shine the light on these prisoners, here are some of their names:
  - Christian leaders and advocates -- Saeed Abedini, Farshid Fathi, Behnam Irani, Mojtaba Hosseini, Homayoun Shokoohi, Vahid Hakkani, Mohammed-Reza Partoei, Massoud Rezaie, Mehdi Ameruni, Mohammed Roghangir, Soroush Saraie, Eskandar Rezaie, Shahin Lahooti., Bijan Farokhpour Haghighi, and Roxana Forughi;
  - Shi’a Muslim cleric Ayatollah Hossein Kazemini Boroujerdi;
  - The Baha’i Seven -- Fariba Kamalabadi, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, Saeid Rezaie, Mahvash Sabet, Behrouz Tavakkoli, Vahid Tizfahm;
  - Baha’i Educators -- Mahmoud Badavam, Faran Hesami, Nooshin Khadem, Kamran Mortezaie, Shahin Negari, Kamran Rahimian, Kayvan Rahimian, Farhad Sedghi, Riaz Sobhani, and Ramin Zibaie; and

- Sufi activists from the Nematollahi Gonabadi Order -- Hamid-Reza Moradi, Reza Entesari, Amir Eslami, Afshin Karampour, Farshid Yadollahi, Omid Behrouzi, and Mostafa Daneshjoo.

USCIRF encourages Members of Congress to join the Defending Freedoms Project. Through this project, an initiative of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission in conjunction with USCIRF and Amnesty International, Members of Congress can adopt a prisoner of conscience and advocate on their behalf, while shining a light on the conditions in the country and the government that imprisons them.

- The United States should call on Iran to rescind laws that permit members of the Baha'i faith to be killed with impunity, allow members of the Baha'i community to practice their faith in Iran, and grant full access for Baha'is to study in public universities without discrimination.
- The United States also should call on Iran to cease all messages of hatred and intolerance, particularly against religious minorities, in the government-controlled media; halt state-sponsored acts of anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial promotion campaigns; and counteract anti-Semitic rhetoric and other organized anti-Semitic activities by the President and other high-level government officials.
- The United States government should continue to identify Iranian government agencies and officials responsible for particularly severe violations of religious freedom, including but not limited to:
  - Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei;
  - Former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad;
  - Sadegh Ardeshir Larijani, Head of the Judiciary;
  - Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, Chair, Guardian Council;
  - Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi, Assembly of Experts
  - Hossein Shariatmadari, Managing Editor, Kayhan
  - Mohammad Moghiseh, Presiding Judge of Branch 28 of the Islamic Revolutionary Courts;
  - Abbas Pir-Abbassi, Presiding Judge of Branch 26 of the Islamic Revolutionary Courts; and

- Abolghassem Salavati, Presiding Judge of Branch 15 of the Islamic Revolutionary Courts.
- The United States should continue to bar from entry into the United States and freeze the assets of Iranian government officials identified as having engaged in particularly severe religious freedom violations, including but not limited to those listed above, and, where appropriate, their immediate family members. Just last week, White House National Security Advisor Susan Rice stated, “Our sanctions on Iran’s human rights abusers will continue and so will our support for the fundamental rights of all Iranians.”
- The United States should 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.
- The United States should press for a resolution condemning severe violations of human rights in Iran, including freedom of religion or belief, at the UNHRC.
- The United States should call on Iran to cooperate fully with the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights Situation in Iran.
- Finally, the United States government should encourage the UNHRC to continue to use its existing procedures to maintain oversight of conditions for freedom of religion or belief in Iran, including continued visits and reporting by the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, and other relevant special rapporteurs and working groups, to which Iran has issued a standing invitation.

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Iran’s abuses against religious freedom and its unrelenting crackdown on religious minorities are deplorable and demand the world’s attention and action. This is a matter of great urgency. We are concerned that the Iranian government may use the current interim agreement with the United States and other western nations on the nuclear issue to divert the world’s attention from the increasing mistreatment of Christians and other religious minorities throughout the nation.

We urge Members of Congress, the Administration, and the international community to pay increased attention in the coming weeks and months, particularly to the fate of Iranian religious prisoners such as Pastor Saeed Abedini, whom President Rouhani has failed to free despite the outrageous miscarriage of justice perpetrated on this innocent American citizen.

If religious minorities in Iran ever needed a voice to condemn Iran’s abusive practices, it is now. We hope that in his continued talks with Iranian President Rouhani, President Obama will lend his voice to the continued plight of Christians and other religious minorities, insisting that Iran

demonstrate its commitment to peaceful intentions abroad by ceasing its war at home against its own people and their fundamental rights, including the right of freedom of religion or belief.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify, and I look forward to any questions you might have.