



BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES

Testimony of Kenneth E. Bowers, Secretary
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Hearing: “Protecting Religious Freedom: Effective Accountability for Countries of Particular Concern”

United States House of Representatives
Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations

Mr. Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the topic of religious freedom, one of the most vital and pressing human rights issues of our time. I would like to request that my written statement be included in the record.

I am the Secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, the elected governing body of the [Bahá'ís of the United States](#). I am here today to speak about the persecution of the Bahá'ís of Iran, a group that Dr. Heiner Bielefeldt, the UN Special Rapporteur on the freedom of religion or belief, has [labeled](#) one of the clearest cases of state-sponsored religious persecution.

[The Bahá'í Faith](#) is a world religion with some five million followers in over 200 countries and territories, representing virtually every racial, ethnic, and national group on the planet. It is an independent religion with its own sacred scriptures which recognize the divine origin of all of the world's great religious systems, the oneness of the human race, the equality of men and women, the harmony of science and religion, and the importance of universal education. It eschews violence.

The Bahá'í community is the largest non-Muslim religious minority community in Iran, with over 300,000 members. Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, religious minorities, including Christians, Zoroastrians, Jews, Bahá'ís, and Sunni and Sufi Muslims have been subjected to persecution by the government. For Bahá'ís, this persecution has been both severe and systematic. It is [official government policy](#) to deal with Bahá'ís “in such a way that their progress and development are blocked.”

Unlike other religious minorities, including Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians, Bahá'ís [are not recognized under the constitution](#). Their [blood is considered “mobah,”](#) which means it can be spilled with impunity. Over 200 Bahá'ís have been executed, and thousands more have been imprisoned, many of them tortured. Bahá'ís continue to be arbitrarily arrested and detained, and there are currently over 100 Bahá'ís in prison. In the last two years, four babies were incarcerated with their Bahá'í mothers.

Bahá'í schoolchildren are harassed and Bahá'í youth are excluded from the nation's university system. Even the informal network of higher education that the Bahá'í community of Iran established to educate its youth who are denied access to university, known as the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education, or BIHE, has been declared illegal by the government and has been repeatedly raided and attacked by government agents. Bahá'ís are also the subject of a steady stream of hateful [anti-Bahá'í propaganda](#) in the state-sponsored media.

Bahá'ís are [monitored and surveilled](#), and are required to register with the government. They are not permitted to hold government jobs, are officially barred from receiving business licenses in many categories of business, and private employers are pressured not to hire them. Their homes are raided and their property is taken without compensation; over 2,000 cases of confiscation of real property from Bahá'ís have been documented since the revolution. Bahá'ís are also [denied legal redress](#) for crimes that are committed against them, including vandalism, assault, and arson. Bahá'í marriages are not recognized, Bahá'ís cannot inherit the property of their relatives who have died, and numerous Bahá'í cemeteries have been defaced, destroyed and desecrated. In short, the Bahá'í experience in Iran is one of “cradle to grave” persecution.

May 14, 2014 marked the sixth anniversary of the imprisonment of the [“Yaran-i-Iran,”](#) or friends of Iran, the seven former members of the ad hoc leadership group of the Bahá'ís of Iran, who have been imprisoned for their membership in the Bahá'í Faith and for their efforts to minister to the basic needs of the Bahá'í community. The Yaran – Mrs. Fariba Kamalabadi, Mr. Jamaloddin Khanjani, Mr. Afif

Naeimi, Mr. Saeid Rezaie, Mrs. Mahvash Sabet, Mr. Behrouz Tavakkoli, and Mr. Vahid Tizfahm – are now serving 20-year prison terms, the longest of any prisoner of conscience in Iran.

In addition to the seven leaders, there are now twelve [Bahá'í educators in prison](#): Mr. Mahmoud Badavam, Ms. Faran Hessami, Ms. Noushin Khadem, Mr. Foad Moghaddam, Mr. Kamran Mortezaie, Mr. Amanollah Mostaghim, Mr. Shahin Negari, Mr. Kamran Rahimian, Mr. Kayvan Rahimian, Mr. Farhad Sedghi, Mr. Riaz Sobhani and Mr. Ramin Zibaie. These individuals, who served as teachers and administrators for the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education, have been imprisoned for their efforts to educate Bahá'í youth who are denied entrance to Iran's universities because of their religion.

With the election of Hassan Rouhani, a self-described moderate, to the presidency of Iran in June of 2013, the worldwide Bahá'í community held out some hope for an improvement, however modest, in the situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran. Yet, on July 29, days before Mr. Rouhani's inauguration, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, [reissued a fatwa](#) warning Iranians against associating with the “deviant and misleading sect,” a well-known reference to Bahá'ís. And, since Mr. Rouhani's inauguration on August 4, the situation for Bahá'ís has deteriorated.

Violent attacks on Bahá'ís have continued to occur. On August 24, 2014, [Mr. Ataollah Rezvani](#), a prominent Bahá'í in the southern city of Bandar Abbas, was found dead in his car on the outskirts of town. He was shot in the head. Mr. Rezvani had been under pressure from intelligence agents and had been receiving threatening telephone calls for weeks. The day before his death, a local clergyman delivered an inflammatory sermon against Bahá'ís. By all indications, his death was a [religiously-motivated murder](#) – the clearest case involving a Bahá'í since the 1990s. There has been no progress in the investigation of his killing; at one point, investigators suggested, rather fantastically, that the death may have been a suicide. On February 3, 2014, a Bahá'í family – two parents and their adult daughter – were [stabbed by a masked intruder](#) who broke into their home in Birjand, Iran. They received intensive care in the hospital and, fortunately, survived, but there has also been no investigation or prosecution in the case.

Two Bahá'í cemeteries have also been attacked in recent months. In December 2013, a [Bahá'í cemetery in Sanandaj](#) was attacked and partly destroyed, and several weeks ago, Revolutionary Guards began excavating a [Bahá'í cemetery in Shiraz](#). This cemetery is the site of about 950 Bahá'í graves, including those of 10 Bahá'í women hanged in Shiraz in 1983, the youngest of whom was 17.

In November 2013, President Rouhani's administration released a draft [Citizens' Rights Charter](#), the fulfillment of his campaign promise to release a document on the rights of citizens within 100 days of taking office. While, superficially, this Charter may appear to be a step in the right direction, it does not expand or strengthen the rights of Iranians, but instead appears to [further entrench existing discrimination](#). It states that all the rights it enumerates are [subject to the national legal framework](#), which falls far short of international human rights standards. With respect to Bahá'ís in particular, the rights discussed in the Charter apply only to religious minorities officially recognized by the Iranian constitution – a grouping that excludes Bahá'ís – and the Charter does not address laws or policies that discriminate against Bahá'ís. The Rouhani administration invited comments on the Charter for a one-month period, which ended in December. It has not yet announced if or when it will finalize the Charter, but, should the Charter be finalized in its present form, it would risk reinforcing the repression of Bahá'ís and others.

In January 2014, the number of Bahá'ís in prison in Iran reached 136, a two-decade high. In short, the situation for the Bahá'ís of Iran has worsened rather than improved since President Rouhani took office.

Dr. Ahmed Shaheed, the UN Special Rapporteur for the situation of human rights in Iran, has stated that the Rouhani administration has taken only “[baby steps](#)” to improve human rights in Iran, and that major challenges remain. From the perspective of the Bahá’í community, any steps that have been taken by the government appear to be steps backward.

Nevertheless, there is cause for hope. An improving public attitude towards Bahá’ís has been perceptible over the last decade. This is due to several factors.

First, despite efforts by the government of Iran to inhibit free access to the internet, Iranians have become increasingly able to access information from sources not controlled by the state. Many have educated themselves about domestic and international issues, and they have grown increasingly aware of and sensitive to the realities of life in Iran, including the government’s gross mistreatment of citizens of all backgrounds. This has undermined the government’s attempts to justify its persecution of minorities and others, and has fueled what some have described as a [burgeoning human rights discourse](#).

Second, beginning in 2008, several prominent Iranians began publicly defending the rights of Bahá’ís. The late Grand Ayatollah Ali Montazeri, a highly respected religious figure, [declared](#) that Bahá’ís should have all the rights of citizens of Iran. In the same year, Nobel laureate and human rights lawyer [Shirin Ebadi](#) publicly [took on the case](#) of the seven imprisoned Bahá’í leaders and began speaking out for the rights of Bahá’ís. In 2009, over 250 Iranian intellectuals and artists, primarily in the diaspora but some living in Iran, signed an open letter to the Bahá’í community that was widely circulated and entitled “[We Are Ashamed.](#)” in which they publicly apologized for their silence in the face of the injustices visited upon Bahá’ís and vowed to work towards realizing the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In the last year, other well-known figures, including [Mohammad Nourizad](#), a journalist and former strong supporter of the government, and [Mohammad Maleki](#), former President of the University of Tehran, have spoken out for Bahá’ís as well.

Many of these individuals have defended Bahá’ís at great risk to themselves. Ms. Ebadi had to flee Iran because of governmental pressure she was under as a result of her defense of unpopular clients, including Bahá’ís. Other well-known human rights lawyers, including [Nasrin Sotoudeh](#) and [Abdolfattah Soltani](#), were imprisoned for their representation of Bahá’ís and others.

Just last month, Ayatollah Abdol-Hamid Masoumi-Tehrani, a senior cleric, [gifted to the Bahá’í community](#) an illuminated work of calligraphy he made of a verse from Bahá’í sacred scripture. In a [statement on his website](#), he said that the gesture was a show of solidarity with Iran’s persecuted Bahá’í community, who had suffered greatly as a result of “blind religious prejudice,” and called for peaceful coexistence with Bahá’ís and all Iranian citizens. Then, in an [unprecedented gathering](#) earlier this month, Ayatollah Tehrani, Nasrin Sotoudeh, Mr. Nourizad, Dr. Maleki, and several other prominent human rights activists in Iran commemorated the six-year anniversary of the imprisonment of the Bahá’í leaders and made statements calling for the emancipation of the Bahá’í community. The continued advocacy of influential figures like these is contributing to what may be a groundswell of support for the Bahá’í community among Iranians.

At this juncture, it is critical to continue shining a spotlight on human rights and religious freedom in Iran. The government of Iran is, despite its protestations to the contrary, sensitive to international opinion. It is vital that the U.S. government and other governments around the world keep a close eye on the situation in Iran, and continue to speak out against abuses. We believe that this spotlight has stayed the hand of the Iranian government and has prevented the persecution of the Bahá’ís in Iran from

becoming much worse. And mounting international attention lends crucial support and momentum to the growing domestic movement for human rights within Iran.

The U.S. Department of State, in its annual [International Religious Freedom Reports](#), and the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), in its [Annual Reports](#), provide an invaluable service in reporting on the status of religious freedom in Iran, as these reports put the Iranian government on notice that it is being watched, and they provide other governments and civil society actors with the information they need to continue their work in support of religious freedom and human rights.

These reports, as well as public statements made by State Department officials and USCIRF Commissioners, focus attention on egregious situations such as that in Iran. Of particular value have been op-ed pieces in major news outlets authored by USCIRF Commissioners. The latest of these concerning the Bahá'ís in Iran, for which we are most appreciative, by Commissioners Dr. Robert P. George and Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett, about the sixth anniversary of the imprisonment of the Bahá'í leadership group, appeared just three days ago in *The Wall Street Journal's* Opinion Europe section. These are important tools in highlighting issues of human rights and religious freedom, particularly in Iran. We are hopeful that these rights and freedoms will be an important part of the U.S.' current dialogue with Iran.

In addition to the State Department and USCIRF, the U.S. Congress has also consistently condemned the persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran. On December 20, 2013, the Senate passed, with 35 bipartisan cosponsors, [Senate Resolution 75](#). Its companion, [House Resolution 109](#), is now pending in the House with 113 cosponsors, and we expect that it will be passed this year. These resolutions condemn the state-sponsored persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran and urge the President and Secretary of State to utilize all available authorities, including the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act of 2010 (CISADA), to impose sanctions on Iranian government officials and other individuals who are directly responsible for serious human rights abuses, including abuses against the Bahá'í community.

Resolutions like these constitute a strong statement from the U.S. government to the government of Iran and to friends and allies around the world. They are instrumental in gaining media coverage and raising public awareness of the situation in Iran, and they support efforts to promote accountability for human rights violations in Iran. We hope that those representatives who have not yet cosponsored House Resolution 109 will do so promptly and that this resolution, like Senate Resolution 75, will be passed with strong bipartisan support.

I thank you again for holding this important hearing and for inviting me to offer my testimony. We hope that hearings like this will continue to shine a light on religious freedom violations in Iran, and will help to hasten the day when Bahá'ís and all the people of Iran are accorded their full human rights.