



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

USCIRF HEARING SUMMARY: **RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN IRAN**

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USCIRF's Mission

To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

On January 26, 2023, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) held a virtual hearing on [Religious Freedom and Women's Rights in Iran](#) to consider how violations of religious freedom or belief uniquely affect women and to discuss policy options for the U.S. government for advancing religious freedom. The hearing, led by USCIRF's Chair [Nury Turkel](#), convened an array of witnesses who spoke about conditions for women and religious minorities in Iran, and provided policy recommendations for the U.S. government and international community.

Chair Turkel opened the hearing by discussing mandatory hijab laws in Iran, which are only a minor example of religious freedom violations in the country. He noted the recent repression of Sunni Muslims, Gonabadi Sufi Muslims, Christians, Baha'is, and Yarsanis. Chair Turkel concluded by highlighting USCIRF's recommendation that the U.S. government continue to sanction Iranian government officials responsible for religious freedom violations to lift the veil of impunity they currently enjoy. He stressed the importance of General License D-2 which facilitates greater internet access in Iran. Chair Turkel also commended the U.S. government for supporting the United Nations' (U.N.) Fact-Finding Mission on Iran and encouraged ongoing support for multilateral actions to hold Iranian officials accountable. Finally, he expressed support for the bipartisan Lautenberg Amendment, noting that "Over a 16-year period, the Austrian government helped the United States move 32,000 Iranian religious minorities to safety. This program is a natural extension of America's centuries-long commitment to protecting those seeking freedom from religious persecution."

Vice Chair [Abraham Cooper](#) highlighted Iran's targeting of religious leaders, noting that "As a Rabbi, I find it particularly contemptible that leaders of Iran's diverse religious faiths have come under fire." He also discussed Iran's use of antisemitism as a policy tool, and restrictions on the religious freedom of Iran's lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) community, two members of which are currently facing death sentences on religious grounds. Commissioner [Sharon Kleinbaum](#) discussed official violence against women peacefully protesting for freedom of religion or belief, including the government's deliberate and systematic campaign of sexual violence against these women. She stated, "This violence is not a side effect of poor training or lax enforcement. It is a deliberate strategy by the government of Iran to shame and silence women and girls asserting their religious freedom."

In recorded remarks, Senator [Jacky Rosen](#) spoke about mandatory headscarf laws and the Iranian government's repression of peaceful protests against these laws. She described the hearing as "a crucial step in charting a path forward for Iranian women and fundamental freedoms for the people of Iran."

[Jennifer Gavito](#), Deputy Assistant Secretary (DAS) for Iran, Iraq, and Public Diplomacy at the U.S. Department of State, provided an overview of the U.S. government's efforts to promote religious freedom in Iran in the wake of ongoing protests. She expressed concern over the Iranian government's issuance of death sentences on charges rooted in religious interpretations, and condemned Iran's government for limiting internet access and freedom of expression. DAS Gavito highlighted U.S. sanctions on Iranian officials complicit in religious freedom violations and General License D-2, which allows U.S. companies to provide digital services to Iranians. She also highlighted U.S. support for the U.N. Fact Finding Mission on Iran and the removal of Iran from the U.N. Committee on the Status of Women. DAS Gavito urged international coordination on efforts to advance freedom of religion or belief in Iran, noting that "we know Iran responds to broader condemnation than just [from] the United States alone."

[Hon. Javaid Rehman](#), United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, noted that Iran's criminal justice system is based on the government's religious interpretations that it imposes on the Iranian people. He highlighted a concerning uptick in executions, particularly targeting Sunni Baluchis, and expressed concern over the increased arrests of Baha'is. He also expressed concern over the Iranian government's execution of LGBTQI+ individuals, as well as the death sentences against two members of the community on religiously grounded charges. Special Rapporteur Rehman highlighted Iranian authorities' brutality against Mahsa Zhina Amini as emblematic of the official use of violence against women, including those peacefully protesting mandatory hijab laws. He noted the lack of any fair, impartial, and transparent investigations into police misconduct and said he would "hold President Ibrahim Raisi and other high-ranking state officials representing the Iranian state as directly responsible for violence against women and the brutality that is visited upon girls and women in Iran." He noted credible reports of sexual and gender-based violence.

[Marjan Keypour Greenblatt](#) discussed the official pressure on the leadership of religious communities in Iran, including Assyrian and Armenian Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians, to condemn the protests and issue statements of support for Iran's government. However, religious minorities have participated in the protests, and several have been arrested (though some were later released). She noted the overlapping of Sunni and Baluch

identities in Iran and discussed details of authorities' shooting of worshippers leaving a mosque in Zahedan. Greenblatt called on the U.S. government to:

- Hold Iran's government accountable for religious freedom violations;
- Support internet access and other communication tools;
- Limit funding for the Iranian government and continue to support humanitarian efforts for Iranians;
- Maintain a human rights focus in bilateral engagement with Iran; and
- Consider new and comprehensive policies beyond the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

[Tschika McBean](#) discussed Iran's persecution of Baha'is and the escalation of arrests of members of the Baha'i community following the outbreak of protests. She provided historic context of Baha'i persecution in Iran dating back to the 1970s and noted concerning incidents of persecution in early to mid-2022. These included arrests, including of two former members of the Yaran-i-Iran (Friends of Iran) who had previously served a decade in prison. She also discussed the demolition of Baha'i property in Roushankouh. McBean noted that "more than 1,000 Baha'is are [now] languishing at some stage in the criminal justice system," as compared to 443 in 2014. She also noted Iran's official propaganda against Baha'is as well as recent amendments to the penal code targeting Baha'is by criminalizing support for any religious minority and certain religious practices.

[Kate Meyer](#) spoke about the importance of the Lautenberg program, which provides "a lifeline for persecuted Iranian religious minorities to safely resettle as refugees in the United States." She spoke about prior issues related to vetting candidates for the program and provided the update that "nearly all of the Lautenberg applicants who the U.S. had erroneously labeled a 'security threat' have now reunited with their family in the U.S." Meyer recommended that the administration of President Joseph R. Biden restart resettlement through the Lautenberg program, that the administration improve both the efficiency and efficacy of the security vetting of candidates, and that USCIRF continue to recommend reauthorization of the Lautenberg Amendment in Congress.

Chair Turkel concluded by thanking the witnesses for their testimonies.



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