



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Religious Freedom and Women's Rights in Iran

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Nury Turkel, USCIRF Chair

Good afternoon and welcome to today's hearing hosted by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. Today's hearing will focus on religious freedom violations in the Islamic Republic of Iran amid ongoing protests against mandatory religious headscarf laws and other issues. I would like to thank our distinguished witnesses for joining us for this important discussion.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA. The Commission uses international standards to monitor freedom of religion or belief abroad and makes policy

recommendations to the U.S. government. Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this virtual hearing.

USCIRF is one of many organizations working around the world to advance religious freedom. Our governmental and nongovernmental partners share our commitment to protecting the right to freedom of religion or belief, or FoRB, for all. Since protests began in Iran following the killing of Mahsa Zhina Amini on September 16, 2022, the international community has been united in condemning the Iranian government's brutal crackdowns on peaceful protestors seeking greater religious freedom. Laws mandating that women wear the religious headscarf, or *hijab*, violate Iranians' religious freedom by denying women the right to choose for themselves whether to wear the *hijab* as a manifestation of their religious beliefs. This choice is protected by Article 18 of both the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, or ICCPR. When a government prohibits the wearing of *hijab* in public spaces, as some European countries do, the forced imposition of *hijab* on Iranian women violates Iran's obligations under the ICCPR.

Unfortunately, Iran's mandatory *hijab* laws are only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to religious freedom violations. Since 2001, USCIRF has recommended the State Department designate Iran as a Country of Particular Concern for systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations. While some religious

minorities have nominal recognition in Iran's constitution, all religious minorities face persecution as a result of the government's enforcement of its singular interpretation of Shi'a Islam. Iran's government has mercilessly targeted Sunnis, especially those who are ethnic Kurds, during the current protests. In September, security forces opened fire on worshippers leaving a Sunni mosque in Zahedan, killing at least 96 people. Gonabadi Sufis have also faced the government's repression. USCIRF has expressed particular concern for a Gonabadi Sufi husband and wife, Hamid and Farzaneh. They were arrested at a protest commemorating the shooting death of a 23 year-old woman by Iranian security forces. Hamid was sentenced to death, and Farzaneh to 25 years in prison without visitation rights. In November, Iran conducted a mass arrest of 30 Yarsanis and sentenced two others to prison for "propaganda against the state." Iran's government has also targeted Christians, including a raid on a Christmas celebration in December. And Iran's persecution and arrest of Baha'is has continued to intensify amid the protests, including the re-arrest and re-sentencing of two of the "Yaran Iran" or "Friends of Iran," Baha'i community leaders formerly jailed for a decade. Mahvash Sabet and Fariba Kamalabadi were sentenced to an additional 10 years in prison following a one-hour trial in November.

The United States has an array of policy tools to respond to these outrageous violations of freedom of religion or belief. Firstly, there are multiple sanctions

authorities the United States can use to hold accountable Iranian government officials complicit in religious freedom violations. We are pleased that the State and Treasury Departments have used these authorities repeatedly over the past few months, and as USCIRF has long recommended, specifically referenced religious freedom violations in their press releases about these actions. USCIRF also applauds the issuance of General License D-2 which enhances Iranians' ability to communicate and hold accountable officials and government agencies who violate their religious freedom.

USCIRF has also expressed support for the administration's work to facilitate the U.N. Fact Finding Mission on Iran, an investigation that will lift the veil of impunity on Iranian officials who violate freedom of religion or belief. We urge continued U.S. government support for further multilateral action, including a U.N. Security Council resolution referring Iran to the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity.

Finally, as an immigrant to this country myself, I strongly reiterate our recommendation that the Biden administration restart the resettlement of Iranian religious minorities under the bipartisan Lautenberg Amendment. For decades, this program has allowed a special path for resettlement in the United States of Iranian religious minorities fleeing repression. 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. It is imperative that the Biden administration continue this longstanding tradition.

To elaborate further on the persecution these Iranian religious minorities are facing, I am now delighted to recognize my colleague and USCIRF Vice Chair Abraham Cooper.