

USCIRF Hearing on Iran: **Religious Freedom and Women's Rights in Iran**

Testimony of Tschika McBean

Good afternoon,

My name is Tschika McBean, Human Rights Officer at the US Baha'i Office of Public Affairs. It is an honor to be here today to engage in this very timely and meaningful discussion.

Since the 1979 Revolution in Iran, members of the Bahá'í Faith—the largest non-Muslim religious minority in the country—have been subjected to continuous, systematic, and comprehensive state-sponsored persecution, affecting virtually all its members across generations and within every phase of life. However, over the last eight months, there has been a notable surge in persecution of the Baha'is. More broadly, what the world has been witnessing for the last four months, the brutal crackdown of protestors since the murder of Mahsa Amini, is a replica on a larger scale of what the Baha'is community has endured over the last 43 years. While the specific tactics employed by the Iranian authorities have sometimes changed, including as a result of external pressure, there is no doubt that their aim of destroying the Bahá'í community as a viable entity in Iran continues in full force. The Iranian government has been persistent in excluding Bahá'ís from the public sphere and preventing them from expressing their beliefs; impoverishing them economically; undermining their intellectual advancement; erasing traces of their history and culture; as well as spreading disinformation about them and inciting the public to create an environment of hatred against them so as to tolerate the unjust and inhumane treatment they are enduring at the hands of the Iranian government.

Even though Iran is a member of the United Nations, one of 48 UN member states voting to adopt the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, and a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which were signed on April 4, 1968 and ratified on June 24, 1975, the Baha'is are not afforded full rights of citizens under Iran's Constitution, which recognizes only Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism, as well as under its laws. Moreover, the Baha'is do not enjoy the human rights outlined in those treaties. In Iran, adherents of religions not recognized under the Iranian Constitution are treated with disdain. The Iranian government continues to refuse to recognize the Baha'i Faith as a religion and justifies the persecution of the Baha'is under this pretext.

According to the Baha'i International Community, since the beginning of June 2022, over 400 incidents of persecution have been perpetrated against Baha'is in Iran. These include arrests, arraignments, sentencing, and imprisonments, the confiscation or destruction of homes and farms, raids on private homes and businesses, beatings, the denial of medication to detainees, and the denial of higher education to more than one hundred young people. By engaging in these acts, Iran repeatedly violates its international obligations, including article 18 of the ICCPR and articles 11, 12, and 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

During the first three weeks of July 2022, more than twenty Baha'is in Shiraz, Tehran, Bojnourd, and Yazd were arrested, jailed, or subjected to home searches. This followed the month of June, during which [44 Baha'is](#) were arrested, arraigned, sentenced, or imprisoned. The June total included [26 people](#) in Shiraz sentenced to a combined 85 years in prison for, according to the authorities, "causing intellectual and ideological insecurity in Muslim society." In addition, on July 31, three former members of the informal leadership group of the Baha'is of Iran, known as the Yaran-i-Iran ("Friends of Iran"), were detained. Each of the seven, including the three detained --Mahvash Sabet, Fariba Kamalabadi, and Afif Naemi-- previously served a ten-year prison sentence beginning in 2008.). Mahvash Sabet and Fariba Kamalabadi, the two women among the long-disbanded Yaran, were re-arrested on July 31, 2022, and each given a new 10-year prison sentence on November 21, 2022. They have filed an appeal, but the prospects are not very hopeful, and they could each potentially serve a total of 20 years in prison simply for practicing their human right of freedom of religion or belief.

On August 2, 2022, the Iranian government shockingly escalated the persecution of the Iranian Baha'is by targeting the village of Roushankouh in Mazandaran province, where a large percentage of the population is Baha'i. Up to 200 Iranian government and local agents sealed off the village of Roushankouh and used heavy equipment to demolish several homes. This came on the heels of judicial decisions rendered in the last two years, which were endorsed at the appellate level to confiscate property simply based on a person being a Baha'i.

Furthermore, more than 1,000 Baha'is are languishing at some stage in the criminal justice system, from initial arrest to final appeal and sentencing, as compared to about 443 in January 2014, when a more than 15-year high was reached. There are currently some 90 Baha'is in prison. Women have shared the burden of incarceration and, at times, over the last few years, have constituted a majority of new imprisonments over periods of several months. In addition, hate propaganda, perpetrated by state and state-sponsored media via social media, website postings, and radio and television programming, rose to over 950 postings or broadcasts per month during the six-month period ending in April 2021. (In 2010-2011, the number had been about 22 postings or broadcasts per month.) And finally, in 2021, the government enacted amendments to Articles 499 and 500 of the Iranian Penal Code, which effectively criminalize any activity in support of any unrecognized religious minority. Under the amended laws, any assistance to anyone organizing ordinary collective religious practices such as study, training, and communal prayer is subject to prosecution.

As disturbing as these actions are, what I have mentioned today is the tip of the iceberg of incidents the Baha'is have endured for the last four decades. We certainly request the US Congress, State Department, human rights organizations, and, of course, USCIRF to continue to shine a spotlight on the persecution of the Iranian Baha'i community and provide any advocacy within their mandates.

Thank you for your time today.