



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

State-Sanctioned Religious Freedom Violations and Coercion

by Saudi Arabia and Iran

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Anurima Bhargava, USCIRF Commissioner

Thank you very much Chair Maenza. I would like to join in welcoming you all to today's hearing.

In addition to the examples Chair Maenza has mentioned, both Saudi Arabia and Iran use or tolerate violence against prisoners detained on religious grounds.

Prison officials in Saudi Arabia have used or threatened physical force against those who dissent from the government's official interpretation of Islam. Multiple

credible accounts confirm that Saudi prison officials used violence against women who peacefully protested male guardianship laws. These allegations include electric shocks, whipping, beating, and sexual assault. One account by an anonymous Saudi prison guard details torturing an anti-guardianship activist to the point that she became unconscious, noting “we feared that she had died and that we would bear responsibility.” The Saudi Human Rights Commission and National Society for Human Rights both investigated these allegations but claimed there was no evidence to support them.

In Iran, Amnesty International reports that in recent years, intelligence and security forces and prison officials, subjected detainees to prolonged solitary confinement, beatings, floggings, stress positions, forced administration of chemical substances and electric shocks. One such prisoner was a Gonabadi Sufi man named Benham Mahjoubi. Mahjoubi was arrested in 2018 while protesting the house arrest of the Gonabadi Sufi religious leader. He was sent to the infamous Evin Prison near Tehran despite being judged mentally unfit for prison and suffering from a panic disorder. In prison, Mahjoubi was subjected to torture and given unsafe medical interventions against his will. He was also periodically denied access to proper medication. These interventions left him with seizures and partial paralysis. He slipped into a coma this February, and died soon thereafter at the age of 33.

Iran's government also actively uses violence to enforce the state's interpretation of religion against the LGBTI community and does not intervene when vigilantes target this group on the basis of religion. In 2019, Iran hanged a 31-year old man for violating laws against same sex relations. This past May, Iran refused to investigate the killing of a 20 year-old gay man whose half-brother beheaded him and dumped his body under a tree.

For its part, Saudi Arabia has continued to use religion as a basis to target the LGBTI community as well while not intervening in religiously-based violence against its members. In 2020 a Yemeni blogger in Saudi Arabia named Mohamad al-Bokari was arrested after publishing a video in support of rights for LGBTI persons. In prison, al-Bokari was beaten and tortured into a forced confession and charged with "perversion."

USCIRF is particularly concerned that this violence does not stop at the Saudi or Iranian border. Saudi Arabia has targeted dissidents abroad in recent years following physical and electronic surveillance. Many of these dissidents have expressed peaceful opposition to the government's religious interpretations. The

Saudi government has tried to force Saudi women fleeing guardianship abroad to board planes to take them back to the country. And Iran recently tried to kidnap a U.S. citizen from Brooklyn, New York who has expressed opposition to mandatory religious headscarf laws.

Today's hearing will explore the nature and extent of the Saudi Arabian and Iranian government's violence and coercion against religious minorities, and on the basis of religion. We will hear from expert witnesses who will help us understand how religious minorities and those who dissent from these governments' religious interpretations are treated in these countries, and what the United States can do to effectively promote religious freedom for all.

I will now turn the floor back over to Chair Maenza to introduce our witnesses.