

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON  
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

HEARING ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM  
AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN IRAN

Thursday, January 26, 2023

2:00 p.m. ET

Virtual Hearing

P A R T I C I P A N T S

USCIRF COMMISSIONERS PRESENT:

Nury Turkel, Chair  
Abraham Cooper, Vice Chair  
David Curry  
Sharon Kleinbaum  
Stephen Schneck  
Frank R. Wolf

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P R O C E E D I N G S

CHAIR TURKEL: 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 and 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 commonly known as 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 United States government.

Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this virtual

hearing.

USCIRF is one of the 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 the protests started in Iran following the killing of Mahsa Amini on September 16, 2022, the international community has been united in condemning the Iranian regime's brutal crackdown 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 governmental repression.

USCIRF has expressed particular concern for 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-arrests and resentencing 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 ten 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 religious freedom or belief. Firstly, there are multiple sanctions authorities that the United States can use to hold accountable Iranian government officials complicit in religious freedom violations.

We're 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 special paths for resettlement in the United States of Iranian religious minorities fleeing repression. Over a 16-year period, 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 long-standing tradition.

To elaborate further on the persecution

these Iranian religious minorities are facing, now I pass the virtual floor to Vice Chair of USCIRF, Abraham Cooper.

Vice Chair Cooper, the floor is yours.

VICE CHAIR COOPER: Thank you very much, Chair Turkel.

I would like to join the chair and my colleagues in welcoming the global audience to today's important hearing.

Iranians are the inheritors of a millennia-long tradition of religious diversity. Yet the current leadership continues to force its singular religious interpretation on Iranians without their consent and in violation of international law.

Iran's utter disdain for freedom of religion and belief is evident in its response to peaceful protestors calling for greater freedom of religion or belief.

In recent weeks, USCIRF has been greatly alarmed by executions, sometimes multiple instances per day, on religiously grounded charges of, quote-

unquote, "corruption on Earth," and of, quote-unquote, "enmity against God."

As a rabbi, I find it particularly contemptible that the leaders of Iran's diverse religious faiths continue to come under fire. Following the outbreak of protests, the government has intensely pressured the leaders of the Armenian Christian community to condemn the protests and support the government.

Senior members of the Iranian establishment have also placed under house arrest the country's most prominent Sunni cleric, Molavi Abdolhamid, after he called for the government to take seriously protestors' demands and criticized Iranian officials' sexual assault on women prisoners.

I am also particularly concerned by the October detention of Ayatollah Abdolhamid Masoumi Tehrani, a Shi'a cleric who has criticized the Iranian government's use of religion and has conducted public interfaith outreach to Iran's Baha'is, Mandeans, Sabians, Jews, Zoroastrians,

Christians, and Sunni Muslims.

Masoumi Tehrani was held for months in Evian Prison and reportedly denied access to medication to treat his liver disease. Having personally hosted a conversation with the Ayatollah Masoumi Tehrani in my non-USCIRF capacity, dating back to February 2021, I am relieved that he was released on bail on January 3<sup>rd</sup> of this year but remain deeply concerned for his wellbeing.

USCIRF urges the U.S. government to insist that Iran cease its persecution of all these religious leaders.

Iran's government has also shamelessly continued to weaponize antisemitism as a tool of state policy.

In April of last year, an IRGC-affiliated think tank denied there was any, quote-unquote, "real" antisemitism in Nazi Germany. The Iranian regime continues to validate and encourage Holocaust denial and to mock the suffering and death of six million Jewish victims of the Nazi Holocaust.

Furthermore, Ayatollah Khamenei routinely invokes antisemitic tropes and deliberately conflates Judaism with specific Israeli government policies in his multiple tweets.

UNCIRF concurs with the United States Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism, Deborah Lipstadt, that this, quote, "vile antisemitic rhetoric," unquote, is, quote, "unacceptable."

Iran's government had doubled down on invoking its brand of religion to justify its religious freedom violations against the LGBTQI community.

It is one of only a handful of countries that actively executes gay men on the basis of laws grounded in religion. USCIRF was greatly alarmed by the Iranian judiciary's decision in September to issue death sentences against two LGBTQI activists named Sareh and Elham on the religiously-grounded charge of, quote-unquote, "corruption on Earth," for, quote-unquote, "promoting homosexuality," and, quote-unquote, "promoting Christianity."

Later that month, Sareh was hospitalized after trying to take her own life at the Urmia Central Prison where she and Elham are being held.

USCIRF remains deeply concerned by Iran's systematic use of religion to target this community.

USCIRF has also been concerned by the targeting of Iranian women and girls during the current protests.

To delve further into this issue, I now recognize my fellow Commissioner, Sharon Kleinbaum.

COMMISSIONER KLEINBAUM: Thank you very much, Vice Chair Cooper, and welcome to all of our participants as well as our audience members.

As a rabbi, I'm particularly moved to be engaged in such an important hearing today, which is the day before the 78<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau and International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

It is a day we reflect on what happens when good people remain silent, and I'm proud to be part of USCIRF, which is speaking out so strongly

on behalf of those in Iran who are suffering so deeply right now.

Women and girls have been at the forefront of the fight for freedom of religion or belief in Iran. Building on a long tradition of protests, Iranian women and girls today have shown unprecedented levels of commitment to their rights in the face of the gravest dangers.

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iranian women have resisted the government's insistence that it should have the power to decide on their behalf whether they wear hijab.

Today, their mass refusal to abide by laws that violate their fundamental freedoms poses a serious threat to a government that has weaponized religion to rule through force and fear.

It is reprehensible that Iran's government has responded to the peaceful assertion of religious freedom with violence. Among those it has killed are children, including a nine-year-old boy named Kian Pirfalak.

Iranian security forces have beaten,

sexually assaulted and killed girls who participated in protests against mandatory hijab. After 16-year-old Nika Shakarimi was detained and beaten to death, Iranian authorities falsely claimed she had committed suicide, pressured her family not to hold a funeral, and buried her without her family's consent in a cemetery 25 miles away from her house.

In December, activist Narges Mohammadi, who is serving a 16-year sentence at Evin Prison, revealed detailed evidence that Iranian prison officials are systematically using sexual violence, including rape, against women protesters detained at Evin and Qarchak prisons.

Security forces and interrogators have handcuffed, groped, and sexually molested women, all of which has been reported on multiple occasions to Iranian government officials.

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, to silence women and girls who are



asserting their religious freedom. It is an attack on the dignity and autonomy of women in a society with strong and religiously-grounded norms of sexual conservatism.

USCIRF unreservedly condemns the Iranian state's weaponization of gender and sexuality to restrict freedom of religion or belief.

Gender-based violence in the name of religion furthermore is not a niche issue. An attack on anyone's religious freedom, be they by traditional or liberal, theist or nontheist, straight or gay, is an attack on everyone's religious freedom.

Equal protection is only as strong as its weakest link. As such, the Biden administration must continue to call out Iran's attacks on the religious freedom of women and support full accountability for Iranian officials who are complicit in these violations.

Thank you and I now the floor back to Chair Turkel.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much,

Commissioner Kleinbaum. I am particularly appreciative of your powerful statements in solidarity with the Iranians who have been fighting for their freedom.

Now I'd like to introduce Senator Jacky Rosen, who has provided pre-recorded remarks for this hearing.

SENATOR ROSEN: [Pre-recorded remarks transcribed as follows:]

Hi. I'm Jacky Rosen, and I'm honored to represent Nevada in the United States Senate.

I want to thank the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, Chair Nury Turkel, and Vice Chair Cooper for this crucial and timely hearing.

I also want to thank everyone leading the panels today and the brave witnesses for sharing their experiences.

Since the killing of Mahsa Amini last September, Iranians have participated in months of protest against mandatory religious headscarf laws and other restrictions on religious freedom and

human rights.

We have watched the Iranian government respond violently to these demonstrators, conduct mass raids against them, and subjugate them to attacks during demonstrations.

This has not deterred the women of Iran, and today's hearing represents their resilience and the work that remains to be done to make their voices heard.

I will continue to work diligently with my colleagues in the Senate to advance measures to empower Iranian women and defenders of human rights around the world. That's why in September, I co-led a Senate resolution reaffirming the United States' support for the Iranian people, who have taken to the streets in peaceful protests for their human rights, and condemning the Iranian security forces for their violent response.

Today's hearing is a crucial step in charting a path forward for Iranian women and fundamental freedoms for the people of Iran.

Thank you, again, for your bravery and

resilience. I stand in solidarity with you all.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much, Senator Rosen, for your remarks and support of our efforts to preserve and protect religious freedom around the world.

I would like to briefly the witness for our first panel. More detailed biographies of the witnesses will be shown in the chat box and their biographies can be found on our website, [uscirf.gov](http://uscirf.gov).

We will hear from our first witness, Jennifer Gavito, who is Deputy Assistant Secretary for Iraq, Iran and Public Diplomacy at the U.S. State Department.

DAS Gavito, the floor is yours. You may begin your testimony.

MS. GAVITO: Thank you so much and thank you for inviting me to participate today.

With distinguished panelists to follow, I am certain that this will be a compelling discussion on human rights and religious freedom in Iran.

The citizens of Iran deserve the same dignity and respect for their rights as people the world over. And yet Iran's leadership continues to deny them this.

If that was not clear before last September, it certainly is clear to the world after months of protests across the country that the regime has met with violence and cruelty.

These protests, as we all know, were sparked by the death of a young woman in the custody of Iran's so-called "morality police," who had been arrested and accused of wearing a hijab inappropriately—a hijab, a religious symbol that should be something women can choose to wear to express their religious beliefs. But in Iran that choice has been taken away.

This religious symbol has been co-opted by the Iranian government to exert control over women, control that accelerated last summer with the government's renewed focus on enforcing their, quote, "chastity and hajji laws" at any cost.

Though a hijab sparked and fueled the

protest movement, it did not take long for these protests to broaden in scope beyond a singular issue.

What has become clear is that regardless of the issues driving the protests, the Iranian government is not interested in listening. Rather, their violent response shows that Iran's leadership clearly fears its own people.

Iranian authorities continue to suppress dissent through cruel and violent means. We understand from human rights organizations that so far more than 500 Iranians have been killed in the crackdown and nearly 20,000 have been arrested.

The United States remains gravely concerned about the regime's crackdown and about reports of mass arrests, sham trials, and death sentences being handed down and carried out hastily.

Iran has already executed four people for their roles in the protest and several others have been sentenced to death and are at risk of execution without notice.

Human rights organizations report that more than 100 more are at risk of execution having been detained on charges that carry the death penalty.

These charges, often rooted in the Iranian regime's interpretation of Sharia law, include waging war against God and corruption on earth, and they are being applied and carried out after trials that lack fair trial guarantees.

The Iranian government continues its habit of co-opting religious tenets to punish its people for standing up for their rights.

Iranian authorities are also intent on preventing the world from watching as they violently suppress and punish these peaceful protestors.

The Iranian state has routinely disrupted access to the Internet in an attempt to stop its people from telling the international community about these abuses. But they have failed. The world is watching.

The world sees the executions that follow

sham trials. The world sees the more than 700 of those connected to the protests who have been hastily tried and sentenced without transparency, adequate access to legal advice, or accountability, often to harsh prison sentences.

At the Department of State, our senior officials continue to follow the situation closely and we will continue to be vocal in our support for the brave Iranians demonstrating for their basic rights.

Iranian girls, women, men and boys have inspired the world with their courage and must be able to freely express themselves, including the freedom to choose what they wear and what they believe, without fear of persecution, harassment, violence or death.

As part of our response to these human rights abuses committed by Iranian authorities, the United States has issued multiple rounds of sanctions on individuals and entities responsible for the regime's suppression of protests.

We continue to examine how further



activity and enforcement in this area can be effectively employed.

In September, we issued General License D-2, which lifted certain U.S. regulations and opened the door for U.S. companies to provide tools for ordinary Iranians to better communicate via the Internet.

We continue to hold discussions with U.S. technology companies to help them understand the technicalities and encourage them to be aggressive in using the new General License.

Just last week, the Treasury Department released additional information to further clarify how companies can provide digital services to Iranians that can assist in resisting Internet censorship.

And along with partners, and outside of government, we identified ways to hold Iran accountable for its brutal actions through international organizations.

For example, we strongly supported Germany and Iceland in their call for a special session of

the U.N. Human Rights Council that resulted in the creation of a fact finding mission into Iran's human rights abuses.

And in December, the United States led the effort to remove Iran from the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women.

These are just a couple of examples of the steps the U.S. government has taken in recent months to support the Iranian people, and we continue to work with allies and partners, as well as with civil society, to identify practical ways to show our support.

The human rights abuses inflicted by the Iranian regime on its own people must not go without consequence.

Meanwhile, we must also ensure we maintain focus on the ongoing human rights abuses that began before the recent protests and continue even if they aren't making the news.

The government of Iran has long denied Iranians their human rights, including through severe restrictions on the rights to peaceful

assembly, freedom of association, freedom of expression, and, especially to note for this audience, freedom of religion or belief.

Last year, the Iranian authorities stepped up the scope and severity of their harassment of the Baha'i community as authorities raided and demolished Baha'i houses, bulldozed villages, destroyed cemeteries, and arrested those who resisted.

This surge of repression piles further hardship on a community that has long suffered from persecution at the hands of the Iranian regime, being denied access to higher education, the ability to freely conduct business, and the freedom to worship openly as they choose.

Of course, the Baha'i community is not alone among religious minorities in its persecution by the Iranian government. Christian converts, Sunni Muslims, Sufi adherents and the Yarsanis have all been targeted for their beliefs.

And anti-Semitism, as we've heard from others, remains alive and well among the leadership

of Iran, including Supreme Leader Khamenei, who routinely uses Twitter and other social media platforms to engage in virulent and dangerous antisemitism.

And President Raisi continued the regime's long history of repugnant Holocaust denial in an interview last fall.

The United States will continue to call out the Iranian regime's abuses as long as they continue to speak and act in ways which inhibit the fundamental freedoms of the Iranian people, including the exercise of religious freedom.

As Secretary Blinken said last year at the International Religious Freedom Summit, freedom of religion or belief is a human right. We know the world is safer and more stable when people have the chance to practice their faith freely and to contribute their fullest selves to their community's success.

President Biden and Secretary Blinken have repeatedly stressed the centrality of human rights to U.S. foreign policy, and the United States

government will continue to advocate for better human rights in Iran and urge like-minded countries to continue to build on the good work we have done together thus far.

We will continue to enforce sanctions on Iranian entities perpetrating these human rights abuses. In coordination with allies and partners, we will also continue to look beyond sanctions and consider all the appropriate tools to hold individuals and organizations responsible.

And, finally, we will continue to work with our friends in the NGO community to ensure that we are listening to their perspectives and learning from their experiences.

We cannot do the work we do in support of advancing human rights in Iran without our civil society partners.

I hope I've made it clear by now that the U.S. government is not alone in its condemnation of Iranian government's abuses of its people. It is not even only the West that has confronted Iran's brutal crackdown. We've been joined by a broad

base of international organizations and countries around the world who are equally appalled and outraged by Iran's human rights abuses, and we will continue to support the brave people of Iran.

Thank you again for inviting me to participate.

CHAIR TURKEL: DAS Gavito, thank you so much for your testimony and commitment to continue to support the Iranian people who are demanding their freedom.

With that, I'd like to recognize Vice Chair Cooper first and Commissioner Kleinbaum for comments and questions. You're muted.

VICE CHAIR COOPER: Thank you, Chair Turkel, and thank you, Deputy Assistant Secretary, for enumerating the various steps that are currently underway by the U.S. government.

Can you outline for us some of the additional steps that the United States government is considering to coordinate greater multilateral action to advance religious freedom in Iran, and just to make sure you understand we're not just

offloading on you, I want to add could you also inform USCIRF how we can help in that process?

MS. GAVITO: Okay. It's only been two years of using these technologies.

[Laughter.]

MS. GAVITO: Thank you for the question.

As I mentioned in my remarks, we are routinely coordinating with other governments, as well as civil society organizations that focus on human rights in Iran, and we intend to continue to work alongside those partners to take action and hold Iran accountable for its abuses.

This includes working within multilateral organizations but also working separately with allies and partners outside of the U.N. setting.

So the upcoming March session of the Human Rights Council provides, for example, an opportunity to address the nexus of freedom of religion and belief as well as the human rights situation in Iran.

We're also looking forward to galvanizing additional support for the mandate renewal of the

Special Rapporteur for Iran.

Continuing to loudly send a message that the world is watching and sees the abuses that Iran is committing is absolutely critical.

And the State Department also ensures that we consistently monitor and defend international religious freedom in Iran through our annual International Religious Freedom Report, which is generally released in June, and through this thorough and active review of the status of religious freedom, we shine a light on governments like Iran that repress, harass, and abuse religious minorities. So those are few things that are on the agenda.

As far as how you can help us, just continuing to stay in dialogue as far as the abuses that you're hearing and using the convening power to continue to give us ideas.

We know that Iran responds to broader condemnation than just the United States alone, and so continuing to help us build that coalition is vital.



VICE CHAIR COOPER: Let me just quickly follow up. I know your time is limited, but you did mention that there are at least a hundred, maybe more, prisoners who are under threat of possible execution. And that, God forbid, but if, God forbid, that list starts to get sent before the executioner, it's not a question necessarily you can answer right now, but I think we need to collectively think on what we can do together if, God forbid, these executions continue.

MS. GAVITO: I agree. These are horrific and unjustified. We have, as you have seen, sought to both condemn and hold accountable those that are responsible for it but are always continuing to look for other ideas to not just take action after it occurs, but to help ensure that it doesn't occur in the first place.

VICE CHAIR COOPER: Thank you for your commitment and your achievements till now.

COMMISSIONER KLEINBAUM: And I would like to ask a question as well, and thank you again for your testimony, and it's so important to be

gathering the data, publicizing the information, making sure this stays in the news and stays visible, as much as any answers that we could possibly come up with. So thank you so much.

And I'd like you to address how is the U.S. government supporting the United Nations Fact Finding Mission on Iran, and what's the relationship there?

MS. GAVITO: Sure. The U.S. was very proud to support the German and Icelandic delegations when they called for a Special Session of the U.N. Human Rights Council to address the worsening human rights crisis.

As you know, drawing attention to this is absolutely vital, and we strongly supported the resulting resolution of that Special Session, which established the Fact Finding Mission that was convened to thoroughly and independently investigate the alleged human rights violations in Iran.

As the Fact Finding Mission moves forward with its mandate, we are closely coordinating with

human rights NGOs and others to ensure that the appointed experts can effectively fulfill their mandate of gathering, analyzing and preserving evidence to help shine a light on perpetrators of human rights abuses inside of Iran.

And we continue to join our international partners to call on the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran to cooperate fully with the Fact Finding Mission, as is required in that resolution.

So we will continue that partnership and are grateful for the work of our partners in making this a successful endeavor.

COMMISSIONER KLEINBAUM: Thank you so much. So appreciate you and all of your colleagues. Thank you, again.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you.

If I may, I would like to also ask you a question about the State Department, how State Department is using the visa ban and sanctions to hold accountable Iranian officials who are responsible for actions such as restricting religious freedom or belief?

MS. GAVITO: Absolutely.

The Department of State is collaborating closely with the Department of the Treasury on human rights sanctions.

This includes targets that restrict freedom of religious belief. We have an array of sanction authorities at our disposal. I think probably most people on the line have familiarity with those, and we've been using them to the fullest extent over the last several months.

Some of the authorities allow us to impose visa bans on human rights abusers. Others allow us to impose financial restrictions on individuals and entities because of those abuses.

In the days just after the death of Mahsa Amini in the custody of Iran's so-called "morality police," as an example, we sanctioned the morality police themselves and at senior leadership for the roles that they played in the death, as well as other security officials that were directly responsible for the violent crackdown on the resulting peaceful protestors. This included

Iran's Interior Minister.

We later sanctioned several actors involved with Iran's Intelligence Ministry in efforts to surveil the Iranian people and censor the Internet.

Internet censorship does not, as we've already outlined, only impede those protesting the government's abuses, but it also can have a significant impact on the ability of a religious minority groups to communicate with one another and with the outside world.

So, again, these are just a few examples of the sanctions that we've implemented over the last few months. We are continuing to constantly monitor the situation on the ground, and consider whether there are additional sanctions that would be effective in holding Iranian officials accountable while supporting the people of Iran.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much, DAS Gavito.

You know, no human rights abusers, whether it be in Iran or anywhere else around the world,

should remain anonymous. We should hold them, we should continue to hold them to account.

We wanted to thank you for your testimony and taking the time to join us today.

Now we're going to move on to our second panel. I have the privilege to introduce Javaid Rehman, who is the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Mr. Rehman, you may begin your testimony.

MR. REHMAN: Thank you very much for this generous invitation for me to speak to you this afternoon.

I have divided my brief presentation into two main parts. The first part addresses some of the most pressing but ongoing human rights concerns, whereas the second part examines the human rights situation since the death in custody of Zhina Mahsa Amini on 16<sup>th</sup> of September 2022.

Both parts of this presentation relate closely to freedom of religion or belief, as well as women's rights, and therefore are highly

relevant to this afternoon's discussion.

To begin with, I must make a point that Iran's criminal justice system, including deployment of the death penalty, executions, as well as criminal laws repressing and brutalizing women through exoneration of violence against women and laws on enforced hijab, is based on the Iranian authorities' highly problematic and a difficult interpretation of Islamic law.

This problematic criminal justice system and the mechanism therefore for it is then forced upon all communities within Iran regardless of their religious beliefs or ethnic values.

The past year, that is 2022, witnessed an alarming increase in executions, particularly drug offender executions, continuation of child offender executions. There was a resumption of public executions and a disproportionate use of death penalty against ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities.

Reportedly, over 500 persons, including three child offenders and 13 women, were executed

last year in 2022.

This number of 500 executions represents the highest number of executions in the last five years and can be compared to at least 330 executions in 2021, and 267 in 2020.

A deeply troubling matter is the very sharp increase in drug offender executions. In 2022, over 222 drug offender executions took place. In comparison, 226 in 2021 and 25 in 2020.

As I just mentioned, Iranian authorities continue to execute child offenders in violation of their international obligations, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Child Rights Convention.

Ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities have also been disproportionately executed. At least 147 Balochis—the Balochis constitute about between two to six percent of the population—were executed, and, as you know, the Balochis predominantly are Sunni Muslims and not Shi'a.

And these 147 Balochis were executed.



More than half of these executions were for drug-related charges.

In the context of discussing the Balochis as a Sunni minority, as a religious minority, I would like to emphasize that the Baloch represent one of the most marginalized and vulnerable communities, having deliberately been left out or left in a state of poverty and underdevelopment by the authorities.

The situation with the constitutionally recognized—sorry—the constitutionally non-recognized minority, as has just been referred to, including the case of the Baha'i minority, remains particularly disturbing. The Baha'i minority continued to face all forms of targeting, victimization, harassment, prosecution, including detentions, unlawful arrests, confiscations, and destruction of their properties, denials of education rights, closure of businesses, and cemetery desecration.

A high number of Baha'is remain in prison, and the arrested individuals, as we have noted

already, included two former leaders of the Baha'i community, Mahvash Sabet and Fariba Kamalabadi, who were arrested on 31<sup>st</sup> of July 2022, and who on 11<sup>th</sup> of December 2022 were sentenced to a second ten-year imprisonment after having already spent ten years in prison.

Again, we have noted the position of LGBT communities, and I would say that the repression and persecution of sexual minorities has continued, as on first of September 2022, two LGBT rights activists were sentenced to death for vaguely worded and broadly defined charge of "fasad fil arz," which means "corruption on Earth."

I remain extremely concerned about the arbitrary arrests, detention, harsh sentencing, denial of the right to fair trial and all forms of coercion, torture, ill treatment of foreign and dual nationals.

Iranian authorities continue to violate human rights of foreign and dual nationals in order to put pressure on foreign governments as a tactic either for prisoner swaps or for other attempts.

Tragically, Swedish-Iranian Ahmad Reza Jalali, arbitrarily detained since 2016, remains at risk of imminent execution.

I understand that at least 21 foreign and dual nationals, including seven French nationals, have remained detained, primarily on espionage charges.

In light of the gravity of the situation last year, we witnessed considerable continuing repression and victimization of human rights defenders, lawyers, women's rights activists, as well as journalists. The authorities also made a determined effort to block freedom of information, including with severe Internet disruption and censorship of social media platforms.

Now, I have briefly tried to summarize the key concerning elements of the previous year, and now if you will allow me to move to the most concerning and deeply troubling development since the killing of Zhina Mahsa Amini on 16 September 2022.

Zhina Mahsa Amini was a 22-year-old woman

from Saqqez in the province of Kurdistan, and she was arrested by Iran's morality police on 13 September 2022 while she was on a family visit to the capital Tehran. She was arrested for allegedly failing to comply with Iran's strict rules on women's dress by wearing what they call it as an improper hijab.

After the arrest, she was taken to a detention center where she collapsed. Two hours after her arrest, she was taken to Kasra Hospital, and she was officially declared dead at the hospital on 16<sup>th</sup> of September 2022.

Eyewitness testimonies and other evidence indicate that she was violently beaten while being forcibly transferred to Vozara Detention Center in Tehran. Images of Ms. Amini in the intensive care unit that have also suggested that she was assaulted on the head.

Zhina Mahsa Amini's fate is unfortunately a tragic reflection of the violence against girls and women of Iran. In her case, there are also clear implications with an ethnic and religious

dimension as she was ethnically a Kurd, Kurdish background, as well as from a Sunni, Sunni faith background.

However, the law of enforced hijab and the manner of its enforcement by state authorities is emblematic of the violence, brutality and violation of fundamental human rights and a violation of the fundamental human dignity of girls and women of Iran.

Since President Ebrahim Raisi has come into power in August 2021, there has been an enhanced focus on the enforcement of hijab law. The morality police expanded street patrols, subjecting women perceived to be wearing a loose hijab to verbal as well as physical harassment, arresting them and shutting down several businesses.

I would therefore hold President Ebrahim 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.

As regard to any investigation into the death in custody of Zhina Mahsa Amini, there has been a failure to conduct any independent, impartial and transparent investigations.

The authorities have consistently denied any misconduct or wrongdoing on their part and have put forward unsubstantiated claims that Ms. Amini died because of a heart problem linking this to preexisting medical conditions.

These claims were fully rejected by her family, and there is a substantial body of medical evidence, including doctors, which have challenged the state's assertion that her death was not caused by blows to the head and vital organs and limbs of the body.

Now, the death or the killing of Zhina Mahsa Amini resulted in spontaneous protests, which were led by women and the youth of Iran under the banner of "Zan-Zindagi-Azidi," which means "Women, Life, Freedom." These protests very quickly transformed into nationwide protests, spreading

into 160 cities and all 31 provinces of Iran where people from every community, women, men and children, and people from all ethnic and religious backgrounds joining these protests.

An important element of these protests was the involvement of young people, people from schools, and university students. It is estimated that between 16 September and 2 December 2022, over 1,641 protests took place, which included protests in 143 universities.

Unfortunately, and with highly tragic consequences, there has been a brutal response of the Iranian authorities to these protests.

It is estimated that by 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2022, at least 476 persons, including 34 women, were killed. Tragically, amongst those killed by state securities, this included at least 64 children. Consistent with the widespread pattern of denial and cover-ups, Iranian authorities have attributed responsibility for these deaths to the enemies of what they call it, "the enemies of the Islamic Republic."

I have also received consistent reports and testimonies of torture and ill-treatment of protestors, including allegations of sexual and gender-based violence.

Hundreds of protestors have been severely injured and thousands arrested, detained or incarcerated. By some estimates, over 18,000 individuals were arrested or detained of which the identity of 2,942 individuals have been confirmed.

I'm absolutely horrified, shocked, and outraged that despite appeals by the international community, including by our own mandate, Iranian authorities have thus far executed at least four persons associated with these protests.

Mohsen Shekari, Majidreza Rahnavard were executed in December 2022, and Mohammad Mahdi Karami and Seyyed Mohammad Hosseini were executed in January 2023 after arbitrary summary and sham trials, which violated the right to fair trial and due process rights.

I'm very concerned that at least 100 other individuals have been charged with offenses that



can carry the death penalty and may be either awaiting or undergoing trials. These executions are a tool of repression to instill fear, and these are obvious symbols of state brutality.

I thank you very much.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much, Mr. Rehman, for your testimony.

Now I would like to recognize Commissioners Frank Wolf, David Curry and Steve Schneck for questions and comments.

If I could start with Commissioner Wolf.

COMMISSIONER WOLF: Thank you very much. Thank you for the testimony. I appreciate it.

It's just a question of what more could be done? Could the Biden administration do more? Could the West do more than they're doing?

MR. REHMAN: Thank you for the great question.

I think a lot is happening. A lot has happened since 16<sup>th</sup> of September, and, as some of the colleagues have already mentioned, there was a Special Session on Iran; a fact finding mission has

been established.

Iran was removed from the Commission on the Status of Women. And there is a lot of, a lot of passion amongst the international community, galvanized by the civil society, that we must do more.

So I would encourage all the international community to exert maximum pressure on the Iranian regime to immediately release all of the political prisoners. As I said, thousands are incarcerated and detained so there must be pressure.

They must stop these torture practices immediately. They must immediately stop executing individuals. They must also cooperate fully with the fact finding mission, and I think what the United States could do is in addition to talking to a number of countries which are, you know, which are working together, I think there should be more engagement with states including members of the OIC, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, because some of them are also our friends in the international community.

They understand the seriousness of this situation. It has to be a strong, forceful, diplomatic, and global effort. I support, and I fully commend the sanctioning of certain individuals and entities as the U.S. and other states have done.

However, I would recommend that there should be a more coordinated effort in sanctioning because there are gaps, you see. Canada has sanctioned some entities, some individuals. The UK has done. Germany has brought in its own mechanisms. But I think greater coordination would make these sanctions more effective.

I would also say that the sanctions would be more effective and more pertinent if the people right at the top are sanctioned fully. I understand that there are some sanctions attached to President Ebrahim Raisi, but not full sanctions. I think Ebrahim Raisi should be sanctioned fully. He is the person who has, you know, who has mandated, authorized this, this, you know, this whole area of repression.

He has, it's happening under his watch, and we have to remember that he was the president since 2021, but he has had many roles. For example, from 2019, he was the head of judiciary, and he approved a lot of violations of human rights, of, you know, minority rights, repression of women, this whole issue of forced hijab.

So I think he should be on top of the list of sanctions, and so should be the Supreme Leader, you see.

The Guardian Councils, other members of high-policy making decisions. The attorney general. So I think there has to be comprehensive lists of sanctioning of all of these individuals, and I think, furthermore, there has to be a priority now that we have all, as part of the international community's commitment, prioritized human rights, you see.

And, therefore, I think this discussion about a nuclear deal or any other agreement must become secondary to the respect of human rights, respect of religious minorities, minorities who

have been suffering for a long time. But their rights are now, you know, they are being completely brutalized.

And respect for women's rights, and I think that there must be international consensus that this law on enforced hijab must immediately be abolished, and if it's not abolished, I would go so far as saying that we should girls and women, the brave girls and women of Iran, who are resisting this brutal law and who are deciding not to follow this law.

So I think there are a lot of ways in which the international community can support the people of Iran.

Thank you.

COMMISSIONER WOLF: Thank you very much.  
Take care.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you.

Commissioner Schneck.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: Thank you. Thank you very much, Mr. Rehman.

I'm interested in the U.S. Fact Finding

Mission itself on Iran. I'm curious about what your specific mandate is, and I'm wondering if there are sufficient resources available to the work that's underway?

MR. REHMAN: Thank you very much, Commissioner. Thank you for this great question.

You know, my mandate is the mandate on the Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights Situation in Iran. That mandate was reestablished in 2011, and since that time, it is renewed annually.

And we have had a tremendous success in terms of establishing the U.N. Fact Finding Mission, which, as colleagues have mentioned, was the product of the Special Session resolution adopted on 24<sup>th</sup> of November.

And if you look at the text of the resolution itself, the text is very emphatic in terms of its cooperation with various international elements, states, international community, as well as my own mandate. So I am very happy to cooperate with the fact finding mission. I will support them, and I'm sure that the resolution is very

strong, which would allow the fact finding mission to conduct its business, and from what I know, the United Nations and the Human Rights Council has provided the fact finding mission with very appropriate suitable resources because it is clearly a challenging task that has been assigned.

So my office is there. I'm cooperating with the fact finding mission, and I will do my utmost, whatever resources that I have, to cooperate more fully with the fact finding mission.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: Thank you very much and thank you for your excellent work.

MR. REHMAN: Thank you.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you.

If I could ask Commissioner Curry if he has questions and comments?

COMMISSIONER CURRY: Yes. Thank you, Chair Turkel.

Based on the size of the protests, one must assume that there is a majority of faithful Muslims in Iran who are greatly troubled by the use of their faith to justify these death sentences.

Maybe you could talk a little deeper about how Iran is using religion to justify these actions, if you could, please?

MR. REHMAN: Yeah. Thank you.

That is really a very important and significant question. I'll begin by saying, as I said in my presentation, that the whole of the edifice of criminal justice is built on Iran's own very problematic interpretation of the Islamic faith, on Sharia.

And the evidence that I bring to you is that if you look at OIC member states, or Muslim majority states, they don't follow that interpretation. So if you look at Iran executing child offenders, no country would say that this is acceptable anymore.

I mean I come from Pakistan, a significantly Muslim majority country, but child offender execution is not the law. Similarly, in other Muslim member majority countries, children, child offenders are not executed.

Similarly, and that relates to your



question, is that a lot of these death sentences are based on charges which are religiously, a kind of an interpretation. A religious interpretation is given to them. So, for example, "moharebeh" is the "enmity against God," you see.

And that is a religious kind of sentiment that's sprouted. Similarly, "mofsed-e filarz" is a "corruption on Earth," which they interpret as somebody who somehow, you know, is doing something immoral and religiously unacceptable. But, in fact, it is a weaponization, a tool of repression. It's a tool of brutalization.

And all of these executions that I mentioned before, executions, have been conducted on that basis. They use, they abuse religion to stay in power and to manipulate the whole of the system.

Similarly, I mean this law on enforced hijab, and I think what you started your point about faithful Muslims, you know, it's so shocking, and it is so humiliating for millions of Muslim women, both in Iran and outside of Iran, that

Iranian regime is using Islam to brutalize women. I mean there are millions of firm believers, Muslim believers, women, who do not, who do not depend on or who absolutely challenge this assertion that someone could force a hijab on them to make them better Muslims.

Why is it that the Iranian authorities are brutalizing women? And we have to remember that this brutalization is on all women, regardless of their faith, regardless of their culture, regardless of their outlook. So religion is weaponized; it's made a tool of brutalization.

It is not, as a Muslim, I believe that Islam and all other religions empower us. They give us those, you know, that great feeling of belief. That is not the case with the Iranian regime. They are abusing religion to their own petty and manipulative advantages.

Thank you.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much.

COMMISSIONER CURRY: Thank you.

CHAIR TURKEL: Mr. Rehman, thank you for

your testimony. We appreciate you took the time to join us, and we also are grateful for your commitment in this important line of work to help the Iranian people.

With that, we're going to move on to our third panel. I want to begin by thanking our panelists, who have been so patient with the additional panels that we had earlier today.

In the third panel, we will be hearing from Marjan Keypour Greenblatt, the Founder and Director of Alliance for Rights of All Minorities, ARAM.

After Ms. Keypour's testimony, we will hear from Tschika McBean, the Human Rights Officer at the Baha'is of the United States Office of Public Affairs.

Lastly, we will hear from Kate Meyer, a Litigation Staff Attorney at the International Refugee Assistance Project.

Now I'd like to give the floor to Ms. Marjan Keypour—Marjan Keypour. Sorry. You may begin your testimony.

MS. GREENBLATT: Thank you very much for this opportunity.

Esteemed Commissioners, Special Rapporteur Javaid Rehman, I want to thank you for this opportunity to provide you with an update on the status of Iran's minorities since the murder of Mahsa Amini.

Since my last testimony for this Commission, we have seen a continuation of mass arrests, violent crackdown of protesters, grueling accounts of rape, sexual assault, and torture in detention centers, and, most recently, the death sentences and execution of protesters.

Despite the brutality and violence displayed by the regime, the citizens have not stopped their protests but have rather continued to express their unrest in the streets.

In addition to their presence on the streets, Iranians across the country have engaged in alternative protest forms by chanting slogans from the windows and balconies, slogan writing on walls and street signs at night, engaging in labor

strikes and continued presence on social media with hashtags and personal accounts of their experiences.

According to most updated reports, as of today, 19,571 arrests were reported. 527 deaths, including four executions, were reported since September 17<sup>th</sup>. This includes the deaths of 71 children and 168 arrests of children.

These numbers represent all Iranians who have participated in the protests from all regions and all sectors of the country. Indeed, the entire nation has suffered and mourned unbearable losses.

While the religious minorities have not officially organized protests, based on the reports of the arrests, it appears that individuals from various groups have been present on the scenes with their brothers and sisters.

In today's testimony, I will be speaking about the impact of the movement and the regime's crackdown on the country's minorities, with the knowledge that my colleagues will focus more on the condition of the Baha'i community in further

detail.

Based on our assessment, during this period, the Iranian regime once again utilized its policy of division and suppression among the minorities. When the protest movement proved to be a unifying force among the members of ethnic and religious minorities from four corners of the country, the regime stepped in to pressure the minority members into the roles of expressing public loyalty to the regime and vouching for their treatment of the minorities.

The leadership of the Assyrian, Armenian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian communities issued harshly worded statements condemning the protesters and expressing their allegiances to the regime.

In similar tone and messages, the timing of the statements, and the harsh tone that was shared suggests that the leadership of the communities were asked by higher authorities to provide these directives to their members.

Pressures on religious minorities to condemn the protests represents the regime's

pattern of instrumentalization of the minorities.

Despite the pressures, it appears that the groups have continued to participate in widespread protests in Iran and they are paying a high price for it indeed.

Those arrested include five Jews, who were since released based on conditions. At least five members of the Yarsan community remain behind bars, and seven Gonabadi Dervishes, who have been arrested, including one member who was recently released, and as of last night two members are believe to be kidnapped. We're awaiting more details on that.

An Assyrian woman was arrested because of her social media posts in support of the protesters and was subsequently released.

An Armenian female protester, who was arrested in October, has shared a heartbreaking testimony of her time in prison where she suffered the humiliation of physical inspections and was mocked for her Armenian accent and her religious beliefs.

Christians have also experienced arrests during the Christmas celebrations.

Members of the Baha'i community continue to pay a hefty price for their mere existence in Iran, their homeland the birthplace of their religion.

The actual number of detainees is fluctuating because of the number of arrests, but there are believed to be at least 17 previous detainees behind bars and five new arrests.

The re-arrests and resentencing of the Baha'i leaders, Mahvash Sabet and Fariba Kamalabadi, raised more questions and confusion by any logic, and I know that my colleague Tschika will continue on this, will elaborate on this.

Permit me now to say a few words on the impact of the protests on the ethnic Baluch population, the majority of whom are Sunni Muslims. For the 16<sup>th</sup> consecutive week, Sunni Baluch people convened on Fridays for their prayers at the Grand Mosala prayer hall in Zahedan only to encounter armed crackdown by the uniform and plainclothes



officers.

Following their prayers, many worshippers, including children, participated in spontaneous protests and were quickly encountered by indiscriminate firing bullets. On what became known as "Bloody Friday," at least 96 individuals, including 16 children and an 80-year-old woman, were killed. Many more were reportedly injured and could not seek hospital help, fearing that they would be reported to the authorities.

But the protests have not stopped and neither have the repressive measures. In addition to deploying uniform and plainclothes guards, the regime has recently introduced checkpoints at different locations of the region.

At least 15 checkpoints have been reported. Citizens conducting their ordinary affairs have to pass through checkpoints where they have reportedly experienced humiliating searches and inspections and were forced to show documentation and ID.

We have to keep in mind that in this

particular region, obtaining IDs and legal documentation has been a longstanding challenge, due to discriminatory practices and arbitrary requirements, including DNA tests and legal proceedings, a process that is costly and cumbersome in a region that has been perpetually neglected by infrastructure and suffers from at least two-thirds of the population are under the poverty line.

In addition, we have obtained reports of increased Internet monitoring of the region, as well as suspicion of surveillance of citizens' private conversations and activities, an ironic gesture for a government that refuses to acknowledge the cries and demands of the civilians but clandestinely monitors their conversations and activities.

Arrests and detentions and executions were already commonplace in the regions that have continued--in this region--but they have also continued to escalate.

We have received astonishing reports of

executions of at least 90 Baluch individuals in the last four months on various charges.

The continued arrests take a toll on the entire families. Many of the men who were arrested and executed were often the sole breadwinners of their families and they're struggling from systematic cycle of poverty and unemployment in this region.

When the stories of those who are arrested have been released, they are full of heartbreaking accounts of torture, rape, sexual assault and forced confessions.

Friday, Imam-my time is up-on Friday, Imam Molavi Abdolhamid, who was once a figure the regime could count on for motivating-who could be counted on for motivating the Baluch people to back the regime's agenda, has since become an avid advocate of the Baluch people, a direction that has cost him many threats and intimidation initiatives from the regime.

According to Iran International, the regime was recently threatening to arrest him or

destroy the Makki Mosque where he appears for popular public prayers on Fridays.

In late November, a hacktivist group known as the Black Reward released audio-files attributed to conversations among the highest levels of the Iranian government, revealing heated conversations about how to handle the Sunni Baluch Imam.

In this audio-file, deputy commander of the paramilitary Basij, Ghasem Ghoreishi, evaluated options of ways to quell the leadership of the Imam and concluded that delegitimizing Molavi Abodlhamid through perpetual reputational attacks would be a better option than other more violent measures.

These audio-files were reportedly, were initially obtained and released on Iran International channels and are since available by other Persian-language media.

I have some additional recommendations as to where to go from here, and they will be published in my written testimony.

I want to thank you for this opportunity, and my time is up.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much.

Our next witness is Ms. McBean. Ms. McBean, you may begin your testimony.

MS. McBEAN: Thank you, Marjan, Special Rapporteur Rehman, and all those who provided testimonies and questions so far.

Good afternoon. My name is Tschika McBean, Human Rights Officer at the U.S. 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 Baha'i 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'i 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 the aim of destroying the Baha'i community as a viable entity in Iran continues in full force.

The Iranian government has been persistent in excluding Baha'is 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 the 48 U.N. 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 I just mentioned.

In Iran, adherents to 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, sentencings, and imprisonments, the confiscation or destruction of homes and farms, raids on private homes and businesses, beatings, denial of medication to detainees, and the denial of higher education to more than 100 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 20 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 prisons for, according to the authorities, "causing intellectual and ideological insecurity in Muslim society."



In addition, on July 31<sup>st</sup>, three former members of the seven member informal leadership group of the Baha'is of Iran, known as the Yaran-i-Iran, meaning "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 in July 31, 2022, and each given a new ten-year prison sentence on November 21, 2022.

They have filed an appeal, but their prospects are not very hopeful, and they each could 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 443 in January 2014, when a more than 15-year high was reached.

Also, there are currently some 90 Baha'is in prison. Unfortunately, women have shared the burden of incarceration and, at times, over the last few years, have constituted a majority of the 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 months during the six-month period

ending in April 2021.

In 2010 to 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 U.S. 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 so much for your time today.

CHAIR TURKEL: Now we're going to have our final witness, Ms. Meyer, to testify. You may begin your testimony.

MS. MEYER: Thank you, Chair Turkel.

My name is Kate Meyer, and I'm a Litigation Staff Attorney at the International Refugee Assistance Project. IRAP is a global legal aid and advocacy organization, working to create a world where refugees and all people seeking safety are empowered to claim their right to freedom of movement and a path to lasting refuge.

I am honored to be here today to speak about the importance of the Lautenberg Program, which has historically been a lifeline for persecuted Iranian religious minorities to safely resettle as refugees in the United States.

I will also speak about recent vetting changes that ensnared IRAP's clients and threatened the program.

I will conclude by offering recommendations to ensure that the program remains a viable pathway for Iranian religious minorities

going forward.

Nothing speaks to the importance of this program more powerfully than the experience of one of IRAP's clients, who I will refer to as "Jane Doe." Her complete statement for the record will be available on the USCIRF website.

Jane is an Iranian Christian woman who applied to come to the U.S. with her husband, daughter, and parents through the Lautenberg Program in 2016. Jane explained why she decided to flee Iran, stating:

"In Iran, my family and I faced discrimination from the Islamic Republic government for being Christian. The government security and religious police broke the windows of my husband's restaurant many times, and we were falsely accused of selling unclean products in front of our customers.

"We were also cast off from society. At my job as a secretary, I was forced to eat alone because my colleagues believed I would contaminate their food. At public clinics, I was refused

medical treatment because of my religion. The situation got worse once I had my daughter, who I knew would grow up in a gender segregated environment there. I feared that she would suffer without her father being present for many occasions in her life like I had as a child."

The Lautenberg Amendment was enacted by Congress in 1989 to facilitate refugee admission of persecuted religious minorities from certain countries in just these circumstances, with an initial focus on Jews and certain Christian minority groups from the former Soviet Union.

The Lautenberg Amendment lowered the bar for evidence that applicants are required to show in order to be eligible for refugee status.

In 2004, Congress added Iranian religious minorities to these protections through the Specter Amendment. Since its inception, approximately 30,000 individuals belonging to Iranian religious minorities have resettled in the United States under the Lautenberg-Specter Amendment in what has become known as the "Lautenberg Program."

The Lautenberg Program has historically enjoyed bipartisan support and Congress has consistently reauthorized the Lautenberg and Specter Amendments.

Lautenberg applicants typically have a U.S.-based relative sponsor their applications. In Jane's case, her uncle in the U.S. was her family sponsor.

Because the United States does not have an embassy in Iran, Lautenberg applicants who pass initial screening are granted a short visa to travel to Vienna, Austria to complete processing of their applications.

Jane's uncle deposited thousands of dollars to cover the living expenses of her and her family in Vienna for the few months that applications are typically under review.

Until 2016, applicants usually stayed in Vienna for only a few months to finish processing, and the program enjoyed a nearly 100 percent success rate of applicants being approved for admission to the U.S.

Jane believed that she too would only stay in Vienna for a short time, just like many others in her family and community had done before.

In 2017, Jane's family was given approval letters and had travel booked to the U.S. But when the family was on the way to the airport, they got a call that their flight was canceled.

They had already given up their apartment in Vienna and had to return to their building to sleep on the hallway floor. After many more months of waiting without any explanation, Jane was told that her parents could go to the United States sooner if they separated their cases, and they very reluctantly agreed to do so.

The, in February 2018, Jane and nearly 100 other Iranians in Vienna received denials of their Lautenberg applications. This left Jane and the group stranded, terrified of being forcibly returned to Iran yet shut out of the United States.

She stated:

"We were devastated, and the time that we spent waiting in Vienna—six years in total—was very



painful. Our short visa to Austria expired, leaving us without permission to work, proper health insurance, or source of financial support for ourselves and our daughter. We were warned to stay at home or risk being arrested and deported to Iran and had to apply for asylum in Austria after the United States turned its back on us."

These denials were unprecedented for the historically successful program, and IRAP subsequently filed a class action lawsuit challenging the denials. Through that litigation it came to light that a new vetting technique for refugees from a list of predominantly Muslim-majority countries had ensnared Jane and this group of applicants.

Refugees are required to share a large amount of personal information with the U.S. government in their applications, including any phone numbers and email addresses that they've used for the past ten years, as well as contact information of people in the United States—often family members—with whom they intend to reunite.

IRAP believes that the FBI vetted this information and automatically labeled as a security threat any refugee whose communication records matched with those in the government's vast bulk database, even through the database includes records of entirely innocent people caught up in the U.S. government's mass surveillance capabilities.

This extreme vetting led to a steep, unfair increase in security denials and needlessly ensnared refugees seeking a safe place to live.

A settlement agreement reached in the IRAP lawsuit required the government to reassess this group's refugee applications under fair standards.

As of this month, more than 70 individuals, 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.

Jane's case was one of those re-examined and approved under the settlement agreement and she was reunited with her parents this winter in the

U.S. in time for Christmas. But their long-awaited reunion also highlighted the toll that the last six years has taken.

She stated:

"Now that we're together again, it is bittersweet to reflect on what we lost during the years apart. My parents have aged, and I am overcome with emotion when I think of the hardships they endured without us there to support them. I had secured a job in the United States when I was first scheduled to travel, and while I kept the offer alive for some time afterwards, eventually it disappeared. We feel very happy to be reunited, but the trauma and despair of our journey remains with all of us who were stranded for so long."

I would like to offer three recommendations to the Commission to ensure that the Lautenberg Program remains a viable pathway for Iranian religious minorities.

The first recommendation is that the Biden administration should restart robust refugee resettlement for Iranian religious minorities

through the Lautenberg Program. While the situation is improving for the applicants in Vienna covered by the settlement agreement, it has still not been resolved for the program as a whole, which has been frozen since February of 2017.

There are still thousands of applicants in Iran where conditions, as my colleagues have stated, have continued to deteriorate, who are registered for the program and are waiting for their applications to be considered.

The second recommendation is for the Biden administration to commit to improving refugee vetting to increase efficiency and provide more effective security reviews so that future refugee applicants will not be forced to remain in dangerous situations or end up separated from family members while seeking safety.

Refugee applications should not be denied solely based on unreliable or immaterial evidence. An officer should review vetting information on a case-by-case basis to ensure fairness and common sense.

In Executive Order 14013, the Biden administration ordered a reexamination of the refugee vetting processes affecting this population. We hope that the administration will reevaluate refugee practices that needlessly ensnare those trying to find a safe place to live with their families and practice their religion.

The third recommendation is for USCIRF to continue to champion the Lautenberg Program. We're grateful that the Commission has consistently recommended that Congress should vote to reauthorize the Lautenberg Amendment.

We also appreciate that the Commission voiced concern over the mass denials of Lautenberg applications in 2018 and highlighted the dire situation for religious minorities in Iran.

We urge the Commission to continue to uplift the United States' commitment to religious freedom as a foreign policy priority.

Thank you very much.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much, Ms. Meyer, for your testimony.

Now we're going to move on to the Q&A session. I would like to start by asking a general question, which is essentially what is the regime's concern with the Iranian women and girls? Why do they choose to target them? If anyone can care to comment, this is for all of our three panelists.

MS. GREENBLATT: I'll jump in. I think that, as other panelists and other presenters discussed earlier, the Islamic Republic is based on a system of persecution and hierarchy of rights and citizens. And as long as a segment of the population is persecuted, someone is benefitting from this, and for the longest time, for 43 years, there was a belief that men and Shi'a men had more power because of their position and because of their full citizenship rights.

But the events following the death of Mahsa Amini brought a realization to a large portion of the population that even if they are benefitting from this repressive system, they are also in different ways victimized and used by this system, that there are really no beneficiaries when

there are no equal citizens according to a legal system.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much.

Now I'd like to recognize commissioners, starting with Vice Chair Cooper, for questions. You're still muted.

VICE CHAIR COOPER: All right, sorry. I'm a rabbi. I'm not used to being muted at all so please bear with me.

[Laughter.]

VICE CHAIR COOPER: A little tolerance would help.

First to Ms. Meyer's very powerful and coherent presentation, can you please share with us who the key chair people are in the House and Senate who deal with the relevant issues surrounding the Lautenberg Amendment?

And my second question is more generically for anyone. And that is I was very much taken by the fact that the presenters sort of indicated that the elites are being called out, almost universally, and the Special Rapporteur mentioned

they should be held specifically culpable.

Is there any consideration both in terms of U.S., UK, and probably Germany, among three major countries, to start consideration of cancellation of visas of members of their families who are sent to our democracies to enjoy the freedom here that they're crushing at home as a way to have some direct impact on the behavior of the Iranian regime?

MS. MEYER: Thank you, Commissioner Cooper.

I would like to draw attention to the commitments that the Biden administration has made in the Executive Order to review the refugee vetting policy that affects this population, which requests that the State Department and DHS conduct reviews of these programs. I think that those agencies will be important players in reforms to ensure that refugee vetting and this program continue to be a meaningful opportunity and pathway for Iranian religious minorities going forward.

VICE CHAIR COOPER: So that would be in



the executive branch. My question is, is there a way for us—remember that our spiritual leader is former Congressman Frank Wolf. So is there any way that you see a task for the legislative branch to speed up the process that you've been struggling to get reform now for a number of years?

MS. MEYER: Yes, thank you for this question.

It's very important for members of the legislative branch to consistently uplift the importance of this program and reauthorize the Lautenberg and Specter Amendments, which has historically enjoyed bipartisan support, and bringing attention to the situation and the dire circumstances of Iranian religious minorities.

And the historic support that this pathway has had across the aisle in Congress is a critical way to ensure this program success going forward.

VICE CHAIR COOPER: Thank you.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you.

Now I'd like to recognize Commissioner Schneck.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: Thank you, Chairman Turkel.

I have two questions if possible, but the first one I'd like to address to Tschika McBean.

I'm horrified by the situation that the Baha'is have faced, been around for such a long time, and I'm extremely troubled by the rising levels of persecution that seem to be occurring there.

And my specific question in this regard, is there analysis for why, what is happening, why are these, why is persecution actually increasing over the last couple of years? And I'd be curious if that extends as well to other minority religions?

MS. McBEAN: Thank you so much for your questions, Commissioner Schneck.

We don't have specific information about why the persecution has increased, but based on what we have heard is that about a couple years ago, the information regarding the Baha'i community, truthful information regarding the

Baha'i community, was not being reached to the local population.

And a couple of years ago what we witnessed on line is that the local population were actually defending the cause of the Baha'i community because truthful information has been able to seep within the society.

And I think based on that change on the ground, the authorities are finding ways to increase the persecution, especially through spreading disinformation about the Baha'i faith, to quell that organic support that we're seeing building within the Iranian society.

So I think that is probably one of the reasons why we see the escalation in persecution of the Baha'i community, and we kind of see the time between the escalation of the persecution and the increase of the propaganda against the Baha'i community.

As I mentioned in my testimony, about a couple years ago, there were about 29 postings per month. Now, it's 950 relentless postings against

the Baha'i community.

And so as the population are becoming aware of the truth about Baha'is, which are just people who are trying to become positive members of their society, you see the attack on the community by the increasing persecution, propaganda and other means. So I think that is, you know, one of the direct ties that we're seeing there.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: Thank you. Thank you very much.

My second question, I suppose this probably goes to Ms. Greenblatt, but I'd be curious if any of you have a response to it.

I'm curious what actual units of the Iranian government are most culpable for what we're seeing here?

Of course, there was the original incident from the morality police, but, you know, I'm wondering about the judiciary, I'm wondering about the Revolutionary Guard, I'm wondering—I'm just curious what units should be held most accountable?

MS. GREENBLATT: All of the above. I

really have to say that the regime's arms are deployed in different levels of the society in repressive forces. Wherever they are present, whether it is on the ground with militia, the IRGC, they're all repressive, they're all mistreating the citizens.

And then all the way to the treatment in the prisons and the judiciary system, the hasty legal proceedings, even if you can call these legal proceedings, they're all to be held accountable, all of the above.

But I think the most important person to blame for all of these crimes and bloodshed is the Supreme Leader himself, and it's astonishing that he's still not sanctioned by our government.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: Thank you.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you. Thank you very much.

Now, I'd like to go to Commissioner Curry for questions.

COMMISSIONER CURRY: Thank you.

I know our time is limited. I don't have

any questions, but I do want to just comment and thank the panelists. Amazing, informative, and we greatly are with you and the people of Iran so thank you for your comments.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you.

Finally, I'd like to recognize a giant, a spiritual leader, as Vice Chair Cooper said, former Congressman and Commissioner Frank Wolf for final questions, any thoughts that he might have.

COMMISSIONER WOLF: Well, thank you, Commissioner Turkel.

I'm going to ask you a question, but I think that the Baha'is have suffered so much, I mean probably more than any other group.

The Iranian people have been so heroic. When you see the stories, and you see the women demonstrating, I mean it's easy to demonstrate in London or Washington, D.C., and I'm going to ask you the question. You may or may not, you may not want to answer it because it may be so direct.

I think we in the United States and the West have failed, failed the Iranian people. I

think President Obama failed the Iranian people. The Green Revolution, it wasn't until that young girl died that they did anything. I think there was an opportunity there that was missed.

I personally believe that the West and the United States government is failing to do all that it can do to help bring about freedom for the Iranian people.

Do you think the West is doing everything it can do to help or do you think much more should be done? Yes or no?

MS. GREENBLATT: No.

MS. MEYER: I can jump in and add that, you know, in terms of assisting Iranian religious minorities, restarting robust refugee resettlement through the Lautenberg Program is one way that, a concrete way, that the Biden administration can extend a hand to Iranian religious minorities who need to flee persecution right now.

And that's one step that could be taken immediately to reform refugee processing and ensure that this is a meaningful opportunity so I think,

you know, we could be doing more, and that's one example of it.

MS. McBEAN: I just want to add that, you know, the Baha'i community is very, very grateful for the support they've received from the U.S. government, USCIRF, human rights organizations.

I know that, you know, we usually ask for tweets spotlighting the persecution of the Baha'i community, the passage of congressional resolutions every year, you know, press releases, reports, which might seem typical day-to-day, but these activities we believe kind of stay the hands of persecution.

It's similar to like a regular activity like breathing. You breathe every day, but if you stop breathing, the effects are detrimental.

Similarly, these typical, you know, regular activities, if it's stopped, the persecution can actually, in our opinion, increase. So we've very grateful for what have been done so far.

We always are grateful for anything



additional that can be done. So we're going to just thank you all for your support throughout the years.

COMMISSIONER WOLF: Thank you.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you.

We're coming to the top of the hour, finishing up this hearing. I'd like to give all of our three panelists a chance to share any final thoughts or comments that you may have.

MS. GREENBLATT: I will go.

CHAIR TURKEL: Go ahead.

MS. GREENBLATT: I think that it is so important to hear the voices of the Iranian people, and I'm so grateful that this esteemed Commission and each one of you have taken this matter seriously and are continuing to pay attention to this.

And, yes, Commissioner Wolf, you're absolutely right about the limits of the U.S. policies in response to this revolution that is taking place in the streets of Iran. And I think that it is essential that our government will hold

the Supreme Leader and President Raisi accountable for the bloodshed and the crimes that have been committed against their own people.

And I think it would be really more important than any policy measure, I think it is due time for President Biden himself to grip the podium and speak directly to the Iranian people and let them know that he is watching, and he is behind them, and he is supportive of them.

Then all these other policy recommendations, including visas and, yes, refugee policies, are very helpful as well, but I can tell you as a religious refugee member myself, Iranians want to live in Iran. They love their country. They'd much rather be in their own country.

But let's hope that Iranians can rebuild their own country and build a free country for themselves where for all religious groups, all ethnicities, all genders are respected and treated with dignity.

MS. McBEAN: Thank you.

I guess my closing comments is that, you

know, all Baha'is I guess the world over are saddened to see the loss of life in Iran, but the one thing that is encouraging is the coming together of the world and the Iranian people at large to try to bring equity and justice to the people of Iran.

So we definitely send our support and well wishes to those on the ground fighting. Thank you.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you.

MS. MEYER: And thank you.

I wanted to also express my thanks for your time today and for your consideration of these important issues.

I also wanted to thank the Commission again for continuing to champion the Lautenberg Program, and I wanted to highlight again the perspective of our client Jane Doe, who expressed in her statement that her hope is that no other applicants will have to go through six years of heartache and separation from her family that she suffered through.

We urge the Commission to press the Biden

administration to make necessary reforms to ensure that the United States is not employing overzealous screening techniques that are needlessly keeping out refugees who are seeking a safe place to live and practice their religion here.

Thank you again for this opportunity.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much. I wanted to conclude by thanking our witnesses for taking the time to testify, including Senator Rosen.

It's very important that you continue to do what you do. This is a critical time, and this is not the first time that the Iranian people, as Commissioner Wolf noted, looking for help from the free societies, liberal democracies. They're looking for support, moral and whatever that other support that we can provide.

Our mandate does not specifically instruct us to make recommendations to our international partners and allies, but I'd like to note that the United States government, Secretary of State, in particular, should encourage countries like the UK

and Canada that have similar type of sanction mechanisms, such as the Magnitsky Act, to use it. Passing a law and making ourselves feel good is not enough.

Our words must be put into action. And this is not the time that we should dance around or show tepid response. Silence can be taken as a weakness by brutal regimes around the world, including those in Tehran.

We should not, we should not waver. We should continue to support. We also should use whatever the tools that we have in our disposal in our toolbox to make it costly for those perpetrators for not only committing these kind of human rights abuses, but also trying to make it normal, kind of a new normal, trying to normalize. We've seen it in Ukraine through this unprovoked illegal re-invasion by Putin.

We're seeing it in China. There's an ongoing genocide. And as American historian Anne Applebaum often says, the bad guys are winning and they're very united, and the question becomes are

we united? Are the free liberal societies, the free people, like ourselves, are united?

As somebody who has been advocating for human rights centered foreign policy, I firmly believe moral concerns must be an essential part of our own foreign policy objectives and that of those who work with us on multiple fronts, those specific allies and partners.

United States is the chief architect and defender of rules based international system, governed by rules of political economic values. And we should stick to it.

And again, I have to reemphasize, as somebody who has lived through this, and I know it firsthand, how risky, how dangerous that it is to speak out against brutal regimes, and the United States needs to continue to give that hope to millions of hopeless people around the world.

Our values are our greatest strengths, and we need to stick to it, and we need to continue to promote human rights value centric foreign policy.

And with that, I'd like to thank our

Commissioners for attending today's hearing. I also wanted to thank our staff team led by our Executive Director Erin Singshinsuk. I'm particularly grateful to Dr. Scott Weiner, Danielle Ashbahian, and Veronica McCarthy for their diligent efforts to organize today's hearing.

Thank you again. With that, today's hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 3:52 p.m. ET, the hearing was adjourned.]