

Rep. Ted Deutch

Remarks – USCIRF Hearing – State-Sanctioned Religious Freedom Violations and Coercion by Saudi Arabia and Iran

December 8, 2021

Remarks as Delivered

Good morning to Nadine, Sharon, and USCIRF leadership team. Thanks for inviting me to join you for this important hearing.

I would also like to extend a special greeting to Dr. Hala Aldosari, who has lent her expertise to our subcommittee. It's great to see her here today. I look forward to hearing what all the panelists have to say.

On Friday will mark 73 years since the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a document that outlines and protects the fundamental rights and freedoms of every human being.

The Declaration unequivocally states that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Everyone has the freedom alone or in community with others in public or private to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance. And everyone--that's all peoples and all nations.

Of course, the reason we're here today is that those universal rights are not universally respected.

As a senior member of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, and as chair of the Middle East Subcommittee, I've worked with my colleagues for years on ways in which the United States Congress can effectively promote freedom of religion and other basic human rights on the world stage and hold human rights abusers to account.

I'm clear-eyed about the challenges that religious minorities face in the Middle East, in particular, from imprisonment of religious dissidents in Saudi Arabia to the execution of religious minority leaders in Iran. And I have spoken out forcefully against these abuses in the Middle East and around the world.

In my time today, I'd like to highlight two specific issues that have been priorities of mine in my work.

First, those who know me know that I'm not a stranger to the issue of persecution or wrongful detentions in Iran as one of my own constituents, Bob Levinson, is the longest-held American hostage in history, and we know that one of the dangers that religious minorities and those who advocate for them face, particularly in Iran, is arbitrary and unlawful arrest and detention.

Those of you at USCIRF have seen firsthand through your advocacy the horrors that, for example, Raif Badawi has faced in prison for insulting Islam because he "liked" a Saudi Christian Facebook page and advocated online for the equality of Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

I sponsored multiple pieces of legislation that not only condemn actions like those but also bolster our ability to hold accountable those who take prisoners of conscience and other unlawful detainees abroad so we can move toward a future where no family has to suffer what Bob's family has suffered.

During my time in Congress, I've also been a persistent advocate for the Baha'i community in Iran. Congress has long expressed bipartisan support for the human rights of the Iranian people, including the right to freedom of religion. Going back decades, long before I became a member of Congress, the U.S. Congress stood firmly behind religious and ethnic minority communities in Iran, and, in particular, the Baha'i, and over the last 11 plus years since I've been here, my colleagues and I have done so as well.

In keeping with that tradition, I was proud to reintroduce a bipartisan resolution in the 117th Congress H.Res. 744, which expresses the support of the House of Representatives for the rights of the Baha'i community in Iran and condemns the Iranian regime's egregious record of human rights violations against its own people, including persecution of religious and ethnic minorities like the Baha'i.

The resolution highlights the abuses that the Baha'i community has persistently faced at the hands of the Iranian regime, from restrictions in their places of worship to barring and dismissal from employment and education, from harassment and intimidation to physical attacks, and from arbitrary arrests to execution. It demands immediate action by the government of Iran to reverse and remedy these injustices, and it reiterates the obligation of the United States government to utilize all available tools to hold accountable those responsible for these abuses, including international diplomacy with our partners and allies, and sanctions where appropriate.

Human rights are fundamental. And every human being is inherently entitled to their protection. Whether abuses of those rights take place in a nation where diplomatic ties have been severed or in a nation we consider a partner or ally, we must speak out against them.

From my days in college advocating on behalf of Soviet Jewry, I know that a threat or attack against any minority community is a threat or attack on all humanity, and the U.S. must be unyielding in our efforts to protect all people, especially ethnic and religious minorities, to crack down on those who perpetrate human rights abuses, support victims of those abuses, and that's true wherever they occur.

Our legitimacy, quite frankly, our legitimacy as a global leader and our moral standing in the world depends on it.

So I look forward to continuing to collaborate with USCIRF, with the esteemed experts here today, on ways that Congress and the United States government can make progress to support victims of religious freedom abuses and to hold abusers accountable.

I thank you again for inviting me to join you today, and I look forward to the rest of the program.

Thanks so much.