

November 1, 2000: Commission Expresses Concern, Issues Recommendations on Iran

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom today expressed deep concern over the conditions of religious freedom in Iran and recommended that the United States reaffirm that religious freedom and human rights are central to U.S. policy toward Iran. The Commission also recommended, however, that the U.S. government eliminate barriers to unofficial religious, cultural, and academic exchanges with Iranians, specifically by issuing visas and easing a Justice Department policy of fingerprinting all Iranians at U.S. ports of entry. The recommendations were contained in a report on Iran to President Clinton, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, and leaders of Congress as provided for in the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) of 1998. In accord with the IRFA, the State Department has for the last two years listed Iran as a "country of particular concern," for its severe and egregious violations of religious freedom. The Commission finds that: "Members of the Baha'i community suffer the worst forms of religious persecution at the hands of the state." More than 200 Baha'is were executed in the six years following the 1979 revolution. Four Baha'is are now on death row for practicing their religion. Iranian law does not recognize the Baha'i faith and Baha'is are effectively prohibited from teaching or practicing their religion, communicating with their world headquarters, attending university, or holding government jobs. Baha'i religious sites were seized after the revolution, and many destroyed. Members of the officially recognized minority religions - Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians - are subject to official discrimination, including prohibitions on serving in the army, security services, judiciary, or as a school principal; limited access to higher education; and discrimination in legal proceedings. Evangelical Christians suffer further repression, including official harassment and surveillance, and a number of leaders have been murdered or have disappeared in the past 10 years. Jews are vulnerable to harassment and imprisonment, as shown by the recent trial and conviction of a group of Iranian Jews under conditions falling far short of international standards. The Commission made the following recommendations for U.S. government policy: The President or Secretary of State should reaffirm to the Government of Iran that improvement in religious freedom and other human rights in that country is a prerequisite for the complete relaxation of sanctions by and the normalization of relations with the United States. The U.S. Government should consistently, continuously, and vigorously press the Government of Iran to improve conditions of religious freedom, and should urge its European and other allies to support advocacy for religious freedom in Iran. Voice of America Farsi-language broadcasting into Iran should include regular reporting on religious freedom in Iran and religious freedom issues in general. The U.S. Administration should continue to sponsor annual resolutions of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights condemning Iran's egregious and systematic violations of religious freedom and should recruit the support of other Commission member countries, until such violations cease. The United States should facilitate (through issuance of visas) and remove barriers (such as the Department of Justice policy of fingerprinting Iranians at ports of entry) to unofficial cultural exchange--e.g., academic, religious, athletic, and scientific--between the United States and Iran. The full text of the Commission's findings can be obtained by contacting the Communications office at (202) 523-3240 or at communications@uscirf.gov.

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