

Iran hearing - opening statement

Advancing
Religious Freedom and Related Human Rights in Iran:

Strategies for an
Effective U.S.
Policy

Opening Statement

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Commission on International Religious Freedom

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Good morning. My name is Michael Cromartie, and I serve as chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. I would like to welcome you to today's hearing on advancing religious freedom and related human rights in Iran. We have a large number of issues to address in a very short time with a distinguished array of witnesses, so I will be brief.

U.S. government-level discussions of U.S. policy on Iran focus overwhelmingly on the important nuclear question. As a consequence, it seems sometimes as if we hear very little about the precarious state of human rights, including religious freedom, in that country. This is at a time when, under the rule of President Ahmadinejad, the status of such freedoms has markedly deteriorated, especially for religious minorities, and for Baha'is, Sufi Muslims, and Christians in particular, as well as Muslim dissidents and reformers. For example:

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Over the past several years, and particularly

since President Ahmadinejad came to power, members of the Baha'i community have been harassed, physically attacked, arrested, and imprisoned. In November 2007, three Baha'is were sentenced to four years in prison for allegedly spreading propaganda against the regime; 51 others received suspended sentences. Their alleged crime was setting up a program to educate poor Iranian children.

Sufis face growing government repression of their communities and religious practices, including increased intimidation and harassment, and the detention of prominent Sufi leaders by the intelligence and security services in the past year. In 2006, Iranian authorities shut down a Sufi community center in the Shi'a holy city of Qom. More than 1,000 Sufis were arrested after they took to the streets in protest. Several served one-year prison terms.

President Ahmadinejad's denials of the Holocaust and statements calling for Israel to be "wiped of the map" have created a climate of fear among Iran's 30,000-member Jewish community. Official policies promoting anti-Semitism are on the rise in Iran and government discrimination against Jews continues to be pervasive.

Christians, in particular Evangelicals and other Protestants, in Iran continue to be subject to harassment, arrests, close surveillance, and imprisonment; many are reported to have fled the country. In the past, converts to Christianity and their advocates have been killed in Iran. The Iranian parliament is currently considering a new law that would impose serious punishments, including the death penalty, on converts from Islam.

Finally, dissidents and political reformers continue to be imprisoned on criminal charges of blasphemy and for criticizing the Islamic regime. A number of senior Shi'a religious leaders who have opposed various Iranian government policies on political or religious grounds have also been targets of state repression, including house arrest, detention without charge, trial without due process, torture, and other forms of ill-treatment.

The U.S. government, at the highest levels, should take every opportunity to call for

the release of all religious prisoners in Iran, as well as to draw attention to the need to hold Iranian authorities accountable in specific cases where severe violations have occurred.

This bleak human rights picture is being overshadowed, rightly or wrongly, by other concerns. Our overarching question today is, considering the current state of U.S.-Iranian relations, what can the United States do to address these deteriorating human rights conditions? What strategies can be employed? Should we be isolating Iran or engaging Iran without preconditions? What do we need to know about the situation on the ground that can inform new strategies?

We are honored to have an excellent group of witnesses to help address these questions in their remarks today and in their statements for the record. Before we hear from our witnesses, let me just say a word about the structure of the hearing. We will have three panels today with a total of six witnesses, so our timing will be tight. We would like each of our panelists to speak for 7-10 minutes, which should leave us plenty of time for us to ask follow-up questions. Each of you may, however, submit longer statements that will be posted on the Commission's Web site.