



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

USCIRF HEARING SUMMARY:

January 2022

### SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAN STATE-SANCTIONED RELIGIOUS FREEDOM VIOLATIONS

Nadine Maenza  
*Chair*

Nury Turkel  
*Vice Chair*

#### Commissioners

Anurima Bhargava

James W. Carr

Frederick A. Davie

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Sharon Kleinbaum

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Erin D. Singhsinsuk  
*Executive Director*

On December 8, 2021, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom ([USCIRF](#)) hosted a virtual hearing on [\*State-Sanctioned Religious Freedom Violations and Coercion by Saudi Arabia and Iran\*](#). This hearing explored the tactics used by each government to target religious minorities and those who dissent from each government's interpretation of religion.



USCIRF Chair [Nadine Maenza](#) led the hearing, convening four witnesses from a variety of perspectives. She opened the hearing by describing how each government harms individuals who do not adhere to its respective interpretation of Islam. "Many governments restrict freedom of religion or belief to a lesser degree through prejudiced messaging, employment discrimination, or unequal provision of social services," Chair Maenza stated. "Saudi Arabia and Iran, however, go well beyond these restrictions, harming religious minorities, dissidents, and peaceful activists through their use of force and other forms of coercion."



USCIRF Commissioner [Anurima Bhargava](#) detailed each country's treatment of religious prisoners. Saudi prison officials beat and sexually assaulted women who peacefully protested male guardianship laws. Iranian security and prison officials subjected detainees to prolonged solitary confinement, beatings, floggings, and electric shocks. The governments of Saudi Arabia and Iran both actively use violence to enforce the state's interpretation of religion against the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community.



[Rep. Ted Deutch](#) (D-FL), a senior member of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Chair of the subcommittee on the Middle East Subcommittee, highlighted specific issues related to freedom of religion or belief in Saudi Arabia and Iran. Rep. Deutch has been an outspoken opponent of wrongful prison detentions, including his constituent Bob Levinson, and USCIRF Religious Prisoner of Conscience (RPOC), Raif Badawi. In addition, the Congressman has been a persistent advocate for the Baha'i community in Iran and reintroduced [H.Res. 744](#), the bipartisan resolution condemning the Iranian regime's egregious record of violations against religious minorities like Baha'is.

#### USCIRF's Mission

*To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.*



*Dr. Ahmed Shaheed*, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, and former United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, detailed the religious freedom restrictions in Iran.

Iran's constitution makes an explicit commitment to establishing the Ja'afari School of Shi'a Islam as its official religion. Members of non-favored or unrecognized religions are prohibited from engaging in public acts of religious expression. Places of worship used by religious minorities are frequently surveilled to ensure that members of the favored religion do not attend religious services held on those premises. Moreover, the conversion of religious minorities to the official state religion is encouraged, but conversion away from Shi'a Islam is strongly discouraged or even sanctioned. Of particular concern is the government's persecution of the Baha'i community and the harsh treatment through framing them falsely as a national security threat. Further, Iran remains the foremost state perpetrator of antisemitic hatred.

Dr. Shaheed provided the following recommendations to the U.S. government and the international community:

- Support the capacity of human rights defenders to document human rights abuses.
- Consider the promotion of respect for human rights in Iran as a strategic means to promoting regional and international security imperatives.
- Work through United Nations (UN) bodies to foster a 'rights up front' approach to the promotion and protection of human rights in Iran amongst these entities.
- Use and expand the various measures permissible under international law, such as sanctions under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act to target key perpetrators.
- When the United States rejoins the UN Human Rights Council (HRC), it should work with other member states to adopt a substantive resolution that addresses accountability and Iran's lack of cooperation with the mechanisms.



*Eric Goldstein*, Acting Executive Director of Middle East and North Africa Division at Human Rights Watch, recounted similar intolerance, discrimination, and violence used by both Shia-majority Iran and Sunni-majority Saudi Arabia.  
In both countries:

- Intolerance for religious minorities is extensive. In Iran, the Baha'i faith is considered a heretical sect and its adherents are subjected to severe discrimination in law and practice. Saudi Arabia does not tolerate public worship by adherents of religions other than Islam. The government systematically discriminates against Ja'afari Shi'a and Ismaili Muslims, including in public education, the justice system, and employment.
- Women have an inferior status in law and practice. Saudi Arabia's male guardianship system for women effectively renders them minors under the law. In Iran, women face discrimination in marriage, divorce, inheritance, and decisions relating to children.
- Authorities have little tolerance for public questioning of the government's domestic or foreign policies, human rights practices, or official interpretations of Islam.
- Capital punishment is used frequently, including against religious dissidents. The legal systems in both countries provide for corporal punishment, such as lashing for certain offenses.

Mr. Goldstein provided the following policy recommendations to the U.S. government:

#### Iran:

- Work with multilateral institutions like the UNHRC to produce statements of concern and press for access for UN special rapporteurs and NGOs to examine human rights in-country.
- Create clear public engagement on human rights issues with Iran as part of a regional approach that includes the same public criticism of human rights practices of U.S. allies, including Egypt and Israel.
- Review restrictions on academic exchange programs that hinder contact with Iranian civil society.

#### Saudi Arabia:

- Suspend arms sales to Saudi Arabia for its conduct in the war in Yemen.
- Publicly press for the release of persons unjustly detained or prevented from leaving the country.
- Reassess the U.S.-Saudi relationship, prioritizing human rights as part of that reassessment.



Marjan Greenblatt, Founder and Director of the Alliance of Rights for all Minorities, highlighted the systematic discrimination and harassment religious minorities face in Iran. “Iran’s recognized minorities are used as propaganda tools for the regime, to promote a facade of tolerance and acceptance,” she stated.

- The Sunni Muslim community suffers from disproportionate levels of poverty and unemployment. They are most likely to be arrested, jailed, and executed. All aspects of life in Sunni communities, including education content, religious sermons, and civic life, are monitored.
- Christian churches remain closed arbitrarily. Due to lack of human and financial resources, it is difficult for the Armenian Christian community to publish their required books and provide government approved religious education.
- The Iranian government’s discrimination against the Bahá’í community extends from “cradle to grave” and occurs in every part of Iranian society. The government has confiscated properties belonging to members of the Bahá’í community, closed their businesses, and removed access to higher education and cemeteries to conduct ritual burials.
- Those who seek to convert to the Sufi Gonabadi order must pass through an education period with a *marja’ taqlid* (Grand Ayatollah), approved by the clerical establishment. This is a departure from the traditional system of conversion to Sufism, which has historically been open and accepting to all.
- In May 2021, Sepanta Niknam, a Zoroastrian civil servant who registered for the sixth term of the city council in Tehran, was disqualified on the grounds of non-adherence to Islam.

Ms. Greenblatt offered the following recommendations to the U.S. government:

- Designate Iran as a Country of Particular Concern, or CPC, for violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).
- Press Iran to release all prisoners detained for their religion or belief, particularly in light of a recent Supreme Court ruling that promoting Christianity and joining a house church is not criminalized in law.

- Raise religious freedom and other human rights abuses in any discussion with Iran’s government regarding U.S. re-entry to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).
- Continue to impose targeted sanctions on Iranian government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom and work with members of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance to exert multilateral pressure on Iran to improve religious freedom conditions and release religious prisoners of conscience.



Hala Aldosari, Ph.D., a scholar in women’s health and activist from Saudi Arabia, discussed the challenges to religious freedom in Saudi Arabia due to the historical theocratic formation of the Saudi state and its recent pattern of repression.

- There is a newly established online surveillance system, and the state security apparatus began conducting waves of mass arrests and issuing strict laws and regulations against perceived critics and dissidents inside and outside the state.
- State-sponsored media outlets and religious institutions were deployed in an orchestrated campaign against persons and thoughts aimed at challenging or disobeying Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman.
- Saudi Arabia’s government has exploited its religious oversight of the two Islamic holy mosques for political advantage. Over the past four years, Saudi Arabia has deported four Uyghur Muslims to China while visiting Mecca. In order to stop a United Nations investigation into possible war crimes in Yemen, the government threatened to create obstacles for Indonesians’ visits to Mecca if it supported the investigation.
- Saudi courts consider the cases of women’s disobedience valid if guardians’ express religious concerns over women’s choices, such as inappropriate dress, working in mixed gender places, or traveling alone.

Chair Maenza concluded the hearing by thanking the witnesses for their expertise and testimonies.

USCIRF recommends the U.S. government:

- Raise religious freedom and other human rights abuses in any discussions with Iran's government regarding U.S. re-entry to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA);
- Impose targeted sanctions on Saudi and Iranian government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations;
- Reintroduce and pass the bipartisan Saudi Educational Transparency and Reform Act, which requires the U.S. Department of State to report annually on religious intolerance in Saudi textbooks and efforts to remove this content; and
- Reauthorize and ensure implementation of the Lautenberg Amendment, which aids persecuted Iranian religious minorities seeking refugee status in the United States.



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

The Commissioners listed below were present at the hearing.



Chair  
Nadine Maenza



Commissioner  
Anurima Bhargava



Commissioner  
Frederick A. Davie



Commissioner  
Khizr Khan

### Professional Staff

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.