



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

State-Sanctioned Religious Freedom Violations and Coercion

by Saudi Arabia and Iran

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Nadine Maenza, USCIRF Chair

Good morning and thank you for attending the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's hearing today on State Sanctioned Religious Freedom Violations and Coercion by Saudi Arabia and Iran. I would also like to thank our distinguished witnesses for joining us.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or 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 U.S. government. Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this virtual hearing.

USCIRF works to monitor and improve religious freedom in a diverse array of countries and contexts. This diversity calls for a variety of tools and approaches, as different contexts present different landscapes for the success and failure of religious freedom efforts. For today's hearing, we will be focusing on the religious freedom implications of state-sanctioned religious coercion in Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Saudi Arabia's official interpretation of Islam is rooted in Sunni jurisprudence while Iran's is rooted in Shi'a jurisprudence. However, both governments use coercion in similar ways to deny freedom of religion or belief to those within their borders. Many governments restrict freedom of religion or belief to a lesser degree through prejudiced messaging, employment discrimination, or unequal provision of social services. 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.

Religious minorities in Saudi Arabia and Iran have suffered immensely as a result of this coercion. In Saudi Arabia, Shi'a Muslims who peacefully protested in 2011 continue to be prosecuted, convicted, and incarcerated on the basis of their faith. Several of those on trial include religious clerics who are both Sunni and Shi'a. This past June, Saudi Arabia executed a Shi'a Muslim man named Mustafa Darwish. In 2011, when he is alleged to have committed many of the offenses for which he was executed, Darwish was a minor. In April 2019, Saudi Arabia executed 32 Shi'a Muslims for "attempting to spread the Shi'a confession," and other charges. Many of the men executed were reportedly tortured into confessing.

In Iran, officials from the Ministry of Intelligence and other state agencies regularly use force to enter the houses of Baha'is and other religious minorities, confiscating property and arresting those who live inside. The government has also moved ahead with plans to seize Baha'i land in the village of Ivel, and forcibly displace Baha'is who have lived there for 160 years. Iran also continues to execute Sunni Muslims, including three who were executed on December 31, 2020. And it continues to target Christians, including USCIRF religious prisoner of conscience

Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani. After being accused of “promoting Zionist Christianity,” he was arrested in 2018 by plain clothes security forces who forcibly entered his house and used a taser gun on his son. In February 2021, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention issued an opinion that Nadarkhani’s ongoing detention violates several international legal obligations.

Women in Saudi Arabia and Iran are particularly impacted by state coercion and violence. Both governments use such measures to enforce laws that restrict women’s ability to exercise their freedom of religion or belief.

Saudi Arabia continues to detain nonviolent activists who protest male guardianship laws. These laws are premised on the state’s interpretation of gender roles within Islam. These jailed activists have reported the use of extreme violence, sexual assault, and threats of murder against them during interrogations in prison. Furthermore, guardianship laws allow for state violence by giving abusive men the power to enlist state resources to forcibly return women to their houses.

In Iran, security forces harass and arrest women who protest mandatory headscarf laws. Iranian authorities have arrested and seriously mistreated scores of women

who have peacefully protested these provisions. In 2019, an Iranian woman named Sahar Khodayari was threatened during a court hearing with a six month sentence for “appearing in public without a hijab” after she tried to enter a soccer stadium, from which woman in Iran are banned. Following the hearing, Khodayari set herself on fire outside the courthouse. She died three weeks later after suffering third-degree burns on almost 90% of her body.

Religious coercion extends far beyond these examples in Saudi Arabia and Iran. I now turn to USCIRF Commissioner Anurima Bhargava to provide further remarks that will help frame today’s conversation.