

MEMO

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Iran's Severe Discrimination against Religious Minorities

This week, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent U.S. government commission, condemned Iran's harsh repression of religious minorities. The USCIRF statement declared: "Two years have passed since President [Hassan] Rouhani assumed office, and for two years he has failed on his promise to improve the climate for religious freedom, particularly for religious minority communities." Under President Rouhani, Iran continues to persecute Christians, Sunni Muslims, Baha'is, and Sufi Muslims. The United States must continue to pressure Iran to end its suppression of religious freedom. Below are excerpts from the USCIRF 2015 annual report on Iran, released earlier this year.

Iran engages in discriminatory arrests, illegal executions, and suppression to stifle religious freedom.

- **Arrests Increase Under Rouhani:** "Since President Hassan Rouhani assumed office in August 2013, the number of individuals from religious minority communities who are in prison because of their beliefs has increased. The government of Iran continues to engage in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, including prolonged detention, torture, and executions based primarily or entirely upon the religion of the accused."
- **Executions of Religious Dissidents:** "Dissidents and human rights defenders were increasingly subject to abuse and several were sentenced to death and even executed for the capital crime of "enmity against God."
- **Suppression of Dissent:** "Iranian authorities regularly detain and harass journalists, bloggers, and human rights defenders who say or write anything critical of the Islamic revolution or the Iranian government."

Iranian Christians face severe discrimination, incarceration, and physical abuse.

- **Imprisonment of Christians:** "As of February 2015, approximately 90 Christians were either in prison, detained, or awaiting trial because of their religious beliefs and activities."
- **Abuse of American Pastor Saeed Abedini:** "In March 2014, prison authorities beat [Iranian-born American] Pastor Abedini after which he was hospitalized for nearly two months to receive treatment for the injuries sustained from the beatings. In May 2014, Pastor Abedini was beaten a second time when he was released from the hospital and returned to prison."
- **Raiding Church Services:** "Over the past year, there were numerous incidents of Iranian authorities raiding church services, threatening church members, and arresting and imprisoning worshippers and church leaders, particularly Evangelical Christian converts."

Iran's Baha'i community is subject to harsh repression and government-sponsored discrimination.

- **Baha'is Labeled as Heretics:** “The government views Baha'is, who number at least 300,000, as “heretics” and consequently they face repression on the grounds of apostasy. Since 1979, authorities have killed or executed more than 200 Baha'i leaders, and more than 10,000 have been dismissed from government and university jobs.”
- **Barring Baha'i Students from Higher Education:** “Although the Iranian government maintains publicly that Baha'is are free to attend university, the de facto policy of preventing Baha'is from obtaining higher education remains in effect.”
- **Forced Closure of Baha'i-owned Businesses:** In October 2014, nearly 80 Baha'i-owned shops in Kerman Province were forcibly closed.”

The Iranian regime punishes dissenting voices within Islam with detentions, floggings, and executions.

- **Executions of Sunni Muslims:** “150 Sunni Muslims are in prison on charges related to their beliefs and religious activities. More than 30 are on death row after having been convicted of “enmity against God” in unfair judicial proceedings.”
- **Harsh Prison Sentences for Shi'a Reformers:** “Over the past few years, the Iranian government has imposed harsh prison sentences on prominent reformers from the Shi'a majority community. Authorities charged many of these reformers with “insulting Islam,” criticizing the Islamic Republic, and publishing materials that allegedly deviate from Islamic standards.”
- **Detaining Hundreds of Sufi Muslims:** “Over the past year, authorities have detained hundreds of Sufis, sentencing many to imprisonment, fines, and floggings. In May 2014, approximately 35 Sufis were convicted on trumped-up charges related to their religious activities and given sentences ranging from three months to four years in prison.”