



Ready to Join the International Community?

Iran should stop persecuting religious minorities.

By Doug Bandow

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The United Nations Human Rights Council angered Iran by renewing the mandate of monitor Ahmed Shaheed, who has criticized Tehran's abuses. His work remains vital as long as Iran violates its citizens' most basic rights.

At the same time nuclear negotiations continue. Dealing with Tehran could turn into the Obama administration's greatest foreign policy success or another disaster. If the interim Geneva agreement leads to permanent denuclearization of the Islamic Republic of Iran, President Barack Obama can claim an achievement nonpareil. If the effort collapses, he will look dangerously naïve.

Everything depends on whether Tehran, and not just President Hassan Rouhani, is serious. No surprise, many analysts — and more importantly, paladins of Capitol Hill — remain skeptical. And that doubt has fueled efforts to impose new sanctions, which would impede if not kill efforts to reach a final accord.

If Iran is serious about joining the community of nations, it should demonstrate that commitment in practical ways. One of the most important symbols of Iranian irresponsibility today is its ruthless persecution of religious minorities.

Many authoritarian regimes suppress political opponents — the one shared value among governments worldwide is staying in power. Far fewer seek to suppress the most basic exercise of human conscience. With an overwhelming Muslim majority, roughly 90 percent Shia, Iranian institutions will inevitably have an Islamic character. The government should not fear allowing those of other faiths to worship and live freely. There would be no more powerful reassurance for other nations of Tehran's good intentions than for the Iranian authorities to respect religious liberty.

The most celebrated case of persecution today is Saeed Abedini, an American citizen born in Iran and sentenced to eight years in prison last year for "undermining national security" by the Iranian government. The idea that the 33-year-old father of two threatens the regime is ludicrous.

A Muslim convert to Christianity, he had been arrested and released on prior trips. His “crime” in Tehran’s view apparently was aiding house churches. He went to Iran in 2012 to set up an orphanage, with the government’s approval. Since then he was abused and tortured while held at Iran’s notorious Evin prison, and then transferred to Rajai Shahr prison, which may be even more dangerous. President Obama called for Abedini’s release. President Rouhani responded that he could not “interfere in the judicial process,” but left hope that the government might be able to “assist.”

Unfortunately, Abedini is merely the symbol of broader religious repression. As adherents of a historic faith recognized by the constitution, Christians nominally are free to worship. But that right is highly constrained, as Iran has emerged as one of the globe’s worst persecutors.

For instance, Tehran makes the World Watch List from Open Doors USA and the Hall of Shame from International Christian Concern. The European organization Human Rights Without Frontiers reported that Iran is one of the five top prison states for religious prisoners.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has routinely labeled Tehran as a Country as Particular Concern. The Commission’s 2013 report concluded: “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.” In its latest religious liberty report the State Department noted that Iran’s “constitution and other laws and policies do not protect religious freedom, and in practice, the government severely restricted religious freedom.”

Tehran’s brutal persecution has been getting worse. The International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran published a report on religious persecution last year, which noted that “In 2005, coinciding roughly with the election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Iranian government ramped up its repression of Christian house churches, Persian-language Protestant churches, and converts. It has further intensified its efforts since 2010.”

USCIRF reported that “since the disputed 2009 elections, religious freedom conditions in Iran have regressed to a point not seen since the early days of the Islamic revolution. Killings, arrests, and physical abuse of detainees have increased, including for religious minorities and Muslims who dissent or express views perceived as threatening the legitimacy of the government.”

Mohabat News pointed to another increase in repression since 2011: “Many Christians, especially newly converted Christians, have faced imprisonment, pressure and harassment in the past few years.” ICHRI also focused on persecution of converts, who face not only government prosecution, but even more commonly “what are widely considered to be extrajudicial killings.” State [concentrated](#) on 2012, when “The government’s respect for religious freedom declined during the year.” Tehran increasingly was “charging religious and ethnic minorities with moharebeh (enmity against God), ‘anti-Islamic propaganda,’ or vague national security crimes for their religious activities.”

Increasingly religious faith is being treated as a political threat. [Said](#) Indiana University Professor Jamsheed Choksy: “Most of the several hundred imprisoned members of religious minorities

stand charged with threatening ‘national security’ and some even face capital punishment at the hands of revolutionary tribunals.” ICHRI explained that such charges sometimes were used as a substitute for apostasy, to lessen foreign criticism.

Even the United Nations has criticized Iran for its pervasive repression, last year releasing a highly critical report from Ahmed Shaheed, the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights. He pointed to “widespread systemic and systematic violations of human rights.” Religious minorities are at particular risk, facing “discrimination in law and/or in practice. This includes various levels of intimidation, arrest and detention.”

Currently the regime appears to be most concerned about conversions. Christians traditionally were minorities, especially Armenians and Assyrians, who speak a different language. However, the number of converts is increasing. HRWF reported that charges against those arrested last year included “conversion from Islam to Christianity, encouraging the conversion to Christianity of other Muslims, and propaganda against the regime by promoting Christianity as missionaries.”

Since converts are denied government permits to operate churches, they tend to form home congregations, which are targeted by the authorities. The government also has focused on Farsi-language services at Christian churches, on the theory that they draw converts from Islam. Katrina Lantos Swett, who chairs the UCIRF, recently [declared](#): “Conditions are at levels not seen since the early years of the revolution.” During last year’s Iranian presidential campaign the regime closed the country’s largest Farsi-language church, Central Assemblies of God Church in Tehran. Mohabat recently reported that Tehran’s St. Peter Church has told Farsi-speakers that it must drop its Farsi-language services. George Wood of the U.S. Assemblies of God was quoted by the Conservative New Service explaining that shutting down Farsi programs “would essentially remove all open witness of the gospel of Christ in the country.”

Persecution today reflects both law and practice. Iran is a theocratic state whose laws are to be based on “Islamic criteria.” The constitution formally accords “full respect” to Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians, who are allowed to worship “within the limits of the law.” Proselytizing and converting are barred, however. Moreover, according to the State Department, Jews are “regularly vilified” and the government “regularly arrests members of the Zoroastrian and Christian communities for practicing their religion.”

Far worse is the treatment of other groups, such as Baha’is and other Muslims, including Sufis, Sunnis, and non-conformist Shia. The first are considered to be apostates. Atheists also are punished for “enmity against God.” Explained State, “The government prohibits Baha’is from teaching and practicing their faith and subjects them to many forms of discrimination not faced by members of other religions groups.” Sunnis face double jeopardy since many are ethnic minorities, such as Arabs and Kurds. Even dissenting Muslim clerics, according to USCIRF, are “intimidated, harassed, and detained.”

Government hostility encourages private discrimination as well. Said State: “The government’s campaign against non-Shias created an atmosphere of impunity allowing other elements of

society to harass religious minorities.” ICHRI reported that Christians “face systematic discrimination in almost all walks of life.”

Every faith community is at substantial risk. Iran’s Jewish community is small, perhaps 25,000, but under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad suffered through official anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial. President Rouhani has abandoned such rhetorical excesses, even wishing the Jewish community a happy Rosh Hashanah. But the hostile atmosphere runs deep. After the 1979 revolution, nearly a score of Jews were executed for alleged spying. In 2000 ten were convicted of spying for America and Israel in what appeared to be a fantasy plot.

Christians also suffer. In 1990 Rev. Hossein Soodmand was executed for apostasy because he had converted from Islam three decades before. Four years later another Christian was sentenced to death on the same charges, though freed in response to international protests. However, Bishop Haik Hovsepian Mehr, who spoke out in the case, was murdered; his killer or killers were never identified.

Persecution, though more through imprisonment than execution, has been rising since then, apparently for several reasons. Barnabas Aid concluded that the regime fears “the number of Iranian Muslims turning to Christ.” Kiri Kankhwende of Christian Solidarity Worldwide believed the regime saw non-Muslim beliefs “as a challenge to the very state itself.” Iranian officials also cite contacts with foreign-backed groups, as did ICHRI, which reported that the government’s campaign reflected the belief “that the house church movement is linked to ‘Western powers’ and ‘Zionists’ who are waging a soft war against the regime.” These fears have led to raids on established churches and home congregations, threats against and arrests of leaders and worshippers, and punishment for drinking communion wine.

Hundreds of Christians were detained in the last two or three years, with an increase in frequency as last year’s election approached. ICHRI reported that “Christian detainees are often denied due process and basic rights. They are held in prolonged detention without formal charges, trials are held without access to counsel, or, if there is counsel, without access to court files, and ill treatment is common during detention.” Not everyone receives a lengthy term in prison. The International Campaign explained: “Most Christians arrested by authorities are eventually released, often with heavy bails. However, in many cases the investigations are never closed, nor are charges, if there are any, dismissed.” Thus, the threat of prosecution remains. Moreover, a number have been imprisoned, many of whose cases are detailed by ICHRI.

Saeed Abedini is not the only high profile Christian prisoner. Convert Youcef Nadarkhani was arrested in 2009, sentenced to death, retried and acquitted, released, rearrested, and released early last year. His wife was sentenced to life imprisonment for apostasy and then released.

Also officially recognized is Zoroastrianism, which predates both Christianity and Islam and has fewer than 100,000 followers. Yet adherents are monitored and treated as national security threats. Explained Choksy: “Like members of the Christian, Jewish and Baha’i minorities, Zoroastrian activists who protest the theocracy’s excesses are sent to Tehran’s notorious Evin prison on charges of sedition.”

Lacking even a modicum of legal protection are Baha'is. Last year Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khomeini issued a fatwa calling Baha'is "deviant and misguided." Thousands have been arrested since 1979. Heiner Bielefeldt, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief, called Iran's treatment of Baha'is as among the most "extreme manifestations of religious intolerance and persecution."

Several Baha'i leaders arrested in 2008 are serving 20-year sentences. Kamran Hashemi reported in the *Guardian*: "Baha'i-owned shops are sealed or burned to the ground, cemeteries are desecrated, homes are raided and property is confiscated." Perhaps the only way to receive worse treatment would be to declare oneself an atheist.

The Shia regime also targets Sunni Muslims, who are prevented from building their own mosque or using rental facilities. Sunni clerics also have been arrested; believers, including university students, have been sentenced to death for proselytizing. The government also has destroyed worship places for Sufis and imprisoned individual believers.

The situation for religious minorities in Iran is dire. The U.S. government has little direct leverage, having already applied targeted Tehran with economic sanctions over its presumed nuclear ambitions. However, Washington (and the Europeans) could indicate to Iran that a deal is more likely if it quiets Western skeptics. Reversing Iran's recent policy of religious intolerance would offer an important signal.

In fact, public pressure works. UN Special Rapporteur Shaheed reported last year that "At least a dozen lives were saved because of the intervention of international opinion." ICHRI attributed Youcef Nadarkhani's release "to international pressure." Encouraging Tehran to respect the freedom of conscience of its citizens might even more effectively come from the most fervent advocates of engagement. How to best resist proposals for new Western sanctions? Ask Tehran to accept religious dissent.

Candidate Rouhani promised to issue a "civil rights charter," which sounded promising. However, his proposed legislation fails to adequately protect human rights. Today he needs to address those who doubt the Iranian authorities are genuinely committed to a new approach to international affairs.

To prove they are, Tehran should release Rev. Abedini, pardon imprisoned Baha'is, allow Sufis and Sunnis to worship, and more. "The international community is watching," observed Dwight Bashir, deputy director of USCIRF. Iran should act accordingly.

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