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Iran vs. religious minorities

By Doug Bandow

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Nuclear negotiations with Iran continue in Vienna. Skeptics remain many: everything depends on whether the ruling elite, and not just President Hassan Rouhani, is serious about reform. Iran should demonstrate its commitment by respecting 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.

A Muslim convert to Christianity, 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 two of Iran’s worst prisons.

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. Even the United Nations targeted Iran for its pervasive repression, last year releasing a highly critical human rights report.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom 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.”

Tehran’s brutal persecution has been getting worse. The International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran published a report last year on religious persecution, 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.”

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