



UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON  
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

**TESTIMONY OF**

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**CHAIR**

**U.S. COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM**

**BEFORE THE**

**TOM LANTOS HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION**

**ON**

**FREEDOM OF BELIEF: COUNTERING RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE**

**MAY 24, 2017**

Thank you to the Co-Chairs of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, Representatives Jim McGovern (D-MA), and Randy Hultgren (R-IL), and Commission members for holding today's hearing on "Freedom of Belief: Countering Religious Violence" and inviting me to testify. I am Father Thomas J. Reese, S.J., Chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The Commission uses international standards to monitor the universal right of religion or belief abroad and makes policy recommendations to the Congress, President and Secretary of State.

Today's hearing is especially timely given the rise in religious extremism and increased restrictions worldwide on religious freedom that both governments and non-state actors perpetrate. I will explore in my testimony why religious freedom is so important; highlight the violations by governments and non-state actors of the freedom of religion or belief which result in increased violence; and, notwithstanding this dire picture, note some encouraging factors. I will end my testimony by discussing tools, some of which are new, that the U.S. government can use to support the freedom of religion or belief and help prevent and counter religious violence.

### **Why Religious Freedom Matters**

Religion and religious freedom are important, especially in today's world. In fact, religion is a central factor in many of the major foreign policy issues of the day, and violations of the freedom of religion or belief are the source of instability in nations worldwide. The freedom of religion or belief is a broad, inclusive right that embraces the full range of thought, belief, and behavior. It is a conscience right which is not limited to the right to practice a particular religion. At its heart, it is the right to respond to the dictates of one's own conscience on matters of faith and belief, wherever one's conscience may lead, so long as the rights of others and essential principles of public order are respected. Thus, because freedom of religion involves freedom of conscience, it must include the right to a belief or belief system that differs from the majority or not to believe at all. Responding to the call of conscience is both a right and a duty. It is a right because human authenticity and integrity demand that people be allowed to live on the outside what they truly are on the inside. It is a duty because once people believe something to be true, they have an obligation to act and live peacefully in accordance with that belief.

No government, group, or individual has the right to compel others to act against their conscience or restrain them from answering its call. Religious freedom applies to the holders of all religious beliefs and extends to those who reject religious beliefs altogether, and was overwhelmingly adopted in 1948 in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as in subsequent international agreements.

As will be highlighted during this hearing, 84% of the world's population identifies with a specific religious group, and, according to the most recent Pew study – and as we will hear more about at this hearing, more than three-quarters of the world's population live in countries in which religion is restricted significantly, either by the government or societal actors. Given the centrality of the freedom of religion or belief, it is no wonder that this conscience right matters to many people and is feared by governments and societal actors as a competitor, an alternate source of authority which could challenge their control. Religion also can fuel dangerous

conflicts between groups or individuals who hold different beliefs. In both instances, our nation and its diplomats cannot have productive dialogues and satisfactory relations or outcomes if we ignore, downplay, or dismiss religion's pivotal role.

In the just released 2017 Annual Report, USCIRF focused on the governments and non-state actors who most egregiously violated the freedom of religion or belief, and made the following "country of particular concern" (CPC) recommendations and Tier 2 placements:

- **CPC Recommendations:** USCIRF recommends that the State Department again designate these 10 countries as CPCs because of the governments' "systematic, ongoing, and egregious" violations of religious freedom: Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. USCIRF also finds that six other countries meet the CPC standard and should be so designated: Central African Republic, Nigeria, Pakistan, Russia, Syria, and Vietnam.
- **Tier 2:** USCIRF places these 12 countries on Tier 2: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Cuba, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Laos, Malaysia, and Turkey. USCIRF's Tier 2 includes countries where the violations are serious and meet one or two, but not all three, of the "systematic, ongoing, and egregious" test.

With regard to non-state actors, or entities of particular concern, USCIRF recommended the designations of: The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Taliban in Afghanistan, and Al-Shabaab in Somalia.

### **Factors Contributing to the Increased Violations of Religious Freedom and the Resulting Violence:**

Nations in turmoil, such as Iraq and Syria, represent a dire situation which contributes to the increase in the violations of religious freedom and religious violence by governments and non-state actors. Religious minorities, and dissenting members of the majority, face the twin threats from governmental and non-governmental oppression, imprisonment, and violence. Religious minorities, including Yazidis, Christians and Shi'a Muslims, are of special concern. In some countries, persecution and the resultant flight of the persecuted clouds the very future of these communities, some of which have existed for nearly two millennia. Even communities that do not face persecution confront difficult challenges as they try to live out their faiths in conflict-ridden environments.

At its core, many of the increased violations of religious freedom and the resulting violence stem from governments that fear religion as an alternate source of authority and that, through repressive legal systems and laws and also brute force, crack down and imprison members of religious communities whom they view as unwelcome competitors for their absolute power. For example:

- **China:** The Chinese government continues to suppress Tibetans in Tibet and other parts of China. The government claims the power to select the next Dalai Lama with the help of a law that grants the government authority over reincarnations, and vilifies the Dalai Lama,

accusing him of “splittism” and “blasphemy.” In July 2016, the Chinese government launched a sweeping operation to demolish significant portions of the Larung Gar Buddhist Institute located in Sichuan Province. Larung Gar is home to about 10,000 to 20,000 monks, nuns, laypeople, and students of Buddhism from all over the world. Local officials instituting the demolition order referred to the project as “construction” or “renovation” to reduce the number of residents to no more than 5,000 by the end of September 2017. As a result, officials have evicted thousands of monastics, laypeople, and students, some of whom reportedly were locked out of their homes before they could collect their belongings, or were forced to sign pledges promising never to return. Many others were forced to undergo so-called “patriotic reeducation programs.” The demolition order contains language governing ideology and future religious activities at Larung Gar and gives government officials—who are largely Han Chinese, not Tibetan—greater control and oversight of the institute, including direct control over laypeople. The order also mandates the separation of the monastery from the institute, running counter to the tradition of one blended encampment with both religious and lay education. The destruction at Larung Gar exemplifies Beijing’s desire to eviscerate the teachings and study of Tibetan Buddhism that are integral to the faith.

- **Sudan:** Since 2011, the Sudanese government has demolished churches, attempted to seize other churches and religious buildings, and arrested pastors of the Sudan Evangelical Presbyterian Church (SEPC) and its denomination the Khartoum Bahri Evangelical Church. On April 3, 2017, SEPC elder Younan Abdulla was fatally stabbed as he peacefully protested government efforts to seize a Khartoum Bahri Evangelical Church school.
- **Turkmenistan:** In 2016, two members of a Muslim study group in Turkmenistan imprisoned since 2013 died in a notorious desert prison; one was said to have weighed only 55 pounds at the time of his death. Apparently fearing a similar fate, a Muslim man accused of radicalism and pressured to become an informant for the secret police hanged himself in December 2016.
- **Vietnam:** In June 2016, Vietnamese public security officials harassed, physically assaulted, and prevented several Hoa Hao Buddhists from participating in celebrations associated with the June 22 anniversary of their faith. Authorities used checkpoints to block access to Quang Minh Pagoda, the only Hoa Hao Buddhist pagoda in the country under the government’s control. Also during 2016, unknown attackers who may have been part of public security beat a Hoa Hao religious leader.

Governments’ use of force take several forms including: “securitizing” religious freedom; pitting groups against each other to enhance power; government impunity; and targeting a group and inciting vigilante groups and others to violence.

**“Securitizing” Religious Freedom:** Some governments use anti-extremism and anti-terrorism laws to severely limit religious communities’ activities, stifle peaceful dissent, and imprison people. The challenges raised by the relative ease of communication in the Internet age further threaten their grip on power. For example:

- **Russia:** With the July 2016 passage of the Yarovaya amendments, those convicted of extremism are now subject to up to six years' imprisonment, major fines equivalent to several years of average annual wages, and/or bans on professional employment. The anti-extremism law lacks a clear definition of extremism and the use or advocacy of violence is unnecessary for activity to be classified as extremist. Because virtually any speech can be prosecuted, the law is a powerful way to intimidate members of religious and other communities. Books may be placed by court order on a list of banned materials. Religious and other communities can be financially blacklisted or liquidated, and individuals can be subjected to criminal prosecution for a social media post. The Russian government most recently used its "anti-extremism" law to ban Jehovah's Witnesses who became the target of a sustained campaign that began in 2016 and which ended in the Witnesses' permanent elimination of their legal existence in Russia in April 2017.
- In **Uzbekistan**, the government imprisons and often subjects individuals to brutal treatment, including an estimated 12,800 Muslims, who do not conform to officially-prescribed religious practices or whom it claims are extremist. The Uzbek government continues to regard religious activity outside of official channels with deep suspicion and wields a variety of repressive instruments against those who fail to submit to state control of religious practice, including fines, punitive searches, detention, torture, prolonged imprisonment, and the intimidation of family members. In April 2016, Articles 244-1 and 244-2 of the Criminal Code, governing the crimes of having "extremist materials" or taking part in "extremist organizations," were broadened and the maximum penalties raised from 5 to 8 and from 15 to 20 years' imprisonment respectively. Many long-term prisoners of conscience are denied due process and are subject to inhumane conditions of confinement.
- In **China**, the government suppresses Uighur Muslims, often under the rubric of countering alleged religious and other violent extremism. An estimated 10 million Uighur Muslims reside in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region in northwest China where the government presumes their guilt if they are found practicing "illegal" religious activities, including praying or possessing religious materials in their own homes. Authorities even question schoolchildren to coerce them into revealing that their parents pray at home. To constrain what it claims to be widespread radicalism that breeds violent tendencies among Uighur Muslims, the government imposes manifold regulations and restrictions on religious and other daily practices. For example, in a move critics described as targeting Uighur Muslims, in July 2016 the regional government adopted a new counterterrorism measure, which dovetails with a national law that went into effect January 1, 2016. (The national Counterterrorism Law contains vague definitions of "religious extremism" and "terrorism," which the government has routinely used to target the freedom to practice religion and peaceful religious expression.)

**The Pitting of Groups Against each Other to Enhance Power:** In Iraq and Syria, under both the Saddam Hussein and Bashar al-Assad regimes, religious communities were pitted against one another, creating space for all out sectarian strife and conflict once these regimes began to lose their tight grip on power. Even today, the inability and sometimes refusal of the Iraqi and Syrian governments to curb sectarian attacks, such as the Popular Mobilization Forces' sectarian attacks on Iraq's Sunni Arab population, or the Shi'a Iranian-backed militias attacks of Sunni Arab

communities in Syria, has exacerbated religious tensions between Syria and Iraq's many religious communities.

**Government Impunity:** Government inaction to prevent or punish religious freedom violations coupled with efforts to sponsor violent ideologies is a proven recipe for human rights abuses. Instead of enforcing the law and protecting vulnerable populations, an increasing number of countries are turning a blind eye to repression, thereby creating climates of impunity. For example, there continue to be reports that funding originating in Saudi Arabia is used globally to finance religious schools, mosques, hate literature, and other activities that support religious intolerance and, in some cases, violence toward non-Muslims and disfavored Muslims. In Nigeria, the federal government continued to fail to implement effective strategies to prevent or stop Muslim-Christian violence or to hold perpetrators accountable. In 2016, mobs killed two women accused of blasphemy. On June 2 in Kano, Bridget Agbahime was killed after she was accused of insulting a man prior to his prayers. On July 9, Redeemed Christian Church of God Pastor Eunice Elisha was killed while preaching in Abuja. While arrests were made in connection to these incidents, Nigeria officials later released all suspects.

**Targeting a Group and Inciting Vigilante Groups and Others to Violence:** Government targeting of members of religious minority communities, or dissenting members of majority communities, incite vigilante and other groups to violence. For instance, in India, six states have adopted anti-conversion laws that restrict the right of individuals to freely convert from one faith to another. These laws have created a climate in which Hindu Nationalist groups, in particular, harass and violently attack religious minority communities, especially Christian churches, leaders, and laity. In Iran, during the past year, hundreds of pro-government media articles continued to appear online and in print inciting religious hatred and encouraging violence against Baha'is after various sermons of prayer leaders were delivered. In September 2016, Baha'i Farhang Amiri was stabbed to death by two men outside of his home in Yazd; the two men later reportedly confessed, saying they killed him because he was an apostate and they wanted to go to heaven.

The implementation of blasphemy laws has incited violence by vigilante groups in many countries. Blasphemy is "the act of insulting or showing contempt or lack of reverence for God." In more than 70 countries worldwide, laws criminalize acts and expression deemed contemptuous of sacred things, and are actively enforced: Governments justify them as necessary to promote religious harmony. In fact, they do the opposite: they restrict the freedoms of religion and expression, thereby violating two of the most hallowed human rights, which lead to human rights abuses and the destabilization of societies. Blasphemy laws:

- Inappropriately position governments as arbiters of ultimate truths or religious rightness, empowering officials to enforce particular views against individuals, minorities, and dissenters.
- Contradict international human rights standards, as they protect beliefs at the expense of individuals. These standards include Articles 18 and 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which assert

universal individual rights to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion and to freedom of expression.

- Are inconsistent with UN resolutions adopted since 2011 that oppose such laws as a remedy for speech directed against religion or a religion.
- Often carry draconian sentences such as life in prison or even death for “crimes” that amount to the mere utterance of words. Under such bans, members of already-vulnerable religious minorities suffer disproportionately, becoming victims of blasphemy allegations and arrests in far higher numbers than their percentage of the population would predict.
- Are ripe for abuse by accusers harboring political or economic grudges. Blasphemy charges often are based on false accusations, often by members of a majority religious group against those from a religious minority community.
- Often embolden religious extremists to commit acts of violence against perceived transgressors. By fueling violence by extremist non-state actors, blasphemy laws make nations and societies profoundly less stable and secure.

Pakistan, where the crime of blasphemy carries the death penalty or life imprisonment, has the dubious distinction of having more people sentenced to jail for blasphemy than any other country. USCIRF is aware of nearly 40 prisoners convicted of blasphemy charges who have received life sentences or are on death row in Pakistan, more than in any other nation. Others have been killed by vigilante mobs just for being accused of blasphemy.

Christian wife and mother Aasia Bibi was convicted and sentenced to death in 2010 after a 2009 dispute with coworkers. In October 2016, the Pakistani Supreme Court delayed Ms. Bibi’s final appeal hearing after a judge recused himself; she remains imprisoned and the hearing has not yet been rescheduled. Others are sentenced to prison. For example, in January 2016, Abdul Shakoor, an optician and store owner in Rabwah, Punjab province, was sentenced to five years in prison on blasphemy charges and three years on terrorism charges, to be served concurrently, for propagating the Ahmadiyya Muslim faith by selling copies of the Qur’an and Ahmadiyya publications. His Shi’a Muslim store manager, Mazhar Sipra, also was sentenced to five years on terrorism charges. Both have appealed their sentences.

USCIRF shortly will be issuing a report that measures blasphemy law’s adherence to international and human rights principles. This report analyzes the content of laws prohibiting blasphemy worldwide against international and human rights law principles to better understand what aspects of these laws adhere to, or deviate from, international and human rights law principles. By analyzing and quantifying the adherence or non-adherence to international and human rights law principles, examined systematically through a point-system assessment tool, this study identifies specific language that may increase blasphemy laws’ risk for abuse, indicating areas where targeted advocacy for reform could potentially lower that risk.

**The Rise of Non-State Actors:** When IRFA became law in 1998, governments were the principal violators of religious freedom and the law reflected their role. However, since that time, the predations of non-state actors present a major challenge to freedom of religion or belief. In countries around the world, non-state actors are among the primary perpetrators of egregious abuses of religious freedom and other human rights. Governments in these countries either are unable or unwilling to address their violations. Some examples include:

- In the Central African Republic (CAR), militias formed along opposing Muslim and Christian lines in CAR continue to kill individuals based on their religious identity, leading to retaliatory attacks and waves of violence, resulting in thousands of people dead, 2.3 million in need of humanitarian assistance, more than 450,000 refugees, and almost 350,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs). Before 2012, 85 percent of CAR's population was Christian and 15 percent was Muslim. By the end of 2014, 80 percent of the country's Muslim population had been driven out of CAR.
- The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) makes little distinction between sects and ethnicities and universally applies its violent, militant interpretation of Islam. In Iraq, more than 3.4 million have been displaced internally due to ISIS's offensives. In Syria, given the actions of both ISIS and the Assad regime, more than 11 million people have been forced to flee their homes: about seven million have been internally displaced and about five million are refugees in neighboring states. At least 13.5 million out of Syria's population of 17 million are in need of humanitarian aid for survival.
- In Nigeria, Boko Haram rejects the secular state and calls for the universal implementation of what it considers "pure" Shari'ah law. It views as morally corrupt Nigeria's federal and northern state governments, political leaders, and religious elites. Since May 2011, according to the Council on Foreign Relations' Nigeria Security Tracker, Boko Haram and the military campaign against the terrorists have killed more than 28,000 people. The Boko Haram crisis has resulted in more than 1.8 million IDPs. Another 12,000 were killed in fighting between Boko Haram and Nigerian security forces; and
- In Pakistan, the actions of non-state actors, including U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations such as Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (Pakistani Taliban), continue to threaten all Pakistanis and the country's overall security. Religious minority communities, including Shi'a and Ahmadiyya Muslims, Christians, and Hindus, experience chronic sectarian and religiously-motivated violence from both terrorist organizations and individuals within society.

In many of the worst situations today, transnational or local organizations are the egregious persecutors and governments are incapable of addressing the violations or are, for one reason or another, failing to do so. In these situations, allowing the United States to designate the non-state actors perpetrating particularly severe violations would broaden the U.S. government's ability to engage the actual drivers of persecution and would reflect reality, which should be the core point of the CPC process. The Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act, P.L. 114-281, includes this important measure.

## Some Encouraging Factors

**Country-Specific Changes:** While the 2017 Annual Report noted negative trajectories for both Russia, recommending for the first time that it be designated a CPC, and Bahrain, for the first time placing it in the Tier 2 category, the report also noted some improvements in government actions on the freedom of religion or belief in:

- **Egypt:** The Egyptian government has made efforts to address religious freedom concerns and despite the government's widespread repression of human rights, some religious freedom conditions have improved. President Sisi consistently condemned sectarian attacks, pressed for assistance for victims and accountability for perpetrators, and pushed for reform in religious discourse. The parliament in August 2016 passed a law on the construction and maintenance of churches and, by early 2017, the government completed rebuilding/restoring more than 50 churches destroyed in 2013 by extremists. Egyptian courts also made some progress bringing to justice perpetrators of past attacks. Because the CPC designation is based on a government's violations, USCIRF in the 2017 Annual Report recommended that Egypt be placed on the Tier 2 list: USCIRF in past years had recommended that it be designated as a CPC.

At the same time, non-state actors, especially ISIS affiliates, increasingly targeted and killed individuals, especially Coptic Christians, on the basis of religion or belief. ISIS also released a video online vowing to kill all Christians in Egypt. USCIRF is deeply concerned by the deplorable human rights conditions in Egypt and ISIS affiliates target Coptic Christians

- **Iraq:** The Iraqi government has sought to curb sectarian tensions, while ISIS has committed genocide, ruthlessly targeting anyone who does not espouse its extremist ideology: Since 2014, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has sought to reverse former Prime Minister al-Maliki's sectarian policies and curb tensions between the Sunni and Shi'a communities. However, problems remain, including halting the Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Forces' (PMF) attacks on Sunni Muslims and defeating ISIS which continued to ruthlessly target anyone who did not espouse its extremist Islamist ideology, including members of the Christian, Yazidi, Shi'a, Turkmen, and Shabak communities, as well as the Sunni community. ISIS is by far the most egregious perpetrator of religious freedom violations in Iraq, causing the displacement of over 3.4 million Iraqis, many of whom fled to the area controlled by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). In March 2016, then Secretary of State Kerry declared that ISIS's persecution of these groups amounted to genocide and crimes against humanity. Based on the efforts of Iraq's government, USCIRF places Iraq on its Tier 2. USCIRF had recommended that Iraq be designated a CPC since 2008. USCIRF finds that ISIS merits designation as an CPC.

**The Secularization Theory has been Discredited:** Religious freedom historically has been viewed by many as an orphan right, reflecting two views: that this right, if it was to be addressed at all, was best dealt with in the private sphere, and that religion simply did not matter in the modern world. The later view is what commonly has been called the secularization thesis. This thesis held that as societies progress and modernize, religion loses its authority, with secular institutions achieving cultural, social, economic and political supremacy

Others disagree. World events repeatedly have refuted secularization's supposed inevitability as a product of modernization. In country after country, religion remains central in people's hearts and minds even with the advent and spread of the greatest increase in history of urbanization. This conscience right lies at the center of the most consequential issues of the day, and the fate of individuals and nations rest on respecting this right. Accordingly, as a core human right, U.S. foreign policy needs to promote, not ignore, it and give it the priority it merits.

**New Organizations Are Focusing on the Issue and Energizing the Field:** As noted earlier, religion and religious freedom clearly are central factors in most of the major foreign policy challenges the world faces. This recognition is reinforced by the fact that more attention is being paid to the issue in the public, political, and international spheres. For example:

The International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPP-FoRB). The IPP-FoRB is an informal network of more than 130 parliamentarians and legislators from around the world committed to combatting religious persecution and advancing freedom of religion or belief, as defined by Article 18 of the UN Universal Declaration for Human Rights. All participating parliamentarians agree to the Charter's principles to advance religious freedom for all, including the right to believe or not believe, change faith, and share faith with others.

USCIRF Commissioners and staff has been instrumental in the creation of the IPP-FoRB and has collaborated with them. Working with a group of parliamentarians from Brazil, Canada, Norway, Turkey, and the United Kingdom, USCIRF helped launch this parliamentary network in November 2014, bringing together over 30 parliamentarians from different regions, political parties, and religions who signed a [Charter for Freedom of Religion or Belief](#) pledging to advance religious freedom for all. USCIRF Commissioners and staff also participated in meetings in Brussels, London, and Oxford leading up to the launch, and at subsequent meetings in New York City in September 2015, with more than 100 parliamentarians from over 50 countries participating, and in Berlin in September 2016. Parliamentarians gathered the Second International Parliamentarians Conference, focusing on approaches for parliamentarians to use to promote and protect FoRB in their home countries and abroad. With USCIRF's support and assistance, six parliamentarians from five regions visited Burma in August 2016: this was the first trip by members of the network to a country of concern. Parliamentarians in the network have sent letters to the leaders of the following nations expressing concerns about religious freedom conditions in: Burma, Indonesia, Iran, North Korea, Sudan, and Vietnam.

The Marrakesh Declaration: In January 2016, Muslim scholars, politicians, activists, and interfaith clergy from around the world gathered in Marrakesh, Morocco, over two days to address the rights of minorities living in Muslim-majority areas of the world. The gathering was a long time in the making, advanced via scholarly and political dialogue and motivated by growing alarm over the brutalization of minorities by violent extremist groups claiming Islamic legitimation. The conference resulted in the Marrakesh Declaration, a call to action grounded in the historic Charter of Medina, which was forged by Prophet Muhammad as a form of contractual citizenship to ensure equal treatment of all in a multicultural society. Those signing on to the Marrakesh Declaration affirmed that minority rights have a precedent in, and are essential to, Islamic law and tradition in accordance with international legal standards. They further called on politicians, scholars, artists, and others in Muslim-majority societies to advance

the protection of minority rights based on equal citizenship through legal, political, and social processes, to ensure that minority communities—indigenous for centuries in the present-day Muslim world—can continue to flourish there.

### **Policies to Prevent and Counter Religious Violence**

There are several tools, including some new ones, that the U.S. government can use to counter the violations of religious freedom and the increased religious violence. For these and other efforts, it is vitally important that Congress appropriate ample funding for these and other efforts, exercise its oversight responsibility, tirelessly focus on accountability, and continually to create and refine the tools needed to address new challenges, including accountability for genocide and crimes against humanity. To that end and as an initial step, USCIRF strongly urges Congress to quickly pass H.R. 390, the Iraq and Syria Genocide Emergency Relief and Accountability Act to the Senate for passage. This bill has two main goals: (1) promoting accountability for the various atrocity crimes committed by ISIS and other foreign terrorist organizations operating within Iraq and Syria and (2) addressing humanitarian, stabilization, and recovery needs for persecuted religious and/or ethnic minorities.

Current tools available include:

The Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act, P.L. 114-281: Congress, recognizing the need to arm the U.S. government with tools to address the violations of the freedom of religion or belief, introduced and passed the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, which President Clinton signed into law (P.L. 105-292). The law subsequently was amended several times, but none of these amendments focused on updating the law so that it would reflect the totality of the conditions on the ground and provide needed new tools. P.L. 114-281 amends the law in important ways, including with the following provisions:

- **Entities of Particular Concern:** The law requires the President to identify non-state actors engaged in severe religious freedom abuses and designate them as “entities of particular concern,” or EPCs. The act defines a non-state actor as “a non-sovereign entity that exercises significant political power and territorial control; is outside the control of a sovereign government; and often employs violence in pursuit of its objectives.” USCIRF recommends in the 2017 Annual Report that ISIS in Iraq and Syria, the Taliban in Afghanistan, and al-Shabaab in Somalia be designated EPCs. But for the territorial requirement in the new law, USCIRF would have recommended Boko Haram, the Taliban in Pakistan, and ISIS affiliates in Bangladesh and Egypt.
- **Curriculum/Training for Foreign Service Officers:** The law requires the Ambassador at Large, in coordination with other Federal officials as appropriate and in consultation with USCIRF, to make recommendations to the Secretary of State about the curriculum to be used for religious freedom training for Foreign Service Officers. Such training is to be included in the A-100 course all Foreign Service officers attend and the courses required of every Foreign Service Officer, deputy chief of mission, and ambassador prior to a posting outside of the United States with segments tailored to the particular religious demography, religious freedom conditions, and U.S. strategies for advancing religious freedom in each receiving country. The law also recommends

that the curriculum and training materials be shared with the U.S. Armed Forces and other Federal departments and agencies with personnel stationed overseas.

- **Designated Persons list for Particularly Severe Violations of Religious Freedom:** The law: directs the Secretary of State, in coordination with the Ambassador at Large and in consultation with relevant government and nongovernment experts to establish and maintain a list of foreign individuals to whom the consular post has denied a visa on grounds of particularly severe violations of religious freedom, or who are subject to financial sanctions, or other measures, for particularly severe violations of religious freedom; requires the Secretary to submit to Congress a report that contains the list required under this subsection and a description of the actions taken; and requires updates to the report every 180 days thereafter and as new information becomes available.
- **National Security Strategy:** The law recognizes the connection between security and the promotion of religious freedom by expressing, through a sense of Congress, that the President's annual national security strategy report should promote international religious freedom as a foreign policy and national security priority and should articulate that promoting religious freedom is a strategy that protects other, related human rights, and advances democracy outside the United States; and the national security strategy report should be a guide for the strategies and activities of relevant Federal agencies and inform the Department of Defense's quadrennial defense review.
- **Prisoner List:** The law requires USCIRF, to the extent practicable, to compile online and in official publications, lists of persons it determines are imprisoned, detained, disappeared, placed under house arrest, tortured, or subject to forced renunciations of faith for their religious activity or religious freedom advocacy by the government of a foreign country that the Commission recommends for designation as a country of particular concern or a non-state actor the Commission recommends for designation as an entity of particular concern under Section 301 this legislation, and include as much publicly available information as practicable on the conditions and circumstances of such persons.

The Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act: This Act gives the United States a powerful accountability tool by authorizing the President to impose U.S. entry and property sanctions against any foreign person (or entity) who:

- Is responsible for extrajudicial killings, torture, or other gross violations of internationally recognized human rights committed against individuals in any foreign country seeking to expose illegal activity carried out by government officials, or to obtain, exercise, or promote human rights and freedoms;
- Acted as an agent of or on behalf of a foreign person in such activities;
- Is a government official or senior associate of such official responsible for, or complicit in, ordering or otherwise directing acts of significant corruption, including the expropriation of private or public assets for personal gain, corruption related to government contracts or the

extraction of natural resources, bribery, or the facilitation or transfer of the proceeds of corruption to foreign jurisdictions; or

- Has materially assisted or provided financial, material, or technological support for, or goods or services in support of, such activities.

**Focus on Prisoners of Conscience:** It is vitally important to shine a light on prisoners of conscience who have been unjustly prevented from enjoying the most fundamental human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and other international human rights instruments and standards, as well as on the laws and actions that have led to their imprisonment. It also is important to advocate for these prisoners of conscience until they are free – and until the countries that have imprisoned them have implemented needed reforms that reflect the internationally approved standards that many of them have agreed to in writing but violate in practice.

A focus on individuals is vitally needed to make concrete and understandable the impact of unjust laws: people often are numbed by large numbers and cataclysmic events which are beyond their control and understanding. To address this concern, as you well know, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission launched an initiative in the House of Representatives, in conjunction with USCIRF and Amnesty International USA, called the Defending Freedoms Project. The initiative aims to draw attention to prisoners of conscience around the world by having Members of Congress advocate in support of individual prisoners. Representative McGovern is working on behalf of Nabeel Rajab, unjustly imprisoned in Bahrain; and Representative Hultgren is advocating for Zhu Yufu, unjustly imprisoned in China.

Along with working to fulfill the prisoners lists mandate noted above in H.R. 114-281, USCIRF has created the Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project whereby Commissioners select a prisoner of conscience (see Appendix) and advocate on his or her behalf, and also highlight the conditions in the country that led to their imprisonment. Commissioners' selections are:

- Burma: Zaw Latt and Pwint Phyu Latt – Vice Chairman Daniel Mark
- China: Gulmira Imin – Commissioner Sandra Jolley
- China: Panchen Lama – Commissioner Tenzin Dorjee
- Eritrea: Patriarch Abune Antonios – Chair Thomas J. Reese, S.J.
- Iran: Mahvash Sabet and Fariba Kamalabadi – Commissioner Kristina Arriaga
- Iran: Maryam Naghash Zargaran – Commissioner Cliff May
- Russia: Bagir Kazikhanov – Commissioner John Ruskay
- Saudi Arabia: Raif Badawi – Commissioner Cliff May
- Vietnam: Pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh and his wife Tran Thi Hong – Commissioner Wolcott

## **Conclusion**

We face an enormously challenging landscape for freedom of religion or belief abroad. We can and will see constructive change by improving our use of existing tools and creating new tools for a rapidly changing environment. By further integrating this fundamental freedom into our nation's foreign policy, we can bring genuine progress to those who yearn for freedom.

## **Appendix: Religious Prisoners of Conscience**

Through USCIRF's Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project, Commissioners advocate in support of a prisoner of conscience. Through increased education, outreach, and advocacy, USCIRF hopes to raise awareness of these and other individuals being imprisoned for their religion or beliefs, reduce their number, and highlight the country conditions that led to their imprisonment.

As mandated in the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act, USCIRF also will, to the extent practicable, compile online and in official publications lists of persons it determines are imprisoned, detained, disappeared, placed under house arrest, tortured, or subject to forced renunciations of their faith for their religious activity or religious freedom advocacy by the government of a foreign country that the Commission recommends for designation as a CPC or a non-state actor that the Commission recommends for designation as an EPC.

## **Patriarch Abune Antonios**

**Country:** [Eritrea](#)

**USCIRF Advocate:** Chairman Thomas J. Reese, S.J.

**Key Fact:** Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church

**Detained Since:** May 27, 2007

**Biography:** Patriarch Abune Antonios was born on July 12, 1927, in Himberti, a town north of the Eritrean capital, Asmara. His father was a priest. At the age of five, Patriarch Antonios entered the monastery of Debre Tsege Abuna Andrewes, where he was educated, ordained a deacon at the age of 12, and then served as a monk. Patriarch Antonios was ordained a priest in 1942 and was eventually elected a abbot in 1955.

When the Eritrean Orthodox Church first sought its independence, Patriarch Antonios was one of the five abbots from monasteries sent to Egypt to be ordained a bishop so that the church would be able to constitute its own Holy Synod. Antonios was ordained as Bishop Antonios of Hamasien-Asmara on June 19, 1994, in Saint Mark's Cathedral in Cairo by His Holiness Shenouda III, Pope and Patriarch of Alexandria.

Following the death in 2003 of Abune Yacoub, then Patriarch of the Eritrean Church, Patriarch Antonios was elected as the third Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church by a joint vote of the Holy Synod and representatives of all dioceses in the presence of the delegates of the Holy Synod of the Egyptian Orthodox Church. Pope Shenouda III, assisted by Eritrean and Coptic Orthodox Metropolitan and Bishops, ordained and enthroned Antonios as Patriarch on April 23, 2004.



*USCIRF Advocate:* [Chairman Thomas J. Reese, S.J.](#)



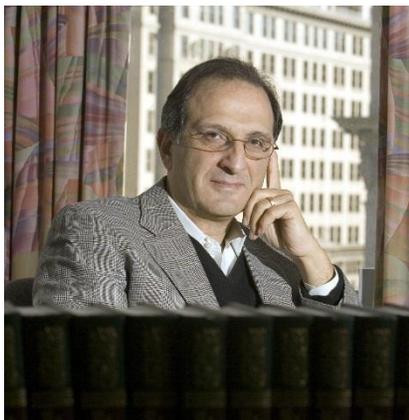
The Eritrean government notified Antonios on January 20, 2006, that he no longer would lead the country's largest religious denomination. After Patriarch Antonios called for the release of political prisoners and refused to excommunicate 3,000 parishioners who opposed the government. One year later, on January 20, 2007, authorities confiscated Patriarch Antonios' personal pontifical insignia. On May 27, 2007, the Eritrean government replaced Patriarch Antonios with Bishop Dioscoros of Mendefera, forcefully removed the Patriarch from his home, and placed him under house arrest at an undisclosed location. Patriarch Antonios, who is 89 years old, continues to be held incommunicado and reportedly is being denied medical care despite suffering from severe diabetes.

**Raif Badawi****Country:** [Saudi Arabia](#)**USCIRF Advocate:** Commissioner Clifford May (Commissioner James Zogby until May 2017)**Key Fact:** Blogger**Detained Since:** June 27, 2012**Charges:** Violating Islamic values and propagating liberal thought**Sentence:** 10-year imprisonment, 1,000 lashes, a fine of 1 million riyals (equal to about \$266,000), and is banned from any media work or foreign travel for 10 years after his release from prison**Biography:** Raif Badawi was born January 13, 1984, in Khobar, Saudi Arabia. He is a blogger, activist, and the creator of the website Free Saudi Liberals, which encourages debate on religious and political matters in Saudi Arabia.

First detained on apostasy charges in 2008, Mr. Badawi was released after a day of questioning. He was arrested on June 17, 2012, on a charge of insulting Islam through electronic channels and brought to court on several charges including apostasy, a conviction which carries an automatic death sentence. Human Rights Watch stated that Badawi's website had hosted material criticizing "senior religious figures." Mr. Badawi had also suggested that Imam Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic University had become "a den for terrorists."

Mr. Badawi appeared before a district court in Jeddah on December 17, 2012, charged with "setting up a website that undermines general security," "ridiculing Islamic religious figures," and "going beyond the realm of obedience." On July 30, 2013, the Jeddah Criminal Court sentenced Mr. Badawi to seven years in prison and 600 lashes for founding an Internet forum that "violates Islamic values and propagates liberal thought." On May 7, 2014, an appeals court increased the punishment to 1,000 lashes and 10 years in prison. He also received a fine of one million riyals (equal to about \$266,000) and is banned from any media work or foreign travel for 10 years after his release from prison.

On January 9, 2015, Mr. Badawi was flogged 50 times before hundreds of spectators in front of a Jeddah mosque. He has not received additional floggings, due partly to international reaction and partly to a medical doctor's finding that he could not physically endure more lashings. On June 7, 2015, Saudi Arabia's Supreme Court denied another appeal from Badawi and upheld the sentence of 1,000 lashes.



Mr. Badawi received the 2015 Sakharov Prize for his human rights work. Raif Badawi married Ensaf Haidar in 2002 in Saudi Arabia; they have three children. His wife and children obtained political asylum in Quebec, Canada in 2013.

*USCIRF Advocate: Commissioner James Zogby was the USCIRF advocate for Raif until May 2016. Commissioner Clifford May will advocate on behalf of Badawi*

*due to the departure of Commissioner Zogby from USCIRF.*

**Pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh and Tran Thi Hong**

**Country:** [Vietnam](#)

**USCIRF Advocate:** Ambassador Jackie Wolcott

**Key Fact:** Evangelical pastor

**Detained Since:** April 28, 2011

**Charges:** Undermining unity

**Sentence:** 11 years imprisonment



**Biography:** Nguyen Cong Chinh is an evangelical pastor originally from the Quang Nam province, and has lived in the Central Highland provinces of Kon Tum and Gia Lai since 1985. He is a long-time pro-democracy activist and critic of the Vietnamese government's ban on preaching in the Central Highlands. He is also the founder of the Vietnamese People's Evangelical Fellowship, a charitable organization that ministers to ethnic minority communities in the central highlands, including ethnic minority prisoners and their families. He and his wife, Mrs. Tran Thi Hong, a Lutheran member of the Vietnamese Women for Human Rights organization, have five children.

In 2011, Pastor Chinh was imprisoned on false charges of undermining national solidarity. Prison authorities reportedly have physically and verbally abused him, and he spent approximately one month in solitary confinement. His health is rapidly declining: he suffers from high blood pressure, acute nasal sinusitis, arthritis, and stomach inflammation and is denied treatment or access to medication.

While the Vietnamese government has unjustly imprisoned Pastor Chinh, they have also engaged in acts of harassment against his wife, Mrs. Tran Thi Hong, including extended periods of surveillance, the sealing up of her house, and prevention of her attending scheduled meetings with her husband or procuring medicine for her sick daughter.



On March 30, 2016, local authorities prevented Mrs. Hong from meeting with then U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom David Saperstein. Although she eventually was able to meet with the Ambassador, she suffered for this meeting: she endured a beating which left her with injuries to her head, knee, leg, hand, and foot. This visit was followed by a three-day interrogation during which Mrs. Train Thi Hong was pressured to sign a document stating that her meeting with the Ambassador was illegal and that she was a member of an illegal and subversive church due to her Lutheran faith. After refusing to sign, she was abused for four hours by female officers.



*USCIRF Advocate:* [Ambassador Jackie Wolcott](#)

## **Gedhun Choekyi Nyima – The Panchen Lama**

**Country:** [China](#)

**USCIRF Advocate:** Commissioner Tenzin Dorjee

**Key Fact:** 11th Panchen Lama

**Detained Since:** May 17, 1995

**Biography:** Gedhun Choekyi Nyima was born on April 25, 1989, in Lhari County, Tibet. After the death of the 10<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama, His Holiness the Dalai Lama chose Gedhun on May 15, 1995, to be the 11<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama, which is the second-highest position in Tibetan Buddhism.



Three days after his selection as Panchen Lama, Chinese government authorities kidnapped then six-year-old Gedhun Choekyi Nyima and his family. On November 11, 1995, Chinese authorities announced their own pick to serve as the Panchen Lama: Gyancaïn Norbu.

Most Tibetans reject this choice, as well as the government's interference in their religious practices. The Chinese government maintains strict control over Tibetan Buddhists, suppressing their cultural and religious practices. Government-led raids on monasteries continue, and Chinese party officials in Tibet infiltrate monasteries with Communist Party propaganda.



**USCIRF Advocate:** [Commissioner Tenzin Dorjee](#)

In the more than 20 years since Gedhun's abduction, Chinese authorities have provided little information about his whereabouts, alleging that they need to protect him from being "kidnapped by separatists." In May 2007, Asma Jahangir, then-United States Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, suggested that the Chinese government allow an independent expert to visit and confirm Gedhun's well-being. On July 17, 2007, the Chinese authorities said that he is a "perfectly ordinary Tibetan boy" attending school and leading a normal life, and that he "does not wish to be disturbed." Authorities say that the state employs both of his parents and that his brothers and sisters are either working or at university.

**Gulmira Imin****Country:** [China](#)**USCIRF Advocate:** Commissioner Sandra Jolley**Key Fact:** Website administrator and Uighur Muslim**Detained Since:** July 14, 2009**Charges:** Splittism, leaking state secrets, and organizing an illegal demonstration**Sentence:** Life imprisonment

**Biography:** Gulmira Imin is a Uighur Muslim and former web administrator for the Uighur-language website Salkin. Ms. Imin was also a government employee in Urumqi, the capital of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region in northwest China. Xinjiang is home to the majority of the country's Uighur Muslim population.

Ms. Imin was born in 1978 in Aksu in Xinjiang and graduated in 2000 from the Chinese-Uighur translation department of Xinjiang University. In spring 2009, Ms. Imin became the moderator of Salkin, a Uighur-language culture and news website to which she had previously contributed poetry and short stories. Many of her online writings criticized government policies.

On July 5, 2009, Ms. Imin participated in a major demonstration protesting the deaths of Uighur migrant workers in Guangdong Province. Initially peaceful, the protests turned violent, with about 200 people, including ethnic Han Chinese, killed during the riots and confrontations with police. On July 14, 2009, Ms. Imin was arrested in Aksu after authorities alleged she had organized the protests, posted an announcement for them on Salkin, and leaked state secrets by phone to her husband in Norway. Her family was not notified of the arrest, and was unaware of her location until the October 2009 airing of a China Central Television documentary that depicted Imin in prison garb.



*USCIRF Advocate:*  
[Commissioner Sandra Jolley](#)

On April 1, 2010, the Urumqi Intermediate People's Court sentenced Ms. Imin to life in prison under Articles 103, 111, and 296 of China's Criminal Law on charges of "splittism, leaking state secrets, and organizing an illegal demonstration." She alleges she was tortured and forced to sign documents while in detention. She reportedly was not allowed to meet with her lawyer until the trial. Her appeal subsequently was rejected. Ms. Imin is currently detained in the Xinjiang Women's Prison (Xinjiang No. 2 Prison) located in Urumqi, where she is allowed one family visit every three months.

**Bagir Kazikhanov**

**Country:** [Russia](#)

**USCIRF Advocate:** Commissioner John Ruskay

**Key Fact:** Said Nursi follower

**Detained Since:** April 2014

**Charges:** Organizing extremist activity

**Sentence:** Three and a half years' imprisonment



**Biography:** Bagir Kazikhanov was born on September 9, 1983 in the Republic of Dagestan, an administrative entity of the Russian Federation.

Mr. Kazikhanov organized regular Islamic study sessions in rented flats between 2012 and 2014. During these sessions, he and his fellow Muslims studied the works of the Turkish Islamic revivalist theologian Said Nursi, along with watching football. Nursi, who died in 1960, was an ethnic Kurd who wrote a body of Qur'anic commentary advocating the modernization of Islamic education. Nursi also criticized the secular character of the post-Ottoman Turkish government, for which he was persecuted. Nursi's emphasis on the integration of modern science into Islamic learning is said to have been an inspiration to Fethullah Gülen, the prominent exiled Turkish Islamic preacher. Although Nursi's writings do not advocate hatred, violence, or the violation of human rights, many of Nursi's works are banned in Russia, reportedly due to state opposition to foreign spiritual and cultural influence.

Mr. Kazikhanov was arrested in the city of Ulyanovsk on April 9, 2014, after participating in one of these study sessions, which authorities deemed to be the "organization of extremist activity" under the Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1. He was accused of recruiting a terrorist cell of Nursi followers as part of a supposed "Nurdzhular" movement, which officially was banned in Russia in 2008 but is widely believed to be a legal fiction invented for the purpose of prosecuting Nursi adherents. Mr. Kazikhanov was held in a pre-trial detention center from April to October 2014, and then placed under house arrest until his February 25, 2015, conviction by Judge Natalya Damayeva at the Lenin District Court in Ulyanovsk. The Judge sentenced him to three and a half years' imprisonment.



USCIRF Advocate: [Commissioner John Ruskay](#)

## **Fariba Kamalabadi - The Baha'i Seven**

**Country:** [Iran](#)

**USCIRF Advocate:** Commissioner Kristina Arriaga de Bucholz

**Key Fact:** Developmental psychologist and Baha'i member

**Detained Since:** May 14, 2008

**Charges:** Espionage, propaganda against the Islamic Republic, and establishment of an illegal administration

**Sentence:** 20 years imprisonment



**Biography:** Fariba Kamalabadi was born on September 12, 1962, in Tehran, Iran. Ms. Kamalabadi graduated from high school with honors but was barred from attending university due to her Baha'i faith.

In her mid-30s, Ms. Kamalabadi embarked on an eight-year period of informal study and eventually received an advanced degree in developmental psychology from the Baha'i Institute of Higher Education (BIHE), an alternative institution the Baha'i community of Iran established to provide higher education for its young people. The Iranian government does not recognize the BIHE.

Ms. Kamalabadi is one of the seven Baha'i leaders known as "Yaran" or "Friends," who tended to the spiritual and social needs of the Iranian Baha'i community in the absence of formally elected Baha'i leadership due to restrictions by the Iranian government. The other six members are Mahvash Sabet, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, Saeid Rezaie, Behrouz Tavakkoli, and Vahid Tizfahm.

Ms. Kamalabadi was arrested on May 14, 2008 after an early morning raid on her home. Ms. Kamalabadi and the other Baha'i Seven were held incommunicado for weeks, placed in solitary confinement for months, and spent a year behind bars without access to legal counsel. In 2010, the seven were tried and convicted of charges of "espionage" and "spreading propaganda against the regime." The Seven were sentenced to 20 years in prison, the longest of any current prisoner of conscience in Iran.

Since her arrest in May 2008, Ms. Kamalabadi has been held in Tehran's notorious Evin prison. Witness reports describe the prison cell for Ms. Kamalabadi as four meters by five meters in size, with two small, metal-covered windows, and with no bed or pillows.



Ms. Kamalabadi married fellow Baha'i Ruhollah Taefi in 1982 and they have three children, Vargha, Alhan, and Taraneh. Ms. Kamalabadi's father was fired from his job in the government health service in the 1980s because he was a Baha'i; he was later imprisoned and tortured.

**USCIRF Advocate:** [Commissioner Kristina Arriaga de Bucholz](#)

## **Mahvash Sabet - The Baha'i Seven**

**Country:** [Iran](#)

**USCIRF Advocate:** Commissioner Kristina Arriaga de Bucholz

**Key Fact:** Educator and Baha'i member

**Detained Since:** March 5, 2008

**Charges:** Espionage, propaganda against the Islamic Republic, and establishment of an illegal administration

**Sentence:** 20 years imprisonment



**Biography:** Mahvash Sabet was born on February 4, 1953 in Ardestan, Iran. Ms. Sabet moved to Tehran when she was in the fifth grade and eventually received a bachelor's degree in psychology.

Ms. Sabet began her career as a teacher and also worked as a principal at several schools. Like thousands of other Iranian Baha'i educators after the Islamic Revolution, she was fired from her job and barred from working in public education. She then became director at the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education, a university established by the Baha'i community in 1987 to meet the educational needs of young people who have been systematically denied access to higher education by the Iranian government.

Ms. Sabet was one of the seven Baha'i leaders who were part of the ad hoc group known as "Yaran" or "Friends." This group tended to the spiritual and social needs of the Iranian Baha'i community given the absence of formally elected Baha'i leadership. Ms. Sabet was the first of the Baha'i Seven to be arrested on March 5, 2008 after she was apprehended while visiting Mashhad. The Baha'i Seven were placed in solitary confinement for months, and spent a year behind bars without access to legal counsel. In 2010, the seven were tried and convicted of charges of "espionage" and "spreading propaganda against the regime." They each were sentenced to 20 years in prison, the longest of any current prisoner of conscience in Iran.

Since her arrest in March 2008, Ms. Sabet has been held in Tehran's notorious Evin prison. Witness reports describe the prison cell for Ms. Sabet as four meters by five meters in size, with two small, metal covered-windows, and with no bed or pillows. Despite such conditions, Ms. Sabet has written poems about her experiences while in prison, which she composed on scraps of paper and sent out via friends and family. In 2013, they were published as a book, *Prison Poems*.



Ms. Sabet married Siyvash Sabet on May 21, 1973 and has a son and daughter.

**USCIRF Advocate:** [Commissioner Kristina Arriaga de Bucholz](#)

## **Maryam Naghash Zargaran**

**Country:** [Iran](#)

**USCIRF Advocate:** Commissioner Clifford May

**Key Fact:** Christian convert from Islam

**Detained Since:** January 6, 2013

**Charges:** Propagating against the Islamic regime and collusion intended to harm national security

**Sentence:** Four years imprisonment with an additional 42 days



**Biography:** Maryam Naghash Zargaran, a Christian convert from Islam and former children's music teacher, was arrested on January 6, 2013. On March 9, 2013, Judge Mohammad Moghisseh of Branch 28 of the Revolutionary Courts sentenced her to four years in prison for “propagating against the Islamic regime and collusion intended to harm national security” in connection with her work at an orphanage with Iranian-American Christian pastor Saeed Abedini, who had been imprisoned for “threatening the national security of Iran” due to his activity in the Iranian house church movement.

Ms. Zargaran began her sentence on July 15, 2013. On September 29, 2013, she was transferred from Evin Prison to Modares Hospital for treatment after an apparent heart attack, and then returned to prison at an unknown date. On May 26, 2016, she launched a hunger strike to protest the authorities’ lack of attention to her medical needs and refusal to grant her conditional release or medical leave. Following her hunger strike, she was granted temporary medical leave and forced to pay a deposit bond of 350 million toman (approximately \$100,000) in order to leave the prison. The court later ordered she return to prison. Since she was still sick, her family applied for an extension, which was denied.

On July 15, 2016, Ms. Zargaran launched an indefinite hunger strike to demand her immediate and unconditional release from prison because of the insufficient treatment of her medical issues. Prison officials examined her five days later and issued a report confirming the seriousness of her condition. Although she again demanded to be released for medical treatment, the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence denied her request and she ended her hunger strike at the beginning of August 2016.

Prison officials allowed Ms. Zargaran to return home at the end of August to receive medical treatment. However, because Ms. Zargaran reportedly objected to her furlough conditions, she was sent to Evin Prison. After another five-day medical leave in December 2016, officials informed Ms. Zargaran that her four-year sentence was extended 42 days for time spent outside of prison for medical care in the summer of 2016.



USCIRF Advocate: [Commissioner Cliff May](#)

Ms. Zargaran suffers from a severe heart condition, ASD (atrial septal defect), which required surgery prior to her arrest. Her condition necessitates ongoing monitoring and follow-up with a cardiologist, but since her detention, she has not had regular access to such care. She also suffers from diabetes, high cholesterol, and arthritis.

**Zaw Zaw Latt and Pwint Phyu Latt**

**Country:** [Burma](#)

**USCIRF Advocate:** Vice Chairman Daniel Mark

**Key Fact:** Interfaith peace advocates

**Detained Since:** July 14, 2015 (Zaw Zaw Latt) and July 19, 2015 (Pwint Phyu Latt)

**Charges:** Violating Article 13(1) of the Immigration (Emergency Provisions) Act, for purportedly crossing the Burma-India border

**Sentence:** Two years' imprisonment, and an additional two years with hard labor



**Biographies:** Zaw Zaw Latt and Pwint Phyu Latt are two Muslim interfaith peace advocates who have been imprisoned since 2015. The two participated in an interfaith peace trip in June 2013 to the headquarters of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), during which they delivered a Christian cross and a statue of Buddha as signs of peace. In April 2014, they traveled to Chin State on a humanitarian relief mission, taking pictures at the Burma-India border, a crossing that they stated immigration officers had approved. Nearly two years after their interfaith trip, the Buddhist nationalist group Ma Ba Tha began pressuring the Burmese government to detain them, alleging that both had promoted “inter-religious mating,” insulted Buddhism, and collaborated with the Kachin Independence Army.

The two were arrested in July 2015. After a six-month trial, both were convicted under article 13(1) of the since-repealed Immigration (Emergency Provisions) Act for allegedly crossing the Burma-India border, and sentenced to two years in prison. On April 8, 2016, the day in which the government amnestied 199 prisoners, both advocates were charged with violating article 17(1) of the Unlawful Associations Act due to their 2013 visit to Kachin State, for which they were convicted and sentenced to two additional years in prison with hard labor.



Despite the repeal of the Emergency Provisions Act under which Zaw Zaw Latt and Pwint Phyu Latt were initially sentenced, neither have been released nor had their sentences reduced.

*USCIRF Advocate:* [Vice Chairman Daniel Mark](#)