

**TESTIMONY OF**

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**CHAIR**

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

**BEFORE THE**

**TOM LANTOS HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION**

**ON**

**THE WORSENING PLIGHT OF RELIGIOUS MINORITIES IN IRAN**

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## Introduction

I want to thank the Members of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for holding this hearing and inviting me to testify today on behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). Mr. Chairman, with your approval, I would like to submit my written testimony for the record.

I commend the Commission for providing this opportunity to spotlight the continued deterioration of religious freedom conditions in Iran, most notably for religious minorities.

It is for good reason that for each year since 1999, the United States has designated Iran a Country of Particular Concern or CPC. Its government continues to rank among the world's worst abusers of freedom of religion or belief, engaging in and tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of this foundational human right. These violations have ranged from daily acts of discrimination to severe punishments including prolonged detention, torture, and executions based primarily or entirely upon the religion of the accused. Those whose fundamental rights have been abused include members of religious minorities, from Baha'is and Zoroastrians to Christians and Jews, as well as Muslims belonging to minority Sufi and Sunni sects in Iran and even Muslims who are part of Iran's Shi'a majority.

Indeed, it is fair to say that no religious community has been unaffected by the government's oppressive hand. Since the start of the Islamic Revolution that swept the current regime into power in 1979, any Iranian who has dissented from the government's own interpretation of Shi'a Islam, whether by word, deed, or affiliation, may be considered an enemy of the state and a potential target for abuse by governing authorities.

While once there were signs that Iran's government was considering reform, the ascension of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the presidency in the summer of 2005 brought that era to a close.

In June 2009, Iran arrived at a watershed moment when in the aftermath of a national election, citizens rose in protest over the legitimacy of its outcome. Ahmadinejad's government responded with brutal repression, triggering precisely what it sought to avoid, the rise of the Green movement that summer, and with it, a stunning display of the breadth of opposition to the government on political, ideological, human rights, and religious freedom grounds. Since that time, Iranians have witnessed a return of human rights and religious freedom conditions to the worst levels since the years after the 1979 Revolution.

Today I will discuss Iran's religious freedom abuses in this post-2009 world, including developments over the past year. While Iranians of all religions and beliefs, and those who reject every religion, have been deeply impacted by repression, there is no question that religious minority communities continue to bear the brunt of the crackdown. In his just-released report to the UN Human Rights Council, Ahmed Shaheed, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran wrote that he remains "deeply concerned about the human rights situation facing religious minorities in Iran."

I will draw attention to the plight of those minorities, such as Baha'is, Sufi Muslims, and Christians, who remain the particular targets of the regime. I also will summarize USCIRF's recommendations to the United States government on how best to respond to the worsening plight of religious minorities in Iran.

### **Deterioration since the 2009 Elections**

The disputed June 2009 elections marked a decisive turning point in the human rights and religious freedom environment in Iran.

The Iranian people have seen the dramatic unleashing of security and paramilitary forces, which have used brutal force against the hundreds of thousands of Iranians who protested in the streets in the months after the elections, as well as after the uprisings which enveloped the Arab world in early 2011. Dozens of Iranians have been killed and thousands arrested, convicted, and given lengthy prison terms. More than a dozen dissidents have been executed on charges such as "waging war against God," "spreading corruption on earth," and "moral corruption." The Iranian government leveled unsubstantiated charges and used trial procedures for national security cases against members of religious minority communities and individuals for alleged crimes such as "confronting the regime" and apostasy. In the run-up to the March 2, 2012 parliamentary elections, Iranian security services increasingly cracked down on any form of public dissent, particularly by journalists.

### **Status of Members of Shi'a Muslim Majority**

Since 2009, the Iranian government has continued to target prominent reformers within the Shi'a Muslim majority. Many have received harsh prison sentences allegedly for "insulting Islam," criticizing the Islamic Republic, and publishing materials that supposedly deviate from Islamic standards. The government increasingly has manipulated its religious laws to silence dissidents simply for exercising their freedoms of thought and expression, conscience and religion.

The government also has expanded its crackdown on Shi'a clerics, barring them from publicly questioning the election results or criticizing the government's response to demonstrations. Over the years, a number of senior Shi'a religious leaders who have opposed various tenets and practices of the government also have been subject to house arrest, detention without charge, trial without due process, torture, and other forms of ill treatment.

For example, in October 2006, Ayatollah Mohammad Kazemini Boroujerdi, who favors the separation of religion and state and supported the rights of Iran's religious minorities as well as those of its Shi'a Muslim majority, was arrested and imprisoned without charge. He and 17 of his followers initially were tried by a special court with jurisdiction over Shi'a clerics, and sentenced to death on spurious charges, including "enmity against God" and spreading propaganda against the regime. After an appeal, the death sentence was withdrawn and Boroujerdi was sentenced to 11 years in prison where he has suffered physical and mental

abuse. Boroujerdi currently is serving his prison term, and the government has banned him from practicing his clerical duties and confiscated his home and belongings. .

### **Status of Sunni Muslims**

In addition to the Shi'a majority, Muslim minorities in Iran also face repression. Several of the country's ethnic minorities – Arabs, Baluchis, Kurds, and Turkmen – practice Sunni Islam. These groups are discriminated against on two counts – their ethnic identity and their faith. Sunni leaders regularly are intimidated and harassed by intelligence and security services and report widespread official discrimination. In addition, the Iranian government discriminates against the Sunni community in government employment, particularly in leadership positions in the executive and judicial branches.

Sunni leaders have reported widespread abuses and restrictions on their religious practice, including detentions and abuse of clerics and bans on Sunni teachings in public schools and Sunni religious literature. The Sunni community remains unable to build a mosque in Tehran and, in recent years, Sunni mosques have been destroyed in portions of eastern Iran. In recent years, dozens of Sunni clerics reportedly were arrested for spreading Sunni teachings in several parts of the country, including Kurdistan, Kermanshah, Baluchistan, West Azerbaijan, Ahvaz, Tavalesh, and Khorassan provinces.

### **Status of Sufi Muslims**

Besides its Sunni minority, Iran's government has been stepping up its harassment and arrests of its Sufi Muslim minority as well, including prominent leaders, while increasing restrictions on places of worship and destroying Sufi prayer centers and *hussainiyas* (or meeting halls).

Over the past few years, authorities have detained hundreds of Sufi Muslims, particularly from the Nematollahi Gonabadi order, sentencing many to imprisonment, fines, and floggings. In September and October 2011, for example, a Sufi Muslim from the Gonabadi order was killed and several were injured during a government crackdown in southwestern Iran, Fars province, during which the Basij militia arrested at least 60 Sufis. At least seven remain in detention. Four attorneys – Farshid Yadollahi, Amir Eslami, Afshin Karampour, and Omid Behruzi – who defended the dervishes in court were also arrested in September 2011. Three of the four attorneys continue to be held in Evin Prison and were charged in late 2011 with insulting the Supreme Leader, “spreading lies,” and membership in a “deviant group.” According to human rights groups, the fourth attorney, Amir Eslami, has a serious heart condition and has been sent to the hospital for medical attention.

In April 2011, eight Sufi dervishes from the Gonabadi order were re-arrested on charges of disrupting public order, for which they received floggings and had been imprisoned. The prior month, in March, more than 200 Gonabadi Sufis were summoned to courts throughout the country based on allegations that they were insulting Iranian authorities. In January, three lawyers who defended Sufi dervishes were sentenced to prison terms.

Further, Iranian state television continued to air programs denigrating and demonizing Sufism, particularly the Nematollahi Gonabadi order. Since 2006, Iranian authorities have attacked or demolished several Gonabadi prayer centers. There also have been reports that the government is considering a ban on Sufism.

### **Status of Non-Muslim Religious Minorities**

While Iran's government has seriously violated the religious freedom of reformers and dissidents among the Shi'a Muslim majority, and members of Sunni and Sufi minorities, it continues to treat non-Muslim minorities just as, if not more, harshly.

To be sure, Iran's constitution recognizes Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians as protected religious minorities who may worship freely and maintain autonomy over their own matters of personal status, such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance.

Nevertheless, under Iran's theocratic government, the primacy of Islam and Islamic laws and institutions diminishes the rights and status of non-Muslims, meaning that these religious minorities live, in effect, as second-class citizens. Members are subject to various forms of discrimination, particularly in education, government jobs and services, and the armed services. In addition, their places of worship and photos of the religious leadership frequently are defaced with graffiti. Their private schools are administered by Iran's Ministry of Education, which imposes a state-approved religious curriculum.

Under Iranian law, non-Muslims may not engage with Muslims in public religious expression or persuasion; some also face restrictions on publishing their religious material in Persian. According to Iranian law, Baha'i blood is *mobah*, which means members of the Baha'i faith can be killed with impunity.

Since the June 2009 elections, Iran's government has intensified its campaign against non-Muslims. A consistent stream of virulent and inflammatory statements by political and religious leaders and an increase in harassment and imprisonment of, and physical attacks against, these groups have returned the nation to levels of oppression not seen since the early 1980s. In October 2010 in Qom in central Iran, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei publicly stated that "enemies of Islam" are using the spread of Sufism, the Baha'i faith, and Christian house churches to weaken the faith of Iran's young people in society. Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, head of the Guardian Council, continued to refer to non-Muslims publicly as "sinful animals" and "corrupt."

### **Status of Baha'is**

Among Iran's religious minority communities, the Baha'i have long been subject to particularly severe religious freedom abuses. Iranian authorities view Baha'is, who number at least 300,000, as "heretics" who may be repressed on the grounds of apostasy. According to the UN Special

Rapporteur on human rights in Iran, Ahmed Shaheed, the Baha'i community is the "most persecuted religious minority in Iran."

Since 1979, authorities have killed more than 200 Baha'i leaders and dismissed more than 10,000 from government and university jobs. Although the Iranian government maintains publicly that Baha'is are free to attend university, reports over the past year indicate that the de facto policy of preventing Baha'is from obtaining higher education remains in effect. Of the very few Baha'is who were enrolled in universities in recent years, most were expelled once their religious beliefs became known. Furthermore, during the past few years, young Baha'i schoolchildren in primary and high schools increasingly have been vilified, pressured to convert to Islam, and in some cases expelled on account of their religion.

Baha'is also may not establish places of worship, schools, or any independent religious associations in Iran. Baha'is are barred from the military and denied government jobs and pensions as well as the right to inherit property. Their marriages and divorces also are not recognized, and they have difficulty obtaining death certificates. Baha'i cemeteries, holy places, and community properties often are seized or desecrated, and many of their important religious sites have been destroyed.

In recent years, emboldened by Iranian law and policy, militant societal actors have physically attacked Baha'is and committed violent acts, including arson on Baha'i homes and businesses, with impunity. A recent wave of arson attacks on Baha'i-owned businesses in Rafsanjan appears to be part of a campaign to fracture relationships between Baha'is and Muslims in the city. Since October 2010, dozens of shops have been attacked and more than 20 Baha'i homes and businesses have received letters warning that Baha'is will suffer severe consequences for forming friendships with Muslims.

The Baha'i community also faces additional economic pressures, including denial of jobs in both the public and private sectors and of business licenses. Iranian authorities often pressure employers of Baha'is to dismiss them from employment in the private sector.

Just in the past two years, Baha'is in Iran have faced increasingly harsh treatment, including increasing numbers of arrests and detentions and violent attacks on private homes and personal property.

A report released just last week by the Baha'i International Community, titled *Violence with Impunity: Acts of Aggression against Iran's Baha'i Community*, notes that more than 660 Baha'is have been arbitrarily arrested since 2005. For the first time since the regime's early years, by the end of 2012, at least 110 Baha'is were being held in prison solely due to their religious beliefs, ten times the number incarcerated in 2005. Baha'i-owned businesses and personal property have been the target of arson attacks in several cities; in all cases, police claimed they could not find the perpetrators.

Dozens of Baha'is await trial while others have been sentenced to prison terms ranging from 90 days to several years. All of those convicted reportedly are in the process of appealing the verdicts. According to human rights groups, more than 500 Baha'is continue to have active cases pending against them, despite having been released from detention.

Also in recent years, Baha'i cemeteries in various parts of the country, including Tehran, Ghaemshahr, Marvdasht, Semnan, Sari, Yazd, Najafabad, and Isfahan, have been desecrated, defaced, or in some way blocked to the Baha'i community. Over the past several years, several articles in the government-controlled newspaper Kayhan, whose managing editor is appointed by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, and other media outlets have vilified and demonized the Baha'i faith and community.

An October 2011 report by the Baha'i International Community, titled "*Inciting Hatred: Iran's Media Campaign to Demonize Baha'is*," summarized the relentless propaganda against the Baha'is as follows:

*"They are accused of being agents for various imperialist or colonialist factions; they face continuous but utterly unfounded allegations of immorality; they are branded as social pariahs to be shunned. The propaganda is shocking in its volume and vehemence, its scope and sophistication, cynically calculated to stir up antagonism against a peaceful religious community whose members are striving to contribute to the well-being of their society."*

In May 2011, in at least four different cities, Iranian authorities raided more than 30 homes of Baha'is involved with the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education (BIHE), the community's 24 year-old effort to educate its youth, whom the government bars from undergraduate or graduate studies. Approximately 18 Baha'is were arrested and a number of books, documents, computers, and other materials associated with the BIHE were seized. Several Baha'is were released after days or weeks in detention, but in October, seven were tried and found guilty of membership in a deviant sect with the goal of acting against national security. The seven were sentenced to either four- or five-year prison terms. In January 2012, Vahid Mahmoudi, one of the seven educators imprisoned, was released on probation after his sentence was suspended. The other six educators – Mahmoud Badavam, Noushin Khadem, Farhad Sedghi, Riaz Sobhani, Ramin Zibaie, and Kamran Mortezaie – remain in prison. In late 2011 and 2012, four additional instructors from the BIHE were convicted and sentenced four year – Faran Hessami, Kamran Rahimian, Shahin Negari – and five year – Kayvan Rahimian – prison terms. In September 2011, prominent human rights defender Abdolfattah Soltani was arrested for preparing a defense for the Baha'i educators. He was arrested and detained for several months in 2005 and 2009 under similar circumstances.

Since 2008, seven Baha'i leaders – Fariba Kamalabadi, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naemi, Saeid Rezaie, Mahvash Sabet, Behrouz Tavakkoli, and Vahid Tizfahm – have been jailed by the government based on an assortment of dubious charges, ranging from espionage to "corruption on the earth." In August 2010, the seven were sentenced to 20 years in prison. In September 2010, authorities informed them that their 20-year sentences were reduced to 10; however, prison

authorities told them in March 2011 that their original 20-year sentences had been reinstated. The two women currently are held in Evin prison while the five men are held under appalling conditions in the notorious Gohardasht prison outside Tehran. Attorneys for the seven Baha'is, including Nobel Laureate Shirin Ebadi, have had extremely limited access to their clients and court proceedings and have reiterated that the charges against them are baseless.

Just when you thought it could not get any worse, the Iranian government has stooped to new lows. In recent months, there have been at least three known instances in which young infants have been incarcerated along with their Baha'i mothers. A five-month-old boy has been imprisoned with his mother in Semnan since September 22, 2012. The infant recently was hospitalized outside of the prison because of a lung disease caused by unsanitary prison conditions. His mother is serving a 23-month sentence. Another infant, the 10-month-old son of a Semnan woman who is serving a 30-month sentence, contracted an infection and was taken out from prison for tests, prescribed medication, and is now back in prison with his mother. On December 17, 2012, another Semnan woman was imprisoned with her one-year-old child and remains there today.

### **Status of Christians**

Besides its severe mistreatment of Baha'is, Iran's government also continues to repress Christians, particularly Evangelicals and other Protestants, who are subject to harassment, arrests, close surveillance, and imprisonment; many are reported to have fled the country. Even indigenous Assyrian and Armenian Christian religious leaders also have been targeted periodically. Ahmadinejad has called for an end to the development of Christianity in Iran.

Since the 1979 Revolution, Iran's government has refused to allow the construction of a single new church in the country.

In recent years, hundreds of Christians have been arbitrarily arrested and detained throughout the country. In cases involving offenses based on religious belief, Iranian authorities typically release prisoners, but leave the charges against them or their convictions in place in order to be able to threaten them with re-imprisonment at any future time.

In September 2012, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran, Ahmed Shaheed, stated since 2010, that more than 300 Christians have been arrested and detained arbitrarily.

In January, the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran released an unprecedented report titled, *The Cost of Faith: Persecution of Christian Protestants and Converts in Iran*. The report – through numerous interviews with Iranian converts to Christianity, lawyers, activists, and journalists – meticulously documents a pattern of abuse that extends to all Protestants in Iran. The report concluded that Christian converts face severe restrictions on religious practice and association, arbitrary arrests and detentions for practicing their faith, and violations of the right to life through state execution for apostasy and extrajudicial killings.



Christian pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, jailed since October 2009, was sentenced to death for apostasy in November 2010 by a court in Gilan province. Prosecutors acknowledged he had never been a Muslim as an adult but said the apostasy law still applies because he has Islamic ancestry. Rejecting his appeal in June 2011, the court suspended the sentence contingent upon his recanting his faith, which he refused to do during hearings in September. Facing mounting international pressure over his plight, officials released Nadarkhani in 2012, only to rearrest him on Christmas, and then release him again in January 2013.

In a particularly outrageous miscarriage of justice, Saeed Abedini, an Iranian-born American pastor, was sentenced on January 27, 2013 by Judge Pir-Abassi, a jurist notorious for perpetrating religious freedom violations, to eight years in prison for “threatening the national security of Iran.” His “crimes” apparently included his participation since 2000 in Iran’s house church movement and his most recent efforts to raise money for an orphanage. Human rights groups have stated that his trial was unfair and the whole legal process deeply flawed. Reportedly, he has spent many weeks in solitary confinement and has suffered mental and physical abuse by authorities while in Evin prison.

Five Iranians who converted to Christianity will go on trial this week in Iran’s Revolutionary Court. They were arrested in October 2012 on “evangelism” and other charges after security forces raided a house church in the city of Shiraz during a prayer session. The five men are members of the Church of Iran denomination, one of the country’s largest house church movements. On February 8, 2012, Iranian authorities raided a house church gathering in Shiraz, confiscated religious materials, and arrested 10 Christian converts. Four remain in detention without charge – Mojtaba Hosseini, Homayoon Shokoohi, Vahid Hakkani, and Mohammad-Reza Paroei.

Meanwhile, rhetoric from political and religious leaders demonizing and insulting the Christian community has escalated alarmingly. In 2011, some 6,500 Bibles were confiscated as they were being transported between the cities of Zanjan and Ahbar in the northwestern province. Commenting on the confiscation, a high-level government official said that Christian missionaries were attempting to deceive people, especially the youth, with an expensive propaganda campaign. In January 2011, the governor of Tehran, Morteza Tamaddon, publicly referred to detained Christians as “deviant” and “corrupt” and vowed to identify and detain more. He likened Evangelical Christians to the Taliban and accused them of placing “themselves within the religion of Islam like a pest and under the cover of Christianity and with the support of England they have designed a movement.”

### **Status of Zoroastrians and Sabeian Mandaean**

Like Christians, members of Iran’s Zoroastrian community are considered protected religious minorities. Nonetheless, in recent years, members of the indigenous Zoroastrian community have come under increasing repression and discrimination. In August 2011, a Zoroastrian man, Mohsen Sadeghipour, began serving a four-and-a-half year prison term, having been charged and

convicted of propaganda of the Zoroastrian faith. Several of his relatives were convicted and imprisoned in 2010 on blasphemy and other charges.

Over the past few years, the Sabean Mandaean religious community, whose members -- like Baha'is -- are unprotected, have been facing intensifying official harassment. There continue to be reports that members, who number between 5,000 and 10,000, experience societal discrimination and pressure to convert to Islam, and they are often denied access to higher education. In recent years, hundreds of Sabean Mandaean families reportedly have fled the country.

### **Status of Jews and Anti-Semitism**

While along with Christians and Zoroastrians, Jews are considered members of a protected religious minority, official policies promoting anti-Semitism have risen sharply in recently years, and Jews have been targeted on the basis of perceived ties to Israel.

President Ahmadinejad and other top political and religious leaders have made public remarks denying the Holocaust and calling for the elimination of the state of Israel. There have continued to be officially-sanctioned anti-Semitic propaganda, involving official statements, media outlets, publications, and books. In line with a stepped-up state-sponsored campaign, numerous programs broadcast on state-run television anti-Semitic messages, a prominent newspaper held a Holocaust denial cartoon contest, and the government sponsored a Holocaust denial conference. Anti-Semitic cartoons depicting demonic and stereotypical images of Jews, along with Jewish symbols, also have been published.

Official government discrimination against Jews continues to be pervasive, fostering a threatening atmosphere for the approximately 20,000-25,000 member Jewish community. According to the State Department, despite minimal restrictions on Jewish religious practice, education of Jewish children has become increasingly difficult in recent years, and distribution of Hebrew religious texts is strongly discouraged.

### **Recommendations**

Let me highlight some of USCIRF's recommendations for U.S. policy.

- In response to the systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, and the repressive policies and practices repeatedly and routinely imposed by the Iranian government, the U.S. government should continue to designate Iran as a "Country of Particular Concern" or CPC.
- The United States should continue to work closely with its allies to apply pressure on the Iranian government through a combination of advocacy, diplomacy, and targeted sanctions with the aim of halting the government's human rights and religious freedom violations.

- Congress should reauthorize, and the President sign into law, the Lautenberg Amendment, a life-line for religious minorities in Iran. The Amendment establishes a presumption of eligibility and allows fast track processing to prevent undue backlogs in countries that host this processing. Congress also needs to reauthorize the Lautenberg Amendment for multiple years, thereby eliminating the disruptions and uncertainties that result from single year appropriations
- The United States government should call on the Iranian government to release all prisoners who have been jailed on account of their religion or belief, and drop all charges against those who have cases pending against them. These prisoners range from a Shi'a cleric and his followers, to a number of Sufi Muslim, Baha'i and Christian leaders whose sole crime is exercising their internationally guaranteed right to freedom of religion or belief.

Since it is important to shine the light on these prisoners, here are some of their names: They are: Christian leaders -- Saeed Abedini, Farshid Fathi and Behnam Irani; Shi'a Muslim Cleric Ayatollah Boroujerdi; The Baha'i Seven -- Fariba Kamalabadi, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, Saeid Rezaie, Mahvash Sabet, Behrouz Tavakkoli, Vahid Tizfahm; and Baha'i Educators -- Mahmoud Badavam, Faran Hesami, Nooshin Khadem, Kamran Mortezaie, Shahin Negari, Kamran Rahimian, Kayvan Rahimian, Farhad Sedghi, Riaz Sobhani, and Ramin Zibaie

- The United States should demand that Iran rescind laws that permit members of the Baha'i faith to be killed with impunity, allow members of the Baha'i community to practice their faith in Iran, and grant full access for Baha'is to study in public universities without discrimination.
- The United States should call on Iran to cease all messages of hatred and intolerance, particularly against religious minorities, in the government-controlled media; halt state-sponsored acts of anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial promotion campaigns; and counteract anti-Semitic rhetoric and other organized anti-Semitic activities by the President and other high-level government officials.
- The United States government should continue to identify Iranian government agencies and officials responsible for particularly severe violations of religious freedom, including but not limited to:

- Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei;
- President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad;
- Sadegh Ardeshir Larijani, Head of the Judiciary;
- Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, Chair, Guardian Council;
- Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi, Assembly of Experts
- Hossein Shariatmadari, Managing Editor, Kayhan
- Mohammad Moghiseh, Presiding Judge of Branch 28 of the Islamic Revolutionary Courts;
- Abbas Pir-Abbassi, Presiding Judge of Branch 26 of the Islamic Revolutionary Courts; and

--Abolghassem Salavati, Presiding Judge of Branch 15 of the Islamic Revolutionary Courts.

- The United States should continue to bar from entry into the United States and freeze the assets of Iranian government officials identified as having engaged in particularly severe religious freedom violations, including but not limited to those listed above, and, where appropriate, their immediate family members.
- The U.S. government should call on the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) to follow up vigorously on Iran's compliance with the recommendations from the February 2010 UPR, including those related to freedom of religion or belief.
- It should continue to support an annual UN General Assembly resolution condemning severe violations of human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, in Iran, and calling for officials responsible for such violations to be held accountable;
- It should press for a resolution condemning severe violations of human rights in Iran, including freedom of religion or belief, at the UNHRC;
- It should call on Iran to cooperate fully with the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights Situation in Iran.
- Finally, the United States government should encourage the UNHRC to continue to use its existing procedures to maintain oversight of conditions for freedom of religion or belief in Iran, including continued visits and reporting by the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, and other relevant special rapporteurs and working groups, to which Iran has issued a standing invitation.

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Mr. Chairman, Iran's abuses against religious freedom and its unrelenting crackdown on religious minorities are deplorable and demand the world's attention and action.

With June presidential elections just months away, this is a matter of great urgency. We are concerned that the Iranian government may use the weeks leading up to the elections to crush any form of dissent and scapegoat religious minorities as in the past.

We urge Members of Congress, the Administration, and the international community to pay increased attention in the coming weeks and months.

If ever religious minorities in Iran needed a voice to condemn Iran's abusive practices, it is now.

We hope President Obama will lend his voice by including the plight of religious minorities in his annual Nowruz message next week to the Iranian people to commemorate the Persian New Year.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify, and I look forward to any questions you might have.