

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing
on
The State of Religious Freedom Around the Globe

July 13, 2021- 2:00 p.m.
Virtual, via WebEx

Statement of Anthony N. Vance
Director of Public Affairs
Baha'is of the United States

Mr. Chairman, I would like to thank you for providing the opportunity to testify on the situation of religious freedom in Iran. Although, as the Director of Public Affairs of the Baha'is of the United States, I am most familiar with the situation of the Baha'is, who, at some 300,000, are the largest non-Muslim, religious minority in Iran, I will also touch on the status of other religious communities.

The Bahá'í Faith is an independent world religion with over five million followers in over 200 countries and territories, representing virtually every racial, ethnic, and national group on the planet.

However, it originated in Iran. It spread rapidly in the mid-1840s immediately after its inception, and included several notable clerics among its adherents. This triggered a violent reaction, instigated or supported by a majority of the clergy, during which some 20,000 Bahá'ís were killed by mobs or the government over little more than a decade. The primary reason that Bahá'ís are persecuted is theological. Most of the Islamic clergy in Iran believe that Islam is the final religion of God. The Bahá'í Faith, a religion that arose after Islam, is therefore viewed by most of Iran's clergy as heresy and blasphemy, and Bahá'ís are viewed as apostates.

In addition, Iran's clerics view certain teachings of the Bahá'í Faith as threatening. For instance, the Bahá'í Faith does not have a clergy and holds that each individual has the duty to investigate spiritual truth and arrive at his or her own beliefs. In addition, Bahá'ís believe strongly in the equality of women and men. The Faith eschews violence.

While the intense brutality against Bahá'ís began to subside toward the end of the nineteenth century, unequal treatment, social hostilities, and sporadic surges in violence continued during much of the twentieth century. After the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Bahá'ís became the target of severe and systematic state-sponsored persecution, and it became official government policy to oppress Bahá'ís. In the years following the Revolution, over 200 Bahá'ís were killed, the

majority by execution. Thousands of Bahá'ís were imprisoned, many of them tortured. Bahá'í holy places were destroyed and Bahá'í cemeteries have repeatedly been attacked and desecrated.

The government also made and continues to make concerted efforts to impoverish the Bahá'í community. After the Revolution, Bahá'ís were dismissed from government jobs and denied pensions, and, to this day, private employers are pressured not to hire Bahá'ís. Bahá'ís still suffer frequent raids on their homes and businesses, including shop closures, they are barred from two dozen occupations, and their property is routinely seized without compensation. In the second half of 2020, two provincial appellate courts confirmed the seizure of some 50 Baha'i homes, including their adjacent farm lands, in the village of Ivel in Mazandaran Province. The courts confirmed a lower court finding that “the perverse sect of Baha’ism is confirmed as heretical and nejasat (ritually unclean)” [and] “there is no legitimacy in their ownership.” These appellate court decisions, if used as precedent across Iran, would have a devastating impact on the already struggling Baha’i community. Bahá'ís were also dismissed from university positions after the Revolution, and Bahá'í students have been excluded from the nation’s universities since then. Arbitrary arrests and imprisonments remain commonplace with some three dozen Baha’is in prison and with typically three times that number out of prison awaiting trial, sentencing, or appellate processes.

Of particular concern at this time has been a surge in anti-Bahá'í hate propaganda in state-sponsored media outlets, including online sites as well as television and radio. For perspective, in 2010 and 2011, approximately 22 anti-Bahá'í written news pieces or broadcasts were appearing every month. In 2014, the number of anti-Bahá'í publications rose to approximately 401 per month – eighteen times the previous level. During the first four months of 2021, the average was 1,034 per month, more than double the 2014 level and an increase of 44% over the monthly average in calendar year 2020, which was 718 per month. We believe that this increase is significant enough to warrant concern that the Iranian government is preparing its population to either support or acquiesce to a planned increase in persecution of the Baha'i community. The false statements in this hate propaganda are designed to provide the most visceral negative responses in an Iranian audience by describing Baha’is as spies of Israel and western powers and Baha’i meetings as secret orgies, together with incest as an accepted practice in the Baha’i community. The Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has issued and repeatedly re-issued a religious decree prohibiting Iranian Muslims from associating with members of the “deviant sect,” a well-known reference to Bahá'ís. The clerical establishment has long promoted the view that Bahá'ís are ritually unclean and that the blood of Bahá'ís is *mobah*, meaning that it can be spilled with impunity.

The surge in hate propaganda creates a very worrying situation. It is well-known from numerous examples around the world over the last 100 years that hate propaganda is often used to prepare the public to support or, at least, acquiesce to severe increases in persecution. We hope that that is not the case here, but feel it is important to alert this Commission and the international community to the situation.

Although, unlike the Baha'i Faith, Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism are recognized as official religions in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran and their adherents are reserved a total of five seats in Iran's 290-member parliament, they nevertheless face serious restrictions on their religious activities. Muslim religious groups not conforming to Shi'a Islam, such as Sunni Muslims, or to the regime's version of Shi'a Islam, such as the Gonabadi Sufis, face varying degrees of persecution. For instance, the International Organization for the Preservation of Human Rights has reported that there are currently eight Gonabadi Sufis in [prison](#) for their faith and another 34 in internal exile, and that, after the death of their leader, Dr. Noor Ali Tabandeh, while under house arrest in December 2019, the community has had the assets of the Sufi order seized and come under pressure from the government to accept new leadership appointed by the government. Article 18, which is a human rights NGO, which focuses on the persecution of Christian converts in Iran, [reports](#) that there are currently at least 23 Christians in prison in Iran for their faith and at least another 53, who are not in prison but awaiting trial, sentencing, or the completion of appellate processes. As with Baha'is, these individuals are commonly charged with endangering national security and making propaganda against the regime.

Mr. Chairman, thank you, once again, for the opportunity to testify.