



*One Free World International*  

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*El Shafie Ministries*

**The Iran Nuclear Agreement**  
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**A Tragic Mistake that Must Be Avoided**

A Report by  
One Free World International

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## Introduction

The draft Iranian nuclear agreement reached by world powers is a tragic mistake and must be stopped. Proponents and critics have largely focused on the terms of the deal and argue over whether or not it will be effective in limiting Iran's nuclear ambitions. This debate is really a red herring, however, since even the deal's supporters agree that, if observed to the letter, the deal does not prevent Iran from developing military grade nuclear capabilities in the medium to longer term should it so desire.

The real reason this agreement is such a tragedy is that it concedes defeat on the most fundamental issues central to American values and for which its young men and women have shed their blood since the earliest days of the country's founding. Specifically, the deal contains no mention of Iran's systemic human rights abuses against its own people. Some may argue that this is because the deal is limited to the nuclear issue and has no intention of dealing with other matters which will continue to be addressed through other avenues. Yet, sometimes silence speaks louder than words and the very fact that the agreement ignores human rights in Iran is in itself a statement about those rights.

It is not enough that the Iranian government finds itself compelled, under the effect of on-going sanctions, to come to the table; it must demonstrate its good faith. Without tangible action or discernible progress on the regime's shameful past and on-going human rights violations, One Free World International (OFWI) is calling on the United States Congress to halt the agreement in its tracks.

The Iranian people counting on us for support on their most basic human rights and freedoms are the real losers of this draft deal. Millions of ordinary Iranians continue to suffer from the human rights abuses of their government and religious leaders:

- Bahá'ís are not recognized and cannot legally attend school without denying their faith.
- Converts to Christianity are jailed, tortured, and executed.
- Jews are imprisoned and accused of spying for Israel.
- Men and women are stoned to death or hanged in public if they are found guilty of homosexual activity or adultery.
- Young men and women who attempt to demonstrate in the streets on behalf of democracy are arrested and imprisoned, briefly or indefinitely, or simply shot in the street, leaving the Green Revolution of 2009 a footnote in history.

As a result, OFWI is urging Congress to use all means at its disposal to prevent the draft agreement from going ahead and to show Iran and the world that the United States still stands for basic, universal values that are worth fighting, and even dying, for. This deal sends exactly

the wrong message to Iran and the world. It tells them that Americans are no longer prepared to fight for what they believe, even when those beliefs are fundamental. It tells them that America is more concerned about its image and status than it is about doing what is right. And it tells them America is weak and knows it (which, ironically, is one of the arguments that has been used to promote the deal) when America desperately needs to be downplaying its weakness and using its strengths to its advantage and the benefit of the weak and the voiceless.

One of the greatest of those strengths is America's historical pursuit and stand on behalf of justice, equality, and human rights. Diplomatic influence, military might, and economic power are fleeting, but moral strength and character stand the tests of time, but only if they are exercised. America has attempted something few other countries have and, even with all its imperfections and setbacks, it has earned and must draw strength from this source – America must not give up the fight.

#### About One Free World International (OFWI)

One Free World International is a Toronto-based international human rights organization that focuses on protecting the rights of religious minorities as well as educating the public and decision-makers about violations of religious freedom around the world. Rev. El Shafie was himself detained and severely tortured by Egyptian authorities after he converted from Islam to Christianity and began pursuing equal rights for Egyptian Christians. After he was sentenced to death, he managed to escape from Egypt and finally settled in Canada where he established OFWI to share a message of freedom, hope, and tolerance for religious differences and to promote human rights in this area through advocacy, humanitarian aid, and public education.

OFWI has advocated on behalf of religious minorities and individuals regardless of creed, including Christians, Jews, Ahmadiyya and Uyghur Muslims, Falun Gong, and Bahá'ís, among others. Rev. El Shafie has also led delegations on fact-finding missions to countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Cuba, Israel, India, and Bangladesh, among others, where he has met personally and addressed these issues with government and opposition leaders and local human rights advocates.

Rev. El Shafie has appeared several times before parliamentary bodies in Canada, and before the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights and the Tom Lantos Human Rights Committee of the United States Congress. He has also provided expert testimony for numerous courts and tribunals on behalf of individuals seeking protection in Canada and the United States. He has developed relationships with members in the Canadian Parliament and the American Congress and addressed these issues directly with cabinet ministers and officials in the Canadian government, including the Prime Minister's Office, in order to help educate decision-makers about the on-going issue of religious persecution around the world. In 2012, Rev. El Shafie was honoured with the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal for his work on behalf of persecuted minorities around the world.

## Discussion

### The Agreement

Since the agreement was announced, political analysts and commentators have been busy dissecting the terms of the deal for its strengths and weaknesses. Supporters see the agreement as the best among poor options in light of the very real limits on American power, and they focus on the hope that the agreement will prevent Iran from having nuclear weapons for another ten years while glossing over its serious flaws. Critics, on the other hand, have focused on the illusory inspection regime, the potential for up to \$150 billion to flow to the Iranian regime and its terrorist protégés in the Middle East, and the fear that in ten years Iran will be on the road to nuclear weapons capability with the implied approval of the world powers.

OFWI does not wish to diminish the concerns over specific terms of the agreement or those over individual human rights cases that have been raised by other organizations and which the American government appears to have abandoned with this deal. These are real, significant, and must be pursued. However, OFWI's concerns are much more fundamental and go to the very premises of the agreement and the circumstances under which it was negotiated. Supporters of the deal argue that there is no alternative, but OFWI would beg to disagree; we believe there are always alternatives. In this case, the alternatives must include addressing the Iranian regime's deplorable human rights record.

### Human Rights in Iran

Iran is a country of contradictions. The population is young, well-educated, and interested in the world beyond their borders. On the other hand, despite periodic elections meant to put on a show of democracy, the country has been run behind the scenes by hardline Shi'a Islamic religious leaders or mullahs since 1979. The regime retains an iron grip on society and human rights are honoured in the breach. Torture is a standard tool and Evin Prison is notorious around the world for its brutality. At the same time, Iran consistently places behind only China in the top countries in the world in terms of executions.

This brief report can only provide a limited overview of a few select rights. The status of these rights and others in Iran have been reported on in much greater detail and with greater eloquence by other organizations and it is not our intent to duplicate those efforts or even provide a general survey. Rather our purpose is simply to draw attention to systemic human rights violations in Iran in a few select areas in order to bring into relief what truly is at stake in the mistaken notion that the nuclear deal can be divorced from the broader context in Iran.

### Religious Freedom in Iran

The population of approximately 80 million is overwhelmingly Shi'a Muslim at almost 90%. The remainder consists mostly of Sunni Muslims (about 9%) and a small number of adherents of

other religions, including Christians, Bahá'ís, Jews, and Zoroastrians, among others, accounting for about 1-2% of the population. Of these minorities, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Judaism have a certain protected status by virtue of being recognized at law. While this does not entail equal rights or grant individuals protection from arbitrary detention and other measures, unrecognized communities like the Bahá'ís must operate entirely outside of the law.

#### *i) Christians*

A traditional Christian community made up mostly of ethnic Armenians worships in relative peace as long as they do not proselytize. In their daily lives, however, these traditional Christians are subject to the same Islamic codes and authoritarian restrictions as the rest of the population, including the requirement to wear Islamic dress in public. Surveillance, intimidation, harassment, and arbitrary detentions are constant threats for Christians as they are for other minorities, especially during periods of government crackdown. These measures are particularly hard on a new and growing Protestant community, including a growing evangelical house-church movement.

Apostasy continues to be a capital offense. Nevertheless, many young Muslims risk their lives to convert to Christianity, often joining evangelical house-churches or finding ways to worship in secret. The authorities are aware of this trend and require evangelical churches to submit membership lists which the authorities use to monitor attendance and identify converts. They also conduct raids on worship services, confiscating materials and detaining worshippers.

The authorities make every effort to keep these activities out of the public eye, typically by bringing charges that avoid focusing on the person's religion as the primary issue. Occasionally a case nevertheless catches the attention of international media and provokes a response from the international community. Two such cases are those of Maryam Rustampoor and Marzieh Amirizadeh, arrested together early in 2009 and charged with "acting against state security" and "taking part in illegal gatherings", and that of Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, also arrested in 2009 and sentenced to death for apostasy. Maryam and Marzieh were released after nine months under intense international pressure and are now safely outside the country. Pastor Yousef's apostasy conviction was eventually overturned although he was convicted of proselytizing. He was released on the basis of time served three years after his arrest and promptly re-arrested although he was quickly released. During this ordeal, Pastor Yousef's wife was also arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment for apostasy and, while she was released after only four months, other Christians remain in prison facing the threat of execution for their faith.

The cases of Maryam and Marzieh and of Pastor Yousef prove that Iran is ultimately responsive to international pressure. As a result, it is important to maintain pressure on the broader issue of human rights in the country, and not just to react to individual cases, until improvements can be seen. It may take time but staying the course will bear results.

### *ii) Bahá'ís*

Iran was the birthplace of the Bahá'í religion in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, yet adherents of the faith today are severely persecuted. Because they have no recognition under the law, Bahá'ís are particularly vulnerable. In addition to arbitrary arrest and detention, persistent harassment, intimidation and discrimination, they are vulnerable to other threats such as confiscation of property and incitement to hatred, and crimes against them, including murder, often go unpunished.

Daily life is a struggle for Bahá'ís. Their marriages and divorces are not recognized leading to various forms of discrimination. At the same time, they cannot enrol in universities and earning a living is difficult when jobs and business licences are denied. In October 2011 a group of Bahá'ís were sentenced each to between four and five years in prison because they had been trying to help their community by teaching other Bahá'ís in order to enable them to get an education.

### *iii) Jews*

Jews have lived in the region known today as Iran for almost 3,000 years. The community is small, numbering in the thousands, compared to the sizeable community that existed until the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 and the Islamic revolution in 1979. The remaining Jewish community is generally able to conduct its affairs although always with oversight from Islamic authorities. For example, Jews are permitted to have schools for their community, but the principals must, in practice, be Muslim and the schools must operate on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath.

The Jewish community is used as an easy tool for state propaganda, both to manipulate Iran's image abroad by asserting that the authorities are not antisemitic but rather tolerate Jews, and also on the domestic front to promote the state's anti-Israel policy. Nonetheless, the authorities continue a policy of Holocaust denial, most famously and consistently promoted by past president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, even as they are at great pains under President Rouhani to distance themselves from Ahmadinejad's constant barefaced denial and to downplay such policies.

In the meantime, Jews have been arrested and charged with spying for Israel on spurious grounds and must constantly be on their guard against saying or doing anything that could be used against them. Jews may be tolerated but any semblance of support for the state of Israel will not. In this regard, Iranian authorities have made it plainly obvious that the nuclear deal is strictly limited to the issue of Iran's nuclear development program and has no bearing whatsoever on its on-going aim of seeking the destruction of Israel and the "Great Satan", the United States.

#### *iv) Dissent – The Green Revolution, Moderate Shi'a, and Sunni Muslims*

Religious minorities are not the only ones whose rights are violated. Religious freedom is a complex right that is intimately tied with freedom of conscience and freedom of expression. Where religious freedom is absent, these related rights are inevitably lacking as well. Sunni Muslims, including those of the Sufi sect, have some rights as Muslims that other minorities do not, but they suffer from many of the same rights violations and threats as the other groups. In addition, moderate Shi'a Muslims, political dissidents, and anyone seeking reform is subject to surveillance, arbitrary arrest, detention, and torture.

Despite the regime's control over the population, in 2009 spontaneous peaceful demonstrations for democracy and against election fraud known as the Green Revolution took the government by surprise. The regime's response, symbolized by cell-phone video splashed across television screens around the world of an innocent young woman dying from sniper fire, left no doubt that the Iranian regime has no scruple about being ruthless and vicious in maintaining its hold on power and pursuing its policies.

#### Women's Rights

Minority women face a double threat: not only are they vulnerable for their religious beliefs and activities, but they are also vulnerable as women. Regardless of their religion and despite the generally high level of education among the population, the status of women in Iran is getting worse, not better.

Islamic doctrines such as Islamic dress code apply to all women regardless of their religion, and enforcement of dress code violations has ramped up since President Rouhani entered office. Images in the western media often portray Iranian women dressed stylishly in attire that would scarcely attract attention in any American city. Compared to countries like Saudi Arabia or Afghanistan, it is tempting to view Iranian women as reasonably liberated. This would be a mistake.

Superficialities aside, starting with such fundamentals as status before the law, women are constantly subjugated and treated as less than human: a woman's testimony is worth half that of a man's; her life is worth half that of a man's; she is entitled only to half the inheritance of a man; she has no right to seek divorce while her husband can divorce her at any time without a reason; she has no right to the custody of her children; and despite the image of a modern, modestly but fashionably dressed woman, she cannot even leave the house without her husband's permission. When she does leave the house, she is constantly under surveillance from the country's so-called "moral police" for the slightest infractions of dress code, or subject to interrogation over the identity of any male who may be in her presence. She is restricted in the fields she can study and jobs she can pursue. Despite empty promises that would see the easing of some restrictions, she still cannot attend male sporting events like men's volleyball tournaments.

While humiliating and abusive, these violations of a woman's fundamental rights that can rightly be described as repugnant are slight compared to the issues of forced and under-aged marriages and female genital mutilation. Girls may legally marry at the age of 13 and boys at 15, but this does not prevent younger girls from being given in marriage, with legal blessing by permission from the court, to men much older than they are. At the same time, female genital mutilation is practised traditionally in some regions of the country and the government allows the practice, which it treats as a Sunni matter, to continue.

### Gay Rights

In America, homosexual activists are rejoicing over recent victories in their battle to legalize same-sex marriage. In Iran, individual gays and lesbians are fighting for their lives. Homosexuality remains a capital offence, despite some minor changes to the legal regime and the structure of sentencing. Moreover, as in other cases, authorities typically use other charges to obscure the real issues and achieve the same aims. Nevertheless, homosexuals declare themselves at their peril and since resources and support are non-existent, they generally live complex, secret lives fraught with danger from authorities, society, and family, vulnerable to abuse from other homosexuals, and plagued by depression and suicide. Ironically, sex reassignment surgery is permitted and is officially promoted as a way out but often only leads to greater issues.

## **Conclusion**

It is not possible in this limited report to give more than a brief summary of these issues. Unfortunately this does not even scratch the surface of the human rights situation in Iran. In light of this reality, OFWI is calling on the United States Congress to prevent a historic mistake of monumental proportions by using all means at its disposal to bury the nuclear agreement with Iran. If this agreement is allowed to go through, it will weaken the United States and endanger not only the Middle East but also America, its interests and allies everywhere. Most importantly, however, it will reward a regime that supports terrorism around the world and denies the most basic human rights of its own citizens.

President Obama is tragically mistaken – this deal will not prevent war or a nuclear arms race any more than Chamberlain's negotiations with Hitler prevented World War II. On the contrary. Israel will understandably not stand by while a state that has committed to its destruction gains nuclear weapons. On the other hand, Sunni Muslim states like Saudi Arabia or Egypt, which want to strengthen their own position in the region and quite justifiably distrust Shi'a Iran, will now make obtaining nuclear weapons their number one priority. Overnight the world became a very dangerous place. And in the meantime, ordinary Iranians continue to pay the price.

The most unsettling part is that we have seen all this before. When Prime Minister Chamberlain was negotiating with Hitler in the late 1930s, the circumstances and arguments were very similar to those focused on by supporters of the Iran deal today. British power was on the wane



and negotiating was seen by many as the only practical alternative. When the United Kingdom finally declared war on Germany, there were no alternatives – and there were no guarantees. There was only the hope of freedom on the one side and the certainty of tyranny on the other.

We are not naïve – we recognize that there are limits to American diplomatic and military might and, unlike in World War II, there is no white knight standing in the wings, no new “America” to come to the rescue. Yet sometimes truth, freedom, and human rights require us to stand firm even in the face of uncertain victory. In this case we are called to do just that.

The people counting on us, the real losers of this nuclear deal, are the Iranian people. Millions of ordinary Iranians continue to suffer from the human rights abuses of their government and religious leaders. Bahá'ís are not recognized and cannot legally attend school without denying their faith, not to mention raids, arrests, and other forms of persecution. Converts to Christianity are jailed, tortured, and executed. Jews are imprisoned and falsely accused of spying for Israel. Men and women are stoned to death in public if they are found guilty of homosexual activity or adultery. Young men and women who attempt to demonstrate in the streets on behalf of democracy are arrested and imprisoned, briefly or indefinitely, or simply shot in the street, leaving the Green Revolution of 2009 a footnote in history. These scenes are not from the pages of a medieval book or from a dystopian Hollywood thriller – they depict real life in Iran in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Under these circumstances, OFWI believes there should be no deal without the inclusion of real reforms within Iran to halt the systemic human rights abuses against its people and demonstrate tangible reforms for the benefit of its own people. Only if Iran demonstrates the ability and willingness to treat its own citizens with dignity and respect and to live up to its international responsibilities in this area, and only then, should an international agreement be reached that begins to lift the sanctions stifling the regime.

OFWI is urging Congress to use all means at its disposal to prevent this agreement from going ahead and to show Iran and the world that the United States still stands for basic, universal values that are worth dying for. Some argue that defeating the agreement now will weaken America even further. While this may be true, in international diplomacy as in day-to-day life, it is always better and shows more courage and strength to admit one's mistake and do what is right than to forge ahead in the error of one's way for fear of appearing weak. Americans deserve better. And the Iranian people certainly deserve better – we must not leave them behind.