

Written evidence submitted by the Amnesty International UK (UKI0031)

Summary of key recommendations

The UK Government should

- Continue to use all opportunities to raise the importance of freedom of expression and the work of human rights defenders, including journalists and other media workers, in multilateral spaces (including the UN Human Rights Council, General Assembly and others) and directly with the Iranian authorities, at the highest levels of government. The UK government should call for the immediate and unconditional release of all human rights defenders.
- Continue to advocate for religious protections in Iran and call on the authorities to uphold its obligations under international law to protect the human rights of all its citizens, including the right to freedom of religion or belief, as articulated in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Iran is a party.
- Continue to follow up with the Iranian authorities bilaterally on the recommendations it made during the last Universal Periodic Review to encourage their implementation.
- Renew its calls to ensure Nazanin is immediately and unconditionally released and can return to her husband and daughter in the UK.
- Prioritise implementation of its *Supporting Human Rights Defenders internationally* guidelines in Iran, by consulting with HRDs and civil society organisations to develop effective and appropriate forms of support and protection. The UK Government should support increased political participation of women, ensure its work in this area is meaningfully informed by women human rights defenders, and work to mitigate the risks they face.
- The UK Government should continue to highlight the need for independent monitoring and reporting of human rights concerns in Iran and to press authorities to urgently implement effective measures to guarantee protection of those at risk of human rights abuse and violations.

Amnesty International UK

Amnesty International UK is a national section of a global movement of more seven million people. We represent more than 600,000 individuals in the UK. We undertake research and action focused on preventing and ending grave abuses of all human rights enshrined in the

Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights instruments. We are independent of any Government, political ideology, economic interest or religion.

Overview

Amnesty International research shows that there are ongoing and serious restrictions to human rights in Iran. The rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly remain suppressed. Security forces use lethal force unlawfully to crush protests, killing hundreds, and arbitrarily detaining thousands. Women continue to face discrimination and there has been an intensified crackdown against women's rights defenders. Ethnic and religious minorities face entrenched discrimination. Torture and other ill-treatment, including through the denial of medical care, remain widespread and systematic; and committed with impunity. Cruel, inhuman and degrading judicial punishments are carried out and there are systematic violations of fair trial rights.¹

The FCO's role in multilateral diplomacy regarding Iran, and the UK's priorities therein;

- 1) With Iran listed as a UK Government Human Rights Priority Country, this submission focuses on human rights in Iran and how the UK Government can further achieve its objectives (such as media freedom, gender equality and freedom of religion and belief)² in the region.

- 2) One of the UK Government's priorities is to stand up for freedom of expression and defend media freedom on the international stage³, including through its Media Freedom campaign. This work has included creating the Media Freedom Coalition⁴ and lobbying offending countries to respect media freedom and journalists' rights.⁵ The impact of the campaign so far remains questionable.

¹ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/iran/>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/iran-human-rights-priority-country/iran-human-rights-priority-country>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/lord-ahmad-addresses-43rd-session-of-the-un-human-rights-council>

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/media-freedom-coalition-january-2020-meeting-statement>

⁵ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmfaff/1920/1920.pdf>

- 3) Media freedom and freedom of expression are severely restricted in Iran. Amnesty International has recorded that journalists, online media workers, students, filmmakers, musicians and writers are among the thousands who have been arbitrarily detained in Iran's crackdown on dissent in 2019. Censorship of all forms of media and the blocking of foreign satellite television channels continues.⁶
- 4) In May 2019, journalist Marzieh Amiri was arrested while covering the International Workers' Day protest. She was sentenced to 10 years and six months in prison and 148 lashes.⁷ In June 2019, journalist Masoud Kazemi was sentenced to four years and six months in prison and a two-year ban on working in journalism, in connection with social media posts in which he alleged government corruption.⁸ In October 2019, news editor Rouhollah Zam, was arrested on charges of inciting the protests of December 2017 and January 2018.⁹ Family members of journalists have also been. In September 2019, three family members of Masih Alinejad, a prominent US-based Iranian journalist were arrested.¹⁰
- 5) Amnesty International recognises that the UK government has pushed for the protection and promotion of journalists' rights in Iran through the United Nations.¹¹ In March 2020, Ambassador for Human Rights, Rita French, raised concerns about media freedoms in "the most deadly crackdown against internal unrest for decades", in the UK's dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran.¹² **The UK Government should continue to use all opportunities to raise the importance of freedom of expression and the work of human rights defenders, including journalists and other media workers, in multilateral spaces (including the UN Human Rights Council, General Assembly and others) and directly with the Iranian authorities, at the highest levels of government. The UK government should call for the immediate and unconditional release of all human rights defenders.**
- 6) Freedom of religion and belief also is systematically violated in law and practice in Iran.¹³ Amnesty International has documented numerous cases of human rights abuse experienced by individuals from minority groups, including arbitrary arrest and detention, torture and other ill-treatment, grossly unfair trials of political

⁶ <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE1318292020ENGLISH.PDF>

⁷ <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE1318292020ENGLISH.PDF>

⁸ <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE1318292020ENGLISH.PDF>

⁹ <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE1318292020ENGLISH.PDF>

¹⁰ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/09/iran-family-of-womens-rights-activist-arrested-in-despicable-attempt-to-intimidate-her-into-silence/>

¹¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/human-rights-council-40-iran>

¹² <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/un-human-rights-council-43-uk-statement-for-the-interactive-dialogue-with-the-special-rapporteur-on-the-situation-of-human-rights-in-iran>

¹³ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/iran/report-iran/>

prisoners, and use of the death penalty which disproportionately affects minorities, as well as restrictions on access to education, employment and other services.¹⁴

- 7) In 2018 the Gonabadi Dervish religious minority faced a particularly vicious crackdown after a peaceful protest they held in February of that year was violently quashed. Hundreds were arrested and more than 200 were sentenced to a total of 1,080 years in prison, 5,995 lashes as well as internal “exile”, travel bans, and bans on joining political and social groups. 95 people from the Baha’i religious minority were also arbitrarily detained¹⁵. In March 2020, three Ahwazi Arab prisoners, Hossein Silawi, Ali Khasraji and Naser Khafaji, were forcibly disappeared during a protest over prison condition.¹⁶
- 8) Dozens of Christians, including converts, have been subjected to harassment, arbitrary detention and prison sentences for practising their faith, with raids on house churches.¹⁷ The right to change or renounce religious beliefs has been violated. Those who have professed atheism have risked arbitrary detention, torture and the death penalty for “apostasy”. In 2018, 171 Christians were arrested for peacefully practising their faith, with some receiving sentences of up to 15 years in prison.¹⁸
- 9) In 2016, the Christians in Parliament All Party Parliamentary Group reported various restrictions faced by Christians in their practice of religion in Iran, in particular the denial of permits to build new churches and increases in regulation of religious spaces. In September 2019, Rehman Chishti MP was appointed Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief. Part of the role includes leading on the implementation of the recommendations from the FCO independent review into support for persecuted Christians.¹⁹ In March 2020, Ambassador for Human Rights, Rita French, raised this issue with the Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran.²⁰
The UK Government should continue to advocate for religious protections in Iran and call on the authorities to uphold its obligations under international law to protect the human rights of all its citizens, including the right to freedom of

¹⁴ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/01/irans-year-of-shame-more-than-7000-arrested-in-chilling-crackdown-on-dissent-during-2018/>

¹⁵ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/01/irans-year-of-shame-more-than-7000-arrested-in-chilling-crackdown-on-dissent-during-2018/>

¹⁶ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/2237/2020/en/>

¹⁷ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/iran/report-iran/>

¹⁸ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/2237/2020/en/>

¹⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-appoints-new-pm-envoy-for-freedom-of-religion-belief>

²⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/un-human-rights-council-43-uk-statement-for-the-interactive-dialogue-with-the-special-rapporteur-on-the-situation-of-human-rights-in-iran>

religion or belief, as articulated in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Iran is a party.

10) The UK has sought to promote human rights in Iran through the UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review of every UN member state's human rights record. The UK's recommendations made in November 2019 focused on ill-treatment of detainees, unfair trials and sexual exploitation of children. The UK subsequently regretted that Iran had not supported its recommendations.²¹ **The UK should continue to follow up with the Iranian authorities bilaterally on the recommendations it made during the last Universal Periodic Review to encourage their implementation.**

Relations between the UK and Iran, and vice versa: history, evolution, and aims

11) UK-Iran bilateral relations include private and public human rights diplomacy. Part of the FCO's priorities (as stated in 2019), are to champion human rights, defend media freedom and to promote gender equality.²² The UK has designated Iran one of its human rights priority countries and is expected to account bi-annually on its efforts to promote human rights in Iran, through the FCO's annual human rights report and ministerial update. In its last annual report and ministerial statement, the FCO acknowledged that human rights situation in Iran had deteriorated, but failed to account for its own efforts.²³

12) Significant bilateral disputes between the UK and Iran exist around the detention of dual nationals who have been arrested on unclear charges, denied due process and/or subject to mistreatment during detention.²⁴ The most notable case is the detention of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, a British charity worker who was unfairly jailed in 2016. Calling for her release, the UK government gave Nazanin diplomatic protection on 7 March 2019.²⁵

²¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/human-rights-priority-countries-autumn-2019-ministerial-statement>

²² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/foreign-and-commonwealth-office-single-departmental-plan/foreign-and-commonwealth-office-single-departmental-plan-2019-20>

²³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/human-rights-and-democracy-report-2018>; <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/human-rights-priority-countries-autumn-2019-ministerial-statement/human-rights-priority-countries-ministerial-statement-january-to-june-2019>

²⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-call-with-president-rouhani-of-iran-9-january-2020>

²⁵ <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/actions/help-get-nazanin-zaghari-ratcliffe-home>

- 13) Amnesty International has designated Zaghari-Ratcliffe a prisoner of conscience targeted solely for the peaceful exercise of her rights to freedom of expression and association. Since Nazanin's imprisonment, she has spent weeks in solitary confinement, suffered a serious decline in her physical and mental health and has periodically been denied access to the medical care recommended by doctors.²⁶ **The UK Government must renew its calls to ensure Nazanin is immediately and unconditionally released and can return to her husband and daughter in the UK.**
- 14) In addressing such disputes, the UK government has called for consular access and petitioned Iran for medical care and improved conditions for detainees. The UK government states that it has persistently called for the release of dual nationals unfairly and arbitrarily detained, both on the world stage and in bilateral meetings.²⁷
- 15) However, there has been some legitimate criticism of the Government over its support to dual nationals detained in Iran. This includes failing to ensure prompt consular access and make their cases a priority, let alone calling for their release or charge with an internationally recognisable criminal offence, until pressed to do so publicly by their families.
- 16) Furthermore, as part of its diplomatic relationships in Iran, the UK government should give significant support to Iran's human rights community, in particular human rights defenders. The UK should robustly implement in Iran its policy on Support for Human Rights Defenders²⁸. While HRDs in Iran are beleaguered and engaging with the international community can be dangerous, the UK must work creatively to ensure defenders can access support to continue their work.
- 17) In 2019, Amnesty International documented widescale suppression of rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly. Security forces used lethal force unlawfully to crush protests, killing hundreds, and arbitrarily detaining thousands of protesters. At least 240 were human rights defenders, including lawyers, labour rights activists, environmental activists, minority rights activists, women's rights activists, anti-death penalty campaigners were arbitrarily detained. Independent civil society and human rights groups remained banned. Censorship of all forms of media and jamming of foreign satellite television channels continued. International sanctions continued to negatively impact Iran's economy, with detrimental consequences for the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights. Iran remained closed to independent human rights observers.²⁹

²⁶ <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/iran-jailed-briton-nazanin-zaghari-ratcliffe-breaking-point-health-declines>

²⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-meeting-with-president-rouhani-25-september>

²⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-support-for-human-rights-defenders>

- 18) In 2019, human rights lawyer Amirsalar Davoudi was sentenced to 29 years and three months in prison and 111 lashes on charges stemming from his human rights work.³⁰ Labour activists Sepideh Gholian and Bakhshi have been in prison since January 2019 in connection with their participation in peaceful protests.³¹ Kurdish civil society activist Zahra Mohammadi, has been arbitrarily detained since her arrest in May 2019 on charges relating to her civil society work with Iran's Kurdish minority.³²
- 19) In 2018, At least 112 women human rights defenders were arrested, facing violent assault, torture and other ill-treatment.³³ In 2019, prominent Iranian human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh was sentenced to 38 years and six months in prison and 148 lashes because of her work defending women's rights and protesting against Iran's discriminatory and degrading forced veiling laws.³⁴
- 20) Human rights defenders (HRDs) come from all walks of life and may include journalists, teachers, farmers poets, lawyers, student and community leaders, politicians, health professionals and whistle-blowers. They are harassed, tortured, jailed and even killed, for daring to challenge abuse of power by governments and corporations, protecting the environments, defending minorities, opposing traditional barriers to the rights of women and LGBTI people, or standing up against abusive labour conditions. Women human rights defenders (WHRDs) face gender-based violence in addition to the attacks other HRDs might face, including sexual violence, and threats, harassment and defamation campaigns linked to their status as women.
- 21) Amnesty International believes that HRDs are crucial in upholding human rights and are legitimate actors whose right to do their work is protected under international law. Defending and promoting their rights and the space in which they live and operate is one of the most important ways to ensure human rights for everyone. They are also the agents of change of in their communities, often working on themes which mirror the UK government's own human priorities, such as on girls' education, modern slavery, media freedom and Sexual Violence in Conflict. **The UK Government should prioritise implementation of its *Supporting Human Rights Defenders internationally* guidelines in Iran, by consulting with HRDs and civil society**

²⁹ <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE1318292020ENGLISH.PDF>

³⁰ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/0636/2019/en/>

³¹ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/1295/2019/en/>

³² <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/1390/2019/en/>

³³ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/01/irans-year-of-shame-more-than-7000-arrested-in-chilling-crackdown-on-dissent-during-2018/>

³⁴ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/get-involved/take-action/iran-free-nasrin-satoudeh-now/>

organisations to develop effective and appropriate forms of support and protection. The UK Government should support increased political participation of women, ensure its work in this area is meaningfully informed by women human rights defenders, and work to mitigate the risks they face.

22) In March 2020, the UK Government noted “..Iran’s continued refusal to allow the Special Rapporteur on Iran access to the country.”³⁵ **The UK Government should continue to highlight the need for independent monitoring and reporting of human rights concerns in Iran and to press authorities to urgently implement effective measures to guarantee protection of those at risk of human rights abuse and violations.**

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³⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/un-human-rights-council-43-universal-periodic-review-adoption-of-iran>