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Austrian Centre for Country of Origin
& Asylum Research and Documentation

Iran: Freedom of Religion; Treatment of Religious and Ethnic Minorities

COI Compilation

September 2015



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ACCORD - Austrian Centre for Country of
Origin & Asylum Research and Documentation

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This report serves the specific purpose of collating legally relevant information on conditions in countries of origin pertinent to the assessment of claims for asylum. It is not intended to be a general report on human rights conditions. The report is prepared within a specified time frame on the basis of publicly available documents as well as information provided by experts. All sources are cited and fully referenced.

This report is not, and does not purport to be, either exhaustive with regard to conditions in the country surveyed, or conclusive as to the merits of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Every effort has been made to compile information from reliable sources; users should refer to the full text of documents cited and assess the credibility, relevance and timeliness of source material with reference to the specific research concerns arising from individual applications.

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1 Freedom of religion

1.1 Religious demography

According to results of the National Population and Housing Census 2011, presented in a report by the Statistical Centre of Iran (AMAR) of August 2012, Muslims constitute 99.4 per cent of the country's population (AMAR, August 2012, p. 26).

Sources indicate that Shia Muslims represent (about) 90 per cent (AA, March 2015a; USDOS, 28 July 2014, section 1) or 90 to 95 per cent (CIA, 1 September 2015, based on 2011 estimates) of the country's population.

Sources indicate the share of Sunni Muslims as about 9 per cent (USDOS, 28 July 2014, section 1), 10 per cent (AA, March 2015a, MRG, July 2014) or 5 to 10 per cent (CIA, 1 September 2015) of the population. As noted by Minority Rights Group International (MRG), Iran's Shia Islam is "strongly dominated by the Twelver Ja'fari School (referred to as Ithna'ashari in Arabic)". Other Islamic groups besides Twelver Shia and Sunni Islam include Ismaili Islam and Ahl-e Haqq (MRG, July 2014).

Minority Rights Group International (MRG), a UK-based NGO campaigning for the rights of minority ethnic, religious and linguistic communities, states in its July 2014 World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples that "[m]ost Kurds, Turkmens, Baluch and some Arabs are Sunni" although these communities "do not form a cohesive coherent whole as Sunnis" and "tend to express their identity in ethnic terms" (MRG, July 2014). Global Security, a US-based think tank that provides information and analysis on a variety of security-related issues, notes that there are also "small communities" of ethnic Persians in southern Iran and Khorasan who are Sunnis (Global Security, 7 September 2011).

Furthermore, the July 2014 US Department of State (USDOS) International Religious Freedom Report (which covers the year 2013) notes that "[t]here are no official statistics available on the size of the Sufi Muslim population" but that "some reports estimate [that] between two and five million people practice Sufism" (USDOS, 28 July 2014, section 1).

According to the 2011 National Population and Housing Census 2011 presented by the Statistical Centre of Iran (AMAR), non-Muslims (referred to as Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian) account for 0.3 per cent of the population, while other groups (labelled as "non-stated" groups) make up another 0.3 per cent (AMAR, August 2012, p. 26). The USDOS, however, notes that groups including Bahais, Christians, Jews, Sabean-Mandaeans, and Zoroastrians represent 1 per cent of the population, with Baha'is and Christians being the "two largest non-Muslim minorities" (USDOS, 28 July 2014, section 1). Sources indicate the number of Baha'is as approximately 300,000 (USDOS, 28 July 2014, section 1) or 300-350,000 (MRG, July 2014).

The USDOS quotes United Nations (UN) figures as indicating that "300,000 Christians live in the country, although the Statistical Center of Iran (AMAR) reports the number of Christians

as 117,700 while “some NGOs estimate [that] there may be as many as 370,000”. The July 2014 USDOS report elaborates on the figures of Christians in Iran:

“The majority of Christians are ethnic Armenians concentrated in Tehran and Isfahan. Unofficial estimates of the Assyrian Christian population range between 10,000 and 20,000. There are also Protestant denominations, including evangelical groups. Christian groups outside the country estimate the size of the Protestant Christian community to be less than 10,000, although many Protestant Christians reportedly practice in secret.” (USDOS, 28 July 2014, section 1)

According to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), the number of Zoroastrians is between 30,000 and 35,000 (USCIRF, 30 April 2015, p. 47). The USDOS notes that the Statistical Center of Iran (AMAR) “estimated in 2011 that there were approximately 25,300 Zoroastrians, who are primarily ethnic Persians” whereas “Zoroastrian groups report 60,000 members” (USDOS, 28 July 2014, section 1).

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) indicates that some 20,000 persons belong to the Jewish community (USCIRF, 30 April 2015, p. 47).

As indicated by the USDOS, “[t]here are from 5,000 to 10,000 Sabeen-Mandaeans” (USDOS, 28 July 2014, section 1).

Results of the 2011 National Population and Housing Census reported by AMAR indicate that the number of Muslims has increased from approx. 70 million in 2006 to about 74.68 million in 2011. AMAR also notes a rise in the Christian population from 109,415 in 2006 to some 117,704 in 2011. The number of Jews is indicated to have decreased from 9,252 in 2006 to 8,756 in 2011, while the number of Zoroastrians is reported to have risen from 19,823 in 2006 to 25,271 in 2011. (AMAR, August 2012, p. 26)

1.2 Religious crimes

An August 2014 note of the UN Secretary-General to the UN General Assembly states that the Islamic Penal Code (IPC) that came into force in 2013 “omits references to apostasy, witchcraft and heresy” (UN General Assembly, 27 August 2014, p. 4). However, as indicated by the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC), the IPC includes criminal provisions for swearing at the Prophet (IHRDC, 30 July 2014, p. 1).

1.2.1 Apostasy

As noted in the July 2014 US Department of State (USDOS) International Religious Freedom Report on the year 2013, the Iranian state “automatically considers a child born to a Muslim father to be a Muslim and deems conversion from Islam to be apostasy” (USDOS, 28 July 2014, section 2).

The June 2015 Country Report on Human Rights Practices of the USDOS, which covers events of 2014, states:

“The law does not stipulate the death penalty for apostasy or heresy, but courts handed down capital punishments in prior years based on their interpretation of fatwas (legal opinions or decrees handed down by an Islamic religious leader).” (USDOS, 25 June 2015, section 1a)

A May 2014 publication of the US Library of Congress (LoC) on laws criminalizing apostasy in the Middle East briefly outlines the legal situation with regard to apostasy in Iran:

“Iran’s current Penal Code, which was approved by the country’s Guardian Council on January 18, 2012, does not include provisions criminalizing apostasy. However, a draft form of the Code containing several provisions on apostasy had been approved by the Iranian Parliament in principal on September 9, 2008, but was not subsequently adopted. While Iranian law does not provide for the death penalty for apostasy, the courts can hand down that punishment, and have done so in previous years, based on their interpretation of Shari’a law and fatwas (legal opinions or decrees issued by Islamic religious leaders).” (LoC, May 2014, p. 7)

An October 2013 report of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) notes that “[a]postasy, sorcery, witchcraft and other such issues have not been explicitly mentioned in the new IPC, although Apostasy has been specifically referred to in the Press Code (Article 26)”. The source further states that “[u]nder the sharia, the punishment for apostasy is death, which a judge can impose by invoking Article 167 of the Constitution.” (FIDH, October 2013, p. 6)

The UK-based Economist newspaper states that judgment on apostasy “rests on *fatwas* by the country’s dozen-odd grand ayatollahs, who are divided on the matter”, mentioning that “the supreme leader supports the death penalty for apostasy” (Economist, 14 September 2012).

In July 2014, the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC) published a detailed report on judicial dealings with apostasy as well as swearing at the Prophet in Iran. The report states that “[u]nder Iranian law, a Muslim who leaves his or her faith or converts to another religion can be charged with apostasy” and that apostasy is a capital offence. Although apostasy “has not been explicitly mentioned as a crime” in the IPC, “provisions in the Islamic Penal Code and the Iranian Constitution state that Shari’a, or Islamic religious law, applies to situations in which the law is silent, thus enabling the judiciary to “bring apostasy charges based on its interpretation of Shari’a law”. (IHRDC, 30 July 2014, p. 1)

The role of state law with regard to apostasy is detailed as follows:

„Despite the fact that Iranian courts have found many individuals guilty of apostasy, there is no provision in the IPC [Islamic Penal Code] criminalizing the act. There are, however, several legal provisions that give judges the discretion to find defendants guilty of apostasy. Article 167 of Iran’s Constitution declares:

The judge is bound to endeavor to judge each case on the basis of the codified law. In case of the absence of any such law, he has to deliver his judgment on the basis of

authoritative Islamic sources and authentic fatwa. He, on the pretext of the silence of or deficiency of law in the matter, or its brevity or contradictory nature, cannot refrain from admitting and examining cases and delivering his judgment.

Accordingly, Article 220 of the IPC states,

Article 167 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran applies regarding the hudūd not specified in this code.

Hudūd is the plural for hadd. Article 15 of the IPC defines hadd as a punishment for which its cause, category, quantity and quality are determined by Shari'a law. As such, Article 220 of the IPC effectively states that crimes punishable under Iranian law are not limited to the ones specified in the IPC. This provision leaves the door open for prosecutors and judges to bring charges and render convictions based on crimes not explicitly defined or even mentioned in any code. Article 8 of the Establishing Law for the Public and Revolutionary Courts also states that judges should rely on existing laws as well as Article 167 of the Constitution in resolving disputes. The principle that Shari'a law should be enforced when there is no codified law is also applicable in civil matters." (IHRDC, 30 July 2014, pp. 10-11)

The same report states that due to the lack of specific provisions on apostasy in the IPC, "there is no explicit provision describing the manner in which a charge of apostasy may be proven". The report outlines that Article 160 of the IPC deals with methods of proving criminal conduct in general:

"Nevertheless, Article 160 of the IPC mentions the different methods by which the commission of a crime may be proven. According to this article, confessions, the testimony of two male witnesses or the 'knowledge of the judge' can each be the basis for a conviction." (IHRDC, 30 July 2014, p. 13)

As regards Shi'a jurisprudence on apostasy, the IHRDC notes that a distinction is made whether an apostate is born to Muslim or non-Muslim parents. Furthermore, Shia jurists hold that female apostates should be exempted from execution:

"Shi'a jurisprudence makes a distinction between an apostate who is born to Muslim parents (murtad-i fitri) and an apostate who is born to non-Muslim parents (murtad-i milli). According to jurists such as Ayatollah Khomeini, the repentance of apostates born to Muslim parents cannot be accepted. Therefore, such apostates are to be killed. Even if only one of the parents is a Muslim at the time of conception, that person is considered to be a Muslim. An apostate who is not born to Muslim parents is considered to be a murtad-i milli. Such an apostate will be given a chance to repent, and he is only to be executed if he does not repent. Some jurists have held that a murtad-e milli should be given a three-day period to repent, and he should be killed if he refuses to repent after three days. [...]

Based on a number of oral traditions attributed to Shi'a Imams, Shi'a jurists believe that female apostates are not to be killed. Ayatollah Khomeini states that a female apostate is

to be imprisoned for life, beaten at times of prayer and afforded only a small amount of food. If she repents, she is to be set free.” (IHRDC, 30 July 2014, pp. 8-9)

As regards judicial practice, the IHRDC notes that apostasy cases are “rare occurrences” in Iran. Nonetheless, as the report goes on to say, a “diverse group of individuals” has been charged with apostasy and swearing at the Prophet, “Muslim-born converts to Christianity, Bahá’ís, Muslims who challenge the prevailing interpretation of Islam, and others who espouse unconventional religious beliefs have been targeted and prosecuted by the Iranian state.” The report adds that “[i]n some instances, apostasy cases have clear political overtones, while others seem to be primarily of a religious nature”. (IHRDC, 30 July 2014, p. 1)

The June 2015 USDOS Country report on human rights practices during 2014 notes that if an alleged act of “libel, insult, or criticism involves Islam or national security, the responsible person may be charged with apostasy and crimes against national security, respectively” (USDOS, 25 June 2015, section 2a).

A June 2014 report of the Danish Immigration Service (DIS) fact-finding mission report on the situation of Christian converts states with reference to information provided by an international organization in Turkey that “[t]he latest case where a convert has been charged with apostasy is that of Yousef Naderkhani, a Church of Iran pastor” (DIS, 23 June 2014, p. 7) who was “charged with apostasy in 2010, but was later acquitted.” (DIS, 23 June 2014, p. 13, footnote 9). The international organization in Turkey and Amnesty International (AI) are referred to as noting the following developments in charges brought against Christian converts since 2009-2010:

“In 2009-2010, when Naderkhani’s case came up, courts were being pressured by the regime to make use of apostasy charges in cases regarding converts. However, the courts were reluctant as apostasy cases were reserved to special religious courts for clergy. Religious courts were legally the only courts that could try apostasy charges and therefore only in the instance where a religious cleric had converted, would such a charge be applicable. Instead, in courts outside of the religious courts, the cases involving converts would then rather be on charges of disturbing the public order than apostasy.

Since 2011, the only significant change in the way the authorities are treating the converts to Christianity is the crystallization that apostasy is not applicable to converts to Christianity. The Iranian authorities stated in 2009 to 2011 that house churches were linked to outside movements, for example Zionist movements, and organizations abroad, for example in the US. The regime sees the efforts of evangelical movements as a drive against the Iranian regime. As a result, evangelical churches and house churches are viewed in a national security frame. This view of the regime explains why some cases involving converts, specifically leaders of house churches, also involved charges of a more political nature. [...]

According to AIIS [Amnesty International International Secretariat], the pattern of persecution of religious minorities appears to have seen a shift over time. In the early years following the 1979 Islamic Revolution into the 1980s and 1990’s, there appeared to

be more cases regarding religious minorities in which the accusations against individuals explicitly mentioned the religious belief or faith of an individual. [...] Now, the authorities are likely to charge converts with vaguely worded and broadly defined charges such as ‘forming of illegal groups’, ‘acting against national security through illegal gatherings’ and other similar charges that are imprecise and potentially could capture a range of activities. It was added that this trend was not specific to the group of Christian converts but that these sorts of charges are used to silence a large group of people, including members of religious minorities such as Baha’is, members of ethnic minorities, and others who peacefully express their rights.” (DIS, 23 June 2014, pp. 7-8)

In a March 2014 report to the Human Rights Council (HRC), the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran quotes sources as reporting that “although prosecutions for the capital offence of apostasy are very rare, officials routinely threaten to prosecute Christian converts for apostasy”. While apostasy is “not found in any Iranian criminal law”, this offense “has been prosecuted based on an Islamic law interpretation”. (HRC, 18 March 2014, p. 11)

The June 2014 fact-finding mission report of the Danish Immigration Service (DIS) quotes Mansour Borji, an advocacy officer at Article 18, a London-based initiative of the United Council of Iranian Churches, as saying that there are “no recent cases in court where an individual has been charged with apostasy”. However, the same report refers to representatives of the Istanbul-based Union Church, according to whom a “high number” of people has been arrested and “accused of apostasy” (DIS, 23 June 2014, p. 11).

The same report goes on to quote Elam Ministries, a UK-based Iranian Christian NGO, as informing that “[w]hen a house church is raided, the authorities will detain the whole of the group and interrogate them often intimidating and threatening them with charges of apostasy but most often they are released without charges” (DIS, 23 June 2014, p. 32)

A May 2015 thematic report of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, BZ) indicates in its section on apostasy that at present, prosecution takes place through application of penal code articles that relate to crimes against state security, with “moharebeh” (enmity against God and thus against the state) and mofsed-e-filarz (spreading corruption against the social order) being the most frequently invoked offences. Both offences may be punished by death. The BZ states that during the reporting period (December 2013 to April 2015), the death penalty for “moharebeh” was imposed several times. (BZ, 7 May 2015, p. 11)

1.2.2 Heresy

As indicated in an August 2014 note of the UN Secretary-General to the UN General Assembly, the Islamic Penal Code (IPC) that came into effect in 2013 does not contain references to heresy (UN General Assembly, 27 August 2014, p. 4). The US Department of State (USDOS) notes that the law does not stipulate the death penalty for heresy or apostasy but that “courts handed down capital punishments in prior years based on their interpretation of fatwas” (USDOS, 25 June 2015, section 1a).

As reported by the Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA), an NGO established by a group of Iranian human rights advocates, in September 2014, authorities at Rajai Shahr prison stated that a man named Mohsen Amir Aslani had been executed on charges of “corruption on earth and heresy in religion” (HRANA, 26 September 2014).

The USDOS noted in its June 2015 country report on human rights practices that “Tehran judiciary head Gholam-hossein Esmaeili denied that Aslani’s execution was tied to the heresy charge and claimed it was for a rape conviction” while “[h]uman rights groups challenged Esmaeili’s claim and called for an independent investigation” (USDOS, 25 June 2015, section 1a)

A September 2014 Reuters news agency report provided the following information on Aslani:

“Iranian opposition news websites have said Aslani, 37, had given religious classes where he propagated a new interpretation of the Koran. He was also accused by the authorities of insulting the Prophet Jonah. The Iran Wire website reported that in one of his classes he told his audience that Jonah could not have emerged from the whale’s belly, and it was this statement that led to his charge of insulting the Prophet Jonah.” (Reuters, 30 September 2014)

Among the sources consulted by ACCORD, no further information could be found on the issue of heresy.

1.2.3 Blasphemy

The July 2014 report of the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC) indicates that “the crime of Sabb-e Nabi, or swearing at the Prophet” has been addressed in Articles 262 and 263 of the Islamic Penal Code (IPC) (IHRDC, 30 July 2014, p. 11).

An October 2013 report of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) states that “Article 262 [of the IPC] stipulates the death sentence for cursing the Prophet of Islam, any of the other grand prophets or for accusing the infallible imams and Prophet Mohammad’s daughter Fatima Zahra of sodomy or fornication.” (FIDH, October 2013, p. 6)

Article 262 of the IPC defines the crime of sabb-e nabi (sāb ul-nabi) as follows:

“Article 262 - Anyone who swears at or commits qazf [false accusation of sexual offences, annotation by ACCORD] against the Great Prophet [of Islam] (peace be upon him) or any of the Great Prophets, shall be considered as Sāb ul-nabi [a person who swears at the Prophet], and shall be sentenced to the death penalty.

Note - Commission of qazf against, or swearing at, the [twelve] Shi’ite Imams (peace be upon them) or the Holy Fatima (peace be upon her) shall be regarded as Sab-e nabi.” (Islamic Penal Code, 2013, Article 262, quoted in IHRDC, 8 April 2014)

Article 263 of the IPC deals with extenuating circumstances in cases where a person has been accused of sabb-e nabi:

“Article 263 - When the accused of a sabb-e nabi (swearing at the Prophet) claims that his/her statements have been under coercion or mistake, or in a state of drunkenness, or anger or slip of the tongue, or without paying attention to the meaning of the words, or quoting someone else, then s/he shall not be considered as Sāb ul-nabi [a person who swears at the Prophet].

Note - When a sabb-e nabi (swearing at the Prophet) is committed in the state of drunkenness, or anger or quoting someone else, if it is considered to be an insult, the offender shall be sentenced to a ta’zir punishment of up to seventy-four lashes.” (Islamic Penal Code, 2013, Article 263)

The IHRDC comments in its July 2014 report that “[i]t is not precisely clear what constitutes insulting the Prophet”, noting that “arguably many statements could be deemed offensive” (IHRDC, 30 July 2014, p. 11). The same report indicates that under Articles 513 and 524 of Book Five of the IPC, insulting Islamic beliefs and insulting the Ayatollah Khomeini (the founder of the Islamic Republic) and/or the Supreme Leader constitutes a “ta’zir crime” (IHRDC, 30 July 2014, p. 12), again pointing out that the text of these articles does not specify what types of utterances are considered to be insults” (IHRDC, 30 July 2014, p. 13).

The same report quotes an explanatory note in which the Iranian parliament (Majles) “attempted to clarify the issue”:

“From the point of view of criminal law, insulting, swearing and the like involve using phrases that are explicit or obvious, or taking actions and performing acts which, considering the norms of the society, time, place, and the circumstances of the affected individuals, cause the humiliation of those persons. An insult does not materialize without explicit words.” (IHRDC, 30 July 2014, p. 13)

The IHRDC points out, amongst others, that in this explanatory note, “[t]here is no line drawn between mere criticism and an insult” (IHRDC, 30 July 2014, p. 13).

The same reports notes that “[t]he evidentiary requirements” for a conviction on charges of swearing at the Prophet or insulting sacred religious values are “the same as [for] other crimes: either a confession from the accused, testimony from two male witnesses or the knowledge of the judge” (IHRDC, 30 July 2014, p. 14).

The IHRDC further indicates that “[t]he extra-judicial killing of apostates or individuals who have been shown to have sworn at the Prophet — or are simply alleged to have done so — is considered acceptable by many Islamic jurists”. Furthermore, the same source states that “Article 302(a) of the IPC states that if the murdered person has committed a capital offense, the perpetrator is not eligible for qisas, or the death penalty.” (IHRDC, 30 July 2014, pp. 14-15)

The same source reports about the case of a man named Rouhollah Tavana whose August 2013 death sentence for sabb-e nabi (swearing at the Prophet) was upheld by the Supreme Court in February 2014:

"In October 2011, men believed to be from the Ministry of Intelligence arrested Rouhollah Tavana at his house in Mashhad. Tavana, a quality control engineer born in 1978, was charged with Sabb-e Nabi, or swearing at the Prophet. This charge arose from comments he allegedly made in a private video. In addition to the main charge of swearing at the Prophet, he was also charged with other crimes such as using illegal drugs, drinking and producing alcoholic beverages, adultery, acts against national security, insulting top ranking officials, and disturbing public opinion. [...]"

On August 3, 2013, the Fifth Branch of the Khorasan Razavi Criminal Court found Tavana guilty of swearing at the Prophet and sentenced him to death. Tavana's sentence was upheld on appeal. On February 14, 2014, Branch 14 of the Iranian Supreme Court also upheld his death sentence, which can now be carried out at any time." (IHRDC, 30 July 2014, pp. 27-28)

In July 2014, the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (ICHRI), a New York-based NGO, reported with reference to the official Iranian news agency IRNA that eight young persons were sentenced to prison terms on charges that included blasphemy. The charges were linked to the defendants' activities on Facebook:

"IRNA reported on July 13, 2014, that eight young individuals active on Facebook were sentenced to a combined total of 127 years in prison on charges of 'assembly and collusion against national security,' 'propaganda against the state,' and 'blasphemy, insulting Heads of Branches, and insulting individuals.' [...] 'All charges that were brought against these individuals were based on content and photographs they had posted on their Facebook pages,' said the source. 'Some of them also face the charge of 'possession of vulgar CDs.' When the agents went to their homes for their arrests, they found some original, uncensored CDs of Hollywood films. In the charges it is stated that they published vulgar photographs in cyberspace, and the example provided was the photograph of a man and a woman embracing,' added the source." (ICHRI, 24 July 2014)

The July 2014 US Department of State (USDOS) International Religious Freedom Report, which covers events of 2013, notes the case of Kamran Ayazi, who has been sentenced to nine years in prison for "criticizing Islam on internet message boards":

"On May 7, Dr. Kamran Ayazi, a dentist serving a nine-year sentence on charges of moharebeh following his conviction of criticizing Islam on internet message boards, began a hunger strike to protest his transfer to solitary confinement following his complaints of poor nutrition in Evin Prison, according to human rights activists. In August 2012, news media reported allegations that Ayazi suffered severe bleeding after being flogged." (USDOS, 28 July 2014, section 2)

As reported by the Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA), in May 2015, a revolutionary court in Tabriz sentenced two civil rights activists to prison terms "on charges of blasphemy and setting fire on public properties with the intention of opposing Islamic regime", noting that "[i]n the issued verdict by court, the reason for blasphemy charge [was] the holy word of Allah, on the flag that had been allegedly burned by these civil rights activists", a claim that both denied. (HRANA, 6 June 2015)

A March 2015 report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran to the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) informs about the case of Mohammad Ali Taheri, “a spiritual leader, proponent of alternative methods of healing, and the founder of the Erfan e-Halgheh (inter-universalism) movement”, who is “serving a five-year prison sentence” on charges including blasphemy, with an impending trial on a charge of efsad fel-arz (‘corruption on Earth’):

“Mr. Taheri’s trial is scheduled for 25 February 2015 at Branch 26 of Tehran’s Revolutionary court based on the charge of efsad fel-arz (‘corruption on Earth’). According to Mr. Alizadeh Tabataba’ei, Mr. Taheri’s lawyer, ‘Mr. Taheri was initially charged with ‘corruption on Earth’ during his first trial in 2011, but the court changed the charge to ‘blasphemy’ and sent [the original charge] back to the Office of Prosecutor for further investigation. Recently, [that charge] has been returned to the court.’” (HRC, 12 March 2015)

In July 2015, the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (ICHRI) provided the following information on the same case:

“Uncertainty surrounds the sentence of Mohammad Ali Taheri, the imprisoned founder of a spiritual healing and cultural group. The Judiciary spokesman says he has been sentenced but his lawyer says this is ‘incorrect.’ ‘I went to the court on Tuesday July 14 and no sentence has been issued. If a sentence is issued, they will first inform me and my client. I’m sure [Judiciary Spokesman Gholamhossein Mohseni] Ejei has been given the wrong information,’ Taheri’s lawyer, Mahmoud Alizadeh Tabatabaee, told the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran.

Ejei had stated in a press conference on July 13 that Taheri had been sentenced at the initial stage and that he could request an appeal. Yet Ejei did not reveal what the sentence was.

Mohammad Ali Taheri, founder of the ‘Erfan-e Halgheh’ spiritual arts and healing group, is facing the charge of ‘Corruption on Earth’ which carries the possibility of the death penalty. On June 20, 2015, his lawyer had expressed concern that the judge had issued the death penalty but the next day this was denied by the Judiciary.” (ICHRI, 17 July 2015)

Amnesty International (AI) reported on 10 August 2015 that Mohammad Ali Taheri was sentenced to death on 1 August 2015 for “spreading corruption on earth”. (AI, 10 August 2015)

In March 2015, the Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA) reported that “12 instructors of Erfane Halgheh (Interuniversalism Mysticism)” were together sentenced to 24 years in prison and a fine on charges of blasphemy, noting that “based on the degree of charges, they were sentenced [to prison terms of] between one to five years each” (HRANA, 23 March 2015)

In November 2014, the ICHRI reported about the case of Soheil Arabi who was convicted in August 2014 on charges of insulting the Prophet in remarks made on Facebook:

“Soheil Arabi was arrested in November 2013, and was sentenced to death on charge of ‘insulting the Prophet’ (sabb-al-nabi) by Branch 76 of Tehran Penal Court for his writings on Facebook. His lawyers had hoped, however, that the Supreme Court would dismiss the charges based on Article 263 of the Islamic Penal Code [which explicitly states that if a suspect claims in court that he said the insulting words in anger, in quoting someone, or by mistake, his death sentence will be converted to 74 lashes] and the defense provided by the suspect [which stated this claim], but he has now been sentenced to death for a second time on charges of ‘corruption on earth.’

When asked on what basis the charge of ‘corruption on earth’ was added to Arabi’s case, the source told the Campaign, ‘It says in the case that because Mr. Arabi had several Facebook pages with different names, and that he repeatedly insulted the Prophet on these pages, his charges are no longer just ‘insulting the prophet.’ This means that if he had only one insulting Facebook page, his charge would have been ‘insulting the Prophet,’ but because he had multiple pages, his charge is ‘corruption on earth.’” [...]

Agents from the Revolutionary Guards Corps’ (IRGC) Sarallah Base arrested Soheil Arabi, 30, and his wife in November 2013. Arabi’s wife was released a few hours later, but he was kept in solitary confinement for two months inside IRGC’s Ward 2-A at Evin Prison, before he was transferred to Evin’s General Ward 350. Branch 76 of the Tehran Criminal Court, under Judge Khorasani, found Arabi guilty of ‘sabb al-nabi’ (insulting the Prophet) on August 30, 2014.” (ICHRI, 26 November 2014)

1.3 Treatment of religious dissidents by the state authorities

Amnesty International (AI) states in its February 2015 annual report, which covers events of 2014, that “[d]issident Shi’a clerics and others who expressed alternatives to the official interpretation of Shi’a Islam [...] remained at risk of persecution, including arrest, imprisonment and possible execution” (AI, 25 February 2015).

The July 2014 US Department of State (USDOS) International Religious Freedom Report, which covers the year 2013, notes that “Shia religious leaders who did not fully support government policies or the supreme leader’s views also faced intimidation and arrest” and that “[t]he government reportedly used the clerical courts to prosecute certain clerics for expressing controversial political ideas and participating in nonreligious activities, including journalism”. (USDOS, 28 July 2014, section 2)

As indicated by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), Ayatollah Mohammad Kazemeyni Boroujerdi, a dissident Shi’a cleric, “continued to serve an 11-year prison sentence” (USCIRF, 30 April 2015).

A March 2015 report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran to the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) provides the following details on the case of Ayatollah Kazemeyni-Boroujerdi:

"In September 2014, Ayatollah Kazemeyni-Boroujerdi was reportedly threatened with execution if he continued to author letters while detained. [...] During his eight years in prison, Ayatollah Boroujerdi has been hospitalized on three occasions. Mr. Boroujerdi, a dissident Shi'a cleric and was arrested in 2006 due to his advocacy of the separation of religion and state. In 2007 he was given the death sentence by a Special Clerical Court. The death sentence was later reduced to an 11 year prison sentence." (HRC, 12 March 2015, p. 31)

In a June 2015 article IranWire, a news website run by Iranian journalists based outside of Iran, reported about the arrest of Mohammad Hossein Rafiee, a member of the opposition party Melli-Mazhabi (Nationalist-Religious Alliance), and about prison sentences and other judicial measures targeting several other members of Melli-Mazhabi:

"On Tuesday, June 16 [2015], security forces arrested Mohammad Hossein Rafiee, a retired Tehran University professor and a member of opposition party Melli-Mazhabi (the Nationalist-Religious Alliance), as he was on his way home. [...]

His arrest follows the convictions of other members of Melli-Mazhabi, which has been openly critical of the government. On June 14, Branch 15 of the Revolutionary Court sentenced Minoo Mortazi to six years in prison and a two-year ban from any political and civil activities. Another member of the alliance, journalist Ahmad Zeidabadi, was sent into exile after being released from prison on May 19. Other alliance members, including Reza Aghakhani and Nasrollah Lashani — who have been sentenced to three and six years' imprisonment respectively — are awaiting appeal trials. Another member, Khosro Mansourian, was ordered to start a 10-year-prison sentence in March 2015." (IranWire, 25 June 2015)

In a July 2015 report, the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (ICHRI) states that Mohammad Hossein Rafiee had been "sentenced by Judge Salavati to six years in prison on May 25, 2015" but that "his case was under review and no final decision had been handed down at the time of his latest detention". The same source notes that "[t]he charges against Rafiee include active membership in the Council of Nationalist-Religious Activists, which is illegal, and propaganda against the state". (ICHRI, 2 July 2015)

In September 2014, the Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA) reported about the case of Masoud Pedram, a social researcher and a member of the Council of Nationalist-Religious Activists:

"Mr. Pedram is a member of the council of national-religious activists who is serving his sentence from November 2011 in Evin prison. He had been summoned frequently by security agencies after [the] 2009 protests and eventually, he was sentenced to three years in prison. During his three-year imprisonment, on charges of propaganda against the regime, he has been sentenced to another one year in prison." (HRANA, 9 September 2014)

The July 2014 US Department of State (USDOS) International Religious Freedom Report reported on the following case of dissident cleric and blogger Arash Honarvar:

“On September 11 (2013), NGOs reported that dissident cleric and blogger Arash Honarvar Shojaei, convicted in 2010 on espionage charges and held in the Special Clerics Ward (Ward 325) at Evin Prison, was additionally charged with ‘insulting [former Supreme Leader] Imam Khomeini.’” (USDOS, 28 July 2014, section 2)

In July 2014, the Daily Mail, a British tabloid newspaper, reported that five Muslim men in the city of Kermanshah were “flogged in public with 70 lashes for not fasting during Ramadan” (Daily Mail, 23 July 2014).

For general Information on the activities of the Special Court for the Clergy, please refer to our July 2015 COI compilation “Iran: Political Opposition Groups, Security Forces, Selected Human Rights Issues, Rule of Law”, chapter 7.1.1 (“Court System”) (ACCORD, July 2015, pp. 163-169).

1.4 Treatment of religious non-conformity by members of society

Kari Vogt, a religious historian specialised in Islam and an emerita of the University of Oslo’s Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages, wrote in an August 2015 email response that societal attitudes towards religious non-conformity is a little-studied area on which more research is needed in order to be able to comment on this issue in any depth. Vogt states, however, that based on her yearly visits to Iran since 1996/97, she has the impression that there is a great diversity of attitudes and treatments of persons who hold non-mainstream religious views, depending on level of education and other factors. She notes that in general, ordinary Iranian citizens seem to be fairly tolerant, and, when left without interference from authorities, more curious about digressing religious belief and practice than condemning. Many Iranians also have a secular attitude, rejecting all religions, Islam included. At the same time, a growing number of people appear to be looking for an alternative to the official version of Islam and many are interested in new religions, Buddhism or Christian messages. Religious non-conformity can also include Muslims with an interpretation of Islam that differs from the official interpretation, including numerous Sufi-brotherhoods and Islamic intellectuals (both clerics and laypersons). These groups or individuals are admired by many, but also criticized, and sometimes attacked, both verbally (threats) and physically. In fact, attacks on individual Sufis and their houses (khanagahs) are well-known. Religious intellectuals can also run risks of physical attack. In such cases, it is, however, difficult to distinguish between officially recognized gangs (which appear under different names) and “ordinary” non-organized citizens. Furthermore, religious groups such as Ahl-e haqq, Baha’is and a few others, are met with suspicion. But the general impression is that Iranian citizens appear to be ashamed and embarrassed of religious discrimination and persecution. (Vogt, 10 August 2015)

Among the sources consulted by ACCORD, no further information could be found on the treatment of religious non-conformity by members of the society.

1.5 Treatment of religious minorities

1.5.1 Apostates

This section deals with cases of Iranian citizens of any faith who have been accused of apostasy. For information on the legal framework on apostasy, please [refer to section 1.2.1](#) ("Apostasy") of this compilation.

The July 2014 report of the IHRDC gives an account of the case of Seyed Ali Gharabat, a former commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) who was convicted of apostasy and executed in 2011, reportedly for claiming to be God:

"According to Mashregh News, a conservative website, Seyed Ali Gharabat was executed on January 26, 2011 in Karoun Prison at Ahvaz. He was reportedly arrested at Susangerd and was charged with apostasy and encouraging prostitution. The nature of Gharabat's activities and religious claims are not clear.

According to Mashregh News, Gharabat had claimed to be God. In an August 28, 2010 report entitled 'Birthday Party of a Person Claiming to be God,' Mashregh News reported that a number of people in Khuzestan Province had accepted Gharabat's claim and that some of them had traveled to other Persian Gulf countries to spread Gharabat's message. This report stated that Gharabat had been arrested and was serving his prison sentence. This report did not mention that Gharabat was facing the death penalty.

Mashregh News also published a video of Gharabat's birthday celebration. A part of this seven-minute video shows a number of men and women prostrating in front of Gharabat while another person recites a prayer in Arabic. According to Mashregh News, this video was shared via Bluetooth wireless technology in some regions in Khuzestan Province. Mashregh News also stated that Gharabat did not talk very much so that his lack of knowledge would not be revealed. According to Al-Arabiya, Gharabat was a senior IRGC commander during the Iran-Iraq War, and his sentence was issued by the Special Court for the Clergy. This claim, however, is not consistent with Fars News Agency's report, which stated the Ahvaz Islamic Revolutionary Court sentenced Gharabat. According to a family member quoted in the Al-Arabiya report, Gharabat had started making claims about being in contact with the Twelfth Imam after the Iran-Iraq War. This family member was also quoted as saying that the authorities knew about Gharabat's claims for years, and that they cracked down on Gharabat and his followers only after Gharabat started criticizing Iran's Supreme Leader." (IHRDC, 30 July 2014, pp. 26-27)

The same source gives an account of the case of Rouhollah Tavana, whose death sentence on charges of sabb-e nabi was upheld by the Supreme Court in February 2014 (IHRDC, 30 July 2014, pp. 27-28, for details [see section 1.2.3](#) of this compilation).

The same source also elaborates on the cases of Hasan Yousefi Eshkevari, a former member of parliament who was convicted of apostasy and sentenced to death in 2000 but eventually released in 2005 (IHRDC, 30 July 2014, pp. 16-21) and Hashem Aghajari, a university professor

found guilty of apostasy and sentenced to death in 2002 but whose sentence was overturned by the Supreme Court in 2004 (IHRDC, 30 July 2014, pp. 22-26).

The same report informs about the case of a protestant Christian convert from Tabriz who was temporarily detained in late 2009 with his wife and “charged with apostasy, insulting Islam, membership in groups or organizations opposed to the Islamic Republic and engaging in propaganda on their behalf”. The report indicates that “[t]he charge of apostasy was later dropped”. The couple left the country in 2011 before they could be put on trial (IHRDC, 30 July 2014, pp. 29-31)

The same source reports about the case of the Christian convert and pastor Youcef Nadarkhani:

“Youcef Nadarkhani is an Iranian Protestant pastor. He converted to Christianity at the age of 19. Nadarkhani was arrested in October 2009. He was tried at the 11th Branch of Gilan Province Appeals Court. On September 22, 2010, the court sentenced Nadarkhani to death. [...]

The five-member panel of judges rejected the arguments put forward by Nadarkhani and his lawyers. His lawyers argued that Nadarkhani had not been a Muslim in the first place and that apostasy laws would not apply to him. In the trial, Nadarkhani said that he had only conceded that he was previously a Muslim at the suggestion of his interrogator, who had argued that anyone who is born to Muslim parents and does not actively choose another religion is considered a Muslim by default. The court rejected this contention, and stated that Nadarkhani’s confessions and the record provided by the Ministry of Intelligence confirmed that Nadarkhani had been a Muslim before converting to Christianity.

The court acknowledged that there is no specific provision criminalizing apostasy. Nevertheless, the court relied on Article 167 of the Iranian Constitution, the Islamic Penal Code, and the Civil Code of Procedure for Public and Revolutionary Courts. The court sentenced Nadarkhani to death based on Shari’a law. [...]

Iran’s Supreme Court quashed the verdict due to ‘investigative deficiencies,’ and remanded for reconsideration. Meanwhile, Nadarkhani’s attorney indicated that the trial court had decided to ask for the opinion of the Supreme Leader regarding Nadarkhani’s case. There is no information available on whether the Supreme Leader intervened in this case or not. Nadarkhani’s retrial took place in September 2011, during which he was reportedly asked to renounce his Christianity and accept Islam, which Nadarkhani refused to do. The court finally issued its verdict on September 8, 2012, acquitting Nadarkhani of the apostasy charge. Nevertheless, the court found him guilty of evangelizing and sentenced him to three years of imprisonment, which he had already served. Nadarkhani was released on September 8, 2012.” (IHRDC, 30 July 2014, pp. 32-34)

The same report also notes that “[i]f [...] a Muslim becomes Bahá’í he or she will be subject to apostasy laws”, citing the case of Zabihollah Mahrami, “a Bahá’í who returned to the Bahá’í

Faith after allegedly denouncing the Bahá'í Faith and becoming a Muslim," who was sentenced to death for apostasy in 1996 (IHRDC, 30 July 2014, pp. 34-35).

A May 2014 publication of the US Library of Congress (LoC) on laws criminalizing apostasy in the Middle East states:

"In September 2012, Christian pastor Youcef Nadarkhani was acquitted of charges of apostasy brought against him in 2010 that carried the death sentence. Nadarkhani was instead convicted of evangelizing Muslims and given a three-year sentence. Reportedly, the last convert to Christianity in Iran to be judicially convicted of apostasy and sentenced to death was Mehdi Dibaj in 1994, although the sentence was not carried out." (LoC, May 2014, p. 7)

Among the sources consulted by ACCORD no further information could be found on the treatment of apostates.

1.5.2 Christians

According to the July 2014 US Department of State (USDOS) International Religious Freedom Report (reporting on events of 2013), "[t]he majority of Christians are ethnic Armenians concentrated in Tehran and Isfahan", while there are also Assyrian Christians as well as "Protestant denominations, including evangelical groups" (USDOS, 28 July 2014, section 1). For demographic information on Iran's Christian communities, please [refer also to section 1.1](#) ("Religious demography") of this compilation.

A June 2014 fact-finding mission report of the Danish Immigration Service (DIS) quotes Mansour Borji, an advocacy officer of the Article 18 initiative of the United Council of Iranian Churches, and an international organization in Turkey as giving an overview of the main denominations within Iran's Protestant non-ethnic Christian communities:

"Asked about the diversity among the Iranian Farsi-speaking Christians with regard to religious outlook, Mansour Borji informed the delegation that there are various Protestant and Evangelical 'branches', including Pentecostal, Brethren, Episcopalian, Baptist and Presbyterian churches. The source assessed that with the huge emigration of Armenian and Assyrian Christians from Iran, Farsi-speaking Christians have probably now outnumbered the ethnic Christians. However, the source emphasized that the Farsi-speaking Christians have no official representation in Iran in the Parliament or elsewhere.

An international organization in Turkey considered that the Pentecostal movements are the strongest of the Evangelical movements in Iran. It was further explained that the Church of Iran emerged as an independent movement and has made different statements with regard to its religious outlook. It has not been consistent on whether it was a non-Trinitarian church for example however, it may now have a more clear understanding of what the church stands for." (DIS, 23 June 2014, p. 24)

Article 13 of the Iranian Constitution of 1979 (last amended in 1989) states:

“Iranian Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians shall be the only recognized religious minorities who, within the limits of law, shall be free to carry out their religious rites and practice their religion in personal status and religious education.” (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1989, Article 13)

The June 2015 US Department of State (USDOS) country report on human rights indicates that “[t]he law reserves seats in the [290-seat] Islamic Consultative Assembly [i.e. Iranian Parliament] for members of recognized minority religious groups”. The report states that in the assembly elected in 2012, Christians held nine of 14 seats reserved for religious minorities (with the remaining five seats held by two Zoroastrians and three Jews)” (USDOS, 25 June 2015, section 3).

The July 2014 USDOS International Religious Freedom Report notes that “[m]embers of religious minority groups, except Sunni Muslims, may not serve in the judiciary, security services, or as public school principals [...] although members of religious minorities, with the exception of Bahais, may serve in the lower ranks of government”. (USDOS, 28 July 2014, section 2)

A May 2015 thematic official report of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, BZ) states that the Iranian authorities generally do not interfere with the religious practices of Christians belonging to the “old” recognized affiliations. As long as these groups refrain from evangelizing, they are generally not targeted by the authorities solely on grounds of their faith. Christians of the “old churches” usually belong to the same ethnic group and are members of the Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant church. Armenian and Assyrian Christians live in closed social communities and do not engage in proselytizing activities. (BZ, 7 May 2015, p. 5)

The July 2014 USDOS International Religious Freedom Report states that “Assyrian Christians reported their community was permitted to write its own textbooks which, following government authorization, were printed at the government’s expense and distributed to the Assyrian community” (USDOS, 28 July 2014, section 2).

The BZ reports that while Iran has no specific legislation dealing with evangelization and conversion, the authorities have been keeping a closer eye on the “new” Christian church communities for the last two years, particularly on the evangelical Christian denominations. (BZ, 7 May 2015, pp. 5-8)

The May 2015 report of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs (BZ) notes that during the reporting period, there has been no known cases of persecution based on outward symbols of the Christian faith. It is, however, illegal for former Muslims to possess Christian documents (including the Bible) or articles. (BZ, 7 May 2015, p. 10)

Amnesty International (AI) notes in its February 2015 Report 2014/15, which covers the year 2014 and key events of 2013, that there continues to be “pervasive discrimination” against religious minorities including Christian converts (AI, 25 February 2015).

The July 2014 USDOS report states that “Christians, particularly evangelicals, continued to experience high levels of harassment and surveillance”, noting disproportionate arrests of Christians:

“The authorities arrested Christians disproportionately, including members of evangelical groups, according to human rights activists. [...] Authorities released some Christians almost immediately, but held others in secret locations without access to attorneys.” (USDOS, 28 July 2014, section 2)

The same source states that “[o]fficial reports and the media continued to characterize Christian house churches as ‘illegal networks’ and ‘Zionist propaganda institutions’” and that “[a]rrested members of house churches were often accused of being supported by enemy countries” (USDOS, 28 July 2014, section 2).

The April 2015 annual report of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) describes the situation of Christians, as follows:

“Over the past year, there were numerous incidents of Iranian authorities raiding church services, threatening church members, and arresting and imprisoning worshipers and church leaders, particularly Evangelical Christian converts. Since 2010, authorities arbitrarily arrested and detained more than 500 Christians throughout the country. As of February 2015, approximately 90 Christians were either in prison, detained, or awaiting trial because of their religious beliefs and activities. During the reporting period, human rights groups inside Iran reported a significant increase in the number of physical assaults and beatings of Christians in prison. Some activists believe the assaults, which have been directed against converts who are leaders of underground house churches, are meant to intimidate others who may wish to convert to Christianity.” (USCIRF, 30 April 2015, pp. 46-47)

The March 2015 report of the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran indicates that “[a]s of 1 January 2015, at least 92 Christians remain in detention in the country allegedly due to their Christian faith and activities” (HRC, 12 March 2015, p. 15).

Proselytizers / religious conversion

The USDOS July 2014 International Religious Freedom Report states that “Muslim converts to Christianity faced harassment, arrest, and sentencing”, with many arrests taking place “during police raids on religious gatherings, which also included government confiscation of religious property”. The same report details on measures taken by the government to enforce its prohibition on proselytising:

“The government enforced the prohibition on proselytizing by closely monitoring the activities of evangelical Christians, discouraging Muslims from entering church premises, closing churches, and arresting Christian converts. Authorities pressed evangelical church leaders to sign pledges they would not evangelize Muslims or allow Muslims to attend church services. Meetings for evangelical services remained restricted to Sundays.

Reports suggested authorities regarded the act of allowing Muslims to visit a Christian church as proselytizing. Some Christian advocacy groups reported the government pressured Armenian, Assyrian, and evangelical churches to cancel all services in the Farsi language. Members of evangelical congregations were required to carry membership cards, photocopies of which had to be provided to the authorities. Security officials posted outside congregation centers subjected worshippers to identity checks.” (USDOS, 28 July 2014, section 2)

The March 2015 report of the UN special rapporteur to the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) indicates that in 2014, “69 Christian converts were reportedly arrested and detained for at least 24 hours across Iran” and that “[a]uthorities reportedly continued to target the leaders of house churches” who were “generally from Muslim backgrounds”. (HRC, 12 March 2015, p. 15). A previous report of the UN special rapporteur, published in March 2014, states that in 2013, “the authorities reportedly arrested at least 42 Christians, of whom 35 were convicted for participation in informal ‘house churches’, association with churches outside the Islamic Republic of Iran, perceived or real evangelical activity, and other standard Christian activities”, with sentences ranging “from one to 10 years of imprisonment”. The same report details on the categories of Christians most frequently prosecuted and the most common types of charges made against Christians:

“The Christians most commonly prosecuted appear to be converts from Muslim backgrounds or those that proselytize or minister to Iranian Muslims. Iranian authorities at the highest levels have designated house churches and evangelical Christians as threats to national security.

While most cases involving Christians are tried in revolutionary courts for national security crimes, some Christians face charges in public criminal courts for manifestation of religious beliefs; for example, a court sentenced four Christians to 80 lashes each for drinking wine during communion in October 2013. Sources also reported that, although prosecutions for the capital offence of apostasy are very rare, officials routinely threaten to prosecute Christian converts for apostasy, which, while not found in any Iranian criminal law, has been prosecuted based on an Islamic law interpretation commonly used by Iranian courts.” (HRC, 18 March 2014, pp. 10-11)

The June 2014 fact-finding-mission report of the Danish Immigration Service (DIS) states with reference to information provided by an international organisation in Turkey:

“An international organization in Turkey explained to this end that Iranian Protestants, with a Muslim background, who chose to convert to Evangelical churches can face problems with the authorities upon their conversion. It is mainly the Evangelical churches that are seen as a threat to the regime and consequently are of interest to the authorities. Some of these churches are based on US funding and the authorities therefore make a link between activities of Evangelical churches and relations to foreign bodies and thus to espionage and undermining of Islam in a political sense. Although it is hard for the authorities to pin such accusations on individuals, there is a threat of such a charge, and there is a public consensus, including the judiciary and law enforcement

authorities, that conversion to Christianity and evangelical networks are politically motivated and linked to Iran's relations with the West." (DIS, 23 June 2014, p. 8)

An August 2014 note of the UN Secretary-General to the UN General Assembly states that "[d]uring the past two or three years, the authorities have increasingly closed officially licensed churches and arrested their pastors for holding services in Persian or for allegedly ministering to Iranians from Muslim backgrounds". The report also notes that "Christian converts continue to report that they were sometimes subjected to physical and intense psychological abuse, including threats of execution, while in detention". (UN General Assembly, 27 August 2014, pp. 12-13)

UN reports also note that "Christian converts also allegedly continue to face restrictions in observing their religious holidays" (HRC, 12 March 2015, p. 15) and that "[t]he authorities regularly block Christian community websites" (UN General Assembly, 27 August 2014).

The April 2015 USCIRF report gives an overview of the cases of Behnam Irani, Reza Rabbani and Abdolreza (Mathias) Haghnejad, three Christian clergymen (HRC, 12 March 2015, p. 15) who are converts from Islam:

"In October 2014, three Christian converts – Silas Rabbani, Abdolreza Haghnejad, and Behnam Irani – were sentenced to six years in prison in remote parts of the country for bogus charges of 'action against national security' and 'creating a network to overthrow the system.' In December, the sentences were dropped against the three and Rabbani and Haghnejad were released. Irani continues to serve a separate six year sentence." (USCIRF, 30 April 2015, p. 47)

The same source notes that "[i]n December 2014, authorities raided a number of private Christmas services and arrested more than a dozen church members in Tehran" (USCIRF, 30 April 2015, p. 47). These arrests are detailed in a March 2015 report of the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran, which was submitted to the UN Human Rights Council (HRC):

"On 25 December, Iranian authorities reportedly raided a house church in the town of Rudehen and arrested nine individuals who had gathered to celebrate Christmas. Authorities also arrested Pastor Victor Beth Tamarz, the former head of the Shahrara Assyrian Pentecostal Church in Tehran, along with two other Christian converts on 26 December while the Pastor was performing a Christmas service. Pastor Victor Beth Tamarz has reportedly been under pressure for performing Persian-language services since 2009." (HRC, 12 March 2015, p. 15)

The August 2014 note of the UN Secretary-General states that "[i]n April 2014, security forces reportedly raided an Easter service in a private home in southern Tehran and detained six individuals" (UN General Assembly, 27 August 2014, p. 12).

The USCIRF reports about the treatment in prison of Christian pastor and convert Farshid Fathi (cf. Christian Today, 9 July 2015):

“Christian convert Farshid Fathi, who was arrested in 2010 and sentenced in 2012 to six years in prison for his religious activities, was beaten by security officials and injured during a April 2014 raid at Evin Prison. In August [2014], he was transferred to Rajai Shahr Prison outside Tehran and in December [2014] he was given an additional one-year prison sentence in connection with the April prison raid.” (USCIRF, 30 April 2015, p. 47)

As reported by the Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA) in July 2015, Fathi is now due to be released in December 2015, two years earlier than the end of his “total of seven years’ imprisonment” which would have lasted until October 2017 (HRANA, 16 July 2015).

The USCIRF further reports about the case of Saeed Abedini, an Iranian-American pastor who converted from Islam (cf. AA, 22 May 2015):

“Iranian-born American pastor Saeed Abedini continues to serve an eight-year prison term after being convicted in 2013 for ‘threatening the national security of Iran’ for his activity in the Christian house church movement. While in Evin Prison since September 2012, Pastor Abedini spent several weeks in solitary confinement and was physically and psychologically abused. In November 2013, he was transferred to the Rajai Shahr Prison, which is known for its harsh and unsanitary conditions. In March 2014, prison authorities beat Pastor Abedini after which he was hospitalized for nearly two months to receive treatment for the injuries sustained from the beatings. In May 2014, Pastor Abedini was beaten a second time when he was released from the hospital and returned to prison.” (USCIRF, 30 April 2015, p. 47)

A July 2015 press release of the UK-based advocacy group Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) reports:

“Iranian Christians Bijan Farokhpour Haghighi and Eskandar Rezaie have been recalled from bail to serve prison sentences they received in 2013. The two men were originally sentenced in July 2013 for security-related charges. Bijan Farokhpour Haghighi was sentenced to three years in prison, while Eskandar Rezaie was sentenced to one year. Sources close to Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) state that Eskandar Rezaie has been imprisoned at Adelabad Prison, while Bijan Farokhpour Haghighi is likely to be imprisoned soon. The men were part of a group that was arrested in Shiraz on 12 October 2012, when security forces raided a prayer meeting. On 16 July 2013, the group was charged with ‘action against national security’ and ‘propaganda against the order of the system’. Despite an appeal, the sentences were upheld in a decision issued on 29 March 2014.” (CSW, 7 July 2015)

A June 2015 article of Christian Today, a UK-based online Christian news provider, quotes Persian-language Radio Farda as reporting that 18 Christian converts were sentenced to prison terms between mid-March and mid-May 2015 (Christian Today, 4 June 2015).

A January 2015 Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) press release states that “Amin Khaki, a member of the Church of Iran, was released on bail”, while two other Christians arrested together with Khaki in March 2014 had been released in December 2014:

“Amin Khaki was part of a group of eight Christians who were detained and interrogated following a picnic on 5 March 2014. While most of them were later released, Mr Khaki, Hossein Baraunzadeh (Daniel) and Rahman Bahman (Zia) were arrested. Amin Khaki was transferred to the Interim Ward of Ahwaz Prison on 7 May, where he is reported to have suffered severe mistreatment. Mr Baraunzadeh and Mr Bahman, who were imprisoned in Desful, were released in December 2014.” (CSW, 7 January 2015)

A February 2015 CSW press release states that Ministry of Intelligence (MOI) agents “raided the homes of three Christians in Rasht [...], confiscating bibles, laptops, Christian CDs and literature” (CSW, 18 February 2015).

As reported by the Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA), at least eight members of a house church in Karaj were arrested by plain-clothed security agents on 7 August 2015 as they gathered for worship. According to reports, three of them were then temporarily released on bail (HRANA, 19 August 2015).

A June 2014 report of the Danish Immigration Service (DIS), which is based on fact-finding-missions conducted to Istanbul, Ankara and London in March and April 2014, states with reference to information provided by an international organisation in Turkey:

“Concerning the obstacles Iranian converts face in Iran because of their conversion to Christianity, an international organisation in Turkey did not consider that there would be any issues if this is not made known. However, if a convert is active in informal church activities or proselytizing, problems may arise with the authorities. Additionally, if conversion comes to the knowledge of the authorities, an individual might lose his or her job. The source explained that at workplaces in Iran, there are offices of Herasat (representatives of the ministry of intelligence and state security) that monitor the employees. [...]

Converts who are attending university may be expelled or in some cases merely suspended. [...]

The source did not consider that the socio-economic profile of a convert would make much a difference in terms of his or her risk of harm from the authorities, except that Basij is more likely to be present among socioeconomically disadvantaged sectors of urban society. However, a convert’s ethnic background could play a role. A Kurd or Azeri, for example, could risk already being under scrutiny due to his ethnic background and even more so if he is also a Christian convert.” (DIS, 23 June 2014, p. 5)

The same report quotes Elam Ministries, a US-based group focussing on Christian missionary work in Iran, as saying that all matters in which a Christian convert is obliged to deal with the authorities may become a problem, including cases where such a person is employed as a civil servant (DIS, 23 June 2014, p. 6).

The same report indicates with reference to the above-mentioned international organisation in Turkey that while “apostasy does not figure in the Iranian criminal code, there have in the

past been cases where judges have made apostasy rulings basing these decisions on the knowledge of the judge and incorporating Islamic law” (DIS, 23 June 2014, p. 7).

Referring to various sources, the June 2014 DIS report discusses the potential treatment of converts by their family members:

“When asked what consequences a convert faces in relation to his family or social network, an international organisation in Turkey considered that a convert may be threatened by family members for example in the instance that a member of his family holds a higher ranking official position. This person may force him or her to stop his Christian activities.

Regarding the risks of maltreatment from actors other than the authorities, the AIIS [Amnesty International International Secretariat] considered that the question of whether risks could emanate from family, would very much depend on how religious the family was or whether it had close ties to the authorities. [...]

Some Christian converts may risk maltreatment from their own family members and relatives but mostly, Christian converts are facing persecution at the hands of the state, according to Mansour Borji. [...]

Asked if the Christian converts would also face problems in relation to their own family members because of their conversion, a non-governmental organization in Turkey informed that according to refugees their problems are mainly related to the authorities. [...]

When asked about the consequences of conversion in relation to family and social network, Elam Ministries considered that very religious families would likely have some issues with an individual converting within the family.” (DIS, 23 June 2014, pp. 11-12)

As regards the treatment of members of house churches, the same report states with reference to Amnesty International that it is “highly likely” that the authorities have “many members [of house churches] under surveillance”, “even if the authorities were not going after ordinary members of house churches” (DIS, 23 June 2014, p. 25).

The same report states with reference to Mansour Borji, advocacy officer of the Article 18 initiative of the United Council of Iranian Churches that “[w]ithin the last two years, there has been an increase in arrest and detention of house church members and especially an increase in the arrest of female members” (DIS, 23 June 2014, p. 25).

The same report goes on to refer to information provided by the international organization in Turkey and Amnesty International on the situation of house church members:

“Asked who is at risk of being detained by the authorities, an international organization in Turkey said that the leaders and hosts of house churches are more likely to be under surveillance, however, regular members may also risk being monitored in the authorities’ attempt to get informants within the house churches. Regular members may be

threatened to stop their activities or assist the authorities in uncovering house churches or providing incriminating information on the networks of converts. The people arrested are also threatened that their family members will risk harm if they do not cooperate. The types of questions converts get while detained often include questions about their connections to foreigners, who is supporting him or her, who does his or her church cooperate with, where does it receive funds from, which are all questions that have significant political underpinnings to them. There are reports of Christian converts or persons accused with links to the networks of Christian converts having been tortured under detention.” (DIS, 23 June 2014, p. 28)

“Most of the cases regarding converts that result in a trial and AIIS knows of, concern converts of a rather higher profile. It was considered that it is highly likely that individuals with a low profile are also arrested and detained for a period of time but are then released without the case going to a court.” (DIS, 23 June 2014, p. 30)

Treatment upon return after affiliating with Christian groups abroad

The June 2014 fact-finding-mission report of the Danish Immigration Service (DIS) states with reference to Mansour Borji of the Article 18 initiative of the United Council of Iranian Churches:

“Since 2006-2007, converts are no longer baptized in Iranian churches as no one was willing to run the risk of performing a baptism. Christian converts consequently started travelling to Turkey and other neighboring countries to get baptized. Asked if house churches perform baptism, the source said that some churches might.

With regard to the situation of converts who return to Iran after being baptized abroad, be it in Turkey, Armenia, UAE or another country, the source found that they may return to Iran quietly and not encounter any problems. If the person is already monitored by the authorities, he or she could risk consequences upon return to Iran.” (DIS, 23 June 2014, p. 15)

The same report goes on to summarize information provided by Amnesty International International Secretariat (AIIS):

“According to AIIS it is difficult to obtain information on potential risks an individual may face upon returning to Iran after conversion abroad. If Iranian informants have gathered information regarding an individual who has returned to Iran, the authorities may arrest them for questioning. It is possible that charging and conviction will ensue the arrest and questioning. A wide group of people could be in that position: students, political activists, family members of political persons might even be questioned as well as Christian converts.” (DIS, 23 June 2014, p. 15)

The same report quotes AIIS as saying that the authorities may consider “[a] person who has attended trainings and sessions abroad” to be a convert even if “he or she may not have officially been baptized”. (DIS, 23 June 2014, p. 15)

The same report states with reference to information obtained from the UK-based advocacy organization Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) and the NGO Elam Ministries:

“Concerning the consequences for an individual upon return to Iran after having converted abroad, CSW said that any convert who wishes to practice his or her faith upon return, would face serious risk. Whether an individual has been baptized in a nearby country or in Europe or the US, would not make any difference. If an individual returns to Iran and is not actually promoting Christianity, the fact still remains that such an individual has left the ‘faith’ (Shia Islam) and thus threatens the order of the regime.

When asked about the consequences of returning to Iran after having been baptized abroad, Elam Ministries said that many Iranians do go abroad and return to Iran after a while. If the authorities in Iran become aware of the fact that a person has been baptized abroad such an individual may risk interrogation and repercussions. The source considered that the authorities may find out that an individual has been baptized through informers and telephone/internet tapping.” (DIS, 23 June 2014, p. 16)

An August 2014 Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) press release reports on the case of Alireza Seyyedian, a member of the Church of Iran who was arrested and convicted of “propaganda against the regime” and “acting against national security” after he had been baptised in Turkey in 2010:

“Alireza Seyyedian, a member of the Church of Iran denomination, has been released early from Evin Prison. Sources inform Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) that although Mr Seyyedian was officially due to be released on 1 August, he was actually released by the prison authorities on 27 July after serving three years, six months and ten days in prison. Mr Seyyedian was initially arrested in June 2010 but released after posting a \$50,000 bail. However, in December 2011, Mr Seyyedian’s lawyer Mohammed Ali Dadkhah, stated that his client had been sentenced to six years imprisonment by Branch 26 of the Revolutionary Court for ‘propaganda against the regime’ and ‘acting against national security’. Mr Dadkhah went on to say that Mr Seyyedian’s baptism in Turkey the previous year had been interpreted as a deliberate attempt to demonstrate that there was a lack of freedom in Iran. The trial judge stated: ‘We have enough priests in Iran to baptize him,’ and concluded that he was ‘propagating against the regime’. Mr Seyyedian was re-arrested on 14 March 2012 at the Iranian border as he tried to enter Turkey and was subsequently imprisoned in Ward 350 of Evin Prison in Tehran. During his imprisonment he is known to have spent time in solitary confinement, experienced ill health and had threats made against his family members.” (CSW, 4 August 2015)

1.5.3 *Sunni Muslims*

For demographic information on Sunni Muslims in Iran, please [see section 1.1](#) (“Religious demography”) of this compilation.

As indicated by Nikki R. Keddie and Yann Richard in their 2006 book *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, “Sunnis are mainly found among ethnic minorities – all Baluchis and Turkomans, most Kurds, and some of the mainly Shi’i Arabs” (Keddie/Richard, 2006, p. 332).

The July 2014 US Department of State (USDOS) International Religious Freedom Report, which covers events of 2013, states that “Sunnis do not have reserved seats in the Majlis but are permitted to serve in the body”. The same source also notes that non-Shia religious leaders “report bans on Sunni religious literature and on Sunni teachings in public schools” and that “Sunnis may not build new schools or mosques” (USDOS, 28 July 2014, section 2).

Amnesty International (AI) notes in its February 2015 Report 2014/15, which covers the year 2014 and key events of 2013, that there continues to be “pervasive discrimination” against religious minorities including Sunni Muslims (AI, 25 February 2015).

The July 2014 USDOS report notes that during the reporting year 2013, “[t]here were reports of arrests and harassment” of members of the Sunni community including “Sunni clerics and congregants”, noting that “[s]ecurity officials continued to raid prayer sites belonging to Sunnis”. The same source also quotes human rights organisations as reporting “several instances of due process violations” against Sunnis. The same source further notes reports about discrimination against members of the Sunni faith:

“Many Sunnis reported discrimination; however, it was difficult to distinguish whether the cause of discrimination was religious or ethnic, since most Sunnis are also members of ethnic minorities. Sunnis cited the absence of a Sunni mosque in Tehran despite the presence of more than one million Sunnis in the city as a prominent example. Sunni leaders reported bans on Sunni religious literature and teachings in public schools, even in predominantly Sunni areas. Sunnis also noted the underrepresentation of Sunnis in government-appointed positions in the provinces where they form a majority, such as Kurdistan and Khuzestan, as well as their inability to obtain senior government positions. Residents of provinces with large Sunni populations, including Kurdistan, Khuzestan, and Sistan-Baluchistan, reported repression by the judiciary and security services, discrimination, lack of basic government services, and inadequate funding for infrastructure projects.” (USDOS, 28 July 2014, section 2)

As noted in the March 2015 report of the UN special rapporteur on human rights in Iran, “Sunnis report that they have not been granted permission for the construction of a Mosque in Tehran since 1979 (HRC, 12 March 2015, p. 14).

As indicated in the July 2014 Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC) report on apostasy in Iran, there is “considerable ambiguity as to how apostasy laws affect Sunni Muslims”:

“Given that Sunni beliefs, including beliefs regarding apostasy, differ from those of Shi’a Muslims, it is not clear whether a Sunni person will be considered an apostate based on Shi’a or Sunni jurisprudence. In addition, it is not clear whether a Shi’a person who becomes a Sunni could be charged with apostasy.” (IHRDC, 30 July 2014, pp. 39-40)

The August 2014 report of the UN Secretary-General to the UN General Assembly states that “[a]t least 150 Sunni Muslims are currently detained for reportedly organizing religious

meetings and activities or after trials that allegedly often failed to meet international standards”, many of whom “have been charged with serious security offences” (UN General Assembly, 27 August 2014, p. 13).

As reported by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), more than 30 Sunni Muslims are on death row (USCIRF, 30 April 2015, p. 46). The February 2015 Amnesty International (AI) Report 2014/2015 indicates that “[b]y October [2015], the authorities held at least 33 Sunni men, mostly members of the Kurdish minority, on death row on charges of ‘gathering and colluding against national security’, ‘spreading propaganda against the system’, ‘membership of Salafist groups’, ‘corruption on Earth’ and ‘enmity against God’. The same report notes that “[c]onverts from Shi’a to Sunni Islam faced increased persecution. (AI, 25 February 2015)

Referring to information provided by Amnesty International (AI), the June 2014 fact-finding-mission report of the Danish Immigration Service (DIS) states that after the Supreme Leader and other leading regime members made statements regarding a fight against “deviant sects”, there appears to be a “renewed thrust towards persecution of members of religious minority groups” including Sunnis and Sunni converts. (DIS, 23 June 2014, p. 30)

A May 2015 article of the International Campaign for Sunni Prisoners in Iran (ICSPI), a non-governmental group established in 2013, which, by its own account, aims to report about “the persecution suffered by Sunni Muslims in Iran” with a focus on “those who have been unjustly imprisoned due to spreading the teachings of Sunni Islam”, states that Shaykh Fathi Mohammad Naghshbandi, who is referred to as “a prominent Sunni scholar and Imam of Friday prayers in the city of Rask” who had been imprisoned since 2012, was released on bail. In January 2015, the Supreme Court had overturned the sentences issued against the cleric and five other Sunni prisoners on grounds of “insufficient evidence”. The condition of the other prisoners, however, is unknown. (ICSPI, 14 May 2015)

There have been a number of reports about arrests of Sunnis and Sunni converts (including preachers and activists) by security agencies including the Ministry of Intelligence (MOI) and the Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) (ICSPI, 20 January 2015; ICSPI, 4 January 2015; ICSPI, 12 November 2014; ICSPI, 17 October 2014; ICSPI, 21 July 2014; ICHRI, 7 March 2014). There have been several reported executions of Sunni prisoners convicted of political or security-related crimes including “moharebeh” (“enmity against God”) and “corruption on earth” (IHR, 4 March 2015; ICSPI, 17 November 2014).

As noted by the ICSPI, there has been a “sharp increase in the number of Sunni converts arrested” in Khuzestan province (ICSPI, 21 July 2014). The same source notes that authorities use various incidents as a pretext to “arrest large numbers of people” for supposed “involvement” in the event (ICSPI, 4 January 2015; ICSPI, 12 December 2014; ICSPI, 30 April 2015).

Referring to a BBC Persian article, a January 2015 ICSPI report notes that the authorities “closed down a Sunni prayer room [...] in the Pounak neighborhood of Tehran”, quoting the director of London’s Center for Baluchistan Studies as saying that officials “dealt harshly” with

the imam of the prayer room and that a few people present at the time were detained for several hours. The director is further quoted as saying that “Sunnis do not have an official prayer site in Tehran, and during previous years have rented a hall to be used as [a substitute for] a mosque” but that “usually these Sunni prayer rooms have been forced to close down shortly after their creation” (ICSPI, 19 January 2015)

The August 2014 report of the UN Secretary-General to the UN General Assembly provides information about the February 2013 convictions of 15 Arab Sunni converts in Ahvaz to prison terms for religious activities:

“According to sources wishing to remain anonymous, 15 Arabs who converted from Shia to Sunni Islam were sentenced to a one-year term of imprisonment on 21 February 2013. They were reportedly detained in an unknown location for 21 days after their arrests on 17 January 2012. They were allegedly interrogated, threatened and encouraged not to seek legal counsel. Sources maintain that the defendants’ activities were solely religious, including organizing private group prayers, reading the Koran and Islamic jurisprudence in their homes and performing charity work. They were reportedly charged with spreading propaganda against the system by promoting Wahhabism and Salafism, holding group prayers, questioning the official religion of the country, producing and distributing deviant books, communicating with salafist and takfirist groups (groups accusing others of apostasy) and participating in the religious courses of salafist and takfirist elements. They were each sentenced to a term of imprisonment of one year by Branch 2 of the Revolutionary Court of Ahvaz and were summoned in April 2014 to serve their sentences.” (UN General Assembly, 27 August 2014, p. 13)

1.5.4 Situation of non-practising Muslims

Among the sources consulted by ACCORD, little specific information could be found on the situation of non-practising Muslims.

Media sources reported in July 2014 that two men in Shiraz and five others in Kermanshah were flogged for eating in public during fasting hours in the holy month of Ramadan. (RFE/RL, 14 July 2014; AFP, 27 July 2014)

A November 2014 article of the Economist newspaper notes that “Islam plays a smaller role in public life today than it did a decade ago” and the power of clerics has “waned”. While the article states that “Iranians remain a spiritual people who see Islam as part of their identity”, many have (to the extent possible) moved away from “institutionalised religion”. (Economist, 1 November 2014)

An August 2012 report of the Iranian Fars news agency, which sources describe as a semi-official organisation linked to the IRGC or the Basij organisation (USDOS, 28 July 2014, section 2; Trend, 24 June 2015) makes reference to a “recent speech by Mehdi Mahdavi-Nezhad, a brigadier general in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps”, in which he depicted the USA not as an “enemy of Islam”, but as “trying to hijack Islam”. The article goes on to say:

“Ordinary Iranians living in Iran often refer to ‘din-i khodiman,’ ‘my personal religion,’ in order to acknowledge and define their own religiosity in opposition to state involvement in religious practice. Mahdavi-Nezhad’s discussion of ‘American Islam’ as a plot might represent a tactic to stigmatize those who do not practice Shi’ism in the manner Iranian hardline clerics would like. As the former paramilitary Basij chief inspector, Mahdavi-Nezhad has made a career not only of military command, but also of promoting religious rigidity.” (Fars, 27 August 2012)

The June 2014 Danish Immigration Service (DIS) fact-finding-mission quotes the NGO Elam Ministries as saying that “abstaining from Muslim rituals such as not attending mosque [...] would not necessarily arouse any suspicion as many in Iran do not regularly attend mosques” (DIS, 23 June 2014, p. 12). The same report also states with reference to Mansour Borji, advocacy officer of the Article 18 initiative of the United Council of Iranian Churches:

“Some people from the conservative communities pay more attention to public manifestation of religion such as participation in Friday prayers etc., whereas people from the more secular segment do not pay any attention to such public manifestations.” (DIS, 23 June 2014, p. 13)

A senior research fellow in Iranian studies at a university in Germany stated that non-practising Muslims form a large part of the population of Iran’s cities. They lead normal daily lives and are rarely called upon to answer direct questions about Muslim religious practice and are rarely pressured to observe Muslim precepts. However, there are some exceptions to this:

- Applicants for certain jobs (including in the public media or the military) are asked about their religious affiliation and way of practicing Islam during their job interviews. In such situations, most non-practising Muslims prefer to hide the truth. If, however, such a person insists on saying that they do not practice the Islamic precepts, they may reduce their chances of being accepted for the job but they would not face any further harm.
- Occasionally, leaders of group tours for students or company staff etc. may organize common prayers during the journey. In such cases, everyone on the tour is obliged to take part in the prayers, even if they do not wish to do so. Refusal to participate is frowned upon but usually does not lead to any further negative consequences.
- During Ramadan, everyone is obliged to observe the Islamic precepts and is therefore not allowed to eat, drink or smoke in public. Here, any visible act of non-observance can entail punishment under the law.
- And finally, women are required to observe the Islamic precept of wearing the hejab in public. (Senior research fellow, 27 August 2015)

1.5.5 Jews

The June 2015 US Department of State (USDOS) country report on human rights practices, which covers events of 2014, states:

“While past media reports estimated the size of the country’s Jewish population at 25,000, a 2012 census reported there were 8,756 Jewish residents. The law recognizes

Jews as a religious minority and provides representation in the Islamic Consultative Assembly.” (USDOS, 25 June 2015)

The same report appears to contain inconsistent information with regard to the number of Jewish representatives in the Islamic Consultative Assembly (i.e. the Iranian Parliament). While the report states that in the assembly elected in 2012, Jews held three of 14 seats reserved for religious minorities, it also indicates that “Samiak Moreh Sedgh is the only Jewish member of parliament.” (USDOS, 25 June 2015, section 6)

The July 2014 USDOS International Religious Freedom Report, which covers events of 2013, states that “[m]embers of religious minority groups, except Sunni Muslims, may not serve in the judiciary, security services, or as public school principals [...] although members of religious minorities, with the exception of Bahais, may serve in the lower ranks of government”. (USDOS, 28 July 2014, section 2)

A September 2013 article of the German news magazine Spiegel also states that according to the most recent 2012 census, fewer than 9,000 Jews reside in Iran, down from a pre-1979 Jewish population of over 100,000 (Spiegel, 5 September 2013). As noted by the daily USA Today newspaper, Jewish leaders estimate that there are between 12,000 and 30,000 Jews in Iran (USA Today, 7 August 2015).

For further demographic information on Jews in Iran, please also [see section 1.1](#) (“Religious demography”) of this compilation.

An older 2012 journal article by Jamsheed Choksy entitled *Non-Muslim Religious Minorities in Contemporary Iran*, states:

“Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran’s native Zoroastrians, Jews, Christians, Mandaean, and Baha’is have experienced increasing discrimination, isolation, and intimidation. Those non-Muslim religious minorities provide Iranian society with confessional pluralism and cultural diversity, thereby serving also as a moderating population sliver against Shi’ite fundamentalism.” (Choksy, 2012, p. 271)

Bijan DaBell, an M.A. graduate in social sciences from the University of Chicago, who is currently working at the Baha’i Chair for World Peace, an academic programme offered by the University of Maryland, states in a September 2013 article for the Iran Primer, a publication of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), that “[m]ost Jews live in Tehran” where there are “active synagogues, a Jewish school and kosher butchers”, with smaller numbers living in “Esfahan, Shiraz, Hamadan and a few other towns”. The article goes on to say that while “Iranian Jews are allowed to practice their religion, [...] they have faced periodic prosecution and harassment” and that “Jewish members of parliament have occasionally expressed grievances”. (DaBell, 3 September 2013a)

Article 13 of the Iranian Constitution of 1979 (last amended in 1989) states that Jews are one of the three recognized minorities who, “within the limits of law, shall be free to carry out

their religious rites and practice their religion in personal status and religious education.” (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1989, Article 13).

The July 2014 USDOS International Religious Freedom report, which covers events of 2013, describes the general situation of Jews in Iran as follows:

“Jewish citizens are free to travel out of the country, and the government generally does not enforce legal restrictions on travel to Israel by Jewish citizens. Other citizens may not travel to Israel. [...]

With some exceptions, there was little government restriction of, or interference with, Jewish religious practice. Government officials, however, continued to sanction anti-Semitic propaganda in official statements, media outlets, publications, and books.

There were reports of government officials making anti-Semitic statements. On November 10, the hardline semi-official IRGC-affiliated news agency Fars News reported that IRGC Lieutenant Commander of the Navy Brigadier General Alireza Tangsiri said “the Israelis are Jews and the Americans are Christians. Our Quran stresses that they are not our friends.” While in office, former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad continued to question the existence and the scope of the Holocaust and publicly called for the destruction of Israel.” (USDOS, 28 July 2014, section 2)

“Many Jews reportedly sought to limit their contact with or support for the state of Israel due to fear of reprisal. In early January news outlets reported that the Jewish community was fearful following the December 2012 murder of Daniel Mahgerefteh, an Iranian Jewish man reportedly in a romantic relationship with the daughter of a member of the IRGC. Although authorities maintained that Mahgerefteh was killed in a robbery, some members of the Jewish community stated there were inconsistencies in the official account and suspected the daughter was complicit in the killing.” (USDOS, 28 July 2014, section 3)

The April 2015 annual report of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) notes the following developments during the year 2014:

“Although not as pronounced as in previous years, the government continued to propagate anti-Semitism and target members of the Jewish community on the basis of real or perceived ‘ties to Israel.’ In 2014, high-level clerics continued to make anti-Semitic remarks in mosques, and the government reinstated a Holocaust denial conference, which had been cancelled in 2013. Numerous programs broadcast on state-run television advance anti-Semitic messages. Official government discrimination against Jews continues to be pervasive, fostering a threatening atmosphere for the approximately 20,000 member Jewish community. In a positive development, as of February 2015, the government no longer requires Jewish students to attend classes on the Sabbath.” (USCIRF, 30 April 2015, p. 47)

As reported by Jüdische Allgemeine, a weekly Jewish magazine published in Germany, in March 2015, the Iran’s largest Jewish communities are located in Tehran, Esfahan and Shiraz.

The capital's eleven synagogues are all in use, but it is difficult to find them, as most of these buildings do not readily reveal their function. These communities are cautious not to strain their relations with the government, refusing interviews with Western visitors unless they can show official permissions and papers. The article quotes an interviewee as saying that while there is no violence against Jews in Iran, many Jews cannot find work or rent an apartment because of their religion. (Jüdische Allgemeine, 5 March 2015)

An August 2015 article of USA Today provides an overview of the situation of Jews in Iran, making reference to statements from Siamak Morsedegh, the current Jewish representative to the Islamic Consultative Assembly (Iran's parliament) and another Jewish leader named Najafabadi:

"The Islamic Republic of Iran allows freedom of worship for Jews and Christians, according to Siamak Morsedegh, the Jewish representative to Iran's parliament. He points out that unlike some other countries in the region and in Europe, Jewish temples in Iran have not been attacked. 'There (is) no need for guards in front of our synagogues,' he said.

But institutional restrictions on Jews remain, Morsedegh said. They are not able to get certain government jobs reserved for Muslims and are banned from serving as professional soldiers, although they face conscription like other Iranians.

From 2005 to 2013, during the administration of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Jews faced many problems. (Ahmadinejad famously questioned the existence of the Holocaust.)

Mohammad Reza Rahimi, Ahmadinejad's first vice president, delivered an anti-Jewish speech at a U.N. drug conference in 2012. He claimed the Talmud teaches 'how to destroy non-Jews so as to protect an embryo in the womb of a Jewish mother' and that Zionists controlled the world's illicit drug trade.

His remarks drew strong criticism from Jews and Muslims inside Iran. Rahimi was later convicted on corruption charges and is now jailed in Tehran's infamous Evin Prison.

Jewish leader Najafabadi said that during Ahmadinejad's time, state-owned TV aired several anti-Jewish programs. [...]

President Hassan Rouhani, elected in 2013, has made conditions for Jews 'somewhat better,' according to Morsedegh.

Previously, Jewish schools kept the Iranian Muslim calendar, and closed on Thursday and Friday. Now they are permitted to observe the Jewish Sabbath and are closed Friday and Saturday." (USA Today, 7 August 2015)

An August 2014 article of Le Point, a French weekly political and news magazine, states that while Jews are tolerated in Iran provided that they lead discrete lives and do not attract public attention. They are excluded from many professional fields such as the army or the civil

service. However, the majority of Iranians show great tolerance towards the Jewish community. (Le Point, 24 August 2014)

1.5.6 Zoroastrians

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) mentions that Iran's Zoroastrian community numbers "between 30,000 and 35,000 people" (USCIRF, 30 April 2015, p. 47). The 2011 population census indicated that Zoroastrians number 25,271. However, "a 2012 report from a high-level official of the Iranian Zoroastrian community estimates that community's demographic number at 13,000 to 15,000 individuals" (Choksy, 2012, p. 272). According to Le Point, which notes that there are "barely 30,000" Zoroastrians in Iran, one third of their population lives in the city of Yazd and its surrounding areas (Le Point, 26 August 2014).

For further demographic information on Zoroastrians in Iran, please [also see section 1.1](#) ("Religious demography") of this compilation.

Jamsheed Choksy mentions in his 2012 journal article that since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Zoroastrians have experienced "discrimination, isolation, and intimidation" (Choksy, 2012, p. 271).

Article 13 of the Iranian Constitution of 1979 (last amended in 1989) states that Zoroastrians are one of the three recognized minorities who, "within the limits of law, shall be free to carry out their religious rites and practice their religion in personal status and religious education." (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1989, Article 13).

Le Point states that unlike other minorities like the Jews and Christians, who are established in the major metropolitan areas, Zoroastrians have traditionally practiced agriculture in isolated areas where living conditions were harsh but which also ensured them greater security. However, unemployment has pressured young people to move to urban areas such as Tehran, Esfahan or Kerman. In Zoroastrianism, marriage is obligatory and is only permitted between persons who share the same faith. Such constraints have compelled new generations of Zoroastrians to convert to Islam or to leave the country, particularly for India. (Le Point, 26 August 2014)

The June 2015 US Department of State (USDOS) country report on human rights practices indicates that in the Islamic Consultative Assembly (Parliament) elected in 2012, Zoroastrians held two of the 14 seats reserved for religious minorities (USDOS, 25 June 2015, section 3). The July 2014 USDOS International Religious Freedom Report states that "[m]embers of religious minority groups, except Sunni Muslims, may not serve in the judiciary, security services, or as public school principals [...] although members of religious minorities, with the exception of Bahais, may serve in the lower ranks of government". (USDOS, 28 July 2014, section 2)

The USDOS notes that the government "regularly arrests members of the Zoroastrian and Christian communities for practicing their religion" (USDOS, 28 July 2014, Executive

Summary). The April 2015 USCIRF annual report states that “[i]n recent years, members of the Zoroastrian community [...] have come under increasing repression and discrimination”, mentioning that “[a]t least four Zoroastrians convicted in 2011 for propaganda of their faith, blasphemy, and other trumped-up charges remain in prison” (USCIRF, 30 April 2015, p. 47).

As noted by Katrina Lantos Swett, a commissioner at the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), in a June 2013 journal article, “[i]n August 2011, a Zoroastrian man, Mohsen Sadeghipour, began serving a four-and-a-half year prison term after being charged and convicted of propaganda of the Zoroastrian faith”. Moreover, “[s]everal of his relatives were convicted and imprisoned in 2010 on blasphemy and other charges”. (Lantos Swett, 20 June 2013)

The French *Le Point* magazine states that members of the Zoroastrian community face multiple discrimination and are excluded from a large number of jobs. (*Le Point*, 26 August 2014)

A May 2013 article of the *Huffington Post* quotes Jamsheed Choksy from the Department of Central Eurasian Studies at Indiana University as saying that “[c]ommunal gatherings are routinely monitored” by the authorities who allege that Zoroastrianism “threatens national security and subverts the Islamic revolution”. (*Huffington Post*, 16 May 2013)

1.5.7 Sabeen Mandaean

Among the sources consulted by ACCORD, little information of current date could be found on the situation of Sabeen Mandaean.

The July 2014 USDOS International Religious Freedom Report, which covers events of 2013, states that although Iran’s Sabeen-Mandaean (population: 5,000 to 10,000) “do not consider themselves Christians, the government regards them as Christians, and thus they are included among the three recognized religious minorities.” (USDOS, 28 July 2014, sections 1 and 2, see also IWPR, 30 July 2010). Other sources, however, note that the Sabeen-Mandaean are not recognized as members of one of the religions of the book mentioned in the Koran and thus lack protection (Ahwaz News Agency, 2 February 2013; Ezidische Akademie, 28 February 2010; IWPR, 30 July 2010; Lantos Swett, 20 June 2013).

According to the Mandaean Human Rights Group, a self-organised volunteer group that is part of the the international Mandaean Associations Union and works for the protection of the human rights of Mandaean in Iraq and Iran, there are 5,000-8,000 Mandaean in Iran (Mandaean Human Rights Group, September 2011, p. 4).

In her 2010 doctoral dissertation entitled “The Mandaean of Iran”, Caroline Nik Nafs notes that since the Statistical Centre of Iran (AMAR) does not collect data on non-recognized minorities, there are no official figures on the country’s Mandaean population, and estimates on their numbers in Iran vary between 3,000 and 30,000 (Nik Nafs, 2010, p. 50).

Jamsheed Choksy mentions in his 2012 journal article that since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran's Mandaean have experienced "discrimination, isolation, and intimidation" (Choksy, 2012, p. 271).

In her 2010 doctoral dissertation, Nik Nafs explains that Mandaism, a pre-Christian religion which shares similarities with Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Christianity, is characterised by a monotheism influenced by dualistic beliefs, strict hygiene rules, complex mythology and a rejection of asceticism. Running water is a core element of all Mandaean rituals. The most important ritual is baptism in rivers, which can be performed anytime for the remission of one's sins. Madaeans generally practice endogamous marriage and do not proselytize (Nik Nafs, 2010, pp. 7-8). According to the IWPR, Iran's Madaeans are located in Khuzestan province (IWPR, 30 July 2010).

The July 2010 article of the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), an independent not-for-profit organisation that works with media and civil society in conflict zones, provides the following general information on Mandaean religion and society:

"The Madaeans, or Sabians as they are often known, are followers of John the Baptist, but are not Christians. [...] Ethnicity and faith are closely connected in Mandaean identity, so there is no proselytising. Marriage with outsiders is strictly forbidden, and counts as apostasy, so anyone doing so is cast out of the faith. As a result of this practice, the Mandaean population is constantly shrinking. But in recent years emigration has been a major factor in reducing numbers in Iran as well as Iraq. [...]"

Because the Madaeans do not seek to convert others, they are not perceived as a threat by the Shia clerical establishment. Yet unlike other faith communities – Armenian and Assyrian Christians, Zoroastrians and Jews – the Madaeans are not recognised as a discrete group in the Islamic Republic's constitution, and are not accorded representation in parliament as others are." (IWPR, 30 July 2010)

The same article quotes a Mandaean man from Ahvaz (Khuzestan province), who emigrated to France, as saying that because Madaeans are not mentioned in the constitution as a minority, their children are "forced to attend Koranic classes and Islamic studies" and, unlike recognized minorities like the Jews, are unable to "opt out of religious classes for Muslims in school". Similarly, Madaeans are not legally allowed to name their children based on their religious preference but are required to give them Muslim or Iranian names. The IWPR further quotes an Arab Muslim originating from the same province as saying that "[t]he Arabs of Khuzestan have good relations with the Madaeans" while "Persian-speakers in Khuzestan are still unfamiliar with the Madaeans and regard them as an Arab tribe". (IWPR, 30 July 2010)

A January 2015 BBC Persian article states that Madaeans lack recognition under the constitution and face restrictions in a number of domains. This affects their right to bury their dead according to traditional customs, and their children are forced to take part in Islamic religious classes and Shia religious practices without being given equal access to their own Mandaean religious teachings. (BBC Persian, 7 January 2015)

A March 2014 query response of the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB) quotes the main representative to the United Nations (UN) for the International Fellowship of Reconciliation (IFOR), a Netherlands-based peace organization, as referring to reports that the Mandaean/Ahwaz minority in the south-western have been “forced to perform military service despite their pacifist religious beliefs and are consequently fleeing the country in large numbers”. As specified by the representative, “[a] figure of 300 was quoted by a spokesman for the ‘Ahwazi organisation for defense of human rights’” in summer 2013. The IRB states that it was not able to corroborate this information. (IRB, 28 March 2014)

The 2013 journal article of USCIRF commissioner Katrina Lantos-Swett states that “[o]ver the past few years, the Sabeian Mandaean religious community, whose members, like Baha’is, are unprotected, have been facing intensifying official harassment”, with continuing reports that their members “experience societal discrimination and pressure to convert to Islam” and are “often denied access to higher education”. The article notes that “[i]n recent years, hundreds of Sabeian Mandaean families have reportedly fled the country”. (Lantos-Swett, 20 June 2013)

The July 2014 USDOS report notes that authorities “harassed and repressed the Sabeian-Mandaean religious community in ways similar to its harassment of other minority religious groups, including often denying members of the community access to higher education and government employment”. (USDOS, 28 July 2014, section 2)

The Ahwaz News Agency, a news website which campaigns for the rights of Iran’s Ahwazi Arabs, states in a February 2013 article:

“Throughout recent years the Mandaean of Iran have suffered persecution and harassment as a result of religious discrimination.

Most recently two Mandaean youth were killed in Ahwaz - Farhan Jasib Zahrooni and Hadi Haider Zahrooni - following a minor road accident. As the punishment for such killing is much lighter than for the rest of the population, the [compensation] for killing a Mandaean is one quarter of that demanded by law for killing a Muslim.

Like other minorities, the Mandaean suffer varying degrees of discrimination in education and employment. They are often denied access to higher education. The Mandaean are treated as second class citizens. They are exposed to continuous pressure to convert to Islam. There is a pressure on Mandaean women and girls in particular to be forced into marriages with Muslim men. Worse still there has been reported incidents of rape of Mandaean women in which the court has judged that the perpetrator had ‘purified’ the women, instead of being punished. The Mandaean are considered ‘unclean’ by their Muslim neighbours experience social problems when touching or handling food when shopping and are even denied medical treatment due to this taboo. Moreover, there have been attacks on their places of worship, the Mandi.” (Ahwaz News Agency, 2 February 2013)

An October 2012 posting on Cloob, a Persian-language social networking website which is mainly used in Iran, states that 12 houses of Mandaean and Mandaean places of worship have been demolished in Ahwaz (Cloob, 12 October 2012).

An Al Arabiya article of December 2011 states that “[m]ore than 300 Iranian families were forced to leave their homeland in the western province of Khuzestan after facing a series of discriminatory acts for following the faith Sabian Mandaism which is not officially acknowledged” in Iran. The article quotes a Sabean-Mandaean man as saying that while Sabean-Mandaeans had been an integral part of the Iranian social and national fabric, especially in Khuzestan where most of the community used to live, this has no longer been the case after the fall of the Shah. A Sabean-Mandaean woman is quoted as saying that Sabean-Mandaeans are not allowed to talk about their faith or rituals and that Iranians harbour hatred for Mandaeans, and Arabs in general, of whom they are considered part. She and others in the community suffered “dual persecution” for being both Arab and Mandaean. (Al Arabiya, 6 December 2011)

1.5.8 Baha’is and Babis

According to the July 2014 US Department of State (USDOS) International Religious Freedom Report, Iran’s Baha’i population (approximately 300,000 persons) is “heavily concentrated in Tehran and Semnan” (USDOS, 28 July 2014, section 1).

Jamsheed Choksy mentions in his 2012 journal article that since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Baha’is have experienced “discrimination, isolation, and intimidation” (Choksy, 2012, p. 271).

The March 2015 report of the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) notes that “[d]espite statements from high-ranking officials that Baha’is are entitled to citizenship rights, they continue to face discrimination, arrest, and arbitrary detention in connection with their religion” (HRC, 12 March 2015, p. 14).

Sources mention that the Iranian state views Baha’is as apostates (AA, March 2015b; USCIRF, 30 April 2015; USDOS, 28 July 2014, Executive Summary), and that it defines the Baha’i faith as a “political sect” (USDOS, 28 July 2014, Executive Summary).

Amnesty International (AI) notes in its February 2015 Report 2014/15, which covers the year 2014 and key events of 2013, that there continues to be “pervasive discrimination” against religious minorities including Baha’is (AI, 25 February 2015).

The July 2014 USDOS report notes that as members of a non-recognized non-Islamic religion, Bahais “do not have the freedom to practice their beliefs”. Baha’is are also “barred from all leadership positions in the government and military” and are required “to register with the police”. The report also notes:

“Article 297 of the amended 1991 Islamic Punishments Act authorizes collection of equal diyeh (blood money) as restitution to families for the death of both Muslims and non-

Muslims. According to law, Bahai blood is considered mobah, meaning it can be spilled with impunity and Bahai families are not entitled to restitution.” (USDOS, 28 July 2014, section 2)

The March 2015 report of the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) refers to reports indicating that “Baha’i students also faced discrimination in admission to the institutions of higher education 2014-2015 academic year” (HRC, 12 March 2015, p. 14).

The USDOS report of July 2014 elaborates on the situation of Bahai’s in the education system:

“The government, since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, formally denies Bahai students access to higher education. In 1991 the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution signed a secret memorandum stating Bahais ‘must be expelled from universities’ and Bahai children ‘should be enrolled in schools which have a strong and imposing [Shia Islamic] religious ideology,’ presumably to indoctrinate Bahais in the state-supported religion. The Ministry of Justice states Bahais are permitted to enroll in schools only if they do not identify themselves as such. To register for the university entrance examination the government requires Bahai students to identify themselves as a religion other than Bahai. These requirements preclude Bahai enrollment in state-run universities, because a tenet of the Bahai faith is not to deny one’s faith. The Ministry of Justice requires universities to exclude Bahais or expel them if their religious affiliation becomes known.” (USDOS, 28 July 2014, section 2)

The same report further states:

“Bahais are banned from the social pension system. In addition, Bahais are regularly denied compensation for injury or criminal victimization and the right to inherit property. The government does not recognize Bahai marriages and divorces but allows a civil attestation of marriage to serve as a marriage certificate.” (USDOS, 28 July 2014, section 2)

As further indicated in the same report, “the government prohibits the Bahai community from officially assembling or maintaining administrative institutions and actively closes such institutions as part of this policy” (USDOS, 28 July 2014, section 2).

The same report also states that authorities “generally prevented Bahais from burying their dead in accordance with their religious tradition” and that “many of their cemeteries have been destroyed”. Furthermore, the USDOS refers to reports of “authorities placing restrictions on Bahai businesses or forcing them to close, asking managers of private companies to dismiss Bahai employees, and denying applications for new or renewed business and trade licenses”. (USDOS, 28 July 2014, section 2)

The same report goes on to note several cases of imprisonment of members of the Bahai Institute for Higher Education in the years 2012 and 2013 (USDOS, 28 July 2014, section 2). The February 2015 Amnesty International (AI) Report 2014/15 states that dozens of students and academics, “including some associated with the Baha’i Institute for Higher Education suppressed by the government in 2011, remained in prison” (AI, 25 February 2015).

The same report notes that while over 200 Baha'is have been executed since 1979, no executions of Baha'is were reported during 2013. The report also states that authorities "frequently prevented Bahais from leaving the country, harassed and persecuted them, and generally disregarded their property rights". (USDOS, 28 July 2014, section 2)

The Bahá'í International Community (BIC), an international NGO which represents persons of Baha'i faith, indicates in its overview of the situation of Baha'is in Iran (updated on 18 August 2015) that "[s]ince 2005, more than 710 Iranian Baha'is have been arrested". Currently, 116 Baha'is are in prison, including seven Baha'i leaders who were sentenced in 2010 to 20 years in prison on charges of "disturbing national security", "spreading propaganda against the regime" and "engaging in espionage". The BIC states that arrests and detentions generally follow a similar pattern: "Agents of the Ministry of Intelligence arrive at the homes of Baha'is, search the premises, confiscate items such as computers and books, and then make arrests". (BIC, 18 August 2015)

The International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (ICHRI), a New York-based human rights NGO on Iran, refers to an unnamed source reporting that Shahriar Siroos, a Baha'i artist and former art instructor, was arrested by agents of the Ministry of Intelligence (MOI) in June 2015 and is detained at Evin prison's section 209 (which is administered by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)) on charges that are still unclear. (ICHRI, 8 July 2015)

The March 2015 report of the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) notes that "[b]etween September and December 2014, security forces in the cities of Isfahan, Tehran, Shiraz, Hamedan, Karaj and Semnan reportedly arrested at least 24 Baha'is" (HRC, 12 March 2015, p. 14).

The BIC lists the following recent raids, arrests and detentions of members of the Baha'i community:

"Since 2005, more than 710 Iranian Baha'is have been arrested. Most of the arrests and detentions follow a similar pattern: Agents of the Ministry of Intelligence arrive at the homes of Baha'is, search the premises, confiscate items such as computers and books, and then make arrests.

In April 2015, for example, 13 Baha'is were arrested in Hamadan. The arrests came over a period of two weeks, as intelligence agents raided and searched a number of Baha'i homes there. Owners/occupants were arrested on charges such as 'engaging in propaganda against the regime.' Most were released within a day or so after posting large sums for bail, ranging from US\$8,000 to US\$20,000. One woman, however, was detained for nine days in solitary confinement.

On 11 August 2014, for example, five Baha'is were arrested in Tehran [...] during a raid on an optical shop. Arrested were shop owners Aladdin (Niki) Khanjani and Babak Mobasher, along with three employees, Naser Arshi-Moghaddam, Ataollah Ashrafi and Rouhollah Monzavi. Mr. Khanjani is the son of Jamaloddin Khanjani, one of the seven Baha'i leaders

who are currently serving 20 year prison sentences on false charges including espionage. Agents also confiscated their computers and other electronic devices and took a large amount of goods and products from their shop. [...]

On 5 August 2014, government agents in Shiraz arrested four Baha'is. Vahid Dana, Saeid Abedi, and Bahiyyeh Moeinipour were arrested at their homes, while Adib Haqpazhuh was arrested at his workplace. To date, no information has been received about their whereabouts or status. [...]

On 27 July 2014, a Baha'i in Vilashahr was arrested and beaten after refusing to work on a secret computer program for the Revolutionary Guards. [...]

On 8 July 2014, Saghi Fadaie was summoned to the Ministry of Intelligence office in Mashhad. After a few hours she was taken to her home, where agents searched her belongings and took her into detention. [...]

On 2 June 2014, three Baha'is were arrested in Mashhad. Their names are May Kholousi, Dori Amri, and Shayan Tafazoli." (BIC, 18 August 2015)

The same source also notes that in February 2013, three Baha'is were stabbed and severely injured in their home in Birjand (South Khorasan province) by an unknown intruder. Furthermore, a "well-known member of the Baha'i community of the city of Bandar Abbas" was shot and killed in August 2013 (BIC, 18 August 2015).

The BIC also reports that in April 2014, members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) started to destroy a historic Baha'i cemetery located in Shiraz, "apparently to make way for a new sports and cultural center" (BIC, 18 August 2015).

The same source further points to the following incidents relating to Baha'i businesses activities:

"In April and May 2015, authorities closed more than 35 shops in the cities of Rafsanjan, Kerman, Sari, and Hamadan, in an effort to pressure Baha'is not to observe their religious holy days. This followed an earlier episode, in October 2014, when 79 Bahá'í-owned shops [...] in Kerman, Rafsanjan, and Jiroft, were sealed by the authorities. They owners had all closed their businesses to observe a Baha'i Holy Day, which apparently triggered the action. [...] In January 2015, most of those shops were allowed to re-open, only to have many closed again in April and May 2015." (BIC, 18 August 2015)

The Bahá'í Center Austria, the administrative centre of Austria's Baha'i community, elaborates that since Baha'is are denied access to higher education and to numerous professions, for many of their members, running a small businesses is the only way of earning a living. Such Baha'is face harassment, with their shops closed by the "Public Places Supervision Office (Amaken)" [of the Law Enforcement Forces] without prior notice. (Bahá'í Center Austria, 16 June 2015)

1.5.9 Sufis

As indicated in a December 2013 General Official Report of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs (BZ), Sufism comprises several orders including the Nematollahi Gonabadi, Naqshbandi, Qaderi and the Yazidis (BZ, December 2013, pp. 27-28).

For demographic information on Iran's Christian communities, please [refer also to section 1.1](#) ("Religious demography") of this compilation.

The January 2015 Human Rights Watch (HRW) World Report, which covers events of 2014, notes that the government continued to "target [...] members of Sufi mystical orders, particularly members of the Nematollahi Gonabadi order" (HRW, 29 January 2015).

Freedom House notes in its January 2015 Freedom in the World 2015 report that increasing pressure in recent years on the Sufi Muslim order Nematollahi order included "destruction of their places of worship and the jailing of some of their members". The report says that "at least nine Sufi dervishes" are being held in Iranian prisons. (Freedom House, 28 January 2015)

Amnesty International (AI) notes that religious minorities including Gonabadi dervishes face "discrimination, harassment, arbitrary detention and attacks on their prayer houses". AI notes that while Ali Younesi, special advisor to the president on ethnic and religious minority affairs, "stated in February 2014 that 'Muslim sects like dervishes' must not experience arbitrary restrictions and abuses in practicing their faith and must receive protection from the police", the targeting of dervishes, "which increased after a speech by the Supreme Leader in the religious city of Qom in October 2010 denouncing 'newly created circles of false mysticism'", has "continued unabated". (AI, 25 September 2014)

The USDOS indicates in its July 2014 International Religious Freedom Report, which covers events of 2013:

"The government repressed Sufi communities and their religious practices. Intelligence and security services continued their harassment and intimidation of prominent Sufi leaders. Government restrictions on Sufi groups and husseiniya (houses of worship) have become more pronounced in recent years. Authorities razed at least one Sufi home during the year [2013], and there were reports of government officials driving Sufi families off their land and then transferring the property titles to cronies, according to human rights activists." (USDOS, 28 July 2014, section 2)

The same report also points to "reports of Shia clerics and prayer leaders denouncing Sufism and the activities of Sufis in the country in both sermons and public statements." (USDOS, 28 July 2014, section 3)

As indicated by Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF), a number of "journalists and netizens working for [the Sufi news website] Majzooban Noor were arrested during a government offensive against Sufis on 8-10 September 2011 and were sentenced on 13 July 2013 [...] to

jail terms ranging from six month to eight years”. They have since been “held in Tehran’s Evin prison or in Nezam prison in Shiraz”. (RSF, 12 September 2014)

The UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran notes in his March 2015 report to the UN Human Rights Council (HRC):

“On September 2011, the Ministry of Intelligence arrested seven members of the Gonabadi Dervish community (Sufi Muslims) in the cities of Shiraz and Tehran. On 13 July 2013, the Revolutionary Court sentenced them to prison terms ranging from seven to ten years. On 31 August 2014, they embarked on a hunger strike to protest that their due process rights had been infringed upon. The police interrupted the demonstrations subsequently organized by their families in front of the Office of the Prosecutor in Tehran and arrested multiple people. In late February [2015], reports surfaced that some of these individuals’ sentences may have been reduced or converted to time on probation.” (HRC, 12 March 2015, pp. 42-43)

As noted in an August 2014 note of the UN Secretary-General to the UN General Assembly, “security forces arrested 326 members of the Gonabadi Sufi order who gathered outside a courtroom in Tehran in March 2014”. The Sufis were “reportedly protesting against the inadequate medical attention offered to three imprisoned members of the community, Mostafa Daneshjoo, Hamidreza Moradi and Farshid Karampour, and the punitive transfer of two other Sufis from Evin prison to Rajaei Shahr prison”. (UN General Assembly, 27 August 2014, p. 13; for details see also ICHRI, 11 March 2014)

The UN report further notes that “[p]eaceful protests in support of imprisoned members of the Gonabadi community were apparently attacked by the police in May 2014”. (UN General Assembly, 27 August 2014, p. 13)

In September 2014, Amnesty International (AI) reported that more than 800 Gonabadi Dervishes were arrested and at least 60 were injured by riot police at a peaceful protest in Tehran held in solidarity with nine imprisoned Gonabadi dervishes who were on hunger strike. Most of those detained were “released after spending up to 48 hours in the basements of various police stations”. (AI, 25 September 2014)

The March 2015 report of the UN special rapporteur further notes that “[o]n 25 February [2015], plainclothes forces, without a warrant, apparently arrested Mr. Saleh Moradi, a Gonabadi Dervish, possibly to serve a prior sentence” (HRC, 12 March 2015, p. 43).

As reported by Radio Zamaneh, an Amsterdam-based independent Persian-language broadcaster, with reference to the Gonabadi dervish news website Majzooban-e Noor, Gonabadi dervish Mostafa Daneshjoo was released after four years in prison. The same report states that “[f]ive more dervishes remain behind bars in Evin and Shiraz prisons, while another seven are serving exile sentences in Hormozgan and Sistan-Baluchistan provinces.” (Radio Zamaneh, 20 May 2015)

The August 2014 report of the UN General Assembly refers to reports of continuing “[i]ncitement against Gonabadi Dervishes, indicating that “[i]n June 2014, religious leaders allegedly described members of the Dervish community as infidels and Wahhabists.” (UN General Assembly, 27 August 2014, p. 13)

For further details on the situation of Gonabadi dervishes up to September 2014, please refer to the following query response of the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB):

- IRB - Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada: Iran: Information about the Gonabadi dervishes, including their origin, history in Iran, leaders, ideology, practice; and the treatment of dervishes and their family members by society and authorities in Iran, including whether dervishes can practice their faith in Iran (1965-2014) [IRN104957.E], 23 September 2014 (available at [ecoi.net](https://www.ecoi.net/local_link/299635/422214_en.html))
https://www.ecoi.net/local_link/299635/422214_en.html

1.5.10 Yezidis

Some of the sources consulted by ACCORD indicate that they are not aware of the existence of Yezidi communities in Iran:

A senior research fellow in Iranian studies at a university in Germany noted in his August 2015 email response that essentially, Yezidis cannot be found in Iran and that they mainly inhabit the Kurdish areas of Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Armenia (Senior research fellow, 28 August 2015).

Khanna Omarkhali, senior research fellow at the Department of Iranian Studies at the University of Göttingen, stated in an August 2015 email response that there is no official information about the situation of Yezidis in Iran today. It is not even known exactly whether there are still Yezidis in the country. There are some unofficial reports that there are 13 Yezidi villages in Iran and some of the followers of this religion have been assimilated among the Ahl-e Haqq group, who are called Yarisan there. All there is available are sporadic references to their existence in travel reports. But given the political attitudes towards minorities and especially towards Yezidis, who are identified there as followers of Yazid ibn Muawiyah and therefore are subject to strongly negative attitudes, it is plausible to assume that they were forced to practice their religion secretly and thus remained “under veil”. (Omarkhali, 31 August 2015)

In an August 2015 e-mail response, a professor at a university in Canada who is specialized in Iranian religions, stated that he is not aware of the existence of any Yezidi communities living on Iranian territory. While there do exist some related communities such as the Ahl-e Haqq in Kermanshah province who share some common pre-Islamic roots, they are not identical with the Yezidis. (Professor at a university in Canada, 26 August 2015).

An undated brief overview of Yazidism published by the Central Council of Yazidis in Germany (Zentralrat der Yeziden in Deutschland) based in the German city of Oldenburg however mentions that the areas of Yezidi settlement are located within those of the Kurds in Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran (Zentralrat der Yeziden in Deutschland, undated).

Petra Uphoff, a German scholar in Islamic studies, stated in her 2012 doctoral dissertation submitted at the University of Cologne that there is little information on the level of recognition and living conditions of members of the Yazidi community in Iran. Most of the time, they seek to remain invisible as Yazidis, which is easier to do in the Kurdish areas with its wide mix of minority groups. In theory, one could expect that Yazidis enjoy a fair amount of tolerance due to their discreet lifestyle and the fact that they do not engage in proselytizing. However, they are neither mentioned in the Constitution nor are they granted any representation in parliament. (Uphoff, 2012, p. 362).

Martin van Bruinessen, a social anthropologist and emeritus professor at Utrecht University (Netherlands) specialised in Kurdish studies, stated in an email response of August 2015:

“There are occasional references to Yezidis in Iran, allegedly living in Kermanshah province. I have never been able to find these communities and long believed that these references were based on misunderstanding, as travellers heard about ‘devi-worshippers’ (as locals sometimes name the Guran Ahl-e Haqq) and inferred that these must be Yezidis.

However, I have more recently heard that there are in fact a few small groups of Yezidis who took refuge in Iran when they were persecuted in the Ottoman Empire; they allegedly settled in different parts of Kurdistan, in Kermanshah and West Azerbaijan provinces. Fearing more persecution, they have always kept their religious background hidden from outsiders, while keeping to their traditions in their own circles.

These communities must, however, be very small and inconspicuous, and not subject to specific policies.” (van Bruinessen, 28 August 2015)

Ezidi Press, a German-based news portal representing Yezidi interests, reported in a January 2015 article that it can be life-threatening to reveal one’s identity as being Zoroastrian, Baha’i or Yezidi in Iran, which is why there are no Yezidis in Iran, or very few Yezidis living in secret (Ezidi press, 10 January 2015).

Among the sources consulted by ACCORD, no further information could be found on Yezidis in Iran.

1.5.11 Ahl-e Haqq (Yaresan)

A 2009 article in the academic *Encyclopaedia of Islam* authored by Martin van Bruinessen provides the following background information on the Ahl-e Haqq:

“The Ahl-i Haqq (lit., ‘people of truth’) is a syncretistic religion or, according to some adherents, an esoteric Shī‘ī community, that appears to have emerged first among the Gūrān of southern Kurdistan in the fifteenth or sixteenth century C.E. and that survives in various parts of Iran and Iraq, among Gūrān, Lurs, Kurds, Azerbaijanis, and Iranians. A preferred self-designation of the community, especially in the Kirmānshāh region, is ‘Yārisān.’” (van Bruinessen, 2009, p. 51)

A July 2011 entry on Ahl-e Haqq in the *Encyclopædia Iranica*, an academic reference work run by Columbia University (USA), informs about the areas of settlement of the Ahl-e Haqq in Iran:

“The heartlands of the Ah-e Haqq are Lorestān and, to the north of it, the regions of the Gūrānī-speaking population around Kermānšāh. The two main sanctuaries of the sect, the tomb of Bābā Yādgār in Dohāb and that of Solṭān Şohāk in Perdīvar, are located in Gūrānī territory. [...] Toward the north, they are dispersed in Iranian Azerbaijan around Lake Ormīa and as far as Mākū. Farther east, they are found in the mountains north of Tehran and on the southern shore of the Caspian Sea. There are also communities of Ahl-e Haqq in most major cities in Iran.” (*Encyclopædia Iranica*, 28 July 2011)

In an older academic journal article published in 1994, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, a legal anthropologist and currently a professorial research associate at the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), stated that two main clusters of Ahl-e Haqq exist in Iranian Kurdistan, notably in the province of Kermanshah where the “largest concentration of the Ahl-i Haqq of Iran is [to] be found”:

“The Ahl-i Haqq of Kermanshah, numbering up to half a million, are grouped in two main clusters, at the western and eastern extremes of the province. The larger Ahl-i Haqq cluster is in the west, scattered in the mountainous territory of the Guran, on the border with Iraq; most of the Ahl-i Haqq sacred places are also located here. [...] The second Ahl-i Haqq cluster is found in the eastern part of the province, in the town of Sahneh and its surrounding villages.” (Mir-Hosseini, 1994, pp. 216-217)

Amir Sharifi, lecturer in linguistics at California State University in Long Beach and president of the Kurdish American Education Society (KAES) in Los Angeles, stated in a June 2013 article published by Rudaw, a Kurdish media network headquartered in Iraqi Kurdistan:

“Numbering over one million, the Yarsans are not recognized as a religious minority and they are labeled as Fergh e Zaleh, a ‘false cult’. Yarsan or Ahl-e Haq, literally means ‘People of Truth’. It is an ancient religion practiced mostly among Kurds in urban and rural areas in and around Kermanshah region in western Iran. The faith has also followers in neighboring Iraq and Turkey. While People of the Book, Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians are at least on paper recognized in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic, Yarsan does not constitute a legal entity.” (Rudaw, 30 June 2013)

Petra Uphoff notes in her 2012 doctoral dissertation that Ahl-e Haqq believers are found especially among Kurds, but to some extent also among Azeris. They are believed to be worshippers of Ali, the first imam. In Iran, they are concentrated in Lorestan and Kermanshah provinces. There are no reliable data regarding the size of the Ahl-e Haqq population in Iran. Ahl-e Haqq representatives indicate that there are between two and three million members in the country (Uphoff, 2012, p. 340).

The July 2011 *Encyclopædia Iranica* entry notes that the Ahl-e Haqq are “[s]plit up into numerous ethnic, tribal and religious groups” and thus “lack a unified, central organization, just as they lack a canonical scripture” (*Encyclopædia Iranica*, 28 July 2011).

In a May 2014 email response, Martin van Bruinessen stated that “[t]here are various Ahl-i Haqq communities in Iran, which have different relations to the official religious establishment”. Bruinessen notes that most of these groups are “considered as esoteric movements within Shi’i Islam” and that “[o]nly one Ahl-e Haqq sub-community is perceived as outside Islam”. (van Bruinessen, 14 May 2014)

Van Bruinessen further wrote in an August 2015 email response that of the different varieties of the Ahl-e Haqq religion, the Guran Ahl-e Haqq, who inhabit the region west of Kermanshah, are considered to be furthest removed from orthodox Shia Islam. They have consequently faced greater discrimination than other Ahl-e Haqq communities. Bruinessen notes that during the past two years, several sources known to him hinted that the situation has been deteriorating and that the Guran Ahl-e Haqq have been suffering some harassment, although he is not aware of details regarding these claims. (van Bruinessen, 21 August 2015)

Khanna Omarkhali, senior research fellow at the Department of Iranian Studies at the University of Göttingen stated in her August 2015 email response that the situation of the Ahl-e Haqq followers is not good and that they are known to be subject to frequent persecution (Omarkhali, 31 August 2015).

An expert academician in Middle East Studies stated in a September 2015 email response that there have been sporadic cases of mistreatment of members of the Ahl-e Haqq community and that they have been treated as second hand citizens for decades, perhaps even centuries, for the most part by Iranian society. Furthermore, occasional mistreatment of fellow citizens by state authority figures might happen in any country; some authority figures might misuse their power and mistreat individuals based on personal biases. While Iran’s laws do not contain any provisions specifically directed against Ahl-e Haqq members, it is nevertheless also a reality that the Ahl-e Haqq lack official status as a minority group. At the same time, the Ahl-e Haqq people are active in preserving their cultural heritage and in seeking full civil rights as citizens. (Expert academician in Middle East Studies, 15 September 2015)

As indicated by Richard Foltz in his 2013 book *Religions of Iran: From prehistory to the Present*, the Ahl-e Haqq (referred to as Yaresan) are seen as a heterodox sect within Shi’ite Islam, even though its members do not observe Islamic rituals”. They speak mainly southern Kurdish (Gurani) and in Iran, they are “centered in the regions of Luristan and Kermanshah”. As indicated by Foltz, “[t]heir total population is unknown but is estimated at anywhere from one to seven million”. While the Ahl-e Haqq traditionally “did not accept converts or intermarriage”, in more recent times “the Elahi branch of the Ahl-e Haqq has begun to welcome initiates willing to ‘entrust [their] head’ (*sar sepordan*) to a Yaresan master (*seyyed*).” (Foltz, 2013, p. 223)

A professor at a university in Canada who is specialized in Iranian religions states in his August 2015 email response that while the Ahl-e Haqq are not technically Muslims, it is in a way an open secret with the Iranian government treating them as if they are and dealing with them through their recognized spiritual leader. As noted by the professor, there have been a few

incidents but by and large the policy towards the Ahl-e Haqq is live-and-let live. (Professor at a university in Canada, 26 August 2015)

As noted by the same professor in another email response later in August 2015, it is in fact difficult to give definitive answers on the situation of Ahl-e Haqq, as everything in Persian culture is subject to constant negotiation and re-negotiation, and nothing is ever set in stone. However, it is probably safe to say that anyone who is not a 12er Shi'ite Muslim can potentially have their religious status used against them. But usually, there is some other agenda at work, which is then used as justification. As for the Ahl-e Haqq specifically, "officially" they are classified as 12er Shi'ite Muslims, but it is well-known that this is a fiction and that they are in fact not Muslims at all. There is a sort of understanding between their spiritual guide and the Iranian government that they will not cause trouble and that in return the government will leave them alone. This understanding is occasionally violated on both sides with sometimes violent and tragic results. However, this does not occur very often. (Professor at a university in Canada, 28 August 2015)

A March 2015 BBC Persian article reports that followers of Ahl-e Haqq are calling for a revision of the constitution, which currently only recognizes Jews, Zoroastrians and Christians as religious minorities. As the article notes, the grievances expressed by Ahl-e Haqq include restricted access to public sector jobs and the occupation of their assembly halls by the authorities and "missionary groups" that seek to persuade Ahl-e Haqq members to convert to Islam. Ahl-e Haqq members further face obstacles in accessing higher education (or may even be barred from it) and are forced to cut their beards, which for them are religious symbols and a form of ritual expression. In recent years, protests of members of Ahl-e Haqq even included self-immolation. (BBC Persian, 20 March)

As Sharifi noted in his June 2013 article published by the Kurdish media network Rudaw, "[d]iscrimination against the Yarsans has taken various forms including banning the faith, religious assembly, places of worship, religious monuments, symbols and rituals, religious speech, political and religious representation, publications, the right to education and communication in Kurdish, Yarsan dress code, [and] employment". The author specifies that "Yarsan religious and community leaders have been repeatedly summoned, interrogated, and often threatened or detained incommunicado by the [i]ntelligence [a]gencies of the Islamic Republic." (Rudaw, 30 June 2013)

The UN Secretary-General indicates in his August 2014 report to the UN General Assembly that "[a]s at June 2014, at least 300 minority religious practitioners were reportedly imprisoned", including three "active members" of the Ahl-e Haqq (Yarsan) faith (UN General Assembly, 27 August 2014, p. 12). The same report also notes that members of the Ahl-e Haqq faith have also "reported being expelled after university officials learned of their faith" (UN General Assembly, 27 August 2014).

Amnesty International (AI) notes in its February 2015 Report 2014/15, which covers the year 2014 and key events of 2013, that there continues to be "pervasive discrimination" against religious minorities including Ahl-e Haqq (AI, 25 February 2015).

As noted by the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran in his October 2013 report to the UN General Assembly, there are continuing allegations that, “in addition to being subjected to limitations on their rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association”, members of religious minorities, including members of Ahl-e Haqq (referred to as Yarsan), are “increasingly subjected to various forms of legal discrimination, including in employment and education, and often face arbitrary detention, torture and ill-treatment” (UN General Assembly, 4 October 2013, p. 11).

A June 2013 Rudaw article reported with reference to the BBC’s Persian service:

“Members of the Yarsan faith in Iran and across the border in Iraqi Kurdistan have staged angry protests and acts of self-immolation, after Iranian prison guards violated a religious prohibition by shaving off the moustache of a Kurdish Yarsan inmate last week. The BBC’s Persian service reported that, after prison authorities shaved off Kayomarth Nakat’s moustache, two fellow Yarsans had set themselves on fire in protest outside the mayor’s office in the Iranian city of Hamadan. One of them, Nimkard Tahiri, later died in hospital of severe burns.” (Rudaw, 20 June 2013)

The Human Rights & Democracy in Iran project of the Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation, a Washington D.C.-based NGO that seeks to promote human rights and democracy in Iran, documents the execution of Ahl-e Haqq prisoner Mehdi Qasemzadeh in February 2009 in connection with his involvement in armed clashes that occurred in protest of restrictions on Ahl-e Haqq religious rights in autumn 2004, quoting a number of sources (Human Rights & Democracy in Iran, undated).

In June 2012, Iran Human Rights (IHR), an Oslo-based human rights organization with a focus on documenting death penalty cases in Iran, noted that some media outlets had reported about the execution of Yunes Aghayan, an ethnic Azeri and Ahl-e Haq follower. However, a source close to his family denied the news of his execution. IHR provides the following background to the case:

“In January 2005, Yunes Aghayan and Mehdi Qasemzadeh were sentenced to death by branch 2 of the Mahabad Revolutionary Court. They were charged with ‘Moharebeh’ (waging war against God). The Supreme Court upheld their death sentences in April 2005. Mehdi Qasemzadeh was executed in February 2009.” (IHR, 22 June 2012)

In September 2013, the Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA) reported that three Ahl-e Haqq (Yarsan) followers were sentenced to five years in prison each and the payment of blood money on a charge of collaboration in murder. As noted by HRANA, these sentences were handed down separately from their previous verdict of 13 years’ imprisonment in exile. (HRANA, 30 September 2013)

1.5.12 Atheists

Among the sources consulted by ACCORD, little information could be found on the treatment of atheists.

Amnesty International (AI) mentions in its February 2015 Report 2014/15, which covers the year 2014 and key events of 2013, that atheists “remained at risk of persecution, including arrest, imprisonment and possible execution” (AI, 25 February 2015).

As indicated in the July 2014 report of the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC) on apostasy, “jurists generally concur” that “atheism establishes apostasy” even though “they have different views regarding what specific acts are tantamount to apostasy (IHRDC, 30 July 2014, p. 39).

The June 2014 Danish Immigration Service (DIS) fact-finding-mission report states with reference to Mansour Borji, advocacy officer of the Article 18 initiative of the United Council of Iranian Churches, that there is a growing number of atheists in Iran and that this is becoming “more accepted among some Iranians” (DIS, 23 June 2014, p. 13).

A senior research fellow in Iranian studies at a university in Germany stated in his August 2015 email response that atheists usually do not express their views in public and are thus able to lead normal lives in Iran without facing any further restrictions. Whereas atheists obviously cannot discuss their opinions in public, they often use the internet to present their views anonymously. They have a number of active internet pages and blogs including a Facebook page with more than 187,000 followers. (Senior research fellow, 27 August 2015)

An October 2012 article of the German weekly newspaper Die Zeit mentions that atheism is not recognized in Iran and that under Iran’s Sharia law, any Muslim who abandons his faith may face the death penalty for apostasy. While few death sentences for apostasy were carried out in the last ten years, atheists are forced to hide their true beliefs for fear of other consequences such as losing their social benefits or being barred from university entrance. (Die Zeit, 23 October 2012)

A June 2014 Amnesty International (AI) report mentions that university students “face penalties if they are judged to support groups that the authorities consider atheist or mohareb”. Such students are “often likely to be arrested and detained by state security authorities but also face punishment by their university or other institution’s Disciplinary Committee, which may impose a variety of sanctions”. (AI, 2 June 2014, p. 19)

1.6 Treatment of persons in mixed religious marriages

Richard Foltz explains the implications of mixed religious marriages between Zoroastrian and non-Zoroastrian spouses in his 2013 book *Religions of Iran*:

“While in the West it is not unheard of for non-Zoroastrian spouses to join the faith or at least allow their children to have a Zoroastrian upbringing, in Iran (where the non-Zoroastrian spouse is almost sure to be a Muslim) Islamic law ensures that this will not be the case. Thus, at least officially, a Zoroastrian who marries a Muslim is permanently lost to the community, along with his or her eventual children, whether they like it or not. And although some mixed couples do make the choice to maintain a Zoroastrian religious

culture within the home, it is not generally possible for them to make this choice public, and the Zoroastrian community cannot formally accept them as members. Within Iran's Zoroastrian community today, the attitude towards out-marriage appears to be mostly one of reluctant resignation. It is viewed with disfavor, but accepted as unavoidable. Families would prefer to see their children marry within the community, but have little power to stop those who choose otherwise." (Foltz, 2013, p. 260)

Among the sources consulted by ACCORD, no further information could be found on the treatment of persons living in mixed religious marriages.

2 Treatment of minority ethnic groups

The World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples, updated by the Minority Rights Group (MRG), a UK-based NGO working for the rights of ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities, in July 2014, includes the following information on Iran's ethnic and linguistic demography:

"Out of a population of approximately 76 million people, Persians comprise the largest ethnic group in Iran at approximately 61 per cent. Other ethnic minority groups include Azeris (16 per cent), Kurds (10 per cent), Lur (6 per cent), Baluchi and Arabs (both two per cent), Turkmen and other Turkic tribes (two per cent), and other nomadic peoples comprising about one per cent of the total population. Other minorities include Armenians and Assyrians, as well as an Afro-Iranian minority. The most commonly used languages in Iran are: Persian (official), Persian dialects, Azeri and other Turkic dialects, Kurdish, Gilaki and Mazandarani, Luri, Baluchi, Arabic, and other non-Turkic languages." (MRG, July 2014)

2.1 Kurds

For information specifically regarding the situation of Kurdish opposition groups, please refer to our COI compilation "Iran: Political Opposition Groups, Security Forces, Selected Human Rights Issues, Rule of Law" of July 2015, sections 4.4 through 4.8. (ACCORD, July 2015).

Sources indicate that the size of Iran's Kurdish population is about eight million (DaBell, 3 September 2013b; FT, 3 December 2014). The Kurds are "spread over the provinces of West Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, Kermanshah and Ilam" (FT, 3 December 2014).

The US Congressional Research Service (CRS), a policy research and analysis think tank of the US Congress, states in a report of May 2015:

"There are about 5 million-11 million Kurds in Iran. The Kurdish language is not banned, but schools do not teach it and Kurdish political organizations, activists, and media outlets are routinely scrutinized, harassed, and closed down for supporting greater Kurdish autonomy." (CRS, 28 May 2015, p. 16)

As noted in a December 2014 article of the Financial Times (FT), the Islamic Revolution of 1979 was followed by "[m]ore than a decade of fighting between Kurdish separatists and central government forces". After this failed fight for independence, the Kurdish community has been "treated as a security risk by the government". The article states that many Kurds who are also Sunni Muslims "feel doubly discriminated against under the Shia regime", although "[m]ost Kurds acknowledge that belonging to the Islamic Republic brings some benefits, not least being shielded from the jihadis of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant". The same article continues:

"[T]he desire of many to be recognised as a nation with its own language, history and culture, rather than simply as an ethnicity, remains strong. Among their demands are the right to hold senior positions in the government, for the Kurdish language to be taught in schools and for action to promote economic development in Kurdish provinces.

Activists are engaged in a non-violent campaign to promote their message, standing in elections, publishing books and using social media and Kurdish television. They have also undertaken civil disobedience – for example, many closed their shops in a one-day protest three years ago when five Kurds were hanged on charges of acting against national security.

However, Tehran is unlikely to accept any form of Kurdish self-rule in a country where half the population is composed of non-Persian minorities, including Azeris, Arabs and Baluchis as well as Kurds, for fear of encouraging other breakaway movements.

‘Federalism is a real demand of Kurds, but we know that the chance under the Islamic Republic is next to zero,’ says one activist, who asked not to be named. ‘We may have to wait at least a decade to achieve only some of our demands for equal rights.’

Iranian analysts say the Islamic regime fears the revival of Kurdish separatism but is divided on how to address the threat.

The centrist government of president Hassan Rouhani appears to favour bolstering the region’s economy and increasing freedoms, and it recently embarked on negotiations with Iranian Kurdish opposition leaders based outside the country.

However, the hardline Revolutionary Guards, the elite force responsible for defending the Islamic revolution – insists on maintaining a tough security-led policy, justifying it, according to analysts, by citing violence by Pejak, a marginal Iranian Kurdish group allied to Turkey’s PKK and operating in the northwestern mountains. [...]

Despite the frustration, many Kurds see grounds for optimism. ‘The level of repression under Rouhani is probably a quarter of what we faced in the previous years,’ says Ejlal Ghavami, a human rights activist who has been publicising the plight of about 250 Kurdish prisoners.

To the surprise of activists such as Mr Ghavami, the government in October permitted Kurds to hold a peaceful rally in Sanandaj – the first since 1979 – in solidarity with Syrian Kurds in the besieged town of Kobani. An estimated 10,000 people participated.

Mr Rouhani’s government has also eased curbs on cultural activities, sparking a rise in the number of events, according to Omid Varzandeh, head of the Kurdish Studies Centre at Azad University, which was established three months ago and is the first such department in Iran.” (FT, 3 December 2014)

The Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), a US think tank on foreign policy and international affairs, notes in a July 2015 overview that “Iran’s Kurds have received less international attention than their Iraqi, Syrian, and Turkish brethren”, a fact that is attributed by experts “partly to internal disunity, but mostly to the Iranian regime’s political repression and limits on international media coverage”. The CFR indicates that “[i]n 2011, the government carried out a massive military campaign against the Kurdish guerrilla group Party for a Free Life in

Kurdistan (PJAK), which left hundreds dead” and that “Iran has routinely executed Kurdish activists”. (CFR, 29 July 2015)

Amnesty International (AI) notes in its February 2015 Report 2014/15, which covers the year 2014 and key events of 2013, that there continues to be “pervasive discrimination” against ethnic minorities including Kurds (AI, 25 February 2015).

A July 2015 joint public statement by Amnesty International and a number of other human rights organisations states that there is continuing “[w]idespread discrimination against children from ethnic minorities”, including the Kurdish minority, “in everyday life, including in access to education” (AI, 20 July 2015).

The US Department of State (USDOS) writes in its June 2015 country report on human rights practices, which covers events of 2014:

“The government continued to use security law, media law, and other legislation to arrest and prosecute Kurds for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and association. The government reportedly banned Kurdish-language newspapers, journals, and books and punished publishers, journalists, and writers for opposing and criticizing government policies. Although speaking the Kurdish language was not prohibited, schools were prohibited from teaching it. Authorities suppressed legitimate activities of Kurdish NGOs by denying them registration permits or bringing security charges against persons working with such organizations. Kurds were not allowed to register most Kurdish names for their children in official registries. The Gozinesh law impaired the ability of Sunni Kurds to integrate into civic life.” (USDOS, 25 June 2015, section 6)

The “gozinesh” criterion is referred to in the August 2014 report of the UN Secretary-General, as “a selection procedure requiring prospective State officials and employees to demonstrate allegiance to the Islamic Republic of Iran and the State religion” (UN General Assembly, 27 August 2014, p. 19).

In an article published on Al-Monitor, a Washington, D.C.-based media site, in May 2015, the Istanbul-based journalist and writer Amberin Zaman provided the following overview of the government’s policies towards Kurds:

“Under the Iranian Constitution, non-Persians are notionally allowed to be educated in their own languages in state schools. But the laws have never been put into practice.

Under Mohammad Khatami, a Reformist cleric who served as Iran’s president from 1997 to 2005, some restrictions were relaxed. Private schooling in Kurdish was permitted. Some 30 ethnic Kurds were elected to the Majles, or national parliament. Current President Hassan Rouhani is said to favor further reforms and in October the Kurds were allowed to hold their first peaceful rally since 1979 in solidarity with the Syrian Kurds.

The Kurdish language was never criminalized in Iran as it was for decades in neighboring Turkey. This is probably because the national language, Farsi, and the Sorani and Pehlewan Kurdish dialects spoken in Iran share the same roots. But unlike Turkey, where

a pro-Kurdish party is running for the June 7 [2015] parliamentary elections, all Kurdish parties remain banned. Secret talks held outside Iran between regime and Kurdish officials remain sporadic and have yet to bear fruit.” (Al-Monitor, 11 May 2015)

A number of sources report that clashes between protesters and security forces broke out in the Kurdish majority city of Mahabad (West Azerbaijan province) in early May 2015, after the death of a woman who, according to sources, fell or deliberately jumped from a hotel balcony after a member of the Iranian intelligence services reportedly attempted to rape her (Asharq al-Awsat, 11 May 2015; Al Jazeera, 8 May 2015; CRS, 28 May 2015, p. 16; Rudaw, 7 May 2015).

Rudaw reports that the deputy governor of Western Azerbaijan province said that 25 people were injured during the riots but denied that any protesters were detained. Meanwhile, the article quotes the country’s deputy police chief as saying that “individuals who are believed to have masterminded the riot” were arrested after the riots. The official however did not provide any details about the number or whereabouts of the detainees. According to Kurdish activists, “at least 50 demonstrators were wounded and more than 70 others were arrested by police forces” (Rudaw, 20 May 2015).

As noted by Stephen Schwartz, director of the Center for Islamic Pluralism, a non-profit organization based in Washington, D.C., in a May 2015 Huffington Post article, “[l]ocal activists claimed between 25 and 50 protestors, and seven police, were injured in the confrontation, and that police attacked the angry crowds with tear gas and firearms”. A suspect in the death of the woman, was reportedly arrested. As solidarity protests spread to the nearby city of Sardasht, demonstrators were “attacked by police, which fired on the people, and at least 30 Kurdish militants were rounded up and jailed”. (Huffington Post, 22 May 2015)

As reported by Asharq al-Awsat, an Arabic international newspaper headquartered in London, with reference to the secretary-general of the Kurdistan Freedom Party (KFP), an Iraq-based Kurdish-Iranian opposition party, the protests subsequently spread from Mahabad to other cities with large Kurdish populations. (Dukan, Shanu, Marivan, Sardasht and Sahneh). According to the source, three protesters were killed and dozens more were injured in the clashes, with more than 200 persons were arrested by security forces. (Asharq al-Awsat, 11 May 2015)

Following the protests, the Jerusalem Post (JPost) newspaper quotes the head of the Kurdistan Independent Party (Parti Serbesti Kurdistan, PSK) as saying that “Iranian security agents are all over Kurdish areas” (JPost, 8 May 2015).

The May 2015 report of the US Congressional Research Service (CRS) states that “[s]everal Kurdish oppositionists have been executed since 2010” (CRS, 28 May 2015, p. 16).

In January 2015, the Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA) reported that three prisoners, including a Kurdish opposition activist who had also been sentenced to a five-year prison term, were executed at Urmia Prison (HRANA, 10 January 2015).

As reported by BasNews, a news agency based in Erbil (Iraqi Kurdistan), in December 2014, authorities executed 18 Kurdish prisoners from several prisons across the country. According to the Ministry of Justice, they had been sentenced on charges of drug dealing. BasNews notes that authorities often accuse political activists of drug-related offences. (BasNews, 4 December 2014)

Several sources report that in March 2015, six Sunni Kurdish prisoners were executed at Raja'i Shahr prison in Karaj (IHR, 4 March 2015; RFE/RL, 4 March 2015; Al-Monitor, 11 May 2015). The men were convicted on charges of "moharebeh" ("enmity against God") and "corruption on earth" for their alleged involvement in the assassination of a senior Sunni cleric with ties to the authorities, a charge that they denied, indicating that they were already arrested and detained several months prior to the assassination (IHR, 4 March 2015).

Several further executions of ethnic Kurds on political charges have been reported in recent months (IHR, 15 June 2015; Kurd PA, 15 August 2015; AI, 26 August 2015).

The news website Kurdistan Daily News states with reference to a report by ANF, a Kurdish news agency, that Ali Bedirxanî, a Kurdish writer, has been arrested and sent to Urmiya prison "on the grounds of posing a threat to the national security of Iran" (Kurdish Daily News, 20 January 2015).

The June 2015 USDOS report points to the following prison sentences handed out to ethnic Kurds in 2014 and 2013:

"According to HRANA, on November 21 [2014], a revolutionary court sentenced three Kurds--Kianoosh Rostami, Mohsen Khodaband Loo, and Nemat Fathi--to a combined total of 44 years in prison on charges of being members of the Democrat Party, insulting the supreme leader, and declaring war against the supreme leader.

According to online activists, Ghasem Ahmadi, a journalist and editor of the previously banned Tehran University publication Rozhaf, started his two-year sentence in Mahabad Prison in January. In August 2013 HRANA reported that Branch 1 of the Mahabad Revolutionary Court sentenced Ahmadi to four years in prison on unspecified charges." (USDOS, 25 June 2015, section 6)

Human Rights Watch (HRW) states in an August 2014 report on political prisoners held in prisons in the city of Karaj (Alborz province):

"During the course of its investigation into political prisoners in Karaj Human Rights Watch compiled information regarding several dozen Sunnis (mostly ethnic Kurds and Baluch) who are being detained in Ward 4, Room 10 of Rajai Shahr Prison and Ghezel Hesar Prison). The judiciary has convicted many of these individuals of violence or

involvement in terrorism-related activities and they are serving heavy prison sentences. Revolutionary courts have sentenced some of these prisoners to death. The charges against some of these individuals, the nature of their activities, and serious concerns regarding violation of their due process rights suggests that some may, in fact, qualify as peaceful religious rights activists, but because Human Rights Watch could not gather enough information regarding their cases it could not make a conclusive determination in this regard.” (HRW, 18 August 2014)

2.2 Arabs

As indicated in a May 2015 report of the Congressional Research Service (CRS), the country’s 2 to 4 million ethnic Arabs “are prominent in southwestern Iran, particularly Khuzestan Province” (CRS, 28 May 2015, p. 16). Bijan DaBell, an M.A. graduate in social sciences from the University of Chicago, who is currently working at the Baha’i Chair for World Peace, an academic programme offered by the University of Maryland, states that most Iranian Arabs are Shiite Muslims, with a minority of Sunnis (DaBell, 3 September 2013b) The CRS report notes that they face “systematic oppression and discrimination, including torture and a prohibition on speaking or studying Arabic”. (CRS, 28 May 2015, p. 16)

Amnesty International (AI) and Human Rights Watch (HRW) state in a joint press release of April 2015 that Khuzestan province “has a large Arab population, estimated at between 2.5 and 5 million”. The press release outlines their situation in socioeconomic and cultural and political terms as follows:

“Khuzestan province, where much of Iran’s oil and gas reserves are located, has a large Arab population, estimated at between 2.5 and 5 million. Despite Khuzestan’s natural resource wealth, the province is plagued with severe socioeconomic deprivation and high levels of air and water pollution. Concentrated in poor urban outskirts lacking in basic facilities, many Iranian Arabs have alleged that the government systematically discriminates against them, particularly in employment, housing, access to political office, and the exercise of cultural, civil and political rights. The inability to use their mother language as a medium of instruction for primary education is also a source of deep resentment and frustration.” (AI/HRW, 28 April 2015)

Chris Zambelis, a senior analyst specializing in Middle East affairs who works for Helios Global, Inc., a risk management group based in the Washington D.C. area, writes in an article published by the Jamestown Foundation (JF) in August 2015:

“Many Ahwazis believe that their predicament is the product of a calculated effort to emphasize the Islamic Republic’s Persian character at their expense, even though the majority of Ahwazis are Shi’a Muslims. These circumstances have provided a fertile ground for the spread of secessionist and nationalist impulses among many Ahwazis over the years.” (JF, 7 August 2015)

The Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC) states in a report of September 2014 that “[t]he Arab ethnic minority in Iran—or Ahwazi Arabs as they refer to themselves—have a

long history of political, economic and cultural discrimination by successive Iranian governments” (IHRDC, 25 September 2014, pp. 1-2).

Amnesty International (AI) notes in its February 2015 Report 2014/15, which covers the year 2014 and key events of 2013, that there continues to be “pervasive discrimination” against ethnic minorities including Ahwazi Arabs (AI, 25 February 2015).

The IHRDC documents in detail the treatment of the Arab minority in Iran. It mentions that there were large-scale protests and violent crackdowns in Ahvaz and other areas of Khuzestan province in April 2005, followed by a number of bomb attacks in Ahvaz later in 2005 and early 2006 (IHRDC, 25 September 2014, pp. 10-12). The report goes on to give an account of subsequent developments in the province:

“Following the unrest in Ahvaz in 2005-2006, the province of Khuzestan came under increasing security control. While the 2005 protest events were commemorated annually, the next major period of unrest occurred six years later.

On April 15, 2011, as the world watched the protests collectively dubbed the ‘Arab Spring’, Arab activists using Facebook organized a protest. The protest erupted against the backdrop of the arrests of 16 Arab cultural activists (three of whom are currently on death row, two of whom were executed at the end of January 2014).

Many Arabs in Ahvaz, Abadan, Khorramshahr, Hamidieh, Mahshahr and Shadegan took to the streets in what was dubbed a ‘Day of Rage’ to commemorate the sixth anniversary of the 2005 protests. Multiple sources allege the use of live ammunition to suppress the 2011 protests, and additionally that security services had begun raids against suspected organizers the day before the protests began. Reports indicated that as many as 15 protesters were killed by security services and police during protests, with ‘tens’ injured and ‘hundreds’ arrested.

One report indicated that as many as 150 protesters were arrested, including 30 women, and that one protester died not as a result of live ammunition fire but from suffocation after inhaling Russian-made tear gas that was fired into the crowds.

Other reports indicated that nine protesters arrested in connection with the protests were executed within a month—three in public at Hamidieh junction and another six in prisons.

Another protest took place on June 21, 2012 in Ahvaz. At least 15 protesters were arrested on the same day, and protests following the death of Arab poet Sattar al-Siahi also occasioned another province-wide crackdown by IRI security services, during which it is alleged that nearly thirty people were arrested.

Five Arab cultural activists who founded and were leading members of al-Hiwar, the Arab cultural group established during Mohammad Khatami’s reformist presidency, were arrested in the April 2011 protests. They later received death sentences and were incarcerated in Karun prison. The five men—Mohammad Ali Amouri, Sayed Jaber

Alboshoka, his brother Sayed Mokhtar Alboshoka, Hashem Sha'baninejad Amouri and Hadi Rashedi—were convicted of muharibih, or 'warring against God' for allegedly killing a law enforcement official.

Their death sentences, as confirmed by Iran's Supreme Court in January 2013, are the most recent manifestation of the negative trend in relations between the Iranian state and the Ahwazi Arab ethnic minority. [...] At the end of January 2014, Hashem Sha'baninejad Amouri and Hadi Rashedi were executed in secret, without any prior notice to their families." (IHRDC, 25 September 2014, pp. 13-14)

The February 2015 Amnesty International (AI) Report 2014/15, which covers the year 2014 and key events of 2013, states that "authorities secretly executed at least eight Ahwazi Arabs after they were convicted on charges that included 'enmity against God'" after trials which are referred to as "grossly unfair" (AI, 25 February 2015).

The April 2015 joint press release of Amnesty International (AI) and Human Rights Watch (HRW) notes that "[s]ince 2005, authorities have executed at least 37 Ahwazi Arabs following unfair trials" (AI/HRW, 28 April 2015).

The April 2015 joint press release of Amnesty International (AI) and Human Rights Watch (HRW) indicates that dozens of Ahwazi Arabs were arrested in Khuzestan province in March and April 2015:

"Iran's intelligence and security forces have rounded up and detained scores of Ahwazi Arabs, including several children, in what appears to be an escalating crackdown in Iran's Khuzestan province, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch said today.

According to activists and family members, many arrests took place in the lead-up to the tenth anniversary of mass anti-government demonstrations that gripped the Arab-populated province in April 2005. Family members said the arrests have been carried out without warrants by groups of armed masked men affiliated with Iran's security and intelligence services, usually following home raids of Ahwazi Arab activists during the late evening or early morning hours. [...]

Ahwazi Arab activists outside Iran told Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch that security forces have arrested at least 78 people, and possibly more than 100, since mid-March 2015 in the city of Ahvaz, the Khuzestan provincial capital, and surrounding towns and villages following largely peaceful protests. They said those arrested include people suspected of playing leadership roles in mobilizing local protests. Iranian authorities have not given a reason for the arrests or revealed the status and whereabouts of the detainees, placing them at increased risk of torture and other ill-treatment, the human rights organizations said. [...]

The latest round of arrests has taken place amid the anger that has swept the province following the death of Younes Asakereh, an Ahwazi Arab street vendor who set himself on fire on 13 March 2015 to protest municipal authorities' removal and destruction of his fruit stand. He was denied adequate emergency treatment and transport to Tehran due

to lack of funds and died of his injuries on 22 March, a source familiar with the details of his case told Human Rights Watch. Ahwazi Arab demonstrators then took to the streets in large numbers in the provincial city of Khorramshahr. [...]

Several days before Asakereh's death, a protest erupted outside Ahvaz's Ghadir Stadium after mostly young Ahwazi Arab men displayed a banner during a soccer match between Saudi Arabia's Al-Hilal and the local team, Foolad, in the Stadium, that read 'We are all Younes!' Police then arrested several dozen men, beating them on their backs and heads. The police seem to have particularly targeted men dressed in traditional Arab clothing." (AI/HRW, 28 April 2015)

Zambelis notes in his August 2015 Jamestown Foundation (JF) article that amid these heightened tensions, several attacks were carried out in April and May 2015 "against Iranian security forces and other targets in Khuzestan". These attacks have been "claimed by ethnic Arab militants affiliated with the Harakat al-Nazal al-Arabi li-Tahrir al-Ahwaz (Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahwaz—ASMLA)" (JF, 7 August 2015)

The same article goes on to elaborate on the Iranian authorities' perceptions of ASMLA and other ethnic Ahwazi activist and militant organizations, as well as the Arab population in general:

"Iran has accused the ASMLA and other ethnic Ahwazi activist and militant organizations as serving as proxies for enemies of the Islamic Republic. In particular, the historical links between Ahwazi militants and Saddam Hussein's Iraq continues to shape Iranian perceptions of its Arab population. The rhetoric and actions of Ahwazi militants are likely to feed Iran's suspicions. The ASMLA has embraced similarly motivated activist movements that purport to act on behalf of Iran's ethnic Kurdish, ethnic Baloch and other minority communities, including violent insurgent groups. For instance, a statement issued by the ASMLA in May threatened that its future military operations will be coordinated with ethnic Baloch and ethnic Kurdish insurgents [...]"(JF, 7 August 2015)

A July 2015 joint public statement by Amnesty International and a number of other human rights organisations states that there is continuing "[w]idespread discrimination against children from ethnic minorities", including the Ahwazi Arab minority, "in everyday life, including in access to education" (AI, 20 July 2015).

2.3 Baluchis (Balochs)

For information specifically regarding the situation of Baloch opposition groups, please refer to our COI compilation "Iran: Political Opposition Groups, Security Forces, Selected Human Rights Issues, Rule of Law" of July 2015, section 4.3 ("Jundallah"). (ACCORD, July 2015)

As indicated by Bijan DaBell, an M.A. graduate in social sciences from the University of Chicago, who is currently working at the Baha'i Chair for World Peace, "Baluchis number between 1.5 million and 2 million in Iran" and "are largely Sunni Muslims, which has contributed to tension with Iran's Shiite government". DaBell adds that "Baluchis are noticeably underrepresented in government positions". (DaBell, 3 September 2013b)

Amnesty International (AI) notes in its February 2015 Report 2014/15, which covers the year 2014 and key events of 2013, that there continues to be “pervasive discrimination” against ethnic minorities including Baluchis (AI, 25 February 2015).

A July 2015 joint public statement by Amnesty International and a number of other human rights organisations states that there is continuing “[w]idespread discrimination against children from ethnic minorities”, including the Baloch minority, “in everyday life, including in access to education” (AI, 20 July 2015).

The US Department of State (USDOS) country report on human rights practices of June 2015 provides the following overview of the situation of ethnic Baluchis:

“Local and international human rights groups alleged serious economic, legal, and cultural discrimination during the year against the predominantly Sunni ethnic Baluchi minority, estimated to be between 1.5 and two million persons. Areas with large Baluchi populations were severely underdeveloped and had limited access to education, employment, health care, and housing. The Gozinesh (selection) procedure limited Sunni Baluchis’ employment opportunities and political participation and caused them to be underrepresented in government positions. Baluchi journalists and human rights activists faced arbitrary arrest, physical abuse, and unfair trials.” (USDOS, 25 June 2015, section 6)

A March 2014 article of the International Campaign for Sunni Prisoners in Iran (ICSPI) states:

“Sunni Baloch Muslims living within Iran face widespread political, social and economic discrimination, due to being both an ethnic and a religious minority. Numerous Sunni Balochi youth have been convicted in politically motivated trials, often based on ‘evidence’ obtained through torture and forced ‘confessions’.” (ICSPI, 6 March 2014)

The Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC) reports that “[i]n February 2014, Ali Naroui, a Balouch political prisoner held at Orumiye Central Prison, died under suspicious circumstances” while serving an 18-year prison sentence, noting that “[w]hile prison and judiciary officials stated that his death was due to illness, his family maintained that they had seen bruises on his body, indicating that he was physically abused in prison” (IHRDC, 18 March 2015, p. 24). The same IHRDC article further states that Baluchi political prisoner Mohammad Saber Malek-Raeesi was “prohibited from having booth visits or phone calls to his family for 16 months for unspecified reasons” (IHRDC, 18 March 2015, p. 43).

A March 2015 report of the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran to the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) states that “[o]n 4 January 2015, Iranian authorities reportedly arrested 33 Baluchi residents of Sarbaz Village (Sistan and Baluchistan Province), in relation to recent incidents in the area” including the reported deaths of two men a few days earlier, “which some officials described as criminal or terrorist acts”. The families of several of the detainees wrote a letter to the UN in which they “rejected authorities’ allegations and expressed concern regarding the detainees’ alleged lack of access to lawyers and fair trials”. (HRC, 12 March 2015, p. 29)

In an August 2014 report on political prisoners held in prisons in the city of Karaj (Alborz province), Human Rights Watch (HRW) states that it has collected information on “several dozen Sunnis (mostly ethnic Kurds and Baluch) who are being detained in Ward 4, Room 10 of Rajai Shahr Prison and Ghezel Hesar Prison”. Many of them were convicted of “violence or involvement in terrorism-related activities”. The prisoners are “serving heavy prison sentences” and some of them have been sentenced to death. HRW notes that some of these prisoners may “qualify as peaceful religious rights activists”, although the organisation notes that since it could not gather enough information in this regard. (HRW, 18 August 2014)

Rasmus Christian Elling, assistant professor at the University of Copenhagen’s Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies, notes in his 2013 book *Minorities in Iran* that in Baluchistan, “[e]ach year, dozens of people are executed for drug-related crimes” and that “Baluch organizations claim that many of them are in fact political activists”. The author notes that according to allegations by Baluch activists, the “state covers up actions against Baluch ethnicist groups with the excuse that they are fighting narcotics”. Elling notes that “the Iranian state has yet to produce concrete evidence” that militants finance their activities through drug trafficking, although it is possible that this is the case. The same book further states:

“Baluch activists claim that security forces use excessive force to harass the local population, while special courts have been set up to deal with ‘bandits.’ State-run provincial media reports are often written in a tone that seems to warn or threaten locals.” (Elling, 2013, pp. 72-73)

2.4 Azerbaijani (Azeri) Turks

For information specifically regarding the situation of Azeri opposition groups, please also refer to our COI compilation “Iran: Political Opposition Groups, Security Forces, Selected Human Rights Issues, Rule of Law” of July 2015, section 4.9 (“Azeri political groups”). (ACCORD, July 2015)

The US Department of State (USDOS) indicates that the number of Azeris in Iran is “approximately 13 million” (USDOS, 25 June 2015, section 6). Other sources state that the size of the Azeri population is 16 million (MRG, 2008) or even around 20 million (Saleh, 2013, p. 66).

According to DaBell, “Azeris mostly live in northwestern Iran, notably in the provinces of East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, Ardabil, and Zanjan”, and [a]bout one-third of Tehran’s population” is also reportedly Azeri. DaBell adds that “[s]maller numbers of Azeris reside in Hamadan, Qazvin and Karaj.” (DaBell, 3 September 2013b). Alam Saleh, currently lecturer in Modern Middle East History at the University of Exeter (UK), states in his 2013 book *Ethnic Identity and the State in Iran* that most Azeris are Shi’a Muslims (Saleh, 2013, p. 66).

The World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples, updated by the Minority Rights Group (MRG) in July 2014, states that “[o]f all of Iran’s ethnic minorities, Azeris receive perhaps the greatest acceptance” among Persian Iranians, while noting that Azeris

nevertheless “continue to face discrimination and are denied education in their mother tongue.” (MRG, July 2014)

Similarly, the June 2015 US Department of State (USDOS) country report on human rights practices, which covers the year 2013, states that ethnic Azeris were “well integrated into government and society”, while noting, on the other hand, that:

“Nonetheless, Azeris reported the government discriminated against them by prohibiting the Azeri language in schools, harassing Azeri activists or organizers, and changing Azeri geographic names. Azeri groups also claimed a number of Azeri political prisoners had been jailed for advocating cultural and language rights for Azeris. The government charged several of them with ‘revolting against the Islamic state.’” (USDOS, 25 June 2015, section 6)

Amnesty International (AI) notes in its February 2015 Report 2014/15, which covers the year 2014 and key events of 2013, that there continues to be “pervasive discrimination” against ethnic minorities including Azerbaijanis (AI, 25 February 2015).

A July 2015 joint public statement by Amnesty International and a number of other human rights organisations states that there is continuing “[w]idespread discrimination against children from ethnic minorities”, including the Azerbaijani Turks, “in everyday life, including in access to education” (AI, 20 July 2015).

Elling writes in his 2013 book *Minorities in Iran: Nationalism and Ethnicity After Khomeini*:

“While repression in [Iranian] Azerbaijan has been decidedly more restrained than in Kurdistan, Khuzestan and Baluchistan, there are nonetheless numerous reports of an ongoing clampdown on ethnicists. Yet in comparison, the ethnicist movement in Azerbaijan has been significantly more successful in marking its causes in public space. [...] [T]he various Azeri ethnicist movements have so far been generally peaceful, seeking to operate within the framework of the law, and predominantly focused on cultural and civil rights rather than sensitive issues such as autonomy or independence.” (Elling, 2013, p. 194)

As reported in July 2015 by Amnesty International (AI), “[t]wo activists for the rights of Iran’s Azerbaijani Turkish minority have been sentenced to 10 years in prison for allegedly burning the flag of the Islamic Republic of Iran.” The activists were arrested in November 2013 and “held incommunicado and interrogated for 42 days, without access to a lawyer” at a Ministry of Intelligence (MOI) detention centre in Tabriz. One of the men reported that they were subjected to torture during this period. They were convicted on charges of “insulting Islamic sanctities” and “vandalizing public property with the intent to rise up against the Islamic establishment”. The activists have denied these charges and have lodged an appeal. (AI, 17 July 2015)

The USDOS country report on human rights practices notes that “[t]here was no new information available regarding Vahid Faezpour Kiaksar, an Azeri blogger and activist, and five

other Azeri activists who were arrested on their way to an International Day against Torture ceremony in June 2013 and subsequently detained.” (USDOS, 25 June 2015, section 6)

As reported in a June 2015 article of the Central Asia-Caucasus (CACI) Analyst, mass demonstrations took place in Tabriz (East Azerbaijan province) and other cities of Iranian Azerbaijan in May 2015 as “supporters of Tabriz’s football club Tractor Sazi, numbering tens of thousands, took to the streets to protest a referee decision in a match against Naft Tehran FC”. The same article provides the following analysis on Azeri nationalism in Iran:

“Nationalism is growing among Iranian Azeris, the Islamic theocracy’s largest ethno-linguistic community (see the 06/14/06; 10/27/10; and 10/05/11 issues of the CACI Analyst). While on the rise since the early 1990s and particularly during the last decade, what started as an emancipatory movement aimed at establishing education in Azeri Turkish throughout Iran’s predominantly Azeri northwest gradually transformed into a relatively strong nationalist movement, now approaching calls for separatism and irredentism. The recent developments have tainted the established image of Iranian Azeris as a perfectly integrated community known for its political apathy. However, due to the strong religious identity prevailing in Iranian Azerbaijan’s rural areas, the long-standing tradition of Iranian statehood, and state-supported persianization coupled with the dominance of Persian nationalism, ethnic nationalism is yet to become a decisive ideological force among the twenty million Iranian Azeris.” (CACI Analyst, 24 June 2015)

A December 2014 Huffington Post article by James Dorsey, senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (Singapore), points to recent cases of “[u]nrest among Azeris”, which, “despite the fact that many Azeris have risen to high positions and exert influence within government, the military and the security forces, suggest [...] that Iranian attempts to silence political demands by enhancing individual social and economic rights is failing.” (Huffington Post, 19 December 2014).

2.5 Qashqai

According to Afrasiab Shekofteh, a representative of the Cultural and Civil Society of Khorasani Kurds (CSKK), a UK-based non-profit organisation that seeks to protect and promote the culture of the Kurds of Khorasan (northeastern Iran), the “Qashqai are a Turkic-speaking tribal minority” and mainly live in the south west of Iran: “[i]n the [n]orth of Fars province (especially around the city of Shiraz), and [the] southern part of Isfahan Province, and [e]astern part of Chahar-mahal Bakhtiyari and some part of Khuzestan Province” (Shekofteh, undated). Shekofteh mentions the cities Firozabad, Sepidan, Ardakan and Marvdasht as places where most Qashqai live, noting that “[t]he Qashqai were originally nomadic pastoralists and some remain so today” while “[t]he majority of them however, has now settled, or is partially settled.” (Shekofteh, undated)

As noted by Julia Huang, an anthropologist and teaching fellow at the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), in her book *Tribeswomen of Iran: Weaving Memories among Qashqa’i Nomads* (2009), the term “Qashqai” refers to members of the tribal confederacy and their history, beliefs, customs, and language (Qashqa’i Turkish) (Huang, 2009, p. 6).

Huang quotes an unofficial estimate for the year 2008 as indicating that the Qashqai tribal confederacy numbered one million people (Huang, 2009, p. 7). Shekofteh points to the difficulty of providing accurate statistics and states that the size of the Qashqai population is roughly estimated to be “close to 600,000” (Shekofteh, undated). An undated *Cultural Field Guide* for US Marine Corps staff indicates that the Qashqai “number about 500,000” (US Marine Corps, undated)

Huang’s 2009 book provides the following overview of Qashqai ethnic identity, social structure, livelihoods, religious affiliation and changes in their lifestyle over time:

“By asserting their Turkish identity, the Qashqa’i contrast themselves from other peoples in the region. At the same time they differentiate themselves within the confederacy by way of sections and subsections, which indicate specifically their tribe, subtribe, lineage, and extended family. The Qashqa’i confederacy consists of five large tribes (Amaleh, Darrehshuri, Kashkuli Bozorg, Farsi Madan, and Shesh Boluki) and many smaller ones (such as Kashkuli Kuchek and Qarachai), each containing its own divisions and subdivisions. [...]

The confederacy’s four main economic sectors include people living as nomadic pastoralists, people still living as nomads and raising sheep and goats but also engaging in compatible livelihoods, people residing in villages and towns and cities supported by a wide range of occupations, and people pursuing activities outside of Iran.” (Huang, 2009, pp. 6-7)

“The Qashqa’i are Shi’i Muslims, unlike many of Iran’s other tribally organized ethnic and national minorities who are Sunni Muslims. As such, the Qashqa’i appear to have escaped some problems experienced by Iran’s religious minorities: Sunni Muslims and members of other faiths (Christians of different sects, Bahais, Zoroastrians, and Jews).” (Huang, 2009, p. 12)

“The Iranian revolution and the Islamic Republic caused more changes for city and town dwellers than for most nomads. The Qashqa’i and many other tribal groups live high in the mountains or far in the deserts and border regions, away from urban areas, and are semi-autonomous political and social entities. As a result, they experience national changes less directly than most other Iranians.” (Huang, 2009, p. 17)

The undated US Marine Corps field guide states that the “Qashqai of the Fars province [...] are ethnically and linguistically related to the Azerbaijanis, but are nomadic and tribal”. The guide notes that while the Qashqai do not have aspirations for political independence, they “fear that the imposition of government control could destroy their language and culture”. (US Marine Corps, undated)

The undated Qashqai.net website, which describes itself as an ethnographic project, gives the following overview of the Qashqai:

“The Qashqai compose a community of settled, semi-settled, and pastoral nomadic households who reside mainly in the Fars region of southern Iran. They speak Qashqai Turki (Turkish). Most of them also speak, at least, Persian (Farsi). They are Shia Muslims. [...] Since the 1960s the general trend has been a sharp increase in sedentarization of Qashqai nomads and involvement in non-pastoral and non-traditional economic activities. Presently the Qashqai form mainly settled and semi-settled households. Qashqai population of today is estimated between one and one and a half million.” (Qashqai.net, undated)

In September 2008, Reza Molavi, a former academic at Durham University (UK), and Mohammad M. Hedayati-Kakhki, a current honorary fellow and tutor in law at the same university, prepared a report for the UK Advisory Panel on Country Information (APCI) evaluating the UK Home Office’s Country of Origin Information Report on Iran. The authors state with regard to the Qashqai:

“The population of the group is estimated as 2% of the Iranian population, living mainly in Fars Province in Southern Iran. Shiraz is known as the biggest centre of the group’s activities, whilst a part of the group continue to be nomadic. Notably, after the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution, Khosrow Khan Qashqai, the Ghashghayi leader, returned to Iran from Germany, was arrested and subsequently publicly executed for advocating for the group’s rights and autonomy. This has caused long-standing suspicion by the government of this ethnic group, considering it a potentially volatile one.

Moreover, the religious practices of the group are not entirely in line with those of the mainstream Islamic regime and therefore give rise to suspicions and discrimination against them, as described in the account below:

Following the Islamic Revolution, various Qashqa’i customs, such as public dancing, the playing of traditional music on oboes and skin drums, and stickfighting games performed to music, were declared immoral and anti-Islamic by the new government. The extent of continuous discrimination is not known. However, various laws still deem certain Qashqa’i practices to be anti-Islamic, despite the fact that the group is Shia Muslim.” (Molavi/Hedayati-Kakhki, 23 September 2008, pp. 51-52)

Among the sources consulted by ACCORD, no further information could be found on the treatment of Qashqai.

2.6 Khavaris

As indicated in a February 2013 joint fact-finding mission report of the Danish Immigration Service (DIS), the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and the Norwegian Country of Origin Information Centre (Landinfo) with reference to information provided by an international organisation in Tehran, “the word ‘khavar’ means ‘east’ and ‘Khavari’ means ‘person from the east’” and “the Khavaris are a group of people with Afghan Hazara or Barbari origins, mostly Shia Muslim”. The fact-finding mission report goes on to say with reference to the same source that “some of the Khavaris are registered as refugees in Iran” while “[s]ome however, are able to provide evidence of their ancestry in Iran, for example by providing witnesses who

can testify to a family's presence in the area." The same report further notes with reference to the same source:

"Some Khavaris have Amayesh [cards]¹ and are registered as refugees. Some of these persons claim that they are not Afghans and those who are able to demonstrate that they have roots in Iran, were then registered as nationals of Iran. For those who took part in the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) on the Iranian side or are married to Iranians, it may be easier to prove connection to, and be registered as Iranian nationals." (DIS/DRC/Landinfo, February 2013, pp. 78-79)

The same DIS/DRC/Landinfo report goes on to render information provided by the director of the Citizenship and Refugee Affairs Department of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs:

"Asked if Iran considers the Khavaris an Iranian minority, the source stated that they are basically of Afghan origin. The majority of them carry Afghan ID-documents and are living on the Afghan side of the border. However, it was added that in the course of the Afghan-Soviet war (1979-1989), many moved into Iranian territory. Asked if it is known how many Khavaris are actually living in Iran, the Director replied that he could not give any exact numbers. [...] The Director explained that there are a vast number of people living in Iran without legal documents, especially Afghans. [...] Asked if Khavaris can become Iranian citizens, the Director replied that if they have documents which prove they are of Iranian origin, they can apply in the usual manner according to current procedures." (DIS/DRC/Landinfo, February 2013, pp. 78-79)

A February 2015 query response of the Swiss Refugee Council (Schweizerische Flüchtlingshilfe, SFH), a Swiss NGO working for refugees and asylum seekers, quotes an NGO specialised in Iran as saying that there are currently about 2.5 million persons in Iran who are regarded as Khavaris (SRC, 11 February 2015, p. 2). The same query response further quotes a contact person of an NGO specialised in Iran as saying that Khavaris are often victims of racially motivated discrimination based on their appearances which often hint to their Afghan Hazara origins. Their discrimination is similar to the discrimination faced by people from Afghanistan, irrespective of whether the Khavaris hold Iranian citizenship or live in Iran illegally. The SFH goes on to quote Alessandro Monsutti, an associate professor of anthropology at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva as reporting that when he visited various quarters in Mashad that were inhabited by Khavari families, he noticed that while recent immigrants from Afghanistan would often live in the same quarters as the Khavaris, the Khavaris would keep themselves apart from the Afghan residents so as to avoid being perceived as Afghans by the Iranian population at large. (SFH, 11 February 2015, pp. 2-3, translated from German)

According to an academic researcher with a focus on Iran contacted by the SFH, even Khavaris with Iranian citizenship face some (though not systematic) discrimination. While they are entitled by law to the same rights as other Iranian citizens, they are treated as "second-

¹ The term "Amayesh" refers to Iran's refugee registration system introduced in 2003 (HRW, November 2013, p. 5)

class citizens” and are discriminated against both socially and economically and face prejudice. The SFH goes on to quote a contact person from an NGO specialised in Iran as saying that the situation is considerably more difficult for Khavaris without legal residence status. Khavaris who are unable to provide proof of their (Iranian) origins may be judged to be Afghan Hazara and illegal migrants. According to this source, many Khavaris are indeed affected by de facto statelessness. (SFH, 11 February 2015, p. 3).

SFH quotes a contact person from an NGO specialised in Iran as stating that Khavaris can face the risk of deportation. This may affect both Khavaris with and without valid documentation. (SFH, 11 February 2015, p. 4).

According to various sources consulted by the SFH, it appears that it is normally necessary for applicants for Iranian citizenship to prove that they have Iranian ancestry. A local immigration bureau in Iran’s Alborz province told the SFH that in order to be eligible for Iranian citizenship, a person must submit written evidence that he/she is originally from Iran or that his/her father is an Iranian citizen. In addition, the applicant is required to do a DNA test. (SFH, 11 February 2015, p. 7)

According to an academic researcher with a focus on Iran who was interviewed by the SFH, it is almost impossible to be granted Iranian citizenship if a person’s father is not Iranian. The SFH further quotes a contact person from an NGO specialised in Iran as saying that under the current circumstances, only few Khavaris (those with sufficient financial means or political connections) are able to obtain Iranian citizenship. The SFH quotes several sources as saying that the number of Khavaris who have been integrated and naturalized as Iranians is not known (SFH, 11 February 2015, p. 8)

The January 2015 Human Rights Watch (HRW) World Report 2015 (covering the year 2014) states that “Afghan refugees and migrant workers, estimated at between 2.5 and 3 million, continued to face serious abuses” (HRW, 29 January 2015).

As indicated on the website of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the majority of Afghan refugees arrived in Iran before 2001 as prima facie refugees. The source further notes that “[a]bout 97 per cent of the country’s refugees live in rural and urban areas; only three per cent live in settlements” (UNHCR, 2015).

The June 2015 USDOS country report on human rights practices states:

“Refugees faced restrictions on in-country movement. According to the UN special rapporteur’s October 2013 report, authorities prohibited Afghan nationals from residing in 16 of the country’s 31 provinces and in parts of 13 other provinces. [...]

In December 2013 the head of the Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrants’ Affairs reportedly said that Afghan children lacking legal documents could not register in schools. Justice for Iran, a human rights advocacy group, reported the government sometimes charged school fees to the children of registered Afghan refugees, prompting some refugee children to study in illegal, self-governed schools that the government

sometimes closed. Most provinces' residency limitations on refugees effectively denied them access to public services, such as public housing, in those provinces. [...]

Women may not transmit citizenship to their children or to a noncitizen spouse. According to media reports in 2013, there were officially 30,000 citizens married to Afghan men, although the number was likely much higher. There were more than 32,000 children without refugee identification cards in 2013, making them effectively stateless and subject to inconsistent government policies. They could attend formal government schools but could not receive certification for their attendance." (USDOS, 25 June 2015, section 2d)

"The law prohibits all forms of forced or compulsory labor, but the government did not effectively enforce the law. Conditions indicative of forced labor sometimes occurred in the construction, domestic labor, and agricultural sectors, primarily among adult Afghan men." (USDOS, 25 June 2015, section 7b)

"Reportedly significant numbers of children, especially of Afghan descent, worked as street vendors in major urban areas." (USDOS, 25 June 2015, section 7c)

The Neue Zürcher Zeitung (NZZ), a Swiss daily newspaper, states in February 2014 that Afghans face "enormous discrimination" in areas relating to civil law. Marriages between Iranians and Afghans are not recognized, and children of these couples do not obtain Iranian citizenship under the law. Therefore, even the second generation is denied access to education in state schools. According to Afghan refugee representatives in Iran, an estimated 400,000 children are excluded from school education every year. Discrimination against Afghans is not only practiced by state institutions but such attitudes have also been adopted by many Iranians. Hazara women report about harassment in the streets. Male Afghans are often made responsible for increasing crime rates and the spread of drug abuse. In Iranian vocabulary, the word "Afghani" has now become a common swear word pointing to something wild and primitive. The same NZZ article notes that shortly after president Rouhani took office, Iran's Mehr news agency reported that all unregistered Afghans would be required to leave the country by early September 2013. Eventually, this deadline elapsed without any further consequences (NZZ, 1 February 2014).

A February 2015 of the UN Secretary-General to the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) states:

"Nationality laws in the Islamic Republic of Iran do not grant women equal rights when transferring their nationality to their children. [...] Iranian women who marry men from Iraq or Afghanistan are unable to pass on their Iranian nationality to their children, who thereby risk becoming stateless." (HRC, 20 February 2015, pp. 8-9)

The US Department of State (USDOS) notes in its July 2015 Trafficking in Persons Report (which covers the year 2014):

"Traffickers subject Afghan migrants, including boys, to forced labor in construction and agricultural sectors in Iran. Afghan boys are at high risk of experiencing sexual abuse by

their employers and harassment or blackmailing by the Iranian security service and other government officials.” (USDOS, 27 July 2015)

As reported by HRW in December 2014, the Iranian government announced that it would grant a six-month visa extension to 450,000 Afghans living in the country:

“The Iranian government’s December 13, 2014 announcement that it will grant a six-month visa extension to 450,000 Afghans is a helpful move to prevent their imminent deportation, Human Rights Watch said today. However, the visa-extension plan is no substitute for an asylum system that will allow newly arriving Afghans to lodge refugee claims. An Iranian foreign ministry official described the visa extension plan as a reflection of Iran’s ‘brotherly relations’ with Afghanistan. The official said that the Afghan government had agreed to devise an assistance plan for reintegrating the 450,000 Afghans when they return to Afghanistan. Under the Iranian plan, the previously undocumented Afghans will be able to apply for temporary visas and work. [...]

Iranian authorities have previously extended the visas of several hundred thousand Afghans who have temporary residence status in Iran. From 2010 to June 2012, the Iranian government operated a Comprehensive Regularization Plan (CRP), which offered undocumented Afghans in Iran an opportunity to register officially and apply for temporary visas and work permits with the possibility, but not the guarantee, that they would be extended.

The process required Afghan men without families to return to Afghanistan to apply for visas, while families could apply without leaving Iran. The process was difficult and costly for indigent migrants, in part because it required all applicants first to obtain Afghan passports. The Iranian authorities have also encouraged Afghans who have legal status as refugees to exchange refugee status for Iranian residential visas.

For the last three decades, Iran has hosted one of the largest refugee populations in the world, according to the United Nations high commissioner for refugees. But at present, only 840,000 of the approximately 3 million Afghans estimated to live in Iran have legal status as refugees. The Iranian government has excluded the remainder from accessing asylum procedures, including the Afghans whose temporary legal status has now been extended by the Iranian government, as well as the many others who have temporary visas or are undocumented.” (HRW, 21 December 2014)

An April 2014 report of the UN Secretary-General to the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) states with reference to a previous report of the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran:

“The situation of Afghan refugees is of concern as was highlighted by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran in his report to the sixty-eighth session of the General Assembly. The Special Rapporteur noted that, as the Government does not recognize marriages between illegal migrants and Iranians, many children born out of such marriages do not possess a birth certificate and are deprived of educational opportunities and health care. In addition women married to

illegal migrants cannot transfer their nationality or citizenship to their husbands or children. Afghan refugees are also subjected to movement restrictions and are banned from residing in various provinces. On 22 December 2013, the head of the Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrants' Affairs was quoted as saying that Afghan children, who are not in possession of legal documents, would not be registered in schools. Concerns further remain about the manner in which Afghan refugees are subjected to deportation. According to Human Rights Watch, thousands of Afghan refugees are arbitrarily deported, with no opportunities to legally challenge their deportation. Newcomers are denied the opportunity to seek refugee status, even if they are at risk of persecution and serious harm in Afghanistan. Some Afghan refugees also reportedly experienced physical mistreatment and confiscation of property during deportation. Families are reportedly often separated, leaving children more vulnerable to physical and mental abuse." (HRC, 7 April 2014, pp. 10-11)

As noted in the May 2015 annual report of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), "Afghan refugees and irregular migrants living in the Islamic Republic of Iran found it difficult to obtain social services" (ICRC, May 2015).

Zuzanna Olszewska, departmental lecturer in Social Anthropology at the Oxford University's Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, states in a journal article of 2013 that unlike in Afghanistan or Pakistan, there have been no Hazara-led protests in Iran "where, despite its size, the Hazara and Afghan refugee population in general prefers a strategy of invisibility due to the discrimination it faces in the country, both from the state and from ordinary people" (Olszewska, spring 2013).

Detailed information on the situation of Afghan refugees and migrants in Iran can be found in a HRW report dating from November 2013:

- HRW - Human Rights Watch: Unwelcome Guests: Iran's Violation of Afghan Refugee and Migrant Rights, 20 November 2013 (available at [ecoi.net](http://www.ecoi.net))
http://www.ecoi.net/file_upload/1788_1385029141_iran1113-forupload.pdf

2.7 Treatment of people in mixed ethnic marriages

Rasmus Christian Elling, assistant professor at the University of Copenhagen's Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies, stated in a September 2015 email response that the situation of persons living in mixed ethnic marriages in Iran very much depends on the specific case. For example, a marriage between a Gilaki and a Persian would generally not result in social stigma or have any other repercussions. On the other hand, a marriage between a female Arab, for example, and a male non-Arab can cause significant problems in local communities and in families – including violence. However, Elling explained that these generalized examples can become irrelevant if one is talking about upper middle class families in urban societies such as Tehran. (Elling, 4 September 2015)

Among the sources consulted by ACCORD no further information could be found on the treatment of people in mixed ethnic marriages.

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