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2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran

Executive Summary

The constitution defines the country as an Islamic republic and specifies Twelver Ja'afari Shia Islam as the official state religion. It states all laws and regulations must be based on "Islamic criteria" and an official interpretation of sharia. The constitution states citizens shall enjoy human, political, economic, and other rights, "in conformity with Islamic criteria." The penal code provides for *hudud* punishments (those mandated by sharia), including amputation, flogging, and stoning, and specifies the death sentence for proselytizing and attempts by non-Muslims to convert Muslims, as well as for *moharebeh* ("enmity against God") and *sabb al-nabi* ("insulting the Prophet or Islam"). According to the penal code, the application of the death penalty varies depending on the religion of both the perpetrator and the victim. In January, parliament amended the penal code to criminalize insulting "divine religions or Islamic schools of thought" and committing "any deviant educational or proselytizing activity that contradicts or interferes with the sacred law of Islam." Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) said these new provisions put religious minorities at a higher risk of persecution. The law prohibits Muslim citizens from changing or renouncing their religious beliefs. The constitution also stipulates that five non-Ja'afari Islamic schools shall be "accorded full respect" and official status in matters of religious education and certain personal affairs. The constitution states Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians, excluding converts from Islam, are the only recognized religious minorities permitted to worship and form religious societies "within the limits of the law." According to numerous international human rights NGOs and media reporting, the government convicted and executed dissidents, political reformers, and peaceful protesters on charges of "enmity against God" and anti-Islamic propaganda and, in the case of members of some religious minorities, detained them and held them incommunicado. Amnesty International reported an "alarming rise" in the execution of ethnic minority prisoners since mid-December 2020. Authorities denied prisoners access to attorneys and convicted them based on "confessions" extracted under torture. In January, authorities executed Baluchi Javid Dehghan (also known as Dehghan-Khold) in Zahedan Central Prison on charges of "enmity against God," "armed rebellion against the Islamic Republic," and alleged membership in banned Sunni separatist groups. The NGO Iran Human Rights (IHR) reported that as of October, government executions continued at an "alarmingly high" rate, with at least 226 people put to death, 125 of them under "retributive" (eye-for-an-eye) justice. According to the database of the NGO United for Iran, *Iran Prison Atlas*, least 67 members of minority religious groups remained imprisoned at year's end for being "religious minority practitioners." Of the prisoners listed in the database, the government sentenced at least 62 to long-term imprisonment or executed them on charges of "enmity against God" or "armed rebellion against Islamic rule" (*baghi*), which officials sometimes used in recent years instead of "enmity against God." Human rights NGOs reported poor prison conditions and mistreatment of religious minority prisoners, including beatings, sexual abuse, degradation specifically targeting their religious beliefs, and denial of medical treatment. The Abdorrahman Boroumand Center for Human Rights in Iran, a U.S.-based human rights NGO, said that from January 1 to September 24, the government sentenced at least 77 individuals to flogging, based on its interpretation of sharia, and carried out these sentences in at least eight cases. NGOs reported that in January, authorities transferred women's rights activist Golrokh Ebrahimi Iraee, originally charged in 2014 with "insulting Islamic sanctities" and "spreading propaganda" for criticizing the government's policy of stoning women to death for adultery, to Amol Prison in Mazandara Province, far away from her family. According to IranWire and the London-based NGO Article 18, which focuses on religious freedom in Iran, in September, security forces in Shiraz and Mazandaran Province conducted multiple arrests of Baha'is in their homes or workplaces in the last week of September without providing reasons or charges. In a July report, UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Iran (UNSR) Javaid Rehman stated there continued to be reports of forced evictions of members of the Sunni Baluch minority in Sistan and Baluchistan Province, despite the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. An August report by the UN Secretary General highlighted that the Supreme Court upheld the death sentences for 10 Kurdish political prisoners on charges involving "acting against national security," "spreading corruption on earth," and "membership in Salafi groups." According to an October report by the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO), at least 10 Baluchi individuals were summoned to court following a rally in the village of Ramin to prevent the destruction of the *Eidgah* (land reserved for Eid

prayers for Sunni followers). Officials continued to disproportionately arrest, detain, harass, and surveil non-Armenian Christians, particularly evangelicals and other converts from Islam, according to Christian NGOs. On March 9, the Tehran Appeals Court reduced Saba Kord-Afshari's prison sentence, which she received in 2019 on a set of charges relating to protesting the compulsory hijab, from 24 years to seven years and six months in prison. UNSR Rehman's July report and NGOs said authorities continued to confiscate Baha'i properties as part of an ongoing state-led campaign of economic persecution against Baha'is. Authorities issued an order in April denying Baha'is permission to bury their dead in empty plots at the Tehran-area cemetery designated for Baha'is, forcing them to bury them at a mass grave site. Sunni Muslims stated the government did not permit them to build prayer facilities sufficient to accommodate their numbers, and government restrictions forced many Christian converts and members of unrecognized religious minority groups, such as Baha'is and Yarsanis, to assemble in private homes to practice their faith in secret. Authorities reportedly continued to deny the Baha'i, Sabean-Mandaean, and Yarsani religious communities, as well as members of other unrecognized religious minority groups, access to education and government employment unless they declared themselves as belonging to one of the country's recognized religions on their application forms. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) reported textbooks at all grade levels and across many subjects contained antisemitic material. Government officials continued to disseminate anti-Baha'i and antisemitic messages using traditional and social media. On December 16, the UN General Assembly approved a resolution expressing concern about "ongoing severe limitations and increasing restrictions on the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief" and "harassment, intimidation, persecution, arbitrary arrests and detention, and incitement to hatred" against recognized and unrecognized religious minorities.

According to multiple sources, non-Shia Muslims and those affiliated with a religion other than Islam, especially members of the Baha'i community, continued to face societal discrimination and harassment, while employers experienced social pressures not to hire Baha'is or to dismiss them from their private-sector jobs. Yarsanis reported experiencing widespread discrimination. They stated Yarsani children were socially ostracized in school and in shared community facilities. Yarsani men, recognizable by their distinct mustaches, continued to face employment discrimination. According to reports, Shia preachers continued to encourage social discrimination against Yarsanis. According to human rights NGOs, converts from Islam to Christianity faced ongoing societal pressure and rejection by family or community members. Shia clerics and prayer leaders reportedly continued to denounce Sufism and the activities of Sufis in both sermons and public statements. Sunni students reported professors continued to routinely insult Sunni religious figures in class. Baha'is reported continued destruction and vandalism of their cemeteries. According to the Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA), on September 8, a Baha'i cemetery in Dena County, Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad Province was partly destroyed by unknown individuals using heavy machinery.

The United States does not have diplomatic relations with Iran. During the year, the U.S. government used public statements, sanctions, and diplomatic initiatives in international forums to condemn and promote accountability for the government's abuses against and restrictions on worship by members of religious minorities. Senior U.S. government officials publicly reiterated calls for the release of prisoners held on religious grounds. On March 9, the United States sanctioned Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) interrogators Ali Hemmatian and Masoud Safdari for their involvement in gross violations of human rights in Evin Prison, including torturing activists advocating for religious freedom. On December 7, the United States sanctioned the Special Units of Iran's Law Enforcement Forces (LEF) and Iran's Counter-Terror Special Forces (NOPO) for violently suppressing protests in November 2019. It sanctioned two LEF commanders, Hassan Karami and Seyed Mousavi Azami, as well as a Basij commander, Gholamreza Soleimani, and the Governor of Qods City, Leila Vaseghi, for their roles in carrying out crackdowns against peaceful protesters. Two prisons, Zahedan Central Prison and Isfahan Central Prison, as well as the warden of Qarchak Women's Prison, Soghra Khodadadi, and IRGC commander and brigadier general Mohammad Karami were also sanctioned for their roles in the "flagrant denial" of the rights of prisoners and other citizens, including religious minorities. The Treasury Department statement announcing the sanctions said, "Zahedan Prison holds several political prisoners who belong to the Baluch ethnic minority group. According to public reports, on January 3, 2021, Baluch prisoner Hassan Dehviri was executed in Zahedan Prison. Dehviri was sentenced to death for 'armed rebellion against the Islamic Rule.' His prison sentence was escalated to execution after he engaged in several acts of peaceful protests, such as signing statements condemning executions of Sunni prisoners and condemning the mistreatment of fellow prisoners."

Since 1999, Iran has been designated as a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On November 15, 2021, the Secretary of State redesignated Iran as a CPC. The following sanction accompanied the designation: the existing ongoing travel restrictions based on in section 221(c) of the Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act of 2012 (TRA) for individuals identified under Section 221(a)(1)(C) of the TRA in connection with the commission of serious human rights abuses, pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 85.9 million (midyear 2021). According to Iranian government estimates, Muslims constitute 99.4 percent of the population, of whom 90-95 percent are Shia, and 5-10 percent are Sunni, mostly Turkmen, Arabs, Baluchis, and Kurds, living in the northeast, southwest, southeast, and northwest provinces, respectively. Afghan refugees, economic migrants, and displaced persons also make up a significant Sunni population, but accurate statistics on the breakdown of the Afghan refugee population between Sunni and Shia are unavailable. There are no official statistics available on the number of Muslims who practice Sufism, although unofficial reports estimate several million.

According to U.S. government estimates, groups constituting the remaining less than 1 percent of the population include Baha'is, Christians, Yarsanis, Jews, Sabeen-Mandaeans, and Zoroastrians. The three largest non-Muslim minorities are Baha'is, Christians, and Yarsanis.

According to Human Rights Watch data, Baha'is number at least 300,000.

The government Statistical Center of Iran reports there are 117,700 Christians in the country. Some estimates, however, suggest there may be many more than actually reported. According to Boston University's 2020 World Religion Database, there are approximately 579,000 Christians. NGO Open Doors USA estimates the number is 800,000, and Elam Ministries, a Christian organization, estimates there could be between 300,000 and one million.

Estimates by the Assyrian Church of the total Assyrian and Chaldean Christian population put their combined number at 7,000. There are also Protestant denominations, including evangelical groups, but there is no authoritative data on their numbers. Christian groups outside the country disagree on the size of the Protestant community, with some estimates citing figures lower than 10,000. Many Protestants and converts to Christianity from Islam reportedly practice in secret.

There is no official count of Yarsanis, but HRANA and the NGO Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI) estimate there are up to two million. Yarsanis are mainly located in Loristan and the Kurdish regions.

According to recent estimates from Armenian Christians who maintain contact with the Christian community in the country, their current numbers are approximately 40,000 to 50,000, significantly lower than the peak of 300,000 estimated prior to 1979. The number of Roman Catholics in the country is estimated to be 21,000.

According to Zoroastrian groups and the government-run Statistical Center of Iran, the population includes approximately 25,000 Zoroastrians, although the World Religion Database estimates this number to be 64,000.

According to the Tehran Jewish Committee, the population includes approximately 9,000 Jews, while representatives of the Jewish community in the country estimated their number at 15,000 during a 2018 *PBS News Hour* interview.

The population, according to government media, includes 14,000 Sabeen-Mandaeans.

According to the 2011 census, the number of individuals who are nonreligious rose by 20 percent between 2006 and 2011, which supports observations by academics and others that the number of atheists, agnostics, nonbelievers, and religiously unaffiliated living in the country is growing. The 2020 World Religion Database estimates their number to be 239,000. Often, however, these groups do not publicly identify, as documented by Amnesty International's report on the country, because those who profess atheism are at risk of arbitrary detention, torture, and the death penalty for apostasy.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution defines the country as an Islamic republic and designates Twelver Ja'afari Shia Islam as the official state religion. The constitution stipulates all laws and regulations must be based on "Islamic criteria" and an official interpretation of sharia. The constitution states citizens shall enjoy all human, political, economic, social, and cultural rights "in conformity with Islamic criteria."

The constitution prohibits the investigation of an individual's ideas and states no one may be "subjected to questioning and aggression for merely holding an opinion." The law prohibits Muslims from changing or renouncing their religious beliefs. The only recognized conversions are from other

religions to Islam. Sharia as interpreted by the government considers conversion from Islam apostasy, a crime punishable by death. Under the law, a child born to a Muslim father is Muslim.

By law, non-Muslims may not engage in public persuasion or attempt to convert a Muslim to another faith or belief. The law considers these activities to be proselytizing and punishable by death. In addition, citizens who are not recognized as Christians, Zoroastrians, or Jews may not engage in public religious expression, such as worshiping in a church or wearing religious symbols such as a cross. The government makes some exceptions for foreigners belonging to unrecognized religious groups.

The penal code specifies the death sentence for *moharebeh* ("enmity against God," which according to the *Oxford Dictionary of Islam* means in Quranic usage "corrupt conditions caused by unbelievers or unjust people that threaten social and political wellbeing"), *fisad fil-arz* ("corruption on earth," which includes apostasy or heresy), and *sabb al-nabi* ("insulting the Prophet" or "insulting the sanctities [Islam]"). According to the penal code, the application of the death penalty varies depending on the religion of both the perpetrator and the victim.

On January 13, parliament passed amendments that added two provisions to the penal code criminalizing "insulting legally recognized religions and Iranian ethnicities." The Guardian Council approved the amendments on February 3, and then president Hassan Rouhani signed them into law on February 18. Under the amendment to Article 499 of the code (which criminalizes membership in any group that "disturbs the security of the country"), authorities may impose a sentence of between two to five years in prison and/or a monetary fine where violence is involved, and between six months and two years and/or a monetary fine if no violence is involved, on anyone who "insults Iranian ethnicities or divine religions or Islamic schools of thought recognized under the constitution." Under the amendment to Article 500, authorities may impose prison sentences of two to five years and/or a fine on anyone who commits "any deviant educational or proselytizing activity that contradicts or interferes with the sacred law of Islam."

The constitution states the four Sunni schools (Hanafi, Shafi, Maliki, and Hanbali) and the Shia Zaydi school of Islam are "deserving of total respect," and their followers are free to perform religious practices. It states these schools may follow their own jurisprudence in matters of religious education and certain personal affairs, including marriage, divorce, and inheritance.

The constitution states Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians are the only recognized religious minorities. "Within the limits of the law" they have permission to perform religious rites and ceremonies and to form religious societies. They are also free to address personal affairs and religious education according to their own religious canon. The government considers any citizen who is not a registered member of one of these three groups or who cannot prove his or her family was Christian prior to 1979 to be Muslim.

Since the law prohibits citizens from converting from Islam to another religion, the government only recognizes the Christianity of citizens who are Armenian or Assyrian Christians, because the presence of these groups in the country predates Islam, or of citizens who can prove they or their families were Christian prior to the 1979 revolution. The government also recognizes Sabeian-Mandaeans as Christian, even though they state they do not consider themselves as such. The government often considers Yarsanis as Shia Muslims practicing Sufism, but Yarsanis identify Yarsan as a distinct faith (also known as *Ahl-e-Haq* or *Kakai*). Yarsanis may also self-register as Shia to obtain government services. The government does not recognize evangelical Protestants as Christian.

Citizens who are members of one of the recognized religious minorities must register with authorities. Registration conveys certain rights, including the use of alcohol for religious purposes. Authorities may close a church and arrest its leaders if churchgoers do not register or if unregistered individuals attend services. The law does not recognize as Christian individuals who convert to Christianity. They may not register and are not entitled to the same rights as recognized members of Christian communities.

The Supreme Leader (the *Velayat-e Faqih*, the Guardian of the Islamic Jurist), the country's head of state, oversees extrajudicial special clerical courts, which are not provided for by the constitution. The courts, each headed by a Shia Islamic legal scholar, operate outside the judiciary's purview and investigate offenses committed by clerics, including political statements inconsistent with government policy and nonreligious activities. The courts also issue rulings based on independent interpretations of Islamic legal sources. The constitution provides that the judiciary be "an independent power" that is "free from every kind of unhealthy relation and connection." The government appoints judges "in accordance with religious criteria."

The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) monitor religious activity. The IRGC also monitors churches.

The constitution provides for freedom of the press, except when it is “harmful to the principles of Islam or the rights of the public.”

The Ministry of Education determines the religious curricula of public schools. All school curricula, public and private, must include a course on Shia Islamic teachings, and all pupils must pass this course to advance to the next educational level, through university. Sunni students and students from recognized minority religious groups must take and pass the courses on Shia Islam, although they may also take separate courses on their own religious beliefs. Applicants to university must pass an exam on Islamic, Christian, or Jewish theology, based on their official religious affiliation.

Recognized minority religious groups, except for Sunni Muslims, may operate private schools. The Ministry of Education supervises private schools operated by recognized minority religious groups and imposes certain curriculum requirements. The ministry must approve all textbooks used in coursework, including religious texts. These schools may provide their own religious instruction and in languages other than Farsi, but authorities must approve those texts as well. Minority communities must bear the cost of translating the texts into Farsi for official review. Directors of such private schools must demonstrate loyalty to the official state religion. This requirement, known as *gozinesh* review, is an evaluation to determine adherence to the government ideology and system as well as knowledge of the official interpretation of Shia Islam.

The law bars Baha’is from founding or operating their own educational institutions. A Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology order requires universities to exclude Baha’is from access to higher education, or to expel them if their religious affiliation becomes known. Government regulations state Baha’is are only permitted to enroll in universities if they do not identify themselves as Baha’is. To register for the university entrance examination, Baha’i students must answer a basic multiple-choice question and identify themselves as followers of one of the four officially recognized religions (i.e., Islam, Christianity, Judaism, or Zoroastrianism).

According to the constitution, Islamic scholars in the Assembly of Experts, a group of 86 popularly elected and Supreme Leader-approved clerics whose qualifications include piety and religious scholarship, elect the Supreme Leader. To “safeguard” Islamic ordinances and to ensure legislation passed by the Islamic Consultative Assembly (i.e., the parliament or Majles) is compatible with Islam, a Guardian Council, composed of six Shia clerics appointed by the Supreme Leader and six Shia legal scholars nominated by the judiciary, must review and approve all legislation. The Guardian Council also vets all candidates for the Assembly of Experts, President, and parliament, and supervises elections for those bodies. Individuals who are not Shia Muslims are barred from serving as Supreme Leader or President, as well as from being a member in the Assembly of Experts, Guardian Council, or Expediency Council (the country’s highest arbiter of disputes between the parliament and the Guardian Council over legislation).

The constitution bans parliament from passing laws contrary to Islam and states there may be no amendment to its provisions related to the “Islamic character” of the political or legal system, or to the specification that Twelver Ja’afari Shia Islam is the official religion.

Non-Muslims may not be elected to a representative body or hold senior government, intelligence, or military positions, with the exception of five of the 290 parliamentary seats reserved by the constitution for members of recognized religious minority groups. There are two seats reserved for Armenian Christians, one for Assyrian and Chaldean Christians together, one for Jews, and one for Zoroastrians.

The constitution states that in regions where followers of one of the recognized schools of Sunni Islam constitute the majority, local regulations are to be in accordance with that school, within the bounds of the jurisdiction of local councils and without infringing upon the rights of the followers of other schools.

According to the constitution, a judge should rule on a case on the basis of codified law, but in a situation where such law is absent, he should deliver his judgment on the basis of “authoritative Islamic sources and authentic fatwas.”

The constitution specifies the government must “treat non-Muslims in conformity with the principles of Islamic justice and equity, and respect their human rights, as long as those non-Muslims have not conspired or acted against Islam and the Islamic Republic.”

The law authorizes collection of “blood money,” or *diyyah*, as restitution to families for Muslims and members of recognized religious minorities who are victims of murder, bodily harm, or property damage. Baha’i families, however, are not entitled to receive blood money. This law also reduces the blood money for recognized religious minorities and women to half that of a Muslim man. Women are entitled to equal blood money as men, but only for insurance claims where loss of life occurred

in automobile accidents and not for other categories of death, such as murder. In cases of bodily harm, according to the law, certain male organs (for example, the testicles) are worth more than the entire body of a woman.

The criminal code provides for hudud punishments (those mandated by sharia) for theft, including amputation of the fingers of the right hand, amputation of the left foot, life imprisonment, and death, as well as flogging of up to 99 lashes or stoning for other crimes. As part of hudud, the code allows for *qisas* (retribution in kind). The code also allows for *ta'zir*, which allows judges to use their personal discretion to determine punishment.

By law, non-Muslims may not serve in the judiciary, the security services (which are separate from the regular armed forces), or as public school principals. Officials screen candidates for elected offices and applicants for public sector employment based on their adherence to and knowledge of Islam and loyalty to the Islamic Republic (gozinesh review requirements), although members of recognized religious minorities may serve in the lower ranks of government if they meet these loyalty requirements. Government workers who do not observe Islamic principles and rules are subject to penalties and may be fired or barred from work in a particular sector.

The government bars Baha'is from all government employment and forbids Baha'i participation in the governmental social pension system. Baha'is may not receive compensation for injury or crimes committed against them and may not inherit property. A religious fatwa from the Supreme Leader encourages citizens to avoid all dealings with Baha'is.

Recognized religious groups issue marriage contracts in accordance with their religious laws. The government does not recognize Baha'i marriages or divorces but allows a civil attestation of marriage. The attestation serves as a marriage certificate and allows for basic recognition of the union but does not offer legal protections in marital disputes.

The constitution permits the formation of political parties based on Islam or on one of the recognized religious minorities, provided the parties do not violate the "criteria of Islam," among other stipulations.

The constitution states the military must be Islamic, must be committed to Islamic ideals, and must recruit individuals who are committed to the objectives of the Islamic revolution. In addition to the regular military, the IRGC is charged with upholding the Islamic nature of the revolution at home and abroad. The law does not provide for exemptions from military service based on religious affiliation. The law forbids non-Muslims from holding positions of authority over Muslims in the armed forces. Members of recognized religious minorities with a college education may serve as officers during their mandatory military service, but they may not continue to serve beyond the mandatory service period to become career military officers.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, but at ratification, it entered a general reservation "not to apply any provisions or articles of the Convention that are incompatible with Islamic Laws and the international legislation in effect."

Government Practices

According to numerous international human rights NGOs and media reports, the government convicted and executed dissidents, political reformers, and peaceful protesters on charges of "enmity against God" and producing anti-Islamic propaganda. In February, Amnesty International reported an "alarming rise" in the execution of ethnic minority prisoners since mid-December 2020. Officials arrested Kurdish individuals, including civil society activists, labor rights activists, environmentalists, writers, university students and political activists. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

According to January reports by the NGOs IHR and Iran International, authorities executed three Sunni prisoners – Hamid Rastbala, Kabi Saadat-Jahani and Mohammad Ali Arayesh – on December 31, 2020, at Vakilabad Prison in Mashhad. Ministry of Intelligence officers arrested the three men in 2015 for suspected membership in Hizb al-Forghan, a militant Sunni group, and in the National Solidarity Front of Iranian Sunnis. Branch One of the Revolutionary Court of Mashhad sentenced them to death for "armed rebellion against the Islamic Republic." The men denied being members of Hizb al-Forghan, which was active in the country from 1992 to 1997, when the three men were boys between ages 10 and 12. According to HRANA, prior to their execution, authorities deprived the prisoners of contact with their families for months, including a final meeting, and denied the men legal representation during the trial. In an August 2020 letter, Rastbala said that following their arrest, interrogators tortured all three and threatened to arrest or rape family members to convince them to make televised confessions of their "crimes."

According to Iran International and United for Iran, on January 30, the Justice Department of Sistan and Baluchistan Province announced that authorities executed Javid Dehghan-Khold in Zahedan Central Prison. He had been sentenced to death on charges of “enmity against God/moharebeh” and “armed rebellion against the Islamic Republic” for alleged membership in banned Sunni separatist groups Jaish ul-Adl and Jaish al-Nasr of Iran. A court also convicted Dehghan-Khold of taking part in an attack that killed two Revolutionary Guard officers in 2015 and the kidnapping of five border guards in the city of Saravan in 2017. According to his lawyer, Dehghan-Khold denied membership in these groups or participation in the attacks. The Office of the High Commission on Human Rights (OHCHR) in a January 29 post on Twitter condemned Dehghan-Khold’s execution as part of “the series of executions – at least 28 [Iranians] – since mid-December, including of people from minority groups.” According to Amnesty International, the court had “relied on torture-tainted ‘confessions’ and ignored the serious due process abuses committed by Revolutionary Guard agents and prosecution authorities during the investigation process.”

CHRI and HRANA reported that on February 28, authorities executed four Sunni Ahwazi Arabs – Jasem Heidary, Hossein Silawi, Ali Khasraji, and Nasser Khafajian (Khafaji) – in Sepidar Prison in Ahwaz City, Khuzestan Province, without any advance notice to their families. Ministry of Intelligence agents arrested Heidary in December 2017 and allegedly tortured him into falsely confessing to being a member of an armed group. Security forces detained the other three men in June 2017 as suspects in an armed attack on a military outpost and police station near Ahvaz in May 2017. Officials charged all of the men with “armed rebellion against Islamic rule” (*baghi*). According to Amnesty International, family members who visited the men in prison observed bruises on their bodies, indicating prison authorities had physically abused them. Following the executions, Ministry of Intelligence agents told the four families they were not permitted to hold public memorials or invite family to their homes to mourn. Amnesty International said the families were told the men “would be buried in *la’nat abad* [damned land].”

In March, IHR reported that a woman, Maryam (Masoumeh) Karimi, was executed in Rasht Central Prison at the hands of her own daughter. Authorities had sentenced Karimi more than 13 years earlier for having killed her husband, who was reportedly abusive and had refused to separate from her. In accordance with the rules of *qisas*, Karimi’s estranged daughter, as the victim’s next-of-kin, carried out her execution by hanging on March 15. IHR stated that for unknown reasons, Karimi’s father, her co-accused in the killing, was not executed on the same day, but prison officers brought him to the gallows to see her corpse.

On October 10, World Day Against the Death Penalty, IHR released its findings on the country’s use of capital punishment. According to IHR, as of October, government executions continued at an “alarmingly high” rate, with at least 226 individuals – one juvenile offender, nine women, and 216 adult men – put to death. One hundred and twenty-five executions were *qisas* executions for murder, compared with 164 for the same period in 2020. The *qisas* executions included the juvenile offender, five adult women, and 119 adult men. Among the men, officials executed eight in Zahedan Prison, including Sunni Baluch prisoners Elias Qalandarzehi and Hassan Dehviri, on charges of armed rebellion against Islamic rule/*baghi* for alleged involvement with Jaish al-Adl, and Sunni Ahwazi Arab Ali Motayyeri [Motiri] on charges of moharebeh, *afsad-i fil arz* (“spreading corruption on Earth”) and killing two individuals from the Basij paramilitary militia forces. According to United for Iran, authorities held Motayyeri in solitary confinement for more than one year and subjected him to physical and psychological abuse to force a false confession. According to Dehviri’s attorney, authorities escalated his original prison sentence to execution after he peacefully protested inside Zahedan Central Prison, including by signing statements condemning the executions of Sunni prisoners. Dehviri’s attorney said his execution was carried out despite a retrial request pending with the Supreme Court.

In April, IHR released its annual report on the government’s use of the death penalty, covering the 2020 calendar year. According to the report, murder was the most common charge brought against those executed, and 211 of the 267 individuals executed had been sentenced under the *qisas* code. IHR said that between 2010 and 2020, the government carried out at least 1,678 *qisas* executions.

In October, UNPO, the Kurdistan Human Rights Association Geneva, the Baluchistan Human Rights Group, and the Ahwaz Human Rights Organization submitted a joint report to the UNSR in which they stated executions of the predominantly Sunni Baluch minority and of Kurdish citizens increased between June and October, with at least 39 Baluchi citizens and 56 Kurds executed during that time period. According to IHR’s report entitled *Women and the Death Penalty: A 12-Year Analysis*, between January 1, 2010, and October 10, 2021, three of the at least 164 women who were executed were convicted on security charges. One of these was Shirin Alamhooli, who was executed in 2010 on charges of moharebeh/enmity against God and membership in PEJAK, a Kurdish opposition group. According to IHR, Alamhooli did not speak Farsi at the time of her interrogations and legal proceedings. In her letters from prison, she described experiencing three months of physical and mental abuse.

Residents of provinces containing large Sunni populations, including Kurdistan, Khuzestan, and Sistan and Baluchistan, reported judicial authorities and members of the security services continued to repress them, including through extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, and torture in detention. They also reported discrimination (including suppression of religious rights), denial of basic government services, and inadequate funding for infrastructure projects. The UN Secretary General's August report compiled by OHCHR, IHR, and other human rights activists continued to report a disproportionately large number of executions of Sunni prisoners, particularly Kurds, Baluchis, and Arabs. The Secretary General's August report also stated the Supreme Court upheld death sentences for 10 Kurdish political prisoners on charges involving "acting against national security," *afsad-i fil arz*/spreading corruption on earth, *moharebeh*, and membership in Salafi groups.

According to the UNSR Rehman's July report, on February 22, IRGC officers killed 10 Sunni Baluchi fuel smugglers (*sookhtbars*) in Sistan and Baluchistan Province at its border with Pakistan. The shootings triggered demonstrations, during which security forces fired lethal ammunition at protesters and bystanders, killing at least two persons and seriously injuring others. The death toll was difficult to verify, following the disruption of local mobile data networks from the 24th to the 27th of February. Reuters reported the death toll in Saravan and other parts of Sistan and Baluchistan Province as "possibly up to 23."

According to Amnesty International, authorities held Ahwazi Arab Falah Heidari incommunicado following his arrest on May 20. A source told Amnesty International that security and intelligence agents interrogated Heidari and his son, Safa Heidari, for information about the political activities of Falah's brother, Abdorrahman Heidari, who was based abroad and was the spokesperson for the political group Patriotic Arab Democratic Movement in Ahwaz. According to Amnesty International, Ministry of Intelligence interrogators also questioned Falah Heidari about the religious beliefs and practices of his other son, Alaa Heidari, who had left Iran several years earlier, sought asylum abroad after converting from Shia to Sunni Islam and had since engaged in online proselytizing activities. Authorities aimed to have Falah Heidari pressure his relatives to stop their activities or to relay authorities' threats to kill or abduct and forcibly return Abdorrahman and Alaa to the country. On May 30, an IRGC officer interrogated Falah Heidari's 15-year-old daughter about her family's contact with her paternal uncle and brother abroad, as well as her family's political opinions and religious beliefs.

According to UNSR Rehman's July report, the UN Secretary General's August report, and Human Rights Watch (HRW), in January, authorities arrested and arbitrarily detained more than 100 Kurdish civil society activists and forcibly disappeared some of these individuals. Observers stated that there was credible evidence to believe some of these activists were expressing their Sunni religious identity while standing up for Kurdish rights. According to HRW, of the 89 individuals who remained detained at year's end, authorities subjected at least 40 to enforced disappearance and refused to reveal any information about their whereabouts to their families. While authorities did not provide information about the reasons for these arrests, according to IHR and HRW, the arrests were "due to the individuals' peaceful exercise of their rights to freedom of opinion, expression and association, including through involvement in peaceful civil society activism and/or perceived support for the political visions espoused by Kurdish opposition parties seeking respect for the human rights of Iran's Kurdish minority."

Human rights NGOs reported poor conditions and the mistreatment of religious minorities held in government prisons. BIC reported Baha'is and other prisoners also faced a higher risk of exposure to COVID-19 due to overcrowding.

In February, IranWire and CHRI reported that Behnam Mahjoubi, a Gonabadi dervish, died after suffering seizures in Tehran's Evin Prison. Authorities had originally arrested Mahjoubi and several other Gonabadi dervishes for participating in street protests in 2018 following the death under police interrogation of a Gonabadi Sufi dervish. Mahjoubi had been serving a two-year prison sentence since June 2020, despite the state medical examiner's concluding he was not in sufficiently good health to withstand incarceration. Amnesty International stated that during his incarceration, authorities injected Mahjoubi with unknown substances and subjected him to electric shocks on multiple occasions.

CHRI reported that in a letter from Rajae-Shahr Prison in Karaj to UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet, dated February 3, former political prisoner Arash Sadeghi said authorities denied several fellow prisoners medical treatment, including Raheleh Ahmadi, who was serving a 31-month sentence in Evin Prison for opposing the country's mandatory hijab law. According to CHRI, Ahmadi suffered from mobility issues and her lawyer and medical specialists said there was a possibility she could become paralyzed. In his letter, Sadeghi also wrote that Monireh Arabshahi, who was serving 5.5 years in Kachuei Prison in Karaj for peacefully protesting the mandatory hijab law, had developed a speech impairment due to an untreated inflamed thyroid gland.

On September 28, IranWire reported authorities continued to reserve the harshest treatment for prisoners who were religious minorities. This mistreatment included beatings, harassment of family members, and forbidding visits and phone calls. A former Yarsani inmate told IranWire that authorities shaved Yarsani prisoners' traditional mustaches as a means of humiliating and degrading them. In Dieselabad Prison in Kermanshah Province, to harass Sunni prisoners, the guards would play "music and eulogies that insulted the caliphs and their beliefs." One source told IranWire that authorities routinely tortured Sunnis in detention to obtain confessions. "If you're both a Sunni and a Kurd, these two characteristics are enough for you to be guilty."

The Abdorrahman Boroumand Center for Human Rights in Iran stated that from January 1 to September 24, the government sentenced at least 77 individuals to flogging, based on its interpretation of sharia, and carried out these sentences in at least eight cases.

In October, media reported the government continued to practice qisas, including hand or finger amputations for theft. According to these reports, in October, authorities sentenced one man to be blinded as punishment for having blinded his neighbor in one eye during a fight in 2018.

According to IranWire, on June 15, authorities transferred Amir Hossein Moradi to the Tehran Police Investigation Center, which, according to IranWire, suggested a new case was being prepared against him. Authorities arrested Moradi following the November 2019 protests, charging him and two other defendants with "participating in vandalism and arson with the intent to confront and engage in war with the Islamic Republic of Iran" and "enmity against God." Later in the month, the Twitter account *1,500 Images*, run by activists in contact with the family members of individuals killed and arrested during the November 2019 protests, which initially began over a fuel price increase but quickly turned into antigovernment demonstrations, warned about Moradi's deteriorating health, reporting, "He is sick whenever he eats and has been taken to the hospital several times on a stretcher" and that he "is in a critical condition."

On September 23, HRW reported the judiciary had confirmed the September 21 death of Shahin Nasser, a prisoner who said he had witnessed the torture and forced confession of fellow inmate Navid Afkari when they were both detained in Shiraz Prison. The government arrested Afkari and his brothers Habib and Vahid in 2018 on charges that included "enmity against God." Authorities executed Afkari in 2020. His brothers remained in solitary confinement at year's end. Nasser's former lawyer posted on Twitter that Nasser had called him several times on September 20, the day before his death, to report that his interrogators had threatened him with physical violence.

The government continued to incarcerate numerous prisoners on various charges related to religion. The *Iran Prison Atlas*, a database compiled by the U.S.-based NGO United for Iran, stated at least 67 members of minority religious groups remained imprisoned as of November for "religious practice." Of the prisoners in the *Atlas* database, the government sentenced at least 62 to long-term imprisonment or executed them on charges of "enmity against God" or armed rebellion against Islamic rule/baghi, which officials sometimes used in recent years instead of "enmity against God." Authorities sentenced at least 20 persons to prison for "insulting Islamic sanctities" and for "insulting the Prophet or Islam." According to the NGO Human Rights Without Frontiers, there were 82 persons serving prison terms for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief as of November 1.

In the July report, UNSR Rehman again expressed concern at the reportedly high number of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience from the Azeri, Kurdish, and Ahwazi Arab communities, many of whom were from religious minorities.

According to the Kurdistan Human Rights Network, in March, authorities sentenced Kurdish Sunni imam Mamoutsa Rasoul Hamzehpour to three years in prison for "propaganda against the state" and "activities on the internet." According to the Kurdistan Press Agency and a Kurdish NGO, security forces arrested Hamzehpour in the city of Piranshahr in 2020 at his home, which they searched. The news report stated Hamzehpour was regarded as a prominent cleric in West Azerbaijan Province and had been arrested several times in the past.

According to IranWire, security forces conducted multiple arrests of Baha'is in the last week of September without providing reasons or charges. Authorities held four Baha'is from Shiraz City – Negar Ghaderi Sadi, Moin Misaghi, Hayedeh Forootan, and his son, Mehran Mosalanejad – in solitary confinement in Shiraz Police Detention Center 201 for at least one month following their arrests on September 22. Sources said officers ransacked Misaghi's house, spilling a bowl of soup on his one-and-a-half-year-old baby, causing the child to suffer burns. At Negar Ghaderi's house, officers confiscated mobile telephones, tablets, satellite dishes, and several prayer books. Authorities previously raided these four individuals' homes in April and confiscated personal items, including religious books and pictures. IranWire reported that on September 23 in Ghaem Shahr, Mazandaran Province, Intelligence Ministry agents entered the home of Baha'i Sheida Taeed, confiscated her mobile phone, passport, computer, family photographs, and other personal items, and arrested her without a warrant. BIC's representative to the UN posted on Twitter that authorities appeared to be targeting young parents, and their children in particular, with arbitrary arrests.

IranWire reported that on September 23, Ministry of Intelligence agents arrested Baha'i Sheida Taeed in Mazandaran Province. A source told IranWire that eight agents of the Mazandaran Intelligence Bureau entered Taeed's home, which they searched for two hours. After confiscating personal items, including her mobile phone, laptop, computer, letters, family pictures, and passport, they arrested her without a warrant. According to IranWire, this was the third time authorities had detained or arrested Taeed since 1989.

According to HRANA, Yarsani Kurdish activist and documentary filmmaker Mozhgan Kavousi continued at year's end to serve her sentence at Evin Prison, along with 19 other female prisoners of conscience. Branch 1 of the Revolutionary Court of Noshahr convicted her of "spreading propaganda against the system" and "inciting people to disrupt the country's order and security" in connection with two posts on her Instagram account about the November 2019 antigovernment protests and sentenced her to five years and nine months in prison.

According to widespread media reports and Amnesty International, security forces reacted violently to protests that began in Khuzestan Province in mid-July over water shortages. As protests spread across the country, government forces fired on crowds with live ammunition, birdshot, and tear gas, killing at least nine protestors, including a 17-year-old boy. Security and intelligence forces swept up dozens of protesters and activists, including many from the Sunni Ahwazi Arab minority, in mass arrests.

Authorities transferred Arab minority rights activist Mohammad Ali Amourinejad and several other inmates, including prisoners of conscience serving life sentences for "enmity against God" due to having promoted educational and cultural rights for Ahwazi Arabs, out of Sheiban Prison following the unrest. At year's end, the government continued to hold these prisoners incommunicado in an unknown location.

UNPO's October joint report to the UNSR stated that in June, officials summoned at least 10 Baluchi citizens to court following a rally in the village of Ramin to prevent the destruction of the Eidgah (land reserved for Eid prayers for Sunnis). The report also stated that since June, authorities had arrested or detained three Sunni clerics and religious activists without disclosing the charges, including Baluchi Sunni cleric Jafar Hanzarani from Iranshahr County, Sistan and Baluchestan Province, whom police arrested on August 21 without charge. According to the same report, IRGC intelligence officers arrested Baluchi religious activist Khalilullah Zaeem on September 28, also without an official charge.

According to Article 19, a London-based international human rights organization, the new amendments to the penal code passed in January that criminalized insulting Iranian ethnicities or "divine religions or Islamic schools of thought" (Article 499) and committing "any deviant educational or proselytizing activity that contradicts or interferes with the sacred law of Islam" (Article 500) put religious minorities such as Baha'is, Yarsanis, Mandaean, Sufi dervishes, Christian converts, atheists, and followers of Erfan-e Halgheh (Inter-Universalism) at a higher risk of persecution. In July, human rights advocate Ewelina Ochab wrote in *Forbes* magazine, "Such provisions are destined to be abused against religious minorities." In his July report, UNSR Rehman stated these two amendments would "further suppress freedom of religion and belief as well as freedom of expression, especially for religious minorities, and in particular, non-recognized minorities such as Baha'is, atheists, converts to Christianity and Gonabadi dervishes."

In his July report, UNSR Rehman also noted other official policies targeting religious minorities, including documents published in March that indicated that the suppression of Baha'is and Gonabadi dervishes was "official policy in Sari, Mazandaran Province." The report stated the documents contained plans by local authorities to "rigorously control the movements" of Baha'i and Gonabadi dervish residents and to impose restrictions on Baha'is in education and commerce. According to the UNSR's report, authorities harassed, arrested, and forcibly disappeared dozens of Baha'is in April and June in incidents in Shiraz and Isfahan.

Non-Armenian Christians, particularly evangelicals and other converts from Islam, continued to experience disproportionate levels of arrests and detentions and high levels of harassment and surveillance, according to Christian NGOs. Human rights organizations and Christian NGOs continued to report authorities arrested Christians, including members of unrecognized churches, for their religious affiliation or activities, and charged them with operating illegally in private homes or supporting and accepting assistance from "enemy" countries. Many arrests reportedly took place during police raids on religious gatherings and included confiscation of religious property. News reports stated authorities subjected arrested Christians to severe physical and psychological mistreatment, which at times included beatings and solitary confinement. According to human rights NGOs, the government also continued to enforce the prohibition against proselytizing.

According to human rights activists, the government continued to subject Christians who converted from Islam to arbitrary arrest, physical abuse, and other forms of harsh treatment. The NGO Article 18 reported that on April 19, intelligence agents in Dezful, Khuzestan Province, arrested four

Christian converts – Hojjat Lotfi Khalaf, Esmail Narimanpour, Alireza Varak-Shah, and Mohammad Ali (Davoud) Torabi – and in August charged them with “propaganda against the Islamic Republic” due to their membership in a house church. Authorities arrested and interrogated four additional male Christian converts at the same time and ordered them to sign commitments to refrain from further Christian activities. Authorities reportedly beat some of the Christians during their interrogations, including Narimanpour.

Article 18 reported that on January 18, the morality police rearrested Christian convert Fatemeh (Mary) Mohammadi, saying her trousers were too tight, her headscarf was not correctly adjusted, and she should not be wearing an unbuttoned coat. Mohammadi, who was released from prison in February 2020 after being incarcerated for participating in January 2020 prodemocracy protests, stated she had been unable to return to work as a gymnastics instructor because intelligence agents pressured her former employer not to rehire her.

According to Article 18 and HRANA, on August 22, the Albroz Court of Appeals sentenced three Christian converts – Milad Goodarzi, Amin Khaki, and Alireza Nourmohammadi – to three years each in prison. In November 2020, authorities raided the men’s homes and confiscated personal items, including laptop computers, mobile phones and religious books. At their first trial in June, the Revolutionary Court of Karaj sentenced the three men to five years’ imprisonment each and a 400 million rial (\$9,500) fine for “spreading propaganda against the state” and “engaging in propaganda that educates in a deviant way contrary to the holy religion of Islam.” The latter charge stemmed from an amendment to Article 500 penalizing “any deviant educational or proselytizing activity that contradicts or interferes with the sacred law of Islam” that went into effect on February 18.

Media reported that on 27 January, the 4th Branch of Bushehr Court of Appeal upheld the one-year prison sentences of three Christian converts – Sam Khosravi, Sasan Khosravi, and Habib Heydari – agreeing with the lower court that they were guilty of the “organization of house churches and promotion of Christianity, which are clear examples of propaganda against the state.” Ministry of Intelligence agents arrested Sam and Sasan Khosravi, their wives Maryam Falahi and Marjan Falahi, Heydari, and Pooriya Peyma and his wife Fatemeh Talebi at their homes in Bushehr Province in July 2019. In June 2020, authorities fined the women and gave the men prison terms of one year for Habib, Sam, and Sasan, and 91 days for Pooriya. The court also sentenced Sam and Sasan Khosravi to two years of internal exile and a ban on working in their profession, the hospitality sector, while exiled.

According to IranWire, on March 14, authorities informed Christian converts Hodayoun Zhavah and Sara Ahmadi their case “had advanced” and they could receive a summons to prison at any moment. Intelligence agents arrested the couple in June 2019 during a trip they took with several other Christian families to Amol in Mazandaran Province. Authorities first held the couple in Amol before taking them to Evin Prison. Authorities released Zhavah after one month, but Ahmadi spent 67 days in detention, half of them in solitary confinement in the Ministry of Intelligence’s Ward 209. On November 14, 2020, Branch 26 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran sentenced Zhavah and Ahmadi to two years and 11 years in prison, respectively, for “membership and leadership of [a] church.” On appeal Ahmadi’s sentence was reduced to eight years in December 2020.

According to Article 18, on September 5, authorities arrested three Christian converts – Ahmad Sarparast, Morteza Mashoodkari, and Ayoob Poor-Rezazadeh – during raids on a house church and a private home in Rasht. The officials held the three converts incommunicado at an unknown location, possibly an IRGC detention center, for nearly two weeks. On September 18, authorities transferred Mashoodkari and Sarparast to Lakan Prison and released them on bail on September 21. Authorities released Poor-Rezazadeh on bail on October 3. Authorities did not file official charges, but during interrogations, they accused the men of “acting against national security.”

Article 18 reported that on April 21, authorities arrested four Christian converts – Hojjat Lotfi Khalaf, Esmaeil Narimanpour, Alireza Varak-Shah, and one other person – and detained them for two days. Authorities released the four individuals on the condition they refrain from further Christian activities. Government representatives subsequently summoned them to the 4th branch of the prosecutor’s office of the Civil and Revolutionary Court of Dezful, Khuzestan Province, to answer charges of “propaganda against the Islamic Republic.”

According to human rights activists, Baluchis continued to face government discrimination both as Sunni religious practitioners and as an ethnic minority. Baluchi rights activists reported continued arbitrary arrests, physical abuse, and unfair trials of journalists and human rights activists. They stated authorities often pressured family members of those in prison to remain silent. According to the UN Secretary General’s August report, between January 1 and June 18, authorities executed at least 26 Baluchi individuals, the majority on narcotics charges. The same report stated there were “a large number of executions of members of minorities” during the first half of the year, including from the Kurdish and Arab minorities. The report also noted that from January 1 to June 15, at least 24 border couriers (*kolbar*) and fuel smugglers (*sookhtbar*), predominantly from the Kurdish and Baluch minorities, “were killed as a result of the government’s excessive use of force.”

Human rights NGOs, including CHRI, HRANA, and the official website of Gonabadi Sufi dervishes (Majzooban Noor), reported throughout the year on extremely poor conditions continuing inside Qarchak Women's Prison, as well as reports of Shia guards requiring all inmates, regardless of their faith, to use a chador as their head-to-toe covering.

On June 16, HRANA reported that Hossein Sepanta continued to face medical neglect of long-term injuries in his eighth year inside Adelabad Prison in Shiraz, Kerman Province. Sepanta, a convert from Islam to Zoroastrianism, began serving a 14-year sentence in 2013 on charges of "propaganda against the state" and "assembly and collusion against national security." Authorities beat him during his incarceration, causing a spinal cord disorder. United for Iran posted on Twitter on July 25 that authorities moved Sepanta to a Ministry of Intelligence cell inside the prison after he reportedly started a hunger strike, making it impossible for the NGO to obtain new information on his condition.

According to a January report by IranWire, in December 2020, Ayatollah Mahmoud Amjad, who criticized the government many times in the past, released a video protesting the government's execution of a dissident journalist and blaming Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei for the bloodshed in the country since 2009. He also called on fellow clerics and religious scholars not to remain silent about the violence. According to his Instagram page, he continued to post messages in support of opposition figures like Mehdi Karroubi as of October.

According to the human rights NGO Hengaw, in late February, government security services arrested five Kurdish religious activists – Musa Brusan, Taha Karimi, and Saber Mohtadi from Brukan; Abdul Latif Mahmoudi Deli from Oshnaviyeh; and Naseh Sorkhabi from Piranshahar – in West Azerbaijan Province. The government transferred the men to Urmia Central Prison on February 27. According to the NGO, authorities accused the five individuals of "collaborating with and joining Salafist groups." NGOs reported that the Kurds were denied access to a lawyer.

There continued to be reports that authorities harassed and arrested Sunni clerics and congregants. According to a December report by Iran International, the Supreme Leader's representative in Golestan Province, Kazem Nour-Mofidi, dismissed Mowlavi Hossein Gorgij, the Friday prayer imam in Azadshahr City and an outspoken and popular Sunni cleric, as punishment for his Friday prayer remarks that allegedly insulted Shia "sanctities." Nour-Mofidi appointed a new Sunni imam. Gorgij's followers protested in Azadshahr, and Gorgij issued a statement saying his remarks were misunderstood and that he meant no disrespect toward Shia.

HRANA reported in July that nine Sunni prisoners held in Vakilabad Prison in Mashhad, Razavi Khorasan Province, since at least 2016 wrote a letter to UNSR Rehman requesting an investigation into their cases. The prisoners – Eisa Eid-Mohammadi, Farhad Shakeri, Eid al-Hakim Azim Gargij, Abdolrahman Gargij, Habib Pir-Mohammadi, Abdolbaset Orsan, Mohammad Reza Sheikh Ahmadi, Morteza Fakuri, and Abdullah Hosseini – said authorities beat and tortured them into providing false confessions and threatened their family members. HRANA said they received death sentences and long prison terms based on false charges of being members of dissident groups and groups the government labeled as "terrorist," for example, Hizb al-Forghan, and of committing acts of "propaganda against the regime."

BIC reported authorities arrested 64 Baha'is between January and December. Prison officials kept many in solitary confinement for long periods and detained individuals for weeks or months before releasing them on bail. BIC stated that authorities set bail at exorbitantly high levels, requiring families to hand over deeds to properties or business licenses. In nearly all cases, authorities searched their homes and/or workplaces and confiscated personal belongings, particularly books, photographs, computers, copying machines, and other supplies, as well as items related to the Baha'i Faith. Some victims reported officers beat them when taking them into custody. According to BIC, during the year, authorities required 18 Baha'is to begin serving prison sentences or resume sentences following temporary release.

According to BIC, on June 8, Branch 26 of the Revolutionary Court of Tehran sentenced Baha'i Shahrzad Nazifi, a women's cross-country motorcycle racing trainer, to eight years in prison for "managing unlawful groups for the purpose of disturbing national security." On January 21, Branch 28 of the Revolutionary Court of Tehran sentenced Baha'is Sofia Mobini and Negin Tadrissi to five years each in prison on national security charges. Subsequently, Judge Mohammad Moghiseh, from the same court, without arraignment, adjusted their sentences to 10 and five years' imprisonment, respectively, for "membership in the illegal Baha'i organization with intent to disturb national security," under Article 499 of the penal code. The Court of Appeals later restored their original five-year prison sentences. Intelligence agents arrested Mobini and Tadrissi in 2017 in connection with celebrations of a Baha'i holy day.

In March, HRW reported that Baha'i historian and writer Touraj Amini had begun serving a six-year prison sentence in January. Authorities first searched Amini's house in 2019, confiscating numerous books and his laptop. HRANA later reported that a court in Karaj sentenced Amini to one year's

imprisonment and two years in domestic exile in 2020. An Alborz Province appeals court later reduced the sentence to six months in prison and rescinded the exile. According to HRW, Amini is a historian specializing in the history of Iranian religious minorities prior to the 1979 revolution.

The Kurdistan Human Rights Network reported that in early October, the Revolutionary Court of Orumiyeh sentenced Sunni Kurds Anvar Chaleshi and Kamel Jabarvand (also known as Saydan Maskan) to seven years in prison for “acting against national security” through “membership in the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan.” IRGC officers arrested the men in December 2020 and transferred them in a MOIS detention center in the al-Mahdi base in Orumiyeh, West Azerbaijan Province in January, following their interrogation.

Activists and NGOs reported that the government continued to detain or disappear Yarsani activists and community leaders for engaging in awareness-raising regarding government practices or discrimination against the Yarsani community. According to NGO reports, on June 28, a district court in Kermanshah arrested Kheyrollah Haghighouyan of the Yarsan Civil Rights’ Activists Advisory Council for his remarks criticizing the government’s discriminatory practices against the Yarsani community and for commemorating the eight-year anniversary of the deaths of three Yarsani activists who self-immolated to protest the forced shaving of mustaches – considered an insult in the Yarsani religion – of Yarsani prisoners in Hamadan Prison. The court accused Haghighouyan of “insulting the sanctities and officials of the Islamic Republic of Iran.”

According to a March report by CHRI, judges continued to use internal exile as a form of punishment for political prisoners, including peaceful activists, religious minorities, and dissidents. Exile could be ordered as the primary punishment, for example for those found guilty of moharebeh or “armed rebellion,” or as a supplemental punishment for various crimes, to be carried out after the completion of a prison sentence. Judges chose exile locations from a list prepared by the Ministry of Interior; these were usually remote towns in regions with extreme poverty. CHRI reported that during the year, judges also sent individuals into “prison exile” by transferring them in the middle of their prison terms to severely under-resourced prisons far from their families and friends. According to CHRI, the concept of exile or banishment is rooted in Shia theology and is referred to as “denial of country” (*nafiye balad*). CHRI stated that prison exile also harmed the detainee’s family by putting the individual in a location family members could not easily visit.

CHRI reported that on January 24, Golrokh Iraee Ebrahimi, a civil rights activist who protested against the practice of stoning women accused of adultery, was transferred from Gharchak Women’s Prison in Tehran to the central prison in Amol, Mazandaran Province, far from her parents. Authorities originally arrested and charged Ebrahimi in 2014 with “insulting Islamic sanctities” and “spreading propaganda.” According to her husband, prison officials held Ebrahimi in an unsanitary ward with approximately 50 other inmates, where the risks of infection from COVID-19 and other diseases were high. Contrary to law, prisoners were not being separated by type of offense or duration of sentence, and many of the other inmates in Ebrahimi’s ward were serving narcotics-related sentences. According to the NGO Humanists International, in April, Branch 26 of the Tehran Revolutionary Court sentenced Iraee in absentia to an additional one year in prison, banned her from membership in political organizations, and imposed a two-year travel ban on charges of “propaganda against the state.” Iraee was denied legal representation during the trial. She remained in Amol Prison at year’s end, unable to make telephone calls or contact her family.

Human rights NGOs reported that in February, authorities summoned Ebrahim Firouzi, a Christian convert, to respond to allegations of “propaganda against the Islamic Republic in favor of hostile groups.” He appeared in court on February 8. Authorities arrested him and detained him in Chabahar Prison in Sistan and Baluchestan Province for 19 days, and then released him on bail. Firouzi had been in internal exile as part of his 2015 sentence for “collusion against national security” for converting to and practicing Christianity and related missionary activities. After first serving six years in Rajai Shahr Prison, he was released in November 2019 and reported to the city of Sarbaz for the two years of internal exile included in his sentence. Authorities later extended his exile by 11 months, saying that Firouzi did not have proper permission for a brief trip home to attend to some family business involving the death of his mother. The government informed him in November that he would not be required to serve the 11-month extension of his internal exile.

In the July report, UNSR Rehman stated there continued to be reports of forced evictions of the Sunni Baluch minority in Sistan and Baluchistan Province, despite the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Citing a report by HRANA, HRW said a court in Borazjan, Bushehr Province, sentenced six Baha’is to lengthy prison terms on vaguely defined national security charges, including propaganda against the state “by spreading the beliefs of the Baha’i Faith.” The six convicted Baha’is were Maryam Bashir, Mino Bashir, Hayedeh Ram, Frank Sheikhi, Borhan Ismaili, and Derna Ismaili. Authorities charged Borhan Ismaili with “spreading” the beliefs of the Baha’i Faith and acting against national security interests and sentenced him to 11 years in prison. The court sentenced the other individuals to 12 and a half years in prison for “assisting” in this propaganda, the evidence of which included social media posts on Facebook. At year’s end, the case remained subject to appeal.

The government continued to permit Armenian Christians to exercise what sources stated was perhaps the greatest degree of religious freedom among religious minorities in the country. It extended preservation efforts to Armenian holy sites and allowed nationals of Armenian descent and Armenian visitors to observe religious and cultural traditions within their churches and dedicated clubs.

In November, Humanists International stated in its *Freedom of Thought Report 2021* that although “enmity against God” is framed as a religious offense and may be used against humanists and other religious dissenters, it [was] most often used as a punishment for political acts that challenge[d] the regime (on the basis that to oppose the theocratic regime is to oppose Allah).”

According to the U.S. Institute of Peace, the government continued to monitor statements and views of senior Shia religious leaders who did not support government policies or Supreme Leader Khamenei’s views. According to international media, authorities continued to target these Shia clerics with arrest, detention, funding cuts, loss of clerical credentials, and confiscation of property.

Critics stated the government continued to use extrajudicial special clerical courts to control non-Shia Muslim clerics as well as to prosecute Shia clerics who expressed controversial ideas or participated in activities outside the sphere of religion, such as journalism or reformist political activities.

Sources said that even when arrested, perpetrators of crimes against Baha’is faced reduced punishment if they stated that their acts were based on the religious identity of the victim.

The government continued to require all women to adhere to “Islamic dress” standards in public, including covering their hair and fully covering their bodies in loose clothing – an overcoat and a hijab or, alternatively, a chador (full body-length semicircle of fabric worn over both the head and clothes). Although the government at times eased enforcement of rules for such dress, it also punished “un-Islamic dress” with arrests, lashings, fines, and dismissal from employment. The government continued to crack down on public protests against the compulsory hijab and Islamic dress requirements for women.

According to media reports, on August 9, authorities in Orumiyyeh, West Azerbaijan Province arrested a man for running over two women with his vehicle for “bad hijab” and not heeding the Islamic dress code. The two women, one of whom was reportedly seriously injured, were taken to the hospital. Chief Justice Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Ejei ordered an investigation into the attack. Meeting with officials on August 9, he stressed the judicial duty of “supporting those who enjoin good and forbid wrong and defend Islamic values.”

The NGO Frontline Defenders reported that on March 9, the Tehran Appeals Court reduced Saba Kord-Afshari’s prison sentence, which she received in 2019 on a set of charges relating to her protesting the compulsory hijab, from 24 years to seven years and six months in prison. According to the NGO, on January 26, guards physically assaulted Kord-Afshari and forcibly transferred her from one ward of Qarchak Women’s Prison to another. Kord-Afshari undertook a hunger strike from May 8 to 18 to protest the continued incarceration of her mother, women’s rights defender Raheleh Ahmadi, in Evin Prison, despite Ahmadi’s deteriorating physical and mental health.

On June 21, UN human rights experts condemned the continued imprisonment of Nasrin Sotoudeh, a prominent female human rights lawyer and 2012 winner of the European Parliament’s Sakharov Prize for what Amnesty International described as her “peaceful human rights work, including her defense of women protesting against Iran’s forced-hijab laws.” On July 21, authorities released her from Qarchak Women’s Prison on temporary leave to receive treatment after she contracted COVID-19 there. Her husband told media that conditions in Qarchak Women’s Prison were “catastrophic.” Authorities summoned Sotoudeh back to prison one month after her release. The government arrested Sotoudeh multiple times since 2009 because of her work as a rights defender. A court sentenced her to 33 years in prison and 148 lashes in 2019. According to HRW, in 2020, authorities arrested and then gave conditional release to Sotoudeh’s attorney, Payam Derafshan, whom the NGO described as “a respected human rights attorney.” According to the HRW report, the IRGC committed “revolting abuse and medical negligence” on Derafshan during his detention in Evin Prison, including injecting him with a substance that resulted in physical and psychological damage.

The government continued to suppress public behavior it deemed counter to Islamic law, such as dancing and men and women appearing together in public.

The government continued to hold many Baha’i properties it had seized following the 1979 revolution, including cemeteries, holy places, historical sites, and administrative centers. It also continued to prevent Baha’is from performing burials in accordance with their religious tradition. According to the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC), authorities routinely prevented the burial of deceased Baha’is from Tabriz at the local Vadi-i-Rahmat Cemetery. Instead, they often sent the remains for burial in Miandoab, 100 miles away, where authorities did not permit the

families to wash the bodies and perform Baha'i burial rites. IHRDC noted that Baha'i religious practice requires that the deceased be buried at a location within an hour's travel time from the place of death; however, the travel time between Tabriz and Miandoab is approximately 2.5 hours. According to the report, authorities at the cemetery, the Tabriz City Council, and the Eastern Azerbaijan provincial government said they were executing orders prohibiting the burial of Baha'is in Tabriz, but none of those offices claimed responsibility for issuing the order.

Citing a report by the Baha'i National Center, in April, HRW reported that authorities instituted a prohibition on the Tehran Baha'i community from burying their dead in a section of a cemetery, Golestan Javid, near Tehran that previously was allocated for their use. In an April 23 statement, the Baha'i National Center said the office overseeing the cemetery threatened Baha'is trying to use the designated part of the cemetery. HRW stated that the new policy was part of "a broader, decades-long government repression" of the Baha'i community. The NGO reported that the Baha'i representative to the UN in Geneva stated that the prohibition was intended to coerce the Baha'i community into burying the dead in areas of the nearby Khavaran cemetery, believed to be the site of a mass grave for political prisoners killed by the government in 1988. NGOs and the media identified Ebrahim Raisi, the country's newly elected President, as being heavily involved in those killings. In April, Amnesty International stated that the mass grave was bulldozed multiple times and had become a symbol of the struggle for truth and justice. The Amnesty report said, "As well as causing further pain and anguish to the already persecuted Baha'i minority by depriving them of their rights to give their loved ones a dignified burial in line with their religious beliefs, Iran's authorities are willfully destroying a crime scene."

In his July report, UNSR Rehman expressed "alarm" at the government's order denying the Baha'i community access to that part of the Khavaran cemetery assigned for their use, saying, "This order violates the Baha'i community's right to freedom of religion and belief." He said that the order was "one of the many occasions where Baha'i cemeteries have been desecrated or where burial rituals have been restricted."

According to members of the Sabeian-Mandaean and Yarsani religious communities, authorities continued to deny them permission to perform religious ceremonies in public and to deny them building permits for places of worship.

MOIS and law enforcement officials reportedly continued to harass Sufis and Sufi leaders. Media and human rights organizations reported continued censorship of the Gonabadi order's *Mazar Soltani* websites, which contained speeches by the order's late leader, Noor Ali Tabandeh, and articles on mysticism.

According to Christian NGOs, government restrictions on published religious material continued, including confiscations of previously available books about Christianity, although government-sanctioned translations of the Bible reportedly remained available. Government officials frequently confiscated Bibles and related non-Shia religious literature and pressured publishing houses printing unsanctioned non-Muslim religious materials to cease operations. Books about the Yarsani religion remained banned. Unrecognized religious minorities, such as Yarsanis and Baha'is, continued to report they were unable to legally produce or distribute religious literature. Books published by religious minorities, regardless of topic, were required to carry labels on the cover denoting their non-Shia Muslim authorship.

There were continued reports of authorities placing restrictions on Baha'i businesses or forcing them to shut down after they temporarily closed in observance of Baha'i holidays, or of authorities threatening shop owners with potential closure, even though by law, businesses may close without providing a reason for up to 15 days a year. NGOs also reported the government continued to raid Baha'i homes and businesses and confiscate private and commercial property, as well as religious materials.

UNSR Rehman's July report stated authorities continued to confiscate Baha'i properties they characterized as "illegitimate wealth."

BIC reported that in August, judicial authorities issued court orders informing six Baha'i property owners of the imminent seizure of their properties in Semnan Province. These court orders followed raids security forces carried out on hundreds of Baha'i-owned properties in November 2020, including these properties in Semnan, during which they confiscated ownership deeds. According to BIC, the judiciary ruled these properties belonged to Baha'i institutions rather than to the individuals. However, the institutions in question were banned by the government in 1979 and formally dissolved in 1983, with the government confiscating all connected properties. According to BIC and other NGOs, the confiscations were part of an ongoing state-led campaign of economic persecution against Baha'is. In a 2020 decision upholding the government's 2019 confiscations of Baha'i property in the village of Ivel, Mazandaran Province, a court ruled that Baha'is had "a perverse ideology," which was "heretical and ritually unclean," and therefore had no "legitimacy in their ownership" of any property.

In February, HRANA reported tax authorities in Bandar Lengeh city, Hormozgan Province, acting on a court order, confiscated the business, homes, and bank accounts of two Baha'is – Mohabatullah Thaabet and Erfaan Noahnezhaad. According to HRANA, they had operated a workshop making composite beams, paid taxes, and kept accounts as required for five years prior to authorities forcing them to close in 2019 “because of their Baha'i beliefs.”

Members of the Sunni community continued to dispute statistics published in 2015 on the website of the Mosques Affairs Regulating Authority that stated there were nine Sunni mosques operating in Tehran and 15,000 across the country. Community members said the vast majority of these were simply prayer rooms or rented prayer spaces. International media and the Sunni community continued to report authorities prevented construction of any new Sunni mosques in Tehran. Sunnis said there were not enough mosques in the country to meet the needs of the population. Three news sources opposed to the government previously stated that Sunnis were not allowed to have a mosque in Tehran.

Because the government barred them from building or worshiping in their own mosques, Sunni leaders said they continued to rely on ad hoc, underground prayer halls, or *namaz khane*, the same term used by Christian converts for informal chapels or prayers rooms in underground churches, to practice their religion. Security officials continued to raid these unauthorized sites.

According to human rights organizations, Christian advocacy groups, and NGOs, the government continued to regulate Christian religious practices. Official reports and media continued to characterize private Christian churches in homes as “illegal networks” and “Zionist propaganda institutions.” Christian community leaders stated that when authorities learned Assyrian church leaders were baptizing new converts or preaching in Farsi, they closed the churches. NGOs reported that virtually all Farsi-language churches in Iran were closed between 2009 and 2012. Authorities also reportedly barred unregistered or unrecognized Christians from entering church premises and closed churches that allowed the latter to enter.

Christian advocacy groups continued to state the government, through pressure and church closures, eliminated all but a handful of Farsi-language church services, thus restricting services almost entirely to the Armenian and Assyrian languages. Security officials monitored registered congregation centers to perform identity checks on worshippers to confirm non-Christians or converts did not participate in services. In response, many Christian converts reportedly practiced in secret. Other unrecognized religious minorities, such as Baha'is and Yarsanis, were also forced to assemble in private homes to practice their faith in secret.

According to the Tehran Jewish Committee, five Jewish schools and two preschools continued to operate in Tehran, but authorities required their principals to be Muslim. The government reportedly continued to allow Hebrew language instruction but limited the distribution of Hebrew texts, particularly nonreligious texts, making it difficult to teach the language, according to the Jewish community.

In February, the ADL published a report entitled, *Incitement: Antisemitism and Violence in Iran's Current State Textbooks*. The report stated that “incitement to hatred against Jews and Israel are extensively interspersed throughout multiple fields of the curriculum such as history, religion, and social studies” at all grade levels in the academic year 2020-2021. According to the report, school textbooks “overwhelmingly teach hateful messages about Jewish people across both ancient and modern history” in furtherance of a narrative pitting Islamic leaders against the enemies of Islam. Children were also taught that Jews were untrustworthy, Zionism was “racist,” and the state of Israel must be destroyed.

The ADL report stated a 10th grade textbook on “defense preparation” claimed Zionism and global arrogance had used “religious tools with new definitions of Islam and sect and the creation of *takfiri* [extremist] groups” to undermine Islam, including ISIS. An 11th grade sociology textbook asserted, “The gathering of media power in the hand of wealth owners and Zionist associations...makes the cultural identity of non-Western societies vulnerable[.]”

The ADL report stated that state school textbooks depicted Baha'is as “a conspiratorial creation of the West rather than adherents to a legitimate faith” who, along with Buddhists and Wahhabi Muslims, were “physically unclean.” An 11th grade history textbook stated the Baha'i “sect” was “deviant” and a “trick of colonialism to destroy the religious and cultural foundations of Islamic countries.”

Sunni leaders continued to report authorities banned Sunni religious literature and teachings from religion courses in some public schools, even in predominantly Sunni areas. Other schools, notably in the Kurdish regions, included specialized Sunni religious courses. Assyrian Christians reported the government continued to permit their community to use its own religious textbooks in schools, but only after the government authorized their content. Armenian Christians were also permitted to teach their practices to Armenian students as an elective at select schools.

Authorities reportedly continued to deny the Baha'i, Sabeen-Mandaeen, and Yarsani religious communities, as well as other unrecognized religious minorities, access to education and government employment unless they declared themselves as belonging to one of the country's recognized religions on their application forms.

Public and private universities continued to deny Baha'is admittance and to expel Baha'i students once their religion became known. According to HRW, Iranian authorities systematically refuse to allow Baha'is to register at public universities because of their faith. As in previous years, the government organization responsible for holding university entrance exams and for placing students, the Sazeman-e Sanjesh, used pretexts such as "incomplete information" and "further investigation required" to reject Baha'i applicants. IranWire said that the banning of Baha'is from entering higher education began in 1980.

The July UNSR report stated documents published in March indicated it was official policy to impose restrictions on Baha'i education and commerce in Sari, Mazandaran Province. In 2020, UNSR Rehman reported to the UN Human Rights Council that he remained "highly concerned about the denials of the right to education for religious minorities, with continuing reports of Baha'i students being rejected from entering university despite passing the required examinations."

According to BIC, on March 17, authorities expelled two Baha'i students – Hananeh Afshar and Sana Fakhri Tazangi – mid-semester from the University of Applied Science and Technology in Shiraz, Fars Province. The Baha'i women learned via a text message that the university had changed their student status to "registration cancelled" and had voided their credits from prior semesters. The president of the university showed them a letter from a Ministry of Education official that requested the expulsion of nine Baha'i students from the Universities of Applied Science and Technology across the country. Authorities expelled three other Baha'i students – Sina Shakib, Shima Fattahi Mirshekarlu, and Mahsa Forouhari – from their universities mid-semester under similar circumstances.

In January 2020, the state-issued national identity card required for almost all government and other transactions changed to allow only citizens to register as belonging to one of the country's recognized religions. The Atlantic Council stated in September 2021, "Baha'i families, Yarsanis, Sabeen-Mandaeans, and other religious minorities or atheists must either lie to receive a national identification card or be denied access to services, such as insurance, education, banking, and, most recently, public transportation." Previously, application forms for an ID card had an option for "other religions."

The Atlantic Council reported in September that Sabeen-Mandaeans experienced hate speech and discrimination. One member of the community told a researcher, that "we cannot even choose and officially register a Mandaean name for our children because the state has always instilled a great fear of being interrogated in us." According to the individual, Sabeen-Mandaeans were often called "infidels and impure Muslims in the mosques." They did not have the right to work in governmental agencies. Authorities denied self-employment permits "under various pretexts" and, in some cases, shut down their businesses.

According to an October 29 report by CHRI, the state-run Headquarters for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice announced plans to launch university-level religion courses dedicated to the "promotion of virtue and prevention of vice" that conformed to the government's interpretation of Islam.

According to BIC, the government continued to ban Baha'is from participating in more than 25 types of work, many related to food industries, because the government deemed Baha'is "unclean."

Yarsanis reported continued discrimination and harassment in the military and in school systems. They also continued to report that the birth registration system prevented them from giving their children Yarsani names. According to a 2020 article in the U.S. Institute of Peace's *Iran Primer*, "The regime has discriminated against the group by cracking down on Yarsani places of worship, religious monuments, religious speech, publications, education and communication in Kurdish. Yarsanis have also had difficulty finding employment and faced arrest and interrogation by Iranian intelligence."

In January, IranWire reported that the Yarsani Consultative Assembly of Civil Activists issued a statement calling on the government to stop discriminating against Yarsanis, including depriving of them of government employment, the right to hold public office, the right to post-graduate education, and the right to serve as directors of companies. The assembly protested the compulsory teaching of Islamic sharia to Yarsani children. The assembly also called for amending the constitution to include the Yarsan religion as a recognized minority religion.

According to the U.S.-based think-tank Middle East Institute, under the Ebrahim Raisi administration, which assumed power in August, not a single mid-ranking position was held by a Sunni Muslim or a woman during the year.

Sunnis reported continued underrepresentation in government-appointed positions in provinces where they formed a majority, such as Kurdistan and Khuzestan, as well as an inability to obtain senior government positions. Sunni activists continued to report that throughout the year, and especially during the month of Muharram (the first month of the Islamic year), the government sent hundreds of Shia missionaries to areas with large Sunni Baluch populations to try to convert the local population.

According to media reports from 2018, the most recent reporting available, there were 13 synagogues in Tehran and approximately 35 throughout the country. Jewish community representatives said they were free to travel in and out of the country, and the government generally did not enforce a prohibition against travel to Israel by Jews, although it enforced the prohibition on such travel for other citizens. In March, a local Jewish community source told the *Times of Israel* the government permitted the Jewish community to maintain youth organizations, kosher facilities, and four Jewish schools. In November, Voice of America reported the law barred Jews, in addition to other recognized minorities, from serving in the judiciary and security services, and it further prohibited Jews from holding authority over Muslims in the armed forces. Media reported local sources were careful to avoid publicly discussing politics or the State of Israel.

According to BIC, during the year, the government campaign of hate speech and propaganda against Baha'is "reached new levels, increasing in both sophistication and scale." BIC stated there was a growing and coordinated network of hundreds of websites, Instagram accounts, Telegram channels, and Clubhouse chat rooms containing content such as "Baha'is are unclean and enemies of your religion," "Associating with Baha'is is banned," and "Purchasing any goods from a Baha'i store is forbidden." BIC stated discriminatory online material existed alongside videos, print newspaper articles, books, seminars, exhibitions, graffiti, and fatwas "from both official outlets and others sponsored by the government but purporting to be independent."

International media and NGOs reported continued government-sponsored propaganda aimed at deterring the practice of or conversion to Christianity. According to *Mohabat News*, the government routinely propagated anti-Christian publications and online materials, such as the 2017 book *Christian Zionism in the Geography of Christianity*. In December, Article 18 stated that although government officials issued Christmas greetings on social media as a propaganda tool, government persecution of Christians increased around the holiday. One academic told Article 18 the regime feared that an interest in Christmas and other elements of Western culture would lead Muslims, especially youth, to convert to Christianity. The academic said the government was "more afraid of the religious significance and consequences of these behaviors than of fearing a celebration that belongs to other countries. Negative reactions to the celebration of Christmas, or open repression of Christian converts, are signs of this fear."

In its annual report on the year 2020 published in April, Amnesty International stated, "Freedom of religion and belief was systematically violated in law and practice. The authorities continued to impose on people of all faiths, as well as atheists, codes of public conduct rooted in a strict interpretation of Shia Islam. The authorities refused to recognize the right of those born to Muslim parents to convert to other religions or become atheists, with individuals seeking to exercise this right risking arbitrary detention, torture and the death penalty for 'apostasy.' Only Shia Muslims were allowed to hold key political positions. Members of religious minorities, including Baha'is, Christians, Gonabadi Dervishes, Yarsan (Ahl-e Haq), and converts from Shia Islam to Sunni Islam or Christianity faced discrimination, including in education and employment, as well as arbitrary arrest and imprisonment, torture and other ill-treatment for practicing their faith." The report added, "The authorities continued to commit widespread and systematic human rights violations against members of the Baha'i minority, including forcible closure of businesses, confiscation of property, bans on employment in the public sector, denial of access to higher education and hate speech campaigns on state media. Raids on house churches persisted. Sunni Muslims continued to face restrictions on establishing their own mosques."

In its annual report on the year 2021, HRW noted the country's "law denies freedom of religion to Baha'is and discriminates against them. Authorities continue to arrest and prosecute members of the Baha'i faith on vague national security charges and to close businesses owned by them. The government also discriminates against other religious minorities, including Sunni Muslims.... Minority activists are regularly arrested and prosecuted on vaguely defined national security charges in trials that grossly fall short of international standards."

In July, Article 18 reported that in a video published by Roshangar Media, senior Armenian and Assyrian representatives distanced themselves from the house church movement of evangelical Christian converts. Iranian-Armenian Catholic archbishop Sarkis Davidian reportedly said in the video, "We do not encourage people to change their religion. People must remain in their religion." Iranian-Assyrian parliamentary representative Shaarli Anouyeh Tekyeh, in the same video, said evangelical churches were "repugnant to us." In an August 2020 Article 18 report, an Armenian journalist said despite harassment of minorities being "institutionalized in the very fabric of the

Islamic Republic... representatives of religious minorities find themselves almost forced to defend the interests and discourse of a government that has deprived them of many of their rights, in an attempt perhaps to regain those lost rights or to prevent their further deterioration.”

Government officials continued to employ antisemitic rhetoric in official statements and to sanction it in media outlets, publications, and books. On February 22, Supreme Leader Khamenei posted a message on Twitter saying, “That international Zionist clown [the UN] has said they won’t allow Iran to produce nuclear weapons. First of all, if we had any such intention, even those more powerful than him [sic] wouldn’t be able to stop us.” On June 27, ADL CEO and national director Jonathan Greenblatt wrote in *Newsweek*, “that [President] Raisi was responsible for systematically propagating *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, one of the most dangerous tracts in history, provides an unsettling reminder of just how engaged Iran’s government and leaders have been in inciting antisemitism.” According to the ADL, another central theme of the government’s propaganda regarding the global health crisis was the conspiracy theory that Jews are all-powerful or seek world domination.

In May, the government-controlled arts promotion organization Hozeh Honari hosted an exhibition of submissions to its third Holocaust-denial cartoon contest and offered cash awards to several of the participating artists. The state-run Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Corporation reportedly broadcast the exhibition’s closing ceremony live. Many of the cartoons at the exhibition, also published in a book produced by Hozeh Honari, featured antisemitic imagery and stereotypical caricatures of Jews. The contest had financial sponsorship from the partly state-owned Telecommunication Company of Iran through its subsidiary and the largest mobile operator in Iran, Hamrahe Aval. In an interview on state-run Channel 4 on September 9, Masud Shojaei-Tabatabai, the visual arts director of Hozeh Honari and director of IranCartoon.com, who also organized these exhibitions 2020, 2016, and 2006, said the Holocaust was the “Achilles heel” of the Zionists, that Israelis had “benefited” from the Holocaust, and that the figure of six million Jewish victims was “very exaggerated.”

The government continued to allow recognized minority religious groups to establish community centers and some self-financed cultural, social, athletic, and charitable associations.

Endowed religious charitable foundations, or *bonyads*, accounted for one-quarter to one-third of the country’s economy, according to some experts. According to NGOs, government insiders, including members of the military and clergy, ran these tax-exempt organizations, which the law defines as charities. Members of the political opposition and international corruption watchdog organizations frequently accused bonyads of corruption. Bonyads received benefits from the government, but there was no requirement for a government agency to approve their budgets publicly.

On December 16, the UN General Assembly approved a resolution on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The General Assembly passed the measure by a vote of 78 states in favor, 31 against, and 69 abstentions. The resolution, introduced by Canada with 47 cosponsors, expressed concern about “ongoing severe limitations and increasing restrictions on the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, restrictions on the establishment of places of worship, undue restrictions on burials carried out in accordance with religious tenets, attacks against places of worship and burial, and other human rights violations....” These violations included “harassment, intimidation, persecution, arbitrary arrests and detention, and incitement to hatred that leads to violence against persons belonging to recognized and unrecognized religious minorities, including Christians, Gonabadi dervishes, Jews, Sufi Muslims, Sunni Muslims, Yarsanis, Zoroastrians and members of the Baha’i Faith, who have faced increasing restrictions from the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran on account of their faith and have been reportedly subjected to mass arrests and lengthy prison sentences during the COVID-19 pandemic....” The resolution called upon the government “to cease monitoring individuals on account of their religious identity, to release all religious practitioners imprisoned for their membership in or activities on behalf of a recognized or unrecognized minority religious group, and to ensure that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief, including the freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of their choice, in accordance with its obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights....” The resolution also called upon the government “to eliminate, in law and in practice, all forms of discrimination on the basis of thought, conscience, religion or belief, including restrictions contained in newly enacted provisions Article 499bis and Article 500bis of the Islamic Penal Code, as well as economic restrictions, such as the closure, destruction or confiscation of businesses and properties, the cancellation of licenses and the denial of employment in certain public and private sectors, including government or military positions and elected office, the denial of and restrictions on access to education, including for members of the Baha’i Faith, and other human rights violations against persons belonging to recognized and unrecognized religious minorities....” The resolution condemned “without any reservation any denial of the Holocaust,” and called upon the government “to end impunity for those who commit crimes against persons belonging to recognized and unrecognized religious minorities.”

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Yarsanis outside the country reported that widespread discrimination against Yarsanis continued. They stated Yarsani children were socially ostracized in school and in shared community facilities. Yarsani men continued to face employment discrimination. According to reports, Shia preachers continued to encourage social discrimination against Yarsanis.

According to a media reporting, Yarsani graves were neither safe from attacks nor from disrespect, and Yarsani cemeteries and mausoleums were repeatedly damaged and destroyed in the city of Kermanshah and elsewhere in the country.

Violence and social stigma continued to target Baha'i individuals, according to Baha'is and those who advocated for their rights, and perpetrators reportedly continued to act with impunity. There continued to be reports of non-Baha'is dismissing or refusing employment to Baha'is, sometimes in response to government pressure, according to BIC and other organizations monitoring the situation of Baha'is. BIC continued to report instances of physical violence committed against Baha'is based on their faith.

Baha'is reported there were continued incidents of destruction or vandalism of their cemeteries. IranWire reported that in September, HRANA released a video showing the partial destruction of a Baha'i cemetery in the village of Kata, Dena County, Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad Province. According to HRANA, the attack occurred on September 8. In a manner that would have been difficult without machinery, much of the cemetery's exterior wall and bathroom had been knocked to the ground and stone shrines were smashed.

In July, IranWire reported an Assyrian Christian nicknamed "Farough" suffered employment discrimination following a workplace injury at an industrial factory in 2016 in which he lost three fingers on his right hand. Farough said that when he returned to the factory after his recovery, "They were supposed to do an expert examination and pay me blood money, but when I was paid, I realized that the amount I received was much lower based on the fact that I was a religious minority." Farough said a Muslim colleague with similar academic credentials was promoted and given a raise. "I meanwhile have all the right conditions for employment and career advancement but, just because I am a Christian, I am deprived of any promotion."

According to human rights NGOs, including CSW, Open Doors USA, and others, converts from Islam to Christianity faced ongoing societal pressure and rejection by family or community members.

Shia clerics and prayer leaders reportedly continued to denounce Sufism and the activities of Sufis in both sermons and public statements.

Sunni students reported that professors continued to routinely insult Sunni religious figures in class.

IranWire reported that according to a survey released by Iran Open Data in October, 48 percent of 2,000 adult respondents said they drank alcohol. When asked about drinking frequency, 24 percent of respondents reported that they "sometimes" drank, while 9 percent said they drank "weekly," and 6 percent said they drank "daily." Fifty-two percent of participants said they did not drink alcohol.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The United States does not have diplomatic relations with Iran and did not have opportunities during the year to raise concerns in a bilateral setting with the government about its religious freedom abuses and restrictions.

The U.S. government continued to call publicly and in multilateral forums for the government to respect religious freedom and continued to condemn and promote accountability for its abuses of members of religious minority groups in a variety of ways and in different international forums. These included public statements by senior U.S. government officials, use of social media, reports issued by U.S. government agencies, support for relevant UN and NGO efforts, diplomatic initiatives, and sanctions. Senior U.S. government officials publicly reiterated calls for the release of prisoners held on grounds related to their religious beliefs.

On June 13, the Special Envoy for Iran posted to Twitter, "It's been 3 years since human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh was sentenced to 38 and a half years in prison and 148 lashes for defending women's rights in Iran. From prison she cont[inue]s to advocate for the humane treatment of political prisoners. She should not have spent a single day in prison."

On July 28, the Department of State released a statement on the protests that started over water shortages in Khuzestan Province, home to the predominantly Sunni Muslim Ahwazi Arab minority. It condemned the use of violence against peaceful protestors and supported their rights “to peacefully assemble and express themselves, without fear of violence and detention by security forces.”

On March 9, the United States designated IRGC interrogators Ali Hemmatian and Masoud Safdari pursuant to Section 7031(c) of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2021 for their involvement in gross violations of human rights. According to NGOs, Hemmatian and Safdari operated in Ward 2A of Evin Prison and tortured political prisoners, including activists advocating for religious freedom and protestors, during their interrogations. On the same day, the U.S. representative to the Human Rights Council’s Interactive Dialogue together with the Special Rapporteur on Iran called for Iran to “end its systematic use of an arbitrary and unfair justice system to detain and impose sentence against human rights defenders, including Nasrin Sotoudeh, journalists, members of minority groups, such as the Baha’i, and others who dissent from the government.”

On December 7, the U. S. Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), pursuant to Executive Order 13818, which builds upon and implements the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, sanctioned the Special Units of Iran’s Law Enforcement Forces (LEF) and Iran’s Counter-Terror Special Forces (NOPO) for violently suppressing prodemocracy protests in November 2019. OFAC sanctioned two LEF commanders – Hassan Karami and Seyed Mousavi Azami – as well a Basij commander Gholamreza Soleimani and the Governor of Qods City, Leila Vaseghi, for their roles in carrying out crackdowns against peaceful protesters. OFAC also sanctioned two prisons, Zahedan Central Prison and Isfahan Central Prison, as well as the warden of Qarchak Women’s Prison, Soghra Khodadadi, and IRGC commander and brigadier general Mohammad Karami for their roles in the “flagrant denial” of the rights prisoners and other citizens, including religious minorities. The Treasury Department statement announcing the sanctions said that “Zahedan Prison holds several political prisoners who belong to the Baluch ethnic minority group. According to public reports, on January 3, 2021, Baluch prisoner Hassan Dehvari was executed in Zahedan Prison. Dehvari was sentenced to death for ‘armed rebellion against the Islamic Rule.’ His sentence was escalated to execution after he engaged in several acts of peaceful protests, such as signing statements condemning executions of Sunni prisoners and condemning the mistreatment of fellow prisoners.”

Since 1999, Iran has been designated as a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On November 15, 2021, the Secretary of State redesignated Iran as a CPC and identified the existing sanctions as ongoing travel restrictions based on serious human rights abuses under section 221(c) of the Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act of 2012 (TRA), for individuals identified under Section 221(a)(1)(C) of the TRA in connection with the commission of serious human rights abuses, pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act.

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