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Religious Propaganda in Iran



UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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*To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by
independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats
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Cover Photo: TEHRAN, IRAN: Media microphones are set up as journalists wait for Iranian President Muhammad Khatami to give a press conference in the corridor of the parliament building in Tehran 14 January 2004. President Khatami did not attend the press conference as scheduled. A portrait of Iran's late founder of Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini is seen in the background. AFP PHOTO/ Behrouz MEHRI (Photo credit should read BEHROUZ MEHRI/AFP via Getty Images)

JULY 2022

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The Iranian government's misinformation campaign against Iran's religious minorities has continued in the last year, in tandem with the security apparatus's efforts to stifle religious freedom inside the country. While the specific false accusations against each minority group are distinct, there are overarching themes in the government's propaganda campaign against all. A common thread in the content published on religious minorities is their alleged ties to foreign states and their nefarious activities aimed at sowing discord and division within Iranian society. It is noteworthy that religious minority groups typically are not attacked for their religious beliefs per se. Instead, they are targeted on the pretext of posing threats to Iran's sovereignty and security. This report provides examples of instances in which minority groups are depicted as posing national security threats as well as having anti-Iranian sentiment.

VIOLATION OF THE RIGHT TO RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which Iran ratified in 1975, ensures the right to religious freedom. Section 2 of this article declares, "No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice." The propaganda directed against religious minorities in Iran is one part of a two-pronged assault on religious freedom in the country. While the state security apparatus and the judiciary arrest and prosecute religious minorities on baseless national security charges, the propaganda effort attempts to justify the measures taken against religious minorities by providing false narratives regarding their alleged nefarious activities and links to foreign governments and entities. This report discusses various allegations levelled against religious minorities in Iran. These allegations are mirrored in the legal proceedings against religious minorities, and, as such, function as part of a broad campaign aimed at curtailing their religious freedom.

OVERVIEW OF IRAN'S MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

Media outlets operating in Iran are under state control. Some outlets are directly operated by state institutions. For instance, *Iran* newspaper is run by the executive branch and is known to reflect the views of the Iranian president. *Hamshahri* is run by the Tehran municipality and reflects the views of Tehran's mayor. The ultra-conservative *Kayhan* is run by Hossein Shariatmadari, who is directly appointed by Iran's Supreme Leader. *Mizan* is a news site run by the Iranian judiciary. There is no independent radio and television broadcaster. The only operating broadcaster is the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB).

In addition to media outlets that are officially run by state institutions, there are other outlets that are widely believed to be run by various government entities, but they are not officially attributed to them. For instance, Fars News is believed to be run by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), while it claims to be an independent media outlet. Mashreq News is another conservative website, and it is believed to be operated by the IRGC intelligence unit. One website, Aryanne Adyannet, is specifically dedicated to publishing propaganda against religious minorities. While the

website is most probably funded by the Iranian government, it is not clear what state entity is in charge of the website.

Another category of media outlets includes those that are nominally independent but face serious censorship and are at risk of closure. Reformist newspapers such as *Shargh* and *Etemad* are in this category. While these outlets cannot be classified as state-run, they observe the state's red lines, such as never criticizing the Supreme Leader or the Islamic Republic's foundational ideology. Nevertheless, reformist newspapers have been repeatedly closed down over the past several decades over minor infractions. As a result, they are exceedingly careful not to publish any content that could be controversial. In addition, print media in Iran are dependent on government subsidies for the paper they use. As such, there is no independent media outlet operating in Iran. In other words, the main difference between media outlets is the degree to which they are subject to state control.

MEDIA COVERAGE

This section provides an overview of recent misinformation campaigns regarding religious minority groups. The incidents are broken down by minority group.

ANTISEMITISM

In January 2022, Iran was the only country voting against a UN General Assembly resolution on defining Holocaust denial.¹ Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs denounced the resolution as an attempt by Israel to use UN mechanisms to cover up its crimes.² Antisemitic remarks by public figures abound in Iran. In a speech about alleged "Zionist" influence in Iran's economy, Mojtaba Rahmandoust, a former member of the parliament, said, "There is a Jew or Zionist behind every economic disaster."³ He criticized "exclusivity" as a Jewish tactic. He also stated that usury is a Jewish tradition, and that Iran's banking system, in which the payment of interest is allowed, is under the influence of Jewish beliefs.⁴ Rahmandoust attributed Iran's brain drain to hidden Jewish hands.⁵ Ali-Akbar Raefipour, a well-known conspiracy theorist who regularly gives speeches on university campuses, has continued his antisemitic tirades over the past few years. In a video published in 2020, Raefipour attributed the killings of holy Shi'a figures such as Ali and Hossein to Jews.⁶

A recent line of antisemitic attacks has involved criticism of Purim celebrations. The celebrations, based on the account depicted in the Book of Esther, mark an ancient Jewish victory over Persians who had plotted to kill them. Iranian media have portrayed contemporary Purim celebrations as an anti-Iranian political statement by glorification of the killing of ancient Persians. In a piece published on Mehr News, Purim is described as the most important Jewish holiday and is claimed to celebrate mass murder of Iranians.⁷ Another article published on Adyannet echoes this view in stating, "[E]very year, in the course of the Purim festival (the Iranian-killing celebration) most Jews celebrate the anniversary of the mass murder of Iranians during the Achaemenid era." The

article then provides the image of a flyer from a 2012 Purim celebration event at a synagogue in California as evidence of anti-Iranian sentiment among Jews.⁸ An article on the website of the Young Journalists Club, a conservative news site, discusses Purim as an anti-Iranian festival, and includes several images depicting Jews in blood-soaked clothing.⁹ This type of nationalist propaganda against Jews is, to some extent, different from more familiar tropes such as Jewish involvement in international conspiracies or nefarious actions of the state of Israel. Instead, it attacks Jews as having animosity against Persians from antiquity.

SUNNI MUSLIMS

In December 2021, Mohammad Hossein Gorgij, a Sunni cleric and the Friday Imam in Azadshahr, Golestan Province, stated that the second Caliph, Umar, had arranged the marriage of Hossein, the third Shi'a Imam, and his wife, a Persian princess. Therefore, he argued, if a person does not accept Umar as the rightful caliph, he or she has questioned the legitimacy of Shi'a Imams. This statement was considered offensive and led to his dismissal by the Supreme Leader's representative in Golestan Province. In a piece published in Fars News, a major conservative news site, the author demanded that the judiciary should take action against him and put down "Saudi-Israeli" seditions.¹⁰ Fars News claimed that ten thousand individuals had joined its campaign to demand action against Gorgij, although it appears that simply clicking on the article link is counted as indicative of support for the petition.¹¹ Another feature of this campaign is quoting pro-government Sunni clerics. For instance, Taghrib News quoted the Sunni Friday Imam of Javanroud, Kermanshah Province, as saying that Gorgij's statements amounted to

¹ <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202201203872>

² <https://www.farsnews.ir/news/14001101000543>

³ <https://bit.ly/3pVmU2i>

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4BRadknZSpo>

⁷ <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/5405118>

⁸ <https://www.adyannet.com/fa/news/24923>

⁹ <https://www.yjc.news/fa/news/6478196>

¹⁰ <https://www.farsnews.ir/my/c/107724>

¹¹ <https://www.farsnews.ir/golestan/news/14000922000490>

a “conspiracy” instigated by the “enemies of Islam and the Revolution,” suggesting foreign interference.

Another example of pitting pro-government Sunni clerics against prominent Sunni leaders occurred in January 2022. Molavi Abdolhamid, Zahedan’s Friday prayer Imam, criticized the Iranian government’s control over Sunni affairs, particularly in Kurdistan Province.¹² In response, several Sunni leaders from Kurdistan Province wrote a letter to Molavi Abdolhamid, criticizing him for having a patronizing approach. The letter admonished him for implying that “there were only a few oppressed, secluded, seminary students with limited knowledge” in Kurdistan who cannot advocate for their own rights.¹³ This letter was published on various news sites.

Another feature of anti-Sunni sentiment is expressing alarm over reports that birth rate is higher in areas where Sunnis reside compared to where Shi’a live. Several Shi’a clerics have publicly voiced their concerns. For instance, in July 2020 Qasem Ravanbakhsh, a hardline cleric, said that “alarm bells” are ringing for the decline in Iran’s population and that a province where Sunnis are in the majority has the highest rate of population growth.¹⁴ In a sarcastic remark, he added that Iranian people should be thankful to Sunnis because there would not be a need to “import” people from Afghanistan and Pakistan in the future.¹⁵ These comments follow a string of similar comments from senior clerics in previous years. In 2014, for instance, Ahamd Alam al-Hoda, Mashhad’s Friday Prayer Imam, issued a warning about the increasing Sunni population in Mashhad.¹⁶ He added that world powers use “Wahhabism and fanaticism” as two blades of scissors against Iran.¹⁷ The concern over possible increasing share of Sunnis in Iran’s population was also reflected in *Strategic Defense Studies*, a quarterly publication by the Supreme National Defense University.¹⁸ This article considered the increasing Sunni share of population in northern and northeastern provinces of Iran as a threat to Iran’s national security. In particular, the study noted that in some small towns in the periphery of major population

centers the population pattern was changing from Shi’a majority to Sunni majority.¹⁹

State propaganda against Sunnis is often shrouded in anti-Wahhabi discourse, implicating foreign conspiracies often involving Saudi Arabia. A report by Defa Press warned that Wahhabis target Sunni religious schools in border areas, alleging that anti-Shi’a concepts are taught at these schools.²⁰ The report did not mention any particular school by name, but indicated that Khuzestan Province is home to such schools.²¹



An image accompanying an article²² about Mohammad Hossein Gorgij, the Sunni Friday Imam of Azadshahr, includes the phrase “Wahhabism” in flames.

While state propaganda blames foreign states such as Saudi Arabia for fomenting religious extremism and violence, it also portrays the Islamic Republic as working toward Sunni-Shi’a unity. For instance, a November 2021 article on Adyannet, a website dedicated to spreading propaganda against religious minorities, focused on Supreme Leader Khamenei’s remarks on unity among Islamic sects. The article quoted Khamenei as saying that unity among Muslims is a Quranic command.²³ Khamenei further stated that bridging the Sunni-Shi’a divide was necessary because there is a concerted effort to sow division among Muslims. “Today the words ‘Shi’a’ and ‘Sunni’ have entered American political discourse. Why should Shi’a and Sunni matter to the Americans?”²⁴

¹² <http://www.ensafnews.com/323264>

¹³ <https://www.farsnews.ir/kordestan/news/14001016000005>

¹⁴ <https://bit.ly/3pVhnVn>

¹⁵ Id.

¹⁶ <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/f1-shia-imam-warns-about-increasing-number-of-wahabis-and-sunnis--in-iran/25380185.html>

¹⁷ Id.

¹⁸ <https://iranwire.com/fa/features/42284>

¹⁹ <https://iranwire.com/fa/features/42284>

²⁰ <https://defapress.ir/fa/news/278220>

²¹ Id.

²² <https://www.hawzahnews.com/news/99600>

²³ <https://www.adyannet.com/fa/news/35879>

²⁴ Id.

GONABADI DERVISHES

The misinformation campaign against Gonabadi Dervishes continued with the theme of portraying them as proponents of political violence. Sites affiliated with the Iranian government repeated their narrative of the February 2018 Golestan-e Haftom incident during the anniversary of the clashes.

The February 2018 clashes at Golestan-e Haftom street in Tehran took place when rumors spread that Iranian security forces were about to impose restrictions on Noor-Ali Tabandeh, the Dervishes' Qotb, or spiritual leader.²⁵ Clashes broke out in the night of February 19 and continued through early hours of February 20. Security forces used excessive force against the Dervishes, causing severe injuries to them. One Dervish, Mohammad Raji, died in custody after being detained during the clashes.²⁶ Iranian authorities announced that 300 Gonabadi Dervishes had been arrested.²⁷ During the clashes, a bus ran over police forces, killing three police personnel.²⁸ Iranian authorities arrested Mohammad Salas, a Gonabadi Dervish, for the attack. He was forced to confess to conducting the attack on camera from what seemed to be a hospital bed. He later retracted his confession and stated that it was extracted under torture. Despite serious questions about the government's case against him, he was convicted of the crime. He was executed on June 18, 2018.²⁹ Hundreds of Gonabadi Dervishes received prison sentences in grossly unfair trials. The sentences ranged from four months to seven years.³⁰

Soon after the Golestan-e Haftom clashes, propaganda against Gonabadi Dervishes portrayed them as a violent sect tied to foreign entities. A cartoon published on a news site in February 2018 depicted a Dervish giving an angry stare, with the Star of David as the pupils of his eyes. The cartoon was entitled "ISIS-Zionist Dervishes."³¹

On the third anniversary of the clashes, Tasnim News ran a story featuring the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) flag with the phrase "Gonabadi ISIS."³² In December 2021, Adyannet.com claimed that Gonabadi Dervishes had

provided food to violent protesters in Isfahan during the recent protests by farmers.³³ Highlighting internal divisions within the Gonabadi Dervish community was also another tactic deployed in the misinformation campaign, with Fars News publishing a piece critical of the Iran International network for providing a platform for "radical" Gonabadi Dervishes.³⁴ The piece quoted a Gonabadi Dervish residing in Iran as saying that Iran International had hurt the majority of Gonabadi Dervishes by promoting its "radical" and "political" fringe.

In 2021, a five-minute video about Gonabadi Dervishes was posted to Aparat, a Persian-language video sharing platform authorized to operate in Iran.³⁵ The video states that Gonabadi Dervishes are used as political pawns by foreign powers. It accuses them of supporting the Pahlavi government and having family ties with its government officials. It also mentions the Dervishes' support for Mehdi Karroubi, a reformist candidate in the disputed 2009 presidential election now under house arrest, as further evidence of the Dervishes' political malfeasance.³⁶ This video stated that Dervishes seek to impose sanctions on Iran through raising human rights concerns. Without providing any details, the video also alleged that one Dervish Qotb has sexually abused a follower. Burning down mosques during the protests of December 2017–January 2018 is another allegation leveled against Gonabadi Dervishes in the video.³⁷ Showing a picture of Mostafa Azmayesh, a prominent Dervish residing in the United Kingdom (UK), alongside Diane Alai from the Bahá'í International Community, the video stated that Dervishes were plotting against the Iranian government alongside the Bahá'ís.³⁸

CHRISTIAN CONVERTS

While a November 3, 2021, ruling³⁹ by Branch 28 of Iran's Supreme Court declared that promoting Christianity and establishing home churches are not crimes and do not amount to national security crimes, detention of Christian converts has continued. Under Iran's legal system, a ruling

²⁵ <https://iranhrdc.org/living-under-suppression-the-situation-of-gonabadi-dervishes-in-iran/>

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ <https://snn.ir/fa/news/668611>

³² <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1399/11/29/2454537>

³³ <https://www.adyannet.com/fa/news/36148>

³⁴ <https://www.farsnews.ir/news/14001005000645>

³⁵ <https://bit.ly/3tLgekx>

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ <https://articleeighteen.com/fa/news/10726/>

by a Supreme Court branch is not necessarily binding on lower courts. Moreover, the November 3 Supreme Court opinion used the phrase “Evangelical Zionist cult” to refer to the Christian converts whose case it was addressing.⁴⁰ Propaganda against Christian converts is often disguised as anti-Zionism, and Christian converts are regularly referred to as members of a “Zionist” network. The reference to Zionism in this context does not refer to specific allegations of links between Christian converts in Iran and the state of Israel. Instead, it should be understood as describing a broad conspiracy in which evangelical Christians across the world promote political viewpoints that serve Zionist ideology.



Image used for news story on “Zionist” Christians

In a January 2021 news item, for instance, Fars News reported that members of a “Zionist network” across several provinces were arrested. The report added that the purpose of the network was “creating moral depravity” and “promoting religious conversion.” The final line of the report mentioned that in the previous two years, “networks connected to the Christian movement” have engaged in “widespread security efforts” in the country.⁴¹ Iran’s misinformation campaign against Christian converts has persistently used vague national security accusations to differentiate Christian converts from Armenians and Assyrians as recognized religious minority groups. In an interview with a website dedicated to exposing religious movements and cults, Hojjat al-Islam Kashani, a cleric who serves as the secretary of the Islam-Christianity Dialog Association, stated, “What is being promoted today as Christianity is not traditional Christianity, but rather it is evangelical and colonial Christianity. In reality,

evangelical Christianity is not a religion. It is a policy oriented towards colonialism.” He further claimed that the political aims of evangelical Christianity have resulted in their alienation from other Christians, and that Iranian Armenians are opposed to evangelical Christians.⁴²

BAHÁ’ÍS

The campaign against the Bahá’ís continued its long-running accusations of political influence and intrigue. One news item accused the Bahá’ís of advocating for destruction of the shrines of holy Muslim figures by the Saudi government during the Pahlavi era.⁴³ Another item claimed that the Bahá’ís were plotting to infiltrate Iran’s network of chess players through a chess club established by a Bahá’í who resides in the United States.⁴⁴ In November 2021 Tasnim News reported that the theme of the second national graphics art fair will be “Bahá’ísm: Assembly of Treason.”⁴⁵ The art fair organizers award gold coins to artists who receive the first, second, and third prizes.⁴⁶ The topics about which artists should produce their works include “destruction of Islamic-Iranian culture,” “occupation of Palestine,” and “moral deviances.”⁴⁷



Posters at the January 2022 “Bahá’ísm: Assembly of Treason” art competition.

A long-standing accusation against the Bahá’ís is the charge that they threaten Iran’s territorial integrity by promoting global citizenship and undermining national borders. An example of this effort is a video produced by Jam News and widely distributed on social media platforms such as Twitter.⁴⁸

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ <https://www.farsnews.ir/news/13991104000257>

⁴² <https://bit.ly/3tRXdg7>

⁴³ <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1400/02/29/2505811>

⁴⁴ <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1399/09/01/2391495>

⁴⁵ <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1400/08/04/2596352>

⁴⁶ <https://moghadas-nama.com/awards/>

⁴⁷ <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1400/08/04/2596352>

⁴⁸ https://twitter.com/vahid_bahman/status/1424360299239550976?s=20&t=cnGBtZu5cRD3lz-QpUDQ1A

This video contains out of context statements by Erfan Sabeti, a well-known Bahá'í scholar residing in the UK who regularly appears on Persian language television channels such as Manoto, BBC Persian, and Iran International. In the video, which is from an appearance of Sabeti in a program on Manoto, Sabeti states that it is regrettable that some people in Iran and the broader Middle East are willing to shed blood for what they claim to be defending their land. This video, which is from a program aired in 2018, resurfaced again in 2021 on social media platforms. Several Iranian websites have published articles about Sabeti's statements, attributing his out-of-context remarks to the entirety of the Bahá'í community. One website dedicated to covering the news about different religions and sects published an article entitled "The Bahá'ism's Latest Treason: Invitation to Sell Out the Country."⁴⁹ According to the article, "Recently, speaking on the offensive Manoto channel, which has a long history in insulting Iran and Iranians, Sabeti has made remarks on the pointlessness of defending a country's independence, encouraging selling out the country, and children's curriculum, etc. These remarks include some of the goals of Bahá'ism with respect to opening up pathways for influence and treason, which can be seen throughout the history of this sect."⁵⁰

The Iranian government has utilized nationalist propaganda to promote a variety of policies, from pursuing nuclear technology to fighting in Syria. Targeting religious minorities for alleged disloyalty to Iran is another feature of the nationalist propaganda. In a long article entitled "Zedefergheh" (literally translated to Anti-cult) published online, the Bahá'ís are criticized for promoting cosmopolitanism.⁵¹ Citing a speech given in America by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the son of the Prophet-Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, in which he criticized nationalist prejudices, the article stated that unlike America, where 'Abdu'l-Bahá made his remarks, Iran has always been repeatedly subject to Russian and British colonialist aggression.⁵² The article went on to

argue that the Bahá'ís believe that the United States is a just government and what the U.S. government and its people do always have humanitarian intentions.⁵³ To support this argument, the article cites a 1912 speech by 'Abdu'l-Bahá.⁵⁴ Misrepresenting his words, the article further argues that 'Abdu'l-Bahá encouraged America to plunder Iran's natural resources.⁵⁵

An individual named Hassan Ershad, ostensibly a researcher and expert on the Bahá'ís, continued to post anti-Bahá'í content on the internet. Ershad is not publicly affiliated with a governmental entity. Nevertheless, the extent of his activities, and the fact that he appears on media outlets sanctioned by the Iranian government, indicate a strong possibility that he is backed by a state organ.

Ershad has produced more than 500 videos criticizing various aspects of the Bahá'í Faith, particularly on the alleged ties of the Bahá'í community with foreign governments and their political machinations.⁵⁶ While the themes of Ershad's videos have remained the same, there was a new development with respect to his platform. On February 19, 2022, Ensaf News, a reformist website, published a 55-minute interview with Ershad on its YouTube channel.⁵⁷ While Ershad's previous videos were on his own platforms, the recent video was published by a mainstream news site popular with Iranian users.

In this video Ershad discussed a program on Iran International featuring Mansour Farhang, Iran's former ambassador to the United Nations after the Iranian Revolution, and Erfan Sabeti.⁵⁸ Ershad criticized Farhang for stating that the Bahá'ís have been oppressed for more than a century.⁵⁹ Ershad referred to the Babi movement, the precursor to the Bahá'í Faith, as an ISIS-like movement.⁶⁰ Ershad accused the Bahá'ís of having tremendous influence in the Pahlavi dynasty's government, alleging that there were 1,300 high-ranking Bahá'í officers in the Iranian military before the 1979 Islamic Revolution.⁶¹ Ershad repeated the false

⁴⁹ <https://www.adyannet.com/fa/news/30832>

⁵⁰ *Id.*

⁵¹ <https://bit.ly/3HSDbHl>

⁵² *Id.*

⁵³ *Id.*

⁵⁴ *Id.* The speech cited in the article says, in relevant part, "I find the United States of America an exceedingly progressive nation, the government just, the people in a state of readiness and the principle of equality established to an extraordinary degree. Therefore, it is my hope that, inasmuch as the standard of international peace must be upraised, it may be upraised upon this continent, for this nation is more deserving and has greater capacity for such an initial step than any other. If other nations should attempt to do this, the motive would be misunderstood. For instance, if Great Britain should declare for international peace, it would be said that it has been done to ensure the safety of her colonies. If France should hoist the standard, other nations would declare some hidden diplomatic policy underlies the action; Russia would be suspected of national designs if the first step were taken by that people, and so on with all the European and eastern governments. But the United States of America could not be accused of any such selfish interest."

See <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/abdu-baha/promulgation-universal-peace/8#467723418>

⁵⁵ <https://bit.ly/3HSDbHl>

⁵⁶ <https://www.aparat.com/naseredin313>

⁵⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8o2XiqMU-js>

⁵⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uXMfYmafY5A>

⁵⁹ *Id.*

⁶⁰ *Id.*

⁶¹ *Id.*

allegation that former Prime Minister Amir Abbas Hoveida and Parvis Sabeti, an official in the Pahlavi government's secret police, were Bahá'ís.⁶² While both were born in Bahá'í families, neither one was, in fact, a Bahá'í. Ershad also alleged that the Bahá'ís had formed a parallel government in Iran and that Bahá'í administrative bodies are meant to function as parallel state institutions.⁶³ Drawing a comparison to Reza Shah, who had closed down Bahá'í schools for observing Bahá'í holidays, Ershad stated that the Iranian government's current policy of shutting down Bahá'í-owned businesses is motivated by trade regulations.⁶⁴ While the program on Iran International was about discriminatory practices against the Bahá'ís in Iran, in his 55-minute video Ershad did not mention rights violations against the Bahá'ís. Instead, he falsely accused the Bahá'ís of planning to overthrow the Iranian government.⁶⁵ Ershad criticized the Iranian judiciary for failing to fully explain the reasons for the actions it was taking against the Bahá'ís in its rulings.⁶⁶ He also stated that the Bahá'ís deliberately hurt themselves so that they can derive benefits from the harm they have endured, likening them to drug addicts who throw themselves into incoming traffic to get injured and receive compensation.⁶⁷ The person interviewing Ershad on behalf of Ensaf News did not challenge him or ask for evidence, but he stated that as a media outlet they could not accept or deny the accusations regarding plots to overthrow the government.⁶⁸ Ershad suggested that the Iranian government should gather evidence against the Bahá'ís and present it to international tribunals.⁶⁹

Accusations of economic malfeasance have also continued against the Bahá'ís in recent years. In February 2022, Turkish media reported that Iranian intelligence agents had plotted to abduct a Bahá'í named Shahnám Golshani from Turkey.⁷⁰ Golshani was first arrested in Iran in 2012, when he ran the Mesghal website, which provided the latest financial information such as currency exchange rates and the price of gold.⁷¹ Without any credible evidence, Golshani was accused of disrupting Iran's financial markets. He was released, and he fled to Turkey afterwards, where he has remained until the present. Golshani's involvement with the Mesghal website has

fed a large amount of propaganda against the Bahá'ís. In 2019, for instance, Fars News ran a story entitled “An Overview of the Bahá'í Institutions' Sabotage in the Economic Arena.”⁷² The article stated,

*The Bahá'í institutions are focused on infiltrating and gaining organized influence on the society's macroeconomics through boosting black markets such as smuggling, hoarding, and money laundering. In recent years, and considering America's economic war against Iran, it has become more intense so that they can fight for the enemy in the front line of this soft war, much more so than other cultish movements.*⁷³

The article went on to claim that Golshani created demand for foreign currencies through his analysis and financial advice, and that since his website and Telegram channel had become a reliable source, he had become influential in setting prices.⁷⁴ Fars News claimed that foreign intelligence services provide intelligence to Golshani, and given his access to a large network of traders, Telegram channels, websites, and large reserves of foreign currency, he was the main influencer of the currency market in Iran.⁷⁵ Another Fars News piece, also published in 2019, alleged a wide conspiracy by the Bahá'ís to gain influence in Iran's economy. While the article leveled serious charges against companies run by the Bahá'ís, it did not name a single company to substantiate its allegations.⁷⁶

⁶² *Id.*

⁶³ *Id.*

⁶⁴ *Id.*

⁶⁵ *Id.*

⁶⁶ *Id.*

⁶⁷ *Id.*

⁶⁸ *Id.*

⁶⁹ *Id.*

⁷⁰ <https://bit.ly/3HXElfv>

⁷¹ <https://bit.ly/37j0D48>

⁷² *Id.*

⁷³ *Id.*

⁷⁴ *Id.*

⁷⁵ *Id.*

⁷⁶ <https://www.farsnews.ir/news/13980502000337>



An image on an Iranian website depicts 'Abdu'l-Bahá, a holy figure in the Bahá'í Faith, as a grave digger.

Accusations of moral deviance against the Bahá'ís have continued. A recent example was a piece in *Adyannet* charging that the Bahá'ís exhume bodies of their dead in violation of their religious principles. Citing examples from the history of the Bahá'í Faith, the article argues that the Bahá'ís do not respect the remains of deceased persons. The article is accompanied by the image of 'Abdu'l-Bahá as a grave digger.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ <https://www.adyannet.com/fa/news/37649>

CONCLUSION

Promoting one's religion is a protected right under international law. The Iranian government maintains that recognized religious minorities are free to exercise their religion and to have representation in the parliament.

The Iranian government spends considerable sums to promote its singular interpretation of Ja'afri Shi'a Islam. Non-Muslim citizens, as well as adherents of other Islamic traditions, are not afforded equal protection under the law. For instance, a Muslim cannot be put to death for killing a non-Muslim. Another example of religious discrimination is that non-Muslims cannot be employed by the Iranian military. These practices contravene Iran's obligations under Articles 2 and 26 of the ICCPR, and they demonstrate the Iranian government's explicit discriminatory policies.

Article 18 of the ICCPR protects the right to religious freedom, including the right to promote one's religion. The Iranian government has consistently harassed and prosecuted Christian converts and Bahá'ís for proselytizing. While the Iranian judiciary uses national security charges to suppress Christian converts and Bahá'ís, the propaganda campaign against the two groups implicitly admits that they are targeted for promoting their faiths rather than nefarious activities against the Iranian state. Furthermore, non-Muslim citizens are not afforded equal protection under the law. The Iranian government provides false narratives regarding alleged ties between religious minorities inside Iran and foreign states and non-state entities, and it makes baseless allegations about threats posed by religious minorities to Iran's security and territorial integrity. The same tactic is used in state-sponsored antisemitic propaganda, with Jews being implicated in international conspiracies against Iran. Sunni Muslims and Gonabadi Sufi Dervishes are also portrayed as furthering foreign interests at the expense of Iran's security and stability, with both groups being tied to extremist groups such as ISIS.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shahin Milani is the Executive Director of the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC). He obtained his J.D. from Howard University School of Law and his LL.M. from Vermont Law School. Shahin Milani is the principal author of several IHRDC reports, including *Denied Identity: Human Rights Abuses against Iran's LGBT Community*, *Apostasy in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, *Restrictions on Freedom of Expression in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, *Excluded from the Public Sphere*, *Controlled and Pursued: Labor Activism in Contemporary Iran*, *Extreme Inequality: The Human Rights Situation of Iran's Baluch Minority*, *The 1980 Cultural Revolution and Restrictions on Academic Freedom in Iran*, and *Access to Justice for Victims of Sexual Violence in Iran*.

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