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2016 Report on International Religious Freedom - Iran

Executive Summary

The constitution defines the country as an Islamic republic, and specifies Ja'afari Shia Islam as the official state religion. It states all laws and regulations must be based on "Islamic criteria" and official interpretation of sharia. The constitution states citizens shall enjoy human, political, economic, and other rights, "in conformity with Islamic criteria." The penal code 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"). The law prohibits Muslim citizens from changing or renouncing their religious beliefs. The constitution stipulates the five Sunni Islamic schools named therein shall be "accorded full respect" and official status in matters of religious education and certain personal affairs. "Within the limits of the law," the constitution states Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians (excluding converts from Islam) are the only recognized religious minorities permitted to worship and to form religious societies. The government executed individuals on charges of *moharebeh*, including more than 20 Sunni Kurds. The Iran Prison Atlas, compiled by the nongovernmental organization (NGO) United for Iran, stated at least 103 members of minority religious groups remained imprisoned for their religious activities, 198 individuals on charges of *moharebeh*, and 31 on charges of "insulting Islam." Shia religious leaders who did not support government policies reportedly continued to face intimidation and arrest. The government continued to harass, interrogate, and arrest Bahais, Christians, Sunni Muslims, and other religious minorities and regulated Christian religious practices closely to enforce the prohibition on proselytizing. It reportedly denied building permits for places of worship and employment and higher educational opportunities for members of religious minorities and confiscated or restricted their religious materials. Security officials continued to raid Sunni prayer sites and prevent the construction of new ones. The government continued to use anti-Semitic and anti-Bahai rhetoric in official statements, as well as promote Holocaust denial. There were reports of authorities discouraging employment of Bahais and placing restrictions on Bahai businesses or forcing them to shut down.

A man stabbed a Bahai to death on September 26, telling police afterwards he did so because of the victim's religion. According to multiple sources, non-Muslims and non-Shia, especially the Bahai community, continued to face societal discrimination and harassment, and employers experienced social pressures not to hire Bahais or to dismiss them from their private sector jobs. According to Sufi media and NGOs, Shia clerics and prayer leaders continued to denounce Sufism and the activities of Sufis in both sermons and public statements. Yarsanis reported they continued to face discrimination and harassment. Bahais reported there were at least three incidents of destruction or vandalism of their cemeteries.

The United States has no diplomatic relations with Iran. The U.S. government used public statements, sanctions, and diplomatic initiatives in international forums to condemn the government's abuses and

restrictions on worship by religious minorities. Senior U.S. government officials publicly reiterated calls for the release of prisoners held on religious grounds. In May the Department of State condemned the detention of the seven members of the Bahai leadership council and the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom repeatedly criticized the country's discrimination against Bahais and other religious minorities. The United States supported religious minority groups in the country through actions in the UN, including votes to extend the mandate of the UN special rapporteur for human rights in Iran and support for resolutions expressing concern over the country's human rights practices, including the continued persecution of religious minorities. 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 February 29, 2016, the Secretary of State re-designated Iran as a CPC and identified the following sanction that accompanied the designation: the existing ongoing travel restrictions based on serious human rights abuses under section 221(a)(1)(C) of the Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act of 2012, pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 82.8 million (July 2016 estimate). According to U.S. government estimates and other statistical reports, including Global Security and Iran Press Watch, Muslims constitute 99 percent of the population; 89-94 percent are Shia and 5-9 percent Sunni (mostly Turkmen, Arabs, Baluchis, and Kurds living in the northeast, southwest, southeast, and northwest, respectively). Afghan refugees, economic migrants, and displaced persons also make up a significant Sunni population but accurate statistics on the breakdown 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 and other statistical estimates, including Global Security, Iran Press Watch, and Iran Primer, groups together constituting the remaining less than 1 percent of the population include Bahais, Christians, Jews, Sabeian-Mandaeans, Zoroastrians, and Yarsanis. The three largest non-Muslim minorities are Bahais, Christians, and Yarsanis.

There is no official count of Yarsanis, but one NGO and some Yarsani leaders estimate there are up to one million. Yarsanis have often been classified by the government as Shia Muslims practicing Sufism, but Yarsanis identify Yarsan as a distinct faith (known as Alhe Haq or Kakai). Yarsanis are mainly located in Loristan and the Kurdish regions.

According to Human Rights Watch data, Bahais number at least 300,000.

According to World Christian Database statistics, there are approximately 285,000 Christians, although some estimates suggest there may be many more Christians than actually reported. While the government's Statistical Center of Iran reports there are 117,700, Elam Ministries, an Iranian Christian organization, estimates that there could be between 300,000 and one million Christians. The majority of Christians are ethnic Armenians concentrated in Tehran and Isfahan. 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 are no authoritative data on their numbers. Christian groups outside the country estimate the size of the Protestant community to be less than 10,000, although many Protestants and other converts to Christianity from Islam reportedly practice in secret.

According to Zoroastrian groups and the Statistical Center of Iran, there are approximately 25,000 Zoroastrians.

According to the Tehran Jewish Committee, there are approximately 9,000 Jews, while one British media report estimated their number at 18,000-20,000. There reportedly are 5,000 to 10,000 Sabeian-Mandaeans.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution defines the country as an Islamic republic, and Ja'afari Shia Islam to be the official state religion. The constitution stipulates all laws and regulations must be based on "Islamic criteria" and 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 states the investigation of an individual's ideas is forbidden, and no one may be "subjected to questioning and aggression for merely holding an opinion." The law prohibits Muslim citizens from changing or

renouncing their religious beliefs. The only recognized conversions are from another religion to Islam. Apostasy from Islam is a crime punishable by death. Under the law, a child born to a Muslim father is considered to be Muslim.

By law, non-Muslims may not engage in public persuasion, or attempted conversion of Muslims. These activities are considered proselytizing and are 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. Some exceptions are made for foreigners belonging to unrecognized religious groups.

The penal code specifies the death sentence for *moharebeh* (enmity towards or waging war against God or "drawing a weapon on the life, property or chastity of people or to cause terror as it creates the atmosphere of insecurity"), *fitnad fil-arz* (corruption on earth – including apostasy or heresy), and *sabb al-nabi* ("insulting the prophets" or "insulting the sanctities").

The constitution states the Hanafi, Shafi, Maliki, Hanbali, and Zaydi Sunni schools 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 does not recognize evangelicals as Christian. Because 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, since the presence of these groups in the country predates Islam, or, reportedly, of citizens who can prove that they or their families were Christian prior to 1979 revolution. The government also recognizes Sabeen-Mandaeans as Christian, even though the Sabeen-Mandaeans do not consider themselves to be Christians. Any citizen who is not a registered member of one of these three groups or of Judaism or Zoroastrianism or who cannot prove that his or her family was Christian prior to 1979 is considered Muslim. Citizens who are members of one of these recognized religious minorities must register with the authorities.

Registration conveys certain rights, including the use of alcohol for religious purposes. Failure of churchgoers to register and attendance at churches by unregistered individuals may subject a church to closure and arrest of its leaders by the authorities. Christian converts are not recognized as Christian under the law; they cannot register, and are not entitled to the same rights as recognized members of Christian communities.

The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security monitor religious activity, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (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." Unrecognized religious minorities, such as Yarsanis and Bahais, report they are unable to legally produce or distribute religious literature.

The religious curriculum of public schools is determined by the Ministry of Education. All school curricula, public and private, must include a course on Shia Islamic teachings and all pupils must pass this course in order to advance to the next educational level through university. Sunni students and students from recognized minority religious groups must also take and pass the courses on Shia Islam, although they may also take courses on their own religious beliefs separately.

Recognized religious minority groups, except for Sunni Muslims, may operate private schools. The Ministry of Education supervises the private schools operated by the 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 so the authorities can review them. Directors of such private schools, whether Muslim or of another religious affiliation, must demonstrate loyalty to the official state religion (a requirement known as *gozinesh* review, an evaluation to determine adherence to the government ideology and system as well as knowledge of the government interpretation of Shia Islam).

The law bars Bahais from founding their own educational institutions. A Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology order requires universities to exclude Bahais from access to higher education or expel them if their religious affiliation becomes known. Government regulation states Bahais are permitted to enroll in schools only if they do not identify themselves as such. To register for the university entrance examination, Bahai students must identify themselves as followers of a religion other than Bahai. To pass the entrance examination,

university applicants must pass an exam on Islamic, Christian, or Jewish theology based on their official religious affiliation.

According to the constitution, Islamic scholars in the Assembly of Experts, an assembly of 86 popularly elected clerics, whose qualifications include piety and religious scholarship, elect the supreme leader, the country's putative head of state. To "safeguard" Islamic ordinances and to ensure the compatibility with Islam of legislation passed by the Islamic Consultative Assembly (i.e., the parliament or Majlis), 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 reviews all candidates for the Assembly of Experts, president, and parliament and supervises elections for those bodies.

The constitution bans the 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 of Shia Ja'fari Islam as 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 parliament seats reserved by the constitution for recognized religious minorities. 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, in regions where followers of one of the recognized Sunni schools 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 the other schools.

According to the constitution, a judge should rule on a case on the basis of the 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 and all Muslims are "required to treat non-Muslims in conformity with the principles of Islamic justice and equity, and to 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 *diyyeh* as restitution to families for the death of Muslims and members of recognized religious minorities. Bahai families are not entitled to receive *diyyeh*. This law also reduces the *diyyeh* for recognized religious minorities and women to half that of a Muslim man.

By law, non-Muslims may not serve in the judiciary, the security services (separate from 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* requirements), although members of recognized religious minorities, may serve in the lower ranks of government if they meet these *gozinesh* 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.

Bahais are banned from all government employment. They are not allowed to participate in the governmental social pension system. Bahais cannot receive compensation for injury or crimes committed against them and cannot inherit property. A religious edict (fatwa) from the supreme leader encourages citizens to avoid all dealings with Bahais.

The government does not recognize Bahai marriages or divorces, but allows a civil attestation of marriage to serve as a marriage certificate, which allows for basic recognition of the union but does not offer legal protections in marital disputes. Bahai activists report this often leaves women without legal protections provided for in government-recognized marriage contracts.

Recognized religious groups issue marriage contracts in accordance with their religious laws.

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, there is an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps 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, thus limiting upward mobility of religious minorities. Members of recognized religious minorities with a college education may serve as officers during their mandatory military service, but 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.

Government Practices

According to Amnesty International and other international human rights NGOs, the government convicted and executed dissidents, political reformers, and peaceful protesters on charges of *moharebeh* and anti-Islamic propaganda. The government executed more than 20 Sunni Kurds on charges of *moharebeh* and incarcerated numerous prisoners on varying charges related to religion. According to the U. S.-based NGO United for Iran, there were 198 political prisoners incarcerated on charges “waging war against God,” 31 for “insulting Islam,” and 12 for “corruption on earth.” Shia religious leaders who did not support government policies reportedly continued to face intimidation and arrest. The government continued to harass, interrogate, and arrest Bahais. The government also continued to regulate Christian religious practices closely to enforce the prohibition on proselytizing and conversion. Security officials continued to raid and demolish existing prayer sites belonging to Sunnis; the government reportedly barred the construction of new Sunni mosques. Authorities continued demolition of a Bahai cemetery in Shiraz. There were reports of authorities placing restrictions on Bahai businesses or forcing them to shut down.

According to multiple reports from international media, such as Reuters, and NGOs, including the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (ICHR) and Amnesty International, on August 2, one week after airing their confessions on television, the government executed more than 20 Sunni Kurdish prisoners at Rajai Shahr Prison on charges of *moharebeh*, “being affiliated with Salafi groups”, and “acting against national security.” Those executed included Bahman Rahimi, Mokhtar Rahimi, Yavar Rahimi, Arash Sharifi, Kaveh Veisi, Ahmad Nasiri, Kaveh Sharifi, Behrouz Shahnazari, Talek Malek, and Shahram Ahmadi. Courts had upheld the death sentences even though NGOs reported the charges were based on confessions obtained through torture.

Courts also upheld the 2015 death sentences of Sunni prisoners Mohammad Kayvan Karimi, Amjad Salehi, and Omid Payvand, on charges of “enmity against God through spreading propaganda against the system,” despite NGO reports the convictions were based on confessions obtained through torture.

IHRDC reported the government executed one individual with the initials H.S. on charges of *moharebeh* in January in Zanjan. Additional information about the case was unavailable.

According to the Iranian Human Rights News Agency, on November 18, Mohammad Eshaqabadi, a member of the Gonabadi community of Sufi dervishes, died several days after he was detained by plainclothes policemen in Tehran.

Residents of provinces with large Sunni populations, including Kurdistan, Khuzestan, and Sistan-Baluchistan, reported continued repression by the judiciary and security services, including extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrest, and torture in detention, as well as discrimination, including suppression of religious rights, lack of basic government services, and inadequate funding for infrastructure projects. Sunnis reported it was sometimes difficult to distinguish whether the cause of government discrimination against them was religious or ethnic, since most Sunnis were also members of ethnic minority groups.

According to Baluchi rights activists, Baluchi journalists and human rights activists faced arbitrary arrest, physical abuse, and unfair trials. Baluchi rights activists reported families of those in prison were often pressured to remain silent and threatened with retaliation for speaking out about cases. Baluchistan Human Rights Group reported on October 19 that Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) agents arrested Ameneh Issazadeh, a Sunni Baluchi girl from Sirik Township, at her home for criticizing religious ceremonies on social media during the month of Moharam. She contacted her family from a MOIS detention center in Bandar Abbas after several days, but her family was not allowed to see her.

Christians who were arrested were reportedly subject to severe physical and psychological mistreatment. The Christian news website, *Mohabat News*, said the mistreatment sometimes included beatings and solitary confinement.

According to the Iran Prison Atlas data set from United for Iran, there were 31 political prisoners incarcerated on charges of “insulting Islam,” 198 for *moharebeh*, and 12 for “corruption on earth” and at least 103 members of minority religious groups remained imprisoned for their religious activities. According to the Bahai International Community (BIC), there were 86 Bahai prisoners incarcerated at year’s end. According to Christian World Watch Monitor, there were 82 arrests of Christians (including converts) during the year. According to IHRDC, at least 261 people remained imprisoned at the end of the year for their membership in or activities on behalf of a minority religious group, including at least 115 Sunnis, 80 Bahais, 26 Christian converts, 18 Sufis, and 10 Yarsanis.

Mohammad Ali Taheri, founder of the spiritual doctrine Interuniversalism, remained in prison serving a life sentence for “insulting the sanctities.” Taheri reportedly began a hunger strike on September 28 and was transferred to the hospital after fainting, according to local media reporting. One of his supporters, Sara Saei was summoned to court in January for participating in protests of Taheri’s prison conditions, according to ICHR. In October security forces, using tear gas and beating participants with batons, reportedly broke up a

gathering of Taheri's supporters in front of Baghiatollah Hospital, where he was believed to be hospitalized, and arrested 15 people.

The September 6 report of the UN by Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran, Dr. Ahmed Shaheed, stated that flogging continued to be used as punishment for not fasting during the month of Ramadan.

Multiple Bahais remained incarcerated, serving sentences on charges including "insulting religious sanctities," "corruption on earth," "propaganda against the system," and actions against national security, or for their involvement with the Bahai Institute for Higher Education (BIHE), a university-level educational institution the government considered illegal. Of seven Bahai leaders serving 20-year terms after 2011 convictions, one, Afif Naeimi, was provisionally released in July for medical reasons due to a heart condition. He remained out of jail at year's end. Two of the remaining six, Fariba Kamalabadi and Mahvash Sabet received five-day furloughs before returning to prison. Prison authorities denied Abdolfattah Soltani, an attorney who defended teachers at BIHE and was serving a 13-year sentence, family visitation and adequate medical treatment, according to an August 17 report by ICHRI. Amanollah Mostaghim, who had been serving a five-year sentence, was released due to continued medical issues, according to official online Bahai records.

The BIC reported that on January 24, 24 Bahais were sentenced to long-term imprisonment for religious activity. At year's end, the individuals were free on bail awaiting the outcome of an appeal. Police arrested 14 Bahais in Shiraz and Karaj for their religious beliefs on September 28 according to the BIC. Police arrested Behzad Zabihi Mahforouzaki, a Bahai business owner, on March 8, first charging him with "propaganda against the regime" and later with "propaganda against Islam and the Quran." Zabihi spent seven days in a detention center and was released on bail of 900 million rials (\$27,800). Zabihi said he was illegally arrested, subjected to torture and insults, prevented from defending himself, and pressured to abandon his faith. There was no further information on the status of his case. Peyman Koushk-Baghi, who was sentenced to five years in prison in 2015 for his activities at BIHE, appealed both his sentence and that of his wife, Azita Rafizadeh, who had been previously convicted of similar charges and was serving a four-year prison sentence. Rafizadeh continued to serve her sentence, but Koushk-Baghi remained free at year's end pending his appeal.

According to the BIC, the government continued to prohibit Bahais from officially assembling or maintaining administrative institutions, actively closed such institutions, harassed Bahais, and disregarded their property rights. On October 4 in Qorveh, security forces raided the home of, and arrested Bahai homeopathic physician Maria Kosari on charges that she was violating sanitary codes by practicing in a field banned to Bahais.

Christians, particularly evangelicals and converts from Islam, continued to experience disproportionate levels of arrests and detention, and high levels of harassment and surveillance, according to reports from exiled Christians. Numerous Christians remained imprisoned at year's end on charges related to their religious practices. Prison authorities reportedly continued to withhold medical care from prisoners, including some Christians, according to human rights groups. According to human rights NGOs, the government also continued to enforce the prohibition on proselytizing.

Several converts who used wine during communion services were arrested during the year. According to reporting from the NGO Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Christian converts Yasser Mossayebzadeh, Saheb Fadaie, and Mehdi Reza Omid were arrested on May 13 for drinking communion wine and convicted and sentenced to 80 lashes each in the city of Rasht on September 10. All were appealing their sentences at year's end.

According to Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Amin Afshar Naderi, Hadi Asgari, Amir Saman Dashti, Mohammad Dehnavi, and Ramil Bet-Tamraz were arrested on August 26 in a private garden in Firouzkooch for having Bibles. Four of the five were Christian converts. According to *Mohabat* Christian news site, Naderi was beaten by security forces for resisting arrest. On October 18, Christian Solidarity Worldwide reported that two of the arrested Christians, Ramil Bet-Tamraz and Mohammad Dehnavi, were released on bail. The rest remained in Evin prison. In August authorities arrested a Christian convert after raiding his house, confiscating religious materials found there. He was convicted of "acting against national security" and sentenced to one year in jail. According to the British online news site *Christian Today*, on June 24, police arrested three Azerbaijani Christians while they were leading a Bible study in a private apartment. After being detained for two months at Evin Prison, the three were released after paying bail and returned to Azerbaijan.

According to *Mohabat News*, prison guards beat Ebrahim Firouzi on July 12 for writing an open letter stating he would not attend any hearings about his case. Firouzi was serving a five-year sentence at Rajai Shahr Prison after a 2013 conviction for "collusion against national security" for converting to and practicing Christianity.

Christian convert Maryam Naghash Zargarani, originally arrested in 2012, continued to serve beyond her original four-year sentence on charges of "propaganda against the Islamic regime and collusion intended to harm national security" for her activities in the Christian community. According to *Mohabat News*, Zargarani went on two hunger strikes to seek conditional early release under a provision of the penal code. She was reported to be in poor health but was not on medical furlough.

Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani was rearrested in Rasht on May 13 for proselytizing. His wife and three members of his church were also arrested, but their charges were not specified. Pastor Nadarkhani's wife was subsequently released, and the pastor was released on bail July 24. The three church members remained in custody at year's end.

The authorities often arrested members of unrecognized churches for operating illegally in private homes or on charges of supporting and accepting assistance from enemy countries. Many arrests reportedly took place during police raids on religious gatherings, during which the authorities also confiscated religious property.

Other unrecognized religious minorities such as Bahai and Yarsan also often gathered in private homes to practice their faith in secret.

According to the Article 18 Organization, an NGO, on April 27, plainclothes security agents arrested 17 Christians who were attending a private social event in Tehran. Following this incident, attendees of the event were reportedly subjected to interrogations and intimidation and had their private property seized. Two attendees were reportedly banned from continuing their university studies for engaging in "illegal activities" while other attendees lost their jobs. Several other attendees were charged with crimes against national security by propagating Christianity in a house church. On October 4, university authorities expelled a Christian pastor post-graduate student for engaging in unauthorized religious activities.

The government continued to regulate Christian religious practices closely. The authorities prevented Muslim converts to Christianity from entering Armenian or Assyrian churches, according to UN Special Rapporteur Shaheed. According to Christian community leaders, if the authorities found Armenian or Assyrian churches were baptizing new converts or preaching in Farsi, they closed the churches. The authorities reportedly also barred all unregistered or unrecognized Christians from entering church premises, closed churches that allowed them to enter, and arrested Christian converts. Christian advocacy groups stated the government, through such pressure and through church closures, had eliminated in recent years all but a handful of Farsi-language church services, restricting services to the Armenian and Assyrian languages. The government continued to ban Farsi-language churches, according to Christian Solidarity Worldwide. 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 citizens who had converted to Protestantism or other Christian faiths practiced their religion in secret.

The government continued to monitor the statements and views of senior Shia religious leaders. Shia religious leaders who did not support government policies or supreme leader Ali Khamenei's views reportedly continued to face intimidation, arrest, and imprisonment on charges related to religious offenses.

The supreme leader oversaw the extrajudicial Special Clerical Courts, not provided for by the constitution. The courts, headed by a Shia Islamic legal scholar, operated outside the judiciary's purview and were charged with investigating offenses committed by clerics, including political statements inconsistent with government policy and nonreligious activities. The courts also issued rulings based on independent interpretation of Islamic legal sources. Critics stated clerical courts were used to control non-Shia Muslim clerics, as well as to prosecute Shia clerics who expressed controversial ideas and participated in activities outside the sphere of religion, such as journalism or reformist political activities. On August 16, Vice President for Legal Affairs Majid Ansari declared cases of individuals and entities who insulted the president would be tried in the Special Clerical Courts.

Local media reported the Qom branch of the Special Clerical Court interrogated prominent cleric Hojjatolleslam Ahmad Montazeri on August 14 for posting audio recordings of his father, the late cleric Hossein Ali Montazeri, condemning a 1988 mass execution of political prisoners. After Hojjatolleslam Ahmad Montazeri's interrogation, he was arrested September 4 for "endangering national security" and "leaking secrets of the Islamic system." On September 5, he was released on a 700 million rials (\$21,620) bail. On November 27, he was sentenced to 21 years in prison, of which he was ordered to serve six. The government suspended 15 years of his sentence because of what it said was respect for his family's role and sacrifice in the 1979 revolution.

According to Amnesty International, Shia cleric Ayatollah Hossein Kazemini Boroujerdi, serving an 11-year sentence after conviction on charges including "*moharebeh*" and "abusing his clerical flock," was transferred to a medical clinic on January 19 to treat recurring stomach pain, nausea, vomiting, and dizziness, but was returned by prison officials to his cell the same day without undergoing full treatment.

Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Reza Nekounam, who was originally arrested in 2015, remained in prison in Qom despite appeals for his release on medical grounds to the Special Clerical Court after he suffered a stroke during the year while in solitary confinement, according to Human Rights Activist News Agency (HRANA). Reportedly, the authorities brought him before the Special Clerical Court in June for further investigation.

There continued to be reports of arrests and harassment of Sunni clerics and congregants. ICHRI reported that in August Hassam Amini, a Sunni cleric and Islamic judge, was interrogated for two days by the intelligence ministry for his criticism of the execution of the 20 Sunni Kurdish prisoners in Rajai Shahr Prison and visiting the

victim's families. His interrogators reportedly said Amini "had acted against the state," that his criticisms "disturbed the public and undermined the judiciary," and his visit with the families meant he was supporting their positions. The intelligence ministry also interrogated Sunni religious scholar Hashemi Hossein Panahi on August 8 after he criticized the executions.

According to *Majzooban-e-Noor*, a website reporting on the Gonabadi (Sufi) dervish community, Gonabadi followers Kazem Dehghan and Salahaddin Moradi were charged with being members of an illegal group, a group countering the government and/or its theology, and conspiring to disrupt the country's security. There was no further information on their case.

According to a February 1 report by *Majzooban-e-Noor*, a special clerical court sentenced seven dervishes of Kavar to internal exile on charges including *moharebeh*. The court sentenced Kazem Dehghan, Hamid Reza Arayesh, and Mohammad Ali Shamshirzan to permanent internal exile, and sentenced Mohammad Ali Dehghan, Mohammad Ali Sadeghi, Ebrahim Bahrami, and Mohsen Esmaeili to seven years of internal exile.

Security officials continued to raid prayer sites belonging to Sunnis. News media outlet *Al Sharq Al Awsat* reported 18 parliamentarians had presented a warning to Interior Minister Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli after the closure of a Sunni mosque in Eslamshahr, west of Tehran. Parliament member Mahmoud Sadeghi said the closure of the mosque "contradict the Shia-Sunni unity that is always stressed by the supreme leader." Sadeghi also said authorities had blocked attendance at other Sunni mosques, including at Tehran Pars Mosque. HRANA reported plainclothes security agents raided a mosque in northwest Tehran and attacked worshippers there on the eve of Eid al-Fitr.

The government continued to require women of all religious groups to adhere to "Islamic dress" standards in public, including covering their hair and fully covering their bodies in loose clothing – a *manteau* (overcoat) and a *rousari* (headscarf), 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. In May according to media reports, 99 students in Qazvin, both men and women, were each given 99 lashes for attending a coed party where the women were, according to authorities, improperly dressed in accordance with Islam.

According to members of the Sabeian-Mandaean and Yarsan religious communities, authorities continued their harassment of these communities, including by denying them permission to perform religious ceremonies in public and denying them building permits for places of worship. The government continued to classify Yarsanis as Shia Muslims practicing Sufism, although Yarsanis identified themselves as practitioners of a distinct faith. Yarsanis reported continued discrimination in the military and school systems, where they faced harassment. They also faced discrimination in the birth registration system, which prevented them from giving their children Yarsani names. Without providing details, Yarsanis in exile reported thousands of community members remained missing after arrests by security forces.

The intelligence and security services reportedly continued their harassment of prominent Sufi leaders and raided Sufi businesses as a means of intimidation and information gathering. Government legal restrictions on Sufi groups and their *husseiniya* (auxiliary prayer and teaching spaces) also continued due to the groups' differences with the government's interpretation of Islam.

According to human rights activists, the government maintained a legal interpretation of Islam that required citizens of all faiths to follow strict rules based on the government's interpretation of Shia jurisprudence, creating differentiation under the law between the rights granted to men and women. The government continued to enforce gender segregation and discrimination throughout the country without regard to religious affiliation.

The authorities, employers, bureaucrats, hotels, and others reportedly often used marriage contracts to identify and discriminate against religious minorities.

Government restrictions on published religious material continued. Government officials frequently confiscated Bibles and pressured publishing houses printing Bibles or unsanctioned non-Muslim materials to cease operations. Books about the Yarsan religion remained banned. Books published by religious minorities, regardless of their topic, were required to carry labels on the cover denoting their non-Shia authorship.

Iranian media reported there were nine Sunni mosques operating in Tehran and 15,000 across the country. International media and the Sunni community reported no new Sunni mosques were allowed to be built in Tehran to meet demand. Sunnis reported the existing number of mosques in the country did not meet the demands of the local population. Sunnis continued to cite the absence of a Sunni mosque in Tehran, despite the presence of more than one million Sunnis in the city, as an example of government discrimination. Sunni leaders said, because the government barred them from building or worshiping in their own mosques, they relied on ad hoc, underground prayer halls, or *namaz khane*, to practice their faith.

According to the BIC website, authorities continued demolition of the Bahai cemetery in Shiraz. A cultural and sports recreation center for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps built on the site of the cemetery was reportedly near completion. The BIC reported authorities representing the Ardestan Municipal Council bulldozed the Bahai cemetery in Ardestan on October 27. Although the BIC presented an official petition to the Municipal Council and the office of the Friday prayer leader of Ardestan, authorities did not launch an investigation. Instead, the BIC reported the municipal council put up a banner requiring any burial in the area to have a special permit and stipulating that anyone carrying out a burial without a permit could be prosecuted.

The government continued to hold many Bahai properties it had seized following the 1979 revolution, including cemeteries, holy places, historical sites, and administrative centers. The government also continued to prevent Bahais from burying their dead in accordance with their religious tradition.

According to the BIC, authorities continued to restrict Bahai businesses, making it difficult for Bahais to earn their livelihood. The government continued to raid Bahai homes and businesses and confiscated private and commercial property, as well as religious materials. There were reports of authorities placing restrictions on Bahai businesses or forcing them to shut down when they had temporarily closed in observance of Bahai holidays. On April 20, authorities sealed off 17 Bahai owned shops after the owners closed their businesses for Bahai holy days. The shops included two toy stores, two pharmacies, a tire repair shop, a women's clothing store, and two optical stores. Authorities also reportedly asked managers of private companies to dismiss Bahai employees, and denied applications from Bahais for new or renewed business and trade licenses.

The Bahai community wrote a public letter to President Hassan Rouhani in September protesting the government's continuing seizure of Bahai personal property and stating its denial of access to education and employment eroded the Bahai community's economic base and threatened its survival. There was no public response from the government to the letter.

According to the Article 18 Organization, on July 26, the Third Branch of Tehran's Revolutionary Court confirmed a 2015 court order to seize an Assemblies of God retreat center in Mohammadshahr. The court stated the U.S. Government funded the Assemblies of God to infiltrate the country and the Islamic world by conducting evangelistic activities.

Sunni leaders reported the authorities had 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 for the students. Assyrian Christians reported the government continued to permit their community to write its own religious textbooks for use in schools, after the government reviewed and authorized their content.

Members of the Bahai community reported teachers and administrators in public schools continued to try to convert Bahai children to Islam. The BIC stated in its October report, *The Bahai Question Revisited*, that "students were being pressured to convert to Islam, were required to endure slander of their faith by religious instructors, and were being taught and tested ... from authorized texts that denigrate, distort, and brazenly falsify Bahai religious heritage." According to the report, Bahai students were often transferred to schools farther from home and told not to teach or discuss their religion with other students.

According to the Tehran Jewish Committee, five Jewish schools and two kindergartens continued to operate in Tehran, but authorities required their principals to be Muslim. The government reportedly continued to allow Hebrew instruction but limited the distribution of Hebrew texts, particularly nonreligious texts, making it difficult to teach the language, according to the Jewish community. The government reportedly required Jewish schools to remain open on Saturdays, in violation of Jewish religious law, to conform to the schedule of other schools.

Public and private universities continued to deny Bahais admittance and to expel Bahai students once their religion became known. ICHRI reported the June expulsion of Faraz Karin-Kani Sisan from Ghiyaseddin Jamshid Kashani Institute for Higher Education (GJKI) in Abyek, Alborz Province, although he had already completed two years of study, after administrators found out he was Bahai. Many Bahais reportedly did not try to enroll in state-run universities because of the Bahai Faith's tenet not to deny one's faith.

During the year Bahai students reported they were unable to register for university, even if they passed entrance exams, because of error messages in the online registration system. According to HRANA, a Bahai high school graduate in Abadan, Seraj Azadi, was told by university admissions he could not register for university, despite successfully passing entrance exams, because he had "insufficient/incomplete documentation," a statement reportedly used to deny Bahai students entrance into universities.

Many Bahais reportedly turned to online education at BIHE despite government censorship through use of internet filters and blocking of websites and the arrests of teachers associated with the program. As the BIHE's operations, online and offline, were illegal, students and teachers faced risk of arrest for participation. BIHE instructor Azita Rafizadeh remained in prison serving out her four-year sentence for teaching at the institution.

The government's lack of recognition of degrees from BIHE resulted in employment barriers for graduates from the institution.

Authorities reportedly continued to deny the Sabeen-Mandaeen and Yarsan religious communities access to higher education and government employment unless they declared themselves to be Christian or Muslim, respectively, on their application forms.

According to *Majzooban-e-Noor* website, at the beginning of the new school year, authorities continued to bar Gonabadi Sufis from studying and teaching at universities. In September security at Azad University of Shiraz refused to allow Farshid Yadollahi, Sufi attorney and activist in his second year of graduate studies, to continue his education at the university.

Representatives of minority religious groups, such as the Bahais and Yarsanis, reported the government continued to avoid investigating crimes committed against members of religious minority groups and against their property, including religious sites and graveyards.

International news media, such as the UK newspaper *The Independent*, quoted Jewish community representatives as saying there continued to be government restrictions and discrimination against Jews, but little interference with Jewish religious practices. According to the government, there were 31 publicly-listed synagogues in Tehran. The Tehran Jewish Committee reported in 2015 there were 13 active synagogues in Tehran.

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 with other citizens.

The government officially did not limit voting rights on account of religion, although there were separate election processes for the seats reserved for representatives of the recognized religious minority communities in parliament. The government continued to permit Sunnis, Christians, Zoroastrians, and Jews to serve in parliament but not the Assembly of Experts. Through the end of the year, the Guardian Council, assigned by the constitution to confirm the eligibility of candidates for the presidency, had deemed only Shia Muslims eligible for the presidency.

According to reporting from *Mazjooban-e-Noor*, university professor Sharam Pazouki was prevented from teaching at Azad University after authorities discovered his ties to the Gonbadi dervish community.

Sunnis reported continued underrepresentation in government-appointed positions in the provinces where they formed a majority, such as Kurdistan and Khuzestan, as well as inability to obtain senior government positions.

Sunni activists reported that throughout the year, and especially during the month of Moharam, the government sent hundreds of Shia missionaries to areas with large Sunni Baluch populations to try to convert the local population.

According to the Bahai International Community, government regulations continued to ban Bahais from participating over 25 types of work, many related to food industries, because the government deemed Bahais to be "unclean."

The government allowed operation of a 100-bed Jewish hospital in Tehran, according to the Tehran Jewish Committee.

According to reports from the Bahai community, government-sponsored public denunciations of Bahais continued to increase steadily, as they had for several years, with over 20,000 pieces of anti-Bahai propaganda in the Iranian media during the year. Government media statements continued to accuse Bahais of sexual deviance and illegitimate relations, calling them members of a "cult" which was a threat to national security.

Former parliamentarian Faezeh Hashemi Rafsanjani was publicly criticized for visiting Bahai prisoner of conscience, Fariba Kamalabadi, in her home during a five-day furlough from jail. In response to Rafsanjani's visit, on May 16, the Tasnim news agency quoted Judiciary Chief Ayatollah Sadeq Amoli-Larijani as saying the Bahai Faith "is a threat to Iran's national security" and that relatives of senior clerics who socialized with Bahais "damage the norms." An article in *Javan* magazine stated "...the deviant Bahai sect was created by colonists," and called on Rafsanjani to apologize for her visit. Rafsanjani's father, former President Hashemi Rafsanjani, also criticized his daughter's visit.

Government officials continued to employ anti-Semitic rhetoric in official statements and sanction them in media outlets, publications, and books. On January 27, International Holocaust Remembrance Day, Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's official website posted a video that questioned whether the Holocaust happened and criticized the U.S. and European governments for disapproving of Holocaust denial.

On April 29, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum cited the Iranian government's partial funding of a Holocaust cartoon contest, which included anti-Semitic cartoons, stating, "The organizations associated with the contest are sponsored or supported by government entities, including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Ministry of Islamic Guidance." There continued to be reports of government officials and government-affiliated religious figures making anti-Semitic statements, including a January video produced by the office of the supreme leader, questioning the facts surrounding the Holocaust. Government-sponsored rallies continued to include chants of "death to Israel" and accused other religious minorities, such as Bahais and Christians, of collusion with Israel. On June 30, *Kayhan* newspaper, whose management is appointed by the office of the supreme leader, published an article stating the Holocaust was a myth and a figment of Jewish historians' imaginations.

Official reports and the media continued to characterize Christian house churches as "illegal networks" and "Zionist propaganda institutions."

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

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Bahais, and those who advocated for their rights, reported Bahais continued to be a major target of social stigma and violence. According to The Bahai World News Service, Farhang Amiri, was stabbed to death outside his residence in Yazd on September 26 by individuals, one of whom stated during the police investigation that he had carried out the killing because Amiri was Bahai.

In March an attacker involved in 2014 acid attacks against women was arrested by authorities and charged with "deliberate destruction, arson, and attacks on women." The media had reported at the time the attacks were being motivated by the women's "improper Islamic dress."

There continued to be reports of non-Bahais dismissing or refusing employment to Bahais, sometimes in response to government pressure, according to BIC.

Yarsanis outside the country reported there was widespread discrimination against Yarsanis in the country. Yarsani children were socially ostracized in school and shared community facilities. Yarsani men, recognizable by their particular mustaches, often faced employment discrimination. Friday preachers often encouraged such social discrimination against the Yarsani. During the year, protests broke out in the city of Eslamabad after police officers were seen mocking Yarsani men's mustaches in the street.

According to Christian Solidarity Worldwide, converts from Islam faced 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 routinely insulted Sunni religious figures in class.

On May 20, Fars Provincial TV aired a sermon by Shiraz Imam Hojjat ol-Eslam val-Moslemin Razavi-Ardakani, who said the Bahai religion is not a religion but a political party that was created by the United Kingdom and that intelligence and security services should be attentive to Bahais operating in some of the cities in the country.

Bahai representatives in the U.S. reported there were at least three cases of destruction or vandalism of Bahai cemeteries. In July the Bahai cemetery in Ghorveh was completely destroyed and the gravestones razed to the ground. The Semnan Bahai cemetery was also vandalized in July. In October according to Iran Press Watch, vandals attacked the Bahai cemetery in Urmieh for the second time, cutting down trees, burning parts of the grounds, and demolishing graves. Local Bahais reported the incident to the police, who reportedly took no action.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The United States has no diplomatic relations with the country, and therefore did not have regular opportunities to raise concerns directly with the government over its religious freedom abuses and restrictions.

The U.S. government continued to call for the government to respect religious freedom and continued to condemn its abuses of religious minorities in a variety of ways and in different international forums. This included public statements by senior U.S. government officials and 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. For example, in May the Department of State issued a press statement condemning the continued detention of the seven members of the Bahai leadership council and called for their release. The Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom regularly criticized the country's continued discrimination against Bahais and other religious minorities. In an August 24 statement, the Ambassador called upon the country to end the use of blasphemy and apostasy laws. In an October 4 Voice of America editorial, he reiterated the U.S. government's concerns with the Iranian government's discriminatory actions against religious minority groups, specifically Bahais. In other statements, U.S. government officials, including the Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, called attention to the situation of Bahais and Christians in the context of supporting religious freedom for members of all minority religious groups in the country.

The United States supported an extension of the mandate of the UN special rapporteur for human rights in Iran in a vote at the UN Human Rights Council. The United States also voted in November and December in the UN General Assembly in favor of resolutions expressing concern over Iran's human rights practices, including the continued persecution of religious minorities.

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 October 31, 2016, 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(a)(1)(C) of the Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act of 2012, pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act.

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