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Topic(s)

1. [Background information](#)
2. [Legislation](#)
3. [Treatment by state authorities](#)
4. [Treatment by society](#)
5. [Mechanisms of state recourse](#)

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Cite as: EUAA, Country of Origin Information Query, Iran: Situation of individuals who have converted from Shia Islam to Sufism, particularly to Gonabadi Dervish order, 1 August 2025, [url](#)

COI QUERY RESPONSE – Iran

Situation of individuals who have converted from Shia Islam to Sufism, particularly to Gonabadi Dervish order

1. Background information

Sufism is described as a ‘mystical branch’ within Islam,¹ that emphasises the inward spiritual search for God,² renouncing materialism,³ and advocating practices ‘such as meditation, asceticism, and devotion to God’.⁴ Sufis are also known as ‘dervishes’.⁵

There are various Sufi Muslim groups in Iran including Naqshbandi, Qaderi, Khaksari,⁶ and Gonabadi dervishes.⁷ Gonabadi dervishes is reported to be one of the largest Sufi orders.⁸ Gonabadi dervishes identify as Shia Muslims⁹ and observe Shia religious practices.¹⁰ However, Gonabadi dervishes have ideological differences with Shia Islam, as they do not accept some Shia religious disciplines and practices.¹¹

Information on the official statistics of Sufi adherents, or specifically on Gonabadi dervishes in Iran, could not be found in the sources consulted by EUAA within the time constraints of this query.

The US Department of State (USDOS) indicated that besides the lack of available official statistics on the number of Sufis in Iran, unofficial reports estimated that there are several million.¹² A 2018 article by Al Jazeera also noted that Gonabadi dervishes were estimated between two and five million.¹³

¹ Iran International, Armed attack in southern Iran kills Sufi Sheikh and two followers, 18 July 2024, [url](#); Medium, The Mystical Journey of Dervishes: Exploring History, Occultism, and Spiritual Practices, 28 October 2023, [url](#)

² Medium, The Mystical Journey of Dervishes: Exploring History, Occultism, and Spiritual Practices, 28 October 2023, [url](#); IHRDC, Living Under Suppression: The Situation of Gonabadi Dervishes in Iran, 6 March 2021, [url](#)

³ IHRDC, Living Under Suppression: The Situation of Gonabadi Dervishes in Iran, 6 March 2021, [url](#)

⁴ Medium, The Mystical Journey of Dervishes: Exploring History, Occultism, and Spiritual Practices, 28 October 2023, [url](#)

⁵ Medium, The Mystical Journey of Dervishes: Exploring History, Occultism, and Spiritual Practices, 28 October 2023, [url](#)

⁶ EUAA, Iran - Country Focus, June 2024, [url](#), p. 85

⁷ Netherlands, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, General Country of Origin Information Report on Iran, September 2023, [url](#), p. 87; IranWire, Iranian Gonabadi Dervish Freed After Nearly Five Years In Prison, 25 January 2023, [url](#)

⁸ Iran International, Armed attack in southern Iran kills Sufi Sheikh and two followers, 18 July 2024, [url](#); BBC News, Name in the News: The Gonabadi Sufis of Iran, 20 February 2018, [url](#)

⁹ IranWire, Gonabadi Dervishes Resist Oppression of All Minorities Since Tehran Clashes, 25 June 2021, [url](#); IHRDC, Living Under Suppression: The Situation of Gonabadi Dervishes in Iran, 6 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁰ IranWire, Iranian Gonabadi Dervish Freed After Nearly Five Years In Prison, 25 January 2023, [url](#)

¹¹ IranWire, Gonabadi Dervishes Resist Oppression of All Minorities Since Tehran Clashes, 25 June 2021, [url](#); IHRDC, Living Under Suppression: The Situation of Gonabadi Dervishes in Iran, 6 March 2021, [url](#)

¹² USDOS, 2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran, 26 June 2024, [url](#), p. 6

¹³ Al Jazeera, Iran's Gonabadi Dervishes: A 'long history' of persecution, 27 February 2018, [url](#)

According to the 2023 report on international religious freedom by USDOS, Shia clerics reportedly denounced Sufism and the activities of Sufis in sermons and public statements.¹⁴ Concerning Gonabadi dervishes, Iran International, indicated that 'Iran's Supreme Leader and other influential figures dismiss their beliefs as "false mysticism."'.¹⁵

In February 2018, 300 members of the Gonabadi dervishes' group were arrested in Tehran,¹⁶ following violent clashes with security forces.¹⁷ The clashes emerged after Gonabadi dervishes gathered outside a police station in Tehran to protest the arrest of a member of their religious community.¹⁸ According to Iranian authorities, three police officers and two members of the paramilitary Basij force were killed during the above-mentioned events.¹⁹ However, members of the Gonabadi order claimed that as a result of the clashes, one²⁰ to five Gonabadi dervishes were killed²¹ and dozens were injured.²²

According to a joint submission by the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and the League for the Defence of Human Rights in Iran (LDDHI) to the UN Human Rights Committee, many of those arrested in connection to the February 2018 clashes were 'severely beaten while in detention' or were 'subjected to torture and other ill-treatment', while one protester died in custody.²³ The same source also indicated that over 200 of the arrested were sentenced, 'after grossly unfair trials to harsh prison terms, floggings, internal exile, travel bans, and/or a ban on membership of social and political groups'.²⁴ Corroborating information on the number of persons convicted in relation to the protests could not be found among the sources consulted by EUAA within the time constraints of this query.

According to sources, a member of the Gonabadi dervishes' group, was executed in June 2018²⁵, after he was sentenced to death for the murder of three police officers by running over

¹⁴ USDOS, 2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran, 26 June 2024, [url](#), pp. 5, 63

¹⁵ Iran International, Armed attack in southern Iran kills Sufi Sheikh and two followers, 18 July 2024, [url](#)

¹⁶ FIDH and LDDHI, Joint submission, Iran, UN Human Rights Committee: 139th Session (9 October - 3 November 2023), 12 September 2023, [url](#), p. 8; IranWire, Iranian Gonabadi Dervish Freed After Nearly Five Years In Prison, 25 January 2023, [url](#)

¹⁷ IranWire, Iranian Gonabadi Dervish Freed After Nearly Five Years In Prison, 25 January 2023, [url](#); RFE/RL, Clashes Highlight Tensions Between Dervishes And Iran's Establishment, 20 February 2018, [url](#)

¹⁸ IranWire, Iranian Gonabadi Dervish Freed After Nearly Five Years In Prison, 25 January 2023, [url](#); RFE/RL, Six People Said Killed, 300 Arrests At Sufi Protest In Iran, 20 February 2018, [url](#)

¹⁹ IranWire, Iranian Gonabadi Dervish Freed After Nearly Five Years In Prison, 25 January 2023, [url](#); RFE/RL, Six People Said Killed, 300 Arrests At Sufi Protest In Iran, 20 February 2018, [url](#)

²⁰ RFE/RL, Six People Said Killed, 300 Arrests At Sufi Protest In Iran, 20 February 2018, [url](#)

²¹ Al Jazeera, Iran's Gonabadi Dervishes: A 'long history' of persecution, 27 February 2018, [url](#)

²² IranWire, Iranian Gonabadi Dervish Freed After Nearly Five Years In Prison, 25 January 2023, [url](#)

²³ FIDH and LDDHI, Joint submission, Iran, UN Human Rights Committee: 139th Session (9 October - 3 November 2023), 12 September 2023, [url](#), p. 8

²⁴ FIDH and LDDHI, Joint submission, Iran, UN Human Rights Committee: 139th Session (9 October - 3 November 2023), 12 September 2023, [url](#), p. 8

²⁵ FIDH and LDDHI, Joint submission, Iran, UN Human Rights Committee: 139th Session (9 October - 3 November 2023), 12 September 2023, [url](#), p. 8; Al, Iran: Sufi bus driver executed at dawn after grossly unfair trial, 18 June 2018, [url](#)

them with a bus during the protests.²⁶ Sources noted that the man was sentenced after he was reportedly ‘forced’ to confess ‘under torture’.²⁷

Sources further reported on cases of Gonabadi dervishes imprisoned in connection with the February 2018 incidents, who were released in 2023 because they completed their sentence,²⁸ had a sentence reduction,²⁹ or because they were granted a ‘pardon’.³⁰ The Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs indicated that as of the end of August 2023, other Gonabadi Sufis sentenced in relation to the 2018 protests, remained in prison ‘sometimes even in solitary confinement’.³¹

2. Legislation

The Iranian Constitution defines Shia Islam as the official state religion.³² Specifically, article 12 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran states:

‘The official religion of Iran is Islam and the Twelver Ja’fari school [in usual al-Din and fiqh], and this principle will remain eternally immutable. Other Islamic schools, including the Hanafi, Shafi’i, Maliki, Hanbali, and Zaydi, are to be accorded full respect, and their followers are free to act in accordance with their own jurisprudence in performing their religious rites.’³³

Article 13 of the Constitution stipulates that ‘Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian Iranians are the only recognized religious minorities’.³⁴

Conversion from Islam to another religion is prohibited in Iran.³⁵ Even though apostasy is not codified in the Iranian penal code,³⁶ under the Sharia law conversions from Islam can be seen

²⁶ IHRNGO, Iran Executions: Mohammad Salas, the Gonabadi Dervish, Hanged, 18 June 2018, [url](#); AI, Iran: Sufi bus driver executed at dawn after grossly unfair trial, 18 June 2018, [url](#)

²⁷ FIDH and LDDHI, Joint submission, Iran, UN Human Rights Committee: 139th Session (9 October - 3 November 2023), 12 September 2023, [url](#), p. 8; EU, EEAS, Statement on an execution carried out in Iran, 19 June 2018, [url](#)

²⁸ United for Iran, Kianoush Abbaszadeh, n.d., [url](#); United for Iran, Mostafa Abdi, n.d., [url](#)

²⁹ IranWire, Iranian Gonabadi Dervish Freed After Nearly Five Years In Prison, 25 January 2023, [url](#)

³⁰ HRANA, Report on the Release of Prisoners in the Last 24 Hours, 14 February 2023, [url](#);

IHRNGO, Iran Human Rights Defenders in Iran 2023, 2023, [url](#), pp. 98, 101

³¹ Netherlands, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, General Country of Origin Information Report on Iran, September 2023, [url](#), p. 88

³² USDOS, 2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran, 26 June 2024, [url](#), p. 1; UN Human Rights Council, Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, 9 February 2024, [url](#), para. 79; Humanists International, The Freedom of Thought Report, Iran, last updated 24 October 2023, [url](#)

³³ Iran, Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, n.d., [url](#)

³⁴ Iran, Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, n.d., [url](#)

³⁵ Iran International, Cleric says some Iranian Muslims converting to other religions, 11 March 2023, [url](#); USDOS, 2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran, 26 June 2024, [url](#), p. 9

³⁶ Article18 et al., 2025 annual report – The Tip of the Iceberg, January 2025, [url](#), p. 21; UN Human Rights Council, Detailed findings of the independent international fact-finding mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran, 19 March 2024, [url](#), para. 102; HRRC, The Status of Religious Freedom in Iran, 16 November 2023, [url](#)

as apostasy,³⁷ which is punishable by death,³⁸ while individuals suspected of conversion can be also sentenced under other criminal charges.³⁹

Although Sufism was not reported to be illegal in Iran,⁴⁰ it is not recognized by the Iranian state,⁴¹ whereas Sufis faced ‘systematic’ discrimination by the state.⁴²

Moreover, according to an August 2024 report by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN OHCHR), article 500 of the Islamic Penal Code of Iran, criminalizes ‘adherence to, practice, and promotion of religions and beliefs that fall outside the legally recognized religions’ and ‘any deviant educational or proselytising activity that contradicts or interferes with the sacred law of Islam’.⁴³ This provision was reportedly disproportionately used against religious minorities, including Gonabadi dervishes as it was considered as ‘deviant sects’ by the Iranian government.⁴⁴

Detailed information on freedom of religion, conversion and on the situation of religious minorities can be found in the EUAA Country of Origin Information Report: [Iran – Country Focus](#), published in June 2024.

Additional information on freedom of religion in Iran, including on conversion and converts, can be

found in the following EUAA Query responses:

- [Situation of individuals who have converted from Islam to Zoroastrianism in Iran](#), published on 26 May 2025
- [Freedom of movement and right of employment for converts from Islam to Christianity, including for returnees](#), published on 9 August 2024
- [Situation of returnees from Western countries who converted from Islam to Christianity, including those who have a family with a Christian spouse and children; treatment by the state](#), published on 9 August 2024

³⁷ USDOS, 2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran, 26 June 2024, [url](#), p. 9; Article 18, Apostasy never codified in Iranian law ‘due to international pressure’, 17 January 2023, [url](#)

³⁸ CHRI, Imprisonment of Christians Jumps Six-Fold in Iran as Persecution Intensifies, 1 April 2025, [url](#); IHRNGO (Iran Human Rights NGO) and ECPM (Together against the death penalty), Annual Report on the Death Penalty in Iran – 2023, 2024, [url](#), p. 30

³⁹ USDOS, 2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran, 26 June 2024, [url](#), p. 9; HRRC, The Status of Religious Freedom in Iran, 16 November 2023, [url](#)

⁴⁰ Iran International, Armed attack in southern Iran kills Sufi Sheikh and two followers, 18 July 2024, [url](#)

⁴¹ FIDH and LDDHI, Joint submission, Iran, UN Human Rights Committee: 139th Session (9 October - 3 November 2023), 12 September 2023, [url](#), p. 8

⁴² Iran International, Armed attack in southern Iran kills Sufi Sheikh and two followers, 18 July 2024, [url](#); FIDH and LDDHI, Joint submission, Iran, UN Human Rights Committee: 139th Session (9 October - 3 November 2023), 12 September 2023, [url](#), p. 8

⁴³ UN OHCHR, Independent International Fact-finding Mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran, “They have dehumanized us”: Minority rights violations during the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement in the Islamic Republic of Iran, August 2024, [url](#), p. 6

⁴⁴ UN OHCHR, Independent International Fact-finding Mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran, “They have dehumanized us”: Minority rights violations during the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement in the Islamic Republic of Iran, August 2024, [url](#), p. 6

- [Situation of atheists and non-religious individuals, including legislation, treatment by state actors and society, availability of state protection](#), published on 17 November 2023
- [People convicted with religious offences](#), published on 8 February 2023

3. Treatment by state authorities

Religious minorities in Iran, including Sufis and Gonabadi dervishes, faced discrimination both in legislation⁴⁵ and in practice,⁴⁶ including access to education, employment, child adoption,⁴⁷ economic opportunities,⁴⁸ places of worship,⁴⁹ and exclusion from holding political office⁵⁰ and high-ranking positions.⁵¹

According to Amnesty International (AI), members of religious minorities, including Gonabadi Dervishes, as well as Shia Muslims who convert to other religions faced ‘harassment, arbitrary arrest and detention and prison sentences’.⁵² Similarly, sources indicated that Gonabadi dervishes were targeted by the state authorities with arrest, criminal prosecution and imprisonment.⁵³

Incidents of arrests and convictions of Sufis and Gonabadi dervishes, as reported by sources during the reference period of this query response, included:

- In January 2023, HRANA reported that the Revolutionary Court sentenced a Gonabadi dervish to one year imprisonment on the charge of ‘propaganda against the regime’, following his arrest in October 2022 for allegedly writing slogans on a wall.⁵⁴
- In October 2023, a member of the Gonabadi dervish order was arrested in Kashan, Isfahan province, and his personal belongings, including his laptop and mobile phone, were confiscated.⁵⁵ In December 2023, he was sentenced by the Tehran

⁴⁵ AI, The State of the World's Human Rights; Iran 2024, 29 April 2025, [url](#); UN Human Rights Council, Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, 9 February 2024, [url](#), para. 79

⁴⁶ AI, The State of the World's Human Rights; Iran 2024, 29 April 2025, [url](#); Bertelsmann Stiftung, BTI 2024 Country Report Iran, 19 March 2024, [url](#), p. 28

⁴⁷ AI, The State of the World's Human Rights; Iran 2024, 29 April 2025, [url](#)

⁴⁸ UN OHCHR, Independent International Fact-finding Mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran, “They have dehumanized us”: Minority rights violations during the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement in the Islamic Republic of Iran, August 2024, [url](#), p. 5

⁴⁹ AI, The State of the World's Human Rights; Iran 2024, 29 April 2025, [url](#); Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2023 - Iran, 2023, [url](#)

⁵⁰ AI, The State of the World's Human Rights; Iran 2024, 29 April 2025, [url](#)

⁵¹ Bertelsmann Stiftung, BTI 2024 Country Report Iran, 19 March 2024, [url](#), p. 27

⁵² AI, Iran: All-out attack on human rights: Submission to the 48th Session of the UPR Working Group, January – February 2025, July 2024, [url](#), p. 4

⁵³ HRANA, Mazaher Heydari Continues Hunger Strike in Shahr-e Kord Prison, 22 August 2024, [url](#); Freedom House, Freedom on the Net 2023 - Iran, 4 October 2023, [url](#); Netherlands, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, General Country of Origin Information Report on Iran, September 2023, [url](#), p. 87

⁵⁴ HRANA, Iran Protests: Gonabadi Dervish Mohsen Sentenced to One Year in Prison, 23 January 2023, [url](#)

⁵⁵ Hengaw Organization for Human Rights, Arrested two individuals in Kashan and Iranshahr by security forces, 19 October 2023, [url](#); HRANA, Gonabadi Dervish Arash Moradi Arrested in Kashan, 19 October 2019, [url](#)

Revolutionary Court to eight years of imprisonment on the charges of blasphemy, ‘insulting the leader and founder of the Islamic Republic and disturbing the public order’, as well as ‘propagandizing against the regime’.⁵⁶ The same individual had been previously sentenced and served one year imprisonment in relation to the 2018 protests.⁵⁷

According to the Human Rights Activists News Agency’s (HRANA) annual report covering 2024, around 67 % of reports of human rights violations in terms of arrests and convictions affected religious minorities, with 0.58 % being towards Gonabadi dervishes.⁵⁸

In July 2024, unidentified gunmen entered a Sufi lodge in Saqqez city, Iranian Kurdistan, killing three persons, including a Sufi religious leader.⁵⁹ According to the news source, IranWire, local law enforcement authorities announced the launch of an investigation, however as of the end of October 2024, authorities did not provide reliable information about the murder to the victim’s family or the community.⁶⁰ The Sufi leader’s brother was arrested in March 2025 during the Nowruz celebrations, allegedly without a judicial warrant, and was released from detention on bail on 28 May 2025.⁶¹

4. Treatment by society

Information on the treatment by society of Muslims who have converted to Sufism, particularly to the Gonabadi dervish order, could not be found in the sources consulted by EUAA within the time constraints of this query.

5. Mechanisms of state recourse

Information on mechanisms for state recourse in cases of violations by society against Muslims who have converted to Sufism, particularly those belonging to the Gonabadi dervish order, was scarce among the sources consulted by the EUAA within the time constraints of this query.

⁵⁶ Hengaw Organization for Human Rights, Gonabadi Dervish Arash Moradi Receives 8-Year Prison Sentence in Iran, 16 December 2023, [url](#)

⁵⁷ Hengaw Organization for Human Rights, Arrested two individuals in Kashan and Iranshahr by security forces, 19 October 2023, [url](#); HRANA, Gonabadi Dervish Arash Moradi Arrested in Kashan, 19 October 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁸ HRANA, Annual Statistical Report of Human Rights Conditions in Iran 2024, [2025], [url](#), p. 18

⁵⁹ IranWire, Conscience Held Captive: The State of Religious Minorities in the Islamic Republic of Iran, 24 April 2025, [url](#)

⁶⁰ IranWire, Conscience Held Captive: The State of Religious Minorities in the Islamic Republic of Iran, 24 April 2025, [url](#)

⁶¹ Kurdpa, Saqqez: Sheikh Zahid Shahabi Released on Bail, 29 May 2025, [url](#)

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