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U.S. Department of State Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999: Iran

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IRAN

Section I. Freedom of Religion

The Government restricts freedom of religion. The Constitution declares that the "official religion of Iran is Islam and the doctrine followed is that of Ja'fari (Twelver) Shi'ism." It also states that "other Islamic denominations are to be accorded full respect," and designates Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians as the only "recognized religious minorities," which, "within the limits of the law", are permitted to perform their religious rites and ceremonies and "to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education." Although the Constitution states that "the investigation of individuals' beliefs is forbidden" and that "no one may be molested or taken to task simply for holding a certain belief," the adherents of religions not specifically protected under the Constitution do not enjoy freedom of activity. This situation most directly affects the 300,000 to 350,000 followers of the Baha'i Faith in the country.

The central feature of the country's Islamic republican system is rule by a "religious jurisconsult." Its senior leadership, including the Supreme Leader of the Revolution, the President, the head of the Judiciary, and the Speaker of the Islamic Consultative Assembly (Parliament), is composed principally of Shi'a clergymen.

Religious activity is monitored closely by the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance and by the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS). Adherents of recognized religious minorities are not required to register individually with the Government, although their community, religious, and cultural events and organizations, as well as schools, are monitored closely. Baha'is are not recognized by the Government as a legitimate religious group but are considered an outlawed political organization. Registration of Baha'i adherents is a police function. Evangelical Christian groups have been pressured by government authorities to compile and hand over membership lists for their congregations. Evangelicals have resisted this demand.

The population is approximately 99 percent Muslim, of which 89 percent are Shi'a and 10 percent are Sunni (mostly Turkomen, Arabs, Baluchs, and Kurds living in the southwest, southeast, and northwest). Baha'i, Christian, Zoroastrian, and Jewish communities constitute less than 1 percent of the population. Estimates on the size of the Jewish community vary from 25,000 to 40,000. These figures represent a substantial reduction from the estimated 75,000 to 80,000 Jews who resided in the country prior to the 1979 Revolution. The Christian community is estimated at approximately 117,000 persons according to government figures. Of these the majority consists of ethnic Armenians and Assy-

ro-Chaldeans. Protestant denominations and evangelical churches also are active; although non-ethnically based faith groups report a greater degree of restriction imposed by authorities on their activities. Sufi Brotherhoods are popular, but there are no reliable figures available to judge their true size.

The U.N. Special Representative for Human Rights in Iran noted in his September 1998 report frequent assertions that religious minorities are, by law and practice, barred from being elected to a representative body (except to the seats in the Majles reserved for minorities, as provided for in the Constitution) and from holding senior government or military positions. Members of religious minorities are allowed to vote, but they may not run for President. All religious minorities suffer varying degrees of officially sanctioned discrimination, particularly in the areas of employment, education, and housing (see Section II).

Members of religious minorities are generally barred from becoming school principals. Applicants for public-sector employment are screened for their adherence to Islam. The law stipulates penalties for government workers who do not observe "Islam's principles and rules." Religious minorities cannot serve in the army, the judiciary, and the security services. The Constitution states that "the Army of the Islamic Republic of Iran must be an Islamic army, i.e., committed to an Islamic ideology and the people, and must recruit into its service individuals who have faith in the objectives of the Islamic Revolution and are devoted to the cause of achieving its goals." Baha'is are prohibited from government employment.

University applicants are required to pass an examination in Islamic theology. Although public-school students receive instruction in Islam, this requirement limits the access of most religious minorities to higher education. Applicants for public-sector employment similarly are screened for their adherence to Islam.

The Government allows recognized religious minorities to conduct religious education of their adherents. This includes separate and privately funded Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian schools. The Ministry of Education, which imposes certain curriculum requirements, supervises these schools. With few exceptions, the directors of these private schools must be Muslim. Attendance at these schools is not mandatory for recognized religious minorities. All textbooks used in course work must be approved for use by the Ministry of Education, including religious texts. Religious texts in non-Persian languages require approval by the authorities for use. This requirement imposes sometimes significant translation expenses on minority communities.

Recognized religious minorities may provide religious instruction in non-Persian languages but often come under pressure from the authorities when conducting such instruction in Persian. In particular, evangelical Christian and Jewish communities have suffered harassment and arrest by authorities for the printing of materials or delivery of sermons in Persian.

Recognized religious minorities are allowed by the Government to establish community centers and certain cultural, social, sports, or charitable associations that they finance themselves. This does not apply to the Baha'i community, which since 1983 has been denied the right to assemble officially or to maintain administrative institutions. Because the Baha'i Faith has no clergy, the denial of the right to form such institutions and elect officers has threatened its existence.

Religious minorities suffer discrimination in the legal system, receiving lower awards in injury and death lawsuits and incurring heavier punishments than Muslims. Muslim men are free to marry non-Muslim women, but the opposite does not apply. Marriages between Muslim women and non-Muslim men are not recognized.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. The Government continues to restrict religious freedom.

The Government is highly suspicious of any proselytizing of Muslims by non-Muslims and can be harsh in meting out its response, in particular against Baha'is and evangelical Christians. The Government regards the Baha'i community, whose faith originally derives from a strand of Islam, as a "misguided" or "wayward" sect. The Government has fueled anti-Baha'i and anti-Jewish sentiment in the country for political purposes.

The Government does not ensure the right of citizens to change or renounce their religious faith. Apostasy, specifically conversion from Islam, can be punishable by death.

Although Sunni Muslims are accorded full respect under the terms of the Constitution, some groups claim discrimination on the part of the Government. In particular, Sunnis cite the lack of a Sunni mosque in Tehran and claim that authorities refuse to authorize construction of a Sunni place of worship in the capital.

Human Rights Watch reported in 1998 the killing of Sunni prayer leader Molavi Imam Bakhsh Narouie in the province of Sistan va-Baluchistan in the southeast. This led to protests from the local community, which believed that government authorities were involved in the murder.

Majdhub Alishahi, an adherent of the Sufi tradition, reportedly was executed on charges of adultery and homosexuality after a coerced confession in 1996. Sufi organizations outside the country reported an increasing level of repression by the authorities of Sufi religious practices during the period covered by this report.

The Government figures reported by the United Nations in 1996 place the size of the Zoroastrian community in the country at approximately 35,000 adherents. Zoroastrian groups cite a larger figure of approximately 60,000, according to the same United Nations report. Zoroastrians are mainly ethnic Persians concentrated in the cities of Tehran, Kerman, and Yazd. Zoroastrianism was the official religion of the pre-Islamic Sassanid Empire and thus has played a central role in Iranian history. There were no reports of government persecution of the Zoroastrian religious community in the country.

The largest non-Muslim minority is the Baha'i Faith, estimated at about 300,000 to 350,000 adherents throughout the country. The Baha'i Faith originated in Iran during the 1840's as a reformist movement within Shi'a Islam. Initially it attracted a wide following among Shi'a clergy. The political and religious authorities of that time joined to suppress the movement, and since then the hostility of the Shi'a clergy to the Baha'i Faith has remained intense. Baha'is are considered apostates because of their claim to a valid religious revelation subsequent to that of Muhammad. The Baha'i Faith is defined by the Government as a political sect historically linked to the Shah's regime and, hence, as counterrevolutionary and characterized by its espionage activities for the benefit of foreign entities, particularly

Israel. Historically at risk in the country, Baha'is often have suffered increased levels of persecution during times of political ferment. The Baha'is also faced discrimination under the Shah. Baha'i groups have alleged that prior to the 1979 Islamic Revolution, previous governments occasionally used Baha'is as scapegoats for various difficulties, allowing elements within the clerical establishment to repress Baha'i activities.

Baha'is may not teach or practice their faith or maintain links with coreligionists abroad. The fact that the Baha'i world headquarters is situated in what is now the state of Israel (established by the founder of the Baha'i Faith in the 19th century in what was then Ottoman-controlled Palestine) exposes Baha'is to government charges of "espionage on behalf of Zionism," in particular when caught communicating with or addressing monetary contributions to the Baha'i Faith headquarters.

Broad restrictions on Baha'is appear to be geared to destroying them as a community. They repeatedly have been offered relief from persecution if they were prepared to recant their faith. Baha'i marriages are not recognized by the Government, leaving Baha'i women open to charges of prostitution. Children of Baha'i marriages are not recognized as legitimate and, therefore, are denied inheritance rights. Baha'i sacred and historical properties have been confiscated systematically. Baha'is are not allowed to bury and honor their dead in keeping with their religious tradition, while historic Baha'i gravesites have been confiscated and in many cases desecrated or destroyed. In October 1998, three Baha'is were arrested in Damavand, a city north of Tehran, on the grounds that they had buried their dead without government authorization.

Ruhollah Rowhani, a Baha'i, was executed in July 1998 after having served 9 months in solitary confinement on a charge of apostasy stemming from allegedly having converted a Muslim woman to the Baha'i Faith. The woman concerned asserted that her mother was a Baha'i and that she herself had been raised a Baha'i. Rowhani was not accorded a public trial or sentencing for his alleged crime, and no sentence was announced prior to his execution.

The Government continued to imprison and detain persons based on their religious beliefs.

Two other Baha'is, Sirus Zabihi-Moghaddam and Hadayat Kashefi-Najafabadi, were tried alongside Rowhani and later sentenced to death by a revolutionary court in Mashad for the exercise of their Baha'i Faith. Unofficial reports received by Baha'is outside the country in March 1999 indicated that the death sentences against Zabihi-Moghaddam and Kashefi-Najafabadi had been lifted. The two remain in prison and there is no confirmation of a new sentence. Four Baha'is are currently on death row--two for "Zionist Baha'i activities" and two for apostasy.

Baha'i group meetings and religious education, which often take place in private homes and offices, are curtailed severely. Public and private universities continue to deny admittance to Baha'i students, a particularly demoralizing blow to a community that traditionally has placed a high value on education. Denial of access to higher education appears aimed at the eventual impoverishment of the Baha'i community.

In September 1998, authorities launched a nationwide operation to disrupt the activities of the Baha'i Institute of Higher Learning, also known as the "Open University", established by the Baha'i community shortly after the revolution to offer higher educational opportunities to Baha'i students who had

been denied access to the country's high schools and universities. The Institute employed Baha'i faculty and professors, many of whom had been dismissed from teaching positions by the Government as a result of their faith, and conducted classes in homes or offices owned or rented by Baha'is. In the assault, which took place in at least 14 different cities, 36 faculty members were arrested, and a variety of personal property, including books, papers, and furniture, either were destroyed or confiscated. Government interrogators sought to force the detained faculty members to sign statements acknowledging the Open University was now defunct and pledging not to collaborate with it in the future. Baha'is outside the country report that none of the 36 detainees would sign the document. All but 4 of the 36 persons detained during the September 1998 raid on the Baha'i Institute were released.

In March 1999, Dr. Sina Hakiman, Farzad Khajeh Sharifabadi, Habibullah Ferdosian Najafabadi, and Ziaullah Mirzapanah--the four remaining detainees from the September 1998 raid, were convicted under Article 498 of the Penal Code and sentenced to prison terms ranging from 3 to 10 years. In the court verdict, the four were accused of having established a "secret organization" engaged in "attracting youth, teaching against Islam, and teaching against the regime of the Islamic Republic." According to Baha'i groups outside Iran, the four taught general science and Persian literature courses. In July 1999, Mirzapanah, who had been sentenced to 3 years in prison, became ill and was hospitalized. Prison authorities allowed him to return home upon his recovery on the understanding that they could find him whenever necessary.

The Government appears to adhere to a practice of keeping a small number of Baha'is in arbitrary detention, some at risk of execution, at any given time. There were 14 Baha'is reported to be under arrest in Iran for practice of their faith as of June 1999, 4 under sentence of death.

Baha'is regularly are denied compensation for injury or criminal victimization. Government authorities claim that only Muslim plaintiffs are eligible for compensation in these circumstances.

A 1993 law prohibits government workers from membership in groups that deny the "divine religions", terminology that the Government uses to label members of the Baha'i Faith. The law also stipulates penalties for government workers who do not observe "Islamic principles and rules."

In 1993 the U.N. Special Representative reported the existence of a government policy directive on the Baha'is. According to the directive, the Supreme Revolutionary Council instructed government agencies to block the progress and development of the Baha'i community, expel Baha'i students from universities, cut the Baha'is' links with groups outside Iran, restrict the employment of Baha'is, and deny Baha'is "positions of influence," including those in education. The Government claims that the directive is a forgery. However, it appears to be an accurate reflection of current government practice.

Property belonging to the Baha'i community as a whole, such as places of worship, remains confiscated. Baha'i graveyards have been confiscated and defiled. Other government restrictions have been eased; Baha'is currently may obtain food ration booklets and send their children to public schools. However, the prohibition against the admission of Baha'is to universities remains. Thousands of Baha'is dismissed from government jobs in the early 1980's receive no unemployment benefits and have been required to repay the Government for salaries or pensions received from the first day of employment. Those unable to do so face prison sentences.

In his 1996 report to the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, the U.N. Special Rapporteur on the Question of Religious Intolerance recommended "that the ban on the Baha'i organization should be lifted to enable it to organize itself freely through its administrative institutions, which are vital in the absence of a clergy, and so that it can engage fully in its religious activities." In response to the Special Rapporteur's concerns with regard to the lack of official recognition of the Baha'i Faith, government officials said that the Baha'is "are not a religious minority, but a political organization which was associated with the Shah's regime, is against the Iranian Revolution and engages in espionage activities." According to the Special Representative, government officials stated nonetheless that, as individuals, all Baha'is were entitled to their beliefs and were protected under other articles of the Constitution as citizens.

Authorities have become particularly vigilant in recent years in curbing what is perceived as increasing proselytizing activities by evangelical Christians, whose services are conducted in Persian. Government officials have reacted to this perceived activity by closing evangelical churches and arresting converts. Members of evangelical congregations have been required to carry membership cards, photocopies of which must be provided to the authorities. Worshipers are subject to identity checks by authorities posted outside congregation centers. Meetings for evangelical services have been restricted by the authorities to Sundays and church officials have been ordered to inform the Ministry of Information and Islamic Guidance before admitting new members to their congregations.

Christian groups point to the closure by authorities of the Iranian Bible Society in February 1990 and the confiscation of an estimated 20,000 Bibles as evidence of official discrimination. The U.N. Special Rapporteur on the Question of Religious Intolerance cited in his 1996 report that the alleged forced closure by the authorities of Christian churches in Mashad (1988), Sari, (1988), Kermanshah and Ahwaz (1988), Kerman (1992), and Gorgan (1992).

As conversion of a Muslim to a non-Muslim religion can be considered apostasy under traditional Shari'a practices enforced in the country, non-Muslims can not proselytize Muslims without putting their own lives at risk. Evangelical church leaders are subject to pressure from authorities to sign pledges that they would not evangelize Muslims or allow Muslims to attend church services. Evangelical communities report a heightened sense of fear from authorities in the period since the murders of three prominent evangelical ministers in 1994, Reverends Tatavous Michaelian, Mehdi Dibaj, and Haik Hovsepien Mehr. Three female members of the Mujahedin-e Khalq organization were convicted for the murders of the three ministers; however, many observers believe that authorities played a role in the killings.

One U.S.-based organization reported 8 deaths of evangelical Christians at the hands of authorities in the past 10 years and between 15 and 23 disappearances in the year between November 1997 and November 1998.

Oppression of evangelical Christians continued during the period covered by this report. Christian groups reported instances of government harassment of churchgoers in Tehran, in particular against worshipers at the Assembly of God congregation in the capital. Instances of harassment cited included conspicuous monitoring outside Christian premises by Revolutionary Guards to discourage Muslims or converts from entering church premises and demands for presentation of identity papers of worshipers inside. Iranian Christians International (ICI) detailed the cases of Alireza and Mahboobeh

Mahmoudian, converts to Christianity and lay leaders of the Saint Simon the Zealot Osgofi Church in Shiraz, who were forced to leave the country permanently in June 1998 after continued harassment by authorities. ICI reported that Alireza Mahmoudian had lost his job on account of his conversion and had been beaten repeatedly by Basiji and Ansar-e Hizbollah thugs on orders of government officials from the Ministry of Islamic Guidance. His wife, Mahboobeh, also had been the subject of intimidation, principally through frequent and aggressive interrogation by government officials.

While Jews are a recognized religious minority, allegations of official discrimination are frequent. The Government's anti-Israel policies, coupled with a perception among radicalized Muslim elements that Jewish citizens support Zionism and the State of Israel, create a threatening atmosphere for the small Jewish community. Jewish leaders are reportedly reluctant to draw attention to official mistreatment of their community due to fear of government reprisal.

Some outside Jewish groups cite an increase in anti-Semitic propaganda in the official and semi-official media as adding to the pressure felt by the Jewish community. One example cited is the periodic publication of the anti-Semitic and fictitious Protocols of the Elders of Zion, both by the Government and by periodicals associated with hard-line elements of the regime. In 1986 the Iranian Embassy in London was reported to have published and distributed the Protocols in English. The Protocols also were published in serial form in the country in 1994 and again in January 1999. On the latter occasion they were published in Sobh, a conservative monthly publication reportedly aligned with the security services.

There appears to be little restriction or interference with religious practice or education, but Jews were eased out of the Government after 1979. Jews are permitted to obtain passports and to travel outside the country but, with the exception of certain business travelers, are required by the authorities to obtain clearance (and pay additional fees) before each trip abroad. The Government appears concerned about the emigration of Jews and permission generally is not granted for all members of a Jewish family to travel outside the country at the same time.

In March 1999, 13 Jews were arrested in the cities of Shiraz and Isfahan. Among the group were several prominent rabbis, teachers of Hebrew, and their students, including a 16-year-old boy. As of June 1999, judicial authorities had not completed their investigation into the case and an indictment had not been made. However, the investigation centered around charges of espionage on behalf of Israel, an offense punishable by death. Governments around the world criticized the arrests and called for the safe treatment of the detainees, who have been allowed only sporadic family visits and deliveries of kosher food. They were not granted access to counsel.

Jewish groups outside Iran noted that the March arrest of the 13 Jewish individuals coincided with an increase in anti-Semitic propaganda in newspapers and journals associated with hard-line elements of the Government.

Human Rights Watch reported the death in May 1998 of Jewish businessman Ruhollah Kakhodah-Zadeh, who was hanged in prison without a public charge or legal proceeding. Reports indicate that Kakhodah-Zadeh may have been killed for assisting Jews to emigrate. Specifically, as an accountant, Kakhoda-Zadeh provided power-of-attorney services for Jews departing the country.

The Government restricts the movement of several senior religious leaders, some of whom have been under house arrest for years, and often charges members of religious minorities with crimes such as drug offenses, "confronting the regime," and apostasy.

There were no reports of the forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the Government's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section II. Societal Attitudes

The continuous activity of Iran's pre-Islamic, non-Muslim communities, e.g., Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians, has accustomed the population to the presence of non-Muslims in society. However, government actions have fueled anti-Baha'i and anti-Jewish sentiment, creating a threatening atmosphere for both communities (see Section I).

The Jewish community has been reduced to nearly one-half its prerevolutionary size. Some of this emigration is connected with the larger, general waves of departures following the establishment of the Islamic Republic, but some also stems from perceived anti-Semitism on the part of the Government and within society.

The Government's anti-Israel policies, coupled with the perception among some of the country's radicalized elements that Iranian Jews support Zionism and the Israeli state, create a threatening atmosphere for the Jewish community (see Section I). Many Jews have sought to limit their contact with or support for the State of Israel out of fear of reprisal.

Non-Muslim owners of grocery shops are required to indicate their religious affiliation on the front of their shops.

Sunni Muslims encounter religious discrimination at the local level, and reports of discrimination against practitioners of the Sufi tradition surfaced during the year.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

The United States has no diplomatic relations with Iran and thus cannot raise directly with the Government the restrictions it places on religious freedom and other abuses that it commits against adherents of minority religions. The U.S. Government makes its position clear in public statements, support for relevant United Nations and nongovernmental organization efforts, and in diplomatic contacts with other countries.

The President has made a number of statements regarding the treatment of religious minorities in Iran, including a statement criticizing the execution of Ruhollah Rowhani, a member of the Baha'i Faith, in June 1998, and a statement calling on the Government to release 13 members of Iran's Jewish community accused of espionage in June 1999. The Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs, in testimony before Congress on Iran, has highlighted the plight of Iran's religious minorities.

The U.S. Government has cosponsored each year since 1982 a resolution regarding the situation of human rights in Iran offered by the European Union at the annual meeting of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights. The United States has supported a similar resolution offered each year during the United Nations General Assembly. The U.S. Government has supported strongly the work of the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Human Rights for Iran and called on the Iranian Government to grant him admission and allow him to conduct his research (he has been denied entry visas since 1996).

The U.S. State Department spokesman on numerous occasions has addressed the situation of the Baha'i and Jewish communities, notably following the execution of Ruhollah Rowhani in June 1998, following the Government's actions against the Baha'i Institute of Higher Education in September 1998, and following the arrest of 13 members of the Iranian Jewish community in March 1999. The U.S. Government has encouraged other governments to make similar statements and has pressed those governments to raise the issue of religious freedom in discussions with the Iranian Government.

This report draws heavily on non-U.S. Government sources.

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