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*To advance international
freedom of religion or
belief, by independently
assessing and unflinchingly
confronting threats to this
fundamental right.*

Religious Freedom Conditions in Iran

By Scott Weiner, Supervisory Policy Analyst

Introduction

The government of Iran has continued its egregious repression of religious minorities in the first half of 2021. On February 18, then-President Hassan Rouhani signed two alarming amendments to Articles 499 and 500 of the Penal Code passed in January 2021 by Iran's parliament. The amendment to Article 499 *imposes* prison sentences and fines on anyone who insults "divine religions or Islamic schools of thought recognized under the Constitutions with the intent to cause violence or tensions in the society." The amendment to Article 500 penalizes those who conduct "any deviant educational or proselytizing activity that contradicts or interferes with the sacred law of Islam." The language of these amendments is designed for persecuting specific Iranian religious minorities that the government considers a threat. As the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has *noted*, the effective criminalization of non-Muslim religions is a severe violation of religious freedom as protected under international law.

In addition, despite ongoing *international calls* to respect freedom of religion or belief and other fundamental human rights, Iranian authorities have arrested scores of religious minorities, who face lengthy prison sentences, while harassing others or *denying* them advancement in higher education. Those in prison face an elevated risk of contracting COVID-19 in cells that are close together and often unsanitary.

In addition to targeting religious communities, the government of Iran has also continued to use religion as a basis for violating the rights of its citizens. As USCIRF *noted* earlier in 2021, Iran is one of a handful of countries that actively executes members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community. Iranian laws against same-sex relations are based in interpretations of Muslim religious teachings, and imposed on Iranians regardless of their religious beliefs, putting many LGBTI people in grave danger from both state and societal actors. In May 2021 in Khuzestan, family members *beheaded* Alireza Fazeli Monfared, a gay nonbinary 20 year-old, after they saw a government-issued card *excusing* him from military service for "perversions that are contrary to social and military values," a phrase referring to Monfared's sexual identity. Perpetrators of honor killings in Iran face lighter criminal sentences if the victim was accused of a *hadd* crime—one for which the Muslim Shari'a legal framework imposes a fixed punishment.



Based on religious grounds, the Iranian government also mistreats women. Among them is USCIRF religious prisoner of conscience [Golrokh Iraee](#), who was arrested in 2014 after writing an unpublished short story criticizing the religiously grounded practice of stoning adulterous women to death. In April 2021, Judge Iman Afshari of Branch 26 of the Tehran Revolutionary Court [sentenced](#) Iraee to an additional year in prison, and banned her from holding membership in political organizations and from traveling for two years based on charges of “propaganda against the state.” Iran has also continued to mistreat lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh, who defended many women activists who protested Iran’s mandatory headscarf laws. Sotoudeh was released from Evin prison on temporary medical furlough in November 2020 after [contracting](#) COVID-19. She was again [granted](#) temporary medical furlough in January 2021 for heart problems, and had an [additional](#) two-week medical furlough coinciding with the Persian New Year in March 2021. On April 5, 2021, she [returned](#) to prison until a five-day [medical furlough](#) in July 2021.

Baha’is

Conditions for Baha’is in Iran reflect an alarming [deterioration](#) in 2021. Throughout 2020 and into 2021, Iran [escalated](#) the publication and broadcast of anti-Baha’i propaganda through state media channels as compared to previous years. In February 2021, Branch Two of the Hormozgan Court of Appeals [upheld](#) prison sentences against eight Baha’is on the grounds that their Baha’i identity makes them a *prima facie* threat to national security. Additionally, the court is forcing them to attend “counseling sessions” run by a Shi’a religious

institute regarding their religious beliefs. This treatment marks a new and concerning shift by Iran’s government toward an explicit policy that Baha’is do not have rights in Iran on national security grounds, despite the baseless nature of the charges and the [non-derogable](#) nature of religious freedom under international law.

Iran has targeted other Baha’is throughout the country during the first half of 2021. In January, officers from Iran’s Ministry of Intelligence conducted [house raids](#) in Karaj. In one raid, officers confiscated religious books, a mobile phone, and a computer. In February, the government [summoned](#) five Baha’is to Vakilabad prison, each on a one-year sentence for “propaganda against the regime through propagation of the Baha’i faith.” In late February, the Tehran Revolutionary Court [sentenced](#) three members of a Baha’i family to prison sentences on spurious national security charges. It sentenced [two more](#) Baha’i women in early March, one of whom was arrested in 2017 [during](#) a Baha’i religious ceremony.

In April 2021, Iran further [escalated](#) its persecution of Baha’is. Eight Baha’is were detained in [Isfahan](#) along with a total of [nine](#) in [Shiraz](#), [four](#) in Mashhad, and [one](#) in Babel. Simultaneously, in late April, authorities [informed](#) Baha’i families in Tehran that they would have to bury deceased community members in a mass grave in Khaveran for political prisoners executed in 1988. The government eventually [reversed](#) this decision following an international outcry. However, it continued the persecution of Baha’is through May. A Baha’i woman in Khuzestan was [arrested](#) at the beginning of the month, and on May 26, the Revolutionary Court of Dashtestan [sentenced](#) six Baha’is to years in prison. In mid-June, Islamic Revolutionary Guard

Corps (IRGC) intelligence agents [arrested](#) two Baha'is in Shiraz, searched their homes, and confiscated some of their belongings. The two prisoners were [detained in an unknown location](#) for at least ten days and permitted only sporadic contact with their families.

In June, Branch 26 of the Tehran Revolutionary Court [sentenced](#) a Baha'i woman, Shahrzad Nazafi, to eight years in prison under Article 498 of Iran's penal code, which prohibits membership in any group "with the aim of disrupting the security of the country" and is often used against Baha'is in Iran. Nazafi, a motocross and motorcycle racing champion, was not present at the sentencing hearing. In August, the homes of at least three Baha'i families in the town of Roshan Kuh in Mazandaran Province, Iran were destroyed. Officials from Mazandaran's Natural Resources Department, aided by police and officials from the Prosecutor's Office of Mazandaran, reportedly conducted the most recent demolitions.

Christians

Christians in Iran have also faced intense religious persecution in 2021. As in previous years, Iran has targeted Christian converts from Islam in particular. These include USCIRF religious prisoner of conscience Pastor [Youcef Nadarkhani](#), who was charged in 2016 with "promoting Zionist Christianity." Pastor Nadarkhani remains in prison on a ten-year sentence. Following her [release](#) from prison in February 2020, Christian convert and political activist Mary Mohammadi was [re-arrested](#) in January for improperly wearing her headscarf. In February, an appeals court in Bushehr [sentenced](#) three Christian converts to jail time for spreading "propaganda" against Iran through promoting Christianity. That same month, Iran's Ministry of Intelligence [summoned](#) Christian convert Ebrahim Firouzi to the prosecutor's office in Sarbaz after he posted videos online detailing his persecution. Firouzi was arrested and detained in Zahedan prison, but [released](#) on bail after three weeks [following](#) a hunger strike. In April, officers from Iran's Ministry of Intelligence [arrested](#) three more Christian converts in Dezful, Khuzestan province. Later that month, the Karaj Revolutionary Court [sentenced](#) Christian convert Hamed Ashouri to ten months in prison. In late [June](#), the same court [sentenced](#) three Christian converts to five years each in jail and a fine of 40 million tomans (US\$947).

In early June, the government of Iran also [decided](#) not to renew the residency visa of a 75-year-old nun, Giuseppina Berti, who worked for 26 years treating leprosy patients in Tabriz before moving to Isfahan.

Sunni Muslims

Iran's persecution of Sunni Muslims also continued in 2021. On New Year's Eve 2020, the government [executed](#) three Sunni Muslim political prisoners at Vakilabad prison without notifying their families beforehand. In January, it [demolished](#) the foundations of a Sunni mosque in Iranshahr, and also reportedly halted the construction of two new Sunni mosques in the region. In March, authorities [arrested](#) a Sunni author and translator and sent him to Zahedan prison. That same month, the Urmia Revolutionary Court [sentenced](#) a Sunni Muslim man to three years in prison on the charge of membership in a Salafi group. The court also [sentenced](#) a Sunni Muslim man to a year-long sentence at Urmia prison. The court also [sentenced](#) Sunni cleric Rasul Hamzepour to three years in prison on the charge of "propaganda against the state." In June, the Special Court for the Clergy [summoned](#) a Sunni cleric, Fazul al-Rahman Kuhi, while on furlough from Vakilabad prison.

Sufi Muslims

Iran continued imposing harsh sentences on members of the Gonabadi Sufi community in 2021. In late January, Branch 28 of the Tehran Revolutionary Court [sentenced](#) editor Abbas Dehghan to five years in prison for "collusion against national security." Branch 1146 of the Penal Court also sentenced Dehghan to five and a half years in prison, 74 whip lashes, and a 140 million toman (\$3325) fine on charges of attacking Iranian government agents. Dehghan was arrested in 2018 following his coverage of Gonabadi Sufi protests that emerged following the house arrest of the community's former spiritual leader Noor Ali Tabandeh. The government also [moved](#) Gonabadi Sufi journalist Kasra Nouri from Evin Prison Adelabad Prison in Shiraz, hundreds of miles away from his family in Tehran. Nouri is now [serving](#) a seven and a half year prison term. He was expelled from Tehran University for absenteeism while serving his sentence, but the decision was later [reversed](#) following public pressure.

Yarsanis

While the Iranian government considers followers of the Yarsan faith to be Shi'a Muslims who practice Sufism, members identify as a distinct and separate religion (also known as Ahl-e Haqq or People of Truth, [estimated](#) to number up to two million). Yarsanis whose religious identity is publicly known face discrimination in education, employment, and running for political office. Last year a Sunni cleric in Kermanshah [called](#) Yarsanis "infidels,



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Satanists, and enemies of Muslims.” In early 2021, the National Security Quarterly journal from Iran’s National Defense University published a piece entitled “Explaining the Threats of the Ahl al-Haqq Sect” which [claims](#) that Yarsanis “disrupt the functioning of religious order, disrupt ideological unity, and undermine political stability,” creating “security problems” and “spreading violence.” On January 28, 2021, the Yarsani Consultative Assembly of Civil Activists [issued a statement](#) calling for a constitutional revision to grant formal recognition (and thus protection) to Yarsanis.

Other Religious Minorities

Iran’s government continued to persecute members of other religious groups in 2021. A [Zoroastrian](#) man, Hussein Sepanta is being denied [treatment](#) for a progressive spinal condition while imprisoned at Adelabad Prison in Shiraz. Iran has also put immense pressure on members of the Mandaean community as well as followers of spiritualist movements including Erfan-e Halgheh. Members of these communities who seek refuge in Turkey (where visas are not required for Iranian citizens) face ongoing harassment and threats from the IRGC. Iranian

Christians in Turkey face similar harassment, as do Iranian Sufi dissidents in other parts of the world.

Conclusion

Iran’s government has escalated religious repression in 2021 in light of heightened political and economic uncertainty. Domestically, changes in leadership and widespread public dissatisfaction over economic hardship, an inadequate response to COVID-19, and a series of likely cyberattacks on critical defense infrastructures exacerbate the government’s perception it is under threat. Internationally, defense alliances between Israel and the Arabian Peninsula states, international economic sanctions, and a new U.S. administration seeking a nuclear agreement create additional pressure. These considerations, however, do not exempt Iran’s government from the obligation to provide freedom of religion to all Iranians. As the United States continues to engage Iran, raising religious freedom concerns remains imperative.

For information on religious freedom conditions in Iran during 2020 and USCIRF’s recommendations to the U.S. government, see USCIRF’s [2021 Annual Report](#).

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.