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Iran

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

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The Constitution states that the official religion of Iran is Islam, and the doctrine followed is that of Ja'afari (Twelver) Shi'ism. Article 4 of the Constitution states that all laws and regulations must be based on Islamic criteria. The Government severely restricts freedom of religion.

There was continued deterioration of the extremely poor status of respect for religious freedom during the reporting period. Government rhetoric and actions created a threatening atmosphere for nearly all non-Shi'a religious groups, most notably for Bahá'ís, as well as Sufi Muslims, evangelical Christians, and members of the Jewish community.

Reports of government imprisonment, harassment, intimidation, and discrimination based on religious beliefs continued during the reporting period. Bahá'í religious groups often reported arbitrary arrests, expulsions from universities, and confiscation of property. Government-controlled media, including broadcast and print, intensified negative campaigns against religious minorities--particularly the Bahá'ís--during the reporting period.

Although the Constitution gives Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians the status of "protected" religious minorities, in practice non-Shi'a Muslims face substantial societal discrimination, and government actions continued to support elements of society who create a threatening atmosphere for some religious minorities.

The U.S. Government makes clear its objections to the Government's harsh and oppressive treatment of religious minorities through public statements, support for relevant U.N. and nongovernmental organization (NGO) efforts, as well as diplomatic initiatives. Every year since 1999 the U.S. Secretary of State has designated Iran as a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act, for its particularly egregious violations of religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 631,000 square miles, and according to the Government's 2006 census, a population of 70 million. The population is 98 percent Muslim; 89 percent is Shi'a and 9 percent Sunni (mostly Turkmen and Arabs, Baluchs, and Kurds living in the southwest, southeast, and northwest respectively). Non-Muslims account for 2 percent of the population. There are no official statistics available on the size of the Sufi Muslim population; however, some reports estimate between two and five million people practice Sufism.

Recent unofficial estimates from religious organizations claim that Bahá'ís, Jews, Christians, Sabeen-Mandaeans, and Zoroastrians constitute 2 percent of the total population. The largest non-Muslim minority is the Bahá'í religious group, which numbers 300,000 to 350,000. Unofficial estimates of the size of the Jewish community vary from 25,000 to 30,000.

According to U.N. figures, 300,000 Christians live in the country, the majority of whom are ethnic Armenians. There are Protestant denominations, including evangelical religious groups. Christian groups outside the country estimate the size of the Protestant Christian community to be less than 10,000, although many Protestant Christians reportedly practice in secret. Unofficial estimates for the Assyrian Christian population are between 10,000 and 20,000. Sabeen-Mandaeans number 5,000 to 10,000 persons. The Government regards the Sabeen-Mandaeans as Christians, and they are included among the three recognized religious minorities; however, Sabeen-Mandaeans do not regard themselves as Christians. There are indications that members of all religious minorities are emigrating at a high rate, although it is unclear if the reasons for emigration are religious or related to overall poor economic conditions. The Government estimates there are 30,000 to 35,000 Zoroastrians, a primarily ethnic Persian minority; however, Zoroastrian groups claim to have 60,000 adherents.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution declares the "official religion of Iran is Islam and the doctrine followed is that of Ja'afari (Twelver)

Shi'ism." All laws and regulations must be consistent with the official interpretation of Shari'a (Islamic law). The Government severely restricts freedom of religion. The Constitution states that "within the limits of the law," Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians are the only recognized religious minorities who are guaranteed freedom to practice their religion; however, members of these recognized minority religious groups have reported government imprisonment, harassment, intimidation, and discrimination based on their religious beliefs.

The Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, heads a tricameral structure of government (legislative, executive, and judicial branches). The Supreme Leader is not directly elected, but chosen by a group of 86 Islamic scholars (the Assembly of Experts), who are directly elected. All acts of the Majlis (parliament) must be reviewed for strict conformity with Islamic law and the Constitution by the Council of Guardians, which is composed of six clerics, appointed by the Supreme Leader and six Muslim jurists (legal scholars), nominated by the head of the judiciary and approved by the Majlis. The Council of Guardians also screens presidential and Majlis candidates for eligibility. The Supreme Leader is also advised by the Expediency Council, which has the authority to mediate disputes between the Majlis and the Council of Guardians. The president is directly elected every 4 years. Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nejad won the presidency in June 2005.

The Government does not respect the right of Muslim citizens to change or renounce their religious faith.

Non-Muslims may not engage in public religious expression and persuasion among Muslims, and there are restrictions on published religious material.

A child born to a Muslim father automatically is considered a Muslim.

Apostasy, specifically conversion from Islam, is punishable by death, although there were no reported cases of the death penalty being applied for apostasy during the reporting period. Proselytizing of Muslims by non-Muslims is illegal. Evangelical church leaders are subject to pressure from authorities to sign pledges that they will not evangelize Muslims or allow Muslims to attend church services.

Members of religious minorities, excluding Sunni Muslims, are prevented from serving in the judiciary and security services and from becoming public school principals. Applicants for public sector employment are screened for their adherence to and knowledge of Islam, although members of religious minorities could serve in lower ranks of government employment, with the exception of Bahá'ís. Government workers who do not observe Islam's principles and rules are subject to penalties. The Constitution states that the country's army must be Islamic and must recruit individuals who are committed to the objectives of the Islamic revolution; however, in practice no religious minorities are exempt from military service, apart from Bahá'ís, who are not permitted to serve in the military. The law forbids non-Muslims from holding officer positions over Muslims in the armed forces. Members of religious minorities with a college education can serve as officers during their mandatory military service but cannot be career military officers. The Constitution provides Sunni Muslims a large degree of religious freedom.

By law, religious minorities are not allowed to be elected to a representative body or to hold senior government or military positions, with the exception that 5 of a total 290 seats in the Majlis are reserved for religious minorities. Three of these seats are reserved for members of Christian religious groups, including two seats for the country's Armenian Christians, and one for Assyrian Christians. There is also one seat to represent Jewish Iranians, and one to represent Iranian Zoroastrians. While Sunnis do not have reserved seats in the Majlis, they are allowed to serve in the body. Sunni Majlis deputies tend to be elected from among the larger Sunni communities. Members of religious minorities are allowed to vote; however, all minority religious groups, including Sunni Muslims, are barred from being elected president.

The legal system discriminates against religious minorities. Article 297 of the amended 1991 Islamic Punishments Act authorizes collection of equal "blood money" (diyah) as restitution to the families for the death of both Muslims and non-Muslims. Prior to the 2004 change, the law gave a lesser monetary amount as "blood money" for non-Muslims than for Muslims. All women, as well as Bahá'í and Sabean-Mandaean men, are excluded from the equalization provisions of the bill. Restitution for the death of a woman is half that of a man. According to law, Bahá'í blood is considered mobah, meaning it can be spilled with impunity.

Adherents of religious groups not recognized by the Constitution, such as the Bahá'ís, do not have freedom to practice their beliefs. Government officials have stated that, as individuals, all Bahá'ís are entitled to their beliefs and are protected under the articles of the Constitution as citizens; however, the Government continues to prohibit Bahá'ís from teaching and practicing their faith. Bahá'ís are barred from government and military posts.

The Government considers Bahá'ís to be apostates and defines the Bahá'í faith as a political "sect." The Ministry of Justice states that Bahá'ís are permitted to enroll in schools only if they do not identify themselves as Bahá'ís, and that Bahá'ís preferably should be enrolled in schools with a strong and imposing religious ideology. There were allegations that Bahá'í children in public schools faced attempts to convert them to Islam. After a brief policy change during the reporting period allowed Bahá'í students to enroll in universities, the Government reverted to its previous practice of requiring Bahá'í students to identify themselves as other than Bahá'í in order to register for the entrance examination. This action precluded Bahá'í enrollment in state-run universities, since a tenet of the Bahá'í religion is not to deny

one's faith. The Ministry of Justice states that Bahá'ís must be excluded or expelled from universities, either in the admission process or during the course of their studies, if their religious affiliation becomes known. University applicants are required to pass an examination in Islamic, Christian, or Jewish theology, but there was no test for the Bahá'í faith.

Bahá'ís are banned from the social pension system. In addition, Bahá'ís are regularly denied compensation for injury or criminal victimization and are denied the right to inherit property. Bahá'í marriages and divorces are not officially recognized, although the Government allows a civil attestation of marriage to serve as a marriage certificate.

The Government allows recognized religious minorities to establish community centers and certain self-financed cultural, social, athletic, or charitable associations. However, the Government prohibited the Bahá'í community from official assembly and from maintaining administrative institutions by closing any such institutions.

The Government propagated a legal interpretation of Islam that effectively deprived women of many rights granted to men. Gender segregation was enforced, generally throughout the country, without regard to religious affiliation. Women of all religious groups are expected to adhere to Islamic dress in public. Although enforcement of rules for conservative Islamic dress eased in previous years, the Government periodically cracks down on "un-Islamic dress," particularly during the summer months. The crackdowns on "un-Islamic dress" during the reporting period were much harsher than in recent years. The Government's 12-point contract model for marriage and divorce limits the rights accorded to women by custom and traditional interpretations of Islamic law.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to severe restrictions on religious freedom. All non-Shi'a religious minorities suffer varying degrees of officially sanctioned discrimination, particularly in the areas of employment, education, and housing.

The Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance (Ershad) and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) monitor religious activity closely. Members of recognized religious minorities are not required to register with the Government, and religion is not noted on national identity cards; however, their communal, religious, and cultural events and organizations, including schools, are monitored closely. Registration of Bahá'ís is a police function. The Government required evangelical Christian groups to compile and submit membership lists for their congregations.

The Government generally allowed recognized religious minorities to conduct religious education for their adherents in separate schools, although it restricted this right considerably in some cases. The Ministry of Education, which imposed certain curriculum requirements, supervised these schools. With few exceptions, the directors of such private schools must be Muslim. Attendance at the schools was not mandatory for recognized religious minorities. The Ministry of Education must approve all textbooks used in coursework, including religious texts. Recognized religious minorities could provide religious instruction in non-Persian languages, but such texts required approval by the authorities. This approval requirement sometimes imposed significant translation expenses on minority communities. However, Assyrian Christians reported that their community was permitted to write its own textbooks, which, following government authorization, were then printed at government expense and distributed to the Assyrian community.

On December 19, 2006, the U.N. General Assembly passed a resolution condemning the human rights situation in Iran. The resolution follows similar U.N. statements since 2001 that decry the Government's harsh treatment of non-Shi'a Muslims. In March 2006 the U.N. General Assembly adopted Resolution 60/171 expressing serious concern about the continued discrimination and human rights violations against religious minorities by the Government. Also, in March 2006 the U.N. Special Rapporteur (UNSR) on Freedom of Religion or Belief issued a statement of concern about the treatment of the Bahá'í community in the country.

During the reporting period, many Sunnis claimed that the Government discriminated against them. It was difficult to distinguish whether the cause of discrimination was religious or ethnic, since most Sunnis are also members of ethnic minorities. Sunnis cited the absence of a Sunni mosque in Tehran, despite the presence of more than one million adherents there, as a prominent example. Sunni leaders reported bans on Sunni religious literature and teachings in public schools, even in predominantly Sunni areas. Sunnis also claimed there was a lack of Sunni representation in government-appointed positions in the provinces where they form a majority, such as Kurdistan and Khuzestan Province, as well as their inability to obtain senior governmental positions. In addition, Sunnis charged that the government-owned Broadcast Corporation's program, *Voice and Vision*, airs programming which is insulting to them.

Sunni Majlis representatives assert that government discrimination led to the lack of Sunni presence in the executive and judicial branches, especially in higher-ranking positions in embassies, universities, and other institutions, as well as anti-Sunni propaganda in the mass media, books, and publications.

Broad restrictions on Bahá'ís severely undermined their ability to function as a community. The Government repeatedly offers Bahá'ís relief from mistreatment in exchange for recanting their faith.

Bahá'ís may not teach or practice their faith or maintain links with coreligionists abroad. Bahá'ís are often officially charged with "espionage on behalf of Zionism," in part due to the fact that the Bahá'í world headquarters is located in Israel. These charges are more acute when Bahá'ís are caught communicating with or sending monetary contributions to the Bahá'í headquarters.

Since late 2005 Bahá'ís have faced an increasing number of public attacks, including a series of negative and defamatory articles in *Kayhan*, a government-affiliated newspaper whose managing editor was appointed by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamene'i. Radio and television broadcasts have also increasingly condemned the Bahá'ís and their religion, and since October 2005 state-owned media has launched a series of weekly anti-Bahá'í broadcasts. These reports had the intention of arousing suspicion, distrust, and hatred for the Bahá'í community.

Public and private universities continued either to deny admittance to or expel Bahá'í students. In 2004 Bahá'í applicants took part in the nationwide exam for entrance into state-run universities; however, "Islam" was pre-printed as a prospective student's religious affiliation on the form authorizing their matriculation. This action precluded Bahá'í enrollment, since a tenet of the Bahá'í religion is not to deny one's faith. During the reporting period, Government officials reportedly stated that "Islam" printed on the authorization form did not reflect the student's religion, but the religion about which the student was tested. After taking part in the nationwide entrance examination, more than 175 Bahá'í students reportedly enrolled in universities during the reporting period, but close to half of those students were expelled once their religious affiliation became known. Toward the end of the reporting period, the Government reverted to the previous practice of requiring Bahá'í students to identify themselves as other than Bahá'í to register for the entrance examination.

The Government monitored the activities of Bahá'ís. A Bahá'í group outside the country reported an August 19, 2006, letter from the Ministry of Interior requesting provincial offices to "cautiously and carefully monitor and manage" all Bahá'í social activities.

The U.N. Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief reported the existence of a secret October 2005 letter written by the Chairman of the Armed Forces Command, Major General Seyyed Hossein Firuzabadi, acting on instructions from Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, to the Ministry of Information, the Revolutionary Guard, and the Police Force, which requested the agencies to collect and to provide to the Armed Forces Command all information about Bahá'ís.

There were reports the Association of Chambers of Commerce and related associations, which are nominally independent bodies that are nonetheless heavily influenced by the Government, compiled a list of Bahá'ís and their trades and employment. A May 2006 letter from the Trades, Production, and Technical Services Society of Kermanshah to the Union of Battery Manufacturers showed further evidence of workplace restrictions as it asked the union to compile "a list of the names of those who belong to the Bahá'í sect and are under the jurisdiction of your union."

The Government promoted and condoned anti-Semitism in state-media and hosted a Holocaust denial conference during the reporting period. However, with some exceptions, there was little government restriction of, or interference with, Jewish religious practice. Nevertheless, education of Jewish children has become more difficult in recent years. The Government reportedly allowed Hebrew instruction, recognizing that it was necessary for Jewish religious practice. However, it limited the distribution of Hebrew texts, in practice making it difficult to teach the language. Moreover, the Government required that in conformity with the schedule of other schools, several Jewish schools must remain open on Saturdays, which violates Jewish law.

Jewish citizens are permitted to obtain passports and travel outside the country. In contrast with past reporting years, Jewish groups reported that Iranian Jews are now issued the multiple-exit permits issued to other citizens, and other travel restrictions have eased. Jewish groups outside the country reported unsuccessful government attempts to interfere in the elections of the Jewish Central Committee (JCC), which appoints the head of the Jewish community in the country. The groups also reported that the Jewish community's newspaper, *Ofogh-e-Bina*, stopped publication, reportedly due largely to government pressure on the previous chair of the JCC.

The small Sabean-Mandaean religious community reportedly faced intensifying harassment and repression by authorities, including reported government closings of Sabean-Mandaean places of worship (Mandi). There were also reports of religious freedom violations, such as forced observance of Islamic fasting rituals and praying in an Islamic fashion, which are in violation of Sabean-Mandaean teachings.

Sufis within the country and Sufi organizations outside the country remained extremely concerned about growing government repression of their communities and religious practices, including increased harassment and intimidation of prominent Sufi leaders by the intelligence and security services. Government restrictions on Sufi groups and houses of worship (husseiniya) became more pronounced in recent years.

Reportedly, the President called for an end to the development of Christianity in the country. Christian groups outside the country reported the growth of underground churches in the country during the reporting period.

The Government carefully monitors the statements and views of senior Shi'a religious leaders. The Special Clerical Courts, established to investigate offenses and crimes committed by clerics, and which the Supreme Leader oversees directly, are not provided for in the Constitution and operate outside the judiciary. In particular, critics alleged that the clerical courts are used to prosecute certain clerics for expressing controversial ideas and for participating in nonreligious activities, including journalism.

Non-Shi'a religious leaders reported abuse, including detentions and torture of Sunni clerics, as well as other widespread restrictions on their ability to practice their faith. They also reported bans on Sunni teachings in public schools and Sunni religious literature. Residents of provinces with large Sunni populations, including Kurdistan, Khuzestan, and Sistan-va-Baluchestan, reported discrimination and lack of resources, but it was difficult to determine what was ethnic-based discrimination and what was religious-based.

Laws based on religion have been used to stifle freedom of expression. Independent newspapers and magazines have been closed, and leading publishers and journalists have been imprisoned on vague charges of "insulting Islam" or "calling into question the Islamic foundation of the Republic."

Many female Muslims sought to eliminate laws and practices that discriminate against women, arguing that relegating women to a lesser status due to, inter alia, their being considered "deficient in reason," was not a precept of Islam, but rather a non-Islamic accretion to Islamic practices.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

According to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, since 1979 more than 200 Bahá'ís have been killed, and 15 have disappeared and are presumed dead.

The Government seized many Bahá'í properties following the 1979 revolution and has not returned any Bahá'í cemeteries, holy places, historical sites, administrative centers, or other assets. No properties have been returned, and many have been destroyed. Bahá'ís are generally prevented from burying and honoring their dead in accordance with their religious tradition; however, Bahá'í groups reported some instances during the reporting period of Bahá'ís being permitted to bury their dead in their own cemeteries.

The property rights of Bahá'ís are generally disregarded, and they suffer frequent government harassment and persecution. The Government has confiscated large numbers of private and business properties belonging to Bahá'ís, as well as religious material. The Government reportedly seized numerous Bahá'í homes and handed them over to an agency of Supreme Leader Khamene'i. Sources indicated that property was confiscated in Rafsanjan, Kerman, Marv-Dasht, Yazd, and Kata Provinces. The Government also seized private homes in which Bahá'í youth classes were held, despite the owners having proper ownership documents.

The Bahá'í community claimed the government's seizure of Bahá'í personal property and its denial of Bahá'í access to education and employment was eroding the economic base of the community and threatening its survival. On June 29, 2006, the U.N. Special Rapporteur on adequate housing found that government expropriations of property in Iran "seem to have targeted disproportionately" the property of Bahá'ís and other ethnic and religious minorities. He further mentioned that many of the confiscation verdicts made by Iranian Revolutionary Courts declared that "the confiscation of the property of the evil sect of the Bahá'í [were] legally and religiously justifiable." There were reports during the reporting period of authorities forcing Bahá'í businesses to close and placing restrictions on their businesses, and asking managers of private companies to dismiss their Bahá'í employees.

The Government continued to imprison and detain Bahá'ís based on their religious beliefs. The Government arbitrarily arrested Bahá'ís and charged them with violating Islamic Penal Code Articles 500 and 698, relating to activities against the state and spreading falsehoods, respectively. Often the charges were not dropped upon release and those with charges still pending against them reportedly feared rearrest at any time. Most were released only after paying large fines or posting high bails.

Between May 2006 and January 2007, the Government reportedly arrested 63 Bahá'ís. As of February 2007 three remained in prison. The Government never formally charged many of the others, but released them only after they posted bail. For some, bail was in the form of deeds of property; others gained their release in exchange for personal guarantees or work licenses.

There were also reports of attacks on Bahá'ís by unidentified assailants, including the killings of two elderly Bahá'í women. On February 16, 2007, an 85-year-old Bahá'í woman, Behnam Saltanat Akhzari, was killed in her home by a masked intruder. The following day, a 77-year-old Bahá'í woman, Shah Beygom Dehghani, was also assaulted in her home by a masked intruder and she died on March 7, 2007.

On January 1, 2007, two Bahá'í men, Riaz Heravi and Siamak Ebrahimi, were arrested and detained for 20 and 30 days, respectively. No details were available about the reasons for their arrests, although a Bahá'í group noted that the two coordinated events for their Bahá'í community on an ad hoc basis.

On November 1, 2006, a Bahá'í man, Fayzullah Rowshan, was reportedly arrested by order of the Ministry of Information, following a search of his home. He was released on January 1, 2007. No details about the reason for his arrest were available.

On September 21, 2006, the Court of Appeal in Semnan province denied the appeal of eight Bahá'ís arrested in May 2005. They were accused of "teaching activities against the Islamic Republic of Iran." Three were given sentences of 6 months in prison, and five were sentenced to 91 days. Six of the eight sentences were suspended for 4 years, and the other two appealed their sentences.

On August 17, 2006, a Bahá'í man, Babak Roohi, was reportedly arrested in Mashhad for making 50 photocopies of a Bahá'í book for a Bahá'í function. He was released 2 weeks later after posting bail of \$34,000 (315,000,000 rials).

On June 28, 2006, a Bahá'í was taken into custody and was being held in the Ministry of Information's detention center. At the end of the reporting period, no further information was available. This individual was previously arrested and released in August 2005.

On June 21, 2006, a Bahá'í man, Shokrollah Rahmani, was reportedly abducted in broad daylight in Khash, in southeastern Iran. His family reported that the police refused to investigate, despite being presented with evidence, including telephone and license plate numbers. Rahmani was released on November 24, 2006. No further details were available.

On June 21, 2006, a Bahá'í from Baluchistan province was reportedly abducted, and authorities said they suspected criminal elements were involved.

On June 18, 2006, the Government arrested three Bahá'ís from Hamadan after government officials confiscated books, computers, and Bahá'í documents. They were later released on bail on June 21, 2006.

Between May 9 and May 11, 2006, the Government raided eleven Bahá'í homes in Shahinshahr, Najafabad, and Kashan with no arrests made. On May 19, 2006, the Government raided six Bahá'í homes in Shiraz, and arrested 54 Bahá'ís. Security forces also seized notebooks, computers, books, and documents. On May 24 and May 25, 2006, the Government released all but three of the detainees. As of June 14, 2006 the remaining three had been released.

On March 18, 2006, Mehran Kawsari was released from jail without bail, after being charged with taking measures against the internal security of the Government. He was tried in connection with distributing a November 2004 open letter, in which the Bahá'í community wrote to the Government of the Islamic Republic, addressed to then-President Khatami, seeking an end to Bahá'í-focused human rights and religious freedom abuses. Numerous anecdotal reports indicated a marked increase in Government persecution of Bahá'ís after this letter.

On February 5, 2006, the Government arrested three Bahá'ís from Esfahan for coordinating Bahá'í activities.

On January 15, 2006, the Government arrested three Bahá'ís from Kermanshah on charges of "involvement in Bahá'í activities and insulting Islam." The Government raided their homes and the homes of four others the same day and confiscated books, documents, and other items. The Government released them on January 20, 2006.

On December 19, 2005, the longest imprisoned Bahá'í, Zabihullah Mahrami, died in prison of unknown causes. He was arrested in 1995 and convicted of apostasy in 1996. A Bahá'í group outside the country reported in April 2007 that the Revolutionary Court of Yazd province confiscated the home of Mahrami's widow, Nahid Beygi.

In August 2005 the Government arrested at least 23 Bahá'ís and later released 3 on bail and sentenced 4 to 10 months in prison. The Government also searched the homes of several Bahá'ís, and confiscated books, computers, tapes, videos, and CDs.

In May 2005 the Government charged several Bahá'ís with "creating anxiety in the minds of the public and those of the Iranian officials" and distributing "propaganda against the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran," for having distributed copies of the 2004 open letter to various government officials.

In April-May 2005 the Government arrested and imprisoned nine Bahá'ís, following the confiscation of their properties. All nine later gained their release from prison, after a business license was used as collateral.

In March 2005 a series of Bahá'í arrests and imprisonments took place throughout the country. One of the Bahá'ís previously arrested and briefly detained for having distributed an open letter from the Bahá'í community to then-President Khatami, received a 3-year sentence and was incarcerated in Evin prison.

In February 2005 the Government released two Bahá'ís from prison after serving almost 15 years on charges related

to their religious beliefs.

In January 2005 several Bahá'ís were assaulted in their homes by unidentified assailants and later summoned, questioned, and released by the authorities.

Sufi Muslims faced an increasing repression campaign.

On May 21, 2007, security forces arrested the leader of the Nematollahi Gonabadi Sufi order, Nurali Tabandeh. The reason for his arrest and whether formal charges have been brought against him were not known.

On May 4, 2006, a court sentenced 52 Sufis to jail on various charges in connection with a February 14, 2006 incident, in which the Government reportedly arrested more than 1,200 Sufis for gathering illegally. The Government sentenced the defendants and their two lawyers to a year in prison, fines, and 74 lashes, which was later reduced to fines only. The Government also banned the lawyers, Farshid Yadollahi and Omid Behrouzi, from practicing law for 5 years.

Articles attacking Sufis are printed in government-controlled, national newspapers, such as *Jomhouri-ye Eslami* and *Kayhan*. On February 14, 2006, a *Kayhan* article quoted senior clerics in Qom as saying that Sufism should be eradicated in the city. Several anti-Sufi books were reportedly published in recent years.

On February 14, 2006, security forces demolished a husseiniya, as well as neighboring houses, and arrested more than 1,200 persons, according to several sources. Other sources close to the Sufi groups and human rights activists reported up to 2,000 arrests. The Government detained at least 173 people at Fajr prison and reportedly tortured them, to extract confessions that would be read on national television. Those released had to sign agreements saying they would not attend Sufi gatherings in Qom and would present themselves to intelligence offices. Reportedly, the Government required some to sign documents renouncing Sufism.

On February 13, 2006, the day preceding the February 14, 2006, incident, police officers tried to close a husseiniya in the city of Qom, sparking 2 days of clashes and violence. Qom officials stated the Sufis had illegally turned a residential building into a religious establishment. However, the establishment apparently had been built 3 years ago with municipal permission. According to some human rights groups, the Sufis, including many women and children, peacefully protested the order to leave the husseiniya. Police attacked the Sufis in the building with tear gas and explosives, causing more than 500 hospitalizations, according to some sources, and 100 injuries, according to the Qom Governor, General Abbas Mohtaj. Members of the Fatemiyon and Hojjatiyeh groups, conservative Islamic groups, reportedly joined the police in first taunting the protestors and then attacking and beating them.

In September 2005, Ayatollah Hossein Nouri-Hamedani, as Islamic scholar in Qom, reportedly called for a crackdown on Sufi groups, labeling them a "danger to Islam." Five months later an attack occurred that involved police and paramilitary forces. During the riots, the paramilitaries distributed leaflets calling Sufis enemies of Islam, and the Qom governor accused the Sufis of having ties to foreign countries and creating instability.

Christians--particularly evangelicals--continued to be subject to harassment and close surveillance. During the reporting period, the Government vigilantly enforced its prohibition on proselytizing by evangelical Christians by closely monitoring their activities, discouraging Muslims from entering church premises, closing their churches, and arresting Christian converts. Members of evangelical congregations are 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. The Government restricted meetings for evangelical services to Sundays, and church officials are ordered to inform the Ministry of Information and Islamic Guidance before admitting new members.

On September 26, 2006, authorities arrested evangelical Christians Fereshteh Dibaj and Reza Montazami at their home in the northeastern part of the country. Dibaj and Montazami operated an independent church in Mashhad. The Information Ministry held the couple for 10 days without bringing any charges, and agents confiscated their home computer and other belongings. They were released on October 5, 2006.

On July 24, 2006, authorities arrested Issa Motamedi Mojdehi, a Muslim convert to Christianity, following his attempt to register the birth of his son. Charges of drug trafficking were brought against him, which Christian groups said was an attempt to punish him for his conversion.

On May 2, 2006, a Muslim convert to Christianity, Ali Kaboli, was taken into custody in Gorgan, after several years of police surveillance, and threatened with prosecution if he did not leave the country. He was interrogated and was held incommunicado before being released on June 12, 2006.

On November 22, 2005, a Muslim convert to Christianity, Ghorban Tori, was kidnapped from his house in the northeast and killed. His body was later returned to his house. Tori was a pastor at an independent house church of converted Christians. After the killing, security officials searched his house for Bibles and banned Christian books in Persian. In the previous week, according to some sources, the Ministry of Intelligence and Security arrested and tortured 10 Christians in several cities.

In 2004 sources reported the arrest of several dozen evangelical Christians in the north, including a Christian pastor, his wife, and their two teenage children in Chalous, Mazandaran Province. The Government released many of those arrested, including the pastor and his family, after 6 weeks in detention.

In 2004 security officials raided the annual general conference of the country's Assemblies of God Church, arresting approximately 80 religious leaders gathered at the church's denominational center in Karaj. Assemblies of God Pastor Hamid Pourmand, a former Muslim who converted to Christianity nearly 25 years ago and who led a congregation in Bushehr, was the only detainee not released. In late January 2005 he was tried in a military court on charges of espionage, and on February 16, 2005, he was found guilty and sentenced to 3 years. Pourmand, who was a noncommissioned officer, was discharged from the army and forfeited his entire income, pension, and housing for his family. A website documenting persecution of Christians reported that Pourmand was released on July 20, 2006.

The Government was allegedly responsible for the killing of Sunni clerics in recent years. Sunni leaders reported abuses, including detentions and torture of Sunni clerics, and an unconfirmed report of a suspicious death of a Sunni cleric who had defied orders not to return to the mosque after his release from prison.

There were reports of three killings of senior clerics during 2007, including the June 24, 2007 killing of Hesham Saymary, in the ethnically-Arab dominated province of Khuzestan. It is not known whether the Government had any role in those killings.

Anti-Semitism

While the Government recognizes Judaism as a religious minority, Jews alleged frequent official discrimination. During the reporting period, there was a rise in officially sanctioned, anti-Semitic propaganda, involving official statements, media outlets, publications, and books. The Government's anti-Israel policies and anti-Semitic rhetoric, along with a perception among radical Muslims that all Jewish citizens of the country support Zionism and the state of Israel, created a hostile atmosphere for Jews. The rhetorical attacks also further blurred the line between Zionism, Judaism, and Israel and contributed to increased concerns about the future security of the Jewish community.

Many Jews have sought to limit their contact with or support for the state of Israel out of fear of reprisal. Recent anti-American and anti-Israeli demonstrations included the denunciation of Jews, as opposed to the past practice of denouncing only "Israel" and "Zionism," adding to the threatening atmosphere for the community. In 2005 many newspapers celebrated the one-hundredth anniversary of the anti-Semitic publication *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Jewish community members continued to emigrate, in part due to continued anti-Semitism on the part of the Government and within society.

Jewish groups reported that two synagogues in the country were assaulted during the reporting period, largely because a hard-line newspaper, *Yalesarat*, published two photos of synagogues displaying Israeli flags and falsely claimed that the synagogues were in the country.

Since August 2005 President Ahmadi-Nejad has pursued a virulent anti-Israel campaign, including commenting on the 2006 conflict between Israel and Hezbollah as triggering the countdown for the "destruction of the Zionist regime." President Ahmadi-Nejad also publicly questioned the existence or the scale of the Holocaust, which created an even more hostile environment for the Jewish minority. Friday prayer leaders endorsed the President's Holocaust denial statements and reported the statements are "the heartfelt words of all Muslims in the world."

On December 11 and 12, 2006, the Government sponsored a conference entitled, "Review of the Holocaust: Global Vision." This conference was widely criticized as it provided a forum for those who deny the existence or scale of the Holocaust. Speakers at the conference universally called for the elimination or delegitimization of the state of Israel and concluded that the Holocaust did not occur or that the scale of the Holocaust was exaggerated by Jews for political or financial gain.

In mid 2006 the newspaper *Hamshahri* cosponsored a Holocaust cartoon contest, soliciting submissions from around the world and awarding a \$12,000 (111,000,000 rials) prize to a Moroccan cartoonist who drew a picture of an Israeli crane erecting a wall of concrete blocks around the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, Islam's third holiest site. The blocks bear sections of a photograph of the Nazi extermination camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau. The Government sponsored an exhibit of these cartoons in Tehran on August 14, 2006.

Jewish community leaders protested the President's Holocaust denial comments and the Holocaust cartoon contest. The sole Jewish Majlis deputy, Moris Motamed, condemned the President's remarks on the Holocaust, saying in a September 22, 2006, BBC news article, "It is very regrettable to see a horrible tragedy so far reaching as the Holocaust being denied...it was a very big insult to Jews all around the world."

Within the domestic press, anti-Semitism in the media was present, and anti-Semitic editorial cartoons depicting demonic and stereotypical images of Jews, along with Jewish symbols, were published during the reporting period.

Forced Religious Conversions

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

Government officials reportedly offered Bahá'ís relief from mistreatment, in exchange for recanting their faith, and if incarcerated, recanting their faith as a precondition for releasing them.

Authorities reportedly forced several Sufi Muslims to sign forced renunciations of their faith while in prison, following the February 2006 riots.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The continuous presence of the country's pre-Islamic, non-Muslim communities, such as Zoroastrians, Jews, Sabean-Mandaeans, and Christians, accustomed the population to the participation of non-Muslims in society; however, government actions continued to support elements of society who create a threatening atmosphere for some religious minorities. The President's new agenda stressed the importance of Islam in enhancing "national solidarity" and mandated that government-controlled media emphasize Islamic culture in order to "cause subcultures to adapt themselves to public culture." The Supreme Leader named March 2007 to March 2008 the year of "national unity and Islamic solidarity." Since President Ahmadi-Nejad took office in August 2005, conservative media have intensified a campaign against non-Muslim religious minorities, and political and religious leaders issued a continual stream of inflammatory statements. The campaigns against non-Muslims contributed to a significantly worse situation for non-Muslim society throughout the reporting period.

Sunni Muslims and Christians encountered societal and religious discrimination and harassment at the local, provincial, and national levels.

Bahá'ís faced government-sanctioned discrimination in the workplace. Bahá'í graveyards in Yazd and other cities were desecrated, and the Government did not seek to identify or punish the perpetrators.

Since the National Association of Chambers of Commerce began collecting employment data on Bahá'ís, there were reported problems for Bahá'ís in different trades around the country. Bahá'ís experienced an escalation of personal harassment, including receiving threatening notes, CDs, text messages, and tracts. There were reported cases of Bahá'í children being harassed in school and subjected to Islamic indoctrination. Bahá'í girls were especially targeted by students and educators, with the intention of creating tension between parents and children.

There was concern from several groups about the rumored resurgence of the banned Hojatiyeh Society, a secretive religious-economic group that was founded in 1953 to rid the country of the Bahá'í faith, in order to hasten the return of the 12th Imam (the Mahdi). Although not a government organization, it was believed that many members of the administration were Hojatiyeh members and were using their offices to advance the society's goals. However, it was unknown what role, if any, the group played in the arrests of numerous Bahá'ís during the reporting period. Many Bahá'í human rights groups and news agencies described the goals of the Hojatiyeh Society as the eradication of the Bahá'ís, not just the Bahá'í faith. The group's anti-Bahá'í orientation reportedly widened to encompass anti-Sunni and anti-Sufi activities as well.

Religious minorities are allowed to handle food and own food businesses, but most Muslim conservatives will not eat food prepared by Jews.

The small Sabean-Mandaean community reportedly faced discrimination similar to that faced by other religious minorities. There were reports that members of the Sabean-Mandaean community experienced societal discrimination and pressure to convert to Islam and were often denied access to higher education.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The United States has no diplomatic relations with the country, and thus it does not raise directly with the Government the restrictions that the Government places on religious freedom and other abuses the Government commits against adherents of minority religious groups.

The U.S. Government makes its position clear in public statements and reports, support for relevant U.N. and NGO efforts, and diplomatic initiatives to press for an end to government abuses. The U.S. Government calls on other countries with bilateral relations with Iran to use those ties to press its government on religious freedom and human rights.

On numerous occasions, the U.S. State Department spokesman has addressed the situation of the Bahá'í and Jewish communities in the country. The U.S. Government has publicly condemned the treatment of the Bahá'ís in U.N.

resolutions, including one that passed in the General Assembly in 2006. The U.S. Government has encouraged other Governments to make similar statements.

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](#)