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World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Iran : Christians

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Profile

The figure for the total number of Christians in Iran (of all denominations) has been estimated at close to 300,000. The Armenians, Assyrians and Chaldeans represent the more traditional religious groupings in Iran and they constitute over 90 per cent of Iran's Christian population. They do not carry out any missionary activities, and this stance has proven critical to their survival.

Iran's Christians may be categorized as 'ethnic Christians' and 'non-ethnic Christians', the former including Armenians, Assyrians and Chaldeans' and the latter primarily constituting Protestants and evangelicals.

Historical context

Armenians have lived in Iran for around four centuries. Several hundred thousand Armenians were brought to Iran from Armenia in the early seventeenth century by Shah Abbas for political and economic reasons, as merchants and artisans. Armenian Christians have their two representatives in the Iranian Parliament, in accordance with the Iranian Constitution. One seat is reserved for Armenians resident in Tehran and northern Iran, the other for Isfahan and southern Iran. The population of Armenians in Iran before the revolution was estimated at 300,000 and their population in the year 2000 at 150,000 by their own Archbishop Babian (though some quote the higher figure of 200,000). Many emigrated to Armenia after the revolution. Those who have remained have gone to some effort to insist on their good relations with the Iranian government, an example being the MP of the Armenians of northern Iran reportedly condemning UN censure of Iran for its treatment of religious minorities as being politically motivated, stating that the difficulties of religious minorities in Iran were less than those facing minorities in European countries and that domestic legal channels can be used to resolve any difficulties. Armenians run

their own churches, schools, cultural associations and Armenian language publications including a newspaper.

The Assyro-Chaldeans or Assyrians are amongst the oldest settled peoples in Iran. Assyrian Christians have their own representative in the Iranian Parliament. According to the MP representing the Assyrians and Chaldeans, Shamsheon Maqsoodpour, their population stood at 40,000 in 1999. They are allowed to have their own community and sports associations and they produce some publications. However, they face difficulties maintaining their Assyrian language and culture, since Assyrian schools have to teach children in Persian for all classes including those for religious education and even classes held for Assyrian children in the churches have to be examined in Persian.

The Protestants, and particularly evangelical groups, face the most difficulties from amongst the Christian communities in Iran. Churches have been closed down, the use of Persian in sermons banned, the publishing of Bibles restricted and Muslims strictly prohibited from attending sermons, with previous converts from Islam being put under particular surveillance. A number of Christian leaders have also been killed or found murdered since the early 1990s: the manner of their disappearances, and the consistency of the pattern of deaths, has made most observers suspect the Iranian governmental authorities themselves.

Current issues

Despite their formal protection in the Constitution, Christians still face significant levels of persecution in Iran, with church services being raided and Christians who have converted from Islam being imprisoned. Evangelical Christians in particular are targeted and often accused of being a threat to national security, under the influence of foreign powers. As of the end of 2016, around 90 Christians were reported to being detained in prison or awaiting trial on account of their religious beliefs.

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