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COUNTRY UPDATE: IRAN

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Religious Freedom in Iran in 2022

By Scott Weiner, Supervisory Policy Analyst

Introduction

Iran continues its egregious violations of religious freedom in 2022. The state regularly persecutes religious minorities, especially those not officially recognized under Iran's constitution. In particular, Iran's government has continued to escalate its repression of Baha'is, including arrests and the seizure of Baha'i property. Christians in Iran — particularly converts from Islam — have also been subject to arrest and excessive prison sentences. Iran also persecutes smaller religious communities, including Zoroastrians, Mandeans, and Yarsanis. The government continues its arrest and detention of Sunni Muslims as well. Religious minorities who flee Iran continue to face [threats](#) to their safety from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and Iran continues its attempts to [influence](#) other governments in the Middle East to persecute religious minorities. Iran's government also continues to use religion as a pretext for the repression of women, denying them individual freedom of religion or belief, and showing leniency on religious grounds toward perpetrators of so-called "honor killings." The government also uses religion to repress members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) community and actively executes gay men on religious grounds.

This country update details the persecution of religious minorities in Iran in 2022 and illustrates how the Iranian government uses a singular interpretation of Ja'afri Shi'a Islam to restrict religious freedom.

Baha'is

Iran's government considers Baha'is a "deviant sect" of Islam and recently [passed](#) an amendment to Article 500 of the country's penal code outlawing "any deviant educational or proselytizing activity that contradicts or interferes with the sacred law of Islam." In January 2022, state-funded organizations [held](#) a three-day poster design [workshop](#) in Isfahan to create anti-Baha'i propaganda. On April 27, unknown actors [destroyed](#) structures at a Baha'i cemetery in Hamedan.

In recent years, Iran has used legal measures to confiscate Baha'i properties, including in the villages of [Ivel](#) and [Kata](#). In January 2022, a court in Mazandaran ordered the transfer of property owned by a Baha'i woman named Sheida Taeed to the Execution of Imam Khomeini's Order ([EIKO](#)), an organization managing the commercial holdings of Iran's leadership and controlled by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. In February, the Special Court for Article 49 of the Constitution ordered the [transfer](#) of Baha'i properties in Semnan to EIKO as well.



As in past years, Iranian universities continued to deny entrance to Baha'is on the basis of their faith, including Kasra Shoai, who in January 2022 was [denied](#) entrance to Zahedan University.

Iran is also continuing its widescale campaign of arrests of Baha'is based on their faith. In mid-January and early February, the government escalated its [arrest](#) campaign. On January 11, Saba Sefidi was arrested after reporting to Branch 2 of the Court of Evin Prison. She was held at [Evin Prison](#), for 40 days, during which the prison [denied](#) her in-person visits with her family and did not [inform](#) them of her whereabouts for weeks. Authorities at Evin Prison reportedly use threats of torture, indefinite imprisonment and torture of family members, as well as denial of medical care, and denial of family visits. On February 23 Sefidi was released on a bail of 1.5 million tomans (US\$36) but still faces legal proceedings. On January 12, intelligence agents in Sari [detained](#) a Baha'i poet, Natoli Derakhshan, on unknown charges and transferred him to an [unknown](#) location. On January 17, Ministry of Intelligence agents in Tabriz [arrested](#) Sina Shahri and confiscated personal belongings from his home and workplace. He was [released](#) on February 4. Also in early February, security agents arrested three Baha'is in Tehran. The agents searched the homes of those arrested and [confiscated](#) personal belongings, including religious materials. One of the detainees, Pari Kargarian, was detained for several days in an unknown location where she likely [contracted](#) COVID-19. In February, the Mazandaran Revolutionary Court [sentenced](#) Shiva Khalili to a year in prison under Article 500. In March, Iranian officials [arrested](#) Shahnaz Sabet

to [begin](#) a two-year prison sentence at Adelabad Prison in Shiraz, and arrested Shahram Najaf Tomraei to [begin](#) a two-year term at Evin Prison near Tehran. In April, Iranian officials [arrested](#) Saeedeh Khozoei following an appearance at the Evin Courthouse. In May, Sahba Farnoush [began](#) a two-year sentence at Evin Prison after being convicted under articles 499 and 500 of Iran's Islamic Penal Code. In June, Branch 1 of the Shiraz Revolutionary Court [issued](#) jail sentences for 26 Baha'is.

Christians

On November 3, 2021, Iran's Supreme Court [ruled](#) that Christian participation in house churches does not amount to a violation of national security prosecutable under articles 498 and 499 of the Islamic Penal Code. These articles, which [prohibit](#) membership in groups that "aim to perturb the security of the country," are often used to prosecute Christians in Iran. In late February 2022, Branch 34 of the Tehran Court of Appeal concurred with the Supreme Court's ruling, [acquitting](#) nine Christians facing legal charges. In January 2022, Iran also released two Christians early from Bushehr Central Prison. In March, however, the Tehran Prosecutor's Office [informed](#) another Christian convert, Navard Gol-Tapeh, that his plea for early release was denied, despite also being charged with acting against national security for joining a house church. In April, Judge Iman Afshari of Branch 26 of the Tehran Revolutionary Court [sentenced](#) Anooshavan Avedian to ten years in prison for teaching "propaganda contrary to and disturbing to the holy religion of Islam." He also sentenced two Christian converts to a ten-year "deprivation of social rights,"

and two-year ban on travel abroad or membership in any political or social group, and a 50 million toman (US\$1,200) fine each. In May, Judge Afshari [sentenced](#) Pastor Joseph Shabbazian to ten years in prison for acting against national security. Two women converts who are members of his house church face prison time on national security charges as well. During the hearings for these cases, Afshari reportedly made derogatory comments about the beliefs of the Christian defendants. In January 2022, the Ministry of Intelligence press headquarters in Dezful [summoned](#) eight Christian converts and pressured them to change their religion. In February, the Tehran Public Prosecutor's office [summoned](#) Christian convert Sakineh Behjati to begin a two-year prison sentence on charges of speaking against the state and acting against national security. In April, prison authorities [transferred](#) her to Lakan Prison in Rasht. Christian prisoners in Iran, like other religious minority groups, have not been afforded adequate health protection. In February, four Christians detained on the basis of their beliefs — Navard Gol-Tapeh, Saheb Fadaie, Moslem Rahimi, and USCIRF Religious Prisoner of Conscience [Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani](#) — fell ill with [suspected](#) cases of COVID-19 in Ward 8 of Evin Prison. Prison officials [granted](#) Nadarkhani a week's furlough in mid-April for the first time in four years on a [bail](#) of 300 million tomans (US\$7,100).

Muslim Minorities

Sunni Muslims [comprise](#) 5–10 percent of Iran's population, and face ongoing persecution on the basis of their faith from Iran's government, which endorses a singular interpretation of Ja'afri Shi'a Islam. In March, Hamzeh Darvish [began](#) a 15-year prison sentence in Lakan Prison in Rasht. That same month, he received an additional 25-month sentence for "propaganda against the state" and "insulting the Supreme Leader." During the trial, authorities [denied](#) Darvish access to a lawyer, and prison authorities have [denied](#) him medical care. Also in March, authorities [arrested](#) four Sunnis from Ahvaz. In April, security officials, including some linked to the IRGC, [demolished](#) a Sunni mosque in Zehedan.

The Nematollah Gonabadi are Iran's largest Sufi order. Scores of Gonabadi Sufis in Iran have been arrested and sentenced following protests in February 2018 against the house arrest of the community's late spiritual leader Noor Ali Tabandeh. Three Gonabadis in the Greater Tehran Penitentiary (Fashafouyeh Prison) were [denied](#) family visitation rights in April 2022. Many Gonabadi prisoners

are detained in unsafe conditions, and some have [contracted](#) COVID-19. Religious experts also meet with Sufis in prison and try to coerce them to renounce their religious beliefs. The IRGC continues to [target](#) high profile members of the Gonabadi Sufi community abroad, threatening over social media channels to harm or kill them.

Jews and Antisemitism

Iran has fewer than 9,000 Jews in country. Iran's government continues to spread antisemitism and intolerance against Jews. Iranian leaders regularly invoke antisemitic tropes, Holocaust [denial](#), and references to Hitler's "[final Solution](#)" in criticizing the State of Israel. The U.S. Department of State cited in its [2021 International Religious Freedom Report](#) the Anti-Defamation League (ADL)'s report entitled [Incitement: Antisemitism and Violence in Iran's Current State Textbooks](#). The report stated that "incitement to hatred against Jews and Israel are extensively interspersed throughout multiple fields of the curriculum such as history, religion, and social studies" at all grade levels in the academic year 2020–2021. According to the report, school textbooks "overwhelmingly teach hateful messages about Jewish people across both ancient and modern history" in furtherance of a narrative pitting Islamic leaders against the enemies of Islam.

In her March 2022 book, Australian-British citizen Dr. Kylie Moore Gilbert [recounts](#) extreme antisemitism during her IRGC interrogations as a prisoner in Ward 2A of Evin Prison between 2018 and 2020. During questioning, her interrogator, "Lashgaran," asked her if U.S. policy was controlled by the "uber-rich Jewish puppets of the settler movement" and told her "maybe the Jews will wipe themselves out in the end." He also claimed that "the Jewish lobby in the United States controls the world through international finance."

In April 2022, the head of an IRGC-affiliated think tank [claimed](#) there was no "real antisemitism" in Nazi Germany. That same month, the deputy coordinator of the Representative Office of the Supreme Leader in the Alborz Province stated, "We are hostile not only to Israel but also to the Jewish people who believe that Islam should be destroyed" in comments to a newspaper published by Iran's Basij paramilitary force. In June 2022, Ayatollah Khamenei tweeted that "Zionist capitalists were a plague for the whole world. Now they're a plague especially for the world of Islam." U.S. Special Envoy to Combat and Monitor Antisemitism Deborah Lipstadt [condemned](#) this "vile antisemitic rhetoric" as "unacceptable."

Women

Iran's government uses religion as a pretext to restrict the religious freedom of women, including mandating the wearing of headscarves in public on religious grounds. In January, Mohammad Rostami, head of NAJA Special Forces Unit, said [police](#) will be cracking down on unveiled women. This crackdown began on July 3 when government officials in Mashhad and Khorasan [announced](#) plans to punish women and their employers for not enforcing laws requiring women to veil. The governor of Fars province also [announced](#) that women working for the province's Administrative Council can be sent home without pay for not veiling properly. In Qom, the IRGC [shut down](#) three cafes for gender mixing and violating laws requiring veiling.

Several women who have peacefully protested these laws have been imprisoned. In April 2022, the Supreme Court of Iran [acquitted](#) activist [Saba Kord Afshari](#) of "encouraging people to commit immorality and/or prostitution" through her peaceful protests against compulsory headscarf laws, and reduced her sentence from 15 years to five. Afshari's mother, [Rahele Ahmadi](#), is [serving](#) a 15-year prison sentence for protesting compulsory headscarf laws. In February, prison authorities [granted](#) Ahmadi a short medical furlough after she contracted COVID-19 in prison. In February, inmates at Kachuei Prison [physically attacked](#) [Yasaman Ariani](#), who was arrested along with her mother [Monireh Arabshahi](#) in 2019 for handing out flowers in Tehran's metro while suggesting wearing a hijab should not be compulsory. In May, prison officials [sent](#) Arabshahi to a hospital for a serious medical condition.

Iran's government also uses [religious interpretations](#) to justify lighter punishments for "honor killings" of [women](#) as compared to other kinds of homicide. Article 301 of the 2013 Islamic Penal Code [prohibits](#) "retaliation" (*qisas*) against a father or paternal grandfather who murders a child or grandchild. Article 630 [allows](#) a husband to kill his wife if he witnesses her engaging in "illicit intercourse" (*zina*) with another man. These laws rely on religious interpretations to [reduce](#) the consequences for the murder of women. In March, a father in Fars province beat his 20 year-old daughter Zinat Mazidi to [death](#) with an iron bar after she indicated her intent to divorce for a second time. In April, 33 year-old Sara Shadifar was [murdered](#) by her brother for attempting to emigrate to Turkey against her family's wishes.

LGBTQI+ Iranians

Iranian laws [forbid](#) same sex relations on religious grounds. Intercourse between two men is defined and prohibited as *lavat*, a religious term roughly equivalent to "sodomy." Articles 127–34 of the Islamic Penal Code also [forbid](#) a particular type of sexual contact between women on the grounds that it constitutes *mosaheqeh*, [justifying](#) its stance in [Sura 4 verses 15–16](#) of the Qur'an. Iran [punishes](#) *mosaheqeh* according to Islamic religious stipulations.

Iran is one of a handful of countries that actively executes gay men for same sex intercourse. In January, Iran [hanged](#) Mehrdad Karimpou and Farid Mohammad at Maragheh Prison on sodomy charges. In June, Iran [hanged](#) Iman Safari Rad, on sodomy charges at Rajai Shahr Prison in Karaj. In March, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei [spoke](#) against "severe moral deprivation in the world today such as homosexuality" in a televised speech. Government-sponsored media [portray](#) lesbians in Iran as criminals, and officials have forced women accused of being lesbian to attend "reorientation courses" where they are subjected to physical torture and verbal abuse. Iranian lesbians also have little legal recourse if forced by their families into heterosexual marriages where they are subjected to sexual relations with a man against their will.

Iranian Transnational Repression

In addition to restricting freedom of religion and belief domestically, Iran pursues religious minorities who flee the country to pursue greater religious freedom abroad, [including](#) in the United States. Christians, Gonabadi Sufis, and members of spiritualist movements who flee Iran for European countries have received threatening messages from social media accounts linked to Iran's government openly mocking their religion.



Image sent to a follower of the Erfan Keyhani Halgheh (Ring of Cosmic Mysticism) spiritualist movement residing outside Iran from an Iranian government-linked account. The dark red text at left reads Halgheh Sheitan or "Ring of Satan."



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Iran also continues to pressure regional authorities to persecute religious minorities. In Yemen, the Houthi movement has imposed charges on Baha'is that [resemble](#) those used to persecute Baha'is in Iran. In Qatar, Baha'is have faced increasingly systematic religious freedom restrictions. As USCIRF has [reported](#), social media accounts linked to Iran's government are actively encouraging these restrictions on Baha'is.

Conclusion

As the Joseph R. Biden administration engages with Iran concerning a nuclear agreement, it should continue to raise religious freedom concerns with Iran's government. The administration should also encourage like-minded governments, particularly members of the [International Religious Freedom and Belief Alliance](#) (IRFBA) to do the same. The U.S. Congress should continue to hold hearings and raise awareness about detained religious minorities in Iran. Congress should also vote to reauthorize the [Lautenberg Amendment](#), which provides a special resettlement track for Iranian religious minorities seeking asylum from religious persecution in the United States.

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