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IRAN 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution defines the country as an Islamic republic, and specifies Twelver Ja'afari Shia Islam as the official state religion. It states all laws and regulations must be based on "Islamic criteria" and an official interpretation of sharia. The constitution states citizens shall enjoy human, political, economic, and other rights, "in conformity with Islamic criteria." The penal code specifies the death sentence for proselytizing and attempts by non-Muslims to convert Muslims, as well as for *moharebeh* ("enmity against God") and *sabb al-nabi* ("insulting the Prophet"). According to the penal code, the application of the death penalty varies depending on the religion of both the perpetrator and the victim. The law prohibits Muslim citizens from changing or renouncing their religious beliefs. The constitution also stipulates five non-Ja'afari Islamic schools shall be "accorded full respect" and official status in matters of religious education and certain personal affairs. The constitution states Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians (excluding converts from Islam) are the only recognized religious minorities permitted to worship and to form religious societies "within the limits of the law." The government continued to execute individuals on charges of *moharebeh*, including two Kurdish minority prisoners at Rajai Shahr Prison on September 8. Human rights groups raised concerns regarding the use of torture, forced confessions, and denials of access to legal counsel. On June 18, the government executed Mohammad Salas, a member of the minority Gonabadi Sufi Dervish Order, for allegedly killing three police officers during clashes between Gonabadi Sufis and security forces in February. Human rights organizations widely decried Salas' conviction and execution, noting marked irregularities in his case and allegations of forced confession under police torture. The authorities reportedly denied Salas access to a lawyer and dismissed defense witnesses who could have testified to the fact that Salas was already in custody at the time of the police officers' deaths. Salas' execution and alleged show trial was largely seen by the international community as being part of the region's broader crackdown on Sufi dervishes. International media and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported authorities detained more than 300 Gonabadi Sufi dervishes after police open fired on them during February 19-20 demonstrations in Tehran where they were protesting the house arrest of their spiritual leader, Noor Ali Tabandeh. One of the Sufi dervishes arrested in February, Mohammed Raji, died in police custody. The Revolutionary Court of Tehran sentenced 20 of the detained Gonabadi Sufis to lengthy prison terms for crimes of "assembly and collusion against national security," "disturbing public order," "disobeying law enforcement agents," and "propaganda against the state."

The Iran Prison Atlas, compiled by the U.S.-based NGO United for Iran, stated at least 272 members of minority religious groups remained imprisoned for being religious minority practitioners. The government continued to harass, interrogate, and arrest Baha'is, Christians (particularly converts), Sunni Muslims, and other religious minorities, and regulated Christian religious practices closely to enforce a prohibition on proselytizing. The Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI) reported that the government banned Molavi Abdolhamid Ismaeelzahi, the country's leading Sunni cleric and Friday prayer leader of Zahedan, from traveling outside of Zahedan. *Mohabat News*, a Christian news website, reported the detention and abuse of Karen Vartanian, an Armenian Christian. Vartanian reportedly experienced physical and psychological abuse and suffered a heart attack as a result of beatings. According to media and NGO reports in early December, the government arrested 142 Christians across multiple cities in one month, including 114 in one week. According to Sufi media and NGOs, Shia clerics and prayer leaders continued to denounce Sufism and the activities of Sufis in both sermons and public statements, and the government closed Sufi websites, such as the Gonabadi Sufi Order's websites, in an attempt to erase their online identity. Yarsanis stated they continued to face discrimination and harassment by authorities. The government reportedly denied building permits for places of worship and employment and higher educational opportunities for members of religious minorities, and confiscated or restricted their religious materials. There were continued reports of authorities placing restrictions on Baha'i businesses or forcing them to shut down. On November 23, the Baha'i International Community (BIC) reported the government arrested more than 20 Baha'is in multiple cities in the provinces of Tehran, Isfahan, Mazandaran, and East Azerbaijan over the course of two weeks. On October 16, Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported the government arrested more than 20 Baha'is in Shiraz, Karaj, and Isfahan on unknown charges in August and September. CHRI reported the government detained Shiraz city council member Mehdi Hajati for 10 days for defending the "false Baha'i faith" after he tweeted about his attempts to free two Baha'i detainees. The judiciary subsequently placed Hajati under judicial surveillance and banned him from his seat on the council.

According to multiple sources, non-Shia Muslims and those affiliated with a religion other than Islam, especially members of the Baha'i community, continued to face societal discrimination and harassment, and employers experienced social pressures not to hire Baha'is or to dismiss them from their private sector jobs. Baha'is reported there were continued incidents of destruction or vandalism of their cemeteries.

The U.S. has no diplomatic relations with the country. The U.S. government used public statements, sanctions, and diplomatic initiatives in international forums to condemn the government's abuses and restrictions on worship by religious minorities. Senior U.S. government officials publicly reiterated calls for the release of prisoners held on religious grounds. In July the Secretary of State called attention to the situation of religious freedom in the country in a speech and USA Today op-ed piece. In his opinion piece, he said, "Hundreds of Sufi Muslims in Iran remain imprisoned on account of their beliefs, with reports of several dying at the hands of Iran's brutal security forces. The religious intolerance of the regime in Iran also applies to Christians, Jews, Sunnis, Baha'is, Zoroastrians, and other minority religious groups simply trying to practice their faiths." At the July U.S.-hosted Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, the U.S. and four other governments issued a statement on Iran. In the statement, the governments said, "As representatives of the international community, we stand together in condemning the systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom taking place in Iran and call on authorities to ensure religious freedom for all." During a September press briefing, the Special Representative for Iran called for an end of religious persecution in the country, stating: "What we are demanding of the Iranian regime...stop persecuting civil society, please provide all Iranian citizens with due process regardless of their political and religious beliefs." In June a Department of State spokesperson condemned the "the Iranian government's execution of Mohammad Salas, a member of the long-persecuted Iranian Gonabadi Sufi dervish community." The United States supported the rights of members of religious minority groups in the country through actions in the UN, including votes to extend the mandate of the special rapporteur. The U.S. government also supported resolutions expressing concern over the country's human rights practices, including the continued persecution of religious minorities.

Since 1999, Iran has been designated as a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On November 28, the Secretary of State redesignated Iran as a CPC. The following sanction accompanied the designation: the existing ongoing travel restrictions based on serious human rights abuses under section 221(a)(1)(C) of the Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act of 2012, pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 83 million (July 2018 estimate). According to U.S. government estimates, Muslims constitute 99.4 percent of the population; 90-95 percent are Shia and 5-10 percent Sunni (mostly Turkmen, Arabs, Baluchis, and Kurds living in the northeast, southwest, southeast, and northwest, respectively). Afghan refugees, economic migrants, and displaced persons also make up a significant Sunni population but accurate statistics on the breakdown of the Afghan refugee population between Sunni and Shia are unavailable. There are no official statistics available on the number of Muslims who practice Sufism, although unofficial reports estimate several million.

According to U.S. government estimates, groups constituting the remaining less than 1 percent of the population include Baha'is, Christians, Jews, Sabeans, Mandeans, Zoroastrians, and Yarsanis. The three largest non-Muslim minorities are Baha'is, Christians, and Yarsanis.

According to HRW data, Baha'is number at least 300,000.

According to World Christian Database statistics, there are approximately 547,000 Christians, although some estimates suggest there may be many more Christians than actually reported. While the government Statistical Center of Iran reports there are 117,700 Christians, Elam Ministries, a Christian organization, estimates that there could be between 300,000 and one million Christians. The majority of Christians are ethnic Armenians concentrated in Tehran and Isfahan. Estimates by the Assyrian Church of the total Assyrian and Chaldean Christian population put their combined number at 7,000. There are also Protestant denominations, including evangelical groups, but there is no authoritative data on their numbers. Christian groups outside the country estimate the size of the Protestant community to be less than 10,000, although many Protestants and other converts to Christianity from Islam reportedly practice in secret.

There is no official count of Yarsanis, but the Human Rights Activist News Agency (HRANA) estimates there are up to two million. Yarsanis are mainly located in Loristan and the Kurdish regions.

According to Zoroastrian groups and the government-run Statistical Center of Iran, the population includes approximately 25,000 Zoroastrians.

According to the Tehran Jewish Committee, the population includes approximately 9,000 Jews, while a British media report estimated their number at 18,000-20,000.

The population, according to one international NGO, includes 5,000-10,000 Sabean-Mandaeans.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution defines the country as an Islamic republic and designates Twelver Ja'afari Shia Islam as the official state religion. The constitution stipulates all laws and regulations must be based on “Islamic criteria” and an official interpretation of sharia. The constitution states citizens shall enjoy all human, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, “in conformity with Islamic criteria.”

The constitution prohibits the investigation of an individual’s ideas, and states no one may be “subjected to questioning and aggression for merely holding an opinion.” The law prohibits Muslim citizens from changing or renouncing their religious beliefs. The only recognized conversions are from another religion to Islam. Apostasy from Islam is a crime punishable by death. Under the law, a child born to a Muslim father is Muslim.

By law, non-Muslims may not engage in public persuasion or attempted conversion of Muslims. These activities are considered proselytizing and punishable by death. In addition, citizens who are not recognized as Christians, Zoroastrians, or Jews may not engage in public religious expression, such as worshiping in a church or wearing religious symbols such as a cross. Some exceptions are made for foreigners belonging to unrecognized religious groups.

The penal code specifies the death sentence for *moharebeh* (enmity against God), *fisad fil-arz* (“corruption on earth,” which includes apostasy or heresy), and *sabb al-nabi* (“insulting the prophets” or “insulting the sanctities”). According to the penal code, the application of the death penalty varies depending on the religion of both the perpetrator and the victim.

The constitution states the four Sunni (Hanafi, Shafi, Maliki, and Hanbali) and the Shia Zaydi schools of Islam are “deserving of total respect” and their followers are free to perform religious practices. It states these schools may follow their own jurisprudence in matters of religious education and certain personal affairs, including marriage, divorce, and inheritance.

The constitution states Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians are the only recognized religious minorities. “Within the limits of the law,” they have permission to perform religious rites and ceremonies and to form religious societies. They are also free to address personal affairs and religious education according to their own religious canon. Any citizen who is not a registered member of one of these three groups, or who cannot prove that his or her family was Christian prior to 1979, is considered Muslim.

Since the law prohibits citizens from converting from Islam to another religion, the government only recognizes the Christianity of citizens who are Armenian or Assyrian Christians, since the presence of these groups in the country predates Islam, or of citizens who can prove they or their families were Christian prior to the 1979 revolution. The government also recognizes Sabeen-Mandaeans as Christian, even though the Sabeen-Mandaeans state that they do not consider themselves as such. The government often considers Yarsanis as Shia Muslims practicing Sufism, but Yarsanis identify Yarsan as a distinct faith (known as Ahle Haq or Kakai). Yarsanis may also self-register as Shia in order to obtain government services. The government does not recognize evangelical Protestants as Christian.

Citizens who are members of one of the recognized religious minorities must register with the authorities. Registration conveys certain rights, including the use of alcohol for religious purposes. Authorities may close a church and arrest its leaders if churchgoers fail to register or unregistered individuals attend services. Individuals who convert to Christianity are not recognized as Christian under the law. They may not register and are not entitled to the same rights as recognized members of Christian communities.

The supreme leader oversees extrajudicial Special Clerical Courts, not provided for by the constitution. The courts, headed by a Shia Islamic legal scholar, operate outside the judiciary’s purview and investigate offenses committed by clerics, including political statements inconsistent with government policy and nonreligious activities. The courts also issue rulings based on independent interpretation of Islamic legal sources.

The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) monitor religious activity. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) also monitors churches.

The constitution provides for freedom of the press except when it is “harmful to the principles of Islam or the rights of the public.”

The Ministry of Education (MOE) determines the religious curriculum of public schools. All school curricula, public and private, must include a course on Shia Islamic teachings, and all pupils must pass this course in order to advance to the next educational level through university. Sunni students and students from recognized minority religious groups must take and pass the courses on Shia Islam, although they may also take separate courses on their own religious beliefs.

Recognized religious minority groups, except for Sunni Muslims, may operate private schools. The MOE supervises the private schools operated by the recognized minority religious groups and imposes certain curriculum requirements. The ministry must approve all textbooks used in coursework, including religious texts. These schools may provide their own religious instruction and in languages other than Farsi, but authorities must approve those texts as well. Minority communities must bear the cost of translating the texts into Farsi so the authorities can review them. Directors of such private schools must demonstrate loyalty to the official state religion. This requirement, known as *gozinesh* review, is an evaluation to determine adherence to the government ideology and system as well as knowledge of the government interpretation of Shia Islam.

The law bars Baha’is from founding their own educational institutions. A Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology order requires universities to exclude Baha’is from access to higher education or expel them if their religious affiliation becomes known. Government regulation states Baha’is are only permitted to enroll in universities if they do not identify themselves as Baha’is. To register for the university entrance examination, Baha’i students must answer a basic multiple-choice question and identify themselves as followers of a religion other than Baha’i (e.g., Muslim, Christian, Jewish, or Zoroastrian). To pass the entrance examination, university applicants must pass an exam on Islamic, Christian, or Jewish theology based on their official religious affiliation.

According to the constitution, Islamic scholars in the Assembly of Experts, an assembly of 86 popularly elected and supreme leader-approved clerics whose qualifications include piety and religious scholarship, elect the supreme leader, the country’s head of state. To “safeguard” Islamic ordinances and to ensure legislation passed by the Islamic Consultative Assembly (i.e., the parliament or “Majles”) is compatible with Islam, a Guardian Council composed of six Shia clerics appointed by the supreme leader, and six Shia legal scholars nominated by

the judiciary, must review and approve all legislation. The Guardian Council also vets all candidates for the Assembly of Experts, president, and parliament and supervises elections for those bodies.

The constitution bans the parliament from passing laws contrary to Islam and states there may be no amendment to its provisions related to the “Islamic character” of the political or legal system or to the specification that Twelver Ja’afari Shia Islam is the official religion.

Non-Muslims may not be elected to a representative body or hold senior government, intelligence, or military positions, with the exception of five of the 290 parliament seats reserved by the constitution for recognized religious minorities. There are two seats reserved for Armenian Christians, one for Assyrian and Chaldean Christians together, one for Jews, and one for Zoroastrians.

The constitution states in regions where followers of one of the recognized schools of Sunni Islam constitute the majority, local regulations are to be in accordance with that school within the bounds of the jurisdiction of local councils and without infringing upon the rights of the followers of other schools.

According to the constitution, a judge should rule on a case on the basis of the codified law, but in a situation where such law is absent, he should deliver his judgment on the basis of “authoritative Islamic sources and authentic fatwas.”

The constitution specifies the government must “treat non-Muslims in conformity with the principles of Islamic justice and equity, and to respect their human rights, as long as those non-Muslims have not conspired or acted against Islam and the Islamic Republic.”

The law authorizes collection of “blood money” or *diyyeh* as restitution to families for the death of Muslims and members of recognized religious minorities. Baha’i families, however, are not entitled to receive *diyyeh*. This law also reduces the *diyyeh* for recognized religious minorities and women to half that of a Muslim man.

By law, non-Muslims may not serve in the judiciary, the security services (separate from regular armed forces), or as public school principals. Officials screen candidates for elected offices and applicants for public sector employment based on their adherence to and knowledge of Islam and loyalty to the Islamic Republic (*gozinesh* requirements), although members of recognized religious minorities may serve in the lower ranks of government if they meet these loyalty requirement.

Government workers who do not observe Islamic principles and rules are subject to penalties and may be fired or barred from work in a particular sector.

The government bars Baha'is from all government employment and forbids Baha'i participation in the governmental social pension system. Baha'is may not receive compensation for injury or crimes committed against them and may not inherit property. A religious fatwa from the supreme leader encourages citizens to avoid all dealings with Baha'is.

The government does not recognize Baha'i marriages or divorces but allows a civil attestation of marriage to serve as a marriage certificate, which allows for basic recognition of the union but does not offer legal protections in marital disputes. Baha'i activists report this often leaves women without the legal protections of government-recognized marriage contracts.

Recognized religious groups issue marriage contracts in accordance with their religious laws.

The constitution permits the formation of political parties based on Islam or on one of the recognized religious minorities, provided the parties do not violate the "criteria of Islam," among other stipulations.

The constitution states the military must be Islamic, must be committed to Islamic ideals, and must recruit individuals who are committed to the objectives of the Islamic revolution. In addition to the regular military, the IRGC is charged with upholding the Islamic nature of the revolution at home and abroad. The law does not provide for exemptions from military service based on religious affiliation. The law forbids non-Muslims from holding positions of authority over Muslims in the armed forces. Members of recognized religious minorities with a college education may serve as officers during their mandatory military service, but may not continue to serve beyond the mandatory service period to become career military officers.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, but at ratification entered a general reservation "not to apply any provisions or articles of the Convention that are incompatible with Islamic Laws and the international legislation in effect."

Government Practices

According to Amnesty International (AI) and other international human rights NGOs, the government convicted and executed dissidents, political reformers, and peaceful protesters on charges of *moharebeh* and anti-Islamic propaganda. According to AI and CHRI, authorities executed Zaniar Moradi and Loghman Moradi, two Kurdish minority prisoners, at Rajai Shahr Prison on September 8 after they were convicted on charges of *moharebeh* and murder, despite concerns of AI, CHRI, and other human rights NGOs regarding the use of torture, forced confessions, and denials of access to legal counsel. Prior to the executions, the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran and the UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions released a joint statement writing, “We urge the Government of Iran to immediately halt their executions and to annul the death sentences against them. We are alarmed by information received that Zanyar and Loghman Moradi suffered human rights violations before and during their trial, including torture and other ill-treatment and denial of access to a lawyer.”

Media outlets reported that on September 3, authorities hanged three Baluchi prisoners whom the Zahedan Revolutionary Court had sentenced to death in November 2017 on charges of *moharebeh* for allegedly participating in a firefight with police forces that led to the death of a police officer. According to HRANA, “the three wrote an open letter detailing mistreatment and torture at the hands of their interrogators.”

International media and human rights organizations reported that the government executed Mohammad Salas, a member of the Gonabadi Sufi Dervish Order, on June 18 for allegedly killing three police officers during clashes between Gonabadi Sufis and security forces in February. Human rights organizations, including AI, CHRI, and HRANA, decried Salas’ conviction and execution, noting marked irregularities in his case and allegations of forced confession under police torture. The authorities reportedly denied Salas access to a lawyer and dismissed defense witnesses who could have testified to the fact that Salas was already in custody at the time of the police officers’ deaths. According to AI, “Mohammad Salas’ trial was grossly unfair. He said he was forced under torture to make a ‘confession’ against himself. This ‘confession,’ taken from his hospital bed, was...used as the only piece of evidence to convict him. He was not allowed access to his chosen lawyer.”

Human rights organizations widely reported the detention of Zeinab Taheri, a human rights lawyer, who was defending Salas. Authorities arrested Taheri one day after Salas was executed. On June 19, the Prosecutor’s Office for Culture and

Media summoned Taheri and detained her on charges of “disturbing the public opinion,” “spreading propaganda against the system,” and “publishing lies.” Tehran prosecutor Jafari Dolatabadi subsequently said during a press conference that Taheri had “incited the public opinion and mobilized the counterrevolution against the judiciary,” and that “the hostile media used her remarks to published reports against the judiciary.”

Residents of provinces with large Sunni populations, including Kurdistan, Khuzestan, and Sistan and Baluchistan, reported continued repression by judicial authorities and members of the security services, including extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrest, and torture in detention, as well as discrimination, including suppression of religious rights, lack of basic government services, and inadequate funding for infrastructure projects. The March report by UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran Asma Jahangir highlighted the disproportionately large number of executions of Sunni Kurdish prisoners. The report stated authorities often detained Sunni Kurds “on charges related to various activities such as environmental activism, eating in public during the month of Ramadan, working as border couriers engaged in smuggling illicit goods, or for celebrating the results of the referendum held in neighboring Iraqi Kurdistan,” among other political or security-related charges.

Human rights NGOs, including HRANA, reported throughout the year on the extremely poor conditions inside Ardabil Prison, including reports of Shia guards routinely torturing Sunni prisoners. In March CHRI reported that Mohammad Saber Malek-Raeisi, a Baluchi Sunni Muslim, who had been imprisoned since 2009, was suffering from serious injuries as a result of repeated beatings by guards during the four years he has been held in Ardabil Prison. According to CHRI, prison authorities severely beat and tortured Malek-Raeisi in December 2017 after he went on a hunger strike to protest conditions. Since then, his mother reported him ill and unable to see in one of his eyes.

HRANA also reported increased pressure on Sunni inmates at Rajai Shahr Prison in Karaj and Dizal Abad Prison in Kermanshah. According to HRANA, on August 7, approximately 30 MOIS agents and 50 Special Forces raided a ward at Rajai Shahr housing minority Sunni inmates, beating the prisoners and taking their belongings. The security forces reportedly insulted the Sunni prisoners’ religious beliefs during the raid. Authorities reportedly denied medical treatment to those injured from the beatings. The Rajai Shahr incident was reportedly retribution for the inmates’ religious and political activities.

In February HRANA reported seven Sunni prisoners in Rajai Shahr Prison detained since 2009 continued to await a new trial after the Supreme Court rejected the death sentences handed down to them in 2015. The prisoners denied engaging in violence and said the authorities arrested them because of their religious beliefs and activities, including attending religious meetings and disseminating religious material.

According to Baluchi rights activists, Baluchis faced government discrimination as both Sunni religious practitioners and an ethnic minority group. Baluchi rights activists reported continued arbitrary arrests, physical abuse, and unfair trials of journalists and human rights activists. Baluchi rights activists reported that authorities often pressured family members of those in prison to remain silent. HRANA reported that on June 17, authorities arrested Sunni Baluchi civil rights activist Abdollah Bozorgzadeh for joining a gathering in support of the 41 “Iranshahr Girls,” whom a group of well-connected men reportedly raped in the southeastern city of Iranshahr, located in the predominately-Sunni province of Sistan and Baluchistan. Upon his arrest, authorities transferred Bozorgzadeh to an IRGC-run Zahedan detention center, where Bozorgzadeh said he was tortured. In July CHRI reported that authorities arrested at least 10 Baluchi activists for protesting the alleged rapes. At his sermon on June 15, Iranshahr’s Sunni Friday Prayer Leader Mohammad Tayyeb Mollazehi reportedly stated that a suspect in custody had confessed he and several other men had raped 41 women. However, according to CHRI, officials denied either that the rapes happened or claimed elements of the case had been falsified. According to *Iran Wire*, the country’s prosecutor general threatened legal action against the Sunni prayer leader because the alleged perpetrators belonged to some of the city’s most influential families, including connections to or membership in the IRGC, Basij, military, and police.

The government continued to incarcerate numerous prisoners on various charges related to religion. According to the Iran Prison Atlas, a database of political prisoners compiled by the U.S.-based NGO United for Iran, at least 272 members of minority religious groups remained imprisoned for being religious minority practitioners. Of the total number of prisoners in the database, at least 165 were imprisoned on charges of *moharebeh*, 34 for “insulting the Supreme Leader and Ayatollah Khomeini,” 21 for “insulting Islam,” and 20 for “corruption on earth,” a term according to the *Oxford Dictionary of Islam* meaning in Quranic usage “corrupt conditions, caused by unbelievers or unjust people, that threaten social and political wellbeing.” Shia religious leaders who did not support government policies reportedly continued to face intimidation and arrest.

Various media outlets and human rights organizations reported incidents of severe physical mistreatment of the Gonabadi Sufi minority. According to CHRI, guards at the Great Tehran Penitentiary attacked and beat Gonabadi detainees on August 29. Several of the inmates reportedly were badly injured, suffered broken bones, and were moved to solitary confinement. HRANA specified that the guards attacked at least 18 dervishes with batons and electroshock weapons in response to the prisoners' protests of the beating of female Sufis in Gharchak Prison.

International media and NGOs widely reported more than 300 Gonabadi Sufi dervishes were detained after police open fired on them during February 19-20 demonstrations in Tehran to protest the house arrest of their spiritual leader, Noor Ali Tabandeh. Authorities held Tabandeh, aged 91, under house arrest in Tehran since at least February and denied him access to urgently needed medical care. According to HRW, Mohammed Raji, one of those arrested in February, died in police custody. Authorities told Raji's family on March 4 that he died from repeated blows to the head. The family said that Raji was injured, but alive at the time of his arrest. HRW stated that authorities refused to clarify the sequence and timing of events that led to Raji's death.

According to CHRI and other human rights organizations, the Revolutionary Court of Tehran sentenced 20 of the detained Gonabadi Sufis to lengthy prison terms for crimes of "assembly and collusion against national security," "disturbing public order," "disobeying law enforcement agents," and "propaganda against the state." Mostafa Abdi received the most severe sentence with 26 years in prison, 148 lashes, two years of internal exile in Sistan and Baluchistan Province, a two-year ban on social activities, and a two-year prohibition on traveling abroad. In August HRW reported that authorities had sentenced at least 208 dervishes since May "to prison terms and other punishments that violate their basic rights." The courts delivered sentences that included prison terms ranging from four months to 26 years, flogging, internal exile, travel bans, and a ban on membership in social and political groups. CHRI reported that on February 19 Iranian security forces arrested Reza Entessari and Kasra Nouri, reporters with the Sufi news website *Majzooban-e-Noor*, while they were covering the violent dispersal of protests of treatment of the Gonabadi dervishes in Tehran.

On March 3, according to CHRI, the Revolutionary Court of Tehran sentenced Mohammad Ali Taheri, founder of the spiritual doctrine Interuniversalism and the Erfan-e Halgheh group, to five years in prison for a second time, on charges of "spreading corruption on earth." This sentence followed the Supreme Court's rejection of Taheri's prior death sentence in December 2017. According to press,

the Supreme Court ordered Taheri retried, citing a faulty investigation. The case of Taheri, imprisoned since 2011, drew widespread international condemnation, including from human rights organizations, NGOs, and the UN special rapporteur.

On August 19, according to CHRI, a court sentenced journalist and satirist Amir Mohammad Hossein Miresmaili to 10 years in prison for “insulting sacred tenets and the imams,” “insulting government and judicial officials,” “spreading falsehoods to disturb public opinion,” and “publishing immoral and indecent matters.” Authorities had arrested him in April after he posted a tweet criticizing the Friday prayer leader of Mashhad and referencing a Shia imam.

On October 25, according to CHRI, the government arrested journalist Pouyan Khoshhal and charged him with “insulting the divinity of Imam Hossein and other members of the prophet’s blessed household” after he used the word “demise” instead of “martyrdom” in referring to Imam Hossein in an article.

There continued to be reports of arrests and harassment of Sunni clerics and congregants. In February CHRI reported government officials banned Molavi Abdolhamid Ismaeelzahi, the country’s leading Sunni cleric and Friday prayer leader of Zahedan, from traveling outside of Zahedan. According to a July *Radio Farda* report, Member of Parliament (MP) Mahmoud Sadeghi, along with 20 other legislators, called upon the intelligence minister to lift the travel ban imposed on “Iran’s most prominent Sunni clergyman.” The MPs questioned the government’s reason for the travel restrictions and reiterated the right to freedom of movement.

On September 22, HRANA reported the Special Clerical Court of Hamedan arraigned Sunni preacher and activist Hashem Hossein Panahi, “presumably for participating in the funeral of executed political prisoner Ramin Hussein Panahi.” After he delivered a sermon at the funeral, MOIS filed charges against Hashem Hossein Panahi with the Special Clerical Court, which is under the direct control of the supreme leader. The charges included “propaganda against the regime” and “disturbing public opinion.”

In response to the September 22 terrorist attack on a military parade in Ahvaz, Khuzestan, a region with a sizeable Sunni Arab population and where international media report longstanding economic and social grievances have led to sporadic protests, international press and human rights organizations reported domestic backlash against Arab Sunnis. AI and the Ahvaz Human Rights Organization reported the authorities arrested hundreds of Ahvazi political and minority activists in the aftermath of the September 22 attack.

CHRI reported that authorities detained Sunni rap artist Shah Baloch, whose real name is Emad Bijarzehi, on June 20 in the southeastern port city of Chabahar for singing about state oppression against ethnic and religious minorities in Sistan and Baluchistan Province. According to CHRI, authorities did not permit Baloch access to legal counsel.

Human rights organizations and Christian NGOs continued to report authorities arrested Christians for their religious affiliation or activities, including members of unrecognized churches for operating illegally in private homes or on charges of supporting and accepting assistance from “enemy” countries. Many arrests reportedly took place during police raids on religious gatherings and included confiscations of religious property. News reports stated that authorities subjected arrested Christians to severe physical and psychological mistreatment, which at times included beatings and solitary confinement.

CHRI reported that on January 6 the Revolutionary Court in Tehran sentenced Shamiram Isavi, the wife of Victor Bet Tamraz, who formerly led the country’s Assyrian Pentecostal Church, to five years in prison. The judge convicted her on charges of “acting against national security by organizing home churches, attending Christian seminars abroad, and training Christian leaders in Iran for the purpose of espionage.” Authorities arrested Isavi and her husband in their home in Tehran on December 26, 2014, along with their son, Ramin Bet Tamraz, and 12 Christian converts. In June 2016, the revolutionary court judge sentenced Victor Bet Tamraz and Christian converts Hadi Asgari and Kavian Fallah Mohammadi to 10 years in prison each, while convert Amin Afshar Naderi received a 15-year prison sentence. In February 2018, the UN special rapporteurs on freedom of religion or belief, on the situation of human rights in Iran, on minority issues, and on the right to health issued a joint public statement expressing concern at the lengthy sentences for Bet Tamraz, Asgari, Naderi, as well as reports of their mistreatment in prison, and, broadly, the targeting of religious minorities, particularly Christian converts. Authorities released Bet Tamraz, Asgari, Mohammadi, and Naderi on bail while they appealed their sentences.

According to international media and various NGOs, including the Christian World Watch Monitor (CWWM) and Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), on May 2, Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani, Yasser Mossayebzadeh, Saheb Fadaie, and Mohammad Reza Omid received notification that the appeals court upheld their 10-year prison sentences for “acting against national security” by “promoting Zionist Christianity” and running house churches. Instead of utilizing the customary summons

procedure, CWWM and CSW reported that authorities took Nadarkhani and the three other sentenced Christians to Evin Prison following a series of violent raids on their homes in late July, which included beatings and electroshock weapons. According to NGOs, the authorities also sentenced Nadarkhani and Omid to two years internal exile in the southern region of the country, far from their homes in the country's north near the Caspian Sea. As of May Omid, Mossayebzadeh, and Fadaie still awaited the outcome of the appeal of their September 2016 sentence of 80 lashes for consumption of communion wine. According to CSW, the government sentenced Fadaie to an additional 18 months and another Christian, Fatemah Bakhteri, to 12 months in prison for "spreading propaganda against the regime." Fadaie also received two years in internal exile in a remote area near the Afghanistan border after his prison sentence.

On November 16, according to NGOs and media reports, security forces arrested Christian converts Behnam Ersali and Davood Rasooli in separate raids and took them to unknown locations. Six security agents arrested Ersali at his friend's home in Mashhad and two security agents arrested Rasooli at his home in Karaj.

Mohabat News reported the detention and abuse of Karen Vartanian, an Armenian Christian whom authorities initially arrested in December 2017 after participating in student protests at Arak University. Vartanian faced a number of political charges, including "promoting Christianity and anti-Islamic activities." According to *Mohabat News* and local media, Vartanian reportedly experienced physical and psychological abuse, lost at least 15 kilograms (33 pounds) and suffered a heart attack as a result of beatings.

According to a December 5 article in *World Watch Monitor*, citing information from the NGO rights group Article 18, the government arrested 142 Christians across multiple cities in one month. The authorities asked them to write down the details of their Christian activities and told them not to have any more contact with Christians or Christian groups. The authorities released most of them after a few hours or days, but kept the suspected leaders in detention.

Activists and NGOs reported Yarsani activists and community leaders continued to be subject to detention or disappearance for engaging in awareness raising regarding government practices or discrimination. In March the Kurdistan Human Rights Network (KHRN) reported authorities arrested Yarsani activist Seyyed Peyman Pedrood. According to KHRN, Pedrood disappeared in late December 2017 after leaving home, and his family later received unofficial information that security forces had arrested and transferred him to an unknown location.

According to the BIC, approximately 90 Baha'is were in prison as of November. The BIC stated that all arrests and detentions were directly linked to the individual's professed faith and religious identity. Charges brought against Baha'is included "insulting religious sanctities," "corruption on earth," "propaganda against the system," espionage and collaboration with foreign entities, and actions against national security. Charges also included involvement with the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education (BIHE), a university-level educational institution the government considered illegal. According to the BIC, in many cases, the authorities made arrests in conjunction with raids on Baha'i homes, during which they confiscated personal belongings, particularly religious books and writings.

HRW reported the government arrested more than 20 Baha'is in Shiraz, Karaj, and Isfahan on unknown charges in August and September. According to Iran Press Watch (IPC), MOIS officials on September 15 and 16 detained six Baha'i environmental activists, Sudabeh Haghighat, Noora Pourmoradian, Elaheh Samizadeh, Ehsan Mahboub Rahvafa, Navid Bazmandegan and his wife Bahareh Ghaderi, on unknown charges in Shiraz. Human rights organizations and media reported agents searched the home of Basmandegan and Ghaderi and took the couple to an unknown location away from their five-year-old daughter Darya, who suffered from cancer and required care post-treatment.

On November 23, BIC reported the government arrested more than 20 Baha'is in multiple cities in the provinces of Tehran, Isfahan, Mazandaran, and East Azerbaijan over the course of two weeks. The government also sentenced up to a dozen Baha'is, including nine Baha'is in Isfahan, who received a combined sentence of more than 40 years in prison on charges of "membership in the unlawful administration of the perverse Baha'i sect for the purpose of action against internal security" and "engaging in propaganda against the regime of the Islamic Republic."

CHRI reported the government detained Shiraz City Council member Mehdi Hajati for 10 days in September for defending the "false Baha'i faith" after he tweeted about his attempts to free two Baha'i detainees. The judiciary subsequently placed Hajati under judicial surveillance and banned him from his seat on the council

According to CHRI, on April 23 authorities returned to Rajai Shahr Prison Afif Naeimi, one of the seven leaders of the Yaran, a former group that tended to the social and spiritual needs of the Baha'i community and that was formed with the

knowledge and approval of the government. He had been on medical furlough due to life-threatening ailments. CHRI reported, however, that upon return to prison, his condition was still poor and the judiciary's own medical experts had ruled him too ill to be incarcerated. In 2008, authorities arrested the seven individuals and sentenced them to 20 years in prison for "disturbing national security," "spreading propaganda against the regime," and "engaging in espionage" before the sentences were reduced to 10 years each on appeal. Since September 2017, authorities released the other six leaders – Mahvash Sabet, Fariba Kamalabadi, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Saeid Rezaie, Behrouz Tavakkoli, and Vahid Tizfahm – upon completion of their sentences. According to BIC, authorities targeted these individuals because of their religious affiliation.

In May BIC reported a series of arrests of Baha'is. On May 1, authorities detained Baha'i Kaviz Nouzdahi at his home in Mashhad and took him to the city's Vakilabad Prison. BIC also reported that the next day MOIS agents arrested a man identified only as "Motahhari" at his home in Isfahan. According to *Iran Wire*, on May 6, Ministry of Information agents conducted an orchestrated raid of the residences of four Baha'is, during which they arrested three Baha'is, Nooshin Afshar, Neda Sabeti, and Forough Farzaneh, and took them to an unknown location. Authorities reportedly searched their homes and confiscated their mobile phones, computers, and religious books. BIC reported that the May arrestees faced charges because of their religious beliefs. In a May 25 statement, BIC said the "systematic nature" of the arrests in a number of provinces suggested "a coordinated strategy on the part of government authorities."

According to CHRI, on July 22 an appeals court in Kurdistan upheld a one-year sentence for Zabihollah Raoufi, whom authorities accused of proselytizing his Baha'i Faith. The court upheld Raoufi's conviction on charges of "propaganda against the state" and "assembly and collusion against national security by promoting Baha'ism." According to *Iran Wire*, on October 31 the 70-year-old Raoufi reported to prison to start serving his sentence.

According to *Iran Wire*, on January 28 a court sentenced Fataneh Nabilzadeh, a Baha'i resident of Mashhad, to one year in prison on the charge of "propaganda against the regime." MOIS officials had arrested Nabilzadeh in 2013 for administering tests to her son and another Baha'i student on behalf of the BIHE.

According to January reports by CWWM and CSW, authorities sentenced two Christians, Eskander Rezaie and Soroush Saraei, in Shiraz to eight years in prison for "action against national security," proselytizing, and holding house church

meetings. Authorities also charged Saraei, the pastor of the Church of Shiraz, with “forgery” for providing letters for students who did not want to attend Islamic studies classes. The advocacy group Middle East Concern reported both men appealed their sentences. During the same court hearing, a Christian woman, Zahrar Nourouzi Kashkouli, received a one year prison sentence, for “being a member of a group working against the system.”

According to the *World Watch Monitor* website, Article 18 reported Christian convert Ali Amini remained in Tabriz Prison following his arrest by authorities in December 2017 and had his laptop and cell phone confiscated. He remained in a Tabriz Prison as of February.

Many Baha’is reportedly continued to turn to online education at BIHE despite government censorship through use of internet filters, blocking of websites, and the arrests of teachers associated with the program. Since the BIHE’s online and offline operations remained illegal, students and teachers continued to face the risk of arrest for participation. BIHE instructor Azita Rafizadeh remained in prison serving a four-year sentence for teaching at the institution. Rafizadeh’s husband, Peyman Koushk-Baghi, continued serving a five-year sentence. According to *Payam News*, officials initially arrested Koushk-Baghi in March 2016 while visiting his wife at Evin Prison. Tehran Revolutionary Court sentenced them on charges of “membership in the illegal and misguided Baha’i group with the aim of acting against national security through illegal activities at the BIHE educational institute.” CHRI reported that on January 3 Evin Prison authorities told Rafizadeh she would only be considered for furlough if she apologized for teaching online classes to members of her faith. Authorities reportedly said she must sign a statement to repenting for her work and promising she would not work there again.

Christians, particularly evangelicals and converts from Islam, continued to experience disproportionate levels of arrests and detention, and high levels of harassment and surveillance, according to Christian NGO reports. Numerous Christians remained imprisoned at year’s end on charges related to their religious beliefs. Prison authorities reportedly continued to withhold medical care from prisoners, including some Christians, according to human rights groups. According to human rights NGOs, the government also continued to enforce the prohibition on proselytizing.

According to *Mohabat News*, the Revolutionary Court of Bushehr on June 20 sentenced Christian convert Payam Kharaman and 11 other Christians to one year in prison on the charge of “propaganda” activities against the government and

promotion of “Zionist Christianity” through house meetings, evangelism, and proselytizing. Authorities initially arrested the 12 Christians in Bushehr in April 2016. CWWM reported that on March 2 authorities arrested 20 Christians in a workshop near the city of Karaj when security forces raided the premises. Among those detained, authorities reportedly permitted Christian convert Aziz Majidzadeh to contact his family in April; he informed them that he and the others were being held at Evin Prison awaiting formal charges. He reportedly said his interrogators focused on activities related to his Christian faith. Article 18 reported on May 20 that authorities had released Majidzadeh pending a full investigation and trial.

Various media outlets and NGOs reported that on June 25, authorities released Mohammadali Yassaghi, a Christian also known as Estifan, from prison following a hearing at the Revolutionary Court in Babolsar, in which the presiding judge dismissed the charges against him. The authorities arrested Yassaghi on April 10 on accusations of “spreading propaganda against the establishment” and later transported him to Babol Prison in Mazandaran Province. According to CSW, Yassaghi was a member of the Church of Iran and converted to Christianity more than 20 years ago.

International media reported that on March 6 government officials detained Shia cleric Hossein Shirazi, the son of Ayatollah Sadegh Shirazi. Both Hossein Shirazi and his father, a senior cleric in the Qom Seminary, were reportedly critical of the government. Authorities detained Hossein Shirazi in Qom after he attended an Islamic theology class. During a lecture in February, Hossein Shirazi reportedly likened the country’s principle of *Velayat Faghih* – or the rule of a single jurist – to the “regimes of pharaohs in Egypt.” He also reportedly accused the country’s leaders of tyranny. Ayatollah Sadegh Shirazi’s opponents have accused him of promoting “British Shiism” and receiving funds from Britain and Saudi Arabia.

In January HRANA reported that security forces arrested Shia cleric Mohammad Mehdi Nekounam, son of Ayatollah Mohammad Reza Nekounam, a senior cleric detained in October 2017. According to HRANA, authorities also raided Mohammad Mehdi Nekounam’s home and seized all communication devices, including cell phones and laptops, without providing an arrest warrant. Authorities arrested his father, Ayatollah Nekounam, in 2015 and sentenced him to five years in prison and an undisclosed number of lashes. The court also stripped Ayatollah Nekounam of his right to clerical office. The court reportedly said it would not disclose any details about either case to “protect” the status of the clergy. Sources stated the arrests were related to Nekounam’s indirect criticism of other clerics. Reportedly he indirectly criticized Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi’s opposition to fast

internet services and also criticized an incident in Isfahan in which individuals threw acid on women to punish them for improper hijabs. In an interview, Nekounam stated, “The one who throws acid [at others] is the most violent person.” HRANA reported in January of Ayatollah Nekounam’s ailing health following a stroke in the Qom Prison, but said authorities denied him access to his medications.

There were continued reports of authorities placing restrictions on Baha’i businesses or forcing them to shut down after they had temporarily closed in observance of Baha’i holidays or of authorities threatening shop owners with potential closure, even though businesses could legally close without providing a reason for up to 15 days a year. In November BIC reported that authorities shut down more than a dozen Baha’i businesses in Khuzestan Province after the owners closed their businesses temporarily in observance of two Baha’i holidays. According to IPC, on July 28 authorities shut down a Baha’i-owned business in the city of Kashan. HRANA reported that the “Kashan Office of Properties refused to issue a business permit for optician shop of Javad Zabihian, due to his Baha’i Faith. The Office of Properties then shut down and sealed Mr. Zabihian’s business.” According to HRANA, the Superior Administrative Court on August 16 denied a petition to open 24 shuttered Baha’i-owned businesses in Urmia. From July 9 through mid-August 2017, authorities reportedly sealed the businesses for closing in observance of a Baha’i holy day. In August HRANA reported three Baha’is, Sahba Haghbeen, Samira Behinayeen, and Payam Goshtasbi, were fired from their jobs in Shiraz in a “continued effort to put economic constraints on Iranian Baha’is.” HRANA also reported that on May 10, the MOIS office in Maku summoned Shahin Dehghan, a Baha’i citizen, and informed him that he had 10 days to sell his business or it would be confiscated and he would be sent to prison. According to BIC, the government continued to raid Baha’i homes and businesses and confiscate private and commercial property, as well as religious materials.

The government continued to hold many Baha’i properties it seized following the 1979 revolution, including cemeteries, holy places, historical sites, and administrative centers. The government also continued to prevent Baha’is from burying their dead in accordance with their religious tradition. According to HRANA, security forces in Kerman prevented the burial of a Baha’i from Kerman, Hussein Shodjai, who died on August 26, and forced his family to bury the deceased in the city of Rafsanjan. The authorities’ demand contravened Baha’i burial laws, under which the distance from the place of death to the burial place should not exceed one hour, according to the Kitab-i-Aqdas, the central holy book of the Baha’i Faith. IPC also reported that on March 16 authorities sealed the

Baha'i cemetery of Kerman (known as the Eternal Garden) without specific justification.

In August BIC reported continued instances of the desecration and destruction of Baha'i property and holy sites. Many government offices, including the City Council, the governor's office, and the deputy governor's office refused to take any action. In November CHRI reported local authorities relocated the buried body of a Baha'i woman without the permission of the family.

According to human rights organizations, Christian advocacy groups, and NGOs, the government continued to regulate Christian religious practices. Official reports and the media continued to characterize Christian house churches as "illegal networks" and "Zionist propaganda institutions." Christian community leaders stated that if the authorities learned Armenian or Assyrian churches were baptizing new converts or preaching in Farsi, they closed the churches. Authorities also reportedly barred unregistered or unrecognized Christians from entering church premises and closed churches that allowed them to enter.

Christian advocacy groups continued to state the government, through pressure and church closures, had eliminated all but a handful of Farsi-language church services, thus restricting services almost entirely to the Armenian and Assyrian languages. Security officials monitored registered congregation centers to perform identity checks on worshippers to confirm non-Christians or converts did not participate in services. In response, many Christian converts reportedly practiced their religion in secret. Other nonrecognized religious minorities such as Baha'is and Yarsanis were also forced to gather in private homes to practice their faith in secret.

The government continued to curb Christian practices at cemeteries, and authorities confiscated properties owned by Christian religious organizations. CHRI reported that on March 7 a group controlled by the supreme leader issued an eviction order for Sharon Gardens, a Christian retreat center occupying 2.5 acres of land in the Valadabad District of Karaj, 32 miles west of the capital. The center was owned by the country's largest Christian Protestant organization, the Jama'at-e Rabbani Church Council, also known as the Iran Assemblies of God, since the early 1970s; the eviction reflected a 2015 revolutionary court order for its confiscation.

The government continued to monitor the statements and views of senior Shia religious leaders. Shia religious leaders who did not support government policies

or Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's views reportedly continued to face intimidation, arrest, and imprisonment on charges related to religious offenses.

Critics stated the government used extrajudicial special clerical courts to control non-Shia Muslim clerics, as well as to prosecute Shia clerics who expressed controversial ideas and participated in activities outside the sphere of religion, such as journalism or reformist political activities.

The government continued to require women of all religious groups to adhere to "Islamic dress" standards in public, including covering their hair and fully covering their bodies in loose clothing – a *manteau* (overcoat) and a hijab (headscarf) or, alternatively, a chador (full body length semicircle of fabric worn over both the head and clothes). Although the government at times eased enforcement of rules for such dress, it also punished "un-Islamic dress" with arrests, lashings, fines, and dismissal from employment. The government continued to crack down on other public displays it deemed counter to its interpretation of Shia Islam laws, such as dancing and men and women appearing together in public. In June security agents arrested a female teenager, Maedeh Hojabri, for posting videos of herself dancing without a hijab on Instagram. Authorities then aired on state television a video of Hojabri, who acknowledged breaking moral norms while insisting that she was not encouraging others to follow her example, according to a report by *Radio Farda*. International media widely reported her arrest, as well as an outpouring of social media support for Hojabri from fellow citizens. According to a February report by HRW, authorities arrested at least three women protesting the country's dress code/hijab laws in January and February. Officials arrested Nargess Hosseini on January 29 when she took off her headscarf in a public protest against the hijab laws. They arrested Azam Jangravi on February 14 and Shaparak Shajarizadeh on February 21 in similar circumstances. On June 13, authorities arrested Nasrin Sotoudeh, a human rights attorney who had represented the women, telling her husband that authorities were taking her to prison for a sentence she had received in absentia. Authorities sentenced Hosseini in March to 24 months in prison, suspending 21 months of her sentence. On social media, Shajarizadeh stated on July 9 that a court had sentenced her to 20 years in prison, suspending 18 years of the sentence.

HRW also reported that on July 27, state TV's "20:30" program featured an interview with the sister of anti-hijab activist Masih Alinejad, denouncing Alinejad's advocacy against compulsory hijab laws. In a post on social media and in a New York Times op-ed piece, Alinejad stated that, despite her sister's

statements that she had appeared on the program of her own free will, authorities pressured her family to denounce her on state television.

Authorities reportedly continued to deny the Sabeian-Mandaean and Yarsan religious communities access to higher education and government employment unless they declared themselves as Christian or Muslim, respectively, on their application forms.

Public and private universities continued to deny Baha'is admittance and to expel Baha'i students once their religion became known. In September BIC and IPC reported that at least 60 Baha'is were banned from universities during the year due to their religious beliefs and despite passing the entrance exam "under the false pretenses that they had 'incomplete files' or that their names were not in the registration list." The report also stated that officials told many Baha'i students who passed the grueling National University Entrance Exam, known as "Konkur," that they might be able to study, but that they would need to write a letter and disavow their faith in order to do so.

CHRI reported that from March to September authorities expelled at least 50 Baha'i students from universities because of their religious beliefs. In July CHRI reported a Baha'i woman, Sarir Movaghan, was expelled from the Islamic Azad University in Isfahan. Movaghan declared she was Baha'i on the university enrollment form and was accepted, but four years later and just before her final exams, she was expelled. According to CHRI, the university contacted Movaghan in May and told her that, as a Baha'i, she should have known that she could not be at the university. Many Baha'is reportedly did not try to enroll in state-run universities because of the Baha'i Faith's tenet not to deny one's faith.

According to BIC, government regulations continued to ban Baha'is from participating in more than 25 types of work, many related to food industries, because the government deemed them "unclean."

According to *Mazjooban Noor*, the official website of the Gonabadi dervishes, authorities continued to dismiss Gonabadi dervishes from employment and bar them from university studies for affiliation with the Sufi order. CHRI reported that authorities expelled Sepideh Moradi Sarvestani, a member of the Gonabadi dervishes, from Tehran's Tarbiat Modares University on February 3 "for refusing to formally pledge not to engage in activities deemed unacceptable by officials."

Members of the Sunni community continued to dispute statistics published in 2015 on the website of the Mosques Affairs Regulating Authority stating there were nine Sunni mosques operating in Tehran and 15,000 across the country. Community members said the vast majority of these were simply prayer rooms or rented prayer spaces. International media and the Sunni community continued to report authorities prevented any new Sunni mosques from being built in Tehran. Sunnis reported the number of mosques in the country did not meet the demands of the population.

Because the government barred them from building or worshiping in their own mosques, Sunni leaders said they continued to rely on ad hoc, underground prayer halls, or *namaz khane*, to practice their faith. Security officials continued to raid these unauthorized sites. In August international media reported police dispersed Sunni worshipers who had gathered outside a prayer hall in Tehran's eastern Resalat neighborhood. Authorities barred the worshipers from entering the venue to hold communal prayers on Eid al-Adha. The Sunni congregation had reportedly obtained an official permit from the Ministry of Interior and the Tehran governorate's political deputy.

MOIS and law enforcement reportedly continued to harass Sufis and Sufi leaders. Media and human rights organizations reported continued censorship of the Gonabadi order's *Mazar Soltani* websites, which contained speeches by the order's leader, Noor Ali Tabandeh, and articles on mysticism.

International media and NGOs reported continued government-sponsored anti-Christian propaganda to deter the practice of or conversion to Christianity. According to *Mohabat News*, the government routinely propagated anti-Christian publications and online materials, such as the book *Christian Zionism in the Geography of Christianity*, published in 2017.

According to members of the Sabeian-Mandaean and Yarsan religious communities, authorities continued to deny them permission to perform religious ceremonies in public and to deny them building permits for places of worship.

Yarsanis reported continued discrimination and harassment in the military and school systems. They also continued to report that the birth registration system prevented them from giving their children Yarsani names. A March report by the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran stated Yarsanis continued to face a range of human rights violations, including attacks on their places of worship, the destruction of community cemeteries, and arrests and torture

of community leaders. The report provided “accounts of individuals being fired after it is discovered that they are Yarsan, and of individuals being forcibly shaved (the moustache is a holy symbol for the Yarsan community) when they refused to pray, for example when undertaking military service.”

According to the Tehran Jewish Committee, five Jewish schools and two kindergartens continued to operate in Tehran, but authorities required their principals be Muslim. The government reportedly continued to allow Hebrew language instruction but limited the distribution of Hebrew texts, particularly nonreligious texts, making it difficult to teach the language, according to the Jewish community. The government reportedly required Jewish schools to remain open on Saturdays, in violation of Jewish religious law, to conform to the schedule of other schools.

According to Christian NGOs, government restrictions on published religious material continued, including confiscations of books about Christianity already on the market, although government-sanctioned translations of the Bible reportedly existed. Government officials frequently confiscated Bibles and related non-Shia religious literature, and pressured publishing houses printing unsanctioned non-Muslim religious materials to cease operations. Books about the Yarsan religion remained banned. Books published by religious minorities, regardless of topic, were required to carry labels on the cover denoting their non-Shia Muslim authorship.

Sunni leaders continued to report authorities banned Sunni religious literature and teachings from religion courses in some public schools, even in predominantly Sunni areas. Other schools, notably in the Kurdish regions, included specialized Sunni religious courses for the students. Assyrian Christians reported the government continued to permit their community to use its own religious textbooks in schools after the government reviewed and authorized their content. Unrecognized religious minorities, such as Yarsanis and Baha'is, continued to report they were unable to legally produce or distribute religious literature.

In July Sepanta Niknam, a Zoroastrian, was restored to his position on the Yazd City Council following a ruling that constitutionally recognized religious minorities could run in local elections. According to CHRI, on July 21, by a two-thirds majority, the Expediency Council, the country's highest arbiter of disputes between state branches, voted to amend the Law on the Formation, Duties, and Election of National Islamic Councils, thereby affirming the right of constitutionally recognized religious minorities to run in local elections. In

September 2017, local and international media reported that the Yazd Court of Administrative Justice called for the suspension of Niknam. After being re-elected to the council in May 2017, the court forced him to step down after issuing a ruling that as a member of a religious minority, Niknam could not be elected to a council in a Muslim-majority constituency. The ruling was in response to a complaint lodged by his unsuccessful Muslim opponent.

Sunnis reported continued underrepresentation in government-appointed positions in the provinces where they formed a majority, such as Kurdistan and Khuzestan, as well as an inability to obtain senior government positions. In January CHRI observed that while there were 21 Sunni representatives in the 290-member parliament, no Sunni had served in a ministerial position since the founding of the Islamic Republic despite comprising a significant percent of the population.

Sunni activists continued to report that throughout the year, and especially during the month of Moharam, the government sent hundreds of Shia missionaries to areas with large Sunni Baluch populations to try to convert the local population.

International media quoted Jewish community representatives such as Siamak Morsadegh, the sole Jewish member of parliament, as stating that there continued to be government restrictions and discrimination against Jews as a religious minority, but that there was little interference with Jewish religious practices. According to the Tehran Jewish Committee, there were 31 synagogues in Tehran, more than 20 of them active, and 100 synagogues throughout the country. Jewish community representatives said they were free to travel in and out of the country, and the government generally did not enforce a prohibition against travel to Israel by Jews, although it enforced the prohibition on such travel for other citizens.

Government officials continued to employ anti-Semitic rhetoric in official statements and sanction it in media outlets, publications, and books. During remarks on June 15, Supreme Leader Khamenei said, “the Zionist regime, which has a legitimacy problem, will not last... and through Muslim nations’ vigilance, be certainly destroyed.” Government-sponsored rallies continued to include chants of “death to Israel” and participants accused other religious minorities, such as Baha’is and Christians, of collusion with Israel. Local newspapers carried editorial cartoons that were anti-Semitic in nature, often focusing on developments in Israel or elsewhere in the region, including the move of the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem. The May 15 edition of the newspaper *Tasnim* carried a cartoon that portrayed Israel as a snake intent on devouring Jerusalem. On February 13, the website *Javan* published an article, entitled “The Use of Corrupt Jewish Women by

Secret Spy Services to Trap Important World Figures,” that claimed that Jewish religious law allowed Jewish women to use their gender and femininity to gather intelligence for Mossad.

According to human rights activists, the government maintained a legal interpretation of Islam that required citizens of all faiths to follow strict rules based on the government’s interpretation of Shia jurisprudence, creating differentiation under the law between the rights granted to men and women. The government continued to enforce gender segregation and discrimination throughout the country without regard to religious affiliation.

The government continued to maintain separate election processes for the five seats reserved for representatives of the recognized religious minority communities in parliament.

The government continued to allow recognized religious minority groups to establish community centers and certain self-financed cultural, social, athletic, and/or charitable associations.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Baha’is and those who advocated for their rights reported that Baha’is continued to be major targets of social stigma and violence, and that perpetrators continued to act with impunity or, even when arrested, faced diminished punishment following admissions that their acts were based on the religious identity of the victim.

There continued to be reports of non-Baha’is dismissing or refusing employment to Baha’is, sometimes in response to government pressure, according to BIC and other organizations monitoring the situation of Baha’is in Iran. BIC continued to report instances of employment discrimination and physical violence committed against Baha’is based on their faith. Baha’is reported there were continued incidents of destruction or vandalism of their cemeteries.

In October IPC reported “tens of thousands more [Baha’is] experience educational, economic and cultural persecution on a daily basis for merely practicing their faith.” According to BIC, anti-Baha’i rhetoric increased markedly in recent years. In August a BIC report noted the continued harassment, vilification, and psychological pressure children and adolescents known to be Baha’is experience in primary, middle, and high schools throughout the country.

Yarsanis outside the country reported that widespread discrimination against Yarsanis continued. They stated Yarsani children were socially ostracized in school and shared community facilities. Yarsani men, recognizable by their particular mustaches, often faced employment discrimination. According to reports, Shia preachers often encouraged such social discrimination against Yarsanis.

According to CSW, Open Doors USA, and others, converts from Islam to Christianity faced ongoing societal pressure and rejection by family or community members.

Shia clerics and prayer leaders reportedly continued to denounce Sufism and the activities of Sufis in both sermons and public statements.

Sunni students reported professors routinely continued to insult Sunni religious figures in class.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. has no diplomatic relations with the country, and therefore, did not have opportunities to raise concerns directly with the government over its religious freedom abuses and restrictions.

The U.S. government continued to call for the government to respect religious freedom and continued to condemn its abuses of religious minorities in a variety of ways and in different international forums. This included public statements by senior U.S. government officials and reports issued by U.S. government agencies, support for relevant UN and NGO efforts, diplomatic initiatives, and sanctions. Senior U.S. government officials publicly reiterated calls for the release of prisoners held on grounds related to their religious beliefs.

In July the Secretary of State called attention to the situation of religious freedom in the country in a town hall speech on “Supporting Iranian Voices” and an opinion editorial appearing in *USA Today*. In his op-ed, the Secretary of State said, “Hundreds of Sufi Muslims in Iran remain imprisoned on account of their beliefs, with reports of several dying at the hands of Iran’s brutal security forces. The religious intolerance of the regime in Iran also applies to Christians, Jews, Sunnis, Baha’is, Zoroastrians, and other minority religious groups simply trying to practice their faiths.” At the July U.S.-hosted Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, the U.S. and four other governments issued a statement on Iran. In the statement,

the governments said, “Many members of Iranian religious minorities – including Baha’is, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and Sunni and Sufi Muslims – face discrimination, harassment, and unjust imprisonment because of their beliefs....The Iranian regime continues its crackdown on Gonabadi Sufis....Baha’is also face particularly severe ill-treatment. As with many other minority communities, Iranian authorities reportedly harass, arrest, and mistreat Baha’is on account of their faith, and in May the Baha’i International Community reported an uptick in arbitrary arrests and raids across the country....The Government of Iran continues to execute dissidents, political reformers, and peaceful protesters on charges brought because of their peaceful religious beliefs or activities. Blasphemy, apostasy from Islam, and efforts to proselytize Muslims are punishable by death, contrary to Iran’s international human rights obligations....We strongly urge the Government of Iran to cease its violations of religious freedom and ensure that all individuals – regardless of their beliefs – are treated equally and can live out their lives and exercise their faith in peace and security.”

During a September press briefing, the Special Representative for Iran called for an end to religious persecution in Iran, stating: “What we are demanding of the Iranian regime...stop persecuting civil society, please provide all Iranian citizens with due process regardless of their political and religious beliefs.” In June a Department of State spokesperson condemned “the Iranian government’s execution of Mohammad Salas, a member of the long-persecuted Iranian Gonabadi Sufi Dervish community.”

The United States again supported an extension of the mandate of the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran in a vote at the UN Human Rights Council. The United States also voted in December in the General Assembly in favor of a resolution expressing concern over Iran’s human rights practices, including the continued persecution of religious minorities.

Since 1999, Iran has been designated as a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On November 28, the Secretary of State announced the redesignation of Iran as a CPC and identified the existing sanctions as ongoing travel restrictions based on serious human rights abuses under section 221(a)(1)(C) of the Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act of 2012, pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act.