

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	1110
Land:	Iran
Kilde:	US Department of State
Titel:	2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran
Udgivet:	30. juni 2024
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	5. juli 2024



Document #2111574

USDOS – US Department of State (Author)

2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran

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 provides for *hudud* punishments (those mandated by sharia), including amputation, flogging, and stoning. It specifies the death penalty for *moharebeh* ("enmity against God") and *sabb al-nabi* ("insulting the Prophet"). Prevailing fatwas prescribe the death penalty for apostasy. According to the penal code, the application of the death penalty varies depending on the religion of both the perpetrator and the victim. The penal code criminalizes insulting "divine religions or Islamic schools of thought" and committing "any deviant educational or proselytizing activity that contradicts or interferes with the sacred law of Islam." Proselytization of religions other than Islam carries a punishment of up to 10 years in prison. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) said these provisions put religious minorities at a higher risk of persecution. The law, as typically interpreted, prohibits Muslim citizens from changing or renouncing their religious beliefs. The constitution states that Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians are the only recognized religious minorities permitted to worship and form religious societies "within the limits of the law."

According to UN experts, numerous international human rights NGOs, and media reporting, the government convicted and executed peaceful protesters on charges of "enmity against God" and dissidents on charges of blasphemy and spreading anti-Islamic propaganda. A June report by

the UN Secretary-General stated that ethnic and religious minorities were “significantly affected” in the context of the nationwide protests following the September 2022 death in custody of Mahsa (Zhinā) Amini, a Sunni Kurdish citizen whom the “morality police” (Gasht-e Ershad, literally “guidance patrol”) detained for allegedly wearing her hijab improperly and thereby violating the country’s strict Islamic dress code. The report also stated the government disproportionately imposed death sentences on persons belonging to ethnic minorities, including members of the Baloch, Arab, and Kurdish minorities. According to the Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA), the government executed at least 746 individuals during the year, including for offenses classified as “corruption on earth” or “ideological-political-religious reasons,” and arrested 142 citizens for religious reasons. HRANA said the majority of human rights violations against religious minorities involved Baha’is (85 percent), but also impacted Sunnis (11 percent), Yarsans (2 percent), Gonabadi Dervishes, Christians, and other religious minorities.

According to the NGO United for Iran’s *Iran Prison Atlas*, at year’s end, authorities held 115 persons in prison for “religious practice,” including Baluch, Baha’i, Sunni, Christian, and some Shia men and women. Charges included membership in or leadership of organizations that “disrupt national security” and “spread propaganda against the regime.” The NGO Humanists International stated individuals expressing nonreligious views suffered severe persecution, including violence. The government denied individuals access to attorneys and obtained false confessions through torture in some cases. It reportedly detained and held members of religious minorities incommunicado. The NGO Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) reported more than 1,000 Baha’is were either imprisoned, in custody, under house arrest, or waiting for a hearing or to be summoned by a court. According to human rights NGOs, authorities increasingly targeted Sunni religious leaders for persecution, arrest, and imprisonment in retaliation for criticizing the government; some reported being tortured while in custody. Christian converts from Islam reported being detained and forced to sign commitments to refrain from further Christian activities or ordered to attend Islamic re-education sessions. Human rights NGOs reported judges continued to sentence religious minorities to internal exile.

According to the Baha’i International Community (BIC) and multiple international news organizations, security forces in cities across the country continued to shut down Baha’i-owned businesses, conducted multiple raids of Baha’i homes, arrested Baha’is in their homes or workplaces on unsubstantiated charges, and confiscated money and personal belongings. BIC reported authorities closed 59 businesses from mid-July to mid-August. In a February report, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran Javād Rehman stated the Baha’i minority “remained most severely persecuted, with a marked increase in arrests, targeting, and victimization,” including

being deprived of livelihoods, denied access to higher education, and denied the ability to bury their dead in accordance with Baha'i rites. BIC reported that between March and May, authorities sentenced four Baha'is to five years in prison for seeking to facilitate Baha'i burials.

On September 20, parliament approved a bill that, if adopted, would increase penalties for noncompliance with the Islamic dress code as interpreted by authorities, raising prison time for violating the code from two months to 10 years and increasing the fine from 500,000 rials (\$12) to up to 360 million rials (\$8,600). In April, the government announced a domestic surveillance program, including using street cameras, to enforce the hijab law; authorities closed 45 businesses for allowing patrons to violate the law.

The government continued to regulate Christian religious practices. Christian worship in Farsi was forbidden and official reports and state-run media continued to characterize private Christian churches in homes as "illegal networks" and "Zionist propaganda institutions." Authorities reportedly continued to deny members of unrecognized religious minority groups access to education and government employment unless they declared themselves as belonging to one of the country's recognized religions on their application forms.

Governments officials in Greece, the United Kingdom, and Germany warned of or took legal action against individuals who plotted or carried out attacks on Jewish sites in those countries, allegedly at the behest of Iranian authorities. In September, the director of Israel's intelligence agency said the agency and its allies had foiled 27 attacks against Jews and Israelis overseas during the year and that all of them were directed by Iran. Following the October 7 Hamas terrorist attack on Israel, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei denied Iranian involvement but praised Hamas' actions against "the Zionist regime." Some analysts said, however, that Hamas would not have been able to carry out such an attack without Iran's long-time assistance, funding, and training. Iranian nationals from religious minority groups reported they sometimes received threats to themselves or their families from apparent regime officials while abroad.

Throughout the year, authorities reportedly continued to propagate hate speech and falsehoods against religious minorities in speeches and through traditional and social media platforms. On December 19, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution expressing "serious concern" about increasing restrictions on and violence against religious minorities and condemning the regime for propagating antisemitism.

Media outlets reported that on August 13, gunmen opened fire on the Shia Shah Cheragh Shrine in Shiraz, killing two persons and injuring eight. Authorities arrested eight foreign nationals, including a Tajik national who said he had cooperated with ISIS. A panel of UN experts said between

November 2022 and March 2023, there were targeted poisoning attacks against 91 schools in 20 provinces across the country, affecting 1,200 schoolgirls; the experts speculated the poisonings were retaliation for the girls expressing opposition to the mandatory hijab.

Baha'is continued to be targets of violence and social stigma as government repression continued to intensify; perpetrators reportedly continued to act with impunity. There continued to be reports of non-Baha'is dismissing or refusing employment to Baha'is. According to human rights NGOs, converts from Islam to Christianity faced continuing societal pressure and rejection by community members. Shia clerics denounced Sufism in sermons and public statements, and Sunni students reported professors continued to routinely insult Sunni religious figures in class. In Kurdish regions, NGOs reported Shia clerics asked children to spy on Jewish students and that students who befriend Jewish or Christian classmates were surveilled by authorities.

The United States does not have diplomatic relations with Iran. During the year, the U.S. government used public statements, sanctions, and diplomatic initiatives in international fora to condemn and promote accountability for the government's abuses against and restrictions on worship by members of religious minorities. The President and other senior U.S. government officials expressed support for peaceful protesters and used social media to affirm the rights of the country's religious minorities and to call for the release of prisoners of conscience.

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 December 29, 2023, the Secretary of State redesignated Iran as a CPC. The following sanction was identified in connection with the designation: visa restrictions pursuant to section 221(c) of the Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act of 2012 (TRA) for certain senior officials of the Government of Iran identified under section 221(a)(1)(C) of the TRA in connection with the commission of serious human rights abuses against citizens of Iran or their family members.

Section I.

Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 87.6 million (midyear 2023). According to Iranian government estimates, Muslims constitute 99.4 percent of the population, of whom 90 to 95 percent are Shia, and 5 to 10 percent are Sunni. Most Sunnis are Turkmen, Arabs, Baluch, and Kurds, living in the northeast, southwest, southeast, and northwest provinces, respectively. Afghan refugees, economic migrants, and displaced persons also make up 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 are Sufi adherents, although unofficial reports estimate several million. A very small number of Ahmadi Muslims also reside in the country.

According to U.S. government estimates, groups constituting the remaining less than 1 percent of the population include Baha'is, Christians, Yarsanis, Jews, Sabeen-Mandaeans, and Zoroastrians. The three largest non-Muslim minorities are Baha'is, Christians, and Yarsanis. According to Human Rights Watch data, Baha'is number at least 300,000.

The government-run Statistical Center of Iran reports there are 117,700 Christians of recognized denominations in the country as of the 2016 census. Some estimates suggest there may be many more than reported. According to Boston University's 2020 World Religion Database, there are approximately 579,000 Christians. The Christian advocacy NGO Article 18 estimates there are 500,000 to 800,000 Christians in the country, while the Christian advocacy NGO Open Doors International estimates the number is 1.24 million. Christian NGOs report many Christians are converts from Islam or other recognized faiths.

Estimates by the Assyrian Church of the total Assyrian and Chaldean Christian population put their combined number at 7,000. The Assyrian Policy Institute estimates there are fewer than 50,000 Assyrian Christians in the country, the majority residing in Tehran, with 15,000 residing in the northern city of Urmia. There are also Protestant denominations, including evangelical groups, but there is no authoritative data on their numbers. Christian groups outside the country disagree on the size of the Protestant community, with several estimates citing figures lower than 10,000. Many Protestants and converts to Christianity from Islam practice in secret. According to recent estimates from Armenian Christians who maintain contact with the Christian community in the country, their current numbers range from 20,000 to 50,000. Article 18 estimates there are 2,000-6,000 Roman Catholics in the country.

There is no official count of Yarsanis, but estimates from human rights organizations and news outlets, including IranWire and the BBC, range between one and three million. Yarsanis are mainly located in Lorestan and the Kurdish regions.

According to Zoroastrian groups and the government-run Statistical Center of Iran, the population includes approximately 25,000 Zoroastrians, although the 2020 World Religion Database estimates the number at 64,000.

According to the Tehran Jewish Committee, the Jewish population is approximately 9,000.

Government media report the population includes 14,000 Sabeen-

Mandaeans.

The 2020 World Religion Database estimates there are 9,000 atheists and 239,000 agnostics in the country.

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 Muslims from changing or renouncing their religious beliefs. The only recognized conversions are from other religions to Islam. Under the law, a child born to a Muslim father is Muslim.

Sharia as interpreted by the government considers conversion from Islam to be apostasy, a crime punishable by death. Although apostasy is not codified in the penal code, the code instructs judges to rely on the constitution and fatwas in cases of apostasy, and the constitution instructs judges in general to pass judgments based on "authoritative Islamic sources and authentic fatwas," rather than dismissing a case for lack of a codified crime or sentence. A judge may issue the death penalty to someone accused of apostasy under other charges, such as "enmity against God," "corruption on earth," "insulting the Prophet Muhammad," and "outrage against high-ranking officials." The only known execution of an Iranian Christian specifically on the charge of apostasy occurred in 1990.

By law, non-Muslims may not engage in public persuasion or attempt to convert a Muslim to another faith or belief. The law considers these activities to be proselytizing and punishable by two to five years' imprisonment, or up to 10 years if the individual received financial or organizational help from outside the country. The last execution of a non-Muslim specifically for proselytizing occurred in 1998.

The penal code specifies the death sentence for moharebeh ("enmity against God," which, according to the *Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, means in Quranic usage "corrupt conditions caused by unbelievers or unjust people that threaten social and political wellbeing"), *fisad fil-arz* ("corruption on

earth," which includes apostasy or heresy), 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. Those accused of blasphemy are often charged with "spreading corruption on earth" and other crimes. The penal code criminalizes insulting the values of Islam, Iranian "divine religions," Islamic schools of thought recognized under the constitution, the Prophet Muhammad or any of the "Great Prophets", twelve Shia Imams, or the Prophet's mother. Punishments range from imprisonment to 74 lashes to the death penalty. In 2021, the government amended the penal code, adding provisions criminalizing "insulting legally recognized religions and Iranian ethnicities." The amendments allow authorities to impose a sentence of two to five years in prison and a monetary fine where violence is involved, and between six months and two years and a monetary fine where violence is not involved, on anyone who "insults Iranian ethnicities or divine religions or Islamic schools of thought recognized under the constitution."

Additionally, the penal code outlines several "offenses that violate religious sensibilities," which include attacking the creed of a recognized religious minority or "pouring scorn on its religious practices;" making light of a recognized religious minority's tenets or teachings; publicly insulting a symbol or person constituting an object of sanctification, worship, or reverence to a recognized religious minority; and publicly imitating a religious ceremony or celebration with intent to deceive. Such offenses are punishable with a fine or up to three years in prison.

The constitution states the four Sunni schools (Hanafi, Shafi, Maliki, and Hanbali) and the Shia Zaydi school 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. The government considers any citizen who is not a registered member of one of these three groups or who cannot prove his or her family was Christian prior to 1979 to be Muslim.

Because 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, because 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 adherents

to that faith state 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 (also known as Ahl-e-Haq or Kakai). Yarsanis may also self-register as Shia to obtain government services. The government does not recognize evangelical Protestants as Christian.

Citizens who are not recognized as Christians, Zoroastrians, or Jews generally may not engage in public expression of religious faith, such as worshiping in a church or wearing religious symbols such as a cross. The government makes some exceptions for foreigners belonging to unrecognized religious groups.

The constitution bars discrimination based on race, gender, disability, language, and social status "in conformity with Islamic criteria," but the government does not effectively enforce these prohibitions. Some laws, such as personal status laws discriminate between the sexes based on religion.

According to the constitution, "Everyone has the right to choose any occupation he wishes, if it is not contrary to Islam and the public interests and does not infringe on the rights of others."

Citizens who are members of one of the recognized religious minorities must register with authorities. Authorities may close a church and arrest its leaders if churchgoers do not register or if unregistered individuals attend services.

The penal code criminalizes buying, selling, transporting, and keeping alcoholic beverages, but individuals whom the government recognizes as non-Muslims are exempt from punishment if they do not publicly drink alcohol. Production and possession of alcoholic beverages for personal or religious use by non-Muslim religious minorities is not considered a crime. The government does not recognize converts to Christianity as Christian, and such individuals are subject to the prohibitions as if they were Muslim.

The constitution provides that the judiciary be "an independent power" that is "free from every kind of unhealthy relation and connection." The government appoints judges "in accordance with religious criteria." The constitution provides that a judge should rule on a case based on codified law, but, in a situation where such law is absent, he should deliver his judgment based on "authoritative Islamic sources and authentic fatwas."

The Islamic republic is a Shia Islamic political system based on *Velayat-e Faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurist). Shia clergy, most notably the *Rahbar-e Mo'azzam* (Supreme Leader), and political leaders vetted by the clergy dominate key power structures. The supreme leader (the country's head of state) holds constitutional authority over the judiciary, government-run

media, and other key institutions, and oversees extrajudicial special clerical courts, which are not provided for by the constitution. These courts, each headed by a Shia Islamic legal scholar, operate outside the judiciary's purview and investigate offenses committed by clerics, including nonreligious activities and political statements inconsistent with government policy.

The supreme leader holds ultimate authority over all security agencies. The Ministry of Intelligence and Security and law enforcement forces under the Interior Ministry, which report to the President, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which reports to the supreme leader, share responsibility for law enforcement and maintaining order. The Basij, a nationwide volunteer paramilitary group, is an auxiliary law enforcement unit subordinate to the IRGC.

According to the constitution, Islamic scholars in the Assembly of Experts, a group of 86 popularly elected and supreme leader-approved clerics, whose qualifications include piety and religious scholarship, elect the supreme leader. To "safeguard" Islamic ordinances and ensure legislation passed by the Islamic Consultative Assembly (parliament) is compatible with Islam, a Guardian Council, composed of six Muslim 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. Individuals who are not Shia Muslims are barred from serving as supreme leader, president, or chief justice as well as from being a member of the Assembly of Experts, Guardian Council, or Expediency Council (the country's highest arbiter of disputes between parliament and the Guardian Council over legislation).

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 parliamentary seats reserved by the constitution for members of recognized religious minority groups. There are two seats reserved for Armenian Christians, one for Assyrian and Chaldean Christians together, one for Jews, and one for Zoroastrians. The constitution provides for the establishment of political parties, professional and political associations, and Islamic and recognized religious minority organizations, as long as such groups do not violate the principles of freedom, sovereignty, national unity, or Islamic criteria, or question Islam as the basis of the country's system of government.

The constitution prohibits 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.

The constitution states that 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.

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

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 law authorizes collection of “blood money,” or *diya*, as restitution to families of Muslims and members of recognized religious minorities who are victims of murder, bodily harm, or property damage. Baha’i families, however, are not entitled to receive *diya*. This law also sets the amount of *diya* for recognized religious minorities and women at half that of a Muslim man. Women are entitled to equal *diya* as men for insurance claims where loss of life occurred in automobile accidents, but not for other categories of death, such as murder. In cases of bodily harm, according to the law, certain male organs (for example, the testicles) are worth more than the entire body of a woman.

The criminal code provides for hudud punishments (those mandated by sharia) for theft, including amputation of the fingers of the right hand, amputation of the left foot, life imprisonment, and death, as well as flogging of up to 99 lashes or stoning for other crimes. As part of hudud, the code allows for *qisas* (retribution in kind). The code also allows for *ta’zir* (punishment at the discretion of the judge), which allows judges to impose penalties beyond what is prescribed in law.

The penal code provides that women who appear in public without “prescribed Islamic dress,” i.e., hijab, may be sentenced to either imprisonment of between 10 days and two months, or a fine of between 50,000 and 500,000 rials (\$1 to \$12).

The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security monitor religious activity. The IRGC, an independent, stand-alone branch of the armed services charged with protecting the integrity of the Islamic Republic and reporting directly to the supreme leader, also monitors churches.

The Ministry of Education determines the religious curricula of public schools. All school curricula, public and private, must include a course on Shia Islamic teachings and all pupils must pass this course 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. Applicants to university must pass an exam on Islamic, Christian, or Jewish theology, based on their official religious affiliation. Members of unrecognized religious groups must pass Islamic studies exams.

Recognized minority religious groups, except for Sunni Muslims, may operate private schools. The Ministry of Education supervises private schools operated by 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 for official review. Directors of such private schools must demonstrate loyalty to the state and adherence to Shia Islam. This requirement, known as *gozinesh* review, is an evaluation to determine adherence to the governmental ideology and system as well as knowledge of the official interpretation of Shia Islam.

The law bars Baha'is from founding or operating their own educational institutions. A Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology order requires universities to exclude Baha'is from access to higher education, or to expel them if their religious affiliation becomes known. Government regulations state 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 identify themselves as followers of one of the four officially recognized religions (i.e., Islam, Christianity, Judaism, or Zoroastrianism).

By law, non-Muslims may not serve in the judiciary, the security services (which are separate from the 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* review requirements), although members of recognized religious minorities may serve in the lower ranks of government if they meet these loyalty requirements. 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 constitution does not provide for the establishment or the mandate of the revolutionary courts, which were created pursuant to former Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's edict immediately following the 1979 revolution, with a sharia judge appointed as the head of the courts. The courts were originally intended as a temporary measure to try high-level officials of the deposed monarchy, but they became

institutionalized and continue to operate in parallel to the criminal justice system.

The Special Clerical Court is headed by a Shia Islamic legal scholar, overseen by the supreme leader, and charged with investigating alleged offenses committed by clerics and issuing rulings based on an independent interpretation of Islamic legal sources. As with the revolutionary courts, the constitution does not provide for the Special Clerical Court, which operates outside the judiciary's purview. Clerical courts prosecute Shia and Sunni clerics who express controversial ideas and participate in activities outside the sphere of religion, such as journalism or reformist political activities.

The government bars Baha'is from all government employment and forbids Baha'i participation in the government's social pension system. Baha'is may not receive compensation for injuries 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.

Recognized religious groups issue marriage contracts in accordance with their religious laws. The government does not recognize Baha'i marriages or divorces but allows a civil attestation of marriage. The attestation serves as a marriage certificate and allows for basic recognition of the union but does not offer legal protections in marital disputes.

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 mandatory military service based on religious affiliation or conscientious objection. 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 they 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 the time of ratification in 1975, it 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

Abuses Involving Violence, Detention, or Mass Resettlement

According to UN experts, numerous international human rights NGOs, and media reports, the government continued to arrest, convict, and execute dissidents, political reformers, and peaceful protesters on

charges of “spreading corruption on earth,” “enmity against God,” and producing anti-Islamic propaganda. Officials arrested and disappeared Baha’i, Kurdish, and Baluch minority individuals, including civil society activists, labor rights activists, environmentalists, writers, university students, teachers, and political activists. According to the NGO Organization for Human Rights (Hengaw), defendants were typically deprived of the right to legal representation.

On June 15, the UN Secretary-General submitted a report to the UN Human Rights Council on the human rights situation in the country. In it, the Secretary-General stated ethnic and religious minorities were “significantly affected” in the context of the nationwide protests in 2022 and 2023. According to the report, “members of the Baha’i community as well as Armenian and Assyrian Christians continued to face discrimination, particularly in relation to their freedom to practice their religion. Many have been arrested on national security charges and had their places of worship raided.... The rate of arbitrary arrests of members of minority communities has also reportedly increased in the context of recent protests.”

In an August 24 report, the UN Special Rapporteur Rehman stated he was “alarmed by the level of violence used against protestors, in particular targeting religious and ethnic minorities” participating in antigovernment demonstrations sparked by the September 2022 death of Mahsa Amini. As reported by Agence France-Presse (AFP), Amini’s family lawyer and human rights activists stated Amini’s grave was vandalized on May 21.

The NGO Kurdistan Human Rights Network (KHRN) reported the government arrested 12 Kurds in West Azerbaijan Province over a three-day period in July, in advance of the one-year anniversary of Amini’s arrest and death. That same month, Radio Farda and KHRN reported the Public Prosecutor’s Office in the city of Bukan summoned more than 50 lawyers who had signed a statement supporting Amini’s family after they refused to retract it. According to KHRN, Radio Farda, and Human Rights Watch, on August 16, the government arrested 12 women’s rights activists for planning events associated with the anniversary of Amini’s death. In early September, authorities arrested Amini’s uncle, Safa Aeli in Saqqez, in Kurdistan Province. After Amini’s parents announced a graveside commemoration on the anniversary of her death, authorities summoned her father on at least four occasions, threatening to arrest his remaining daughter and warning him against posting on social media or attending a commemoration service at Amini’s grave. On the day of the anniversary, authorities again summoned and briefly detained Amini’s father, who upon returning home found security officials surrounding the residence, preventing anyone from leaving.

The press and KHRN reported that on October 17, the Islamic Revolutionary court convicted Saleh Nikbakht, the lawyer for Mahsa

Amini's family, of "conducting propaganda against the regime" and sentenced him to a year in prison. The government charged Nikbakht after the Ministry of Intelligence filed a complaint against him for discussing Amini's case with media outlets. In those interviews, Nikbakht questioned the government's claims that Amini had died of a heart attack and called for an independent medical panel to investigate her death.

In a December submission to the UN Fact-Finding Mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran, HRANA wrote, "members and agents of the Iranian government targeted perceived political opponents – an opposition which is understood by the members and agents of the government in a broad sense, [as] encompassing any conduct that does not abide by the regime's ideologies and their interpretation of Islamic law.... Numerous acts and conducts from the perpetrators display an intent to discriminate against women, girls, and potentially LGBTQI+ individuals by reason of their gender. ... Ethnicity and religion may also have played a role in the regime's repressive campaign."

On December 27, HRANA released its annual report on human rights in the country. According to the report, the government executed at least 746 individuals during the year, including 20 women and two juveniles, compared with 565 individuals in 2022 and 299 in 2021. Of the 746 executions, 35 percent were for murder, 56 percent for drug offenses, 2.5 percent for sexual crimes, 1.5 percent for offenses classified as "corruption on earth" or "ideological-political-religious reasons," and the remainder for other charges. According to HRANA, during the year, authorities arrested 142 citizens for religious reasons, including 15 arrests made without a judicial warrant. Authorities conducted house raids, obstructed economic activity, prevented burials, impeded religious gatherings, and instituted travel bans against religious minorities. Judges sentenced 115 individuals from religious minority groups to imprisonment, lashes, internal exile, or fines. Judges deprived 17 individuals of their "social rights" (often deprivation of educational or employment opportunities) for religious reasons. Additionally, authorities summoned 57 individuals to appear before security and judicial institutions and deprived at least one individual of educational rights due to religion. The majority of human rights violations against religious minorities involved Baha'is (85 percent), but they also impacted Sunnis (11 percent), Yarsans (2 percent), Gonabadi Dervishes, Christians, and other religious minorities.

According to CHRI, authorities increasingly targeted Sunni religious leaders in Sistan and Baluchistan Province and Kurdish-majority provinces for persecution, arrest, and imprisonment in retaliation for their criticism of the government. In June, an agent of the government attempted to assassinate the Friday prayer leader of Zahedan and de facto Sunni leader of the Baluch community, Molavi Abdolhamid, according to the Haalvash and Abdolhamid's office. According to Haalvash, security guards of

Zahedan's Makki Mosque arrested the would-be assassin, who said the IRGC's intelligence service orchestrated the plot. Haalvash reported in January that since mass protests began in late 2022, Abdolhamid had experienced "intense pressure" from security forces to stop criticizing the government during his Friday sermons. According to analysis published by the Middle East Institute in January, Abdolhamid was "opting to confront Iran's supreme leader, a Shia, head on," using his pulpit "to repeatedly take jabs at Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, calling his rule out of touch and characterizing him as ruthless" while denouncing the government as illegitimate and un-Islamic.

IranWire and the *Guardian* newspaper reported that a woman wearing a chador assaulted 16-year-old Armita Geravand on a subway train in Tehran on October 1, causing Geravand to fall, hit her head, and lapse into a coma. The assault reportedly occurred after a verbal dispute in which the woman, who some reports said was a member of the morality police, criticized Geravand for not wearing the hijab. Geravand died four weeks later. Hengaw reported authorities pressured Geravand's family, friends, and classmates to not speak out against the government's official account that Geravand fainted due to a drop in blood pressure. Amnesty International reported that on October 2, following the teenager's hospitalization, authorities arrested Maryam Lotfi, a journalist investigating the incident. Authorities released Lotfi on bail the same day.

NGOs reported security forces arrested at least 15 individuals at Geravand's October 29 funeral. Among those arrested were family members and activists, including human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh, who spent significant time in and out of prison during the previous decade as a result of her human rights activism, including opposition to the mandatory hijab. Her husband said officers beat her during her arrest and broke her glasses. The IRGC-affiliated Fars news agency said authorities detained Sotoudeh for "removing her hijab and acting against society's mental security." Authorities moved her to Qarchak (Women's) Prison outside of Tehran.

NGOs reported that on May 8, authorities executed Youssef Mehrdad and Sadrollah Fazeli-Zareh on charges of apostasy, promoting atheism, insulting the Prophet, and insulting Islamic sanctities. The charges were based on messages the two broadcast on a Telegram channel they administered called "Criticism of Superstition and Religion." Authorities also claimed to have found evidence on Mehrdad's phone of a Quran burning. Amnesty International issued a statement on social media condemning the executions, saying, "They were hanged solely for social media posts in a grotesque assault on the rights to life and freedom of religion."

On January 19, the European Parliament adopted a resolution condemning "in the strongest possible terms the death sentences of

peaceful protesters in Iran,” urging the country to abolish the death penalty, and calling on the government “to review its legal code and eliminate moharebeh (‘enmity against God’) and mofsed-e-filarz (‘corruption on earth’) as punishable offenses” and to release human rights defenders.

NGOs reported authorities often held detainees, including members of religious minorities, for a week or more before allowing them to contact relatives. Authorities often initially denied the detainee was in custody, which resulted in greater anxiety for families who were unaware of the whereabouts or condition of detainees.

According to Article 18, in May, Ministry of Intelligence agents arrested three converts to Christianity – Shilan Oraminejad, Razieh (Maral) Kohzady, and Zahra (Yalda) Heidary – and held them incommunicado in Tehran’s Evin Prison for 40 days. Agents also confiscated some of their personal belongings, including mobile phones, laptops, books, and pamphlets. The government did not announce the charges against the three women.

Human rights NGOs continued to report poor conditions and physical mistreatment of religious minorities held in government prisons. In his August report, UN Special Rapporteur Rehman stated he continued “to be deeply concerned that discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities persists” and that he was alarmed at “reports of serious abuses, victimization, killings, and executions of ethnic and religious prisoners, especially those belonging to the [largely Sunni] Baloch and Kurdish minorities.” He said Christian converts and members of the Baha’i community continued to face increased repression and persecution.

In particular, Rehman reported that “there was a marked increase in attacks, targeting and harassment of members of the Baha’i community. Since July 2022, more than 333 incidents have been reported, including at least 80 cases of arbitrary detentions, interrogations, and unlawful arrests. Baha’is have continued to suffer serious human rights violations, including through torture and ill-treatment, destruction of properties, cemetery desecration, as well as denials of education and various forms of economic pressure, including reports of forced closure of Baha’i-owned businesses and confiscation of Baha’i properties.”

In April, Faezah Hashemi, a prisoner granted a leave of absence from Evin Prison and the daughter of former President Hashemi Rafsanjani, reported that authorities had broken bones in the knees of Mahvash Sabet, a 70 year-old Baha’i woman given a 10-year sentence in 2022 on “national security” charges of working to “undermine Islam,” and “furthering the interests of dominant foreign countries.” Authorities convicted fellow Baha’i Fariba Kamalabadi on the same charges. According to Sabet’s daughter, prison authorities denied Sabet adequate medical

care and the government seized the family's assets. Sabet, a well-known poet, and Kamalabadi belonged to the seven-member, informal Baha'i leadership group Yaran-e Iran until their incarceration in 2008 and the dissolution of the group. They appealed their 2022 convictions, but in August, the Court of Appeals of Tehran Province upheld the sentences. Authorities did not allow them to communicate with their attorneys.

According to United for Iran, authorities released Gonabadi Dervish Abbas Dehghan in January after he spent almost five years in prison. Authorities arrested Dehghan along with more than 300 others in 2018 following violent clashes between dervishes and security forces in Tehran. According to IranWire, authorities interrogated and physically abused Dehghan for 70 days while in custody, and he suffered a stroke.

United for Iran reported that in October, a court sentenced Gonabadi Dervish Arash Moradi to three years in prison on charges that included insulting sanctities, propaganda against the regime, and insulting the leadership and the founder of the Islamic Republic. Authorities previously arrested Moradi in 2018 and sentenced him to one year in prison for protesting the expected arrest of Dervish leader Nour Ali Tabandeh.

Authorities continued to hold prisoners convicted of theft whose sentences include amputation of fingers, a hudud punishment. In midsummer, Hadi Rostami, convicted in 2017, sent a message from Orumiyeh Central Prison, where he was incarcerated, warning that officials would soon carry out the amputation of the fingers on his right hand. Prison officials sentenced him earlier in the year to an additional eight months in prison and 45 lashes for "disturbing prison order." In early January, KHRN reported Morteza Esmaeilian, convicted of theft 10 years earlier and facing the amputation of the fingers of his right hand, was moved from Orumiyeh Central Prison to an undisclosed location in late December 2022 for the execution of his sentence.

According to United for Iran's *Iran Prison Atlas*, the government dramatically increased sentences involving flogging after the 2022 protests that followed the death of Mahsa Amini. According to the NGO's August report, the imposition of lashes in court sentences quadrupled over the previous year, with at least 13 women and 104 men receiving sentences totaling 7,404 lashes. By comparison, the period of September 2021 to October 2022 resulted in 29 sentences involving flogging, with a total of 1,970 lashes. The most common charges used against activists that result in lashes included: escaping from prison or not returning from furlough, insulting government employees, disturbing the public order, removing the hijab, and disseminating lies with the intention of agitating the public mind.

The Abdorrahman Bouroumand Center reported several cases where courts sentenced prisoners to flogging. In Delgan, Sistan and Baluchistan

Province, an unnamed Baluch prisoner convicted of theft received an unknown number of lashes in public on February 2. On April 3, authorities in Sirjan delivered 80 lashes to two young men convicted of consuming alcohol and circulating a video of the act on social media during Ramadan. Officials meted out the punishment in public, in the amusement park where the alcohol was consumed. On June 26, in the Evin Prosecutor's Office, authorities gave Christian convert Zaman Feda'i 80 lashes for a "delay in returning to prison."

According to United for Iran's *Iran Prison Atlas*, at year's end, authorities held in prison 115 individuals for "religious practice", including Baluch, Baha'i, Sunni, Christian, and some Shia men and women, compared with at least 75 individuals in 2022 and 67 in 2021. Charges included membership in or leadership of organizations that "disrupt national security" and "spread propaganda against the regime."

According to the HRWF database, which tracks individuals convicted and serving sentences, 117 individuals were serving sentences for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief as of year's end, compared with 66 at the end of 2022. The majority were Baha'is, but some were Protestants and Sufi Muslims. HRWF stated, "All in all, over one thousand Baha'is are either behind bars, or in custody, or under house arrest, or waiting for a hearing or to be summoned by a court."

On August 15, CHRI released a report stating: "Religious leaders of the Sunni Muslim communities in Iran's Sistan and Baluchistan Province and in the Kurdish provinces of the country are being increasingly targeted by Islamic Republic authorities for persecution, arrest, and imprisonment because of their peaceful criticism of the state's violent repression." The report noted Sunni clerics also criticized the state's disproportionate use of the death penalty against ethnic minority communities such as Baluchis and Kurds.

In January, the news website al-Monitor reported that during a 24-hour period, authorities detained four Sunni clerics in Kurdistan Province and Sistan and Baluchistan Province for criticizing the government's heavy-handed response to human rights protests in Sunni areas. Abdulmajid Moradzehi, a close associate of Sunni prayer leader Molavi Abdolhamid, was among those detained.

CHRI said that in June and July, security forces detained at least seven close associates of Abdolhamid, including his grandson. According to an August report by CHRI, a large number of other Baluch and Kurdish Sunni clerics and religious teachers who criticized the government were arrested and interrogated during the year, and several received harsh sentences, including long terms of imprisonment, internal exile, flogging, a ban on preaching, and permanent defrocking/removal of clerical clothes.

Haalvash reported officials arrested Baluch Sunni cleric Molavi Abdolmajid Moradzahi on January 30 and subjected him to torture in prison. Authorities charged him with “disturbing public opinion and speaking with foreign media” for giving interviews to foreign media about protests in Sistan and Baluchistan Province. According to CHRI, authorities arrested fellow Baluch Sunni cleric Molavi Ebrahim Hassan-Zahi on February 25 and reportedly subjected him to torture in prison. CHRI also reported officials arrested at least four additional Baluch Sunni clerics who had criticized the government and summoned three others for interrogation.

KHRN stated in its annual report covering March 21, 2022-March 20, 2023 that authorities arrested at least 29 Sunni clerics and activists and Yarsani activists in West Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, and Kermanshah Provinces for their religious or civil-political positions or activities, summoned at least 17 others, and sentenced four to prison terms. The NGO reported that between March and August, at least 10 Kurdish Sunni clerics were sentenced to imprisonment, exile, flogging, and revocation of clerical status, allegedly in response to their speeches in support of the protests.

In February, a prominent Kurdish Sunni cleric, Hassan Amini, who leads the Kurdistan Jurisprudence Assembly, told Radio Farda that authorities arrested more than 20 Kurdish religious scholars in various Kurdish cities for supporting antigovernment demonstrations. According to Radio Farda, Amini “condemned the mass arrests ... and criticized the silence of Shia clerics on the matter.”

CHRI reported in August that at least seven other Kurdish Sunni clerics received lengthy prison sentences during the year, including Seyfollah Hosseini, a Kurdish Sunni prayer leader in Javanrud District, who gave a speech at the funerals for two protestors who state security forces reportedly shot and killed. Authorities sentenced Hosseini to 17 years in prison and 74 lashes for his membership in the religious movement of the Kurdistan Quran School on charges of inciting people to disrupt the security of the country, insulting the founder and leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, disrupting public order, and spreading propaganda against the regime. The court also stripped Hosseini of his clerical status.

On February 10, HRWF issued a statement criticizing the government for arresting 15 Ahmadi Muslims, including three minors, in December 2022 because of their religious beliefs and detaining them for eight weeks in Evin Prison. HRWF said the government released two individuals in January and called on it to free the other 13 “and drop all charges related to their religious beliefs.” The NGO said during their detention, authorities pressured the Ahmadis to sign statements defaming and recanting their faith.

HRANA reported that in January, the Revolutionary Court sentenced Gonabadi Dervish Mohsen Afrooz to one year in prison on the charge of

propaganda against the regime. Afrooz was arrested in October 2022 for allegedly writing slogans on a wall.

Human rights groups reported that persecution of the Baha'i community escalated between April and August, with increased raids, confiscation of property, arrests, and convictions. According to BIC, 70-90 Baha'is were in prison during the year. BIC reported there were 60 arrests or imprisonments of Baha'is from mid-July to mid-August. In October, BIC released a report titled *The Baha'i Question: Persecution and Resilience in Iran*. In the report, BIC stated prison guards and officials physically and psychologically abused Baha'is in custody. The report stated, "Many are held for long periods and are often detained for weeks or months before trial or are released only after posting exorbitantly high bail demands, which often require families to hand over deeds to their properties or business licenses. There have been incidents of torture and beatings while in detention, and hundreds of cases where individuals have been subjected to long periods of solitary confinement, both during pretrial detention and after sentencing."

In an October submission to the UN Human Rights Committee in Geneva, BIC said hundreds of Baha'i shops remained sealed by the authorities, Baha'is were barred from many professions and universities, the government destroyed Baha'i cemeteries, and official efforts to indoctrinate Baha'i children and confiscate property "continue unabated." The report detailed dozens of cases involving the government's "violent and repressive actions against [its] own citizens," adding that "the persecution has affected every Baha'i across generations and within every phase of life, and even in death."

HRANA reported that in August, authorities arrested 90-year-old Baha'i Jamaloddin Khanjani, who had previously served 10 years in prison on charges related to his membership in the informal leadership group Yaran-e Iran. Khanjani was reportedly in failing health. Officials also arrested his daughter Maria Khanjani. The government did not announce the charges against the Khanjanis. BIC reported that after holding Jamaloddin Khanjani in Evin Prison for three weeks, authorities released him when he posted a bail that equated to 15 years of the average Iranian civil service salary. HRANA reported that in February, authorities sentenced another member of Yaran-e Iran, Afif Naeimi, to seven years in prison for "acting against national security by promoting the Baha'i religion among children and adolescents" and "propaganda against Islam." Throughout the summer, other Baha'is received up to five-year prison sentences on the same charges, including Negin Rezaie, Nakisa Sadeghi, Rameleh Tirgarnejad, Kamyar Habibi, Mahsa Tirgar Behnamiri, Elham Shareghi Arani, Sadaf Sheikhzadeh, Saman Ostovar, Shahrzad Mastouri, Anisa Samieian, and Vesal Momtazi.

Human rights groups reported that a common charge leveled against Baha'is was "membership in an illegal group to disrupt national security." HRANA reported that in July, four Baha'is received five-year prison sentences on this charge – Mansour Amini, Shadi Shahidzadeh, Valiollah Ghadamian, and Attaollah Zafar. Also in July, a court upheld Hami Bahadori's five-year sentence for "assembly and collusion against national security" and "propaganda against the regime." In its August 13 statement, BIC said authorities sentenced several Baha'is in Gilan Province to prison, and security agents searched the homes of others and confiscated mobile phones and computers on false charges of spreading "propaganda against the regime" through social media.

HRANA reported that on August 25, Nafisa Saadatyar, a Baha'i who worked as a science representative in a private company in Gorgan, was fired following pressure on her employer from IRGC intelligence forces after she was arrested on unspecified charges and released in January.

BIC reported that nine other Baha'is who either owned or worked for pharmacies were arrested in Tehran on August 13 after being accused of disrupting pharmaceutical supply chains. Radio Farda reported that intelligence agents had shut down and confiscated more than 40 pharmacies and warehouses belonging to the detainees, who were mostly members of one family. Specific charges against the nine included "drug smuggling and hoarding," "fraud with medicines," "money laundering," and "tax evasion." In a statement issued on August 16, BIC said, "In the face of growing solidarity between the Baha'is and the general population, the government is trying to drive a wedge by calling these legitimate Baha'i-owned trading businesses 'hoarders.'"

In November, HRANA reported the Court of Appeals in northern Mazandaran Province sentenced 14 Baha'is to imprisonment and fines. The government arrested the Baha'is in 2022 when authorities charged them with "engaging in educational or propaganda activities contrary to Sharia law of Islam." The Qaem Shahr Revolutionary Court had previously sentenced them to 31 years' imprisonment and ordered the seizure of all of their assets.

Christians, particularly evangelicals and other converts from Islam or other recognized faiths, continued to experience disproportionate levels of arrests and detentions and high levels of harassment and surveillance, according to Christian NGOs. Human rights organizations and Christian NGOs continued to report authorities arrested Christians, including members of unrecognized churches, for their religious affiliation or activities and charged them with operating churches in private homes. According to human rights NGOs, the government also continued to enforce the prohibition against proselytizing.

According to Article 18, authorities arrested 166 Christians during the year, compared with 134 in 2022 and 72 in 2021. By year's end, at least 17 Christians received prison sentences of between three months and five years or fines or flogging on charges such as "acting against national security," "engaging in propaganda and educational activities for deviant beliefs contrary to the holy sharia," forming a house church, and "promoting Zionist Christianity." The NGO said that from June to August, authorities arrested more than 100 Christians in 11 different cities. While most of the individuals were released, many reported being forced to sign commitments to refrain from further Christian activities or ordered to attend Islamic re-education sessions. Others reported they were summoned for further questioning in the days after their release or ordered to leave the country, while one said his employment was terminated at the request of intelligence agents.

In November, Article 18 reported authorities gave early release to three members of the Church of Iran who had been sentenced in 2022 to five years in prison for "spreading deviant beliefs contrary to Islam." Authorities ordered Christians Ahmad Sarparast, Morteza Mashoodkari, and Ayoob Poor-Rezazadeh to work at a factory adjacent to the prison for the remainder of their sentences.

Article 18 reported authorities arrested at least 46 Christians in separate incidents across eight cities during the Christmas period. Police in Dezful, Khuzestan Province, raided the home of Christian convert Esmail Narimanpour on Christmas eve without a warrant, arrested him, and confiscated his Christian books. Authorities arrested four Christian converts, including an Afghan refugee, on December 11. All five individuals remained in custody at year's end. Article 18 said, ""We're particularly concerned for the safety and well-being of those detained, and especially for the Afghan refugee, who is even more vulnerable."

According to a joint report by Article 18, Open Doors, Middle East Concern, and the UK-based Christian advocacy NGO CSW titled *Rights Violations Against Christians in Iran: 2023 Annual Report*, released in February, IRGC troops continued to raid house churches, despite a 2021 Supreme Court ruling that establishing a house church was not a crime. The report stated Christians charged with "acting against national security" were often allowed conditional release while their cases were pending, but endured detentions before release that were often significantly longer than stipulated by law. The report stated bail demands were high and often required the submission of property title deeds. According to the report, "there are more frequent reports of Christians suffering physical abuse during arrest and interrogation." Since the charge invoked national security, such cases were usually heard by revolutionary rather than criminal courts.

The joint report stated that in 2022, authorities increasingly prosecuted Christians under Article 500, which criminalizes “engaging in propaganda that educates in a deviant way contrary to the holy religion of Islam” and carries a punishment of up to five years’ imprisonment; or up to 10 years if the defendant received financial or organizational help from outside the country. The report said the increase of such prosecutions “indicates the prevalence of surveillance of Iranian citizens regarding their religious beliefs.” Christians convicted under this article were punished with imprisonment, internal exile, travel bans, community service, and deprivation of some social services. Authorities also often charged Christians under Article 499 of the penal code for membership in a group proscribed by Article 498, which criminalizes any group, society or branch that “aims to perturb the security of the country.” Punishment ranged from two to 10 years in prison.

Christian NGOs and the online Christian media outlet Morningstar News reported authorities in February released from Evin Prison Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, as well as Christian converts Hadi Rahimi and Zaman Fadaei, as part of the government’s amnesty marking the anniversary of the 1979 revolution. Nadarkhani had been serving a six-year sentence for acting against national security, propagating house churches, and promoting “Zionist Christianity.” Rahimi and Faadaei were serving four- and six-year sentences, respectively, for “acting against national security” and “spreading ‘Zionist’ Christianity” for attending house churches.

In early July, NGOs reported that authorities rearrested Nadarkhani, as well as fellow Church of Iran pastor Matthias (Abdolreza Ali) Haghnejad, on charges of attempting to undermine national security after the government pressured a couple belonging to the church into incriminating the two men. According to CSW, Haghnejad never met the couple and Nadarkhani was only vaguely acquainted with them. Haghnejad already was in government custody awaiting a retrial on 2014 charges of undermining government security and promoting Zionist Christianity. Despite his initial acquittal of those charges, the Supreme Court overturned the verdict and the government rearrested him in late 2022, a short time after his release from prison on other charges. In mid-July, the government moved Haghnejad to a prison in the city of Minab in Hormozgan Province, a thousand miles from his home in the city of Bandar Azali. On January 3, the government arrested Anahita Khademi, Haghnejad’s wife. Authorities released her on bail on January 28, after charging her with “propaganda against the regime” and “disturbing public opinion.”

In May, Article 18 reported that a judge in Branch 34 of the Appeals Court in Tehran overturned the conviction of Christian converts Hodayoun Zhavah and Sara Ahmadi, who had been convicted of participating in a house church. The judge broke with legal precedent by ruling that participation in a house church was not illegal. He said gathering with

people of one's own faith was "natural" and having books related to Christianity was "also an extension of their beliefs," adding there was no evidence the couple had acted against the country's security or had connections with opposition groups or organizations.

Prisoners practicing a religion other than Twelver Shia Islam reported experiencing discrimination.

Activists and NGOs reported the government continued to detain or disappear Yarsani activists and community leaders for raising awareness regarding government practices or discrimination against the Yarsani community, such as the requirement that Yarsanis identify themselves as Shia in order to access employment or higher education.

After a Supreme Court decision to overturn the original guilty verdict and death sentence due to a "flaw in the investigation," authorities continued to incarcerate Kurdish singer and songwriter Saman Yasin (Seydi), a Yarsani who was arrested and charged in late 2022 with "enmity against God" for supporting the nationwide protests against the killing of Mahsa Amini. Media and NGOs reported Branch 15 of the Iranian Revolutionary Court denied Yasin a lawyer and that Yasin attempted suicide following the verdict. The Supreme Court returned the case to the Revolutionary Court. Subsequently, Yasin went on several hunger strikes protesting his treatment and was forcibly committed to a psychiatric hospital for three days. Another prisoner, Ahmadreza Haeri, reported in a November letter that Evin Prison authorities had subjected Yasin to a mock execution before his original trial concluded. Radio Farda reported that no new trial had yet been scheduled and Yasin did not have access to his lawyer.

According to international media, a court sentenced another singer, Toomaj Salehi, to six years and three months' imprisonment. Authorities arrested Salehi in 2022 for supporting the Amini protests and charged him with "spreading corruption on earth." A group of UN human rights experts had expressed concern regarding the cases of both Yasin and Salehi after their arrests.

Media outlets reported that in August, authorities arrested pop singer Mehdi Yarrahi following the release of his song, "Your Head Scarf," ("Roosarito") which urged women to remove their hijabs. According to Voice of America (VOA), government-linked media outlets accused Yarrahi of "releasing an illicit and morally inappropriate song that contradicts the Islamic societal norms." His trial was pending at year's end.

According to human rights NGOs, judges continued to use internal exile as a form of punishment for political prisoners, including peaceful activists, religious minorities, and dissidents. According to CHRI, the concept of exile or banishment is rooted in Shia theology and is referred to as "denial of country" (*nafiye balad*). Exile could be ordered as the primary

punishment, for example for those found guilty of “enmity against God” or “armed rebellion,” or as a supplemental punishment for various crimes, to be carried out after the completion of a prison sentence. Judges chose exile locations from a list prepared by the Ministry of Interior; these were usually remote towns in regions with extreme poverty. Iran Human Rights Monitor reported that during the year, judges also sent individuals into “prison exile” by transferring them to severely under-resourced prisons far from their friends and family. CHRI stated that prison exile also harmed the detainee’s family by putting the individual in a location family members could not easily visit.

Abuses Limiting Religious Belief or Expression

In its report *Freedom of Thought 2023*, the NGO Humanists International stated, “Expression of nonreligious views is severely persecuted, or is rendered almost impossible by severe social stigma, or is highly likely to be met with hatred or violence. Government figures or state agencies openly marginalize, harass, or incite hatred or violence against the nonreligious. It is illegal to register an explicitly Humanist, atheist, secularist or other nonreligious NGO or other human rights organization, or such groups are persecuted by authorities.”

According to Amnesty International, atheists and agnostics often did not publicly identify because those who professed atheism were at risk of arbitrary detention, torture, and the death penalty for apostasy.

In January, the UK-based National Secular Society issued a statement calling for the release of Soheil Arabi, an atheist blogger who was arrested on January 2 for making statements critical of the government. According to the Council of Ex-Muslims in Britain, a group which advocates for freedom to leave Islam without punishment, officers beat Arabi during his arrest, causing him to suffer a heart attack.

In September, the Christian aid group Barnabas Aid stated, “Christian worship in the national language of Farsi (Persian) is forbidden, as is evangelizing Muslims. Farsi-speaking Christians are converts from Islam and therefore punished as apostates in line with sharia (Islamic law), which is rigorously enforced in Iran.” Barnabas Aid stated authorities often charged converts with “acting against national security” and “engage[d] in exhausting them psychologically by continually releasing and rearresting them in order to push them to flee abroad or return to Islam.” The group said intelligence officers regularly forced arrested converts to sign statements promising never to meet with other Christians again after their release.

According to the joint report *Rights Violations Against Christians in Iran*, authorities subjected Christians to monitoring, restrictions, and control, and Farsi-speaking Christians faced “harassment and judicial procedure based on vague ‘propaganda’ charges related to ‘national security’” or

educating others “in a deviant way contrary to the holy religion of Islam.” Authorities arrested or summoned for questioning Christian converts, threatened them, and forced them to sign pledges to refrain from having a Bible, meeting other Christians, or engaging in other Christian activities. The report stated, “There was a marked increase in 2022 of Christian converts being obliged to attend ‘re-education’ classes to pressure them to recant their Christian faith and return to Islam.”

There were continued reports of authorities placing restrictions on Baha’i businesses or forcing them to shut down after they temporarily closed in observance of Baha’i holidays, or of authorities threatening shop owners with potential closure, even though by law, businesses may close without providing a reason for up to 15 days a year. In his report to the UN Human Rights Council in June, the UN Secretary-General stated authorities closed many Baha’i-owned shops and businesses, depriving the Baha’i owners of their livelihoods. BIC reported that there were 59 such business closures by authorities from mid-July to mid-August.

On February 7, UN Special Rapporteur Rehman released a report on human rights in Iran to the UN Human Rights Council. The report stated that the Baha’i minority “remained [the] most severely persecuted” of the country’s ethnic and religious minorities. The report said, “The situation of more than a thousand Baha’is remained unresolved at various stages of the legal process. They were either waiting for a ruling on their cases or the enforcement thereof, including cases related to forms of harassment, such as arbitrary arrests; imprisonment and ill-treatment; raids on homes and confiscation of personal belongings; temporary release in lieu of unjustly heavy bail guarantees pending the conclusion of their trials; expulsion from or denial of entry to universities; raids on, and sealing of, business premises or refusal to issue work permits; confiscation of properties owned by Baha’is; confiscation and destruction of Baha’i cemeteries or continuous questioning of their ownership despite the presentation of legal deeds; prevention of the burial of deceased Baha’is; and many other instances that continue to entangle the Baha’is in the country’s unjust judicial system.”

In its submission to the UN Human Rights Committee for the committee’s October 9-November 3 session, BIC stated that the government’s “aim of destroying the Baha’i community as a viable entity in Iran continues in full force.” The BIC statement said the government pressured members of the Baha’i community by striving to exclude them from the public sphere, preventing them from expressing their beliefs, impoverishing them economically, undermining their intellectual advancement, erasing their history and culture, and inciting public hatred against them.

Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities Alone or In Community with Others

According to IranWire, members of recognized minority religions continued to be barred from much political participation. The NGO stated that although the country's Sunni community was "relatively free to practice its religion," the constitution excluded non-Shias, including Sunnis, from being supreme leader, president, or chief justice. While membership in the Guardian Council was technically only off-limits to "non-Muslims," in practice, Sunnis were not permitted to serve on the council. Similarly, Sunnis might technically run for election, but in practice were often disqualified before the vote. There were no non-Shia political parties in the country during the year.

The government continued to require all women to adhere to "Islamic dress" standards in public, including covering their hair and fully covering their bodies in loose clothing – an overcoat and a hijab or, alternatively, a chador (a full body-length piece of fabric worn over both the head and clothes). "Un-Islamic dress" was punished with arrests, imprisonment, lashings, fines, mandatory psychiatric treatment, closure of businesses which did not enforce dress codes, and dismissal from employment. In an address to regime figures on April 4, Ayatollah Khamenei described the hijab as a requirement of both Islam and the law. Ignoring it, he added, was "forbidden both under Islam and politically." According to press reports, judges also sentenced women convicted of not wearing the hijab to public service, including work in morgues or street cleaning, in lieu of prison time. Protests against the mandatory hijab under the slogan "*Zan, Zendegi, Azadi*" ("Woman, Life, Freedom") continued into the year, originally prompted by Mahsa Amini's death in custody in 2022.

In April, VOA reported authorities closed 45 businesses after the businesses ignored warnings they were not enforcing the compulsory hijab rule among their customers. According to VOA, on April 15, the government launched a new domestic surveillance program for enforcing the mandatory hijab law, and the national police chief, Ahmad Reza Radan, said authorities would employ advanced surveillance capabilities, including street cameras, to identify women violating the law. VOA stated that despite the threat of punishment, videos posted on social media appeared to show many women in different parts of the country defying the rule.

In July, Amnesty International reported that more than a million women had received SMS text warnings threatening to confiscate their cars if they were found traveling in a vehicle unveiled. The Amnesty report also stated that unveiled women had been denied access to banking, education, and public transit. The Amnesty posting also reported that on July 16, a police spokesman announced the return of police patrols to enforce compulsory veiling.

Analysis published by the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP) stated that as of September, regular citizens were being compelled to assist law

enforcement efforts regarding the wearing of the hijab. USIP reported citizens were required to deny services to women who did not adhere to hijab regulations, blocking access to banks, shops, and restaurants, and that business owners who failed to comply risked fines or even closure of their establishments. On July 10, the *Guardian* newspaper reported that at least 60 women had been barred from university for noncompliance with the hijab law.

In his August report, UN Special Rapporteur Rehman reported that “vigilante justice” by elements of the government resulted in violence against women, including arrests and arbitrary detentions, and that “hundreds of businesses” were closed or had received warnings for allowing customers or employees to wear an “improper” hijab.

CHRI reported that on August 7, the Tehran municipal government hired 400 hijab guards to enforce hijab compliance in public areas. According to CHRI, the guards were separate from the morality police, who enforced codes of conduct for both men and women.

On September 20, parliament approved the “Bill to Support the Family by Promoting the Culture of Chastity and Hijab,” that would set new and harsher penalties for noncompliance with the Islamic dress code as interpreted by authorities; the Council of Guardians had not approved the bill by year’s end. Amnesty International reported the bill equated unveiling to nudity. According to a statement from Ravina Shamdasani, spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the proposed changes increased the potential prison time for violating the compulsory dress code from two months to 10 years and increased the fine from 500,000 rials (\$12) to up to 360 million rials (\$8,600). Shamdasani said women also faced flogging, travel restrictions, and deprivation of online access.

According to USIP and the Associated Press, the bill also called for more strict segregation of the sexes in schools, parks, hospitals, and other locations. The bill reportedly extended punishments to business owners who served women not wearing hijab and activists who organized against it. Celebrities not wearing the hijab properly could be banned from leaving the country and performing. On September 1, a panel of UN experts that included UN Special Rapporteur Rehman stated the legislation “could be described as a form of gender apartheid.” The panel expressed concern that the language of the draft law could lead to violent enforcement, adding that the bill “violates fundamental rights, including the right to take part in cultural life, the prohibition of gender discrimination, freedom of opinion and expression, the right to peaceful protest, and the right to access social, educational, and health services and freedom of movement.”

On October 6, the Norwegian Nobel Committee awarded the 2023 Nobel Peace Prize to Narges Mohammadi, the imprisoned deputy head of the NGO Defenders of Human Rights Center, “for her fight against the oppression of women in Iran and her fight to promote human rights and freedom for all.” Nobel Committee chair Berit Reiss-Andersen said, “Her brave struggle has come with tremendous personal costs. Altogether, the regime has arrested her 13 times, convicted her five times, and sentenced her to a total of 31 years in prison and 154 lashes.” In addition to speaking out against the death penalty, torture, and solitary confinement, Mohammadi opposed the compulsory hijab. She remained in Evin Prison at year’s end, serving a 12-year sentence on multiple charges related to her advocacy, including “spreading propaganda against the regime.” Radio Farda reported authorities twice denied Mohammadi medical care and exams after her refusal to wear a hijab. In a letter to the Nobel Committee, Mohammadi wrote, “The ‘compulsory hijab’ is a means of control and repression imposed on the society and on which the continuation and survival of this authoritarian religious regime depends.”

In a letter to CNN smuggled out of the prison, Mohammadi said that the government was using the hijab as a pretext “all to preserve the image of religious Islamic men and ensure the security and purity of women,” adding, “The ‘compulsory hijab’ was a deceitful scheme against women and a tool of pressure to strengthen the power of the religious government.” Following the Nobel committee’s announcement, numerous foreign governments and human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, called on the government to release Mohammadi.

On February 9, international media reported the government released seven women from Evin Prison, including Saba Kord Afshari, who had been imprisoned since 2019 after she campaigned against the mandatory hijab. In 2022, authorities reduced her sentence from seven and a half years to five years.

The government reportedly continued to suppress other public behavior it deemed counter to Islamic law, such as women dancing or singing in public. According to a UN experts panel statement issued in March, several young women who filmed themselves dancing on the street without covering their hair were chased down and forced to apologize on state television.

In January, according to KHRN, the Revolutionary Court in Shahriar in Tehran Province sentenced a Kurdish woman, Mahsa Farhadi, to two years’ imprisonment for not wearing a hijab. Security officials arrested Farhadi in late 2022.

On March 7, international media reported a court had sentenced an unnamed woman to two years in prison for removing her hijab. One report quoted prosecutor Abbas Jafari Dolatabadi as saying the woman

was attempting to “encourage corruption through the removal of the hijab in public.” Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe reported that earlier in the year, authorities announced they had detained 29 women who removed their head scarves as part of a campaign against the country’s mandatory Islamic dress code.

On August 17, KHRN reported authorities arrested Firmesk Babaei after she removed her hijab and shouted antigovernment slogans near the governor’s office in the city of Paveh in Kermanshah Province. According to the report, officials beat Babaei during her arrest and took her to an unknown location.

BIC reported in May that in several localities, including Tehran, the government blocked Baha’is from carrying out burials of deceased relatives in accordance with Baha’i rites. Between March and May, authorities seized at least six bodies and buried the deceased without the knowledge of their families and without Baha’i rites. According to BIC, government officials, including Ministry of Intelligence official Masoud Momeni, obstructed families from obtaining burial permits and taking custody of their deceased relatives. According to BIC, Momeni demanded exorbitant fees to use burial plots in the Khavaran Cemetery, which was traditionally the place for burial of Baha’is, and secretly buried deceased Baha’is in an adjacent plot, which was the site of a historical mass grave for political prisoners and prisoners of conscience. Simin Fahandej, BIC’s representative to the United Nations in Geneva, called the forced burials “coldhearted and grotesque.”

According to BIC, the Ministry of Intelligence arrested three individuals – Mansour Amini, Valiollah Ghedamian, and Ataollah Zafar – who for years had assisted fellow Baha’is at Khavaran Cemetery, as well as Shadi Shahidzadeh, who approached officials asking that they release her grandmother’s body to her so that she could be buried in accordance with Baha’i rights. On May 31, a court sentenced all four individuals to five years in prison for membership in a group that engages in “illegal acts with the aim of disrupting the security of the country.”

According to the report *The Baha’i Question*, in June, authorities advised the Baha’i community of Arak in Markazi Province that the government intended to auction off land used by the Baha’is as a cemetery for more than 120 years, containing approximately 250 graves. The government confiscated the cemetery in 1980, but it had remained in use under the care of the community. BIC reported that on June 9, the Baha’is in Gorgan, Golestan Province, learned that a number of graves in the Baha’i cemetery had been destroyed and that someone claimed to have purchased the cemetery land and held its deeds. The public prosecutor informed the Baha’i community the land had been confiscated in 1980 and subsequently sold without their consent. In August, authorities in Karaj, Alborz Province, constructed a fence around the Baha’i cemetery at

Zarnan and did not provide the Baha'i community with keys so they could access it.

Baha'is continued to be prosecuted for gathering and peacefully practicing their religion. In June, a court sentenced a member of the Baha'i community, Hami Bahadori, to five years in prison for gathering and collusion, and an additional one year for spreading propaganda against the Islamic Republic. Per the verdict, authorities also seized property belonging to him and his wife, including a computer, camera, hard drive, modem, and jewelry.

The Jewish community in Tehran warned people on the messaging app Telegram to refrain from stopping and gathering in the streets for any reason during Rosh Hashanah and after performing religious duties in synagogues during the High Holy Days in September. The community also reportedly warned Jews to maintain a low public profile on al-Quds Day in April, which the government established shortly after the revolution to express opposition to Israel and Zionism.

According to the joint report *Rights Violations Against Christians in Iran*, authorities permitted only four Farsi-speaking churches to operate inside the country but had not allowed these to reopen since the COVID-19 pandemic. The report stated these house churches were not permitted to take on new members, and their dwindling congregations included no more than 70 worshippers in total. Article 18 reported that as of January, there were at least 18 Christians serving sentences of prison or internal exile due to their participation in house churches. The report stated the IRGC, rather than the Ministry of Intelligence, was increasingly taking the lead on raids on house churches and the arrest and interrogation of their members and that there were more frequent reports of Christians suffering physical abuse during arrest and interrogation as a result.

Open Doors USA said the historical communities of Armenian and Assyrian Christians, although recognized and protected by the state, were "treated as second-class citizens." They suffered from legalized discrimination, including being prohibited from worshiping in Farsi or possessing Christian material written in Farsi. In addition, historical Christian communities were not allowed to have contact with Christians from Muslim backgrounds or have them attend church services.

The government continued to restrict the foreign travel of some religious leaders and members of religious minorities. According to the NGO Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC), the government imposed in-country travel restrictions on Sunni clerics and prohibited them from going abroad. Authorities reportedly blocked the planned pilgrimages to Mecca of outspoken critics, including Sunni clerics Molavi Abdolhamid and Molavi Mohammad Tayyeb Mollazahi, both Friday prayer leaders in Sistan and Baluchistan Province. According to the Wilson Center, the

government also banned Abdolhamid from all travel, both international and domestic.

On May 5, Article 18 reported U.S. researchers found that police used spyware to monitor the smartphones of members of minority groups, including Christians. The researchers believed malware was uploaded to individuals' phones after they had been arrested or detained.

The government continued to maintain control over cinema, music, theater, and art exhibits and censored those productions deemed to transgress Islamic values. The government censored or banned films deemed to promote secularism and those containing what it deemed as non-Islamic ideas concerning women's rights, unethical behavior, drug abuse, violence, or alcoholism. According to the IHRDC, the nine-member film review council of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, consisting of clerics, former directors, former parliamentarians, and academics, must approve the content of every film before production and again before screening.

According to a report by the Tehran Electronic Trade Association, one-third of the 200 most popular websites in the world remained inaccessible in Iran due to authorities filtering or blocking them. Many websites of popular international news outlets, the political opposition, ethnic and religious minority groups, and human rights organizations were inaccessible inside Iran. Authorities also blocked private citizens from widely used online messaging tools, including Facebook, YouTube, X (formerly Twitter), Telegram, TikTok, and WhatsApp, although the government reportedly operated official and bot accounts on these platforms that disparaged minority religions and their adherents.

According to Christian NGOs, government restrictions on published religious material continued, although government-approved translations of the Bible reportedly remained available. Government officials frequently confiscated Bibles and non-Shia religious literature and pressured publishing houses printing unsanctioned non-Muslim religious materials to cease operations. Unrecognized religious minorities, such as Yarsanis and Baha'is, continued to report they were unable to legally produce or distribute religious literature. Authorities required books published by religious minorities, regardless of topic, to carry labels on the cover denoting their non-Shia Muslim authorship.

According to BIC, the government continued to hold many Baha'i properties it had seized following the 1979 revolution, including cemeteries, holy places, historical sites, and administrative centers. In its report *The Baha'i Question*, BIC reported how the Iranian government has for decades raided and looted Baha'i businesses and homes, confiscating items related to the Baha'i Faith and personal items "as a terror tactic."

The report also stated authorities often used such looting to enrich themselves.

Members of the Sunni community continued to dispute statistics published in 2015 on the website of the Mosques Affairs Regulating Authority that stated 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, usually based in residential homes or commercial premises.

Shia clerics continue to manage Sunni institutions and control Sunni educational facilities. International media and the Sunni community continued to report authorities prevented construction of any new Sunni mosques in Tehran, a city with more than one million Sunnis, according to the IHRDC. Sunnis said there were not enough mosques in the country to meet the needs of the population. Because the government barred them from building or worshiping in their own mosques in Tehran, Sunni leaders said they continued to rely on ad hoc prayer halls to practice their religion. Security officials reportedly continued to raid these unauthorized sites.

According to human rights organizations, Christian advocacy groups, and NGOs, the government continued to regulate Christian religious practices. Official reports and media continued to characterize private Christian churches in homes as “illegal networks” and “Zionist propaganda institutions.” Authorities also reportedly barred unregistered or unrecognized Christians from entering church premises and closed churches that allowed them to enter. In response, many Christian converts practiced in secret. Other unrecognized religious minorities, such as Baha’is and Yarsanis, were also forced to assemble in private homes to practice their faith in secret.

According to the Iranian American Jewish Federation, there were 16 synagogues in Tehran, of which 11 were active, meaning they regularly functioned, with a higher number of attendees on High Holy Days, and five were considered semi-active, meaning they regularly had only the minimum number of required attendees for prayers (10 men) participating once per day.

The government continued to permit Armenian Christians to exercise what sources stated was perhaps the greatest degree of religious freedom among religious minorities in the country. It extended preservation efforts to Armenian holy sites and allowed nationals of Armenian descent and Armenian visitors to observe religious and cultural traditions within their churches and dedicated clubs.

The government reportedly continued to allow recognized minority religious groups to establish community centers and some self-financed

cultural, social, athletic, and charitable associations.

According to the Tehran Jewish Committee, four Jewish schools and two preschools continued to operate in Tehran, but authorities required their principals to be Muslim. The government prohibited the teaching of Hebrew in schools but allowed individuals to learn it at synagogues. One source said Qom Seminary taught Hebrew to Muslim clerical students.

According to the report *The Baha'i Question*, the government continued to harass and expel Baha'i primary and secondary school students. School textbooks "grossly distort the Baha'i Faith" in ways that were prejudicial and aimed to stoke hatred. The report stated some books included the false claim that the Baha'i Faith "was created and supported by 'foreign powers' such as the United Kingdom and Russia, supposedly with the purpose of generating disunity among Muslims in Iran and aiming to destroy their faith in Islam." In other cases, authorities edited foreign-origin books used in classrooms to omit reference to the Baha'i faith entirely.

On September 11, Radio Farda reported the judiciary closed 12 schools and educational centers in the city of Babol, accusing the schools of "promoting the Baha'i Faith." Mohammad Sadegh Akbari, chief justice of Mazandaran Province, said activities promoting the Baha'i Faith were carried out at two schools and several educational and sports centers "employing Baha'i teachers and coaches" and that authorities had arrested two "prominent Baha'i coaches."

IranWire reported that in December, a revolutionary court in Sari, northern Iran, sentenced Baha'i citizen Saha Sabeti to 33 months in prison, a 13-year ban on working in education, and a fine of 37.5 million rials (\$900) for establishing a kindergarten that used the Montessori educational method, asserting the Montessori method was used as an instrument of Baha'i indoctrination. The court sentenced Sabeti's husband, Behrouz Rahmani, and their colleague Sanaz Alizadeh each to 10-year bans on working in education and fines of 25 million rials (\$600).

Sunni leaders continued to report authorities banned Sunni religious literature and teachings from religion courses in some public schools, even in predominantly Sunni areas. In Kurdish regions, Sunni religious courses were taught by Shia religious figures in specialized schools. A government body called the Planning Council of Sunni Religious Schools supervised Sunni educational facilities. The council chair and the majority of its members were Shia.

Assyrian Christians reported the government continued to permit their community to use its own religious textbooks in schools, but only after the government authorized their content. Armenian Christians were also

permitted to teach their faith to Armenian students as an elective at select schools.

Transnational Repression

During the year, members of the evangelical Iranian community in Armenia continued to report instances of harassment that they believed were orchestrated by Iran's state security services. Adherents cited incidents of unknown Iranian individuals questioning them about other church members' conversions to Christianity and dates of arrival in the country. Church leaders reported persistent harassment and threats to themselves and family members via telephone calls and texts, as well as sporadic threats made in person. According to one evangelical pastor, Armenian authorities took no visible steps to respond to the threats.

Media reported that in February, British Security Minister Tom Tugendhat told the Jewish community in Britain that Iran hired organized criminals to spy on their members in preparation for potential assassinations of prominent community members.

In March, Greek authorities arrested two Pakistani nationals who were allegedly planning attacks against Jewish and Israeli targets in Greece in a plot that Israeli officials blamed on Iran. Greek Public Order Minister Takis Theodorikakos said the operation was directed by a Pakistani national living in Iran. The Israeli Prime Minister's Office said the Israeli Mossad intelligence agency helped Greece identify and investigate the plot, which was part of "an extensive Iranian network run from Iran and spanning many countries."

In March, German security officials reported they suspected Ramin Yektaparast, an Iranian biker gang leader based in Iran, of directing a shooting of a synagogue in Essen, Germany, in November 2022, allegedly at the behest of the IRGC. German authorities alleged that Yektaparast used his criminal network to plot other attacks in Germany. Yektaparast fled to Iran from Germany in 2021 after being suspected of murder.

Voice of America reported that on December 19, a German court found a German-Iranian dual national identified as "Babak J." guilty of an attempted arson attack against a school adjacent to synagogue in the city of Bochum in Northern Rhine-Westphalia State in November 2022 and sentenced him to two years and nine months in prison. In a statement, the court said the plan for the attack stemmed "from an Iranian state institution." Germany's foreign ministry wrote on X that it had summoned the Iranian Chargé to discuss the matter, adding, "It is intolerable that Jewish life was to be attacked here. We will tolerate no foreign-steered violence in Germany."

In September, the director of Mossad, David Barnea, speaking at Reichman University in Tel Aviv, said the agency and its allies had foiled 27

attacks against Jews and Israelis overseas over the past year and that all of them were directed by Iran.

On October 7, the Palestinian group Hamas, which the U.S. government has designated as a terrorist organization, launched an assault inside Israeli territory. Reuters news service reported that on October 10, Supreme Leader Khamenei in a televised speech stated his country was not involved in the attack, but said, “We kiss the hands of those who planned the attack on the Zionist regime.” Some analysts, however, said Khamenei’s claim was false and that Hamas would not have been able to carry out such an attack without Iran’s long-term assistance, funding, and training.

Iranian nationals from religious minority groups also reported they sometimes received threats from apparent Iranian regime officials while abroad – either to themselves or to their family members.

Abuses Involving Discrimination or Unequal Treatment

According to human rights advocacy groups, Baha’is experienced a greater degree of official discrimination than other religious minorities. Saeid Dehghan, a human rights lawyer who has defended Baha’is in court, described to CHRI how being Baha’i is “effectively treated as a crime in the Islamic Republic of Iran, despite no explicit legal designation to that effect” and that the judicial system even penalized lawyers who defended Baha’is.

Authorities reportedly continued to deny the Baha’i, Sabeian-Mandean, and Yarsani communities, as well as other unrecognized religious minorities, access to higher education and government employment unless they declared themselves as belonging to one of the country’s recognized religions on their application forms.

Public and private universities continued to deny Baha’is admittance and expel Baha’i students once their religion became known. According to Human Rights Watch, authorities systematically refused to allow Baha’is to register at public universities because of their faith. As in previous years, the government organization responsible for holding university entrance exams and placing students, the Sazeman-e Sanjesh, used pretexts, such as “incomplete information,” “further investigation required,” or “application defective” to reject Baha’i applicants.

According to BIC, the government continued to ban Baha’is from participating in more than 25 types of work, many related to food industries, because the government deemed Baha’is “unclean.”

On his personal website, Baluch Sunni cleric Molavi Abdolhamid stated Shia and Sunni Muslims should enjoy equal rights, noting that Sunnis sacrificed for the country in the war with Iraq. Accordingly, he said,

"Sunnis hope that there should not be discrimination against Sunnis in recruitment in armed forces" and added, "Sunni citizens have been excluded from high posts like ministry, ambassadorial services, and other key positions."

The state-issued national identity card, required for almost all government and other transactions, allowed citizens to register as belonging to one of the country's recognized religions or leave the religious affiliation blank. According to the Atlantic Council, religious minorities or atheists needed to lie to receive a national identification card or face denial of access to services, such as insurance, education, banking, and public transportation.

According to the UK-based NGO Minority Rights Group International, despite constitutional guarantees of equality, workplace discrimination was institutionalized through the practice of *gozinesh* ("selection"). *Gozinesh* criteria barred members of unrecognized religious groups, disadvantaged Sunnis, and anyone holding views contrary to those of the government from employment – particularly government positions. Christian NGOs reported Christians were not allowed to serve as judges.

The government prohibited travel to Israel, which was punishable by imprisonment.

Throughout the year, authorities reportedly continued to propagate hate speech and falsehoods against religious minorities in speeches and on traditional and social media platforms. Iranian journalist Fred Petrossian, writing for the website Global Voice in December, said clerics and officials regularly labeled religious minorities *najis* (impure), "normalizing the dehumanization of these groups." Petrossian said state-controlled television and state-controlled film production "also propagate Islamic values and ideology across various genres, from comedies to social or war-themed productions."

According to the BIC report *The Baha'i Question*, the government propagated hate speech against Baha'is in traditional and digital news media, popular broadcasts, educational literature, and religious sermons. The report described how hundreds of websites and social media platforms propagated government disinformation and sought to incite hatred and violence against Baha'is through multiple forms of media, including videos, newspaper articles, books, exhibitions, and graphic art. In July, a campaign of social media posts on X celebrated the killing of Babis in the 1850s. Babis were followers of the Bab – a central figure in the Baha'i Faith who was executed for apostasy by the Iranian government in 1850. According to BIC, the campaign, which included more than 17,000 posts in July alone, spread a number of false claims and conspiracy theories about Baha'is. The social media campaign and state

media presented Baha'is as engaging in treason, threatening Iran's territorial integrity, acting as agents of Western countries, and being against Islam, among other false assertions.

In January, former deputy judiciary chief Mohammad Javad Larijani criticized prominent Sunni prayer leader Molavi Abdolhamid, labelling him a "U.S. puppet." Former chairman of the Majlis National Security Commission Alaeddin Boroujerdi warned that Abdolhamid would meet "the same fate as Montazeri," referring to a grand ayatollah and expected heir to Ayatollah Khomeini whom authorities removed from his posts and placed under house arrest after he criticized executions and human rights violations in the 1980s.

In a June 12 interview published on his personal website and in *Jamaran News*, Grand Ayatollah Javad Alavi-Boroujerdi said all individuals must be respected and granted citizens' rights, whether they are Zoroastrians, Jews, Baha'is, Christians, or atheists. Alavi-Boroujerdi praised Iraq's treatment of the Yazidi religious minority as an example for Iran to follow and said, "We do not have the right to kill or chase out of the country those who were born here, even if they do not believe in God. They have rights too. Even the constitution of the Islamic Republic recognizes these civil rights."

On September 25, at the Jamkaran Mosque in southern Tehran, IRGC General Mohammed Bagheri, the armed forces chief of staff, delivered a speech to soldiers standing in formation over a surface featuring a painted inscription that read "Israel should be erased" in both Farsi and Hebrew.

Following Hamas's October 7 terrorist attack on Israel, Islamic Consultative Assembly Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf told the assembled deputies that the "Zionist regime will never have peace until the day it is annihilated." In response, many assembly members stood and chanted, "Death to Israel!" and "Israel is annihilated!" In a posting on X, Supreme Leader Khamenei wrote, "God willing, the cancer of the usurper Zionist regime will be eradicated at the hands of the Palestinian people and the resistance forces throughout the region." On October 8, television host, Mohammad Reza Bagheri, referring to the attack, told his viewers, "All that talk about women and old ladies [Israeli civilian victims of the attack].... Look, there is no such country as 'Israel.' They have gathered from various countries to go and live in occupied lands. They went to live in a military base called 'Israel.' They are all part of this Israeli-Zionist land grab, crime, and aggression. There should be no mercy for them."

Government officials continued to employ antisemitic rhetoric in official statements and to sanction it in media outlets, publications, and books. In April, the Center for Countering Digital Hate and the Anti-Defamation League published a joint report titled *State Hate: How Iran's Press TV Uses*

Social Media to Promote Anti-Jewish Hatred. The report stated, "Press TV, a broadcasting brand founded by Iran's state-controlled media corporation, is a platform used to promote the Iranian state's hateful views of Jewish people, Holocaust denial, and LGBTQ+ and women's rights to the rest of the world.... [Among other programs,] Press TV uses social media to promote 'Palestine Declassified,' a video series which focuses its hatred towards British Jews, but spreads hateful narratives and lies about Jewish people as a whole. We argue this constitutes a 'foreign state hate operation,' that is, a foreign influence campaign by one state designed to sow division among audiences abroad." According to the report, Press TV, an entity sanctioned by the U.S. Department of the Treasury and banned from YouTube, reached an audience of 11.5 million followers on social media platforms.

International media and NGOs reported continued government-sponsored propaganda aimed at deterring the practice of or conversion to Christianity.

Other Developments Affecting Religious Freedom

On December 19, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution expressing "serious concern about ongoing severe limitations and increasing restrictions on the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief," including restrictions on the establishment of places of worship and burial practices, access to higher education and employment, and "the increased harassment, intimidation, persecution, arbitrary arrest and detention of, and incitement to hatred that leads to violence against, persons belonging to recognized and unrecognized religious minorities." The resolution called on Iran "to eliminate, in law and in practice, all forms of discrimination on the basis of thought, conscience, religion or belief, including restrictions contained in article 499 bis and article 500 bis of the Islamic Penal Code [i.e., membership in a proscribed group and engaging in 'propaganda' deemed contrary to Islam], the continuing enforcement of which has significantly escalated discrimination and violence ... and other human rights violations against persons belonging to recognized and unrecognized religious minorities." The resolution condemned "without reservation" antisemitism and Holocaust denial and called on the regime "to end ongoing systemic impunity for those who commit crimes against persons belonging to recognized and unrecognized religious minorities." It also called for repeal of mandatory hijab and chastity laws that "fundamentally undermine the human rights of women and girls, including the rights to freedom of movement and freedom of opinion and expression."

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Media outlets reported that on August 13, gunmen opened fire on the Shia Shah Cheragh Shrine in Shiraz, killing two persons and injuring eight.

Fars Province judiciary head Kazem Mousavi reported authorities arrested eight foreign nationals suspected of involvement in the terror attack and that the primary assailant, later identified as Rahmatollah Norouzof, was a Tajik national who said he had cooperated with ISIS. According to the Associated Press, the website Misan Online reported the Iranian Revolutionary Court in Fars Province sentenced Norouzof to death after a September trial, convicting him of sedition and enmity against God. The attack came less than a year after a similar attack on the same shrine, for which ISIS claimed responsibility.

The *Guardian* reported in February that Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health officials confirmed unknown individuals intentionally poisoned more than 100 schoolgirls from 13 different schools with an unknown agent in the cities of Qom and Borujerd. On March 11, CNN reported authorities announced they had arrested more than 100 individuals suspected of involvement in the poisonings. On March 16, a panel of UN experts that included UN Special Rapporteur Rehman stated that since the initial poisoning attack in November 2022, there had been targeted attacks against 91 schools located in 20 provinces across the country affecting 1,200 schoolgirls. The panel condemned the attacks, stating, "We fear that they are orchestrated to punish girls for their involvement in the movement Woman, Life, Freedom, and for expressing their opposition to mandatory hijab and voicing their demands for equality." The experts criticized the government for mounting a slow and ineffective investigation for many months. They also expressed grave concern that authorities arrested a journalist who was covering the attacks in Qom.

The Associated Press reported in February that although fewer than 10 percent of clerics worked for the government, many human rights protesters viewed all clerics as complicit in the country's repressive theocracy. Videos circulated on social media of young protesters running up behind clerics on the street and knocking off their turbans, a sign of their status.

Baha'is continued to be targets of violence and social stigma as government repression continued to intensify, according to Baha'is and advocates for their rights; perpetrators reportedly continued to act with impunity. 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. BIC continued to report cases of physical violence committed against Baha'is based on their faith.

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

According to his official website, on June 11 at a meeting with clerics, tribal elders, and academics, Molavi Abdolhamid stated, "Discrimination is the biggest problem that we, the people of Iran, have suffered for the past 43 years.... Unwritten policies in Iran have led to discrimination against Sunnis for decades." During his March 17 Friday sermon, Abdolhamid referred to Shia Muslims in Iran and said, "One ethnic group and one religion cannot rule the country."

On a June 11 broadcast on Ofogh TV, political analyst Alireza Soltanshah said that there had been "the Jewish problem" long before Zionism. He said Jews "place a massive emphasis on money," "Judaism contains all the tools necessary for becoming wealthy," "Judaism completely revolves around money," and that "Jews always had problems with their neighbors wherever they lived."

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 continued to routinely insult Sunni religious figures in class.

NGOs reported that in Kurdish regions, Shia clerics asked children to spy on Jewish students and that students who befriended Jewish or Christian classmates were often subject to surveillance by authorities.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The United States does not have diplomatic relations with Iran and did not have opportunities during the year to raise concerns in a bilateral setting with the government about its religious freedom abuses and restrictions.

The U.S. government continued to call publicly and in multilateral forums for the Iranian government to respect religious freedom and continued to condemn and promote accountability for its abuses of members of religious minority groups in a variety of ways and in different international forums. These included public statements by senior U.S. government officials, use of social media, reports issued by U.S. government agencies, support for relevant UN and NGO efforts, diplomatic initiatives, and sanctions. The United States joined 78 members of the UN General Assembly in passing the December 19 resolution calling on Iran to respect the rights of recognized and unrecognized religious minorities and women and cease discrimination and violence against these groups.

On October 6, the U.S. President issued a statement congratulating human rights activist Narges Mohammadi on being awarded the 2023 Nobel Peace Prize. The President urged the government in Iran "to immediately release her and her fellow gender equality advocates from captivity."

On August 18, the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom posted on X: "We condemn the arrest of 90-year-old Baha'i Jamaloddin Khanjani in Iran for simply being Baha'i. We call for his immediate and unconditional release and for an end to the wave of repression targeting the Baha'i community."

On April 21, the U.S. Department of State posted on X: "We are deeply concerned following the news of Mahvash Sabet's injuries sustained while in prison. No one should be punished for their faith. We call on Iranian authorities to make sure Mrs. Sabet receives medical attention immediately and release her."

On June 30, the U.S. State Department posted on X: "The Baha'i community in Iran continues to face persecution for peacefully practicing their religion. We condemn the Iranian regime's continued human rights abuses against the Baha'is. Iran should release prisoners of conscience from all faiths."

On December 21, commenting on a German court's finding that the Iranian government was involved in a 2022 attempted arson attack against a synagogue in the Northern Rhine-Westphalia region, the U.S. Special Envoy for Antisemitism wrote on X, "I am outraged – but hardly surprised – that a German court has ruled that the Iranian regime is behind yet another attack on a Jewish site in Europe. Enough is enough: Iran must end its plotting and attacks against Jews in Europe and around the world."

On January 23, the U.S. Department of the Treasury designated Mohammad Nazar Azimi, the IRGC commander responsible for the primarily Kurdish-Sunni western provinces of Kermanshah, Hamadan, and Ilam, for committing serious human rights abuses. The Treasury Department also designated Azimi's deputy, Kourosh Asiabani, who oversees IRGC activities in Kermanshah Province. In a statement accompanying the designations, the Treasury Department stated, "IRGC forces under the command of Azimi and Asiabani committed some of the worst acts of violence by Iranian security forces in the protests which erupted in September 2022. In Javanrud, a small town in Kermanshah province, IRGC troops used live ammunition, including from semi-heavy machine guns, to quell protests, killing and wounding dozens. The IRGC has shelled vehicles attempting to deliver blood bags to those wounded in local hospitals, preventing their delivery."

On March 8, the Treasury Department designated Dariush Bakhshi for committing serious human rights abuses against women and girls. Bakhshi is the head of Orumiyeh Central Prison in West Azerbaijan Province, which has a large Kurdish population. In a statement accompanying the designation, the Treasury Department stated Bakhshi permitted prison officials to sexually abuse prisoners and "has personally

overseen the physical abuse of prisoners held for political or religious reasons. Prison officials in his jurisdiction have attacked such prisoners with batons, tear gas, and electroshock weapons.”

On September 15, the U.S. Treasury Department designated 29 individuals and entities in connection with the violent repression of nationwide protests following the death of Mahsa Amini while in the custody of the morality police after its officers detained her for allegedly wearing her hijab improperly and thereby violating the country’s Islamic dress code. The Treasury Department designated senior officials in the country’s security forces, IRGC, law enforcement and prison officials, one company tied to the government’s systematic censorship and blockage of the internet, three IRGC and government-controlled media outlets, and other individuals. Designees included Gholamali Mohammadi, who heads Iran’s Prisons Organization. In a statement accompanying the designation, the Treasury Department stated, “Under his [Mohammadi’s] leadership, serious human rights abuses occurred throughout Iranian prisons, including the use of torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, detainment and physical abuse of political dissidents and religious minorities, sexual violence and coercion against female prisoners, including rape, and the abuse and torture of children.”

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 December 29, 2023, the Secretary of State redesignated Iran as a CPC and identified in connection with the designation the following sanction: visa restrictions pursuant to section 221(c) of the Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act of 2012 (TRA), for certain senior officials of the Government of Iran identified under section 221(a)(1)(C) of the TRA in connection with the commission of serious human rights abuses against citizens of Iran or their family members.

ecoi.net description:

Annual report on religious freedom (covering 2023)

Country:

Iran

Source:

[USDOS – US Department of State](#) (Author)

Published:

30 June 2024

Original link:

<https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/iran/>

Document type:

Periodical Report

Language:

English

Available on ecoi.net since:

1 July 2024

Document ID:

2111574

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Country of Origin and	T +43 1 589 00 583	F.A.Q.
Asylum Research and	F +43 1 589 00 589	Data Protection Notice
Documentation	info@ecoi.net	
(ACCORD)		

ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

