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Iran

International Religious Freedom Report 2008

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The Constitution of Iran states that Islam is the official state religion, and the doctrine followed is that of Ja'afari (Twelver) Shi'ism. The Constitution provides that "other Islamic denominations are to be accorded full respect," while the country's pre-Islamic religious groups--Zoroastrians, Christians, and Jews--are recognized as "protected" religious minorities. However, Article 4 of the Constitution states that all laws and regulations must be based on Islamic criteria. In practice, the Government severely restricted freedom of religion.

During the reporting period, respect for religious freedom in the country continued to deteriorate. Government rhetoric and actions created a threatening atmosphere for nearly all non-Shi'a religious groups, most notably for Baha'is, as well as Sufi Muslims, evangelical Christians, and members of the Jewish community. Reports of Government imprisonment, harassment, intimidation, and discrimination based on religious beliefs continued during the reporting period. Baha'i religious groups reported arbitrary arrests, expulsions from universities, and confiscation of property. Government-controlled broadcast and print media intensified negative campaigns against religious minorities, particularly the Baha'is, during the reporting period.

Although the Constitution gives Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians the status of "protected" religious minorities, in practice, those who are not Shi'a Muslims faced substantial societal discrimination. Government actions continued to support elements of society that created a threatening atmosphere for some religious minorities.

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

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 631,000 square miles and a population of 71.6 million. The population is 98 percent Muslim; 89 percent is Shi'a and 9 percent Sunni (mostly Turkmen and Arabs, Baluchs, and Kurds living in the southwest, southeast, and northwest respectively). Non-Muslims account for 2 percent of the population. There are no official statistics available on the size of the Sufi Muslim population; however, some reports estimate between two million and five million persons practice Sufism.

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

According to U.N. figures, 300,000 Christians live in the country, the majority of whom are ethnic Armenians. Unofficial estimates for the Assyrian Christian population are between 10,000 and 20,000. There are also Protestant denominations, including evangelical religious groups. Christian groups outside the country estimate the size of the Protestant Christian community to be less than 10,000, although many Protestant Christians reportedly practice in secret. Sabean-Mandaeans number 5,000 to 10,000. The Government regards Sabean-Mandaeans as Christians, and they are included among the three recognized religious minorities; however, Sabean-Mandaeans do not consider themselves Christians. The Government estimates there are 30,000 to 35,000 Zoroastrians, a primarily ethnic Persian minority; however, Zoroastrian groups claim to have 60,000 adherents. There are indications that members of all

religious minorities are emigrating at a high rate, although it is unclear if the reasons for emigration are religious or related to overall poor economic conditions.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution declares the "official religion of Iran is Islam and the doctrine followed is that of Ja'afari (Twelver) Shi'ism." All laws and regulations must be consistent with the official interpretation of Shari'a (Islamic law). The Constitution provides Sunni Muslims a large degree of religious freedom. However, the Government severely restricts religious freedom. The Constitution states that "within the limits of the law," Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians are the only recognized religious minorities who are guaranteed freedom to practice their religious beliefs. However, members of these recognized minority religious groups have reported government imprisonment, harassment, intimidation, and discrimination based on their religious beliefs.

The Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, heads a tricameral structure of government (legislative, executive, and judicial branches). The Supreme Leader is not directly elected, but chosen by a group of 86 Islamic scholars (the Assembly of Experts), who are directly elected. All acts of the Majles (Parliament) must be reviewed for strict conformity with Islamic law and the Constitution, and all candidates for any elected office must be vetted by the unelected Council of Guardians, which is composed of six clerics appointed by the Supreme Leader, and six Muslim jurists (legal scholars) nominated by the head of the judiciary and approved by the Majles.

The Government observes 14 religious holidays as national holidays, including Eid-e-Ghadir, Tassoua, Ashura, Arbaeen, Death of Prophet Mohammad, Martyrdom of Imam Reza, Birthday of Imam Ali, Ascension of Prophet Mohammad, Birthday of Imam Mahdi, Eid-e-Fitr, Martyrdom of Imam Ali, Martyrdom of Imam Jafar Sadegh, Eid-e-Ghorban, and the Islamic New Year.

The Government does not respect the right of Muslim citizens to change or renounce their religious faith. A child born to a Muslim father automatically is considered a Muslim.

Non-Muslims may not engage in public religious expression and persuasion among Muslims, and there are restrictions on published religious material. In February 2008 a revision to the Penal Code was drafted for approval by the legislature whereby apostasy, specifically conversion from Islam, would be punishable by death under the revised Penal Code. Previously, death sentences for apostasy were issued under judicial interpretations of Shari'a law. However, there were no reported cases of the death penalty being applied for apostasy during the reporting period. Proselytizing of Muslims by non-Muslims is illegal.

Evangelical church leaders are subject to pressure from authorities to sign pledges that they would not evangelize Muslims or allow Muslims to attend church services. Members of religious minorities, excluding Sunni Muslims, are prevented from serving in the judiciary and security services and from becoming public school principals.

Applicants for public sector employment are screened for their adherence to and knowledge of Islam, although members of religious minorities could serve in lower ranks of government employment, with the exception of Baha'is. However, government workers who do not observe Islam's principles and rules are subject to penalties.

The Government does not require the designation of religious affiliation on passports or national identity documents.

The Constitution states that the country's army must be Islamic and must recruit individuals who are committed to the objectives of the Islamic revolution. In practice, however, no religious minorities are exempt from military service. The law forbids non-Muslims from holding officer positions over Muslims in the armed forces. Members of religious minorities with a college education can serve as officers during their mandatory military service but cannot be career military officers.

By law religious minorities are not allowed to be elected to a representative body or to hold senior government or military positions, with the exception that 5 of a total of 290 seats in the Majles are reserved for religious minorities. Three of these seats are reserved for members of Christian religious groups,

including two seats for the country's Armenian Christians, and one for Assyrian Christians. There is also one seat to represent Jewish Iranians and one to represent Iranian Zoroastrians. While Sunnis do not have reserved seats in the Majles, they are allowed to serve in the body. Sunni Majles deputies tend to be elected from among the larger Sunni communities. Members of religious minorities are allowed to vote; however, all minority religious groups, including Sunni Muslims, are barred from being elected president.

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

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

The Government considers Baha'is to be apostates and defines the Baha'i faith as a political "sect." The Ministry of Justice states that Baha'is are permitted to enroll in schools only if they do not identify themselves as such, and that Baha'is preferably should be enrolled in schools with a strong and imposing religious ideology. There were reports that Baha'i children in public schools faced attempts to convert them to Islam.

After a brief policy change during the previous reporting period allowing Baha'i students to enroll in universities, the Government reverted to its previous practice of requiring Baha'i students to identify themselves as a religion other than Baha'i in order to register for the entrance examination. This action precluded Baha'i enrollment in state-run universities, since a tenet of the Baha'i faith is not to deny one's faith. The Ministry of Justice states that Baha'is must be excluded or expelled from universities, either in the admission process or during the course of their studies, if their religious affiliation becomes known. University applicants are required to pass an examination in Islamic, Christian, or Jewish theology, but there was no test for the Baha'i faith.

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

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

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

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

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

The Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance (Ershad) and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) monitored religious activity closely. Members of recognized religious minorities are not required to

register with the Government, and religion is not noted on national identity cards; however, their communal, religious, and cultural events and organizations, including schools, were monitored closely. Registration of Baha'is was a police function during the reporting period. The Government also required evangelical Christian groups to compile and submit membership lists for their congregations.

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

On December 18, 2007, for the fifth consecutive year the U.N. General Assembly passed another resolution condemning the human rights situation in the country and decrying the Government's harsh treatment of religious minorities. In March 2006 the U.N. Special Rapporteur (UNSR) on Freedom of Religion or Belief issued a statement of concern about the treatment of the Baha'i community in the country.

In November 2007 the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps reportedly published a report entitled "Looming Damages and Threats," in which it lists Baha'is, Sufis, feminists, and other groups as threats to the regime.

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

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

Broad restrictions on Baha'is severely undermined their ability to function as a community. Baha'i groups reported that the Government often denied applications for new or renewed business and trade licenses to Baha'is. The Government repeatedly pressured Baha'is to accept relief from mistreatment in exchange for recanting their religious beliefs.

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

During the reporting period, Baha'is faced an increasing number of public attacks, including a series of negative and defamatory articles in *Kayhan*, a government-affiliated newspaper whose managing editor was appointed by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamene'i. The national daily *Etemad* and several provincial newspapers also published defamatory articles against Baha'is.

Following an explosion in April 2008 at a mosque in Shiraz whose prayers leader was known to condemn Baha'is and Salafis in his sermons, *Kayhan* cited the prayer leader suggesting Baha'i involvement in the bombing. There were news reports in May citing the Friday prayers leader of Mashhad calling for the execution of arrested Baha'is. Radio and television broadcasts also increasingly condemned the Baha'is and their religious beliefs. These reports had the intention of arousing suspicion, distrust, and hatred for the Baha'i community.

Public and private universities continued to deny admittance to or expel Baha'i students. During the previous reporting period, the Government briefly suspended its policy against Baha'i matriculation into universities and allowed some Baha'i students to enroll. However, most of these students were expelled once their religious affiliation became known. During this reporting period, the Government reverted to its earlier policy of denying university admittance to Baha'i students.

The U.N. Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief reported the existence of internal government documents that requested the Ministry of Information, the Revolutionary Guard, and the Police Force to collect and provide to the Armed Forces Command all information about Baha'is.

There were reports that the Government compiled a list of Baha'is and their trades and employment using information from the Association of Chambers of Commerce and related associations, which are nominally independent bodies that are nonetheless heavily influenced by the Government.

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

Since August 2005 President Ahmadi-Nejad has pursued a virulent anti-Semitic campaign, including commenting on the 2006 conflict between Israel and Hezbollah as triggering the countdown for the "destruction of the Zionist regime." During the reporting period, President Ahmadi-Nejad publicly stated in news conferences that the Zionists infiltrated the world and must be stopped and destroyed together with Israel.

President Ahmadi-Nejad also regularly questioned the existence and scope of the Holocaust, which created an even more hostile environment for the Jewish community. Friday prayer leaders endorsed the President's Holocaust denial and reported the statements are "the heartfelt words of all Muslims in the world."

The Government promoted and condoned anti-Semitism in state media; however, with some exceptions, there was little government restriction of, or interference with, Jewish religious practice. The Government reportedly allowed Hebrew instruction but limited the distribution of Hebrew texts, particularly nonreligious texts, making it difficult to teach the language. Moreover, the Government required that in conformity with the schedule of other schools, Jewish schools must remain open on Saturdays, which violates Jewish law. During the reporting period, there were reports of government interference in the elections of Jewish community leaders.

Jewish citizens were free to travel out of the country but were subject to the general restriction against travel by the country's citizens to Israel. This restriction, however, was not enforced.

The Sabean-Mandaean religious community reportedly faced harassment and repression by authorities similar to that faced by other religious minorities. There were reports during previous reporting periods that members of the Sabean-Mandaean community experienced societal discrimination and pressure to convert to Islam, and they were often denied access to higher education.

Sufis within the country and Sufi organizations outside the country remained extremely concerned about growing government repression of their communities and religious practices, including increased harassment and intimidation of prominent Sufi leaders by the intelligence and security services. Government restrictions on Sufi groups and houses of worship (husseiniya) became more pronounced in recent reporting periods. There were numerous reports of Shi'a clerics and prayer leaders denouncing Sufism and the activities of Sufis in the country in both sermons and public statements.

President Ahmadi-Nejad reportedly called for an end to the development of Christianity in the country. Christian groups outside the country reported the growth of underground churches in the country during the reporting period.

The Government carefully monitored the statements and views of senior Shi'a religious leaders. The

Special Clerical Courts, established to investigate offenses and crimes committed by clerics, and which the Supreme Leader oversees directly, are not provided for in the Constitution and operate outside the judiciary. In particular, critics alleged that the clerical courts are used to prosecute certain clerics for expressing controversial ideas and for participating in nonreligious activities, including journalism.

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

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

Abuses of Religious Freedom

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

Baha'i groups outside the country reported that government authorities increased their harassment and intimidation of the members of the Baha'i community during the reporting period and extended the harassment to sympathetic Muslim neighbors, friends, and colleagues of Baha'is. According to Baha'i groups outside the country, the Baha'i community in the city of Abadeh in southern Iran experienced a particular increase in harassment.

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

Between July 7, 2007, and May 8, 2008, the Government reportedly arrested at least 41 Baha'is. As of March 2008 at least 12 remained in detention. The Government never formally charged many of the others but released them only after they posted bail. For some, bail was in the form of deeds of property; others gained their release in exchange for personal guarantees or work licenses.

There were also reports of attacks on Baha'is by unidentified assailants, including the killings of two elderly Baha'i women. On February 16, 2007, an 85-year-old Baha'i woman, Behnam Saltanat Akhzari, was killed in her home by a masked intruder. The following day, a 77-year-old Baha'i woman, Shah Beygom Dehghani, was also assaulted in her home by a masked intruder and died on March 7, 2007. There were no pending prosecutions during the reporting period.

On May 27, 2008, security officials arrested two officials of the Baha'i community in Isfahan and one other member of the Baha'i community, reportedly on charges of burying their dead at a particular site that had been used for the past 15 years. They remained detained in Isfahan prison at the end of the reporting period.

On May 14, 2008, authorities arrested six leaders of the Baha'i community at their homes in Tehran and detained them in an unknown location. The six community leaders, Fariba Kalamabadi, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, Behrouz Tavakkoli, and Vahid Tizfahm, are members of a national coordinating group of the Baha'i community. Another member of the coordinating group, Mahvash Sabet, was arrested in Mashhad on March 5, according to the Baha'i International Community.

In May 2008 an exhibition titled the "Fraudulent Myth" opened with the goal of marking the "Anniversary of the Establishment of the Zionist Regime." The exhibit, which took place in Qom, was planned by the Iranian Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. The works of 230 artists from the country and abroad are represented in the exhibition. Most of the items represent the Jews in an anti-Semitic manner. Hamid Rasaim, Advisor to Culture and Islamic Guidance, stated that the cartoon caricatures were especially blunt and each of them questioned the Holocaust, or as the Iranian Minister defined it, "That Fraudulent Myth."

On March 17, 2008, the Intelligence Ministry detained a Baha'i man, Mohammad Ismael Forouzan. Forouzan had a pending appeal against a 1-year prison sentence for unknown charges. When he appeared at the Ministry, he was informed that his appeal had been denied and that his prison sentence would begin that same day.

On March 15, 2008, the appeal court of the Province of Hamadan overturned the guilty verdicts against four Baha'is. Mouzaffar Ayyoubi, Parviz Saifi, and Behrouz Rashedi were arrested on June 18, 2006, and Shahreza Abbasi was arrested on December 13, 2007. All four had been released on bail following their arrests and appealed the judgments of "teaching against the regime." The appeal court ruled that, in view of the appellants' claim, not only were they not against the Government, but they were absolutely obedient to it, and therefore teaching the Baha'i faith could not be regarded as teaching against the regime.

On March 9, 2008, authorities arrested Touraj Amini, Iraj Amini, and Payman Amoui on charges of teaching the Baha'i faith. Iraj Amini and Payman Amoui were released on March 10, and Touraj Amini was released on March 17.

On January 31, 2008, Intelligence Ministry authorities arrested Foad Ettehadolhagh and interrogated him about the activities of the Baha'i community in Shiraz, for which he coordinated affairs on an ad hoc basis. He was released following the interrogation.

On January 31, 2008, police in Hamedan arrested and detained Aziz Pourhamzeh, Kamran Aghdasi, and Fathollah Khatbjavan. They reportedly remained in prison at the end of the period covered by this report.

On January 27, 2008, Pouriya Habibi and Simin Mokhtari were arrested and detained on charges of teaching the Baha'i faith. They reportedly remained in Evin prison at the end of the period covered by this report.

On January 15, 2008, Foad Agah was arrested and detained by the Intelligence Ministry, reportedly in the process of collecting photocopies of Baha'i pamphlets. He was released on January 21. A Muslim friend of Agah's, Ali Karimi, was with him at the time and was also detained but released within 24 hours. On December 28, 2007, Mandana Kamali was arrested and detained by officers of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps. She was interrogated about the activities of the Baha'i community in Shiraz, as she is a member of a local coordinating group for the Baha'i community in Shiraz. She was released on bail on January 10, 2008.

On December 25, 2007, Hormoz Hashemi was arrested in Shiraz for having distributed informational materials about the Baha'i faith. He reportedly stated during interrogation that he received the materials from Mandana Kamali. He was released on January 10, 2008.

On December 13, 2007, the Intelligence Ministry arrested and detained Shahreza Abbasi. Ministry officials searched his home and collected Baha'i religious materials. He was released on bail on December 21, 2007.

On November 19, 2007, the Intelligence Ministry summoned and detained Raha Sabet, Sasan Taqva, and Haleh Rouhi. The three had been arrested previously in May 2006, along with 51 other Baha'i individuals, on charges of teaching the Baha'i faith indirectly through their participation in a community education program. Fifty of those individuals were sentenced to 1 year in prison, commuted to 3 years' suspended sentence. However, Sabet, Taqva, and Rouhi were each sentenced to 4 years in prison. They were reportedly allowed temporary release for 10 days on April 9, 2008, and were in detention at an Intelligence Ministry detention facility in Shiraz at the end of the period covered by this report.

On November 18, 2007, a Baha'i man, Fayzullah Rowshan, began serving his 1-year prison sentence for "teaching activities against the system of the Islamic Republic of Iran." Rowshan was sentenced by the revolutionary court on April 25, 2007.

On November 13, 2007, authorities arrested Diyanat Haghighat, reportedly for seeking redress for expelled Baha'i students, including his daughter, Nasim Haghighat. He was released on November 27, 2007. Nasim Haghighat was charged with insulting Islam but was not detained.

On September 25, 2007, Jamaloddin Khanjani, a member of a group that coordinates the affairs of the Iranian Baha'i community, was detained by the Intelligence Ministry for five days and interrogated. He was

released on October 1, 2007, but the Intelligence Ministry summoned him three more times for questioning during 2007.

Sufi Muslims likewise faced an increasing repression campaign, including defamatory attacks in newspapers and in sermons by Shi'a clerics.

On November 11, 2007, authorities arrested 180 Sufis in the city of Boroujerd, following clashes with police. The Sufis were reportedly arrested for attacking a Shi'a mosque because a local cleric at that mosque had publicly called for their lodge to be shut down. During the clashes, parts of the Sufi mosque were reportedly destroyed.

On May 21, 2007, security forces arrested the leader of the Nematollahi Gonabadi Sufi order, Nurali Tabandeh. Security forces did not disclose the reason for his arrest and it is unknown whether formal charges were brought against him.

On May 31, 2008, authorities arrested Christian Mohsen Namvar from his home in Tehran. He was released on June 26 after his family paid the bail of \$43,000, although authorities told his family he would only be released for a short time. Namvar allegedly was suffering from injuries he received in prison and had previously been detained in 2007.

On May 13, 2008, in Shiraz, two Christian converts, Mahmoud Matin and a man known only by his first name--Arash--were arrested by police as they walked in a city park.

On May 11, 2008, authorities in Shiraz arrested Mojtaba Hussein, his father, brother, and sister and confiscated his family's books, compact discs (CDs), and computers. Although his father and siblings were released later that day, Mr. Hussein remains behind bars. His family did not know where he was being held and requests for a visit were denied.

Amnesty International reported that in April 2008, a man and a pregnant woman, also believed to be Christian converts, were arrested in the city of Amol, north of Tehran.

In 2007 there were three reported killings of senior Sunni clerics, including the June 24, 2007, killing of Hesham Saymary in the ethnically Arab dominated province of Khuzestan.

The Government seized many Baha'i properties following the 1979 revolution and has not returned any, including Baha'i cemeteries, holy places, historical sites, administrative centers, or other assets. Many properties have been destroyed. Baha'is were generally prevented from burying and honoring their dead in accordance with their religious tradition.

The property rights of Baha'is were generally disregarded, and they suffered frequent government harassment and persecution. The Government raided Baha'i homes and businesses and confiscated large numbers of private and business properties, as well as religious material, belonging to Baha'is. The Government reportedly seized numerous Baha'i homes and handed them over to an agency of Supreme Leader Khamene'i. The Government also seized private homes in which Baha'i youth classes were held, despite the owners having proper ownership documents. In one case on January 27, 2008, members of the Basij militia reportedly bulldozed part of a Baha'i family's home in Abadeh.

The Baha'i community reported that the Government's seizure of Baha'i personal property and its denial of Baha'i access to education and employment was eroding the economic base of the community and threatening its survival. On June 29, 2006, the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing found that government expropriations of property in the country "seem to have targeted disproportionately" the property of Baha'is and other ethnic and religious minorities. He further mentioned that many of the confiscation verdicts made by Iranian Revolutionary Courts declared that "the confiscation of the property of the evil sect of the Baha'i [were] legally and religiously justifiable."

There were reports during the reporting period of authorities forcing Baha'i businesses to close, placing restrictions on their businesses, and asking managers of private companies to dismiss their Baha'i employees.

Christians, particularly evangelicals, continued to be subject to harassment and close surveillance. During the reporting period, the Government vigilantly enforced its prohibition on proselytizing by closely

monitoring the activities of evangelical Christians, discouraging Muslims from entering church premises, closing their churches, and arresting Christian converts. Members of evangelical congregations were required to carry membership cards, photocopies of which must be provided to the authorities. Worshipers were subjected to identity checks by authorities posted outside congregation centers. The Government restricted meetings for evangelical services to Sundays, and church officials were ordered to inform the Ministry of Information and Islamic Guidance before admitting new members.

Forced Religious Conversions

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

Government officials reportedly offered Baha'is relief from mistreatment in exchange for recanting their religious affiliation, and if incarcerated, recanting their religious affiliation as a precondition for releasing them.

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

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The continuous presence of the country's pre-Islamic, non-Muslim communities, such as Zoroastrians, Jews, Sabean-Mandaeans, and Christians, accustomed the population to the participation of non-Muslims in society; however, government actions continued to support elements of society that created a threatening atmosphere for some religious minorities. The President's agenda stressed the importance of Islam in enhancing "national solidarity" and mandated that government-controlled media emphasize Islamic culture in order to "cause subcultures to adapt themselves to public culture."

Since President Ahmadi-Nejad took office in August 2005, conservative media intensified a campaign against non-Muslim religious minorities, and political and religious leaders issued a continual stream of inflammatory statements. The campaigns against non-Muslims contributed to a significantly worse situation for non-Muslim society throughout the reporting period.

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

Baha'is faced government-sanctioned discrimination in the workplace. Baha'i graveyards in Abadeh and other cities were desecrated, and the Government did not seek to identify or punish the perpetrators.

Baha'i groups outside the country reported vandalism of Baha'i cemeteries, the desecration of a body exhumed from a Baha'i grave in Abadeh, and attacks against a Baha'i cemetery in Najafabad.

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

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

On May 26, 2008, the government-affiliated newspaper *Kayhan* reported, "The popular movement

dedicated to combating Baha'ism will soon announce its existence through the establishment of an Internet website."

Religious minorities were allowed to handle food and own food businesses, but most Muslim conservatives would not eat food prepared by Jews during the reporting period.

Many Jews sought to limit their contact with or support for the state of Israel out of fear of reprisal. Anti-American and anti-Israeli demonstrations included the denunciation of Jews, as opposed to the past practice of denouncing only "Israel" and "Zionism," adding to the threatening atmosphere for the community. Jewish community members continued to emigrate, partially due to continued anti-Semitism by the Government and within society.

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

During the reporting period, a documentary titled "The Secret Armageddon" was broadcast on state television. The documentary depicted anti-Semitic stereotypes of domination and the "Jewish plan for genocide of humanity."

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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

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

On numerous occasions, the U.S. State Department spokesman has addressed the situation of the Baha'i and Jewish communities in the country. The U.S. Government has publicly condemned the treatment of the Baha'is in U.N. resolutions, including one that passed in the General Assembly in 2007. The U.S. Government encourages other Governments to make similar statements.

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