

Iran (27)

(285)



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Iran

International Religious Freedom Report

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution declares that the "official religion of Iran is Islam and the doctrine followed is that of "Ja'fari (Twelver) Shi'ism." The Government restricts freedom of religion.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. Members of the country's religious minorities—including Baha'is, Jews, Christians, and Sufi Muslims—reported imprisonment, harassment, and intimidation based on their religious beliefs. At least four Baha'is were among those still imprisoned for reasons related to their faith, while eight Jews remained in prison after being convicted in 2000 for cooperating with a hostile government, belonging to an illegal organization, and recruiting members in an illegal organization.

Society is accustomed to the presence of non-Muslim communities, some of which predate Islam. However, government actions create a threatening atmosphere for some religious minorities, especially Baha'is, Jews, and evangelical Christians.

The U.S. Government makes clear its objections to the Government's treatment of religious minorities in public statements, support for relevant U.N. and nongovernmental organization (NGO) efforts, and diplomatic contacts with other countries.

In October 2001, the Secretary of State designated Iran as a "country of particular concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act, for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. This action followed similar designations in September 1999 and September 2000.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of approximately 631,663 square miles, and its population is approximately 66 million. The population is approximately 99 percent Muslim, of which 89 percent are Shi'a and 10 percent Sunni (mostly Turkomen, Arabs, Baluchs, and Kurds living in the southwest, southeast, and northwest). Sufi Brotherhoods are popular, but there are no reliable figures available regarding the size of the Sufi population.

Baha'is, Christians, Zoroastrians, Mandaeans, and Jews constitute less than 1 percent of the population. The largest non-Muslim minority is the Baha'i community, which has an estimated 300,000 to 350,000 adherents throughout the country. Estimates on the size of the Jewish community vary from 20,000 to 30,000. These figures represent a substantial reduction from the estimated 75,000 to 80,000 Jews who resided in the country prior to the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The Government estimates the Christian community to number approximately 115,000 to 120,000 persons; however, the U.N. Special Representative (UNSR) used the figure of 300,000 in a 2001 report. The majority of the Christian population are ethnic Armenians and Assyro-Chaldeans. There also are Protestant denominations, including evangelical churches. The UNSR reported that Christians are emigrating at an estimated rate of 15,000 to 20,000 per year. The Mandaeans, a community whose religion draws on pre-Christian gnostic beliefs, number approximately 5,000 to 10,000 persons, with members residing primarily in Khuzestan in the southwest.

The Government figures reported by the United Nations in 1996 place the size of the Zoroastrian community at approximately 35,000 adherents. Zoroastrian groups cite a larger figure of approximately 60,000, according to the same U.N. report. Zoroastrians mainly are ethnic Persians and are concentrated in the cities of Tehran, Kerman, and Yazd. Zoroastrianism was the official religion of the pre-Islamic Sassanid Empire and thus played a central role in the country's history.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Government restricts freedom of religion. The Constitution declares that the "official religion of Iran is Islam and the doctrine followed is that of Ja'fari (Twelver) Shi'ism." It also states that "other Islamic denominations are to be accorded full respect," and designates Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians as the only "recognized religious minorities," which, "within the limits of the law," are permitted to perform their religious rites and ceremonies and "to act according to their own canon in matters of personal

affairs and religious education." Although the Constitution states that "the investigation of individuals' beliefs is forbidden" and that "no one may be molested or taken to task simply for holding a certain belief," the adherents of religions not specifically protected under the Constitution do not enjoy freedom of activity. This situation most directly affects adherents of the Baha'i Faith. The Government regards the Baha'i community, whose faith originally derives from a strand of Islam, as a misguided or wayward "sect." The Government fuels anti-Baha'i and anti-Jewish sentiment in the country for political purposes. Government officials have stated that the Baha'is "are not a religious minority, but a political organization which was associated with the Shah's regime, is against the Iranian Revolution and engages in espionage activities." However, government officials reportedly nonetheless have stated that, as individuals, all Baha'is are entitled to their beliefs and are protected under other articles of the Constitution as citizens.

The central feature of the country's Islamic republican system is rule by a "religious jurisconsult." The Supreme Leader of Islamic Republic controls the most important levers of power; he is chosen by a group of 83 religious scholars. All acts of the Majles (legislative body) must be reviewed for conformity with Islamic law and principles by the 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 elected by parliament.

Religious activity is monitored closely by the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance and by the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS). Adherents of recognized religious minorities are not required to register individually with the Government; however, their community, religious, and cultural events and organizations, including schools, are monitored closely. Registration of Baha'is is a police function. Evangelical Christian groups have been pressured by government authorities to compile and submit membership lists for their congregations, but evangelicals have resisted this demand. Non-Muslim owners of grocery shops are required to indicate their religious affiliation on the fronts of their shops.

In a March 2002 meeting at the Vatican with Pope John Paul II, Speaker of the Majles Mahdi Karrubi called for the expansion of Tehran-Vatican ties and said that dialog among religions can promote the restoration of peace and the elimination of violence in the world. In June 2002, Mohammad Khamenei, brother of the Supreme Leader, told the Pope in a Vatican meeting that dialog among religions was an ideal means for establishing global peace and justice.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Religious minorities, by law and practice, are barred from being elected to a representative body (except to the seats in the Majles reserved for minorities, as provided for in the Constitution) and from holding senior government or military positions. Members of religious minorities are allowed to vote, but they may not run for President. All religious minorities suffer varying degrees of officially sanctioned discrimination, particularly in the areas of employment, education, and housing.

Members of religious minorities are barred from becoming public school principals. Applicants for public sector employment are screened for their adherence to Islam. The law stipulates penalties for government workers who do not observe "Islam's principles and rules." Religious minorities may not serve in the judiciary or the security services. The Constitution states that "the Army of the Islamic Republic of Iran must be an Islamic army, i.e., committed to an Islamic ideology and the people, and must recruit into its service individuals who have faith in the objectives of the Islamic Revolution and are devoted to the cause of achieving its goals." Baha'is are prohibited from government employment.

University applicants are required to pass an examination in Islamic theology, which limits the access of most religious minorities to higher education, although all public school students, including non-Muslims, must study Islam. Applicants for public sector employment similarly are screened for their knowledge of Islam.

The Government generally allows recognized religious minorities to conduct the religious education of their adherents. This includes separate and privately funded Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian schools but does not include Baha'i schools. The Ministry of Education, which imposes certain curriculum requirements, supervises these schools. With few exceptions, the directors of such private schools must be Muslim. Attendance at the schools is not mandatory for recognized religious minorities. All textbooks used in course work, including religious texts, must be approved for use by the Ministry of Education. Religious texts in non-Persian languages require approval by the authorities for use. This requirement imposes sometimes significant translation expenses on minority communities.

Recognized religious minorities may provide religious instruction in non-Persian languages but often come under pressure from the authorities when conducting such instruction in Persian. In particular evangelical Christian and Jewish communities suffer harassment and arrest by authorities for the printing of materials or delivery of sermons in Persian.

Recognized religious minorities are allowed by the Government to establish community centers and certain cultural, social, sports, or charitable associations that they finance themselves. This does not apply to the Baha'i community, which since 1983 has been denied the right to assemble officially or to maintain administrative institutions. Because the Baha'i Faith has no clergy, the denial of the right to form such institutions and elect officers threatens its existence in the country.

Religious minorities suffer discrimination in the legal system, receiving lower awards than Muslims in injury and death lawsuits, and incurring heavier punishments. Muslim men are free to marry non-Muslim women but marriages between Muslim women and non-Muslim men are not recognized.

The Government is highly suspicious of any proselytizing of Muslims by non-Muslims and can be harsh in its response, in particular against Baha'is and evangelical Christians.

The Government does not ensure the right of citizens to change or renounce their religious faith. Apostasy, specifically conversion from Islam, can be punishable by death.

The Baha'i Faith originated in Iran during the 1840's as a reformist movement within Shi'a Islam. Initially it attracted a wide following among Shi'a clergy. The political and religious authorities of that time joined to suppress the movement, and since then the hostility of the Shi'a clergy to the Baha'i Faith has remained strong. Baha'is are considered apostates because of their claim to a valid religious revelation subsequent to that of Mohammed. The Baha'i Faith is defined by the Government as a political "sect," historically linked to the Pahlavi regime and, hence, counterrevolutionary. Historically at risk in the country, Baha'is often have suffered increased levels of harassment and abuse during times of political unrest.

Baha'is may not teach or practice their faith or maintain links with coreligionists abroad. The fact that the Baha'i world headquarters (established by the founder of the Baha'i Faith in the 19th century, in what was then Ottoman-controlled Palestine) is situated in what is now the state of Israel, exposes Baha'is to government charges of "espionage on behalf of Zionism," in particular when caught communicating with or sending monetary contributions to the Baha'i headquarters.

Broad restrictions on Baha'is appear to be aimed at destroying them as a community. Baha'is repeatedly have been offered relief from mistreatment in exchange for recanting their faith. Baha'i cemeteries, holy places, historical sites, administrative centers, and other assets were seized shortly after the 1979 revolution. None of the properties have been returned, and many have been destroyed.

Baha'is are not allowed to bury and honor their dead in keeping with their religious tradition. They are permitted access only to areas of wasteland that the Government designates for their use, and are not allowed to mark the graves. Many historic Baha'i gravesites have been desecrated or destroyed. In 2000 in the city of Abadeh, a Revolutionary Guard officer bulldozed a Baha'i cemetery with 22 graves.

In what appeared to be a hopeful development, in 2002 the Government offered the Tehran community a piece of land for use as a cemetery. However, the land was in the desert, with no access to water, making it impossible to perform Baha'i mourning rituals. In addition the Government stipulated that no markers be put on individual graves and that no mortuary facilities be built on the site, making it impossible to perform a proper burial.

Baha'i group meetings and religious education, which often take place in private homes and offices, are curtailed severely. Public and private universities continue to deny admittance to Baha'i students, a particularly demoralizing blow to a community that traditionally has placed a high value on education. Denial of access to higher education appears aimed at the eventual impoverishment of the Baha'i community.

Baha'is regularly are denied compensation for injury or criminal victimization. Government authorities claim that only Muslim plaintiffs are eligible for compensation in these circumstances.

A 1993 law prohibits government workers from membership in groups that deny the "divine religions," terminology that the Government uses to label members of the Baha'i Faith. The law also stipulates penalties for government workers who do not observe "Islamic principles and rules."

In 1993 the UNSR reported the existence of a government policy directive regarding the Baha'is. According to the directive, the Supreme Revolutionary Council instructed government agencies to block the progress and development of the Baha'i community, expel Baha'i students from universities, cut Baha'i links with groups outside the country, restrict employment of Baha'is, and deny Baha'is "positions of influence," including in education. The Government claims that the directive is a forgery. However, it appears to be an accurate reflection of current government practice designed to eradicate slowly the Baha'i community.

In September 2001, the Ministry of Justice issued a report that reiterated that government policy continued to aim at the eventual elimination of the Baha'is as a community. It stated in part that Baha'is would only be permitted to enroll in schools if they did not identify themselves as Baha'is, and that Baha'is preferably should be enrolled in schools that have a strong and imposing religious ideology. The report also stated that Baha'is must be expelled from universities, either in the admission process or during the course of their studies, once it becomes known that they are Baha'is.

While in recent years the Government has eased some restrictions, thereby enabling Baha'is to obtain food-ration booklets and send their children to public elementary and secondary schools, the prohibition against the admission of Baha'is to universities remains. Thousands of Baha'is dismissed from government jobs in the early 1980's receive no unemployment benefits and have been required to repay

the Government for salaries or pensions received from the first day of employment. Those unable to do so face prison sentences.

Over the past several years, the Government has taken some positive steps in recognizing the rights of Baha'is, as well as other religious minorities. In November 1999, President Khatami publicly stated that no one in the country should be persecuted because of his or her religious beliefs. He added that he would defend the civil rights of all citizens, regardless of their beliefs or religion. Subsequently the Expediency Council approved the "Right of Citizenship" bill, affirming the social and political rights of all citizens and their equality before the law. In February 2000, following approval of the bill, the head of the judiciary issued a circular letter to all registry offices throughout the country that provided for any couple to be registered as husband and wife without being required to state their religious affiliation. The measure effectively permits the registration of Baha'i marriages in the country. Previously Baha'i marriages were not recognized by the Government, leaving Baha'i women open to charges of prostitution. Thus children of Baha'i marriages were not recognized as legitimate and therefore denied inheritance rights.

While Jews are a recognized religious minority, allegations of official discrimination are frequent. The Government's anti-Israel policies, along with a perception among radical Muslim elements that Jewish citizens support Zionism and the State of Israel, create a threatening atmosphere for the small Jewish community. Jewish leaders reportedly are reluctant to draw attention to official mistreatment of their community due to fear of government reprisal.

In principle with some exceptions, there appears to be little restriction or interference with the religious practice of Judaism. However, education of Jewish children has become more difficult in recent years. The Government reportedly allows the teaching of Hebrew, recognizing that it is necessary for Jewish religious practice. However, it strongly discourages teachers from distributing Hebrew texts to students, in practice making it difficult to teach the language. Moreover, the Government has required that several Jewish schools remain open on Saturdays, the Jewish Sabbath, in conformity with the schedule of other schools in the school system. Because working or attending school on the Sabbath violates Jewish religious law, this requirement has made it difficult for observant Jews to both attend school and adhere to important tenets of their religion.

Jews are permitted to obtain passports and to travel outside the country, but often are denied the multiple-exit permits that normally are issued to citizens. With the exception of certain business travelers, Jews are required by the authorities to obtain clearance (and pay additional fees) before each trip abroad. The Government appears concerned about the emigration of Jews and permission generally is not granted for all members of a Jewish family to travel outside the country at the same time. Jews were removed progressively from government positions after the 1979 revolution.

According to the U.N. High Commission for Refugees Background Paper on Iran, the Mandeans are regarded as Christians, and are included among the country's three recognized religious minorities. However, Mandeans regard themselves not as Christians, but as adherents of a religion that predates Christianity in both belief and practice. Mandeans enjoyed official support as a distinct religion prior to the revolution, but their legal status as a religion since then has been the subject of debate in the Majles and never has been clarified. The small community faces discrimination similar to that faced by the country's other religious minorities.

Although Sunni Muslims are accorded full respect under the terms of the Constitution, some groups claim to be discriminated against by the Government. In particular Sunnis cite the lack of a Sunni mosque in Tehran, and claim that authorities refuse to authorize construction of a Sunni place of worship in the capital. Sunnis also have accused the state broadcasting company of airing programming insulting to Sunnis.

Sufi organizations outside the country remain concerned about repression by the authorities of Sufi religious practices.

Shortly after the 1979 revolution, the Government repealed the Family Protection Law, a hallmark bill that was adopted in 1967, providing women with increased rights in the home and workplace, and replaced it with a legal system based largely on Shari'a (Islamic law). The Government enforces gender segregation in most public spaces, and prohibits women from interacting openly with unmarried men or men not related to them. Women must ride in a reserved section on public buses and enter public buildings, universities, and airports through separate entrances. Women are prohibited from attending male sporting events, although this restriction does not appear to be enforced universally. While the enforcement of conservative Islamic dress codes has varied with the political climate since the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, what women wear in public is not entirely a matter of personal choice. Women are subject to harassment by the authorities if their dress or behavior is considered inappropriate and may be sentenced to flogging or imprisonment for such violations. The law prohibits the publication of pictures of uncovered women in the print media, including pictures of foreign women. There are penalties for failure to observe Islamic dress codes at work.

In 1998 the Majles passed legislation that mandated segregation of the sexes in the provision of medical care. The bill provided for women to be treated only by female physicians and men by male physicians, which raised questions about the quality of care that women could receive under such a regime, considering the current imbalance between the number of trained and licensed male and female physicians and specialists.

Muslim women may not marry non-Muslim men. The testimony of a woman is worth only half that of a man in court. A married woman must obtain the written consent of her husband before traveling outside the country.

In October 2000, the Majles passed a bill to raise the legal age of marriage for women from 9 to 15. However, in November 2000, the Council of Guardians rejected the bill as contrary to Islamic law, although even under the current law, marriage at the minimum age is rare. All women, no matter the age, must have the permission of their father or a living male relative in order to marry. The law allows for the practice of *Siqeh*, or temporary marriage, a Shi'a custom in which a woman or a girl may become the wife of a married or single Muslim male after a simple and brief religious ceremony. The *Siqeh* marriage may last for a night or as little as 30 minutes. The bond is not recorded on identification documents, and, according to Islamic law, men may have as many *Siqeh* wives as they wish. Such wives are not granted rights associated with traditional marriage.

Under legislation passed in 1983, women have the right to divorce, and regulations promulgated in 1984 substantially broadened the grounds on which a woman may seek a divorce. However, a husband is not required to cite a reason for divorcing his wife. In 1986 the Government issued a 12-point "contract" to serve as a model for marriage and divorce, which limits the privileges accorded to men by custom and traditional interpretations of Islamic law. The model contract also recognized a divorced woman's right to a share in the property that couples acquire during their marriage and to increased alimony rights. Women who remarry are forced to give up custody of children from earlier marriages to the child's father. In 1998 the Majles passed a law that granted custody of minor children to the mother in certain divorce cases in which the father is proven unfit to care for the child. The measure was enacted because of the complaints of mothers who had lost custody of their children to former husbands with drug addictions and criminal records.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

According to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States, since 1979 more than 200 Baha'is have been killed and 15 have disappeared and are presumed dead. The Government continued to imprison and detain Baha'is based on their religious beliefs.

The Government appears to adhere to a practice of keeping a small number of Baha'is in arbitrary detention, some at risk of execution, at any given time. There were four Baha'is reported to be in prison for practicing their faith at the end of the period covered by this report, two facing life sentences and two facing sentences of 15 years. In addition the Government appears to engage in harassment of the Baha'i community by arresting Baha'is arbitrarily, charging them, and then releasing them, often without dropping the charges against them. Those with charges still pending against them fear arrest at any time.

Two Baha'is, Sirus Zabihi-Moghaddam and Hadayat Kashefi-Najafabadi, were tried in 1998 and later sentenced to death by a revolutionary court in Mashad for practicing their faith. In 2000 the sentences were reduced to 7 and 5 years respectively. Kashefi-Najafabadi was released in October 2001, after serving 4 years of his sentence. Zabihi-Moghaddam, who originally was arrested in November 1997, was released in June 2002.

The Government continued to imprison and detain Baha'is based on their religious beliefs. Manuchehr Khulusi was arrested in June 1999 while visiting fellow Baha'is in the town of Birjand, and was imprisoned until his release in May 2000. During his imprisonment, Khulusi was interrogated, beaten, held in solitary confinement, and denied access to his lawyer. The charges brought against him remain unknown, but they were believed to be related to his faith. The Islamic Revolutionary Court in Mashhad held a 2-day trial in September 1999 and sentenced Khulusi to death in February 2000. Despite Khulusi's release, it is unclear if the conviction and death sentence against him still stand.

The property rights of Baha'is generally are disregarded. Since 1979 large numbers of private and business properties belonging to Baha'is have been confiscated. During the period covered by this report, 14 Baha'i homes were seized and handed over to an agency of Supreme Leader Khamene'i. Authorities reportedly confiscated Baha'i properties in Kata and forced several families to leave their homes and farmlands. Authorities also imprisoned some farmers, and did not permit others to harvest their crops. In 2000 authorities in Tehran, Isfahan, and Shiraz reportedly also confiscated eight buildings belonging to Baha'is. In one instance, a woman from Isfahan who legally traveled abroad found that her home had been confiscated when she returned home. During the period covered by the report, the Government also seized private homes in which Baha'i youth classes were held despite the owners having proper ownership documents. In 1999 three Baha'i homes in Yazd and one in Arbakan were confiscated because their owners were Baha'is. The Government's seizure of Baha'i personal property, as well as its denial of Baha'i access to education and employment, are eroding the economic base of the Baha'i community.

In 1998 after a nationwide raid of more than 500 Baha'i homes and offices, as well as numerous arrests, the authorities closed the Baha'i Institute of Higher Learning. Also known as the "Open University," the Institute was established by the Baha'i community shortly after the revolution to offer higher educational opportunities to Baha'i students who had been denied access to the country's high schools and universities. The Institute remains closed.

It has become somewhat easier for Baha'is to obtain passports in order to travel abroad. In addition some Iranian embassies abroad do not require applicants to state a religious affiliation. In such cases, it is easier for Baha'is to renew passports. Nevertheless, in February 2001, the Government denied visas to foreigners in the Baha'i delegation to the Asia-Pacific Regional Preparatory Conference for the World Conference on Racism, held in Tehran. The delegation was composed of American, Japanese, South Korean, and Indian nationals.

The authorities particularly are vigilant in curbing what is perceived as proselytizing activities by evangelical Christians whose services are conducted in Persian. Government officials have reacted to such activity by closing evangelical churches and arresting converts. Members of evangelical congregations have been required to carry membership cards, photocopies of which must be provided to the authorities. Worshipers are subject to identity checks by authorities posted outside congregation centers. Meetings for evangelical services have been restricted by the authorities to Sundays, and church officials have been ordered to inform the Ministry of Information and Islamic Guidance before admitting new members to their congregations.

Because conversion of a Muslim to a non-Muslim religion is considered apostasy under Shari'as enforced in the country, non-Muslims may not proselytize Muslims without putting their own lives at risk. 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.

Mistreatment of evangelical Christians continued during the period covered by this report. Christian groups have reported instances of government harassment of churchgoers in Tehran, in particular against worshipers at the Assembly of God congregation in the capital. Instances of harassment cited included conspicuous monitoring outside Christian premises by Revolutionary Guards to discourage Muslims or converts from entering church premises, and demands for the presentation of the identity papers of worshipers inside.

Some Jewish groups outside the country cite an increase in anti-Semitic propaganda in the official and semiofficial media as adding to the pressure felt by the Jewish community. One example cited is the periodic publication of the anti-Semitic and fictitious "Protocols of the Elders of Zion," both by the Government and by periodicals associated with hard-line elements of the regime. In 1986 the Iranian Embassy in London was reported to have published and distributed the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" in English. The Protocols also were published in serial form in the country in 1994 and again in January 1999. On the latter occasion, they were published in *Sobh*, a conservative monthly publication reportedly aligned with the security services.

In February and March 1999, 13 Jews were arrested in the cities of Shiraz and Isfahan. Among the group were several prominent rabbis, teachers of Hebrew, and their students. The charges centered on alleged acts of espionage on behalf of Israel, an offense punishable by death. The 13 were detained for over a year before trial, largely in solitary confinement, without official charges or access to lawyers. In April 2000, the defendants were appointed lawyers, and a closed trial commenced in a revolutionary court in Shiraz. Human rights groups and governments around the world criticized the lack of due process in the proceedings. The UNSR characterized the proceedings as "in no way fair." On July 1, 2000, 10 of the 13, along with 2 Muslim defendants, were convicted on charges of illegal contact with Israel, conspiracy to form an illegal organization, and recruiting agents. They received prison sentences ranging from 4 to 13 years. Three were acquitted. The lawyers of those convicted filed an appeal and on September 21, 2000, an appeals court overturned the convictions for forming an illegal organization and recruiting agents, but upheld the convictions for illegal contacts with Israel. Their sentences were reduced to between 2 and 9 years' imprisonment. One of the 10 convicted was released in February 2001 upon completion of his prison term. A second was released at the end of his prison term in January 2002.

Jewish groups outside the country noted that the March 1999 arrest of the 13 Jewish individuals coincided with an increase in anti-Semitic propaganda in newspapers and journals associated with hardline elements of the Government. Since the beginning of the trial, Jewish businesses in Tehran and Shiraz have been targets of vandalism and boycotts, and Jews reportedly have suffered personal harassment and intimidation.

In 2002 the group Families of Iranian Jewish Prisoners (FIJP) published the names of 12 Iranian Jews who disappeared while attempting to escape from Iran in the 1990's. Babak Shaoulani Tehrani (born in 1977) and Shaheen Nikkhoo (1974) disappeared on June 8, 1994; Behzad (Kamran) Salari (1973) and Farhad Ezzati (1972) on September 21, 1994; Homayoun Balazadeh (1958), Omid Solouki (1979), Reuben Cohan-Masliah (1977), and Ibrahim Cohan-Masliah (1978) on December 8, 1994; Syrus Gaharamany (1939), Ibrahim Gaharamany (1937), Norallah Rbizadeh (Felfeli) (1952) on February 12, 1997; and Es-haagh Hassid (Hashid) (1933) on February 15, 1997. Hassid was last seen in Khorramabad Province. The other 11 all disappeared in Baluchistan Province. Their families have had no contact with them since the dates of their disappearance, but reported anecdotal evidence that some of them are alive and being held in prison. The Government never has provided any information regarding their whereabouts and has not charged any of them with crimes. FIJP believes that the Government has dealt with these cases differently than other such cases because the 12 persons involved are Jewish.

Numerous Sunni clerics have been killed in recent years, some allegedly by government agents.

There were no reports of government harassment of the Zoroastrian community during the period covered by this report.

The Government restricts the movement of several senior religious leaders, some of whom have been under house arrest for years, and often charges members of religious minorities with crimes such as drug offenses, "confronting the regime," and apostasy.

The Special Clerical Court (SCC) system, which was established in 1987 to investigate offenses and crimes committed by clerics, and which is overseen directly by the Supreme Leader, is not provided for in the Constitution, and operates outside the domain of the judiciary. In particular critics alleged that the clerical courts were used to prosecute certain clerics for expressing controversial ideas and for participating in activities outside the area of religion, including journalism.

During the latter part of 2000, a Special Clerical Court began the trial of Hojatoleslam Hassan Yousefi Eshkevari, a cleric who participated in a conference in Berlin on Iran, on charges of apostasy, "corruption on earth," "declaring war on God," and "denial of basic religious principles," which potentially carry the death penalty. Eshkevari has called for more liberal interpretations of Islamic law in certain areas. The verdict was not announced, but, according to Amnesty International, Eshkevari widely was reported to have been sentenced to death. In November 2001, following domestic and international criticism, his sentence reportedly was reduced to 30 months' imprisonment and removal of his status as a cleric. In November 1999, former Interior Minister and Vice President Abdollah Nouri was sentenced by a branch of the SCC to a 5-year prison term for allegedly publishing "anti-Islamic" articles, insulting government officials, promoting friendly relations with the United States, and providing illegal publicity to dissident cleric Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri in the pages of Khordad, a newspaper that was established by Nouri in late 1998 and closed at the time of his arrest. Nouri used the public trial to attack the legitimacy of the SCC.

In January 2001, judicial authorities closed *Kiyan*, a 10-year-old independent journal specializing in religious and philosophical issues. The Tehran General Court ordered the closure. The Judge stated that *Kiyan* had "published lies, disturbed public opinion and insulted sacred religion."

Laws based on religion were used to stifle freedom of expression. Independent newspapers and magazines have been closed, and leading publishers and journalists were imprisoned on vague charges of "insulting Islam" or "calling into question the Islamic foundation of the Republic." In November 2000, a Revolutionary Court began the trials of 17 writers, intellectuals, and political figures who took part in an April 2000 conference in Berlin regarding the implications of the February 2000 Majles elections. In January 2001, verdicts on charges including "insulting Islam" were announced after unfair and closed trials. At least eight of the defendants were sentenced to custodial sentences. Charges were reduced on appeal in December 2001. Some individuals were acquitted, some sentences were reduced, and other sentences were converted to fines.

Forced Religious Conversions

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including 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. However, a child born to a Muslim father automatically is considered a Muslim.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The continuous activity of the country's pre-Islamic, non-Muslim communities, such as Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians, has accustomed the population to the presence of non-Muslims in society. However, government actions create a threatening atmosphere for some religious minorities.

The Jewish community has been reduced to less than one-half of its prerevolutionary size. Some of this emigration is connected with the larger, general waves of departures following the establishment of the Islamic Republic, but some also stems from continued perceived anti-Semitism on the part of the Government and within society.

The Government's anti-Israel policies and the trial of the 13 Jews in 2000, along with the perception among some of the country's radicalized elements that Iranian Jews support Zionism and the State of Israel, created a threatening atmosphere for the Jewish community (see Section II). Many Jews have sought to limit their contact with or support for the State of Israel out of fear of reprisal. Recent anti-American and anti-Israeli demonstrations have 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.

Sunni Muslims encounter religious discrimination at the local level, and there were reports of discrimination against practitioners of the Sufi tradition during the period covered by this report.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The United States has no diplomatic relations with Iran and thus cannot raise directly with the Government the restrictions the Government places on religious freedom and other abuses that it commits against adherents of minority religions. The U.S. Government makes its position clear in public statements, support for relevant U.N. and NGO efforts, and diplomatic contacts with other countries.

From 1982 to 2001, the U.S. Government cosponsored a resolution each year regarding the human rights situation in Iran offered by the European Union at the annual meeting of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights. It passed every year until 2002, when the United States did not sit on the Commission and the resolution failed passage by one vote. The United States has supported a similar resolution offered each year during the U.N. General Assembly. The U.S. Government has supported strongly the work of the UNSR on Human Rights for Iran and called on the Iranian Government to grant him admission and allow him to conduct his research. (He has been denied entry visas since 1996.)

The U.S. State Department spokesman on numerous occasions has addressed the situation of the Baha'i and Jewish communities. The U.S. Government has encouraged other governments to make similar statements and has urged those governments to raise the issue of religious freedom in discussions with the Iranian Government.

In October 2001, the Secretary of State again designated Iran as a "country of particular concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. The Secretary of State similarly had designated Iran in September 1999 and in October 2000.

Released on October 7, 2002

[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2002/13995pf.htm)