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2014 Report on International Religious Freedom - Iran

Executive Summary

The constitution states that Ja'afari Shia Islam is the official state religion and that all laws and regulations must be based on "Islamic criteria" and official interpretation of sharia. It also stipulates that the five major Sunni schools be "accorded full respect," enjoy official status in matters of religious education and certain personal affairs, and that, in regions where followers of one of the five Sunni schools constitute the majority, local regulations conform with that school within certain bounds. The constitution states, "within the limits of the law," Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians are the only recognized religious minorities with protected ability to worship freely and to form religious societies, although proselytizing is prohibited. The government executed and jailed members of religious minority groups on charges of *moharebeh* (enmity against God) and anti-Islamic propaganda. The government discriminated against all religious minority groups in employment, education, and housing. Government rhetoric and actions created a threatening atmosphere for all non-Shia religious groups, most notably for Bahais. Government-controlled broadcast and print media continued negative campaigns against religious minorities.

Non-Muslims faced substantial societal discrimination, aided by official support. Some media outlets continued their campaign against non-Muslim religious minorities, and political and religious leaders made defamatory statements against them. There were reported problems for Bahais at different levels of society throughout the country. Non-Bahais were often pressured to refuse employment to Bahais and to dismiss Bahais from their private sector jobs. There were reports of Shia clerics and prayer leaders denouncing Sufism and the activities of Sufis in the country in both sermons and public statements.

On July 28, the Secretary of State redesignated Iran as a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) and renewed the existing restrictions on certain imports from and exports to the country. The United States has no diplomatic relations with the country. The Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor addressed abuses and restrictions against Bahai, Christian, Jewish, and other religious minority communities in the country. Senior U.S. government officials publicly called for the release of prisoners held on religious grounds. The U.S. government supported religious minority groups in the country through its actions in the UN, including through votes to extend the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran and for resolutions expressing concern over the country's human rights practices, including the continued persecution of religious minorities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 80.8 million (July 2014 estimate). Muslims constitute 99 percent of the population; 90 percent are Shia and 9 percent Sunni (mostly Turkmen, Arabs, Baluchis, and Kurds living in the northeast, southwest, southeast, and northwest, respectively). There are no official statistics available on the size of the Sufi Muslim population; however, some reports estimate that several million Iranians practice Sufism.

Groups constituting the remaining 1 percent of the population include Bahais, Christians, Jews, Sabeans-Mandaeans, Zoroastrians, and Yarsanis. The three largest non-Muslim minorities are Bahais, Christians, and Yarsanis. Bahais number approximately 300,000 and are heavily concentrated in Tehran and Semnan. According to UN data, 300,000 Christians live in the country, although some nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) estimate there may be as many as 370,000. The Statistical Center of Iran reports there are 117,700. The majority of Christians are ethnic Armenians concentrated in Tehran and Isfahan. Unofficial estimates of the Assyrian Christian population range between 10,000 and 20,000. There are also Protestant denominations, including evangelical groups. Christian groups outside the country estimate the size of the Protestant community to be less than 10,000, although many Protestants reportedly practice in secret. Yarsanis, mainly located in Luristan and Gurani-speaking areas of southern Kurdistan, have often been classified by the government as Shia Muslims practicing Sufism. Yarsanis, however, identify Yarsan as a distinct faith (known in Iraq as Kaka'i). There is no official count of Yarsanis, but one NGO and some leaders in the Yarsani faith estimate there are up to one million. There are from 5,000 to 10,000 Sabeans-Mandaeans. The Statistical Center of Iran estimated in 2011 that there were approximately 25,300 Zoroastrians, who are primarily ethnic Persians; however, Zoroastrian groups report 60,000 members. Similarly, Iranian census statistics in 2012 reported there were fewer than 9,000 Jews, while media estimate there are as many as 25,000.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution declares the "official religion is Islam and the doctrine followed is that of Ja'afari Shiism." It states all laws and regulations must be based on undefined "Islamic criteria" and official interpretation of sharia.

The constitution states that the five major Sunni schools of Islam are also to be "accorded full respect" and enjoy official status in matters of religious education and certain personal affairs, including marriage, divorce, and inheritance. The constitution states that, in regions where followers of one of the five Sunni schools constitute the majority, local regulations are to be in accordance with that school, within certain bounds. The constitution states that "within the limits of the law," Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians are the only recognized religious minorities with protection to worship freely and to form religious societies, although proselytizing by them is prohibited. Although the Sabeans-Mandaeans do not consider themselves Christians, the government regards them as Christians and thus includes them among the three recognized religious minorities. The government does not recognize any other non-Islamic religion, and adherents of these other religious groups, such as the Bahais, do not have the freedom to practice their beliefs.

The structure of government reinforces the preeminence of Shia Islam. Islamic scholars select the supreme leader. The guardian council of six Shia clerics appointed by the supreme leader and six Shia legal scholars nominated by the judiciary reviews all laws for conformity with sharia, all candidates for the body that selects the supreme leader, and all candidates for elective office.

The constitution does not provide for the rights of Muslim citizens to choose, change, or renounce their religious beliefs. The government considers a child born to a Muslim father to be a Muslim and deems conversion from Islam to be apostasy, which is punishable by death.

Non-Muslims may not engage in public religious expression, persuasion, or conversion of Muslims. Such activities are considered proselytizing and are punishable by death.

The penal code stipulates the death sentence for "*sabb al-nabi*," insulting or cursing Islamic prophets.

The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (Ershad) and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) closely monitor religious activity, while churches fall under the oversight of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The government closely monitors and regulates Christian religious practice. All churchgoers must register with the authorities, who prevent Muslim converts to Christianity from entering Armenian or

Assyrian churches, according to UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran Ahmed Shaheed. The government also requires Bahais to register with the police.

Non-Muslims may not be elected to a representative body or hold senior government or military positions, with the exception of five of the 290 Majlis (parliament) seats that are reserved by the constitution for religious minorities. There are two seats for Armenian Christians, one for Assyrian Christians, one for Jews, and one for Zoroastrians. Sunnis do not have reserved seats in the Majlis but are permitted to serve in the body. The government does not limit voting rights on account of religion, although only Shia Muslims are eligible to be president.

Non-Muslims may not serve in the judiciary, security services, or as public school principals. Officials screen applicants for public sector employment for their adherence to and knowledge of Islam, although members of religious minorities, with the exception of Bahais, may serve in the lower ranks of government. Government workers who do not observe Islamic principles and rules are subject to penalties. Bahais are barred from government employment and from all leadership positions in the military.

The constitution states the army must be Islamic, in the sense that it must be committed to Islamic ideals and must recruit individuals who are committed to the objectives of the Islamic Revolution. No members of religious minority groups are exempt from military service by law. The law forbids non-Muslims from holding positions of authority over Muslims in the armed forces. Members of constitutionally protected religious minorities with a college education may serve as officers during their mandatory military service but may not be career military officers.

The law authorizes collection of blood money as restitution to families for the death of Muslims and protected minorities. According to law, Bahai blood can be spilled with impunity, and Bahai families are not entitled to restitution.

The government allows recognized religious minority groups to open schools. The Ministry of Education imposes certain curriculum requirements and supervises these schools. With few exceptions, the directors of such private schools must be Muslim. Members of recognized religious minority groups are not required to attend these schools. The ministry must approve all textbooks used in coursework, including religious texts. Members of recognized religious minority groups may provide religious instruction in non-Persian languages, but authorities must approve their texts. This requirement sometimes imposes significant translation expenses on minority communities.

The government denies Bahai students access to higher education. A government order states Bahais “must be expelled from universities” and Bahai children “should be enrolled in schools which have a strong and imposing [Shia Islamic] religious ideology.” The government states Bahais are permitted to enroll in schools only if they do not identify themselves as such. To register for the university entrance examination, the government requires Bahai students to identify themselves as a religion other than Bahai. This means in practice that many Bahais do not enroll in state-run universities because a tenet of the Bahai faith is not to deny one’s faith. The Ministry of Justice requires universities to exclude Bahais or expel them if their religious affiliation becomes known. University applicants are required to pass an examination in Islamic, Christian, or Jewish theology.

Sunni religious leaders report bans on Sunni religious literature and on Sunni teachings in public schools. Sunnis may not build new schools or mosques.

Bahais are not allowed to participate in the governmental social pension system. Bahais cannot receive compensation for injury or crimes and cannot inherit property. The government does not recognize Bahai marriages and divorces but allows a civil attestation of marriage to serve as a marriage certificate.

The government carefully monitors the religious statements and views of senior Shia religious leaders. The supreme leader oversees the extrajudicial special clerical courts established to investigate offenses and crimes committed by clerics. These courts are not provided for in the constitution and sometimes sentence clerics for deviating from sanctioned religious doctrine.

The government maintains a legal interpretation of Islam that forces citizens of all faiths to follow strict rules, justified on the basis of religion, that effectively deprive women of many rights granted to men. The government enforces gender segregation throughout the country without regard to religious affiliation. Women of all religious groups are expected to adhere to “Islamic dress” in public; this includes covering their hair and fully covering the body in loose clothing. Although enforcement of rules for such conservative dress eases at times, the government periodically punishes “un-Islamic dress.”

Government Practices

Government rhetoric and actions created a threatening atmosphere for nearly all non-Shia, particularly for Bahais, but also for Sunni Muslims, including Sufis; Christians, especially evangelicals; Jews; Yarsanis; and

Shia groups that did not share the government's religious views. The government executed at least 24 individuals on charges of *moharebeh* according to credible NGO reports. All non-Shia religious minorities suffered varying degrees of officially sanctioned discrimination, especially in employment, education, and housing. Government-controlled broadcast and print media continued negative campaigns against religious minorities, particularly Bahais.

The government convicted and executed dissidents, political reformers, and peaceful protesters on charges of *moharebeh* and anti-Islamic propaganda. The government executed at least 24 individuals on charges of *moharebeh*, according to NGO reports. Amnesty International reported the families of Ahwazi minority community members Ali Chebeshat and Sayed Khaled Mousawi were notified June 12 that Chebeshat and Mousawi had been executed in secret on *moharebeh* charges, following abuse and due process violations, including alleged torture. On September 29, authorities executed Mohsen Amir-Aslani for making "innovations in the religion" and "spreading corruption on earth." Some human rights groups reported that Amir-Aslani's execution was tied to charges of insulting the prophet Jonah and of promoting his own interpretation of the Quran. The judiciary said the charges were for rape and not tied to Amir-Aslani's religious beliefs.

On November 24, the Supreme Court upheld the death sentence of blogger Soheil Arabi for the charge of "insulting the Prophet Muhammed" on Facebook, according to human rights organizations. The IRGC had arrested Arabi in November 2013, and after appealing an earlier ruling, he was found guilty in August. Separately, in February the Supreme Court upheld the death sentence of Ruhollah Tavana for insulting the Prophet Muhammad.

Christian pastor and dual U.S.-Iranian national Saeed Abedini, detained since September 2012, was sentenced in January 2013 to eight years in prison on charges related to his religious beliefs. He reportedly remained in Rajai Shahr Prison at year's end.

Shia religious leaders who did not fully support government policies or the supreme leader's views also faced intimidation and arrest. Prison conditions remained poor for dissident Shia cleric Ayatollah Hossein Kazemeini Boroujerdi, who was serving an 11-year sentence on unspecified charges in Evin Prison, where officials reportedly continued to torture him and deny him access to medication for several health problems, according to human rights activists. In October prison officials reportedly moved him into solitary confinement.

According to an August 26 Amnesty International report, authorities at Evin Prison threatened Mohammad Ali Taheri with death and subjected him to psychological torture during the year. Taheri, founder of the spiritual doctrine "Interuniversalism," has been held in solitary confinement since 2011 in Evin's Ward 2A and was convicted in October 2011 on charges of "insulting Islamic sanctities."

There were no reports of executions of Bahais during the year. The government frequently prevented Bahais from leaving the country, harassed and persecuted them, and generally disregarded their property rights.

The UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran reported in October that as of June at least 300 minority religious practitioners were imprisoned, including three active members of the Yarsani faith.

Numerous Christians remained imprisoned at year's end. Prison authorities reportedly withheld proper medical care from many prisoners, including some Christians, according to human rights groups. On April 17, a prison guard reportedly broke Christian convert Farshid Fathi's foot by stomping on it during a cell inspection in Evin Prison. Authorities reportedly then prevented Fathi from visiting a hospital for three days. Christians, particularly evangelicals, continued to experience disproportionate levels of arrests and high levels of harassment and surveillance. The status of many of these cases was not known at year's end. Authorities released some Christians almost immediately upon detention, but held others in secret locations without access to attorneys. The United Nations Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran reported in October that authorities held at least 49 Protestant Christians in custody, many for involvement in informal house churches.

At year's end at least 100 Bahais were in detention, according to Bahai organizations. In many cases the government charged them with violating the Islamic penal code prohibiting activities against the state and spreading falsehoods. The government often charged Bahais with "propaganda against the system" or crimes related to threatening national security. Often the charges were not dropped upon the prisoner's release, and those with charges still pending against them reportedly feared rearrest. Government officials reportedly offered Bahais release from prison and relief from mistreatment in exchange for recanting their religious affiliation and making a declaration adopting Islam.

There were reports of arrests and harassment of Sunnis. The International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (ICHRI) cited activist reports that authorities in Ahvaz arrested 20 Arab-Iranians February 26 for converting from Shia Islam to Sunni Islam, arresting them in a house raid without a warrant and then detaining them in an MOIS office. Mohammad Kayvan Karimi, Amjad Salehi, and Omid Payvand were sentenced to death May 4 on charges of "enmity against God through spreading propaganda against the system." According to Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA), the three were active in preaching Sunni Islam.

Seven Bahai leaders (Fariba Kamalabadi, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, Behrouz Tavakkoli, Saeid Rezaie, Vahid Tizfahm, and Mahvash Sabet) remained in detention at year's end, serving sentences of up to 20 years. They were charged in 2011 with "espionage for Israel, insulting religious sanctities, and propaganda against the Islamic Republic." The government did not allow any of the seven access to their attorney, Abdolfattah Soltani, who himself was sentenced to 18 years in prison in 2012 for "spreading propaganda against the system," "setting up an illegal opposition group," and "gathering and colluding with intent to harm national security." The government also banned Soltani from practicing law for an additional 20 years. On April 10, ICHRI reported that Soltani was in critical condition because authorities had denied him needed medical care. He remained in Evin Prison at year's end.

Authorities in Shiraz arrested four Bahais on August 5, according to Bahai groups. Vahid Dana, Saeid Abedi, and Bahiyyeh Moeinipour were arrested at their homes, and Adib Haqapazhuh was arrested at his workplace. No information about their whereabouts or status was available at year's end.

Police targeted Christians with home raids, sometimes confiscating personal property in such raids, including religious materials. On September 27, plainclothes agents raided Christian actor Shahram Ghaedi's home, according to Iranian Christian news agency Mohabat News. The agents arrested Ghaedi and two other Christian converts, Heshmat Shafiei and Emad Haghi, and transferred them to the security ward of Dastgerd Prison in Isfahan. The agents reportedly searched Ghaedi's house and confiscated some of his belongings, including books and a computer.

The government raided Bahai homes and businesses and confiscated private and commercial property, as well as religious materials. MOIS agents raided a business in Tehran August 11 and confiscated goods and products as well as employees' computers and other electronic devices, according to Bahai groups. The agents arrested five Bahais: business owners Aladdin Khanjani (son of imprisoned Bahai leader Jamaloddin Khanjan) and Babak Mobasher, and employees Naser Arshi-Moghaddam, Ataollah Ashrafi, and Rouhollah Monzavi. A sixth employee who was not Bahai was released that afternoon.

The government continued to hold many Bahai properties it seized following the 1979 revolution, including cemeteries, holy places, historical sites, and administrative centers. The government generally prevented Bahais from burying their dead in accordance with their religious tradition, and many of their cemeteries have been destroyed. HRANA reported that Iranian authorities buried two Bahai women in October in the city of West Azerbaijan in a manner not in accord with Bahai tradition and without notifying the women's families. The UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran reported in October IRGC officials demolished a Bahai cemetery in Shiraz in May despite appeals from the surrounding community and from human rights groups. An IRGC commander in Shiraz justified the destruction of the cemetery by saying the Bahai Faith was a "foul, unclean, and rootless sect" and that Bahais had "no rightful place" in Iranian society, according to the International Policy Digest.

There were reports of authorities placing restrictions on Bahai businesses or forcing them to close, asking managers of private companies to dismiss Bahai employees, and denying applications for new or renewed business and trade licenses. According to HRANA the government shut down more than 50 Bahai-run businesses October 26 in Bandar Abbas, Kerman, Rafsanjan, and Jiroft because the businesses had been closed in observance of Bahai holidays.

Although the government maintained publicly that Bahais were free to attend university if they did not identify themselves as Bahai, public and private universities continued to deny admittance and expel Bahai students, thus preventing Bahais from obtaining higher education. According to an April 10 HRANA report, authorities expelled Mazyar Malaki from Birjand University after he refused to sign a statement that he would not participate in Bahai activities.

The government continued to imprison and detain members of the Bahai Institute for Higher Education. ICHRI reported that on September 10, three Bahais serving prison sentences for teaching at the Bahai Institute for Higher Education, Faran Hessami, Kamran Rahimian, and Kayvan Rahimian, were refused early release and furlough to visit their young children unless they recanted their faith and pledged not to teach at the university.

The government's continuing seizure of Bahai personal property and its denial of access to education and employment eroded the Bahai community's economic base and threatened its survival. Members of the Bahai community reported Bahai children in public schools faced attempts by their teachers and administrators to convert them to Islam.

Human rights groups reported several instances of due process violations by authorities against members of the Sunni community. According to HRANA, authorities arrested Saeed Haydari, a recent Sunni convert from Shia Islam, on July 24 at his home in Khuzestan, reportedly for reasons related to his religious activities and his conversion to Sunni Islam.

Muslim converts to Christianity faced harassment, arrest, and jailing. Many arrests took place during police raids on religious gatherings, during which the government confiscated religious property. Iranian officials reportedly raided a house church in Tehran August 12 and arrested Christian converts Mehdi Vaziri and Amir Kian. Both were believed to be held at the Ghezel-Hesar Prison at year's end.

On August 12, Reporters Without Borders reported that plainclothes agents raided the offices of five television stations affiliated with dissident Shia cleric Ayatollah Sadegh Shirazi and arrested several employees, including Hamed Taghipour and Masoud Behnam. The raids followed an August 3 MOIS communique accusing the stations of "provoking sectarian tension within Islam" and "insulting the holy figures of Islam."

The government enforced the prohibition on proselytizing by closely monitoring the activities of evangelical Christians, barring all non-members from entering church premises, closing churches, and arresting Christian converts. Authorities pressed evangelical church leaders to sign pledges that they would not evangelize Muslims or allow Muslims to attend church services. Meetings for evangelical services remained restricted to Sundays. Christian advocacy groups confirmed that through church closures and other pressure, the government had eliminated in recent years all but a handful of Persian-language church services, restricting them to the Armenian and Assyrian languages. Pastors of forcibly closed Persian-language churches reported pressure from the government to leave the country, and the government prevented ordination of new ministers. Members of evangelical congregations were required to carry membership cards, photocopies of which had to be provided to the authorities. Security officials posted outside congregation centers subjected worshippers to identity checks. Christians of all denominations reported the presence of security cameras outside their churches to confirm that no non-Christians participated in services.

Official reports and the media characterized Christian house churches as "illegal networks" and "Zionist propaganda institutions." Arrested members of house churches were often accused of being supported by enemy countries. On October 19, courts sentenced house church leader Behnam Irani and fellow Church of Iran leaders Abdolreza Ali-Haghnejad and Reza Rabbani to six years in prison on charges of "action against national security" and "creating a network to overthrow the system," according to Middle East Concern and other human rights groups.

The government allowed recognized religious minority groups to establish community centers and certain self-financed cultural, social, athletic, or charitable associations. The government, however, prohibited the Bahai community from officially assembling or maintaining administrative institutions and actively closed such institutions as part of this policy.

Jews were free to travel out of the country, and the government generally did not enforce legal restrictions against travel to Israel by Jews, although it enforced this prohibition against other citizens.

The government carefully monitored the statements and views of senior Shia religious leaders. The supreme leader oversaw the extrajudicial Special Clerical Courts established to investigate offenses and crimes committed by clerics. These courts are not provided for in the constitution.

Assyrian Christians reported their community was permitted to write its own textbooks which, following government authorization and approval of the content, were printed at the government's expense and distributed to the Assyrian community. The government reportedly allowed Hebrew instruction but limited the distribution of Hebrew texts, particularly nonreligious texts, making it difficult to teach the language. Although the government did not require Jewish students to attend Saturday classes, it reportedly required Jewish schools to remain open on Saturdays, in violation of Jewish religious law, to conform to the schedule of other schools.

With some significant exceptions, there was little government restriction of, or interference with, Jewish religious practice. Government officials, however, continued to sanction and employ anti-Semitic propaganda in official statements, media outlets, publications, and books.

There were reports of government officials making anti-Semitic statements. During a March 21 speech marking Nowruz, the Persian New Year, Supreme Leader Khamenei described the Holocaust as "an event whose reality is uncertain." From September 29 through October 1, the government sponsored a second instance of the "New Horizon" conference in Tehran, which it billed as focusing on a range of topics including "similarities (between) Nazism and Zionism." The government hosted the first such conference in 2012. On May 6, members of parliament initiated a vote to censure Foreign Minister Zarif for his refusal to deny the Holocaust. Seventy-five members of the 290-member assembly questioned Zarif on a range of issues, including his stance on what they termed "illegitimate" Israel and the "lie of the Holocaust." Zarif defended his previous statements calling the Holocaust a "horrifying tragedy" and the parliament eventually voted against censuring him.

There were also reports of government-affiliated religious figures directing inflammatory rhetoric towards Jews. A cleric at Tehran University stated on state television that Jews used sorcery to spy on behalf of Israel.

Authorities also harassed and repressed members of the Sabeian-Mandaean and Yarsani religious communities in ways similar to their harassment of other religious minority groups, including denial of building permits for places of worship and denial of access to higher education and government employment unless they declared themselves to be Muslim on their application forms.

Yarsani community representatives reported that in April Hekmat Safari, a Yarsani serving in the Iranian military, committed suicide at the military base in Bijar because of harassment for his faith.

There were reports of arrests and harassment of Sunni clerics and congregants. Many Sunnis reported discrimination; however, it was difficult to distinguish whether the cause of discrimination was religious or ethnic, since most Sunnis are also members of ethnic minority groups. Sunnis cited the absence of a Sunni mosque in Tehran despite the presence of more than one million Sunnis in the city as a prominent example. Sunni leaders reported bans on Sunni religious literature and teachings in public schools, even in predominantly Sunni areas. Sunnis also noted the underrepresentation of Sunnis in government-appointed positions in the provinces where they formed a majority, such as Kurdistan and Khuzestan, as well as their inability to obtain senior government positions. Residents of provinces with large Sunni populations, including Kurdistan, Khuzestan, and Sistan-Baluchistan, reported repression by the judiciary and security services, discrimination, lack of basic government services, and inadequate funding for infrastructure projects.

Security officials continued to raid prayer sites belonging to Sunnis. On October 5, security forces prevented Sunni Muslims from entering prayer sites in several parts of Tehran on the occasion of Eid al-Adha, according to human rights organizations.

Intelligence and security services continued their harassment and intimidation of prominent Sufi leaders and their raids on Sufi businesses. Government restrictions on Sufi groups and *husseiniya* (houses of worship) continued. On February 20, security forces raided a Sufi printing business in Ahvaz and arrested two employees and confiscated printed materials, according to Sufi news website Majzooban Noor. On March 10, jailed members of the Gonabadi Sufi order conducted a hunger strike to protest their being denied proper health care, according to media reports.

According to Reporters Without Borders, a group of detained contributors to Majzooban Noor began a hunger strike on August 31 in protest against their conditions in Evin and Nezam prisons. Reza Entesari, Hamidreza Moradi, Mostafa Abdi, Kasra Nouri, and Afshin Karampour were joined by their jailed lawyers Amir Islami, Farshid Yadollahi, Mostafa Daneshjo, and Omid Behrouzi in the hunger strike, and several of the detainees reported medical complications due to denied treatment.

The government reportedly used the clerical courts to prosecute certain clerics for expressing controversial political ideas and participating in nonreligious activities, including journalism. A blog that identified itself as affiliated with dissident Shia cleric Ayatollah Abdul-Hamid Masoumi Tehrani reported that he was summoned to the Clerical Court in Tehran in June, where he was interrogated and then released. According to a June 5 report by Majzooban Noor, a special clerical court sentenced Abbas Salehian, a Sufi, to six months' imprisonment for "committing a forbidden act by promoting the Gonabadi Sufi order faith." The report noted that Salehian was not a clergy member. On July 11, Majzooban Noor reported that a special clerical court removed Shia Muslim cleric Mohammad Nouri from his religious duties for "joining the Sufis while in clerical costume." Nouri said agents of the Ministry of Intelligence and Security had interrogated and repeatedly threatened him.

The government restricted published religious material. Government officials frequently confiscated Bibles and pressured publishing houses printing Bibles or unsanctioned non-Muslim materials to cease operations.

The government failed to investigate crimes committed against members of religious minority groups and against their property, including religious sites and graveyards. For example, on October 14 an investigating magistrate for the Bandar Abbas Revolutionary Court told the family of Ataollah Rezvani, a Bahai killed in 2013, that he would be forced to close the investigation in the absence of further evidence. Rezvani's family reported that the investigating judge had discounted religiously motivated murder as the cause of death, although a relative believed that Rezvani was targeted because he was Bahai. A local imam had reportedly spoken against the Bahai community in his sermons on several occasions, including several days before Rezvani's death.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reported problems for Bahais at different levels of society. Bahais experienced continued personal harassment, and there were reported cases of Bahai children being harassed in school and subjected to Islamic indoctrination. Teachers reportedly asked Bahai and other non-Shia children about their families' religious practices, such as whether their parents prayed the traditional Islamic *namaaz* at home. There were reports of non-Bahais dismissing or refusing employment to Bahais, sometimes in response to government pressure.

In April Ayatollah Abdol-Hamid Masoumi-Tehrani, a prominent dissident Shia cleric, announced he had donated to Bahai representatives an illuminated work of calligraphy of a section of the writings of the prophet-founder of the Bahai Faith. Ayatollah Tehrani said he presented this gift to the Bahais of the world because the Bahais of Iran “have suffered in manifold ways as a result of blind religious prejudice.”

In November the Friday prayer leader in Rafsanjan reportedly declared in a speech that, according to religious fatwas, Bahais were “unclean” and it was forbidden to conduct business with them.

There were reports of Shia clerics and prayer leaders denouncing Sufism and the activities of Sufis in both sermons and public statements. According to a December 22 report by Majzooban Noor, a Shia group in Karaj sponsored a series of speeches against Sufism and put up related posters in front of the city’s Sufi congregation hall. According to the report, authorities intervened and removed the posters in an effort to reduce tensions.

In May a Muslim cleric in the city of Islam-Abade-Gharb publicly declared that members of the Yarsani community were devil worshippers, thus “impure” and “un-Islamic.” Yarsani community members reported harassment targeted against Yarsani men because their long moustaches identified them as Yarsani.

On October 22, demonstrators in Isfahan protested a string of at least eight acid attacks against women, with many demonstrators claiming the women were targeted because their headscarves or other clothing did not conform to perceived Islamic norms. Authorities condemned the attacks but denied any such linkage.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Iran has been a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act since 1999 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. The U.S. Secretary of State redesignated Iran July 28 as a CPC and extended certain trade sanctions.

The United States has no diplomatic relations with Iran, and therefore has limited opportunity to raise concerns directly with the government over its religious freedom abuses and restrictions.

The U.S. government used various avenues to call on Iran to respect religious freedom and condemn abuses. These include public statements and reports, support for relevant UN and NGO efforts, diplomatic initiatives, and sanctions. Senior U.S. government officials publicly called for the release of prisoners held on grounds related to their religious beliefs, including dual U.S.-Iranian national Saeed Abedini. On numerous occasions U.S. government officials, including the Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, addressed the situations of Bahais and Christians in the context of religious freedom for members of all religious groups in the country.

The United States voted at the UN Human Rights Council to extend the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran. The United States also voted in November and December in UN fora in favor of resolutions expressing concern over Iran’s human rights practices, including the continued persecution of religious minorities. The United States submitted recommendations in October, including recommendations related to religious freedom, through the mechanism of the UN Human Rights Council’s Universal Periodic Review of Iran’s human rights situation.