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2011 International Religious Freedom Report - Iran

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies do not protect religious freedom and in practice, the government severely restricted religious freedom. The government's respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom continued to deteriorate. Reports of government imprisonment, harassment, intimidation, and discrimination based on religious beliefs continued during the year. The constitution states that Ja'afari (Twelver) Shia Islam is the official state religion. It provides that "other Islamic denominations are to be accorded full respect" and officially recognizes only three non-Islamic religious groups--Zoroastrians, Christians, and Jews--as religious minorities. These three religions are allowed to practice freely under the constitution as long as their members do not proselytize; however, Christian pastor Youcef Nadarkhani remained jailed and sentenced to death for practicing his faith. While not discussed in the constitution, the government considers Baha'is to be apostates and defines the Baha'i Faith as a political "sect." The government prohibits Baha'is from teaching and practicing their faith and subjects them to many forms of discrimination that followers of other religions do not face.

Government rhetoric and actions created a threatening atmosphere for nearly all non-Shia religious groups, most notably for Baha'is, as well as for Sufi Muslims, evangelical Christians, Jews, and Shia groups that did not share the government's official religious views. Baha'i and Christian groups reported arbitrary arrests, prolonged detentions, and confiscation of property. During the year, government-controlled broadcast and print media intensified negative campaigns against religious minorities, particularly Baha'is. All religious minorities suffered varying degrees of officially sanctioned discrimination, particularly in the areas of employment, education, and housing. Baha'is continued to experience expulsions from, or denial of admission to, universities.

Non-Shia religious believers faced some societal discrimination, and elements of society created a threatening atmosphere for some religious minorities. However, reports during the year indicated that the government largely drove abuse of religious freedom. In addition, the government's campaign against non-Shias allowed for an atmosphere of impunity for those elements of society that harassed religious minorities.

The U.S. government made clear its strong objections to the Iranian government's harsh and oppressive treatment of religious minorities and pushed for improvements in the country through high-level public statements and reports, support for relevant United Nations (UN) and nongovernmental organization (NGO) efforts, diplomatic initiatives, Congressional actions, and sanctions. The State Department also engaged with NGOs and civil society to gain a greater understanding of the status of religious freedom in Iran.

Since 1999 the United States has designated Iran as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On August 18, the secretary of state redesignated Iran as a CPC, and redesignated the existing ongoing restrictions on certain imports from and exports to Iran.

Section I. Religious Demography

The population is 98 percent Muslim--89 percent Shia and 9 percent Sunni (mostly Turkmen and Arabs, Baluchs, and Kurds living in the southwest, southeast, and northwest, respectively). There were no official statistics available on the size of the Sufi Muslim population; however, some reports estimated that between two and five million persons practice Sufism.

Unofficial estimates from religious organizations claimed that Baha'is, Jews, Christians, Sabean-Mandaeans, and Zoroastrians constitute 2 percent of the population. The largest non-Muslim minority is the Baha'is, who number 300,000 to 350,000. Unofficial estimates of the Jewish community's size varied from 20,000 to 30,000.

According to UN figures, 300,000 Christians live in the country, and the majority of them are ethnic Armenians. Unofficial estimates for the Assyrian Christian population ranged 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 Christian community to be less than 10,000, although many Protestant Christians reportedly practice in secret. Sabean-Mandaeans number 5,000 to 10,000 persons. The government estimated there are 30,000 to 35,000 Zoroastrians, who are primarily ethnic Persians; however, Zoroastrian groups claim to have 60,000 adherents.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies severely restrict freedom of religion. The constitution declares the “official religion of Iran is Islam and the doctrine followed is that of Ja’afari (Twelver) Shiism.” The fourth article of the constitution states that all laws and regulations must be based on undefined “Islamic criteria” and official interpretation of Sharia (Islamic law).

The constitution provides Sunni Muslims a degree of religious freedom, and states that, “within the limits of the law,” Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians are the only recognized religious minorities with protected freedom to practice their religious beliefs, as long as they do not proselytize. Articles 13 and 26 of the constitution specifically recognize Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism and grant these three groups the right to worship freely and to form religious societies. The government regarded the Sabean-Mandaeans as Christians, and they are included among the three recognized religious minorities; however, Sabean-Mandaeans do not consider themselves Christians. No other non-Islamic religions are recognized by the law, and adherents of these other religious groups, such as the Baha'is, do not have the freedom to practice their beliefs.

Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Ali Khamenei heads a three-branch 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 every eight years. 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, including the Assembly of Experts, must be vetted by the unelected Council of Guardians. The council 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 legal system fosters religious abuse and discrimination. The constitution does not provide for the rights of Muslim citizens to choose, change, or renounce their religious beliefs. The government automatically considers a child born to a Muslim father to be a Muslim and conversion from Islam is deemed apostasy, which is punishable by death.

Non-Muslims may not engage in public religious expression, persuasion, or conversion among Muslims, and there are restrictions on published religious material; for example, Christian Bibles are frequently confiscated and publishing houses are pressured by government officials to cease operations. Proselytizing of Muslims by non-Muslims is also illegal and can be punishable by death.

The Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance (Ershad) and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) monitor religious activity closely. Members of some recognized religious minorities were not required to register with the government; however, authorities closely monitored their communal, religious, and cultural events and

organizations, including schools. The government requires evangelical Christian groups to compile and submit membership lists of their congregations. Baha'is also are required to register with the police.

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 five of the 290 seats in the Majles are reserved for religious minorities. Two seats are reserved for Armenian Christians, one for Assyrian Christians, one for Jews, and one for 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. Religious minorities are allowed to vote; however, religious minorities, including Sunni Muslims, are ineligible to be president.

Members of religious minorities, excluding Sunni Muslims, are not allowed to serve in the judiciary, security services, or as public school principals. Applicants for public sector employment are screened for their adherence to and knowledge of Islam, although members of religious minorities, with the exception of Baha'is, can serve in lower ranks of government employment. Government workers who do not observe Islamic principles and rules are subject to penalties. Baha'is are barred from all leadership positions in the government and 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. 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 constitutionally protected religious minorities with a college education can serve as officers during their mandatory military service but cannot be career military officers.

Article 297 of the amended 1991 Islamic Punishments Act authorizes collection of equal diyeh (blood money) as restitution to families for the death of both Muslims and non-Muslims. According to law, Baha'i blood is considered "mobah," meaning it can be spilled with impunity.

The government generally allows recognized religious minority groups to conduct religious education for their adherents in separate schools. The Ministry of Education, which imposed 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. The Ministry of Education must approve all textbooks used in coursework, including religious texts. Recognized religious minorities may provide religious instruction in non-Persian languages, but such texts require approval by the authorities. This approval requirement sometimes imposes significant translation expenses on minority communities. Assyrian Christians reported that their community was permitted to write its own textbooks which, following government authorization, were printed at the government's expense and distributed to the Assyrian community. The government reportedly allows Hebrew instruction but limits the distribution of Hebrew texts, particularly nonreligious texts, making it difficult to teach the language. Moreover, the government requires that in conformity with the schedule of other schools, Jewish schools must remain open on Saturdays, which violates Jewish religious law.

The Ministry of Justice stated 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. The government requires Baha'i students to identify themselves as a religion other than Baha'i 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 stated 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 is no test for Baha'i theology.

Non-Shia religious leaders reported bans on Sunni teachings in public schools and Sunni religious literature. The trend of not allowing Sunnis to build new schools or mosques continued.

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. There were no reports that other religious minorities faced this type of discrimination.

The government allows recognized religious minorities to establish community centers and certain self-financed cultural, social, athletic, or charitable associations. However, the government prohibits the Baha'i community from officially assembling or maintaining administrative institutions and actively closes such institutions as part of this policy.

Jewish citizens are free to travel out of the country and the government does not enforce the general restriction against travel by the country's citizens to Israel on Jews.

The government carefully monitors the statements and views of senior Shia religious leaders. The Special Clerical Courts, established to investigate offenses and crimes committed by clerics, are not provided for in the constitution and so operate outside the judiciary. The courts are overseen directly by the supreme leader.

The government maintains a legal interpretation of Islam that effectively deprives women of many rights granted to men. Gender segregation is enforced generally 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 wearing loose clothing that fully covers the body. Although enforcement of rules for such conservative dress has eased at times, the government periodically punishes "un-Islamic dress." The government's 12-point template contract for marriage and divorce, while not mandatory, limits the rights accorded to all women by custom and traditional interpretations of Islamic law.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Eid-e-Ghadir, Tassoua, Ashura, Arbæen, and the Demise of the Prophet Muhammad, Martyrdom of Imam Reza, Birthday of Imam Ali, Ascension of the Prophet Muhammad, Birthday of Imam Mahdi, Eid-e-Fitr (Eid al-Fitr), Martyrdom of Imam Ali, Martyrdom of Imam Jafar Sadegh, Eid-e-Ghorban (Eid al-Adha), and the Islamic New Year.

Government Practices

There were reports of abuses of religious freedom, including religious prisoners and detainees. The government severely restricted overall religious freedom and reports of government imprisonment, harassment, intimidation, and discrimination based on religious beliefs continued during the year. Government rhetoric and actions, particularly since the June 2009 elections, created an increasingly threatening atmosphere for nearly all non-Shia religious groups, most notably for Baha'is, as well as for Sufi Muslims, evangelical Christians, Jews, and Shia groups that did not share the government's sanctioned religious views. Government-controlled broadcast and print media intensified negative campaigns against religious minorities, particularly the Baha'is, during the year. All non-Shia religious minorities suffered varying degrees of officially sanctioned discrimination, particularly in the areas of employment, education, and housing.

Authorities executed at least one individual on charges of apostasy. The media reported that a man identified as "Ali Ghorabat" was hanged on January 26 in Karoun Prison in Ahvaz for "apostasy." Ghorabat, who appears to have been Muslim, was charged with apostasy for "claiming to have contact with God and the 12th Shiite Imam." At least two death sentences for apostasy or evangelism were issued under judicial interpretations of Islamic law in 2010 and the case of at least one of these individuals was on appeal during the year.

In early 2010 the government started convicting and executing reformers and peaceful protesters on the charge of moharebeh (enmity against God). This practice continued during the year, with at least 30 persons reportedly charged, convicted, and sentenced to death for moharebeh since January 2010. According to credible nongovernmental organization (NGO) reports, at least 10 individuals were executed on charges of moharebeh during the year, including brothers Mohammad and Abdollah Fathi on May 17.

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the government has killed more than 200 Baha'is, although there were no reports of Baha'i executions during the year.

In 2010 Christian pastor Youcef Nadarkhani was convicted of apostasy and sentenced to death, pending confirmation by the Supreme Court. The sentence has yet to be confirmed or carried out after the Supreme Court requested the local court to conduct an investigation into Nadarkhani's religious history.

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 pending against them reportedly feared arrest at any time. Most were released only after paying a large fine or posting high bail. For some, bail was in the form of deeds of property; others gained their release in exchange for personal guarantees from a "guardian" that the offender would appear in court, or the granting of a work license. Government officials reportedly offered Baha'is relief from mistreatment in exchange for recanting their religious affiliation, and if incarcerated, made recanting their religious affiliation a precondition for release.

At least 60 Baha'is were arbitrarily arrested during the year, some of whom were released. At least 95 Baha'is were imprisoned and 416 Baha'i cases were still active with authorities at year's end, according to human rights groups.

In September, at the conclusion of her four-year sentence, the government released Raha Sabet, one of three Baha'is arrested in 2006 for their involvement in projects focused on teaching literacy and social skills to children. Authorities released her two colleagues in 2010.

In March, after a challenge from the prosecutor general, the government extended to 20 years the sentences of the seven leaders of the Baha'i community: Fariba Kamalabadi, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, Behrouz Tavakkoli, Saeid Rezaie, Vahid Tizfahm, and Mahvash Sabet. Although the courts originally sentenced the leaders to 20 years' imprisonment in June 2010 for "espionage for Israel, insulting religious sanctities, and propaganda against the Islamic Republic," the courts reduced the sentence to 10 years in September 2010. At

year's end, all remained in detention and the government had not allowed any of the seven leaders access to their attorney, Abdolfattah Soltani.

In May authorities detained at least 30 members of the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education, raided their homes, and took cultural items. Ultimately authorities arrested 16 persons for failing to meet the entrance requirements to the university and for being members of an "illegal cult with anti-human rights activities." Authorities released nine of the detainees within 10 days of their arrest. In October courts found the other seven--Kamran Mortezaie, Ramin Zibaie, Mahmoud Badavam, Farhad Sedghi, Riaz Sobhani, Vahid Mahmoudi, and Nooshin Khadem--guilty of "membership in the deviant Baha'i sect, with the goal of taking action against the security of the country, in order to further the aims of the deviant sect and those of organizations outside the country," according to unofficial transcripts of the trial. Courts sentenced them to four to five years in prison. At year's end, all remained in prison. Their trials were conducted without a senior member of their legal team, Abdolfattah Soltani, who was arrested days before the trials began. On September 10, security agents arrested Soltani without a warrant and took him to an unknown location; at year's end Soltani reportedly was being held in Ward 209 of Evin Prison in Tehran.

Harassment and arrests of Sufis also continued during the year. In September, 60 Sufis were arrested after confrontations with security forces; authorities released 15 but sent the other 45 to prison with no access to attorneys or family members. During the same confrontations, three Sufis--Ibrahim Fazli, Ashgar Karimi, and Mohammad Ali Saadi--were shot, while a fourth, Vahid Banani, was killed. Authorities later arrested three lawyers--Gholam Reza Shirazi, Amir Islami, and Afshin Kharampour--when they attended meetings with government officials with the intent to negotiate the release of those arrested.

Also in September authorities arrested approximately 15 Sufi webmasters and journalists who reportedly still were being held at year's end.

In April police rearrested eight Sufis on charges of disrupting public order, for which they already had served sentences of flogging and imprisonment. In March authorities ordered 200 Gonabadi Sufis to appear in court to face allegations of insulting Iranian officials; the outcome of the order was not reported.

At least 300 arrests of Christians were reported during the year. The status of some of these cases was not known at year's end. Authorities released some Christians almost immediately, while they held others in secret locations without access to attorneys. During the year, authorities also arrested several members of "protected" Christian groups such as Armenian Apostolics and Assyrians.

Three Christian men, Pastor Farhad Sabokrouh, Davood (David) Ali-Jani, and Naser Zamen-Dezfuli, remained in detention after their arrests on December 23. According to media reports, security officials attacked Pastor Sabokrouh's Assembly of God church in Ahvaz during the weekly prayer service. Security forces arrested all church members present, including children, while plainclothes agents confiscated mobile phones, audio-visual equipment, and copies of Christian books. Authorities released congregants after questioning, but they were not allowed to travel. Charges against Pastor Sabokrouh were not announced, nor were family members permitted to see him. Sabokrouh had been arrested previously.

In June 2010 six members of a house church in Shiraz--Pastor Behrouz Sadegh-Khandjani, Mehdi Furutan, Mohammad Beliad, Parviz Khalaj, Nazly Beliad, and Amin Afsharmanesh--were arrested. They were released on bail in February. In March they were found guilty of "crimes against national security," although the verdict was appealed. In April this sentence reportedly was commuted to one year in prison for "crimes against the Islamic Order," when prosecutors failed to produce evidence of apostasy. Sadegh-Khandjani reported to prison in November to serve his sentence, along with Khalaj and Beliad.

On May 14, the Revolutionary Court in Bandar Anzali acquitted 12 Protestant Christians on the charge of "forming a society with the intent of disrupting national security." Among those acquitted was Pastor Abdolreza "Matthias" Haghnejad, who reportedly was re-arrested in August while on a pastoral visit. However, his family had no information on his whereabouts or the charges against him. Haghnejad previously had been arrested in 2006. His condition was unknown at year's end.

There were numerous incidents during the year of Muslim converts to Christianity facing harassment, arrest, and sentencing. Many arrests took place during police raids on religious gatherings, during which religious property also was confiscated. For example, security officials arrested four Ahvazi Arabs in October for having converted from Islam to Christianity. Likewise, in July authorities arrested Leila Mohammadi at her home outside Tehran and transferred her to Evin Prison. Officials raided her home and seized personal belongings, including Christian literature. Mohammadi was charged with, among other crimes, "insulting sacred figures." She was released on bail after spending 74 days in Evin Prison.

Following his October 2009 arrest, Youcef Nadarkhani, a pastor of a house church in Gilan, received a death sentence for apostasy. His case was appealed and later reports indicated that officials had offered to release him if he recanted his Christian faith and made a statement about the Prophet Muhammad. According to news sources, Nadarkhani had refused to make such a statement and a final decision on his case had not been made by the year's end.

Zoroastrians also reported detentions and harassment. In late October ministry of intelligence agents reportedly arrested Yashin Jamshidi, a Zoroastrian in Karaj. According to NGO reports, agents later went to his home and confiscated his personal belongings. There was no information on his whereabouts at year's end. Additionally, Zoroastrians Mohsen Sadeghipour, Mojtaba Ahmadi, Pouria Shahpari, and Mohammad Javad (Dariush) Shahpari continued to serve sentences handed down in 2010 on charges related to their work with the Iran Zoroastrian Committee.

There were reports of arrests and harassment of Sunnis. In October courts handed down prison sentences totaling 164 years for 54 Sunni clerics from the provinces of Azerbaijan and Kurdistan. In June a revolutionary court sentenced Sunni cleric Mamousta Sediq Hassani to 14 years in prison on charges of "cooperating with a dissident group."

Shia religious leaders who did not fully support government policies or the supreme leader's views also faced intimidation and arrest. For example, in December authorities arrested Hojatollah Abdollah Shahani, a religious opposition leader and blogger. Shahani previously had been banned from teaching at a local religious college.

Also in December, ministry of intelligence authorities arrested opposition cleric Hasanali Mostafaei, a disciple of the late reformist cleric Ayatollah Montazeri, at his home. There was no further information on the Shahani or Mostafaei cases or their whereabouts at year's end.

In November Human Rights Watch (HRW) and other NGOs reported that an unnamed assailant attacked dissident Shia cleric Ayatollah Hossein Kazemini Boroujerdi, currently serving an 11-year sentence on unspecified charges in Evin Prison. Family members told HRW a cellmate tried to kill Boroujerdi, who has often been critical of the government, and that prison authorities had denied him proper medical care outside of prison. Boroujerdi, who was attacked twice previously in prison, also suffered from failing eyesight, diabetes, Parkinson's disease, and high blood pressure.

In August media in the country reported the rearrest of religious scholar Ahmad Ghabel, who had been sentenced in 2010 for "propaganda against the regime" and released on bail in June. He was being held in Vakilabad Prison at year's end.

In May the media also reported the arrest of Abbas Amirifar, head of the Preachers Association and the President's Cultural Council, and a close associate of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Reports indicated his case was referred to the Special Court for the Clergy for his involvement in the production of the film "Appearance is Close!" which revolves around the imminent return of the hidden 12th imam of Shia theology. Authorities reportedly released Amirifar in June.

Officials arrested at least eight persons from July 2010 to February 2011 for criticizing Islam on Internet message boards. Dr. Kamran Ayazi, Dr. Ladan Mostavafi, Hanieh Sane, Hojatollah Nikouyi, Mohammad-Reza Pounaki, Mohammad-Reza Akhlaqi, Sepehr Ibrahim, and Amir Latifi were charged with various crimes, including "moharebeh" and "insulting sanctities and insulting the leader." Sentences for these eight ranged from five to nine years in prison.

Women were harassed or punished for failure to adhere to "Islamic dress." Human rights activist Nasrin Sotoudeh was fined 621,483 rial (50 U.S. dollars) for failing to wear a headscarf during a videotaped acceptance speech for an awards ceremony in another country that she was unable to attend. There were reports of increased enforcement of dress codes, and those arrested were subject to fines or other punishment, including whipping. In addition, government officials blamed rape victims for inciting their rapes. During the investigation of one case, Hussein Hosseinzadeh, the head of the Isfahan Police Investigative Unit stated "... the women were not properly dressed. If those women had decent outfits, they may have not been sexually assaulted."

Broad restrictions on Baha'is severely undermined their ability to practice their faith freely, function as a community, or maintain links with coreligionists abroad. Baha'is reported arbitrary arrests, prolonged detention, and confiscation of property. Baha'i groups outside the country reported that government authorities increased harassment and intimidation of members of the Baha'i community during the year. Baha'is often were charged officially with "espionage on behalf of Zionism," partly because the Baha'i world headquarters is located in Israel. These charges were more acute when Baha'is were found communicating with or sending monetary contributions to the Baha'i headquarters.

In addition to killings, executions, and arrests, Baha'is suffered frequent government harassment and persecution, and their property rights generally were disregarded. The government raided Baha'i homes and businesses and confiscated large amounts of private and commercial property, as well as religious materials belonging to Baha'is. The government reportedly seized numerous Baha'i homes and transferred them to an agency of Supreme Leader Khamenei. The government also seized private homes in which Baha'i youth classes were held, despite the fact that the owners had proper ownership documents.

The government continued to hold many Baha'i properties that were seized following the 1979 revolution, including cemeteries, holy places, historical sites, and administrative centers. Unspecified actors destroyed many of the properties, including cemeteries. Baha'is generally were prevented from burying and honoring their dead in accordance with their religious tradition.

There were reports 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. Baha'i groups reported that the government often denied their applications for new or renewed business and trade licenses.

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 organizations, which were nominally independent but heavily influenced by the government.

Public and private universities continued to deny admittance to and expelled Baha'i students. Although the government maintained publicly that Baha'is were free to attend university, reports indicated that the implicit policy of preventing Baha'is from obtaining higher education remained in effect during the year. The Baha'i Institute for Higher Education, created in 1987 after Baha'is were barred from attending regular universities, reportedly was declared illegal in May for being a group that presented national security concerns. During the year, at least 30 Baha'is were barred or expelled from universities on political or religious grounds, including Ava Tavakoli, who was expelled after four semesters of study, and Sharheh Ruhani, who scored in the top 1 percent of all students on the country's university entrance examinations.

The government prevented many Baha'is from leaving the country.

The Baha'i community reported that the government's seizure of Baha'i personal property and its denial of access to education and employment was eroding the economic base of the community and threatening its survival. Members of the Baha'i community reported that Baha'i children in public schools faced attempts by their teachers and administrators to convert them to Islam.

The government actively denied Christians freedom of religion. Christians, particularly evangelicals, experienced increased harassment and surveillance during the year.

The government enforced its prohibition on proselytizing by closely monitoring the activities of evangelical Christians, discouraging Muslims from entering church premises, closing churches, and arresting Christian converts. Authorities pressured evangelical church leaders to sign pledges that they would not evangelize Muslims or allow Muslims to attend church services. Reports implied authorities regarded allowing Muslims to visit a Christian church as constituting proselytizing. Members of evangelical congregations were required to carry membership cards, photocopies of which had to be provided to the authorities. Worshipers were subject 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. Christians of all denominations reported the presence of security cameras outside their churches, allegedly to confirm that no non-Christians participated in services. There were a number of examples of Muslims who converted to Christianity being arrested, detained, or questioned, including the case of Pastor Nadarkhani. The government reportedly confiscated at least 6,500 Bibles during the year.

With some exceptions, there was little government restriction of, or interference with, Jewish religious practice. However, the Jewish community experienced official discrimination. Anti-Semitism remained a problem. Government officials continued to make anti-Semitic statements, organize events designed to deny the Holocaust, and sanction anti-Semitic propaganda. Such propaganda involved 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 supported Zionism and the state of Israel, continued to create a hostile atmosphere for Jews. The rhetorical attacks also further blurred the lines between Zionism, Judaism, and Israel and contributed to increased concerns about the future security of the Jewish community in the country. President Ahmadinejad continued his virulent anti-Semitic campaign. He continued to question regularly the existence and the scope of the Holocaust and publically called for the destruction of Israel, which created a more hostile environment for the Jewish community. In an address at Tehran University on August 26, he stated, "The Zionist regime's establishment was based on numerous deceptions and lies and one of the biggest lies was the Holocaust."

The Sabean-Mandaean religious community reportedly faced harassment and repression by authorities similar to that faced by other religious minorities. The government often denied members of the Sabean-Mandaean community access to higher education.

There were reports of arrests and harassment of Sunni clerics and congregants. Many Sunnis claimed they were discriminated against; however, 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 mosque for use by Sunnis in Tehran, despite the presence of more than one million adherents 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 form 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-va-Baluchestan, reported discrimination and lack of resources, but it was difficult to determine if this discrimination was based on religion, ethnicity, or both.

Sunni members of the Majles wrote a letter to the supreme leader, dated December 19, asking for an end to discrimination against Sunnis. The members noted the non-implementation of elements of the constitution, including “those principles that refer to religious freedom of the Sunnis.” They emphasized as well that Sunnis had been unable to secure permission to build a mosque in Tehran and were still barred from running in presidential elections.

In November security officials in Tehran and Isfahan arrived at prayer sites belonging to Sunnis and prevented them from holding religious ceremonies marking the Feast of the Sacrifice (Eid al-Adha). Media reports also stated that Sunni Muslims in Tehran were banned from congregating at prayers marking the end of Ramadan.

According to reports, the government in August asked Sunni worshippers in Tehran to have a Shia imam lead their prayers, while security police were deployed to prevent Sunnis from entering houses they rented for religious ceremonies.

In February security forces reportedly raided a Sunni house of worship in Tehran, closed the facility, and detained the prayer leader, Mowlavi Musazadeh, who was released the following month on bail.

The government repressed Sufi communities and their religious practices, including increased harassment and intimidation of prominent Sufi leaders by the intelligence and security services. Government restrictions on Sufi groups and husseiniya (houses of worship) have become more pronounced in recent years. Sufi homes, businesses, and religious sites were damaged or destroyed by government officials during the year.

According to critics, the government used the clerical courts to prosecute certain clerics for expressing controversial political ideas and for participating in nonreligious activities, including journalism. In December Hojjatolislam Seyed Reza Ghods Alavi’s office was sealed by the Internal Security Forces shortly after he was suspended from teaching at the religious college in Qom. Alavi was a representative of Ayatollah Sanei, a supporter of reformists. Also, Ayatollah Hossein Kazemeini Boroujerdi remained in prison, in the sixth year of an 11-year sentence. Reportedly, his health was declining, and he was denied medical care and protection from threats from other prisoners. The basis for his conviction had not been disclosed by year’s end.

In March the UN Human Rights Council created a new position of special rapporteur for human rights in Iran. Dr. Ahmed Shaheed assumed the mandate in August and issued his first interim report in October, in which he noted his concern regarding targeted violence and discrimination against Iran’s religious minorities, as well as the constraints on freedom of religion and belief.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Although the constitution gives Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians the status of “protected” religious minorities, in practice non-Muslims faced substantial societal discrimination, and government actions continued to support elements of society that created a threatening atmosphere for some religious minorities. Many reports during the year implied or explicitly stated that the abuses or actions stemmed from government actions or encouragement.

After President Ahmadinejad 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. This campaign against non-Muslims continued and contributed to a significantly poorer situation for the non-Muslim community throughout the year.

Baha’i graveyards in a number of cities were desecrated by unspecified actors, and the government did not seek to identify or punish the perpetrators. Throughout the year, Baha’is in several cities across the country were targets of arson attacks; in all cases, police said nothing could be done to find the perpetrators. Some arson cases appeared to be linked to Baha’i interactions with other religions, as letters were sent to owners of burned businesses shortly after the fires warning Baha’is not to befriend Muslims.

There were reported problems for Baha’is at different levels of society around the country. Baha’is experienced an escalation of personal harassment, including receiving threatening notes, compact discs, 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 were numerous reports of Shia clerics and prayer leaders denouncing Sufism and the activities of Sufis in the country in both sermons and public statements.

Anti-Semitism remained a problem. Many Jews sought to limit their contact with or support for the state of Israel due to 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."

There were reports during the year that members of the Sabeian-Mandaean community experienced societal discrimination and pressure to convert to Islam.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The United States has no diplomatic relations with Iran, and thus did not directly raise concerns with the government over its restrictions on religious freedom and other abuses the government committed against adherents of minority religious groups.

However, the U.S. government made its position clear through public statements and reports, support for relevant UN and NGO efforts, diplomatic initiatives, congressional actions, and sanctions as it pressed for an end to government abuses. Since 1999 the United States has designated Iran as a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

On August 18 the secretary of state redesignated Iran as a CPC. As an action under the IRFA, the secretary of state designated the existing ongoing restrictions on certain imports from and exports to the country, in accordance with section 103(b) of the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions Accountability and Divestment Act of 2010, pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the act.

On numerous occasions White House and U.S. State Department officials, including the ambassador at large for international religious freedom, addressed the situations of Baha'i, Christian, Jewish, and other communities in the country.

In March following the re-imposition of a 20-year prison sentence on Baha'i leaders, the Department of State criticized this "unprecedented step" as a violation of Iran's obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. In July a spokesperson for the State Department issued a statement regarding increasing abuses of religious freedom, noting that, "While Iran's leaders hypocritically claim to promote tolerance, they continue to detain, imprison, harass, and abuse those who simply wish to worship the faith of their choosing." The spokesperson called on the Iranian government to respect the "fundamental rights of all its citizens" and uphold its international commitments to protect them. On August 12, the State Department again criticized the sentencing of the seven Baha'i leaders, emphasizing the lack of due process and the sentencing as a violation of Iran's commitments as a signatory of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

During congressional hearings in May and July, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and other senior officials described the deepening persecution of religious minorities in the country, highlighting the cases of Youcef Nadarkhani and the Gonabadi Sufis. In December the United States extended the Lautenberg Amendment, allowing victims of religious persecution to qualify for refugee status in the United States; supporters of this legislation cited the deterioration of religious freedom in the country as one of the reasons such legislation continued to be important.

The U.S. government publicly criticized the treatment of the country's Baha'is in UN resolutions. The U.S. government has called on other countries that have bilateral relations with Iran to use those ties to press the government on religious freedom and human rights matters.

At the United Nations, the United States helped lead the effort at the UN Human Rights Council to create the position of a special rapporteur for human rights in Iran. For the ninth year in a row, the U.S. government cosponsored and supported a successful UN General Assembly resolution--which passed 86 to 32, with 59 abstentions--condemning the ongoing and severe human rights abuses in the country.