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2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The constitution defines the country as an Islamic republic and specifies Twelver Ja'afari Shia Islam as the official state religion. It states all laws and regulations must be based on "Islamic criteria" and an official interpretation of sharia. The constitution states citizens shall enjoy human, political, economic, and other rights, "in conformity with Islamic criteria." The penal code specifies the death sentence for proselytizing and attempts by non-Muslims to convert Muslims, as well as for *moharebeh* ("enmity against God") and *sabb al-nabi* ("insulting the Prophet or Islam"). According to the penal code, the application of the death penalty varies depending on the religion of both the perpetrator and the victim. The law prohibits Muslim citizens from changing or renouncing their religious beliefs. The constitution also stipulates five non-Ja'afari Islamic schools shall be "accorded full respect" and official status in matters of religious education and certain personal affairs. The constitution states Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians, excluding converts from Islam, are the only recognized religious minorities permitted to worship and form religious societies "within the limits of the law." According to the online news service Iran Focus, on September 10, the Supreme Court, for the third time, upheld the death sentence against seven Sunni Muslim prisoners who were charged with "acting against national security," "propaganda against the state," and "*moharebeh*." On October 4, according to the Kurdistan Press Agency and a Kurdish nongovernment organization (NGO), security forces arrested a prominent Kurdish Sunni imam, Mamousta Rasoul Hamzhepour, in his home in the city of Piranshahr. As of year's end, his whereabouts and the status of his case remained unknown. The Abdorrahman Boroumand Center for Human Rights in Iran (ABC), a U.S.-based human rights NGO, said that from January 2000 to November 2020, the government sentenced at least 237 persons to amputation and carried out the sentence in at least 129 cases. On October 8, the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) released a report on the country's use of capital punishment, stating, "The death penalty...has often been used against members of Iran's ethnic communities and religious minorities, especially in political cases based on *moharebeh*, 'spreading corruption on Earth,' insurrection, and other vaguely worded crimes." According to the ABC, on October 14, authorities in the Office of the Borazjan City Prosecutor flogged a Christian convert, Mohammad Reza (Yohan) Omid, 80 times for drinking communion wine. On November 22, NGOs and several media outlets reported that authorities raided the homes of dozens of Baha'is across the country in "simultaneous operations." On May 28, Radio Farda reported that police in Khuzestan Province said they arrested "14 agents of *takfiri* (an umbrella term to refer to Sunni dissident groups and Sunni individuals) and separatist groups." The opposition website Iran Focus stated human rights groups reported that authorities summoned, interrogated, and arrested several religious Sunni teachers, students, and civil activists during the month of Ramadan (which began in late April). NGOs reported that as of October 27, there were 38 Baha'is – 16 men and 22 women – in prison. Twenty-six of them were placed there during the year. In July, a court sentenced seven of eight Christian converts who were arrested in Bushehr in 2019 for spreading "propaganda against the regime." After sentencing a married couple among the group, the court ruled that, as Christians, the couple were not fit to raise their adopted daughter, who has heart and other health conditions, whom the court viewed as a Muslim. In May, the parliament passed amendments to the Islamic Penal Code, including language that those found guilty of "deviant psychological manipulation" or "propaganda contrary to Islam" could be labeled as members of a "sect" and punished with imprisonment, flogging, fines, or the death penalty. On November 9, the Supreme Court rejected an appeal by women's right activist Saba Kord-Afshari of her prison sentence for protesting the compulsory hijab. On November 1, Iran International and the international human rights news agency HRANA reported that authorities barred from higher education at least 17 Baha'is who participated in the year's nationwide university entrance examinations, despite their being academically qualified. In January, NGOs and press reported that the application form for the state-issued national identity card, required for almost all government and other transactions, would only allow citizens to register as one of the country's recognized religions – Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism; previously application forms for the identity card had an option for "other religions." According to a December 4 report by the news website IranWire, the government issued a memorandum to provincial judiciary heads establishing a new General Office for the Supervision of

Lawyers to receive any reports of transgressions by members of the legal profession, including women lawyers not wearing the mandatory hijab at work or on social media or doubts about a lawyer's commitment to Islam, the Islamic Republic, or the principle of Supreme Leader.

According to multiple sources, non-Shia Muslims and those affiliated with a religion other than Islam, especially members of the Baha'i community, continued to face societal discrimination and harassment, while employers experienced social pressures not to hire Baha'is or to dismiss them from their private-sector jobs. Baha'is reported there was continued destruction and vandalism of their cemeteries. According to IranWire, during Friday prayers in early November in Kermanshah, Sunni cleric Mullahamid Faraji called Yarsanis infidels, Satanists, and enemies of Muslims. Molavi Abdolhamid Ismaeelzahi, the most senior Sunni cleric in the country, circulated a video on social media charging that Chinese Shia students studying at al-Mustafa International University in Qom had infected the country with the COVID-19 virus. According to press and NGO reports, on May 14, following threats on Twitter, a man broke into the shrine of Esther and Mordechai, a Jewish holy site in Hamadan, in an attempt to set fire to the tomb. In June, the Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran, a Netherlands-based NGO focusing on research on Iran, conducted an online survey with the collaboration of the ABC that found dramatic changes in Iranian society's religiosity, especially an increase in secularization and a diversity of faiths and beliefs. The survey found that only 40 percent of respondents identified as Muslim.

The United States has no diplomatic relations with Iran. The U.S. government used public statements, sanctions, and diplomatic initiatives in international forums to condemn the government's abuses and restrictions on worship by religious minorities. Senior U.S. government officials publicly reiterated calls for the release of prisoners held on religious grounds. On September 24, the United States sanctioned several officials and entities for gross violations of human rights and denials to the right of liberty of those seeking only to practice their religion, including Judge Seyyed Mahmoud Sadati, Judge Mohammad Soltani, Branch 1 of the Revolutionary Court of Shiraz, and the Adel Abad, Orumiyeh, and Vakilabad prisons. The statement read, in part, "Judge Soltani is responsible for sentencing Baha'is in Iran on dubious charges related to their exercise of freedom of expression or belief" and "Orumiyeh Prison has subjected members of ethnic and religious minority groups and political prisoners to abuse, including beatings and floggings."

Since 1999, Iran has been designated as a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On December 2, the Secretary of State redesignated Iran as a CPC. The following sanction accompanied the designation: the existing ongoing travel restrictions based on in section 221(c) of the Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act of 2012 (TRA) for individuals identified under Section 221(a)(1)(C) of the TRA in connection with the commission of serious human rights abuses, pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 85.0 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to Iranian government estimates, Muslims constitute 99.4 percent of the population, of whom 90-95 percent are Shia, and 5-10 percent are Sunni, mostly Turkmen, Arabs, Baluchis, and Kurds, living in the northeast, southwest, southeast, and northwest provinces, respectively. Afghan refugees, economic migrants, and displaced persons also make up a significant Sunni population, but accurate statistics on the breakdown of the Afghan refugee population between Sunni and Shia are unavailable. There are no official statistics available on the number of Muslims who practice Sufism, although unofficial reports estimate several million.

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

According to Human Rights Watch data, Baha'is number at least 300,000.

The government Statistical Center of Iran reports there are 117,700 Christians in the country. Some estimates, however, suggest there may be many more than actually reported. According to World Christian Database statistics, there are approximately 547,000 Christians. Elam Ministries, a Christian organization, estimates there could be between 300,000 and one million.

Estimates by the Assyrian Church of the total Assyrian and Chaldean Christian population put their combined number at 7,000. There are also Protestant denominations, including evangelical groups, but there is no authoritative data on their numbers. Christian groups outside the country disagree on the size of the Protestant community, with some estimates citing figures lower than 10,000, and others, such as Open Doors USA, citing numbers greater than 800,000. Many Protestants and converts to Christianity from Islam reportedly practice in secret.

There is no official count of Yarsanis, but HRANA and the Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI) estimate there are up to two million. Yarsanis are mainly located in Loristan and the Kurdish regions.

According to recent estimates from Armenian Christians who maintain contact with the Iranian Christian community in the country, their current numbers are approximately 40,000 to 50,000, significantly lower than the peak of 300,000 estimated prior to 1979. The number of Roman Catholics in the country is estimated to be 21,000.

According to Zoroastrian groups and the government-run Statistical Center of Iran, the population includes approximately 25,000 Zoroastrians.

According to the Tehran Jewish Committee, the population includes approximately 9,000 Jews, while representatives from the Jewish community in the country estimated their number at 15,000 during a 2018 *PBS News Hour* interview.

The population, according to government media, includes 14,000 Sabeen-Mandaeans.

According to the 2011 census, the number of individuals who are nonreligious rose by 20 percent between 2006 and 2011, which supports observations by academics and others that the number of atheists, agnostics, nonbelievers, and religiously unaffiliated living in the country is growing. Often these groups, however, do not publicly identify, as documented by Amnesty International's report on the country, because those who profess atheism are at risk of arbitrary detention, torture, and the death penalty for "apostasy."

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution defines the country as an Islamic republic and designates Twelver Ja'afari Shia Islam as the official state religion. The constitution stipulates all laws and regulations must be based on "Islamic criteria" and an official interpretation of sharia. The constitution states citizens shall enjoy all human, political, economic, social, and cultural rights "in conformity with Islamic criteria."

The constitution prohibits the investigation of an individual's ideas and states no one may be "subjected to questioning and aggression for merely holding an opinion." The law prohibits Muslims from changing or renouncing their religious beliefs. The only recognized conversions are from another religion to Islam. Conversion from Islam may be considered apostasy under sharia, a crime punishable by death. Under the law, a child born to a Muslim father is Muslim.

By law, non-Muslims may not engage in public persuasion or attempted conversion of Muslims. The law considers these activities proselytizing and punishable by death. In addition, citizens who are not recognized as Christians, Zoroastrians, or Jews may not engage in public religious expression, such as worshiping in a church or wearing religious symbols such as a cross. The government makes some exceptions for foreigners belonging to unrecognized religious groups.

The penal code specifies the death sentence for *moharebeh* ("enmity against God," which according to the *Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, means in Quranic usage "corrupt conditions caused by unbelievers or unjust people that threaten social and political wellbeing"), *fisad fil-arz* ("corruption on earth," which includes apostasy or heresy), and *sabb al-nabi* ("insulting the Prophet" or "insulting the sanctities [Islam]"). According to the penal code, the application of the death penalty varies depending on the religion of both the perpetrator and the victim.

The constitution states the four Sunni schools (Hanafi, Shafi, Maliki, and Hanbali) and the Shia Zaydi school of Islam are "deserving of total respect," and their followers are free to perform religious practices. It states these schools may follow their own jurisprudence in matters of religious education and certain personal affairs, including marriage, divorce, and inheritance.

The constitution states Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians are the only recognized religious minorities. "Within the limits of the law," they have permission to perform religious rites and ceremonies and to form religious societies. They are also free to address personal affairs and religious education according to their own religious canon. The government considers any citizen who is not a registered member of one of these three groups or who cannot prove his or her family was Christian prior to 1979, to be Muslim.

Since the law prohibits citizens from converting from Islam to another religion, the government only recognizes the Christianity of citizens who are Armenian or Assyrian Christians, because the presence of these groups in the country predates Islam, or of citizens who can prove they or their families were Christian prior to the 1979 revolution. The government also recognizes Sabeen-Mandaeans as Christian, even though they state they do not consider themselves as such. The government often considers Yarsanis as Shia Muslims practicing Sufism, but Yarsanis identify Yarsan as a distinct faith (known as Ahl-e-Haq or Kakai). Yarsanis may also self-register as Shia to obtain government services. The government does not recognize evangelical Protestants as Christian.

Citizens who are members of one of the recognized religious minorities must register with authorities. Registration conveys certain rights, including the use of alcohol for religious purposes. Authorities may close a church and arrest its leaders if churchgoers do not register or unregistered individuals attend services. The law does not recognize individuals who convert to Christianity as Christian. They may not register and are not entitled to the same rights as recognized members of Christian communities.

The Supreme Leader (the *Velayat-e Faqih*, the Guardian of the Islamic Jurist), the country's head of state, oversees extrajudicial special clerical courts, which are not provided for by the constitution. The courts, each headed by a Shia Islamic legal scholar, operate outside the judiciary's purview and investigate offenses committed by clerics, including political statements inconsistent with government policy and nonreligious activities. The courts also issue rulings based on independent interpretation of Islamic legal sources. The constitution provides that the judiciary be "an independent power" that is "free from every kind of unhealthy relation and connection." The government appoints judges "in accordance with religious criteria."

The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) monitor religious activity. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) also monitors churches.

The constitution provides for freedom of the press, except when it is "harmful to the principles of Islam or the rights of the public."

The Ministry of Education determines the religious curricula of public schools. All school curricula, public and private, must include a course on Shia Islamic teachings, and all pupils must pass this course to advance to the next educational level, through university. Sunni students and students from recognized minority religious groups must take and pass the courses on Shia Islam, although they may also take separate courses on their own religious beliefs. To pass the university entrance examination, applicants must pass an exam on Islamic, Christian, or Jewish theology based on their official religious affiliation.

Recognized minority religious groups, except for Sunni Muslims, may operate private schools. The Ministry of Education supervises the private schools operated by recognized minority religious groups and imposes certain curriculum requirements. The ministry must approve all textbooks used in coursework, including religious texts. These schools may provide their own religious instruction and in languages other than Farsi, but authorities must approve those texts as well. Minority communities must bear the cost of translating the texts into Farsi for official review. Directors of such private schools must demonstrate loyalty to the official state religion. This requirement, known as *gozinesh* review, is an evaluation to determine adherence to the government ideology and system as well as knowledge of the official interpretation of Shia Islam.

The law bars Baha'is from founding or operating their own educational institutions. A Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology order requires universities to exclude Baha'is from access to higher education, or to expel them if their religious affiliation becomes known. Government regulations state Baha'is are only permitted to enroll in universities if they do not identify themselves as Baha'is. To register for the university entrance examination, Baha'i students must answer a basic multiple-choice question and identify themselves as followers of a religion other than the Baha'i Faith (e.g., Islam, Christianity, Judaism, or Zoroastrianism).

According to the constitution, Islamic scholars in the Assembly of Experts, an assembly of 86 popularly elected and Supreme Leader-approved clerics whose qualifications include piety and religious scholarship, elect the Supreme Leader. To "safeguard" Islamic ordinances and to ensure legislation passed by the Islamic Consultative Assembly (i.e., the parliament or Majles) is compatible with Islam, a Guardian Council, composed of six Shia clerics appointed by the Supreme Leader and six Shia legal scholars nominated by the judiciary, must review and approve all legislation. The Guardian Council also vets all candidates for the Assembly of Experts, President, and parliament, and supervises elections for those bodies. Individuals who are not Shia Muslims are barred from serving as Supreme Leader or President, as well as from being a member in the Assembly of Experts, Guardian Council, or Expediency Council (the country's highest arbiter of disputes between the parliament and the Guardian Council over legislation).

The constitution bans parliament from passing laws contrary to Islam and states there may be no amendment to its provisions related to the "Islamic character" of the political or legal system, or to the specification that Twelver Ja'afari Shia Islam is the official religion.

Non-Muslims may not be elected to a representative body or hold senior government, intelligence, or military positions, with the exception of five of the 290 parliament seats reserved by the constitution for recognized religious minorities. There are two seats reserved for Armenian Christians, one for Assyrian and Chaldean Christians together, one for Jews, and one for Zoroastrians.

The constitution states that in regions where followers of one of the recognized schools of Sunni Islam constitute the majority, local regulations are to be in accordance with that school within the bounds of the jurisdiction of local councils and without infringing upon the rights of the followers of other schools.

According to the constitution, a judge should rule on a case on the basis of codified law, but in a situation where such law is absent, he should deliver his judgment on the basis of “authoritative Islamic sources and authentic fatwas.”

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

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

The criminal code provides for *hadud* punishments (those mandated by sharia) for theft, including amputation of the fingers of the right hand, amputation of the left foot, life imprisonment, and death, as well as flogging of up to 99 lashes or stoning for other crimes.

By law, non-Muslims may not serve in the judiciary, the security services (which are separate from the regular armed forces), or as public school principals. Officials screen candidates for elected offices and applicants for public-sector employment based on their adherence to and knowledge of Islam and loyalty to the Islamic Republic (*gozinesh* review requirements), although members of recognized religious minorities may serve in the lower ranks of government if they meet these loyalty requirements. Government workers who do not observe Islamic principles and rules are subject to penalties and may be fired or barred from work in a particular sector.

The government bars Baha’is from all government employment and forbids Baha’i participation in the governmental social pension system. Baha’is may not receive compensation for injury or crimes committed against them and may not inherit property. A religious fatwa from the Supreme Leader encourages citizens to avoid all dealings with Baha’is.

The government does not recognize Baha’i marriages or divorces but allows a civil attestation of marriage. The attestation serves as a marriage certificate and allows for basic recognition of the union but does not offer legal protections in marital disputes.

Recognized religious groups issue marriage contracts in accordance with their religious laws.

The constitution permits the formation of political parties based on Islam or on one of the recognized religious minorities, provided the parties do not violate the “criteria of Islam,” among other stipulations.

The constitution states the military must be Islamic, must be committed to Islamic ideals, and must recruit individuals who are committed to the objectives of the Islamic revolution. In addition to the regular military, the IRGC is charged with upholding the Islamic nature of the revolution at home and abroad. The law does not provide for exemptions from military service based on religious affiliation. The law forbids non-Muslims from holding positions of authority over Muslims in the armed forces. Members of recognized religious minorities with a college education may serve as officers during their mandatory military service, but they may not continue to serve beyond the mandatory service period to become career military officers.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, but at ratification, it entered a general reservation “not to apply any provisions or articles of the Convention that are incompatible with Islamic Laws and the international legislation in effect.”

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

According to numerous international human rights NGOs, the government convicted and executed dissidents, political reformers, and peaceful protesters on charges of “enmity against God” and anti-Islamic propaganda. According to Amnesty International and Voice of America (VOA), on June 10, an official told the family of Hedayat Abdollahpour, a Sunni Kurdish activist, they executed him on or about May 21 in the town of Oshnavieh. Authorities subsequently gave the family a death certificate

stating he died on May 11 as a result of “being hit by hard or sharp objects,” a phrase Amnesty International had previously documented was used on certificates of deaths from gunshot wounds. Authorities had arrested Abdollahpour in 2016 in connection with an armed fight between the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran and the IRGC. The government charged him with “taking up arms [against the government]” and “supporting a dissident group,” charges he denied. The NGO Justice4Iran reported that authorities did not notify Abdollahpour’s family members at the time of his execution, and for many months before his death, his whereabouts were unknown, which led international observers to press authorities for information on his case. At year’s end, the government still refused to disclose what it did with Abdollahpour’s remains. According to Kurdistan Human Rights-Geneva, out of the nine political prisoners executed in 2020 in addition to Abdollahpour, there were three other Sunni Kurd political prisoners charged with “enmity against God” and other vague national security charges – Mustafa Salimi, Saber Shehkh Abdullah, and Diako Rasulzadeh – and two Sunni Baluchis – Abdulbaset Dehani and Abdulhameed Baluchzahi.

According to Radio Farda and IranWire, on July 9, authorities executed in Central Mashad Prison a man social media users helped identify as Morteza Jamali, who was arrested and charged with “consumption of alcohol.” IranWire reported that Jamali’s lawyer said that he was arrested in 2017 or 2018 and had been charged with consuming alcohol on several occasions. Under the country’s Islamic penal code, consuming alcohol is a “crime against God” and the initial punishment is usually flogging. Article 179 of the code states, however, that the accused may face the death penalty after being arrested three times.

According to the U.S. Institute of Peace and multiple media reports, on February 22, a Revolutionary Court sentenced to death three young men who had participated in November 2019 antigovernment protests, which began in reaction to a government increase in fuel prices. The government charged the men with “participating in vandalism and arson with the intent to confront and engage in war with the Islamic Republic of Iran” and “enmity against God.” The reports identified the three men as Amir Hossein Moradi, Saeed Tamjidi, and Mohammad Rajabi. Amnesty International said their trial was unfair and that security forces “tortured [them] with beatings, electric shocks, and being hung upside down.” Gholam-Hossein Esmaeili, a spokesman for the country’s judiciary, confirmed the three protesters’ death sentences on July 14 and accused them of “having links with certain groups abroad.” Citizens posted items on social media using the hashtag “DoNotExecute.” On July 19, the country’s judiciary said it would suspend the executions.

CHRI reported that the government announced the execution of two Sunni Baluch prisoners, Behnam Rigi and Shoaib Rigi, in the central prison in Zahedan, in Sistan and Baluchistan Province, on December 19. On December 20, the government executed a third Baluch prisoner, Abdolbaset Khesht, who was arrested in 2012, in the central prison of Dozap, in the same province. Authorities accused the men of membership in militant Sunni Muslim groups. NGOs and press reported that three other Sunni prisoners held in Zahedan were in imminent danger of execution.

According to Iran Focus, on September 10, the Supreme Court upheld the death sentence against seven Sunni prisoners for the third time. Authorities imprisoned the inmates, Farhad Salimi, Qassem Absteht, Davood Abdollahi, Ayub Karimi, Anwar Khezri, Khosrow Besharat, and Kamran Sheikha, in the Urmia, Evin, and Rajai Shahr prisons for 11 years after arresting them in 2009. The government charged the men with “acting against national security,” “propaganda against the state,” and “*moharebeh*.”

According to the Kurdistan Press Agency and a Kurdish NGO, security forces arrested a Kurdish Sunni imam, Mamousta Rasoul Hamzhehpour, in the city of Piranshahr on October 4. Authorities arrested Hamzhehpour in his home, which they searched. The news report’s source stated that the government arrested Hamzhehpour, whom the source said was regarded as one of the prominent clerics in the province, several times in the past. As of year’s end, his whereabouts and the status of his case remained unknown.

The ABC said that from January 2000 to November 2020, the government sentenced at least 237 persons to amputation and carried out the sentence in at least 129 cases. Commenting on the report, Amnesty International stated, “The real number of victims is likely to be higher as many cases are believed to go unreported.” During this period, the ABC said the government flogged at least 2,134 individuals, including at least 17 children. According to the ABC, these numbers meant that, on average, for the past 20 years authorities have amputated the fingers of at least one person every two months and flogged at least two persons every week.

According to Amnesty International, members of the intelligence unit of the IRGC arrested Yarsani Kurdish activist and documentary filmmaker Mozghan Kavousi at her home in Noshahr, Mazandran Province, primarily in connection to her writings on social media about the November 2019 protests. IGRC intelligence officers held Kavousi in a Mazandran detention center, where she was kept in prolonged solitary confinement. Branch 1 of the Revolutionary Court of Noshahr convicted her of “spreading propaganda against the system” and “inciting people to disrupt the country’s order and security” in connection with two posts on her Instagram account about the protests and sentenced her to five years and nine months in prison. Starting in May, she was serving her sentence in Evin Prison along with 35 other women prisoners of conscience as of year’s end.

According to Amnesty International, in March and April, thousands of prisoners in at least eight prisons across the country, many in provinces containing Sunni Ahwazi Arab, Kurdish, and Azerbaijani Turkish ethnic minorities, staged protests over fears of contracting the COVID-19 virus. Prison authorities and security forces reportedly responded by using live ammunition and tear gas to suppress the protests, killing approximately 35 inmates in two prisons and injuring hundreds of others. According to reports from families of prisoners, journalists, and Ahwazi Arab human rights activists and organizations, on March 30 and 31, security forces used excessive force to quell protests, causing up to 15 deaths in Sepidar Prison and 20 in Sheiban Prison, both located in the city of Ahvaz in Khuzestan Province. Amnesty International reported that numerous videos taken from outside both prisons and shared on social media sites showed smoke rising from the buildings, while gunfire can be heard. Authorities transferred Arab minority rights activist Mohammad Ali Amourinejad and several other inmates, including prisoners of conscience serving life sentences for “enmity against God” due to having promoted educational and cultural rights for Ahwazi Arabs, out of Sheiban Prison following the unrest. At year’s end, the government continued to hold these prisoners incommunicado in an unknown location.

On October 8, ahead of the World Day against the Death Penalty, the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) released a report on the country’s use of capital punishment, saying it was “an indelible stain on the country’s human rights record.” According to the report’s language, “The death penalty...has often been used against members of Iran’s ethnic communities and religious minorities, especially in political cases based on *moharebeh*, ‘spreading corruption on Earth,’ insurrection, and other vaguely worded crimes.” According to the FIDH report, “These ethnic and religious groups have been subjected to extensive and protracted discrimination with regard to their political, civil, economic, social, and cultural rights, which has led to resentment towards the central government. Various groups have engaged in opposition activities and occasionally taken up arms in ethnic-populated regions in the past four decades. Rather than addressing their grievances, the Iranian authorities have responded with heavy-handed measures, including the implementation of the death penalty on a large scale....Members of religious minorities [who have been targeted by executions] include some groups of Sunni Muslims in West Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, and Sistan and Baluchistan Provinces; followers of the Shia Ahl-e-Haq sect [Yarsan] in West Azerbaijan Province; and Baha’is.”

Residents of provinces containing large Sunni populations, including Kurdistan, Khuzestan, and Sistan and Baluchistan, reported continued repression by judicial authorities and members of the security services, including extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrest, and torture in detention. They also reported discrimination (including suppression of religious rights), denial of basic government services, and inadequate funding for infrastructure projects. Iran Human Rights and other human rights activists continued to report a disproportionately large number of executions of Sunni prisoners, particularly Kurds, Baluchis, and Arabs.

On May 6, IranWire and the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) reported security forces shot and killed two Sunni Baluchi brothers, 18-year-old Mohammad and 20-year-old Mehdi Pourian, in their home in Iranshahr, the capital city of Sistan and Baluchistan Province. Security forces also reportedly killed a 17-year-old, Daniel Brahovi, in the incident. The Iranshahr prosecutor told local media that the three were “famous and well-known miscreants” and that “weapons and ammunition were seized from them.” The families of the three deceased filed charges against the security forces involved but did not receive a response. According to one report, the local police and prosecutor threatened to kill the Pourian family if they continued to press the case.

According to the ABC, on October 14, authorities of the Office of the Borazjan City Prosecutor flogged a Christian convert, Mohammad Reza (Yohan) Omid, 80 times for drinking communion wine. Authorities released Omid from Evin Prison in August after he served two years on charges of “establishing home churches” and “promoting Zionist Christianity.” In September, he moved to Borazjan in Bushehr Province to serve a two-year term of internal exile. The Revolutionary Court of Tehran sentenced Omid and fellow members of the Church of Iran denomination Yussef Nadarkhani, Zaman (Saheb) Fadai, and Mohammad Ali (Yasser) Mosayebzadeh to 10 years in prison each in 2017. At a retrial in June, a court reduced Nadarkhani and Fadai’s sentences to six years each and Omid’s sentence to two years. On November 15, according to UK-based Article 18, an NGO focused on religious freedom in Iran, authorities summoned Fadai to the Shahid Moghadas Revolutionary Court, where he received 80 lashes for drinking communion wine.

Human rights NGOs, including CHRI, HRANA, and the official website of Gonabadi Sufi dervishes, Majzooban Noor, reported throughout the year on extremely poor conditions inside Qarchak Prison for Women, including reports of Shia guards requiring all inmates, regardless of their faith, to use a chador as their head-to-toe covering.

According to human rights activists, the government continued to target Christians who converted from Islam, using arbitrary arrests, physical abuse, and other forms of harsh treatment. Article 18 reported that on January 12, authorities arrested Christian convert Fatemeh (Mary) Mohammadi during protests in central Tehran and took her to Vozara detention center, where male and female prison guards beat her so badly that she carried visible bruises for three weeks. Detention center

staff forced her to sit outside in extremely cold temperatures, withheld food until 24 hours after her arrest, and strip-searched her. They transferred Mohammadi to Qarchak Prison, where her bail was set at approximately 95 million rials (\$2,300), equivalent to more than the annual salary of the average Iranian. Mohammadi had already served six months in prison for her Christian activities on charges of “action against national security” and “propaganda against the system.” According to VOA, on April 21, Mohammadi told her Instagram followers that she spent 46 days in “terrible conditions” during her detention. She said authorities sentenced her to three months in prison and 10 lashes for participating in the January protests but suspended punishment for one year, allowing her to remain free.

In a July report, the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Javād Rehmān, expressed concern at the reported high number of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience from the Azerbaijani-Turk, Kurdish, and Ahwazi Arab communities, many of whom were from religious minorities.

On May 6, Amnesty International reported that Hossein Sepanta, a prisoner in Adel Abad Prison in Shiraz, was critically ill because authorities denied him proper treatment for a spinal-cord disorder. CHRI had reported in 2019 that in response to his hunger strike, prison authorities had transferred Sepanta, a convert from Islam to Zoroastrianism, to the “punishment unit” of Adel Abad Prison. According to a source inside the prison, an interrogator severely beat Sepanta, after which he had problems keeping his balance when walking. Sepanta began serving a 14-year sentence in 2013 on charges of “propaganda against the state” and “assembly and collusion against national security.”

According to human rights activists, Baluchis faced government discrimination both as Sunni religious practitioners and as an ethnic minority group. Baluchi rights activists reported continued arbitrary arrests, physical abuse, and unfair trials of journalists and human rights activists. They reported authorities often pressured family members of those in prison to remain silent. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and Amnesty International called on authorities to suspend the execution of a Baluchi man, Javid Dehghan, who had been forced to confess under torture that he was a member of a Salafi terrorist group called Jaish ul-Adl and fatally shot two IRGC agents in an ambush in 2015. According to OHCHR, there was a series of “at least 28” executions in December in the country. An OHCHR spokesperson said, “This has included a series of executions of members of ethnic and religious minority groups – in particular, Kurdish, Ahwazi Arabi, and Baluchi communities.”

According to IranWire, on December 15, Ayatollah Mahmoud Amjad, who criticized the government many times in the past, released a video protesting the government’s execution of a dissident journalist and blaming Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei for the bloodshed in the country since 2009. He also called on fellow clerics and religious scholars not to remain silent about the violence.

The government continued to incarcerate numerous prisoners on various charges related to religion. The *Iran Prison Atlas*, a database compiled by the U.S.-based NGO United for Iran, stated at least 60 members of minority religious groups remained imprisoned for being “religious minority practitioners.” Of the prisoners in the *Atlas* database, the government sentenced at least 25 to long-term imprisonment or executed them on charges of “enmity against God” or a charge referring to groups taking arms against the government (*baghi*), which officials sometimes used in recent years instead of “enmity against God.” Authorities sentenced at least 43 persons to prison for “insulting the Supreme Leader and Ayatollah Khomeini,” and at least 13 for “insulting the Prophet or Islam.”

On May 28, Radio Farda reported police in Khuzestan Province said they arrested “14 agents of *takfiri* and separatist groups.” The report said that authorities used *takfiri* as an umbrella term to refer to Sunni dissident groups and Sunni individuals. Police accused those arrested of shooting at government buildings and raising the flag of dissident groups around the city.

On November 22, NGOs and several media outlets reported that authorities raided the homes of dozens of Baha’is across the country in “simultaneous operations.” Security agents possessing vaguely worded search warrants confiscated personal effects, mobile telephones, computers, laptops, and religious books and pictures. In some cases, agents also reportedly confiscated cash and national identity cards. Some of the Baha’is whose homes were searched had previously served prison sentences, including Afif Naeimi, a member of the former leadership body of the country’s Baha’i community, who was freed in 2018 after serving a 10-year sentence, and Riaz Sobhani and Shahrokh Taef, who each had served four-year sentences in Rajaei Shahr Prison.

Human rights NGOs reported poor prison conditions and mistreatment of religious minorities held in government prisons. On September 26, VOA reported that since August, authorities denied a Gonabadi Sufi dervish, Benham Mahjoubi, medical treatment, including medication provided by his family, for a panic disorder, and forcibly transferred him from Evin Prison to the Razi Aminabad psychiatric hospital in Tehran. Amnesty International stated that authorities subjected Mahjoubi to torture and gave him injections of an unknown substance on multiple occasions against his will. Mahjoubi’s wife posted on social media that authorities transferred him to the facility after he was paralyzed in a fall. According to VOA, the government had arrested Mahjoubi for taking part in street

protests in Tehran in 2018, along with 300 other Gonabadi Sufi dervishes who had been demanding the release from house arrest of their leader, Dr. Noor Ali Tabandeh (who subsequently died on December 24, 2019).

In May, Gonabadi dervish Reza Yavari told VOA that authorities forced him to relocate to the northeastern town of Taybad, in Razavi Khorasan Province, to start a two-year sentence of internal exile following his April 1 pardon and release from a prison in the southwestern city of Ahvaz, capital of Khuzestan Province. Yavari, a native of Khuzestan who was studying at a Tehran university prior to his 2018 detention, accused authorities of acting illegally by forcing him into internal exile after granting him a pardon. Yavari told VOA that 38 other dervishes had also been forced into internal exile and expressed concern about the government's ongoing imprisonment of eight other dervish activists who were among more than 300 dervish community members arrested for involvement in antigovernment protests in Tehran in 2018. In August, four dervishes whom the government sentenced to internal exile told VOA that they rejected the claim made by a government representative in a press briefing that the government did not maintain a predetermined list of destinations for internal banishment. The four men said that the government sends released prisoners to live in poor towns, with harsh climates, far from the country's population centers and their homes.

According to the human rights NGO Hengaw, in late September, government security services arrested three Kurdish religious activists, Syawash (Forat), Behzad Talayi, and Farshad Fatahi in Urmia, West Azerbaijan Province. The government transferred the men to Urmia Central Prison on October 14. According to the NGO, the government arrested the three individuals because of religious activities and "propaganda" on behalf of "Islamic extremist groups."

There continued to be reports of arrests and harassment of Sunni clerics and congregants. According to a June report by the online news source Balochwarna News, Sunni cleric Molavi Fazl al-Rahman Kouhi remained in prison in the northeastern city of Mashhad on the orders of a special clerical court that summoned and jailed him in November 2019 following nationwide antigovernment protests after a sharp increase in gasoline prices. Kouhi served as the Friday prayer leader for the town of Pashamagh, inhabited mostly by Baluchi Sunnis. The court summoned and jailed him days after he gave a sermon criticizing the country's Shia-dominated government for violently suppressing the protests. According to the report, Kouhi's sermon described the crackdown as un-Iranian, un-Islamic, and inhumane. Abdol Sattar Doshoki, an exiled Sunni rights activist, said that the government's apparent arbitrary detention of an outspoken Sunni cleric was the latest sign of a bleak future for the country's Sunni Muslim minority.

Balochwarna News reported that security forces arrested Molawi Mohammad Qalandarzai, a Sunni imam, on February 27 at his home in Zahedan.

Iran Focus stated that during the year, the government increased its persecution of Sunnis in the parts of the country that have large Sunni populations. The website stated that human rights groups reported that authorities summoned, interrogated, and arrested several Sunni religious teachers, students, and civil activists during the month of Ramadan, which began in late April. Authorities detained at least 10 Sunnis in Sanandaj in Kurdistan Province. According to other reports, the Sanandaj Intelligence Agency summoned Ali Moradi, a Sunni cleric, and his son Mohammad at the beginning of Ramadan. On April 22, the IRGC summoned and interrogated Maktoom Askani, a Sunni activist in Zahedan in Sistan and Baluchistan Province. The Zahedan Revolutionary Guards Corps summoned and arrested Abdul Rauf Dashti, another Sunni activist. In late April, the Human Rights News Agency reported that MOIS summoned and interrogated Shahdad Zehi, a Sunni cleric in Sarbaz in Sistan and Baluchistan Province. On May 21, the Baluch Activists Campaign said that the Zahedan Revolutionary Guards Corps summoned and interrogated Akram Kuhi, the temporary head of Friday prayers in Peshamag village. The reports said that after the IRGC officials asked Kuhi about the employees, teachers, and students at a local religious school, they summoned and interrogated four other Sunnis from the school in September.

NGOs reported that as of October 27, there were 38 Baha'is – 16 men and 22 women – in prison. Twenty-six of them – 19 women and seven men – were placed there in 2020. NGOs reported that it was not clear whether holding twice as many women as men was accidental or whether it marked the beginning of a trend designed to apply additional pressure on the Baha'i community. In Shiraz, authorities summoned 26 Baha'is for a criminal hearing on October 5.

According to Iran Press Watch (IPW), on December 24, Branch 2 of the Bandar Abbas Revolutionary Court sentenced eight Baha'is for "gathering and colluding with the intent to disrupt the security of the country." Six Baha'is received two-year prison sentences and two received one-year prison sentences. The court banned them from membership in political and social parties and groups, including Baha'i banquets and gatherings, for a period of two years and sentenced them to five sessions of "counseling on sectarian issues."

According to press reporting, on September 7, a court in southern Khorasan Province sentenced eight Baha'is – six women and two men – to prison for "membership in the illegal Baha'i organization, which is a threat to national security." Authorities arrested the eight during a celebration of a Baha'i

holiday. The court gave the defendants – Ataollah Melaki, Attiyeh Salehi, Saeed Melaki, Roya Melaki, Nasrin Ghadiri, Arezou Mohammadi, Farzaneh Dimi, and Banafshe Mokhatari – sentences ranging from 15 months to two years' imprisonment. Some of these individuals wrote letters to Birjand judicial authorities requesting a delay in starting their sentences due to the rampant spread of COVID-19 in prisons. Authorities denied their requests, however, and the group began serving their sentences on October 20.

On June 8, the Baha'i International Community (BIC) reported that in the weeks leading up to that date, authorities summoned 55 Baha'is to court in Shiraz, Birjand, Karaj, and Kermanshah, trying and sentencing 26 of them; summoned 11 Baha'is to prison in Shiraz, Ghaemshahr, and Birjand; arrested three Baha'is in Yazd; and arrested two Baha'is in Isfahan, releasing them shortly thereafter. In a court hearing in Shiraz, a court official threatened to "uproot" the Baha'is in the city.

The Kurdistan Human Rights Network reported that on September 17, security forces arrested brothers Salar Ghazali and Saman Ghazali, holding them in a MOIS detention center for 75 days before transferring them to Mahabad Prison. In mid-December, Branch 1 of the Mahabad Revolutionary Court tried them for "acting against national security through membership in a Kurdish opposition party" and "propaganda against the state."

Activists and NGOs reported that Yarsani activists and community leaders continued to be subjected to detention or disappearance for engaging in awareness-raising regarding government practices or discrimination against the Yarsani community.

IPW and IranWire reported that on May 2, IRGC agents raided the Isfahan homes of three Baha'is, Shahzad Hosseini, his son Shayan Hosseini, and Shahzad's mother. Security personnel then arrested Shayan Hosseini and transferred him to an unknown location. According to a close relative of Shayan, during the raids, agents searched for small wooden boxes that the families used to store prayer books.

Non-Armenian Christians, particularly evangelicals and other converts from Islam, continued to experience disproportionate levels of arrests and detentions and high levels of harassment and surveillance, according to Christian NGOs. Human rights organizations and Christian NGOs continued to report authorities arrested Christians, including members of unrecognized churches, for their religious affiliation or activities, and charged them with "operating" illegally in private homes or supporting and accepting assistance from "enemy" countries. Many arrests reportedly took place during police raids on religious gatherings and included confiscation of religious property. News reports stated authorities subjected arrested Christians to severe physical and psychological mistreatment, which at times included beatings and solitary confinement. According to human rights NGOs, the government also continued to enforce the prohibition against proselytizing.

On May 28, authorities summoned Hossein Kadivar, Khalil Dehghanpour, Kamal Naamanian, and Mohammed Vafadar to begin serving five-year prison sentences. The government arrested the men in early 2019 before releasing them on bail. The four men were among nine Christian converts belonging to the Church of Iran denomination arrested over a four-week period, accused of endangering state security and promoting Zionism. The government transferred the other five converts, who were unable to afford bail, to Evin Prison shortly after their 2019 arrests. In late 2019, a court convicted all nine of "acting against national security" and sentenced them to five years' imprisonment. A court upheld the sentences on appeal in February.

In July, a court convicted seven of eight Christian converts arrested in Bushehr in 2019 of "propaganda against the regime." One of the Christians, Sam Khosravi, received a one-year prison term followed by two years of internal exile. The court fined Maryam Falahi, his wife, who worked as a nurse, 80 million rials (\$1,900) and banned her from working in a public institution. After their sentencing, a court ruled that as Christians, the couple were not fit to raise their daughter, whom they adopted as an infant in early 2019 and whom the court viewed as a Muslim. In September, an appeals court upheld that decision, despite the daughter's physical disabilities, which, according to the judge, made her chances at another family adopting her "zero."

On January 11, a court sentenced Anglican convert Ismaeli Maghrebinejad to three years' imprisonment for "insulting sacred Islamic beliefs" after he responded with a smiley emoji to a joke seen as critical of ruling clerics that had been texted to him on his cell phone. On February 27, a court sentenced him to two years' imprisonment on a separate charge of "membership in a group hostile to the regime" ("evangelical Zionism," according to court documents) for receiving a Bible verse sent over a cell phone app. In May, a court upheld the February verdict and added a one-year prison sentence for "propaganda against the regime." In July, a court overturned on appeal his three-year sentence for "insulting sacred Islamic beliefs," but upheld the other two sentences. Authorities arrested Maghrebinejad in early 2019 in Shiraz. In late 2019, authorities dropped a charge of apostasy that they brought against Maghrebinejad at the time of his arrest.

In February, authorities in Rasht arrested four Christian converts, Ramin Hassanpour, his wife Saeede (Kathrin) Sajadpour, Hadi (Moslem) Rahimi, and Sakine (Mehri) Behjati, for being members of a house church belonging to the Church of Iran. On May 14, the Revolutionary Court in Rasht initially

set bail at five billion rials each (\$119,000). The government transferred the four to Lakan Prison, near Rasht, when they were unable to post bail. A week later, the court reduced the bail to two billion rials each (\$47,600) and released Sajadpour, Rahimi, and Behjati on May 20 and Hassanpour on May 21. On August 1, a court handed down prison sentences to the four for “acting against national security” by belonging to a house church and “spreading Zionist Christianity.” Hassanpour received a five-year sentence, Rahimi four years, and Behjati and Sajadpour two years each.

After the cancellation of several court sessions connected with appeals of their 2017 and 2018 convictions and respective 10- and five-year sentences relating to “illegal church activity,” Victor Bet Tamraz, who formerly led the country’s Assyrian Pentecostal Church, and his wife, Shamiram Isavi, learned in early August that their appeals had been denied and that authorities would schedule no further hearings. On August 11, Isavi received a summons to report to Evin Prison to begin her prison sentence. On August 15, the couple fled the country. In September, Article 18 reported that Christian converts Kavian Fallah-Mohammadi, Hadi Asgari, and Amin Afshar-Naderi, who had received prison sentences in 2017 alongside Bet Tamraz, also fled the country after their appeals were rejected. In January, authorities summoned Ramiel Bet Tamraz, the son of Victor Bet Tamraz and Shamiram Isavi, to Evin Prison to serve his four-month sentence from 2018 for “propaganda against the system” through membership in a house church. Authorities released him from prison on February 26.

According to Article 18, authorities extended the two-year internal exile of Ebrahim Firouzi by 11 months. The government released Firouzi, a Christian convert, from Rajai Shahr Prison in 2019 after he served six years in prison for “collusion against national security” for converting to and practicing Christianity and related missionary activities. After he reported to the city of Sarbaz for the two years of internal exile included in his sentence, authorities extended his exile, saying that Firouzi did not have proper permission for a brief trip home to attend to some family business involving the death of his mother. After Firouzi’s exile was extended, a local prosecutor summoned him on new charges of “insulting the sacred,” which carries a maximum five-year sentence, and “propaganda against the state through promoting the Christian faith,” which may be punished with up to a year in prison. After meeting Firouzi, the prosecutor dismissed the case.

On November 18, at a virtual conference hosted by the International Organization to Preserve Human Rights regarding the “attitude of the Islamic Republic of Iran towards the different religious groups,” an Article 18 representative said that 17 Christian prisoners of conscience, all converts, were incarcerated in Tehran’s Evin Prison.

In April, authorities arrested Masoud Heydari and Hamid Haghjoo, the managing director and the Telegram channel administrator at the semiofficial Iranian Labor News Agency (ILNA), following the posting of a cartoon mocking COVID-19 remedies prescribed by religious leaders. ILNA officials denied publishing the cartoon and said they were falsely accused. Police released Heydari on bail while detaining Haghjoo pending an investigation into the case. There were no updates as of year’s end.

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

According to the BBC Persian service, on October 29, the Qom Seminary Teachers Association labeled Grand Ayatollah Kamal Heidari a “liar,” “sinner,” and “foreign agent,” and decreed that any dealings with him would be considered a “sin.” The association excommunicated Heidari and labeled him a “seditionist” for his modernist and rationalist views.

In a January 28 report to the UN Human Rights Council, the special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran said he was “deeply concerned” about a bill adopted by the Committee for Judicial and Legal Affairs of parliament in 2019 on “misguided sects” that would criminalize membership in religious groups that the government considered to be “misguided.” The special rapporteur stated, “According to a member of the Committee, the bill was proposed because of concerns about sects that have no jurisprudential or religious status but attribute their belief to Islam and about the cults that have emerged recently. Members of nonrecognized religious minorities have expressed concern that passage of the bill would make it a criminal offence to follow certain religions and could be used to increase discrimination against them.”

In May, parliament passed the legislation on “misguided sects” in the form of amendments to articles 499 and 500 of the Islamic Penal Code. The legislation stated that those found guilty of “deviant psychological manipulation” or “propaganda contrary to Islam” could be labeled as members of a “sect” and punished with imprisonment, flogging, fines, or the death penalty. A human rights lawyer living in Europe stated, “The law should protect citizens, including Christian converts and Baha’is, against the government, but in Iran the law has become a tool to justify the government’s violent treatment of converts and other unrecognized minorities.” The NGO Article 18 reported that the Guardian Council, which must approve all parliamentary bills, returned the bill to parliament in July, seeking eight clarifications, the majority of which related to “ambiguous” language. An Article 18

official cautioned that the legislation would still likely to return in a “different, perhaps more minimal, form.” ARTICLE 19, another human rights NGO based in the UK, reported that in November, it was believed that parliament addressed issues raised by the Guardian Council, but the specific changes were not publicly released. The NGO said the proposed amendments, regardless of any changes, would “further erode the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of religion and belief.”

According to the U.S. Institute of Peace, the government continued to monitor statements and views of senior Shia religious leaders who did not support government policies or Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei’s views. According to international media, authorities continued to target Shia clerics with arrest, detention, funding cuts, loss of clerical credentials, and confiscation of property. On September 5, IranWire reported that in late 2019, authorities arrested Einollah Rezazadeh Juibari, a Shia cleric, at his home as preparations began for the 40th day commemorations of the deaths of protestors killed by government forces in the November 2019 protests. Authorities first detained Juibari, a critic of the government who was repeatedly arrested in the past, at a detention center in Urmia before taking him to a prison in Miandoab, where he undertook a 13-day hunger strike before being released. IranWire reported that Juibari, whose case remained open at year’s end, had written a letter stating that he would remove his clerical garments and clerical turban for good, because such clerical attire needed to be “excised from politics.” His letter also said that the government had “used Islamic jurisprudence as a pretext for a power grab” and that it had “sacrificed the truth and authority of the Shia faith with [its] greed.”

Critics stated the government continued to use extrajudicial special clerical courts to control non-Shia Muslim clerics as well as to prosecute Shia clerics who expressed controversial ideas and participated in activities outside the sphere of religion, such as journalism or reformist political activities.

The BBC Persian service and the *Times of Israel* reported authorities confirmed to local media that a California-based Zoroastrian priest, Arash Kasravi, was killed on July 25 while attending his father’s funeral in Kerman. BBC Persian reported on August 2 that the Kerman Province prosecutor told local media that the killer’s body was one of two others found with Kasravi and that he had committed suicide after the killings. The prosecutor said the judiciary believed the killings were financially motivated, since \$10,000 was found in one of the victims’ vehicles. A social media post said that, following the 1979 revolution, many Zoroastrians have been targeted in these types of “mysterious homicides.”

Sources said that even when arrested, perpetrators of crimes against Baha’is faced reduced punishment if they stated that their acts were based on the religious identity of the victim.

There were continued reports of authorities placing restrictions on Baha’i businesses or forcing them to shut down after they temporarily closed in observance of Baha’i holidays, or of authorities threatening shop owners with potential closure, even though by law, businesses may close without providing a reason for up to 15 days a year. NGOs also reported the government continued to raid Baha’i homes and businesses and confiscate private and commercial property, as well as religious materials.

The government continued to hold many Baha’i properties it had seized following the 1979 revolution, including cemeteries, holy places, historical sites, and administrative centers. It also continued to prevent Baha’is from performing burials in accordance with their religious tradition. According to the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC), authorities routinely prevented the burial of deceased Baha’is from Tabriz at the local Vadi-i-Rahmat Cemetery. Instead, they often sent the remains for burial in Miandoab, 100 miles away, where authorities did not permit the families to wash the bodies and perform Baha’i burial rites. The IHRDC noted that Baha’i religious practice requires the deceased be buried at a location within an hour’s travel time from the place of death; however, the travel time between Tabriz and Miandoab is approximately 2.5 hours. According to the report, authorities at the cemetery, the Tabriz City Council, and the Eastern Azerbaijan provincial government said they were executing orders prohibiting the burial of Baha’is in Tabriz, but none of those offices claimed responsibility for issuing the order.

BIC reported that it learned in July that the Baha’i cemetery in Taft, Yazd Province, which the government had confiscated shortly after the 1979 revolution, was being divided and sold. According to BIC, the judiciary endorsed the confiscation of all property owned by Baha’i residents in the village of Ivel, Mazandaran Province, on the grounds that Baha’is have “a perverse ideology” and therefore have no “legitimacy in their ownership” of any property.

According to BIC, the government’s anti-Baha’i rhetoric increased markedly in recent years.

According to human rights organizations, Christian advocacy groups, and NGOs, the government continued to regulate Christian religious practices. Official reports and media continued to characterize Christian private churches in homes as “illegal networks” and “Zionist propaganda institutions.” Christian community leaders stated that when authorities learned Assyrian church leaders were baptizing new converts or preaching in Farsi, they closed the churches. NGOs report that virtually all Farsi-language churches in Iran were closed between 2009 and 2012. In 2019, Radio

Farda reported, “Christians from Iran’s historic Assyrian and Armenian communities are a recognized minority who are usually able to freely practice their faith, providing they don’t open their doors to Muslim-born Iranians by holding services in Persian.” Authorities also reportedly barred unregistered or unrecognized Christians from entering church premises and closed churches that allowed the latter to enter.

Christian advocacy groups continued to state the government, through pressure and church closures, eliminated all but a handful of Farsi-language church services, thus restricting services almost entirely to the Armenian and Assyrian languages. Security officials monitored registered congregation centers to perform identity checks on worshippers to confirm non-Christians or converts did not participate in services. In response, many Christian converts reportedly practiced their religion in secret. Other unrecognized religious minorities, such as Baha’is and Yarsanis, were also forced to assemble in private homes to practice their faith in secret.

The government continued to require all women to adhere to “Islamic dress” standards in public, including covering their hair and fully covering their bodies in loose clothing – an overcoat and a hijab or, alternatively, a chador (full body length semicircle of fabric worn over both the head and clothes). Although the government at times eased enforcement of rules for such dress, it also punished “un-Islamic dress” with arrests, lashings, fines, and dismissal from employment. The government continued to crack down on public protests against the compulsory hijab and Islamic dress requirements for women.

On November 9, Branch 28 of the Supreme Court rejected an appeal by women’s right activist Saba Kord-Afshari of her 24-year prison sentence, which she received in August 2019, on a set of charges relating to her protesting the compulsory hijab. As a result, she faced a minimum of 15 years in prison, the sentence associated with the most serious charge against her, “spreading corruption.” In July, Amnesty International said authorities forced Kord-Afshari to wait a year following her 2019 arrest before allowing her to make her first hospital visit on June 29 for pre-existing gastrointestinal problems that were exacerbated in prison. Amnesty International also said the doctor failed to conduct a comprehensive examination of Kord-Afshari and referred her for future colonoscopy, endoscopy, and ultrasound procedures. VOA reported that Kord-Afshari was told that she could not have the procedures because of her late hospital arrival and her lack of funds for payment. As a result, Kord-Afshari’s health problems worsened since the government transferred her to Evin Prison in August 2019, the source added.

In December, authorities summoned Nasrin Sotoudeh, a prominent female human rights lawyer and 2012 winner of the European Parliament’s Sakharov Prize, back to prison one month after her release due to health complications she manifested in prison. The government arrested Sotoudeh multiple times since 2009 because of her work as a rights defender. Most recently, authorities arrested her in 2018 as a result of what Amnesty International described as her “peaceful human rights works, including her defense of women protesting against Iran’s forced-hijab laws.” A court sentenced her to 33 years in prison and 148 lashes in 2019. At year’s end, she remained confined to Qarchak Prison.

The government continued to suppress public behavior it deemed counter to Islamic law, such as dancing and men and women appearing together in public.

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

Public and private universities continued to deny Baha’is admittance and to expel Baha’i students once their religion became known. On November 1, Iran International and HRANA reported that authorities barred from higher education at least 17 Baha’is who participated in the year’s nationwide university entrance examinations, despite their being academically qualified. As in previous years, the government organization responsible for holding university entrance exams and for placing students, the Sazeman-e Sanjesh, used pretexts such as “incomplete information” and “further investigation required” to reject Baha’i applicants. A November 2 Radio Farda report stated, “The real number of Baha’i students unable to access... degrees is likely much higher,” noting that officials rejected 70 Baha’i students in 2017. IranWire said that the banning of Baha’is from entering higher education began in 1980 and that this was the 40th consecutive year the government denied its own citizens access to higher education because of their religious beliefs.

In January, the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran reported to the UN Human Rights Council that he remained “highly concerned about the denials of the right to education for religious minorities, with continuing reports of Baha’i students being rejected from entering university despite passing the required examinations.”

On September 11, Radio Farda reported that new Minister of Education Mohsen Haji Mirzaei, apparently in response to an account published two days earlier by a human rights organization, said, “It is forbidden for them [Baha’is] to study in schools.” Mirzaei was referring to the

organization's claim that authorities had ordered Saadet High School in the city of Semnan to refuse enrollment to student Borna Pirasteh in the third year of high school because of her Baha'i faith.

A Sabean-Mandaean resident of Bandar-e Mahshahr, Khuzestan Province told IranWire in October that law enforcement personnel regularly harassed his community. The man said that authorities regularly demanded bribes from Sabean-Mandaean goldsmiths. Another Sabean-Mandaean goldsmith stated that police worked with known thieves to victimize Sabean-Mandaean-owned jewelry shops.

In January, NGOs and press reported that the state-issued national identity card required for almost all government and other transactions would henceforward only allow citizens to register as belonging to one of the country's recognized religions. According to CHRI, "anyone applying for the card who is not of the official Muslim faith or one of three religious minorities recognized in the... constitution (Christianity, Judaism or Zoroastrianism) will have to either lie and check the required box on the application for one of those religions, or not receive the card." Previously, application forms for the ID card had an option for "other religions." The card is used for all government services, banking activities, and the vast majority of other transactions. CHRI stated the policy "will blatantly discriminate against Baha'is as well as members of the Mandaean, Yarsani, and other unrecognized minority faiths in the country." A report by Deutsche Welle stated that since Baha'is were forbidden by their faith to lie about their religion, they were unable to apply for new identity cards and obtain official identification.

In a July 21 report to the UN General Assembly, the special rapporteur stated that he "remains deeply concerned at the continued discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities. Changes to the national identity card application process reportedly hinder minority religious groups from gaining access to several essential services. The application form had previously listed 'other' as a religious option. In January, the National Organization for Civil Registration reported that this option had been removed, meaning individuals could only choose from the four officially recognized religions. The removal of 'other' raised fears that nonrecognized religious groups, such as Baha'is, Christian converts, Yarsanis, Sabean-Mandaean and nonbelievers, would be unable to obtain a national identity card, which is necessary to gain access to government and banking services."

According to a December 4 report by IranWire, the government issued a memorandum to the country's provincial judiciary heads regarding the supervision of lawyers. Describing the expansion of a "security umbrella" over practicing attorneys, the government letter said it had established a new General Office for the Supervision of Lawyers to receive any reports of transgressions by members of the legal profession, in addition to the work already carried out by the Bar Association. Possible issues cited in the memorandum included non-observation of the mandatory hijab by female lawyers at work or on social media, or doubts about a given lawyer's commitment to Islam, the Islamic Republic, or the principle of Supreme Leader. According to IranWire, this new office "will intimidate, silence, and push some lawyers out of the profession, while forcing others to align with the state's principles, leading to an atrophy of justice."

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

Members of the Sunni community continued to dispute statistics published in 2015 on the website of the Mosques Affairs Regulating Authority that stated there were nine Sunni mosques operating in Tehran and 15,000 across the country. Community members said the vast majority of these were simply prayer rooms or rented prayer spaces. International media and the Sunni community continued to report authorities prevented the building of any new Sunni mosques in Tehran. Sunnis said there were not enough mosques in the country to meet the needs of the population. Three news sources opposed to the government stated that Sunnis were not allowed to have a mosque in Tehran.

On May 25, the Deutsche Welle Persian service reported that Mohammad Baqer Tabatabai, an advisor to the Razavi Khorasan Guidance Office, referred to the Maki Mosque in Zahedan, the country's largest and most culturally significant Sunni mosque, as a "house of corruption" on his Twitter account and called for its destruction. He deleted his tweet after public protest. Maki Mosque was built in 1353 in Zahedan, the capital of Sistan and Baluchistan Province. It is religiously and culturally significant to the Sunni Baluch minority, which reportedly contributed to the upkeep of the building independently from the central government.

Because the government barred them from building or worshiping in their own mosques, Sunni leaders said they continued to rely on ad hoc, underground prayer halls, or namaz khane, the same term used by Christian converts for informal chapels or prayers rooms in underground churches, to practice their religion. Security officials continued to raid these unauthorized sites.

MOIS and law enforcement officials reportedly continued to harass Sufis and Sufi leaders. Media and human rights organizations reported continued censorship of the Gonabadi order's *Mazar Soltani* websites, which contained speeches by the order's leader, Noor Ali Tabandeh, and articles on mysticism.

International media and NGOs reported continued government-sponsored propaganda aimed at deterring the practice of or conversion to Christianity. According to *Mohabat News*, the government routinely propagated anti-Christian publications and online materials, such as the 2017 book *Christian Zionism in the Geography of Christianity*.

According to members of the Sabeen-Mandaean and Yarsan religious communities, authorities continued to deny them permission to perform religious ceremonies in public and to deny them building permits for places of worship. A member of the Sabeen-Mandaean community in Ahvaz, whom IranWire identified as “Selim,” said, “The Mandaeans of Ahvaz are not allowed to be buried in the public cemetery.” On December 31, Radio Farda reported, “destroying graves and tombstones of minorities and dissidents, including Baha’is and Yarsanis, [has] formed a part of the daily life of the supporters of the Islamic Republic.” According to the report, security forces warned Baha’is that they no longer had the right to bury their dead in many cities, including Gilavand, Tabriz, Kerman, and Ahvaz.

Yarsanis reported continued discrimination and harassment in the military and in school systems. They also continued to report the birth registration system prevented them from giving their children Yarsani names. According to a February article in U.S. Institute of Peace’s *Iran Primer*, “The regime has discriminated against the group by cracking down on Yarsani places of worship, religious monuments, religious speech, publications, education and communication in Kurdish. Yarsanis have also had difficulty finding employment and faced arrest and interrogation by Iranian intelligence.”

According to the Tehran Jewish Committee, five Jewish schools and two preschools continued to operate in Tehran, but authorities required their principals be Muslim. The government reportedly continued to allow Hebrew language instruction but limited the distribution of Hebrew texts, particularly nonreligious texts, making it difficult to teach the language, according to the Jewish community.

According to Christian NGOs, government restrictions on published religious material continued, including confiscations of previously available books about Christianity, although government-sanctioned translations of the Bible reportedly remained available. Government officials frequently confiscated Bibles and related non-Shia religious literature and pressured publishing houses printing unsanctioned non-Muslim religious materials to cease operations. Books about the Yarsani religion remained banned. Books published by religious minorities, regardless of topic, were required to carry labels on the cover denoting their non-Shia Muslim authorship.

Sunni leaders continued to report authorities banned Sunni religious literature and teachings from religion courses in some public schools, even in predominantly Sunni areas. Other schools, notably in the Kurdish regions, included specialized Sunni religious courses. Assyrian Christians reported the government continued to permit their community to use its own religious textbooks in schools, but only after the government authorized their content. Armenian Christians were also permitted to teach their practices to Armenian students as an elective at select schools. Unrecognized religious minorities, such as Yarsanis and Baha’is, continued to report they were unable to legally produce or distribute religious literature.

Sunnis reported continued underrepresentation in government-appointed positions in provinces where they formed a majority, such as Kurdistan and Khuzestan, as well as an inability to obtain senior government positions. Sunni activists continued to report that throughout the year, and especially during the month of Moharam, the government sent hundreds of Shia missionaries to areas with large Sunni Baluch populations to try to convert the local population.

Baluch sources reported that throughout the year, the government sent hundreds of Shia missionaries to areas with large Sunni Baluch populations to try to convert the local population.

According to media reports from 2018, the most recent reporting available, there were 13 synagogues in Tehran and approximately 35 throughout the country. Jewish community representatives said they were free to travel in and out of the country, and the government generally did not enforce a prohibition against travel to Israel by Jews, although it enforced the prohibition on such travel for other citizens.

Government officials continued to employ anti-Semitic rhetoric in official statements and to sanction it in media outlets, publications, and books. According to the Anti-Defamation League, following a March speech by the Supreme Leader on the COVID-19 pandemic, his office’s website posted remarks by a cleric who said “there is no doubt that the Jews and especially the Zionists previously have a long history of supernatural affairs and matters such as a relationship with the devil and genies.” The Anti-Defamation League report stated that most of the COVID-19 conspiracy theories spread by the government imagined the United States as leading “a biological attack, either with the help of Jewish capitalists or Israel, or to benefit Israel or at the behest of Jewish puppet masters.” According to the Anti-Defamation League, another central theme of the government’s propaganda regarding the global health crisis was the conspiracy theory that Jews are all-powerful or seek world domination.

In September, Masud Shojaei-Tabatabai, the head of a government arts agency, announced a plan to organize another exhibition of Holocaust-denial cartoons, which the government also held in 2006 and 2016. Following the beheading in France of a teacher who had shown students the Charlie Hebdo cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad, Shojaei-Tabatabai told the *Tehran Times*, that “our [exhibition] program [will] publish serious artworks challenging the Holocaust; for one insulting cartoon, we will publish 10 cartoons in social media and other virtual spaces.” After French President Macron defended the slain teacher’s presentation of secularism and individual freedom, the Supreme Leader asked on Twitter, “Why is it a crime to raise doubts about the Holocaust? Why should anyone who writes about such doubts be imprisoned while insulting the Prophet (pbuh [Peace be upon him]) is allowed?”

The government continued to allow recognized minority religious groups to establish community centers and some self-financed cultural, social, athletic, and charitable associations.

On December 16, the UN General Assembly approved a resolution on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The General Assembly passed the measure by a vote of 82 states in favor, 30 against, and 64 abstentions. The resolution, which was cosponsored by 45 member states, expressed concern about “ongoing severe limitations and increasing restrictions on the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, restrictions on the establishment of places of worship, undue restrictions on burials carried out in accordance with religious tenets, attacks against places of worship and burial, and other human rights violations....” These violations included “harassment, intimidation, persecution, arbitrary arrests and detention, and incitement to hatred that leads to violence against persons belonging to recognized and unrecognized religious minorities, including Christians, Gonabadi dervishes, Jews, Sufi Muslims, Sunni Muslims, Yarsanis, Zoroastrians and members of the Baha’i faith, who have faced increasing restrictions from the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran on account of their faith and have been reportedly subjected to mass arrests and lengthy prison sentences.” The resolution called upon the government “to cease monitoring individuals on account of their religious identity, to release all religious practitioners imprisoned for their membership in or activities on behalf of a recognized or unrecognized minority religious group, and to ensure that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief, including the freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of their choice, in accordance with its obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights”

Endowed religious charitable foundations, or *bonyads*, accounted for one-quarter to one-third of the country’s economy, according to some experts. According to NGOs, government insiders, including members of the military and clergy, ran these tax-exempt organizations, which the law defines as charities. Members of the political opposition and international corruption watchdog organizations frequently accused *bonyads* of corruption. *Bonyads* received benefits from the government, but there was no requirement for a government agency to approve their budgets publicly.

According to Radio Farda, religious leaders in Qom warned shops not to sell gifts associated with Valentine’s Day because of its roots in Christian tradition. Radio Farda stated that the country’s law enforcement agencies issue warnings to stores every year against selling such items, threatening to close the businesses from one to six months for noncompliance. The report also stated that some secular citizens have tried to promote the February 19 celebration of the day of Sepandarmaz, the goddess of fertility from the country’s pre-Islamic past. The country’s religious leaders opposed Sepandarmaz because of its roots in Zoroastrianism, which was replaced by Islam as the country’s predominant religion.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to IranWire, during Friday prayers in early November in Kermanshah, Sunni cleric Mullahamid Faraji called Yarsanis infidels, Satanists, and enemies of Muslims. “Yarsanis are not our brothers,” he told the congregation, adding, “Brotherhood is only possible in Islam.” According to IranWire, protests by members of the Yarsan community followed, gaining momentum over the days that followed, prompting Faraji to issue a retraction on social media in which he said enemies of the Islamic Republic had distorted and misrepresented his statements in an attempt to sow division between Muslims and Yarsanis in the area. He defined these “enemies” as Jews, Christians, and Zionists.

According to Radio Farda, Molavi Abdolhamid Ismaeelzahi, the most senior Sunni cleric in the country, circulated a video on social media charging that Chinese Shia students studying at al-Mustafa International University had infected Iran with the novel coronavirus. The university said in a statement that the Sunni leader had no evidence to back up his accusation and that top religious clerics should be more cautious in public remarks. According to Iran News, the university also “deplored Abdolhamid for accusing al-Mustafa International University of brainwashing its non-Iranian students.”

A member of the Sabeen-Mandaean community in Ahvaz said that he had witnessed the destruction of a temple and 12 other buildings belonging to the community in recent years. Another Sabeen-Mandaean said, “Since 2015, the destruction of the Mandaean tombs has occurred many times in different parts of the country. But have our protests ever been heeded?”

According to a Radio Farda report, Yarsani graves were neither safe from attacks nor from disrespect, and Yarsani cemeteries and mausoleums were repeatedly damaged and destroyed in the city of Kermanshah and elsewhere in the country.

According to press and NGO reports, on May 14, following threats on Twitter, a man broke into the shrine of Esther and Mordechai, a Jewish holy site in Hamadan, in an attempt to set fire to the tomb. IRNA, the country’s official press agency, which first confirmed the attack but later removed the report from its website, said there was no major damage to the shrine. The attack followed reports in February that the government was considering razing the shrine as an act of revenge aimed at the United States and Israel. Hamedan’s prosecutor, Hassan Khanjani, told the semiofficial ISNA news agency that police had not reached a conclusion on the cause of the fire and that no arrests had been made.

Baha’is and those who advocated for their rights reported that Baha’is continued to be major targets of social stigma and violence and that perpetrators reportedly continued to act with impunity.

There continued to be reports of non-Baha’is dismissing or refusing employment to Baha’is, sometimes in response to government pressure, according to BIC and other organizations monitoring the situation of Baha’is. BIC continued to report instances of physical violence committed against Baha’is based on their faith. Baha’is reported there were continued incidents of destruction or vandalism of their cemeteries.

Yarsanis outside the country reported that widespread discrimination against Yarsanis continued. They stated Yarsani children were socially ostracized in school and in shared community facilities. Yarsani men, recognizable by their particular mustaches, continued to face employment discrimination. According to reports, Shia preachers continued to encourage social discrimination against Yarsanis.

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

Shia clerics and prayer leaders reportedly continued to denounce Sufism and the activities of Sufis in both sermons and public statements.

Sunni students reported professors continued to routinely insult Sunni religious figures in class.

In June, the Netherlands-based NGO Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran conducted an online survey with the collaboration of the ABC that showed Iranian society’s unprecedented secularization. According to its authors, the result of the poll of 40,000 individuals revealed dramatic changes in the country’s religiosity, with an increase in secularization and a diversity of faiths and beliefs. The survey found that only 40 percent of respondents identified as Muslim, contrasting with government data that states 99.5 percent of the country is Muslim. The survey found 32 percent of respondents explicitly identified as Shia, while 5 percent said they were Sunni Muslim and 3 percent Sufi Muslim. Another 9 percent said they were atheists, along with 7 percent who preferred the label of “spirituality” as describing their religion. Among the other selected religions, 8 percent said they were Zoroastrians, which the pollsters interpreted as a reflection of Persian nationalism and a desire for an alternative to Islam, rather than strict adherence to the Zoroastrian faith, while 1.5 percent said they were Christian (which Christian groups state translates into between 750,000 and one million Christians in the country). Of those polled, 78 percent said they believed in God, while only 37 percent believed in life after death and only 30 percent believed in heaven and hell. Approximately 25 percent said they believed in jinns (demons).

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The United States has no diplomatic relations with Iran and therefore did not have opportunities to raise concerns in a bilateral setting with the government about its religious freedom abuses and restrictions.

In a speech to the National Prayer Breakfast on February 6, the President expressed concern about the arrest of Mary Mohammadi, a Christian convert, at an antigovernment protest in January, which the President said was due to her conversion to Christianity. The Secretary of State later told an interviewer that he was deeply disturbed by the arrest.

The U.S. government continued to call publicly and in multilateral forums for the government to respect religious freedom and continued to condemn its abuses of religious minorities in a variety of ways and in different international forums. These included public statements by senior U.S. government officials, use of social media, reports issued by U.S. government agencies, support for relevant UN and NGO efforts, diplomatic initiatives, and sanctions. Senior U.S. government officials publicly reiterated calls for the release of prisoners held on grounds related to their religious beliefs.

On January 15, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom tweeted, “Following the tragic death of Dr. Noor Ali Tabandeh [on December 24, 2019], we are closely watching how the Iranian government treats Gonabadi Sufis. Authorities should release those unjustly detained and allow the community to select their religious leaders without government interference.”

On October 16, the Department of State spokesperson tweeted, “Deeply disturbed by reports Iran lashed Mohammad Reza Omid 80 times for drinking communion wine. He already served two years in prison for belonging to a house church. We condemn these unjust punishments and urge Iran to allow all Iranians the freedom to practice their beliefs.”

On September 24, the United States sanctioned several Iranian officials and entities, including Judge Seyyed Mahmoud Sadati, Judge Mohammad Soltani, Branch 1 of the Revolutionary Court of Shiraz, and the Adel Abad, Orumiyeh, and Vakilabad Prisons, for gross violations of human rights and denials to the right of liberty of those seeking to practice their religion. The statement read, “Judge Soltani is responsible for sentencing Baha’is in Iran on dubious charges related to their exercise of freedom of expression or belief” and “Orumiyeh Prison has subjected members of ethnic and religious minority groups and political prisoners to abuse, including beatings and floggings.” The statement added, “The actions taken today by the United States expose Iran’s revolutionary courts and their judges for what they really are: tools designed to enforce the Iranian regime’s brutal ideology and suppress dissent. They do not fairly administer justice, but rather seek to deprive the Iranian people of due process as well as their human rights and fundamental freedoms. The United States will continue to stand with the Iranian people and demand the regime treat them with the respect and dignity they deserve.”

Following the attempted arson in May at the tomb of Esther and Mordechai in Hamadan, the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism called on the government in a tweet “to stop incitement and protect its Jewish and other minorities.” He said that the United States strongly condemned the attack and that the Iranian government is “the world’s chief state sponsor of anti-Semitism.”

Since 1999, Iran has been designated as a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On December 2, the Secretary of State redesignated Iran as a CPC and identified the existing sanctions as ongoing travel restrictions based on serious human rights abuses under section 221(c) of the Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act of 2012 (TRA), for individuals identified under Section 221(a)(1)(C) of the TRA in connection with the commission of serious human rights abuses, pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act.

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