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ACCORD – Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation

Query response on Iran: Situation of Sunnis [a-11755-3]

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Please read in full all documents referred to.

Non-English language information is summarised in English. Original language quotations are provided for reference in the document or upon request.

The US Department of State (USDOS)'s 2020 Report on International Religious Freedom, published in May 2021, notes that "[a]ccording 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." (USDOS, 12 May 2021, section 1)

Article 12 of the Iranian Constitution of 1979 (last amended in 1989) contains the following provisions relating to adherents of the country's official religion, Twelver Shi'ism ("Jafari Athna Ashari") (cf. Encyclopedia Britannica, 4 September 2019), as well as other groups including the Fiver Shias ("Zaidi") (cf. Encyclopedia Britannica, 22 March 2019) and the Hanafi, Shafei, Maleki and Hanbali schools of Sunni thought (cf. Elger/Stolleis eds., 2018):

"The official religion of Iran shall be Islam and faith Jafari Athna Ashari, and this article shall be eternal and immutable. Other Islamic faiths such as the Hanafi, Shafei, Maleki, Hanbali and Zaidi, shall enjoy full respect. The followers of these faiths are free to carry out their religious rites according to their own Fegh [religious jurisprudence] their religious education and training, personal status (marriage, divorce, inheritance and will) and lawsuits related thereto shall be officially recognized by the court of law. In any region where the followers of these faiths have a majority, the local rules and regulations, within the scope of authorities of councils, shall be in conformity with these faiths, by reserving the rights of followers of other faiths." (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1989, Article 12)

An April 2020 report of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) comments on these constitutional provisions as follows:

"Article 12 of the constitution accords full respect to other schools of thought within Islam, and affords their adherents the freedom to practise their religious rites and follow their own jurisprudence in matters of religious education and personal affairs such as marriage, divorce, inheritance and wills. Article 12 also stipulates that, in regions where non-Shi'a Muslims comprise a majority of the population, local regulations are to conform to the relevant school of Islam, without infringing upon the rights of other schools. Sunnis can serve as judges in the general courts (but not in the Revolutionary Courts) and, as Muslims, can contest parliamentary elections (there were 24 Sunni members in the previous parliament)." (DFAT, 14 April 2020, pp. 28-29)

Meanwhile, the same source notes that "[d]espite these constitutional protections, Sunnis report official discrimination", including being underrepresented in government positions in provinces where they are a majority (DFAT, 14 April 2020, p. 29).

The May 2021 USDOS report notes:

“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.” (USDOS, 12 May 2021, Section 2)

An October 2020 report by the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and the League for the Defense of Human Rights in Iran (LDDHI) states that:

“The death penalty in Iran has also been used against members of some of the country’s ethnic communities - such as Kurds, Arabs, and Baloch - and religious minorities - such as Sunni Muslims, Baha’is, and followers of the Shia Ahl-e Haq sect. These 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. 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.” (FIDH, October 2020, p. 4)

However, as DFAT points out, “Sunnis note that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish whether the cause of government discrimination against them is religious or ethnic, since most Sunnis are also members of ethnic minority groups”. (DFAT, 14 April 2020, p. 29)

The same source points to the following reported types of infringement of religious rights:

“Sunnis accuse the authorities of suppressing their religious rights. This includes limitations in performing Friday prayers and religious celebrations in Tehran and other major cities, detention and harassment of clerics, and bans on Sunni teachings in public schools. Sunnis claim they are denied permission to build mosques in major cities, including Tehran. DFAT understands that no Sunni mosques have been constructed in Tehran since the Islamic Revolution.” (DFAT, 14 April 2020, p. 29)

Regarding places where Sunnis can practise their faith, the May 2021 USDOS report notes:

“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. [...] 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.” (USDOS, 12 May 2021, Section 2)

According to a February 2021 report of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, BZ), the majority of Iranian Kurds are of Sunni faith. Those Kurds who actively stand up for their ethnic, religious or political rights become the focus of the authorities’ increased attention. The same applies for predominantly Sunni Baluchis in Sistan and Baluchistan who actively stand up for their ethnic, religious or political rights.

Thus, for example, in October 2020, Fazl al-Rahman Kouhi, a Sunni cleric from the city of Sarbaz (Sistan and Baluchestan Province) who had been arrested in late 2019 after criticising the authorities’ treatment of protesters in his Friday sermon, was sentenced to six years and four months in prison.

2020 also saw the executions of several ethnic Baluchis: In April 2020 a man named Abdulbaset Dahani was executed in Zahedan in Sistan and Baluchistan after being convicted of “enmity against God”. On 19 December 2020, two Baluchis were executed in Zahedan on drug trafficking charges. Furthermore, in early January 2021, two Baluchis were executed for membership of the militant group Jaish al-Adl. (BZ, February 2021, pp. 41-42)

A Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) article elaborates on the early January 2021 executions as follows:

"Iran has hanged two men for 'terrorist acts' and another for murder and armed robbery, the judiciary's official Mizan news agency said. The three were executed in the early morning of January 3 in the southeastern Sistan-Baluchistan Province, Mizan reported. Two were identified as Hassan Dehviri and Elias Qalandarzehi, who were arrested in April 2014 after being found with 'a large amount of explosives' and weapons, the report said. The pair were convicted of the abduction, bombing, murder of security forces and civilians, and of working with the Sunni Muslim extremist group Jaish al-Adl (Army of Justice), Iranian media reported. The U.S.-based Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA) said the two had been tortured in detention. Dehviri and Qalandarzehi were also arrested in possession of documents from Jaish al-Adl on 'how to make bombs' as well as 'takfiri fatwas,' terms used by Iranian authorities to refer to religious decrees issued by Sunni extremists. Jaish al-Adl has reportedly carried out several high-profile bombings and abductions in Iran in recent years." (RFE/RL, 3 January 2021)

The May 2021 US Department of State (USDOS) report informs about the following cases of arrest and killing of ethnic Baluchis by security forces during the year 2020:

"Balochwarna News reported that security forces arrested Molawi Mohammad Qalandarzai, a Sunni imam, on February 27 at his home in Zahedan." (USDOS, 12 May 2021, Section 2)

"According to the Kurdistan Press Agency and a Kurdish NGO, security forces arrested a Kurdish Sunni imam, Mamousta Rasoul Hamzehpour, in the city of Piranshahr on October 4 [2020]. Authorities arrested Hamzehpour in his home, which they searched. The news report's source stated that the government arrested Hamzehpour, 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. [...]

On May 6 [2020], 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 [...]. 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." (USDOS, 12 May 2021, Section 2)

The latest United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) country update on Iran, published in August 2021, notes the following incidents relating to Sunnis reported in 2021:

"Iran's persecution of Sunni Muslims also continued in 2021. [...] In January, [the government] demolished the foundations of a Sunni mosque in Iranshahr, and also reportedly halted the construction of two new Sunni mosques in the region. In March, authorities arrested a Sunni author and translator and sent him to Zahedan prison. That same month, the Urmia Revolutionary Court sentenced a Sunni Muslim man to three years in prison on the charge of membership in a Salafi group. The court also sentenced a Sunni Muslim man to a year-long sentence at Urmia prison. The court also sentenced Sunni cleric Rasul Hamzepour to three years in prison on the charge of 'propaganda against the state.' In June, the Special Court for the Clergy summoned a Sunni cleric, Fazul alRahman Kuhi, while on furlough from Vakilabad prison." (USCIRF, August 2021, p. 3)

A January 2021 RFE/RL article provides the following details on the above-mentioned demolition of the Sunni mosque foundations in Iranshahr:

"Baluchi activists say Iranian authorities have demolished the foundations of a Sunni mosque in the city of Iranshahr in the Sistan-Baluchistan Province in order 'to pressure' the Sunni minority in the region. According to the Europe-based Campaign Of Baluch Activists, the demolition took place on January 23, while all the necessary permits had been obtained by the municipality and the prosecutor's office. But Iranshahr Mayor Noorahmad Darkhosh told the official government news agency IRNA that the construction had not been approved by the authorities. IRNA reported that the location has been licensed as an open-air enclosure for prayers, while adding that 'based on rules and regulations, it should not be roofed.' The report said Iranshahr, which has a predominantly ethnic-Baluch population, has 500 Sunni mosques and 80 Shi'ite mosques. Baluchi activists say authorities have in recent weeks halted the construction of two other Sunni mosques in the region. They have blamed the representative of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the Intelligence Ministry for the pressure.

Ethnic and religious minorities in Iran have repeatedly complained of state pressure and discrimination. In a January letter to Ayatollah Khamenei, prominent Iranian Sunni leader Maulana Abdolhamid criticized what he described as the establishment's discriminatory treatment of the Sunnis. 'Forty- two years after the victory of the Islamic revolution, Iran's Sunnis still face many problems and concerns about their civil rights,' the letter said, adding that Sunnis are considered 'second-class citizens.' Abdollah Aref, the director of the Campaign of Baluch Activists, told the BBC that in the past two months his group has documented the execution of 16 members of the Baluch minority.

The [New York-based Center for Human Rights in Iran](#) reported in December 2020 that three Baluch prisoners had been executed in Sistan-Baluchistan after being convicted of membership in militant Sunni groups that have carried out deadly attacks in Iran in the past. Human rights attorney Mostafa Nili told the daily Etemad on December 18 that there are at least 10 prisoners on death row in the central prison of Zahedan, the capital of Sistan-Baluchistan, in connection with militant groups opposed to the Islamic republic." (RFE/RL, 25 January 2021)

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Page 1 of 1

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