

# IRAN 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## 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"). 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." The government continued to execute individuals on charges of "enmity against God," including two Sunni Ahwazi Arab minority prisoners at Fajr Prison on August 4. Human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) continued to report the disproportionately large number of executions of Sunni prisoners, particularly Kurds, Baluchis, and Arabs. Human rights groups raised concerns regarding the use of torture, beatings in custody, forced confessions, poor prison conditions, and denials of access to legal counsel. International media and human rights activists reported authorities in Qarchak Prison for Women routinely targeted Gonabadi Sufi inmates for mistreatment and denied them access to legal counsel. In January the Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI) reported authorities gave Elham Ahmadi, an imprisoned member of the Sufi Gonabadi Order in Iran, an additional sentence of 148 lashes for speaking out about the denial of medical treatment and poor living conditions in the prison. Human rights organizations, as well as UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran Javid Rehman, widely decried Ahmadi's mistreatment, along with that of 10 Gonabadi Sufi women serving prison sentences at Qarchak. They also deplored the high number of deaths and arrests in ethnic and religious minority provinces that, according to the organizations, resulted from the government's excessive use of force against protesters during November demonstrations. The Iran Prison Atlas, a database compiled by the U.S.-based NGO United for Iran, stated at least 109 members of minority religious groups remained imprisoned for being religious

minority practitioners. In March CHRI reported the mass sentencing of 23 Gonabadi Sufi dervishes to prison terms of up to 26 years each on charges of “assembly and collusion against national security,” “disobeying police,” and “disturbing public order.” According to media, these individuals were among the more than 300 Gonabadi Sufis arrested in 2018 for protesting the house arrest of their spiritual leader and the arrest of a fellow devotee, Nematollah Riah. The government continued to harass, interrogate, and arrest Baha’is, non-Armenian Christians (particularly converts), Sunni Muslims, and other religious minorities, and regulated Christian religious practices closely to enforce a prohibition on proselytizing. The Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA) reported in September authorities sentenced Sunni Imam Tohid Ghoreishi to a 16-year prison term for charges of “assembly and collusion against national security,” “supporting opposition groups,” and “propaganda against the state.” The website IranWire reported that between March and October judiciary officials engaged in a wave of increased summons, detentions, and trials of Baha’is, and during this six-month period, at least 65 Baha’is stood trial in various cities across the country. According to CHRI, on June 2, security agents arrested Shiraz City Council member Mehdi Hajati to serve a one-year prison sentence after he was tried in absentia for defending the “false Baha’i Faith.” On February 10, according to NGO Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) agents arrested a pastor from Rasht and confiscated Bibles and phones belonging to his congregants. Yarsanis stated authorities continued to discriminate against and harass them. The government reportedly denied building permits for places of worship and employment and higher education opportunities for members of religious minorities and confiscated or restricted their use of religious materials. There were continued reports of authorities placing restrictions on businesses owned by Baha’is or forcing them to shut down. The government continued to crack down on public displays of protest of the compulsory hijab and Islamic dress requirements for women. In August international media and various human rights NGOs reported the 24-year prison sentence of women’s rights activist Saba Kord Afshari for her involvement in protests against the compulsory hijab. According to a May report by CHRI, state agents continued to use malware to conduct cyberattacks on the online accounts of minority religious groups, particularly those of Gonabadi Sufis. The Baha’i International Community (BIC) reported Baha’is remained barred from government employment at the local, provincial, and national levels, not only in the civil service but also in such fields as education and law.

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.

The United States has no diplomatic relations with the country. 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. At the July Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in Washington, D.C., the United States and seven other governments issued a statement on Iran that said, "We strongly oppose the Iranian government's severe violations and abuses of religious freedom... We call on the Iranian government to release all prisoners of conscience and vacate all charges inconsistent with the universal human right of religious freedom. We urge Iran to ensure fair trial guarantees, in accordance with its human rights obligations, and afford all detainees access to medical care. We stand with Iranians of all beliefs, and hope someday soon they will be free to follow their consciences in peace." On August 2, the Vice President stated on Twitter, "Iran must free Mahrokh Kanbari today. Whether Sunni, Sufi, Baha'i, Jewish, or Christian, America will stand up for people of faith in Iran like Mahrokh and Pastor Bet Tamraz, whose persecutions are an affront to religious freedom." The United States supported the rights of members of minority religious groups in the country through actions in the United Nations. In November the United States again voted in the UN General Assembly in favor of a resolution expressing concern about Iran's human rights practices, including the continued persecution of religious minorities.

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 18, the Secretary of State redesignated Iran as a CPC. The following sanction accompanied the designation: the existing ongoing travel restrictions based on serious human rights abuses under section 221(a)(1)(C) of the Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act of 2012, pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the population at 84 million (midyear 2019). Muslims are estimated to constitute 99.4 percent of the population, of which 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, Jews, Sabean-Mandaeans, Zoroastrians, and Yarsanis. 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 above 800,000. Many Protestants and converts to Christianity from Islam reportedly practice in secret.

There is no official count of Yarsanis, but HRANA and 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 reduced from a peak of approximately 300,000 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 one international NGO, includes 5,000-10,000 Sabean-Mandaeans.

According to the 2011 census, the number of individuals who are areligious 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 (AI) 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 is considered apostasy, 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. These activities are considered 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. Some exceptions are made for foreigners belonging to unrecognized religious groups.

The penal code specifies the death sentence for “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”). 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 (Hanafi, Shafi, Maliki, and Hanbali) and the Shia Zaydi schools 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. 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, is considered 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 Sabean-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 Ahle 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 the 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.

Individuals who convert to Christianity are not recognized as Christian under the law. They may not register and are not entitled to the same rights as recognized members of Christian communities.

The supreme leader, 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 Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) monitor religious activity. The 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 (MOE) 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.

Recognized minority religious groups, except for Sunni Muslims, may operate private schools. The MOE 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 regulation states 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 Baha'i (e.g., Muslim, Christian, Jewish, or Zoroastrian). To pass the entrance examination, university applicants must pass an exam on Islamic, Christian, or Jewish theology based on their official religious affiliation.

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.

The constitution bans the 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 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 the 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.

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**

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. UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran Rehman expressed deep concern about the government’s use of “excessive” force during the November protests in provinces with a majority population of ethnic minorities. The report pointed to the highest number of deaths in these provinces, with at least 84 persons killed in Khuzestan (predominantly Sunni Arab) and 52 in Kermanshah (predominantly Kurdish). IranWire, citing an unnamed Khuzestan official, reported on December 17 that the total number of protester fatalities in Mahshahr, a major city and residence for Ahwazi Arabs in the region, was 148 over five days. On December 1, *The New York Times* reported IRGC forces killed as many as 100 protestors on a single day, many of whom were local Sunni Arab citizens, by machine gun fire in a marshland in Mahshahr. The special rapporteur also reported officials arrested dozens of activists from ethnic minorities, including Kurds and Azerbaijani-Turks, as well as 10 Baha’is who were arrested in Baharestan on November 29 and 30.

According to AI, authorities executed Abdullah Karmollah Chab and Ghassem Abdullah, two Sunni Ahwazi Arab-minority prisoners, at Fajr Prison on August 4, after they were convicted on charges of “enmity against God” in connection with

an armed attack on a Shia religious ceremony in Safiabad. The convictions and executions proceeded despite AI's and other human rights NGOs' concerns regarding what they stated was the use of torture, forced confessions, and denials of access to legal counsel.

The NGO Iran Human Rights reported on May 23 that authorities hanged Mehdi Cheraghi on charges of "enmity against God" in connection with the robbery of a jewelry shop in April 2015. According to the report, authorities hanged Cheraghi in public, in the city of Hamadan, during Ramadan. Iran Human Rights also reported authorities executed two prisoners, Hossein Roshan and Mohsen Konani, at Rajai Shahr Prison in Karaj on charges of "enmity against God" on October 2. Authorities originally arrested and convicted the two prisoners for armed robbery.

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 27, international media reported police in Sistan and Baluchistan Province shot and killed a young Sunni Baluchi man, Mousa Shahbakhsh, after he did not follow orders to stop following a police pursuit because he did not have a driver's license. Following his death, protests broke out at the governor's office in the provincial capital of Zahedan; authorities arrested approximately 30 protesters. Media reports noted a tense relationship between the Sunni Baluchi population and the Shia authorities.

AI reported on June 26, Benjamin Alboghbiash, a Sunni Ahwazi Arab arrested on May 26, died under suspicious circumstances at a detention center believed to be under the control of the IRGC in Ahvaz, Khuzestan. Alboghbiash's mother and brother were arrested with him and remained detained at year's end. Intelligence agents notified Alboghbiash's family on June 26 of his death. AI raised concerns that he might have been tortured. AI urged authorities to undertake immediately an impartial investigation into Alboghbiash's death and to hold accountable anyone found responsible.

According to HRANA and AI, after arresting Kurdish singer Peyman Mirzazadeh in February, authorities sentenced him to a two-year prison term in May and flogged him 100 times on July 28 for *sabb al-nabi*, or “insulting the prophet” (80 lashes) and drinking alcohol (20 lashes). AI said the flogging left Mirzazadeh “in agonizing pain with a severely swollen back and legs.”

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 routinely targeting Gonabadi Sufi prisoners for mistreatment, such as encouraging other inmates to physically abuse them. In January CHRI reported authorities gave Elham Ahmadi, an imprisoned member of the Sufi Gonabadi order, an additional sentence of 148 lashes for speaking out about the denial of medical treatment and poor living conditions in the prison. She reportedly had said that another imprisoned Gonabadi Sufi, Shahnaz Kianasl, did not receive proper medical attention.

In his July report to the UN General Assembly, the special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran commented on Ahmadi’s case and those of other Gonabadi Sufis at Qarchak Prison. According to the report, “The special rapporteur is deeply concerned about the situation of members of the Gonabadi Dervish community who remain in detention in Qarchak Prison without access to their lawyers since the protests of 2018. This includes at least 10 women serving prison sentences of up to five years.” CHRI and the special rapporteur reported that in April, according to an unnamed source, a fellow inmate beat Sima Entesari, a Gonabadi Sufi detainee at Qarchak Prison, after prison authorities promised the attacker a case review if she assaulted her fellow prisoner, and they promised to consider her request for conditional release if she attacked Sufi dervishes. The special rapporteur also reported the authorities placed Entesari and four other Gonabadi Sufi detainees sentenced on national security charges in the same ward as prisoners convicted of drug-related charges, theft, and social crimes, in contravention of the prison’s regulations.

Human rights NGOs also reported poor prison conditions and mistreatment of religious minorities in Great Tehran Penitentiary. On January 28, CHRI reported two Gonabadi Sufi dervishes – Hassan Shahreza and Vahid Khamoushi – were denied medical treatment for infected wounds received when security forces shot them with pellet guns during protests in 2018. According to CHRI, Shahreza reportedly retained 200 pellets in his body, which had led to the infections. In

addition to pellet gun wounds, Khamoushi had a broken ankle. CHRI reported authorities denied both men access to medical care.

CHRI reported Mitra Badrnejad, a Baha'i woman arrested in March 2018 during a raid by security agents on her home, began her one-year prison sentence on September 22. The revolutionary court in Ahvaz convicted Badrnejad of "membership in the Baha'i Organization" and "propaganda against the state," with a sentence of five years in prison and two years in exile. Upon appeal, the sentenced was reduced to one year. According to her son, authorities held Badrnejad in solitary confinement for 50 days in the Intelligence Ministry's detention center and in Ahwaz's Sepidar Prison. Her son also said authorities blindfolded her during interrogation and subjected her to threats and other forms of psychological abuse.

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. Mohabat News reported that on January 23, eight security officers raided the Isfahan home of Christian convert Sina Moloudian and arrested and beat him, leaving bruise marks on his face. The officers also confiscated cellphones, computers, Bibles, and other religious materials. Authorities emphasized they had been monitoring Moloudian for months prior to the arrest. He was released on bail on February 4.

On February 7, HRANA reported special forces agents beat several Sunni prisoners in Rajae Shahr Prison. According to HRANA, the beatings came in retaliation for Sunni Imam Tohid Ghoreishi's refusal to attend his court hearing. Ghoreishi, Hamzeh Darvish, Marivan Karkuki, and Namegh Deldel were among the Sunni inmates severely injured in the beatings.

On February 12, a Baloch NGO reported security guards in the city of Iranshahr, in Sistan and Balochistan Province, shot and killed a young Baluchi man, Davood Zahroozah, while he was transporting fuel in his personal vehicle. HRANA reported a Balochi man, Muhammad Kurd, was shot and killed on February 9 by security forces when they opened fire on his vehicle without warning as he was transporting fuel for sale, a common activity in that region that the government viewed as "smuggling." 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 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 109 members of minority religious groups remained imprisoned for being “religious minority practitioners.” Of the prisoners in the Atlas database, at least 103 were imprisoned on charges of “enmity against God”, 49 for “insulting the Supreme Leader and Ayatollah Khomeini,” 15 for “insulting the Prophet or Islam,” and 15 for “corruption on earth.” At least 10 were arrested for a charge referring to groups taking arms against the government (“*baghi*”), which officials have used in recent years instead of “enmity against God.”

Noor Ali Tabandeh, the 92-year-old spiritual leader of the Gonabadi Surfi order, died on December 24 after almost two years of house arrest and denial of urgent medical care. He was under house arrest resulting from 2018 protests in Tehran. According to the Majzooban Noor website, as of March, approximately 110 dervishes remained imprisoned in inhumane conditions in Great Tehran Penitentiary and Qarchak Prison. On March 15, CHRI reported the mass sentencing of 23 Gonabadi Sufi dervishes to prison terms ranging from six to 26 years each, which included 74 lashes, two years in exile, a two-year ban on social media and interviews, and a two-year prohibition on traveling abroad for each. Charges included “assembly and collusion against national security,” “disobeying police,” and “disturbing public order.” According to the November CHRI report, Gonabadi Sufi religious centers remained closed following the 2018 protests.

According to the July report to the UN General Assembly from the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran, on March 13 Amir Noori, a member of the Gonabadi Dervish community, was sentenced to five years in prison on charges of “acting against the internal security of the country, and disrupting public order.” Noori lost a finger during the 2018 protests, when authorities initially arrested him.

There continued to be reports of arrests and harassment of Sunni clerics and congregants. In January IranWire reported security agents detained and threatened at least three Sunni seminary students and clergymen traveling from Sistan and Baluchistan Province to Mashhad and banned them from entering Sunni seminaries and mosques. Similarly, according to the same report, intelligence agents detained another group of Sunni seminary students traveling from Zahedan, Sistan and

Baluchistan Province to Khaf, in Khorasan Province. The agents inspected their phones, notebooks, and cars and forced them to return to Zahedan.

HRANA reported that on September 24, a revolutionary court in Tehran sentenced Sunni Imam Tohid Ghoreishi to a 16-year prison term. Ghoreishi, the former imam of Friday prayers at Imam Shafi'i Mosque in Talesh, was originally arrested in April 2014 and had just completed a five-year sentence. The 16-year sentence was based on charges of “assembly and collusion against national security (10 years), “supporting opposition groups” (five years), and “[disseminating] propaganda against the state” (one year).

IranWire reported the arrest of several Baha'is in late November, noting the reasons for the arrests were unclear but appeared related to claims Baha'is had led and spurred on the nationwide protests. On November 27 and 29, security officers in Baharestan, a satellite city of Isfahan, arrested at least ten Baha'is – Soroush Azadi, Shahab Ferdowsian, Nasim Jaber, Mehranollah Daddy, Shahbaz Bashi, Vahid Niazmand, Naser Lotfi, Ghodus Lotfi, Saghar Manouchehrzadeh, and Homa Manouchehrzadeh – and took them to an unknown location. Following Friday prayers, residents of Baharestan held up signs calling for the arrest of Baha'is and protesters. On November 30, a social media application, Telegraph, reported the arrestees in Baharestan were of Baha'is involved in the unrest and called for them to receive the worst possible punishment.

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

According to the Geneva-based Baha'i International Community (BIC) and the UN special rapporteur's June report, more than 49 Baha'is remained in prison. According to BIC, the Baha'i citizens were arbitrarily detained, and some were subsequently given harsh sentences due to their professed faith and religious identity. IranWire reported between March and October, officials engaged in a wave of increased summons, detentions, and trials of Baha'is since the appointment of a new chief justice earlier in the year. It said during this six-month period, at least 65 Baha'is stood trial. According to media and NGO reports, Baha'is continued to face charges that included “insulting religious sanctities,” “corruption on earth,” “propaganda against the system,” “espionage and collaboration with foreign entities,” and “actions against national security.” Charges also included involvement with the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education (BIHE), a university-level educational institution offering mainly distance

learning, that the government considered illegal. According to BIC, in many cases, authorities made arrests in conjunction with raids on Baha'i homes, during which they confiscated personal belongings, particularly religious books and writings.

HRANA, IranWire, and Iran Press Watch (IPW) reported that on April 30, MOIS masked agents arrested three Baha'is in Semnan – Ardeshir Fanaeian, Behnam Eskandarian, and Yalda Firoozian – following a search of their homes. According to the reports, the three were initially held at an unknown location without the right to legal counsel and were accused of “propaganda against the regime.” According to an updated October Iran Wire report, the three were detained in the central prison of Semnan and the judge handling the case held them without clear reason, despite the completion of their interrogations three months prior. In August Iran Wire and IPW reported prison officials allowed inmates to beat Eskandarian, resulting in a ruptured ear, blood clots, and severe inflammation of the inner ear. According to the report, guards observed the attack but did nothing to intervene. On December 16, following an initial ruling by the revolutionary court in Semnan in October, the Semnan Court of Appeals sentenced Fanaeian to a prison term of six years, Eskandarian to three years and six months, and Firouzian to two years and six months.

According to CHRI, on June 2, security agents arrested Shiraz City Council member Mehdi Hajati in his home. Hajati's wife stated the day before, Hajati had received a text message notifying him authorities had sentenced him in absentia to one year in prison and two years of exile. On June 19, IPW reported 29 prominent political and civil rights activists issued a statement strongly condemning Hajati's imprisonment. International media and human rights NGOs reported the government previously detained him for 10 days in 2018 for defending the “false Baha'i faith” after he tweeted about his attempts to free two Baha'i detainees. Following that detention, the judiciary placed Hajati under surveillance and banned him from holding his seat on the council for approximately three months.

CHRI and international media reported authorities in February sentenced Mehdi Moghaddari, a member of the Isfahan City Council, to six months in prison for his social media support of Hajati and Baha'i rights. An appeals court upheld the sentence, but authorities did not summon him to prison by year's end. On April 15, the revolutionary court in Isfahan handed down a six-month suspension from the city council.

In January IPW reported authorities arrested four Baha'is in Isfahan stemming from 2017 convictions of “membership in illegal Baha'i organizations with the



intention of acting against national security.” Sohrab Naghipoor was sentenced to five years, while Farzad Homayooni, Mohsen Mehregani, and Manouchehr Rahmani each received 20-month sentences. All remained imprisoned at year’s end.

IPW reported in January the Isfahan Court of Appeals sentenced, in separate judgments, nine Baha’is to prison sentences averaging more than five years each. Authorities charged them with “membership in the illegal Baha’i community and disseminating propaganda against the regime by spreading the Baha’i faith in society.”

CHRI and BIC reported that on May 6, a revolutionary court in Bushehr sentenced seven Baha’is – Asadollah Jaber, Ehteram Sheikhi, Emad Jaber, Farideh Jaber, Minoo Riyazati, Farrokh Faramarzi, and Pooneh Nasheri – to three years in prison each for answering questions about their religious beliefs to Muslim guests in their homes and for “membership in an organization against national security.” According to the report, intelligence ministry agents arrested the seven in February 2018.

HRANA reported that on July 6, the revolutionary court in Birjand sentenced nine Baha’i residents to six years each in prison. According to the report, the court authorities did not allow the defendants to have their lawyer present during the hearing. The nine – Sheida Abedi, Firouz Ahmadi, Khalil Maleki, Simin Mohammadi, Bijan Ahmadi, Maryam Mokhtari, Saghar Mohammadi, Sohrab Malaki, and Bahman Salehi – were convicted of “membership in an illegal...Baha’i group” and “propaganda against the state by promoting Baha’ism.” Authorities also confiscated funds the Baha’i community raised to support the needs of Baha’i residents of Birjand.

IPW reported that in June the revolutionary court in Isfahan sentenced Negin Tadrissi, a Baha’i resident, to a five-year prison term on charges of “collusion and assembly against national security.” According to the report, authorities arrested Tadrissi in October 2017 in connection with celebrations of a Baha’i holy day. HRANA and IPW reported that on March 6, judicial authorities sentenced Baha’i Ghazaleh Bagheri Tari to five years in prison for “acting against the security of the country through membership in and administration of Baha’i institutions.” Security forces arrested Bagheri Tari in 2017 during a celebration held in her home marking the 200th anniversary of the birth of Baha’u’llah, the Prophet-Herald of the Baha’i Faith. According to the report, security forces required each of the participants in the celebration to sign a pledge not to attend Baha’i gatherings.

On June 25, HRANA reported the revolutionary court in Tehran sentenced Baha'i resident Sofia Mobini to 10 years in prison for "establishing and organizing an illegal Baha'i group with intentions to threaten the national security." Authorities arrested Mobini in October 2017 during the celebration of the 200th birthday of Baha'u'llah and transferred her to Evin Prison, from which she was later released on bail. According to the report, the maximum allowable penalty for such charges under the relevant article of the penal code is no more than five years imprisonment.

In August BIC and international media reported a wave of arrests of Baha'is in various cities. On August 10, MOIS agents arrested Monireh Babil Saqlaei, Minou Zamanipour, and Gholamhossein Mazlumi in their homes in Tehran and transferred them to Evin Prison. Simultaneously, authorities arrested Sohaila Haqiqat, a Baha'i resident of Shiraz, in her home and took her to an unknown location, as well as Farid Moqaddam in Birjand. On August 3, according to the reports, authorities detained two Baha'is from Karaj: Abolfazl Ansari and Rouhollah Zibaei. Security agents reportedly ransacked the homes of all the detained Baha'is, confiscating their laptops, smartphones, identification cards, bank statements, and other personal effects. Authorities did not cite charges at the time of the arrests. While confirming these reports, the Geneva-based BIC said it was not yet clear which state-run entity was behind the arrests or what the charges were.

According to HRANA and IPW, on January 21, eight MOIS agents arrested and imprisoned a Baha'i woman living in Tehran, Atousa Ahamadayi, following a search of her house and the confiscation of some of her personal belongings, including books, laptops, and religious material. The agents accused Ahamadayi of committing acts against national security. On March 11, IranWire, HRANA, and IPW reported security agents arrested two Baha'i brothers and residents of Tehran, Hamid Nasser, at his place of business, and Saeed Nasser, who had gone to the Evin prosecutor's office to inquire about on his wife's detention. According to the report, security forces arrested Nasser's wife, Afsaneh Emami, on February 2; authorities transferred all three Baha'i family members to Evin Prison.

Many Baha'is reportedly continued to turn to online education at BIHE despite government censorship through use of internet filters, blocking of websites, and arrests of teachers associated with the program. Since the BIHE's online and offline operations remained illegal, students and teachers continued to face the risk of arrest for participation. According to IPW, on October 9, authorities released

BIHE instructor Azita Rafizadeh after she completed a four-year sentence for teaching at the institution. Rafizadeh's husband, Peyman Koushk-Baghi, continued serving a five-year sentence. According to *Payam News*, officials initially arrested Koushk-Baghi in March 2016 while he was visiting his wife, who was imprisoned at Evin Prison. The Tehran revolutionary court sentenced the two on charges of "membership in the illegal and misguided Baha'i group with the aim of acting against national security through illegal activities at the BIHE educational institute."

Since the government did not recognize Baha'i marriages or divorces, Baha'i activists said this situation often left women facing irreconcilable differences with their partners, including in cases involving domestic violence, without the legal protections of government-recognized marriage contracts.

On November 2, BIC reported authorities harassed Baha'is around the time of the 200th anniversary of the birth of the Baha'u'llah. Authorities raided Baha'i homes and celebrations in Shiraz, arresting at least five Baha'is. In the days leading to the anniversary, perpetrators vandalized a Baha'i cemetery. Authorities sealed five shops belonging to Baha'is because owners had observed the Baha'i holy days.

The government continued to permit Armenian Christians to have what sources stated were perhaps the most generous rights 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.

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.

In May, according to *Christian Post*, Intelligence Minister Mahmoud Alavi stated authorities were “summoning” Christian converts from Islam to explain their conversions. In a speech to Shia clerics, Alavi cited “evangelical propaganda” as one of the government’s concerns about the spread of Christianity and local Muslims’ converting to it. According to the *Post* report, Alavi said the Ministry of Intelligence and the Qom Seminary had dispatched officials to counter “the advocates of Christianity” and to question converts.

According to al-Arabiya English news service, authorities began increasing their surveillance of evangelical Christians in the days preceding Christmas. Christmas celebrations made it easier for authorities to arrest a group of Christians at one time, according to Dabrina Tamraz, a religious rights activist. According to reports, at least 109 evangelical Christians were arrested during the year. On February 10, according to CSW, IRGC agents arrested Matthias Haghnejad, the pastor of an underground Christian church, in Rasht following a church service and confiscated Bibles and phones belonging to church attendees. Agents also confiscated the pastor’s books and his wife’s phone from their home. On September 23, the Tehran revolutionary court sentenced Haghnejad and eight members of the church to five years in prison after a short trial. Media reported the supreme leader intervened in Pastor Haghnejad’s case to ensure the court upheld the charges against him; he was subsequently transferred to Evin Prison without trial and remained in detention at year’s end.

According to media reports and Article 18, an NGO promoting religious freedom and supporting Iranian Christians, MOIS agents raided the homes of eight converts to Christianity on July 1 in Bushehr, placing them in solitary confinement and denying them access to legal counsel. During the raids, agents reportedly confiscated Bibles, religious literature, wooden crosses, pictures of Christian symbols, laptops, phones, identity cards, bank cards, and other personal belongings.

On August 1, international media and Christian NGOs reported that in late July, the revolutionary court in Karaj sentenced 65-year-old Mahrokh Kanbari, a Christian convert, to one year in prison on charges of “acting against national security” and engaging in “propaganda against the system.” According to the reports, three MOIS agents initially arrested Kanbari at her home on Christmas Eve in 2018, after which she was released on 105 million rials (\$2,500) bail. Authorities reportedly directed Kanbari, while released on bail, to be instructed by an Islamic religious leader on how to return to Islam.

According to a September report from Mohabat News, the Bukan Revolutionary Court sentenced Mustafa Rahimi to six months and one day in prison on charges related to selling the Bible at his bookstore. Intelligence agents arrested Rahimi in June and released him on bail, but authorities detained him a few days later and imprisoned him at Bukan Central Prison.

HRANA reported on December 20, Mohammad Moghisseh, Presiding Judge of Branch 28 of the Tehran Revolutionary Court, sentenced nine converts to Christianity to five years in prison each for “acting against national security” on October 13. According to HRANA, the trial reportedly took place on September 23; the individuals appealed the sentences. All were reportedly arrested by IRGC intelligence agents.

According to Article 18 and Mohabat News, on October 26, authorities released Ebrahim Firouzi, a Christian convert imprisoned in Rajai Shahr Prison since 2013. On November 12, he reported to Sarbaz to begin the two years of internal exile included in his 2013 sentence for “collusion against national security,” for converting to and practicing Christianity, and related missionary activities.

Victor Bet Tamraz, who formerly led the country’s Assyrian Pentecostal Church; his wife, Shamiram Isavi; and their son, Ramin Bet Tamraz, continued to appeal prison sentences handed down to them because of their religious activities. According to Article 18 and Christian religious freedom NGO Middle East Concern, the judge postponed a hearing for Victor Bet Tamraz and Isavi on November 13, stating the court was “too crowded” and there was not time to hear their cases.

According to a report by NGOs Article 18, Open Doors International, CSW, and Middle East Concern, at least 17 Christians were in prison on charges related to their religion at year’s end.

NGO reports said the Erfan-e Halgeh group, followers of the spiritual doctrine of Interuniversalism, under the leadership of Mohammad Ali Taheri, continued to be subject to frequent arrests, detentions, harassment, and surveillance. According to HRANA, in February authorities arrested and sentenced an Interuniversalism believer and member of the Erfan-e Halgheh group to five years in prison on charges of “acting against national security.” In April authorities released Taheri from prison after he served nearly eight years following his arrest in 2011, according to media and NGO reports. According to CHRI, a state media outlet reported authorities granted him a furlough for the Iranian new year, but he faced

more time in prison because the appeals court in Tehran upheld a 2018 five-year prison sentence based on the charge of “corruption on earth.” According to social media reports, Taheri remained out of prison on furlough but was banned from leaving the country.

CHRI reported that on May 15, an appeals court upheld the 91-day prison sentences of 18 persons whom authorities arrested on charges of “disrupting public order” while they were peacefully protesting on behalf of Taheri outside Evin Prison in 2015. Sixteen of the defendants in the case are followers of Taheri and the Erfan-e Halgheh group.

According to the United States 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.

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.

On January 12, HRANA reported authorities sentenced Shia cleric Seyed Hassan Aghamiri to two years of suspended imprisonment and stripped him of his clerical office as a result of his interviews and speeches in government media. According to Radio Farda, Aghamiri was charged with “undermining clerics’ prestige and insulting sanctities”. NHK English News Service reported in February Aghamiri was very popular among youth because he called for younger generations to “think on their own” by telling them, “God gives you talent. Nothing will stop you. You don’t have any limits.”

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. In January BIC, HRANA, and IPW reported authorities denied the renewal of a business license to Farshid Deimi, a Baha’i resident of Birjand, because of his Baha’i faith. According to the report, on

January 5, officials sealed Deimi's business of 20 years without providing any specific reason for doing so. HRANA also reported in May authorities raided the Kashan home of Heshmatollah Ehsani and confiscated his equipment for producing rosewater because he was a Baha'i business owner. BIC similarly reported in May the intelligence ministry office in Kermanshah summoned Baha'i resident Sasan Ghaghchi for eight hours of interrogation and intimidation related to an inventory of goods authorities had confiscated from his shop and warehouse.

In September IPW reported agents from the state agency The Execution of Imam Khomeini's Order (EIKO) forcibly entered the residence of Sharareh Farrokhzadi and Sirous Irannejad, a Baha'i family in the Niavaran region of Tehran, and within seven hours, cleared the residence of all furniture and other belongings and transferred ownership of the house to EIKO. In 2017 a revolutionary court order stated, "Since it has been established that the above-named are...members of the perverse sect of Baha'ism, all their assets may be seized by EIKO."

HRANA and Iran Wire reported that between June 9 and 15, security forces searched the homes and businesses of nine Baha'i families in Shahin Shahr – Arshad Afshar, Aziz Afshar, Peyman Imani, Mahboubeh Hosseini, Bahram Safaei, Mehran Yazdani, Mesbah Karambakhsh, Sirous Golzar, and Naieem Haghiri – and confiscated their belongings, including cell phones, laptops, tablets, satellite devices, books, photographs, carpets, identification documents, tools, and other business equipment. Judicial authorities summoned the Baha'is, along with three others, to the local intelligence ministry office. According to the report, a group of seven security agents confiscated belongings valued at approximately one billion rials (\$23,800). According to HRANA, under pressure from intelligence agents, Haghiri's employer fired him.

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 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, 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.

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 when authorities learned Assyrian church leaders were baptizing new converts or preaching in Farsi, they closed the churches. Authorities also reportedly barred unregistered or unrecognized Christians from entering church premises and closed churches that allowed the latter to enter.

International media and the Assyrian International News Agency reported authorities closed a 100-year-old Presbyterian church belonging to the Assyrian community in Tabriz on May 9. According to Article 18, agents from the Ministry of Intelligence and EIKO, which is under the direct control of the supreme leader, stormed the church. The agents then changed all the locks, tore down a cross from the church tower, ordered the church warden to leave the premises while they installed closed circuit television and other monitoring systems, and barred the congregants from holding services in the building. According to Article 18, a cross was reinstalled on top of the church in July.

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 women of all religious groups 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. International media and various human rights NGOs reported the 24-year prison sentence on



August 27 of women's rights activist Saba Kord Afshari for her involvement in protests against the compulsory hijab. According to an August 27 report by HRANA, on June 1, security forces arrested Afshari on charges of "collusion against national security," "propaganda against the state," and "promoting corruption and prostitution by appearing without a headscarf in public."

In April authorities arrested three anti-forced-hijab activists, Mojgan Keshavarz, Monireh Arabshahi, and her daughter Yasaman Ariyani, for their widely shared video via various social media networks on March 8, International Women's Day, depicting the women handing out flowers in the Tehran metro while suggesting to passengers that the hijab should be a choice. According to HRW, on July 31, branch 31 of Tehran's revolutionary court sentenced each of them to five years in prison for "assembly and collusion to act against national security," one year for "propaganda against the state," and 10 years for "encouraging and enabling [moral] corruption and prostitution." Keshavarz received an additional seven-and-a-half years for "insulting the sacred." On August 16, six UN human rights experts issued a statement calling for the release of the women. These included the special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran; the special rapporteur on violence against women, its causes, and consequences; the special rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders; the chair of the working group on discrimination against women and girls; the special rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression; and the special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief. The experts stated, "We call upon the Iranian authorities to quash these convictions and immediately release all human rights defenders who have been arbitrarily detained for their work in advocating women's rights, and to ensure full respect for the rights of women to freedom of opinion and expression, peaceful assembly, and nondiscrimination."

International media and human rights organizations widely reported the March 11 sentencing of female human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh to 33 years in prison and 148 lashes. According to AI, Sotoudeh's conviction and sentencing came as a result of her "peaceful human rights work, including her defense of women protesting against Iran's degrading forced-hijab laws." In June 2018 authorities arrested Sotoudeh, who represented opposition activists, including women prosecuted for removing their mandatory headscarf, and she remained in Evin Prison at year's end. UN human rights experts, including the special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran and the special rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, expressed alarm at the news of Sotoudeh's conviction and sentencing. "We are deeply concerned about Ms. Sotoudeh's conviction and the prison sentence imposed. Her detention and the charges against her appear to

relate to her work as a human rights lawyer, especially representing Iranian women human rights defenders arrested for peacefully protesting against laws making the wearing of veils compulsory for women,” the experts said. *The Los Angeles Times* reported Sahar Khodarayi, also known as “Blue Girl,” was arrested in March for violating the government ban on women entering soccer stadiums by donning a blue wig and an overcoat to watch her favorite soccer team Esteghlal, known for their blue jerseys, play against a team from the United Arab Emirates. She was released on bail and charged with “harming public decency” and “insulting law enforcement agents” for not wearing a hijab. In September, when informed she faced six months in prison, she doused herself in gasoline and set herself on fire in front of a courthouse, dying from her burns a few days later. In October women flooded Azadi Stadium in Tehran to attend a FIFA soccer match chanting “Blue Girl” as they defied the longstanding de facto ban on women attending sporting events in stadiums, where they could mix openly with the opposite sex.

The government continued to suppress public displays it deemed counter to Shia Islamic laws, such as dancing and men and women appearing together in public. In May international media reported the arrest of 30 persons in the city of Gorgan for taking part in a private, mixed-gender yoga class. A local justice department official said the participants wore “inappropriate clothing” and “behaved inappropriately.” According to CHRI, these types of arrests were common but rarely acknowledged publicly by government officials. In March international media reported police in Arak arrested a couple on charges of “undermining Islamic chastity” after an individual posted a video on social media of the young man proposing to the young woman. According to the reports, clerics accused the couple of promoting an illicit relationship and living together without being married. The reports, however, indicated that according to local police, the couple was already legally married.

According to a May 20 CHRI report, government agents continued to use malware to conduct cyberattacks on the online accounts of religious minority groups, with the aim of stealing private information in the individuals’ accounts. There were nearly 100 documented accounts that authorities hacked, according to CHRI. CHRI identified accounts of the Gonabadi Sufi community in particular as key targets of the government’s hacking efforts.

Authorities reportedly continued to deny the Baha’i, Sabeian-Mandaean, and Yarsan 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. In September Iran Wire, IHRDC, and international media reported that Minister of Education Mohsen Haji-Mirzaei described a new ministry initiative, Project Mehr, which allowed schools increased authority to deny education to religious minority students. The minister was quoted as saying, “If students say they follow a faith other than the country’s official religions and this is seen as proselytizing, they cannot continue attending school.” He further stated all of the ministry’s provincial and local offices were taking part in the initiative and the human resources necessary for its implementation had been organized.

In June HRANA and IHRDC reported a new directive issued by The Welfare Organization, the country’s social welfare ministry, banning the employment of religious minorities in preschools. The directive states, “Employment of personnel belonging to religious minorities in any capacity in kindergartens is prohibited, except in kindergartens specific to religious minorities.” Director of the Office of Children and Adolescents in the State Welfare Organization Seyed Montazer Shobbar issued the directive on May 27.

Public and private universities continued to deny Baha’is admittance and to expel Baha’i students once their religion became known. In September HRANA reported at least 22 Baha’is were banned from universities during the year due to their religious beliefs, even though they passed the entrance exam. Officials stated the students had “incomplete files” or their names were not in the registration list. Applicants received a short message stating, “...There is a flaw in your dossier. Please contact the Response Unit of the Appraisal Agency.”

On January 19, media and NGOs reported a wave of expulsions of Baha’is from universities because of their religion. HRANA reported authorities at Azad University in Sama expelled Shirin Bani Nejad, a fifth-term Baha’i studying applied computer science, one month before she was to complete her associate degree. According to the reports, Bani Nejad’s expulsion came after she had paid her full tuition and taken one of her exams. Similarly, according to BIC, authorities expelled Shadi Shogi, a Baha’i student at Najafabad University of Applied Science and Technology, after four terms of study. Officials also expelled Elmira Sayyar Mahdavi, an undergraduate student in photo advertising, from Karaj University of Applied Science and Technology during her third term for being Baha’i. HRANA reported the expulsion of Baha’i Sama Nazifi, a student of architecture at Azad University in Shahriar. According to the reports, Nazifi had received awards and recognition the prior year for her academic achievement. According to Radio Zamaneh, authorities expelled Badi Safajou, a Baha’i student in chemical engineering at Azad University of Sciences and Research in Tehran

with a high grade-point average, during his seventh term. According to the report, supporters of Safajou conducted a poll that showed 81 percent of respondents disapproved of his expulsion. After nine days, security agents ordered the removal of the poll from the university's Instagram page.

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 them "unclean."

According to Mazjooban Noor, authorities continued to dismiss Gonabadi dervishes from employment and to bar them from university studies because of their affiliation with the Sufi order.

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.

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 faith. 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 anti-Christian propaganda to deter 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 Sabean-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. Yarsanis reported continued discrimination and harassment in the military and school systems. They also continued to report the birth registration system prevented them from giving their children Yarsani names. A July report by the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran stated Yarsanis continued to face a range of government-sanctioned discrimination and human rights violations, including attacks on their places of worship, the destruction of community cemeteries, and arrests of community leaders. The report noted the continuing practice of firing Yarsanis from employment after it was discovered they were Yarsani, and of individuals being forcibly shaved (the report noted the moustache is a holy symbol for the Yarsan community) when they refused to pray, including during military service.

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. The government reportedly required Jewish schools to remain open on Saturdays, in violation of Jewish religious law, to conform to the schedule of other schools.

According to Christian NGOs, government restrictions on published religious material continued, including confiscations of books about Christianity already on the market, 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 Yarsan 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 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.

International media quoted Jewish community representative Siamak Moreh-Sedegh, the sole Jewish Member of Parliament, stating there continued to be government restrictions and discrimination against Jews as a religious minority, but there was little interference with Jewish religious practices. He ran the Sapir Hospital in Tehran, which played a key role in treating revolutionaries throughout 1978-79 and which continued to have a Hebrew phrase from the Torah over its entrance. Speaking as a government official during a human rights meeting in Geneva on November 9, Morseh-Sedegh, according to government media, said, "Like other Iranians, we religious minorities are free to perform our religious ceremonies." According to the Tehran Jewish Committee, there were 31 synagogues in Tehran, more than 20 of them active, and 100 synagogues 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. In an October 2 speech, IRGC Chief General Hossein Salami said Israel would be "wiped off the world's political geography." Government-sponsored rallies continued to include chants of "Death to Israel," and participants accused other religious minorities, such as Baha'is and Christians, of collusion with Israel. Local newspapers carried editorial cartoons that were anti-Semitic, often focusing on developments in Israel or elsewhere in the region. For example, *Jam-e Jam* daily newspaper in September published an editorial cartoon that suggested Israel's participation in international sports "was a Jewish plot to crush Palestine."

The government continued to maintain separate election processes for the five seats reserved for representatives of the recognized religious minority communities in parliament.

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

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Baha'is and those who advocated for their rights reported Baha'is continued to be major targets of social stigma and violence, and perpetrators reportedly continued to act with impunity. Even when arrested, perpetrators faced diminished punishment following admissions that their acts were based on the religious identity of the victim.

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. According to BIC, anti-Baha'i rhetoric increased markedly in recent years. In April BIC reported residents in Shiraz held a town-hall-style meeting against the Baha'i Faith and posted related banners promoting anti-Baha'i sentiment and publications.

Yarsanis outside the country reported 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 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. On September 25, local media reported several government sources criticized Sufi beliefs in reaction to announced plans to produce a film about the life of Sufi Persian poet Shams Tabrizi. Ayatollah Nasser Makarem-Shirazi said, "Considering that this [film] will promote the deviant Sufi sect, it is religiously forbidden and should be avoided." Ayatollah Hossein Nouri-Hamedani said, "According to Imam Sadeq, the Sufi sect

is our enemy and promoting it in any way is not permitted and is religiously forbidden [haram].”

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

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

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

The U.S. government continued to call 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 and 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.

At the July U.S.-hosted Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, the United States and seven other governments issued a statement on Iran that said, “We strongly oppose the Iranian government’s severe violations and abuses of religious freedom. In Iran, blasphemy, apostasy from Islam, and proselytization of Muslims are crimes punishable by death. Many Iranians are languishing in jails, including the Great Tehran Penitentiary and Evin Prison, simply for exercising their fundamental freedom to worship, observe, practice, and teach their faiths. Unrecognized religious minorities, including Baha’is and Christian converts, are particularly vulnerable to discrimination, harassment, and unjust imprisonment. ...Last year, the Iranian government sentenced more than 200 Gonabadi Sufis to lengthy prison terms and other harsh punishments after security forces cracked down on Gonabadi Sufis peacefully protesting the detention of one of their fellow faith members. We call on the Iranian government to release all prisoners of conscience and vacate all charges inconsistent with the universal human right of religious freedom. We urge Iran to ensure fair trial guarantees, in accordance with its human rights obligations, and afford all detainees access to medical care. We stand with Iranians of all beliefs and hope someday soon they will be free to follow their consciences in peace.”



During the Secretary of State's July 18 keynote remarks, he said, "In the Islamic Republic of Iran, authorities ban religious minorities from possessing religious books and they deny them access to education... In May, the Iranian government prohibited religious minorities from working at childcare centers where there are Muslim children. And as we know too well, beatings and imprisonments are common. Iranians who dare stand up for their religious freedom, for their neighbors, face abuse. Last month, the regime threw a city councilman in prison for calling for something so simple as the release of two Baha'is."

On August 2, in response to media reports of Christian convert Mahrokh Kanbari's prison sentence, the Vice President stated on Twitter, "I am appalled to hear reports that Iran's despotic rulers have punished yet another Christian woman for exercising her freedom to worship. Iran must free Mahrokh Kanbari today. Whether Sunni, Sufi, Baha'i, Jewish, or Christian, America will stand up for people of faith in Iran like Mahrokh and Pastor Bet Tamraz whose persecutions are an affront to religious freedom."

On October 3, the U.S. Special Representative for Iran delivered a video message in which he stated, "Christians, Jews, Sunnis, Baha'is, Zoroastrians, and other religious minorities are denied the most basic rights enjoyed by the Shia majority today. And believers are routinely fined, flogged, and arrested in Iran. Worse off yet are the members of unrecognized religious minorities like the Baha'is or others in Iran who are met with brutal subjugation including prison, torture, intimidation and even death due to their faith. Today, there are dozens of Baha'is arbitrarily detained in Iran for practicing their faith."

In November the United States again voted in the UN General Assembly in favor of a resolution expressing concern about Iran's human rights practices, including the continued persecution of religious minorities.

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 18, 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(a)(1)(C) of the Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act of 2012, pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act.