

KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Iran remained extremely poor. Protests against mandatory hijab laws and other restrictions on freedom of religion or belief continued despite security forces' violent repression. Officials systematically harassed, arrested, detained, sexually assaulted, raped, and tortured protesters, including [minors](#). In March, the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Javaid Rehman, [said](#) the government's treatment of protesters may constitute crimes against humanity. During the year, Iran executed at least [eight](#) protesters on religiously grounded charges. In May, the government [executed](#) two men on blasphemy charges. In November, it executed [five](#) men in cities including Karaj, Ahvaz, and Zahedan on religiously grounded [charges](#), including "corruption on Earth" and "enmity against God."

In September, Iran's parliament approved the Bill to Protect the Family by Promoting the Culture of Chastity and Hijab, which the Expediency Council amended in December. The law [expands](#) the scope of prohibited religious practice and expression. Authorities escalated enforcement of mandatory hijab laws throughout 2023, increasing surveillance and secretly [funding](#) a "morality guard" to harass uncovered women. In November, UN experts [called](#) for an independent investigation into the [death](#) of 16-year-old Armita Geravand, who was beaten into a coma on the Tehran metro, reportedly by security forces, for wearing improper hijab and later died. The government also failed to thoroughly investigate a series of reported gas attacks on girls'

schools and repressed protests by families calling for investigations. Security forces arrested celebrities for voicing opposition to religiously based government restrictions on gender minorities. In October, authorities rearrested lawyer [Nasrin Soutudeh](#), who advocated for Iranian women opposing hijab laws. Following mistreatment in prison, she was released on bail in November. [Zahra Sedighi-Hamadani](#) fled Iran in December after being released on bail in March. She was sentenced to death in 2022 for "corruption on Earth" and "promoting homosexuality."

Security forces violently repressed weekly Sunni Muslim protests following Friday prayers and arrested scores of Sunni religious leaders in Zahedan. The government also continued its campaign against Baha'is, arresting scores of people and sentencing several to lengthy prison terms. Iran [resentenced](#) several members of the *Yaran-e-Iran* (Friends of Iran) in 2023 to years in prison, including Afif Naimi, Enayatollah Naeimi, and Jamaloddin Khanjani.

Iran's government also continued repressive action abroad, including the harassment of religious dissidents and targeting of Jewish sites. In March, Greece arrested and charged two men connected to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) who planned to attack a Chabad house and kosher restaurant in Athens. In June, Cyprus thwarted an IRGC plan to attack Jews and Israelis. In November, Israeli and Brazilian authorities thwarted an attack directed and financed by Iran and executed by Hizbullah on Jewish and Israeli targets in Brazil.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Iran as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted sanctions on Iranian government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations;
- Continue to issue clarifications of [general and specific sanctions licenses](#), expedite the processing of general license applications, and continue issuing new general licenses that facilitate financial and technological [support](#) for Iranians asserting their freedom of religion or belief through peaceful demonstrations and labor strikes; and
- Work with members of the [International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance](#) and other international associations to stem the flow of surveillance technology and weapons platforms used to suppress lawful religious expression in Iran, support the UN Fact-Finding Mission to Iran, and support a Security Council referral of the situation in Iran to the International Criminal Court for investigation of crimes against humanity against those asserting freedom of religion or belief.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Permanently reauthorize and exercise oversight to ensure implementation of the bipartisan Lautenberg Amendment, which aids persecuted Iranian religious minorities seeking refugee status in the United States.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Iran](#)
- **Factsheet:** [SGBV against Religious Freedom Protesters in Iran](#)
- **Hearing:** [Religious Freedom and Women's Rights in Iran](#)
- **Hearing:** [Transnational Repression of Freedom of Religion or Belief](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [Iran](#)

Background

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a theocratic, authoritarian state with restricted political participation. Ninety to 95 percent of the [population](#) are Shi'a Muslim, while Sunni Muslims account for 5–10 percent. Approximately 0.3 percent ascribe to other religions, including the Baha'i faith, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Judaism. While the Jaafari school of Shi'a Islam is the official religion, the constitution extends respect to the five major Sunni schools and recognizes some Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians as protected minorities. Five of the parliament's 290 seats are reserved for the recognized religious minorities—two for Armenian Christians and one each for Assyrian/Chaldean Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians. There are two Hindu temples, and Buddhism has historic influences. Iran is home to several other religious groups that face persecution, including Mandeans, Yarsanis, nonbelievers, and spiritualist movements such as Erfan-e Halgheh.

Baha'is

In 2023, authorities conducted individual and mass arrests of Baha'is across Iran, taking them to undisclosed locations and imposing excessively long prison sentences. Iranian security officials beat and brutalized Baha'is during raids and searches of private homes. In November, Iranian security forces [arrested](#) scores of Baha'is in cities including Hamadan, Mehrshahr, Yazd, Karaj, Alborz, and Tehran. The government has targeted Baha'i women in particular, including 10 arrested in Isfahan in October. Approximately two-thirds of Iranian Baha'i prisoners are women, including [Mahvash Sabet](#) and [Fariba Kamalabadi](#), members of Iran's former Baha'i leadership (*Yaran-e-Iran*). Both are serving a decade in prison after having previously served an identical sentence in the early 2010s. Authorities also [targeted](#) Baha'i cemeteries in Arak, Alborz, and Golestan. Local municipalities seized and confiscated Baha'i land, restricted Baha'i access to burial grounds, and declared intentions to sell Baha'i-owned property exclusively to Muslims.

Sunni Muslims

Between January and April 2023, Iran arrested several Sunni religious leaders on whom courts ultimately imposed egregiously long sentences. In January, the Urmia Special Court for Clergy sentenced cleric Yunes Nokhah to nearly five years in prison on charges including blasphemy, and the Hamedan Special Court for Clergy sentenced cleric Seifallah Hosseini to 17 years in prison, 74 lashes, and two years of exile. The government repeatedly targeted Zahedan's Sunni prayer leader Molavi Abdolhamid Ismailzahi, who has called for greater religious freedom. Iran escalated the targeting of Sunni clerics ahead of the one-year anniversary of a violently repressed protest following Friday prayers in Zahedan in October 2022. In August, security forces arrested [Fathi Mohammad Naqshabandi](#) in Rask. In September, the Kermanshah Special Court for Clergy sentenced Hadi Ahmadi to six months in prison for "propaganda against the state." In December, Iran detained Sunni prayer leaders Hassan Amini and Mohiuddin Mohammadzadeh in West Azerbaijan Province.

Christians

Iran released several Christians from Evin Prison in early 2023 but continued to target Christians on the basis of their religion. Between June and July, security forces arrested at least 69 Christians across 11

cities. In February, Iran's Supreme Court ruled that Armenian Christian house church leader [Joseph Shahbazian](#) should be retried on accusations including "promoting Zionist Christianity." His sentence was reduced in May from 10 years to two. Authorities pardoned and released him from prison in September. In May, the Tehran Appeals Court acquitted [Homayoun Zhavah](#) and [Sara Ahmadi](#), who were serving prison sentences related to house-church membership. In July, Iran relocated Pastor [Abdolreza Ali Haghnejad](#) from a prison near his family in Rasht to a facility over 800 miles away in Minab. Haghnejad is serving a six-year sentence for "propagating Christianity." That same month, a court summoned Pastor [Youcef Nadarkhani](#) to appear on charges of undermining state security but took no further action following his official rejection of the charge in court.

Other Religious Minorities

Iran continued to repress Gonabadi Sufis and target members of the community abroad. In January, a court sentenced [Mohsen Afrouz](#) to a year in prison for "propaganda against the regime." Security officials released [Abbas Deghan](#) from Evin Prison that same month, but two people went missing and were presumed arrested following a ceremony celebrating his release. In April, a Karaj court [sentenced](#) [Hamid Gharehassanlou](#) to 15 years in prison and his wife [Farzaneh](#) to five following their participation in a memorial protest for 23-year-old Hadis Najafi. Gharehassanlou originally faced a death sentence and sustained serious injuries after being beaten in prison. In October, security officers arrested [Arash Moradi](#) in Kashan. In December, the Tehran Revolutionary Court sentenced him to a six-year sentence.

Iran's government reportedly coerced Jewish communities to [protest](#) Israel's military operation in Gaza following the October 7 Hamas terrorist attacks.

In June, IRGC intelligence forces in Karaj arrested and tortured [Abolfazl Pour-Hosseini](#), a follower of the Erfan-e-Halgheh movement. The Karaj Revolutionary Court sentenced him to three years in prison and a two-year suspended imprisonment.

Key U.S. Policy

The U.S. [government raised](#) religious freedom [concerns](#) in [Iran](#) consistently [throughout](#) 2023. In August, Iran released five U.S. prisoners in exchange for access to \$6 billion in Iranian assets frozen in South Korea for humanitarian use. In November, the U.S. House of Representatives passed [H.R. 5961](#) to block Iranian access to these funds. That same month, the United States [conducted](#) strikes on Iranian-backed militias responsible for attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq.

Following the October 7 terrorist attacks in Israel, Deputy National Security Advisor Jonathan Finer [stated](#) that Iran was "broadly complicit" in the attacks. Later that month, the U.S. Department of the Treasury [sanctioned](#) Hamas members supported by Iran, including Mahmoud Khaled Zahhar, who has threatened "violence against Jewish civilians" in interviews. In January 2023, the Joseph R. Biden administration sanctioned Iranian officials [responsible](#) for repressing peaceful expression of religious views and [surveillance](#) of religious sites in the United States. In 2023, the U.S. Congress introduced [H.R. 589](#) and [several bipartisan](#) resolutions related to religious freedom in Iran. On December 29, 2023, the U.S. Department of State [redesignated](#) Iran as a CPC under IRFA and reimposed existing ongoing sanctions.