

KEY FINDINGS

In 2018, religious freedom conditions in Iran trended in a negative direction relative to 2017, with the Iranian government heightening its systematic targeting of Muslims (particularly Sunni Muslims and Sufis), Baha'is, and Christians. The government arbitrarily detained, harassed, and imprisoned Baha'is based on their religion and continued its long-term practice of egregious economic and educational persecution of the community. Hundreds of Sufis were arrested and scores were sent to solitary confinement and beaten in prison. Christians faced a dramatic uptick in arrests from previous years, and Muslim converts to Christianity continued to face severe persecution. Sunni Muslims experienced discrimination in employment and political leadership, and had difficulty obtaining permission to build mosques. A senior member of Iran's government led an anti-Semitic conference in Tehran accusing Jews of manipulating the global economy and exaggerating the Holocaust. Shi'a Muslim reformers and dissenters faced prolonged detention

and the threat of execution. While President Hassan Rouhani in 2016 signaled his intent to address some religious freedom violations, these promises have yet to be implemented; meanwhile, the number of individuals imprisoned for their beliefs continued to climb.

Based on these severe religious freedom violations, USCIRF again finds in 2019 that Iran merits designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). Since 1999, the U.S. Department of State has designated Iran as a CPC, most recently in November 2018. USCIRF recommends that the State Department redesignate Iran as a CPC under IRFA and maintain the existing, ongoing travel restrictions in section 221(c) of the Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act of 2012 (TRA) for individuals identified under section 221(a)(1)(C) of the TRA in connection with the commission of serious human rights abuses.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Speak out publicly and frequently at all levels about the severe religious freedom abuses in Iran, and highlight the need for the international community to hold authorities accountable in specific cases;
- Identify Iranian government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom, freeze those individuals' assets, and bar their entry into the United States, as delineated under the [Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and](#)

[Divestment Act](#) (CISADA), the [Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act](#), and related executive orders, citing specific religious freedom violations;

- Press for and work to secure the release of all prisoners of conscience, including Youcef Nadarkhani, Golrokh Ebrahimi Iraee, and Mohammad Ali Taheri;
- Work with European allies to use advocacy, diplomacy, and targeted sanctions to pressure Iran to end religious freedom abuses, especially

leading up to Iran's 2019 Universal Periodic Review; and

- Develop and utilize new technologies to counter censorship and to facilitate the free flow of information in and out of Iran.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Reauthorize and ensure implementation of the Lautenberg Amendment, which aids persecuted Iranian religious minorities seeking refugee status in the United States.

COUNTRY FACTS

FULL NAME

Islamic Republic of Iran

GOVERNMENT

Theocratic Republic

POPULATION

83,024,745

GOVERNMENT-RECOGNIZED RELIGIONS/FAITHS

Shi'a Islam (Jaafari and Zaydi); Sunni Islam (Maliki, Hanafi, Shafi'i, Hanbali); Christianity; Judaism; Zoroastrianism

RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY*

99.4% Muslim (90–95% Shi'a, 5–10% Sunni)

<1% Other (includes Baha'is, Christians, Jews, Sabeen-Mandaeans, Zoroastrians, and Yarsanis)

*Estimates compiled from the CIA World Factbook and U.S. Department of State

BACKGROUND

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a theocratic authoritarian state with elements of restricted political participation. The Jaafari (Twelver) school of Shi'a Islam is the official religion of the country. Iran is governed under the doctrine of *Velayat-e Faqih* or rule of the jurist. Its supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, is a religious scholar appointed by the 88-member Assembly of Experts. Iran's constitution stipulates that followers of five other schools of thought within Islam—Maliki, Hanafi, Shafi'i, Hanbali, and Zaydi—should be accorded respect and permitted to perform their religious rites. The constitution recognizes Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians as protected religious minorities, free to perform their rites “within the limits of the law.” There are two Hindu temples in Iran, one each in the cities of Bandar Abbas and Zahedan, and Buddhism has historic influences in Iran despite the confiscation of Buddha statues in recent years. Iran holds elections for parliament every four years, but candidates must be approved by the Guardian Council, a group of 12 Muslim scholars appointed either directly by Ayatollah Khamenei or nominated for parliament approval by the head of the judiciary, who is in turn appointed by Ayatollah Khamenei. Five of the parliament's 290 seats are reserved for these groups—two for Armenian Christians and one each for Assyrian/Chaldean Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians.

All of Iran's laws and regulations are based on unique Jaafari Shi'a Islamic interpretations. Under Iran's Penal Code, *moharebeh* (“enmity against God”) is vaguely defined and often used for political purposes. Both *moharabeh* and *sabb al-nabi* (“insulting the prophet”) are capital crimes. Apostasy is not codified as a crime in the Penal Code but detainees are still tried as apostates because the constitution specifies that Shari'ah be applied to any cases not explicitly addressed by the law.

In December 2016, President Rouhani publicly released a nonbinding Charter on Citizens' Rights that promised, among other rights, recognition of all religious identities and nondiscriminatory legal protection. However, since his reelection in May 2017, religious minorities in Iran have seen little change based on this document. Instead, growing numbers of religious minorities, dissident Shi'a and Sunni Muslims (especially Sunni Muslim Kurds), and human rights defenders have been subject to harassment, arrest, and execution for exercising rights nominally protected by the charter. These arrests have intensified in the wake of a wave of protest activity that started in December 2017 and continued through 2018. Initial protests sparked by economic grievances expanded to include political issues including corruption, involvement in regional conflicts, unchecked power in the religious establishment, and restrictions on women's rights justified on

religious grounds. These protests have resulted in the deaths of approximately 30 Iranians.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2018 Muslims

Over the past few years, Iranian authorities have charged many reformers within the Shi'a Muslim community of "insulting Islam," criticizing the Islamic Republic, and publishing materials that allegedly deviate from Islamic standards. In March 2018, the Iranian Intelligence Services (*Itila'aat*) arrested cleric Hossein Shirazi, the son of detained senior cleric Ayatollah Sadegh Shirazi. Iran's Special Clergy Court charged him with criticizing Iran's leadership and its system of rule of a single jurist.

The Sunni Muslim population in Iran is concentrated in underdeveloped areas and experiences discrimination in employment. Repeated requests—including some made in 2018—by Tehran's Sunni Muslim community to build an official mosque have been refused. While the Iranian government claims Sunni Muslims in Tehran have nine mosques at which to pray, most Sunni Muslim sites in Tehran are "prayer houses," which—unlike mosques—have no imam, budget, or religious instruction. Most Sunni Muslim worship in Tehran occurs in private homes or large rooms in other buildings. In August 2018, police blocked the entrances to prayer houses in four districts of Tehran during the Eid al-Adha holiday. Sunni clerics were also the targets of violence in Iran in 2018. In July, gunmen assassinated a Sunni cleric in southeastern Iran, and in November a Sunni cleric was shot four times with a hunting rifle on his way home from a mosque.

Sunni Muslim Kurds face particular discrimination since they are neither Shi'a nor Persian, and are often targeted by Iranian authorities. Iran executed approximately 53 Kurds in 2018. These include Zeinab Sekaanvand, a child bride who was allegedly beaten and forced into confessing to her husband's murder; she was executed in October 2018. Approximately 100 Kurds now remain on death row, including those who were accused of crimes as minors.

Nonetheless, criticism of Sunni Muslims is also a punishable offense in Iran. In May 2018, forces from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps arrested Persian literature Professor Hameed Samsam for insulting Sunni Muslims in a video clip posted online.

Adherents to Sufi orders, which emphasize mystic elements of Islam, are targeted by the government for "following a deviant sect" that does not conform to the state's official interpretation of Islam. Members of Iran's largest Sufi order, the Nematollahi Gonbadi, face a range of abuses. In February 2018, Iranian police, security, and intelligence agents surrounded the house of Sufi leader Noor Ali Tabandeh, leading to clashes with protestors. At the end of the reporting period, Tabandeh remained under house arrest without an official explanation from Iran's government. Iran has also targeted members of the Sufi community itself. During Sufi protests in February 2018, five security officers and one other person were killed and reports indicate 300 protestors were arrested. Mohammed Salas, a Sufi Iranian, was accused of driving a bus into security officers, killing three of them, during these protests. Following his arrest, Salas was denied access to his chosen lawyer, allegedly tortured into a confession, convicted by Tehran Appeals Court judge Mohammed Shahriari in March 2018, and executed at Raji Shahr Prison in June. Throughout 2018, Sufi prisoners at Great Tehran Prison and Shapour Detention Center conducted hunger strikes protesting Salas' execution and torture by prison guards.

In August 2018, Iran's revolutionary courts sentenced a group of 208 Sufis held at Fashafuyeh and Qarchak prisons to prison terms ranging from four months to 26 years, flogging, internal exile, a ban on travel, and a prohibition on participation in certain

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social and political groups in the country. In some cases, trials for these individuals lasted no longer than 15 minutes, and charges and evidence against the defendants were not made publicly available. That same month, six administrators

of the popular Sufi website Majzooban Noor were also sentenced in absentia by Judge Abolqasem Salvati, head

of the 15th branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Court in Tehran, to prison time (three received a seven-year sentence, two received a 12-year sentence, and one received a 26-year sentence), 74 lashes, two years of internal exile, and a two-year ban on journalistic activity. Mistreatment also occurred while approximately 300 Sufi Muslims served prison terms during the year. In August 2018, prison guards beat detainees on a sit-in strike over the detention and physical abuse of four Sufi women incarcerated at Qarchak Prison. In late August, eight Sufi Muslims were sent to solitary confinement at Great Tehran Penitentiary as punishment for their participation in a prison protest that turned violent. In November, three Sufi women were beaten at Qarchak Prison and eight Sufi Muslims at Great Tehran Penitentiary were sent into solitary confinement.

Baha'is

There are more than 300,000 Baha'is in Iran, who together constitute the largest non-Muslim religious majority in the country. Iran's government considers the Baha'i faith a heretical "deviant sect" whose members are de facto apostates. Despite promises by President Rouhani to end religious discrimination, Baha'is are not recognized by the state and are denied political, economic, cultural, and social rights on this basis. Since 2014, more than 26,000 pieces of anti-Baha'i media have aired on official or semi-official Iranian television channels.

Over the past 10 years, more than 1,000 Baha'is have been arbitrarily arrested on the basis of their faith. Arrest orders come from revolutionary courts that were set up following the 1979 Islamic revolution, and are executed by both security forces and agents of Iran's Ministry of Intelligence. In February 2018, security forces arrested seven Baha'is in Bushehr, and five additional Baha'is were sentenced by the Revolutionary Court of Mashhad. In September 2018, Iran's Ministry of Intelligence escalated its crackdown on the Baha'i community when its agents, along with security forces, arrested six Baha'is in Karaj, eight in Baharestan, and six in Shiraz. Shiraz city councilman Mehdi Hajati was

arrested on the order of the Shiraz Revolutionary Court after criticizing the arrests of Baha'is in his city. He was released 10 days later with a bail of \$47,500 (200 million tomans) but forced out of his council seat in October 2018. That same month, intelligence and security forces arrested two additional Baha'is in Karaj.

All seven of the high-profile Baha'i leaders known as the "Friends of Iran," or *Yaran*, were released from prison by the end of 2018 after serving 10-year sentences. Three of the seven *Yaran* were released in 2017, and four additional members were released in 2018: Saeid Rezaie, Vahim Tizfahm, Jamaloddin Khanjani, and Afif Naemi. Nonetheless, more than 70 Baha'is remained in prison in Iran at the end of 2018.

Although the Iranian government maintains publicly that Baha'is are free to attend university, the de facto policy of preventing Baha'is from obtaining diplomas continued in 2018. At least 60 Baha'i students were prevented from beginning university studies despite passing national university entrance examinations on the pretense of having incomplete files or not being registered. In other cases, Baha'i students had their examination scores invalidated by the National Organization for Educational Testing. Other Baha'is were expelled by their university security office or prevented from receiving diplomas despite having completed, or nearly completed, their studies.

Throughout 2018, Baha'i places of business were also targeted. Security forces shut down Baha'i businesses in Abadan and Maku, and the Ministry of Intelligence closed a business in Tabriz. In July, Mazandaran Province county supervisor Esmail Hossein Zadeh ordered restrictions on Baha'i businesses in Sari. Twenty-four Baha'i-owned businesses in Urmia shut down in 2017 by the Office of Public Places remained closed at the end of the reporting period. Security forces also prevented the burial of two deceased Baha'i individuals in a Baha'i cemetery in Kerman after it was sealed in March 2018. In October, the body of a deceased Baha'i woman was exhumed four days after her burial and abandoned in a desert area outside the town of Jaban.

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Christians

Iran has nearly 300,000 Christians, including traditional Armenian and Assyrian/Chaldean ethnic churches and newer Protestant and evangelical churches. The government monitors members of the historical churches and imposes legal restrictions on constructing and renovating houses of worship. Christians have been sentenced to prison terms for holding private Christmas gatherings, organizing and conducting house churches, and traveling abroad to attend Christian seminars. Evangelical Christian communities face repression because many conduct services in Persian and proselytize to those outside their community. Pastors of house churches are often charged with national security-related crimes and apostasy.

In 2018, Iran drastically escalated its arrests of Christians. Whereas 16 Christians were arrested in Iran in 2017, at least 171 were arrested in 2018. While Iran often arrests Christians ahead of Christmas, arrests in 2018 began earlier and took place in a wider set of cities and towns than usual. A total of 114 Christians were arrested in Iran during the first week of December 2018 and more than 150 were arrested between November and December 2018. Christians arrested in Iran are

often treated and charged as enemies of the state, and lawyers who take on their cases face the threat of detention. In September 2018, for example, Iran revolutionary court judges Mashallah Ahmadzadeh and Ahmad

Zargar affirmed sentences leveled in 2017 against Saheb Fadaie and Fatemeh Bakhteri on the charge of “spreading propaganda against the regime.”

Iran has specifically targeted the family of Assyrian Christian pastor Victor Bet-Tamraz on spurious charges of acting against national security. In 2017, Bet-Tamraz was sentenced to 10 years in prison and continues to appeal the sentence. In January 2018, Judge Mashallah Ahmadzadeh of Branch 26 of the Tehran Revolutionary Court sentenced Bet-Tamraz’s wife, Shamiram Isavi, to five years in prison on national security charges. In July 2018, the judge sentenced their son, Ramil, to four months in prison, also for “acting against national

security.” Converts to Christianity in Iran also face persecution. Two converts to Christianity from Islam, Hadi Asgari and Amin Afshar-Naderi, awaited verdicts at the end of the reporting period from appellate courts on extensive prison sentences for “conductive evangelism” and “illegal house church activities.”

Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani, a prisoner for whom USCIRF advocates as part of its [Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project](#), is a convert from Islam to Christianity who leads the Evangelical Church of Iran and has been arrested several times. In 2017, Judge Ahmadzadeh sentenced Nadarkhani to 10 years in prison and two years in internal exile for “promoting Zionist Christianity.” After several failed appeals, he was rearrested in July 2018 by plainclothes agents, beaten, and taken to a quarantine ward in Evin Prison.

Other Religious Minorities

Iran is home to between 15,000 and 20,000 Jews, and the capital city Tehran hosts 13 synagogues. Although government-driven anti-Semitic sentiment in 2018 was not as pronounced as in previous years, the government continued to propagate and tolerate anti-Semitism. In October 2018, Ali Reza Soltan-Shahi, an Iranian gov-

ernment official from the Office of the Iranian Presidency, organized an anti-Semitic conference in Tehran that accused Jews of manipulating the global economy and exploiting the Holocaust. Jews in Iran do not hold senior government or military

positions and many are believed to be under government surveillance. Iranian officials and clerics regularly call for the elimination of the state of Israel, and members of the Jewish community have been targeted on the basis of real or perceived ties to Israel. In December 2018, a group of evangelical Christians were also arrested and charged with promoting “Zionist Christianity.”

In 2018, members of Iran’s Zoroastrian community, which numbers between 30,000 and 35,000 people, faced ongoing discrimination. However, a ban imposed on a Zoroastrian member of the Yazd city council in 2017 was lifted by Iran’s Expediency Council in July 2018 after

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protests by Iranian deputy speaker Ali Motahari. President Rouhani also expressed support for the council member in June 2018.

While the Iranian government considers followers of the Yarsan faith to be Shi'a Muslims who practice Sufism, members of the faith identify as a distinct and separate religion known as *Ahl-e Haqq*, or People of Truth, whose numbers are estimated at more than one million. Members of the Yarsani community face discrimination in education, employment, and running for political office. During crackdowns on protests against the house arrest of Iran's Sufi spiritual leader in February 2018, police and Basij forces arrested a Yarsani woman, Shokoufeh Yadollahi, beating her so hard that her skull cracked and some of her ribs broke; at Shapour Detention Center she was denied access to medical treatment for dizziness and high blood pressure and eventually lost her sense of smell.

Mohammad Ali Taheri, another USCIRF-adopted [prisoner of conscience](#), university professor, and founder of a spiritual movement (*Ergan-e Halgheh* or Spiritual Circle), remains in prison. In 2015, Taheri was sentenced to death before the Iranian Supreme Court overturned his death sentence. In August 2017, he was retried and once more sentenced to death for "spreading corruption on Earth." His death sentence was overturned in March 2018 and Taheri was instead given an additional five-year sentence by Judge Abolqasem Salavati of Branch 15 of the Tehran Revolutionary Court for "insulting religious sanctities." In January 2019, Taheri announced his intention to give up his Iranian citizenship, citing "comprehensive injustice" at the hands of Iran's government.

Women and Religious Freedom

In 2018, Iran's government violated the freedom of women and girls on religious grounds. In December 2018, Iran's Parliamentary Committee for Judicial and Legal Affairs rejected a bill to ban marriage for girls under the age of 13. The bill would have banned marriage for boys between the ages of 16 and 18 as well.

Opponents to the bill, including the Basij Student Union and senior clerics, appealed to justifications in Shari'ah as the basis for their opposition. Statements from other senior religious clerics, such as Grand Ayatollah Naser Makarem Shirazi, opposed child marriage.

Since May 2017, Iranian women have participated in "White Wednesdays" in protest of Iran's mandatory hijab laws justified on the basis of religion. In February 2018, Iran arrested 29 women for protesting the law without wearing hijab. These arrests included activist Shaparak Shajarizadeh, who removed her headscarf in public at a May 2018 protest in Kashan. Shajarizadeh was charged by Tehran prosecutor Abbas Jafari Dolatabadi with "inciting corruption and prostitution" and was sent to solitary confinement at Shahr-e Rey Prison where she was allegedly tortured. In July 2018, Branch 1089 of Tehran's Criminal Court sentenced Shajarizadeh to serve 20 years in prison, though 18 of these years were suspended from the sentence. Shajarizadeh fled the country soon thereafter and at the end of the reporting period continued to seek asylum in Canada.

Author and human rights activist Golrokh Ebrahimi Iraee, another USCIRF [prisoner of conscience](#), was convicted in 2016 of "insulting the sacred" based on her unpublished story in which a protagonist angered by stonings burns a Qur'an. In January 2018, Iraee faced additional charges for allegedly insulting Ayatollah Khamenei and reciting a political poem. After being beaten and moved to Qarchak Prison in January 2018, Iraee began a hunger strike. She was transferred back to Tehran's Evin Prison in May 2018 and remained there at the end of the reporting period.

U.S. POLICY

Since President Donald J. Trump assumed office in January 2017, the U.S. government has significantly shifted its approach to relations with Iran, adopting a "maximum pressure" campaign that emphasizes accountability for Iran's nuclear activity and destabilizing activities in the region in addition to its egregious violations of human rights and religious

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In May 2018, the Trump Administration [announced](#) a re-imposition of sanctions waived or lifted under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to occur over a 180-day wind-down period. The first of these re-impositions occurred on August 7, 2018, and the second occurred on November 5. By the end of the reporting period, the United States had fully re-imposed the sanctions on Iran that had been lifted or waived under the JCPOA.

During the year, the U.S. government increasingly highlighted the poor religious freedom situation in Iran. At the July 2018 [Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom](#) held in Washington, DC, participating delegations from around the world issued a [Statement on Iran](#) concerning its mistreatment of religious minorities. Vice President Michael R. Pence also [spoke](#) about Iran's restriction on religious freedom and urged Iranians

to "press on with courage in the cause of freedom." In August 2018, the Iran Action Group at the State Department issued a [report](#) in which it detailed Iran's targeting of religious minorities, noting "Baha'is, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and Sunni and Sufi Muslims face widespread persecution, discrimination, and unjust imprisonment." In December, the House of Representatives passed [H.Res.274](#), which condemns the persecution of Baha'is in Iran.

On November 28, 2018, the secretary of state redesignated Iran as a CPC. The secretary also designated the following presidential action for Iran: "The existing ongoing travel restrictions in section 221(c) of the [TRA] for individuals identified under section 221(a)(1)(C) of TRA in connection with serious human rights abuses, pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act."

INDIVIDUAL VIEWS OF COMMISSIONER ANURIMA BHARGAVA

Iran raises a multitude of political and human rights concerns. My view is that the Commission should not raise concerns about Iran's relationship with Israel or other countries unless that relationship has a direct impact on religious freedom in Iran.