

# IRAN 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution declares the country to be an Islamic Republic, and Ja'afari Shia Islam to be the official state religion. It states all laws and regulations must be based on "Islamic criteria" and 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 prophets"). The constitution stipulates the five major Sunni schools be "accorded full respect" and enjoy official status in matters of religious education and certain personal affairs. "Within the limits of the law," the constitution states Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians are the only recognized religious minorities permitted to worship freely and to form religious societies, although proselytizing is prohibited. The government executed at least 20 individuals on charges of *moharebeh*, among them a number of Sunni Kurds. A number of other prisoners, including several Sunni preachers, remained in custody awaiting a government decision to carry out their death sentences. According to the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center database, at least 250 members of minority religious groups remained imprisoned, including Sunnis, Bahais, Christian converts, Sufis, Yarsanis, and Zoroastrians. Shia religious leaders who did not support government policies reportedly continued to face intimidation and arrest. The government continued to harass Bahais, and regulated Christian religious practices closely to enforce the prohibition on proselytizing. Security officials continued to raid prayer sites belonging to Sunnis. Government-sponsored public denunciations of the Bahai faith increased. Anti-Semitic rhetoric also continued to appear in official statements. There were reports of authorities placing restrictions on Bahai businesses or forcing them to shut down.

Non-Muslims and non-Shia reportedly continued to face societal discrimination, especially the Bahai community, which reported continuing problems at different levels of society, including personal harassment. There were reports of non-Bahais being pressured to refuse employment to Bahais or dismissing Bahais from their private sector jobs. Shia clerics and prayer leaders reportedly continued to denounce Sufism and the activities of Sufis in both sermons and public statements.

The United States has no diplomatic relations with Iran. The U.S. government used public statements, sanctions, and diplomatic initiatives in international forums

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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. The United States supported religious minority groups in the country through actions in the UN, including votes to extend the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran and support for resolutions expressing concern over the country'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 February 29, 2016, the Secretary of State redesignated Iran as a CPC and identified the following sanction that 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 81.8 million (July 2015 estimate). According to U.S. government estimates, Muslims constitute 99 percent of the population; 90-95 percent are Shia and 5-10 percent Sunni (mostly Turkmen, Arabs, Baluchis, and Kurds living in the northeast, southwest, southeast, and northwest, respectively). 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 1 percent of the population include Bahais, Christians, Jews, Sabeen-Mandaeans, Zoroastrians, and Yarsanis. The three largest non-Muslim minorities are Bahais, Christians, and Yarsanis.

There is no official count of Yarsanis, but one nongovernmental organization (NGO) and some Yarsani leaders estimate there are up to one million. Yarsanis have often been classified by the government as Shia Muslims practicing Sufism, but Yarsanis identify Yarsan as a distinct faith (known as Alhe Haq or Kakai). Yarsanis are mainly located in Luristan and Gurani-speaking areas of southern Kurdish regions.

According to Human Rights Watch data, Bahais number at least 300,000.

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According to World Christian Database statistics, there are approximately 285,000 Christians, although some estimates suggest there may be many more Christians than actually reported. The Statistical Center of Iran reports there are 117,700. The majority of Christians are ethnic Armenians concentrated in Tehran and Isfahan. 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 estimate the size of the Protestant community to be less than 10,000, although many Protestants or converts reportedly practice in secret.

According to Zoroastrian groups and the Statistical Center of Iran, there are approximately 25,000 Zoroastrians. According to the Tehran Jewish Committee, there are currently approximately 9,000 Jews, while the media estimate their number to be between 18,000 to 20,000. There reportedly are 5,000 to 10,000 Sabeen-Mandaeans.

### **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

#### **Legal Framework**

The constitution declares the country to be an Islamic Republic, the official religion to be Islam, and the doctrine followed to be Ja'afari Shiism. It states all civil, penal, financial, economic, administrative, cultural, military, political, and other laws and regulations must be based on "Islamic criteria" and official interpretation of sharia.

The constitution states all citizens shall enjoy human, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, "in conformity with Islamic criteria." It states the investigation of an individual's beliefs in general is forbidden, and no one may be "molested or taken to task" for holding a certain belief. The constitution does not address the right of Muslim citizens to change or renounce their religious beliefs, nor does the penal code include provisions addressing apostasy, although apostasy is a crime punishable by death under sharia law, which judges may also apply. Under the law, a child born to a Muslim father is considered to be Muslim.

By law, non-Muslims may not engage in public religious expression, persuasion, or conversion of Muslims. Such activities are considered proselytizing and are punishable by death.

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The penal code stipulates the death sentence for *moharebeh* (“enmity against God”) and *sabb al-nabi* (“insulting the prophets”).

The constitution states other schools of Islam, including the Hanafi, Shafi, Maliki, Hanbali, and Zaydi Sunni schools of Islam, are to be “accorded full respect” and their followers are free to perform religious rites. It states these five schools shall enjoy official status 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 who, “within the limits of the law,” have permission to perform religious rites and ceremonies and to form religious societies. They are also free to address personal affairs and religious education according to their own religious canon. The law bans these groups from proselytizing. Included in this legal grouping of three recognized religious minorities are Sabean-Mandaeans, whom the government regards as Christians, even though the Sabean-Mandaeans do not consider themselves to be Christians.

The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security monitor religious activity, while churches are also monitored by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). All churchgoers must register with the authorities. Registration conveys certain rights, including the use of alcohol for religious purposes. Failure of churchgoers to register and attendance at churches by unregistered individuals may subject a church to closure and arrest of its leaders by the authorities. The law also requires Bahais to register with the police.

The constitution provides for freedom of the press except when it is “detrimental” to the fundamental principles of Islam.

The religious curriculum of public schools is determined by the Ministry of Education. All school curricula must include a course on Shia Islamic teachings and all pupils must pass this course in order to advance to the next educational level through university. Sunni students and students from recognized minority religious groups must also take and pass the courses on Shiism, although they may take courses on their own religions in addition.

Recognized religious minority groups, except for Sunni, may operate private schools. The Ministry of Education supervises the private schools operated by the

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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 religious instruction in non-Persian languages, but authorities must approve those texts as well. The minority communities must bear the cost of translation expenses to meet this requirement. Directors of such private schools, whether the directors are Muslim or non-Muslim in religious affiliation, must demonstrate loyalty to the official state religion (a requirement known as *gozinesh*).

The law bars Bahais from founding their own educational institutions. A Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology order requires universities to exclude Bahais from access to higher education or expel them if their religious affiliation becomes known. The government instruction states Bahais are permitted to enroll in schools only if they do not identify themselves as such. To register for the university entrance examination, Bahai students must identify themselves as followers of a religion other than Bahai. To pass the entrance examination, university applicants must pass an exam on Islamic, Christian, or Jewish theology.

According to the constitution, Islamic scholars select the supreme leader, whose qualifications include piety and religious scholarship. To “safeguard” Islamic ordinances and to examine the compatibility with Islam of legislation passed by the Consultative Assembly, the constitution mandates formation of a Guardian Council composed of six Shia clerics appointed by the supreme leader and six Shia legal scholars nominated by the judiciary. The Guardian Council also reviews all candidates for the body selecting the supreme leader, and all candidates for elective office.

The constitution bans the Majlis 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 of Shia Ja’fari Islam as the official religion.

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

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The constitution states in regions where followers of one of the five recognized Sunni schools 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 the 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 and all Muslims are “duty-bound” to 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 refrain from “engaging in conspiracy or activity” against Islam and the Islamic republic.

According to the law, the value of a woman’s “blood money” or testimony in court is half that of a man, with the exception of traffic accidents, and women are not granted custody or guardianship of their children. The age for criminal accountability for a girl starts from about age nine and about age 14 for a boys.

By law, non-Muslims may not serve in the judiciary, the security services (separate from 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, although members of recognized religious minorities, with the exception of Bahais, may serve in the lower ranks of government. Government workers who do not observe Islamic principles and rules are subject to penalties and may be barred from work.

Bahais are banned from government employment and from all leadership positions in the military. They are not allowed to participate in the governmental social pension system. Bahais cannot receive compensation for injury or crimes committed against them and cannot inherit property. The government does not recognize Bahai marriages and divorces, but allows a civil attestation of marriage to serve as a marriage certificate.

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.

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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, there is an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps charged with upholding the Islamic nature of the revolution at home and abroad. By law, members of religious minority groups are not exempt from military service. The law forbids non-Muslims from holding positions of authority over Muslims in the armed forces. Members of constitutionally protected religious minorities with a college education may serve as officers during their mandatory military service, but may not continue to serve beyond the mandatory service period to become career military officers.

The law authorizes collection of “blood money” as restitution to families for the death of Muslims and protected minorities. According to law, Bahai blood may be spilled with impunity, and Bahai families are not entitled to restitution.

### Government Practices

The government executed at least 20 individuals on charges of *moharebeh*, according to the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center. A number of other prisoners, including several Sunni preachers, remained in custody on death sentences. According to the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center database, at least 250 religious practitioners remained imprisoned because of their religious affiliation or activities, including Sunnis, Bahais, Christian converts, Sufis, Yarsanis, and Zoroastrians. Shia religious leaders who did not support government policies reportedly continued to face intimidation and arrest. The government continued to harass Bahais and to regulate Christian religious practices closely to enforce the prohibition on proselytizing. Security officials continued to raid and demolish existing prayer sites belonging to Sunnis; the government reportedly barred the construction of new Sunni mosques. Government sponsored public denunciations of the Bahai Faith increased. Government officials also continued to employ anti-Semitic rhetoric in official statements. There were reports of authorities placing restrictions on Bahai businesses or forcing them to shut down.

According to Amnesty International and other international human rights NGOs, the government convicted and executed dissidents, political reformers, and peaceful protesters on charges of *moharebeh* and anti-Islamic propaganda. The Iran Human Rights Documentation Center reported the government executed at least 20 individuals on charges of *moharebeh*. According to the Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA), in June the government executed a Sunni Kurd,

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Mansour Arvand, in West Azerbaijan Province on charges including *moharebeh*. According to multiple sources, including the NGO Iran Human Rights (IHR), on March 4, the government executed six Kurdish Sunni prisoners – Hamed Ahmadi, Jamshed Dehghani, Jehangir Dehghani, Kamal Molayee, Seddigh Mohammadi and Syed Hadi Hosseini – in Rajai Shahr Prison in Karaj, near Tehran, on charges of *moharebeh*.

In October the Supreme Court upheld the 2012 death sentence for Kurdish Sunni preacher Shahram Ahmadi on charges of *moharebeh*. As of year's end, Ahmadi was awaiting execution in Rajai Shahr Prison.

Sunni prisoners Mohammad Kayvan Karimi, Amjad Salehi, and Omid Payvand, along with 24 others, remained in custody awaiting execution following the Supreme Court's confirmation at the end of December of their death sentences for "enmity against God through spreading propaganda against the system." According to Human Rights Watch, their trials lacked basic safeguards, such as the right to testify in their own defense, and the authorities denied some of the accused access to a lawyer of their own choosing before and during their trials.

On August 1, the Islamic Revolutionary Court sentenced to death Mohammad Ali Taheri on new charges of "corruption on earth." Taheri, founder of the spiritual doctrine "Interuniversalism," had already served four years of a 37-year sentence for "insulting the sanctities" and had reportedly been in solitary confinement since 2011 in Ward 2A of Evin Prison (the ward supervised by the Revolutionary Guards). He went on a hunger strike following the announcement of the sentence. According to the media, the Supreme Court annulled his death sentence in December and referred his case back to the court which sentenced him to life in prison. He remained in prison at the end of the year.

The Supreme Court commuted the death sentence for blogger Soheil Arabi on the charge of "insulting the Prophet Muhammad" on Facebook, reducing the punishment to reading 13 religious books and studying theology for two years, according to media and NGO reports.

The October report submitted to the UN by Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran, Dr. Ahmed Shaheed, cited a semi-official news outlet as the source of information on the government's punishment of more than 480 people by flogging during the first 15 days of Ramadan for not observing fasting requirements. The

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government officially reported only three flogging punishments for failure to observe Ramadan.

According to the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center database of prisoners, at least 380 religious practitioners remained imprisoned at the end of the year for their membership in or activities on behalf of a minority religious group, including approximately 250 Sunnis, 82 Bahais, 26 Christian converts, 16 Sufis, 10 Yarsanis, three Sunni converts, and two Zoroastrians.

There continued to be reports of arrests and harassment of Sunni clerics and congregants. On June 29, Iranian authorities detained seven Ahvazi Sunnis – Mehdi Heydari, Abdul-Hakim Khasraji, Sajjad Alhaei, Heydar Naseri, Ayoub Heydari, Ahmad Badawi and Abbas Badawi – for attempting to carry out Sunni rituals during Ramadan. As of year's end, there was no update on their status.

Security forces arrested Sheikh Qassem Jaber al Abbas, a leader of the al-Bawi tribe from the village of Arab Rashed, on April 23, for leading Sunni congregational prayers, according to Sunni monitoring groups. As of the end of the year, he remained in detention.

The government often charged Bahais with violating the Islamic penal code prohibiting activities against the state and with spreading falsehoods, including disseminating “propaganda against the system” or crimes related to threatening national security. Seven Bahai leaders – Fariba Kamalabadi, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, Behrouz Tavakkoli, Saeid Rezaie, Vahid Tizfahm, and Mahvash Sabet – remained in detention at year's end, serving sentences of up to 20 years from convictions in 2011 for “espionage for Israel”, “insulting religious sanctities,” “corruption on earth,” and “propaganda against the Islamic Republic.” On April 22, authorities demolished the home of Jamaloddin Khanjani in Semnan, despite a Supreme Court order to stay the demolition, according to IHR.

Abdolfattah Soltani, an attorney involved in defending individuals charged with teaching at the Bahai Institute for Higher Education (BIHE) and cofounder of the Center for Defenders of Human Rights, remained in prison following a 2012 sentence of up to 18 years in prison, later reduced to 13 years by an appeals court, for founding the center, providing the media with information about his clients' cases, as well as “spreading propaganda against the system,” “setting up an illegal opposition group,” and gathering and “colluding with intent to harm national security.”

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The government continued to imprison and detain members of the BIHE. In October the media reported Azita Rafizadeh, a Bahai instructor at BIHE, began serving a four-year sentence following her 2014 conviction for “membership in the illegal and misguided Bahai group with the aim of acting against national security through illegal activities at the BIHE educational institute.” According to IHR, the Tehran Revolutionary Court sentenced her husband, Peyman Koushk-Baghi, to five years in prison for the same offense in May, although he had not yet begun to serve his sentence as of the end of the year.

According to the Office of Public Affairs of the Bahais of the United States, a number of other Bahais remained in prison as of the end of the year for teaching at BIHE, including Kamran Mortezaie, Kayvan Rahimian, Foad Moghaddam, Amanollah Mostaghim, and Azizullah Samandari, who were all previously sentenced to five-years imprisonment, and Shahin Negari and Masim Bagheri Tari, who previously were sentenced to four years imprisonment. Of other Bahais serving prison sentences for teaching at BIHE, the media reported the authorities released Mahmoud Badavam, Noushin Khadem, Farhad Sedhi, Riaz Sobhani, and Ramin Zibaie in May following completion of their four year prison sentences. The authorities reportedly released Kamran Rahimian in August following completion of his four-year sentence, and granted a clemency furlough to his wife, Faran Hessami, in November to attend to a family medical problem.

According to the Bahai International Community, police arrested 13 Bahais in Hamadan in April over the course of two weeks on charges of “engaging in propaganda against the regime.” The authorities released most of those arrested on bail ranging from 30,000,000 to 600,000,000 rials (\$8000 – \$20,000), and detained one woman for nine days in solitary confinement.

According to local media reports, intelligence ministry agents arrested 16 Bahais at their homes in Tehran, Isfahan, and Mashhad on November 16. As of the end of the year, the authorities had not yet charged any of the 16 with a crime.

According to the El Yasin (Elahiyoun) community, their spiritual leader, Elias Mim (Peyman Fattahi), and two of his followers, Morteza Rasoulian and Reza Almasian, were arrested on August 7. This was the fifth time since 2007 that Mim was arrested. As of the end of the year, the three remained in detention.

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Muslim converts to Christianity reportedly continued to face harassment, arrest, and detention. According to UN reports, on April 15, the Shahin Shahr Revolutionary Court upheld the one-year prison sentence and two-year travel ban of 13 Christian converts who were arrested in 2013 at a house church and were charged with “propaganda against the State,” “advocating for evangelical Christianity,” and “establishing house churches.”

According to Christian Solidarity Worldwide, the police arrested 14 Protestants on November 10, in Varamin. Most of them were members of the Protestant Emmaus Church in Tehran, which authorities had forced to close in 2012 for conducting services in Farsi. There was no reported information on the charges leveled against the 14.

Numerous Christians remained imprisoned at year’s end. According to HRANA, Ebrahim Firouzi, who was held since 2013 with violent offenders in Ward 10 of Rajai Shahr Prison (rather than in Ward 12 with prisoners of conscience) for converting to and practicing Christianity, went on a hunger strike to protest his continued detention after completing his original sentence in January. According to Mohabat News, he ended the hunger strike in June after authorities agreed to an improvement in his prison conditions, but he remained in prison under a new five-year sentence imposed in 2014 for “collusion against national security.”

Despite ill health, Christian convert Maryam Naghash Zargaran continued to serve a four year sentence on charges of “propaganda against the Islamic regime and collusion intended to harm national security” for her activities in the Christian community, according to Mohabat News. Prison guards had reportedly sexually abused her upon her return to prison from a medical furlough in November 2014.

According to Majzooban-e-Noor, a website reporting on the Gonabadi (Sufi) dervish community, the Supreme Court in late January confirmed the sentences of seven Gonabadi dervishes from Kavar to exile, meaning they would not be permitted to live in their home province. The court confirmed the sentence of lifelong internal exile on Kazem Dehghan, Hamid Reza Arayesh, and Mohammad Ali Shamshirzan, and seven years of temporary internal exile on Mohammad Ali Dehghan, Mohammad Ali Sadeghi, Ebrahim Bahrami, and Mohsen Esmaili. A lower court had found the seven dervishes guilty of *moharebeh* and “corruption on earth.” In addition, the lower court had found Kazem Dehghan, Hamid Reza Arayesh, and Mohammad Ali Shamshirzan guilty of being members of an illegal group and conspiring to disrupt the country's security.

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According to media accounts, over the course of the year the authorities released nine Gonabadi dervish leaders and journalists associated with Majzooban-e-Noor. The Tehran Revolutionary Court had sentenced the group in 2013 to up to 10 years in prison on charges of “forming the illegal Majzooban-e-Noor group with the intent to disrupt national security,” “propaganda against the state,” “insulting the supreme leader,” and “participation in disrupting public order.” Following the Supreme Court’s reduction of their sentences, the authorities released Afshin Karampour, Amir Eslami, Farshid Yadollahi, and Omid Behrooz in March. They released Mostafa Daneshjoo in May, and Hamid Reza Moradi Sarvestany and Reza Entesari in August. The authorities released the remaining two dervishes, Kasra Noori and Mustafa Abdi, in October and December respectively.

The authorities often arrested members of house churches on accusations of supporting and accepting assistance from enemy countries. The authorities released Behman Irani, a leader of the non-Trinitarian group called “The Church of Iran,” for two weeks on bail in July but then returned him to prison to serve out the remaining portion of his six-year sentence for “creating a network to overthrow the system.”

Shia religious leaders who did not support government policies or the supreme leader’s views reportedly continued to face intimidation and arrest on charges related to religious offenses. According to human and religious rights activists, prison conditions remained poor for Shia cleric Ayatollah Hossein Kazemini Boroujerdi, who was in the last years of an 11-year sentence on charges including “*moharebeh*” and “abusing his clerical flock” for denying the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic as a theological system. Reportedly, the authorities brought him before the Special Clerical Court in June for further investigation. According to human rights activists, prison officials continued to deny him medical care and daily medicine for various health problems, including a heart condition, despite a doctor’s recommendations.

As of the end of the year, government authorities had not brought to trial individuals arrested in 2014 for eight acid attacks against women, which the media reported as motivated by the women’s “improper Islamic dress.” Authorities condemned the attacks but denied the cause was the women’s “un-Islamic” dress.

According to representatives of the Bahai community, the government continued to prohibit Bahais from officially assembling or maintaining administrative

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institutions, actively closed such institutions, harassed Bahais, and disregarded their property rights.

Christians, particularly evangelicals and converts, continued to experience disproportionate levels of arrests and high levels of harassment and surveillance, according to reports from exiled Christians. Many arrests reportedly took place during police raids on religious gatherings, during which the authorities also confiscated religious property. Prison authorities reportedly continued to withhold medical care from prisoners, including some Christians, according to human rights groups.

The government continued to regulate Christian religious practices closely. The authorities required all churchgoers to register with them and prevented Muslim converts to Christianity from entering Armenian or Assyrian churches, according to UN Special Rapporteur Shaheed. According to Christian community leaders, if the authorities found Armenian or Assyrian churches were baptizing new converts or preaching in Farsi, they closed the churches. Those found to be hosting worship meetings in their homes were arrested.

According to human rights NGOs, the government also continued to enforce the prohibition on proselytizing. The authorities reportedly barred all nonmembers from entering church premises, closed churches, and arrested Christian converts. They reportedly continued to press evangelical church leaders to sign pledges saying they would not proselytize Muslims or allow Muslims to attend church services. Meetings for evangelical services remained restricted to Sundays. Christian advocacy groups stated the government, through such pressure and through church closures, had eliminated in recent years all but a handful of Farsi-language church services, restricting most services to the Armenian and Assyrian languages. Pastors of forcibly closed Farsi-language churches continued to report pressure from the government to leave the country, and the government prevented ordination of new ministers. Security officials remained posted outside congregation centers to perform identity checks on worshippers. Christians of all denominations reported the presence of security cameras outside their churches to confirm non-Christians did not participate in services. In response, many Protestants and other converts practiced their religion in secret.

The government continued to monitor the statements and views of senior Shia religious leaders. The supreme leader oversaw the extrajudicial Special Clerical Courts, not provided for by the constitution, but established by the government to

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investigate actions by clerics which it viewed as offenses and crimes, including political statements inconsistent with government policy and nonreligious activities.

According to members of the Sabean-Mandaean and Yarsan religious communities, authorities continued their harassment of these communities, including by denying them permission to perform religious ceremonies in public and denying them building permits for places of worship. The government continued to classify Yarsanis as Shia Muslims practicing Sufism, although Yasanis identified themselves as practitioners of a distinct faith

The intelligence and security services reportedly continued their harassment of prominent Sufi leaders and raided Sufi businesses as a means of intimidation and information gathering. Government restrictions on Sufi groups and their *husseiniya* (auxiliary prayer and teaching spaces) also continued.

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 – a *manteau* (overcoat) and a *rousari* (headscarf), or, alternatively, a *chador* (full body length semicircle of fabric worn over both one’s 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.

Articles in international news media quoted Jewish community representatives as saying there continued to be government restrictions and discrimination against Jews, but little interference with Jewish religious practices. According to the Tehran Jewish Committee, there continued to be 13 active synagogues in Tehran.

Government restrictions on published religious material continued. Government officials frequently confiscated Bibles and pressured publishing houses printing Bibles or unsanctioned non-Muslim materials to cease operations. Books published by religious minorities, regardless of their topic, were required to carry labels on the cover denoting their non-Shia authorship.

Authorities continued to raid Christian homes, sometimes confiscating personal property along with religious materials. On February 16, the authorities raided the house churches of Mehdi Reza Omidi, Saheb Fadaie, and Yasser Mosayebzadeh in

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Rasht. The authorities confiscated their Bibles, Christian CDs, and religious literature, along with their laptops, according to Christian Solidarity Worldwide.

Sunnis continued to cite the absence of a Sunni mosque in Tehran, despite the presence of more than one million Sunnis in the city, as an example of government discrimination against them. Sunni leaders said because the government barred them from building or worshiping in their own mosques, they relied on ad hoc, underground prayer halls, or *namaz khane*, to practice their faith.

Security officials continued to raid prayer sites belonging to Sunnis. On January 9, Tehran municipal authorities sealed off the Sunni prayer hall in the Punak area of Tehran, according to BBC reports. The site was opened several weeks later but barred from weekly Friday worship services. On July 29, government forces gutted the interiors of several Sunni prayer halls, including in Punak, according to multiple news sources.

The government continued to hold many Bahai properties it had seized following the 1979 revolution, including cemeteries, holy places, historical sites, and administrative centers. The government also continued to prevent Bahais from burying their dead in accordance with their religious tradition, and continued demolition of the Bahai cemetery in Shiraz, where authorities had already destroyed over 400 of the 950 graves. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps had previously confiscated the property, reportedly in order to build a cultural and sports recreation center.

Sunni leaders reported the authorities had banned Sunni religious literature and teachings from religion courses in public schools, even in predominantly Sunni areas.

Members of the Bahai community reported Bahai children in public schools continued to face attempts by their teachers and administrators to convert them to Islam.

Many Bahais reportedly turned to online education at the BIHE despite government censorship and the arrests of teachers associated with the program. The government did not recognize any education obtained this way, creating barriers to work for those who wanted to use their BIHE degrees in seeking employment.

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Assyrian Christians reported the government continued to permit their community to write its own textbooks which, following the government's authorization and approval of the content, were printed at the government's expense and distributed to the Assyrian community.

According to the Tehran Jewish Committee, five Jewish schools and two kindergartens continued to operate in Tehran, but their principals were required to be Muslim. The government reportedly continued to allow Hebrew instruction but limited the distribution of Hebrew texts, particularly nonreligious texts, making it difficult to teach the language, according to the Jewish community. Although the government did not require Jewish students to attend Saturday classes, it 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 human rights activists, the government maintained a legal interpretation of Islam which required citizens of all faiths to follow strict rules based on the government's interpretation of Shia jurisprudence, creating differentiation under the law between the rights granted to men and women. The government continued to enforce gender segregation throughout the country without regard to religious affiliation.

Representatives of minority religious groups reported the government continued to avoid investigating crimes committed against members of religious minority groups and against their property, including religious sites and graveyards.

Jewish community representatives said they were free to travel in and out of the country, and the government generally did not enforce legal restrictions against travel to Israel by Jews, although it enforced this prohibition against other citizens.

The government officially did not limit voting rights on account of religion. It continued to permit Sunnis to serve in the Majlis. Through the end of the year, the Guardian Council, assigned by the constitution to confirm the eligibility of candidates for the presidency, had deemed only Shia Muslim males eligible to be president.

The government appointed its first Sunni ambassador, Dr. Saaleh Adibi, originally from the Iran Kurdish region, to be ambassador to Cambodia and Vietnam.

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Sunnis reported continued discrimination by the government, but said it was sometimes difficult to distinguish whether the cause of discrimination was religious or ethnic, since most Sunnis were also members of ethnic minority groups.

Sunnis reported continued underrepresentation in government-appointed positions in the provinces where they formed a majority, such as Kurdistan and Khuzestan, as well as inability to obtain senior government positions. Residents of provinces with large Sunni populations, including Kurdistan, Khuzestan, and Sistan-Baluchistan, reported continued repression by the judiciary and security services, as well as discrimination, lack of basic government services, and inadequate funding for infrastructure projects. One Sunni teacher reported being fired from his job because the new regional educational administrator refused to accept his religious credentials and reported that a local police chief had similarly lost his job in Baluchestan.

According to the Bahai international community, government regulations continued to ban Bahais from participating in 25 types of work, many related to food industries, because the government deemed Bahais to be “unclean.”

Although the government continued to maintain publicly Bahais were free to attend university if they did not identify themselves as Bahais, public and private universities continued to deny Bahais admittance and to expel Bahai students once their religion became known. Many Bahais reportedly did not try to enroll in state-run universities because of the Bahai Faith’s tenet not to deny one’s faith.

During the year many Bahai students reported they were unable to register for university because of error messages in the online registration system saying “defects in the file.” A court ruling upheld the universities’ position based on a 1979 decree barring Bahais from higher education in government-run institutions. One Bahai applicant told Iran Press Watch in September a university had denied him entry because of his faith, even though he had higher than the requisite exam scores to enter the university.

Authorities reportedly continued to deny the Sabeian-Mandaean and Yarsani religious communities access to higher education and government employment unless they declared themselves to be Muslim on their application forms.

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According to the U.S. Bahai Office of Public Affairs, government-sponsored public denunciations of Bahais increased again in comparison to previous years. Government statements accused Bahais of sexual deviance and illegitimate relations, calling them members of a “cult” which was a threat to national security. According to the London Bahai Office of Public Affairs, the number of anti-Bahai stories appearing in state-sponsored media outlets grew from approximately 20 per month in 2010 to more than 400 per month by 2014 (the last full year for which data was available).

Government officials continued to sanction and employ anti-Semitic rhetoric in official statements, media outlets, publications, and books. There continued to be reports of government officials and government-affiliated religious figures making anti-Semitic statements. Government-sponsored rallies continued to include chants of “death to Israel” and accused other religious minorities, such as Bahais and Christians, of collusion with Israel.

Official reports and the media continued to characterize Christian house churches as “illegal networks” and “Zionist propaganda institutions.”

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

The government allowed operation of a 100-bed Jewish hospital in Tehran, according to the Tehran Jewish Committee.

The government continued to raid Bahai homes and businesses and confiscated private and commercial property, as well as religious materials. There were reports of authorities placing restrictions on Bahai businesses or forcing them to shut down because the businesses had temporarily closed in observance of Bahai holidays. Authorities also reportedly asked managers of private companies to dismiss Bahai employees, and denied applications from Bahais for new or renewed business and trade licenses. In April and May authorities permanently closed at least 35 shops in the cities of Rafsanjan, Kerman, Sari, and Hamadan. According to Bahai International Community reporting, shop owners temporarily had closed businesses to observe Bahai holy days and authorities put up banners announcing the shops could not reopen and often bolted them shut or placed guards in front to prevent shopkeepers from attempting to reopen them. For example, on November

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1, authorities raided a Bahai-owned glass warehouse and confiscated its entire merchandise stock, according to HRANA.

According to human rights organizations, the government's continuing seizure of Bahai personal property and its denial of access to education and employment eroded the Bahai community's economic base and threatened its survival.

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

Discrimination against religious minorities, both Muslim and non Muslim, reportedly continued. Non-Muslims stated they continued to face societal discrimination, especially Bahais, who continued to report problems at different levels of society, including personal harassment. There also continued to be reports of non-Bahais dismissing or refusing employment to Bahais, sometimes in response to government pressure.

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

Unknown assailants vandalized the Bahai cemetery of Urumieh in August by cutting down all the trees, according to HRANA. According to Bahai media sources, local authorities did not respond to requests from Bahai community members for assistance in keeping out trespassers and investigating the crime.

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

The United States has no diplomatic relations with Iran, and therefore did not have regular opportunities to raise concerns directly with the government over its religious freedom abuses and restrictions.

The U.S. government continued to call, in a variety of ways and in different international forums, for the Iranian government to respect religious freedom and continued to condemn its abuses of religious minorities. This 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. For example, in August the Department of State issued a press statement calling for the Iranian government to rescind the death sentence given to Mohammad Ali

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Taheri. In other statements, U.S. government officials, including the Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, called attention to the situation of Bahais and Christians in the context of supporting religious freedom for members of all minority religious groups in the country.

The United States supported an extension of the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran in a vote at the UN Human Rights Council. The United States also voted in November and December in the UN General Assembly in favor of resolutions expressing concern over Iran's human rights practices, including the continued persecution of religious minorities. In October the United States submitted recommendations related to religious freedom through the mechanism of the UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review of Iran's human rights situation.

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 February 29, 2016, the Secretary of State redesignated Iran as a CPC and identified the following sanction that 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.