

# IRAN 2017 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 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 to form religious societies "within the limits of the law." The government continued to execute individuals on charges of *moharebeh*, including four prisoners at Rajai Shahr Prison in December 20, and four men charged with waging "war on God" in Kerman Province in September. A court sentenced Mohammad Ali Taheri, founder of the spiritual movement Erfan-e Halgheh, to death for a second time on August 27 for "spreading corruption on earth;" he remained imprisoned in solitary confinement since 2011, while authorities continued to harass, arrest, and condemn dozens of his followers for their beliefs. The Supreme Court rejected Taheri's death sentence in December and ordered him retried. Human rights organizations reported in April the self-immolation of two brothers belonging to the Yarsani faith in Kermanshah, which they attributed to the government's ongoing discrimination against the Yarsani community. The UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran highlighted in her March and August reports the large number of executions of the largely Sunni Kurdish prisoners on *moharebeh* charges. The Iran Prison Atlas, compiled by the U.S.-based nongovernmental organization (NGO) United for Iran, stated at least 102 members of minority religious groups remained imprisoned for their religious activities, 174 individuals on charges of *moharebeh*, 23 on charges of "insulting Islam" and 21 for "corruption on earth." Shia religious leaders who did not support government policies reportedly continued to face intimidation and arrest by authorities. The government continued to harass, interrogate, and arrest Bahais, Christians (particularly converts), Sunni Muslims, and other religious minorities and regulated Christian

religious practices closely to enforce a prohibition on proselytizing. There continued to be reports of arrests and harassment of Sunni clerics and congregants. According to a Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI) report, the Council of Sunni Theologians of Iran (CSTI), representing Sunni clerics based in the northwestern Kurdish-populated provinces, suspended its operations on July 13 in response to ongoing intimidation reportedly perpetrated by the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS). The Special Court for the Clergy in Hamadan tried the cleric Hassan Amini, CSTI's secretary general, on June 29, on charges of "propaganda against the state." *Mohabat News*, a Christian news website, citing local media reports, reported in October that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) arrested several Christians in Tehran, Rey, and Pardis, who were expected to face long jail terms after a video was released in July showing dozens of Bibles, textbooks, theological notes, and CDs. According to Sufi media and NGOs, Shia clerics and prayer leaders continued to denounce Sufism and the activities of Sufis in both sermons and public statements, and the government closed Sufi websites, such as the Gonabadi Sufi Order's websites, in an attempt to erase their online identity. Yarsanis reported they continued to face discrimination and harassment by authorities. The government reportedly denied building permits for places of worship and employment and higher educational opportunities for members of religious minorities, and confiscated or restricted their religious materials. Security officials continued to raid underground Sunni prayer sites, or *namaz khane*, and prevent the construction of new ones. The government continued to use anti-Semitic and anti-Bahai rhetoric in official statements. There were continued reports of authorities placing restrictions on Bahai businesses or forcing them to shut down. In November authorities sentenced three Bahai students who had been barred from university and who had complained to state officials, to five years in prison for "membership in the anti-state Bahai cult" and "publishing falsehoods." According to media reports, in June authorities released two men who stabbed a Bahai man to death in September 2016 after they confessed they killed him because of his faith. According to the special rapporteur's August 14 report, "[a]dherents of recognized religions ... continue to face severe restrictions and discrimination, and are reportedly prosecuted for peacefully manifesting their religious beliefs."

According to multiple sources, non-Shia Muslims and those affiliated with a religion other than Islam, especially members of the Bahai community, continued to face societal discrimination and harassment, and employers experienced social pressures not to hire Bahais or to dismiss them from their private sector jobs. Bahais reported there were continued incidents of destruction or vandalism of their cemeteries.

The U.S. has no diplomatic relations with Iran. 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. In August the Secretary of State called attention to the fact that members of the Bahai community were in prison simply for abiding by their beliefs, and denounced the continued sentencing to death of individuals on vague apostasy laws. In September a State Department spokesperson condemned the second death sentence of Mohammad Ali Taheri, along with the ongoing arbitrary arrests of several of Taheri's followers. In May a State Department spokesperson condemned the unjust imprisonment of the seven Bahai leaders jailed since 2008 for exercising their freedoms of religion, association, and expression. The U.S. supported the rights of religious minority groups in the country through actions in the UN, including votes to extend the mandate of the special rapporteur. The U.S. also supported 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 December 22, 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 82 million (July 2017 estimate). According to U.S. government estimates and other statistical reports, including Global Security and Iran Press Watch, Muslims constitute 99.4 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). 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 and other statistical estimates, including those from Global Security, Iran Press Watch, and Iran Primer, groups constituting the remaining less than 1 percent of the population include Bahais, Christians, Jews, Sabean-Mandaeans, Zoroastrians, and Yarsanis. The three largest non-Muslim minorities are Bahais, Christians, and Yarsanis.

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

According to World Christian Database statistics, there are approximately 350,000 Christians, although some estimates suggest there may be many more Christians than actually reported. While the government Statistical Center of Iran reports there are 117,700 Christians, Elam Ministries, an Iranian Christian organization, estimates that there could be between 300,000 and one million Christians. 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 and other converts to Christianity from Islam reportedly practice in secret.

There is no official count of Yarsanis, but the Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA) estimates there are up to two million. Yarsanis are mainly located in Loristan and the Kurdish regions.

According to Zoroastrian groups and the 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 a British media report estimated their number at 18,000-20,000.

The population reportedly includes 5,000-10,000 Sabean-Mandaeans.

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

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution defines the country as an Islamic republic and designates Ja'afari Shia Islam as the official state religion. The constitution stipulates all laws and

regulations must be based on “Islamic criteria” and 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 Muslim citizens from changing or renouncing their religious beliefs. The only recognized conversions are from another religion to Islam. Apostasy from Islam is 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 *moharebeh* (enmity against God), *fisad fil-arz* (“corruption on earth,” which includes apostasy or heresy), and *sabb al-nabi* (“insulting the prophets” 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 that 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, since 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 Sabeian-Mandaeans as Christian, even though the Sabeian-Mandaeans 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 in order 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. 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. 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 oversees extrajudicial Special Clerical Courts, not provided for by the constitution. The courts, headed by a Shia Islamic legal scholar, operate outside the judiciary's purview and are charged with investigating 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 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 determines the religious curriculum of public schools. All school curricula, public and private, 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 take and pass the courses on Shia Islam, although they may also take separate courses on their own religious beliefs.

Recognized religious minority groups, except for Sunni Muslims, may operate private schools. The Ministry of Education supervises the private schools operated by the 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 so the authorities can review them. 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 government interpretation of Shia Islam.

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. Government regulation states Bahais are only permitted to enroll in universities if they do not identify themselves as Bahais. To register for the university entrance examination, Bahai students must answer a basic multiple-choice question and identify themselves as followers of a religion other than Bahai (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 clerics whose qualifications include piety and religious scholarship, elect the supreme leader, the country's head of state. To "safeguard" Islamic ordinances and to ensure the compatibility with Islam of legislation passed by the Islamic Consultative Assembly (i.e., the parliament or Majlis), 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 of Shia Ja'fari Islam as 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 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 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 [religious edicts].”

The constitution specifies the government and all Muslims are “required 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 have not conspired or acted against Islam and the Islamic Republic.

The law authorizes collection of “blood money” or *diyyeh* as restitution to families for the death of Muslims and members of recognized religious minorities. Bahai families, however, are not entitled to receive *diyyeh*. This law also reduces the *diyyeh* for recognized religious minorities and women to half that of a Muslim man.

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 and loyalty to the Islamic Republic (*gozinesh* requirements), although members of recognized religious minorities may serve in the lower ranks of government if they meet these *gozinesh* 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 Bahais from all government employment and forbids Bahai participation in the governmental social pension system. Bahais 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 Bahais.

The government does not recognize Bahai marriages or divorces but allows a civil attestation of marriage to serve as a marriage certificate, which allows for basic

recognition of the union but does not offer legal protections in marital disputes. Bahai activists report this often leaves women without legal protections of government-recognized marriage contracts.

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 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 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**

*Summary paragraph:* The government convicted and executed dissidents, political reformers, and peaceful protesters on charges of *moharebeh* and anti-Islamic propaganda. The Revolutionary Court of Tehran sentenced Mohammad Ali Taheri, founder of the spiritual doctrine of “Interuniversalism” and the Erfan-e Halgheh group, to death for a second time on August 27. The Supreme Court rejected Taheri’s death sentence in December and ordered him retried. On March 12, a court sentenced Marjan Davari, a translator, researcher, and writer, to death on charges of blasphemy. Human rights organizations reported in April the self-immolation of two Yarsani brothers in Kermanshah, which they attributed to the government’s ongoing discrimination against the Yarsani community. The head of the country’s judiciary reportedly ordered Sunni prisoners convicted of drug

smuggling to be executed as soon as possible so that they would not be subject to a parliament bill proposing the elimination of the death penalty for certain prisoners. Residents of provinces with large Sunni populations reported continued government repression, including extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrest, and torture in detention, as well as discrimination, suppression of religious rights, and denial of basic government services. CHRI reported that authorities released Christian convert Maryam (Nasim) Naghash Zargaran from Evin Prison on August 1, after serving more than four years for engaging in Christian missionary activities. Zargaran told CHRI that prison authorities forced her and some female prisoners to take unnecessary antipsychotic medications while in prison. On August 13, security and plainclothes agents arrested and reportedly beat Sunni Arabs for publicly praying in Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province. Baluchi journalists and human rights activists, largely Sunni, continued to face arbitrary arrest, physical abuse, and unfair trials. The government pressured families of imprisoned Baluchis to remain silent and threatened them with retaliation for speaking out about cases. Shia religious leaders who did not support government policies reportedly continued to face government intimidation and arrest. Authorities continued to harass, interrogate, and arrest Bahais. The government also continued to regulate Christian religious practices closely to enforce the prohibition on proselytizing and conversion. Security officials continued to raid and demolish existing prayer sites belonging to Sunnis, and reportedly barred the construction of new Sunni mosques. In February courts sentenced four Sunni individuals to five years in prison each for jogging, with authorities claiming that it was part of organized activities against national security.

According to Amnesty International (AI) 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. According to a report by the Iran Human Rights NGO, authorities executed four prisoners on the same day at Rajai Shahr Prison on December 20, for *moharebeh*. The Iranian Students News Agency (ISNA) reported the execution of four men charged with waging “war on God” in Kerman province on September 17. The government incarcerated numerous prisoners on varying charges related to religion. The Iran Prison Atlas, compiled by the U.S.-based NGO United for Iran, stated at least 102 members of minority religious groups remained imprisoned for their religious activities, 174 individuals on charges of *moharebeh*, 23 on charges of “insulting Islam” and 21 for “corruption on earth,” a term, according to the *Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, from the Quran meaning “corrupt conditions, caused by unbelievers or unjust people, that threaten social and political wellbeing.” Shia

religious leaders who did not support government policies reportedly continued to face intimidation and arrest.

The Revolutionary Court of Tehran sentenced Mohammad Ali Taheri, founder of the spiritual doctrine Interuniversalism and the Erfan-e Halgheh group, to death by on August 27, charged with “spreading corruption on earth.” Taheri’s death sentence drew widespread international condemnation, including from human rights organizations, NGOs, and the UN special rapporteur. According to AI, the verdict stated that Taheri had “corrupt[ed] the thoughts and beliefs of tens of thousands of Muslim citizens across the country” by the founding of Erfan-e Halgheh. AI stated that prior to Taheri’s first court hearing, state television aired a program called “Satan’s Ring,” which introduced Taheri as the leader of a “perverse sect” and showed alleged “survivors” of his teachings calling for his death. According to press, the Supreme Court rejected Taheri’s death sentence in December, citing a faulty investigation, and ordered him retried.

AI reported that this was the third time the government sought the death penalty against Taheri, all for the same activities. AI also said that authorities had held Taheri in solitary confinement for more than six years. According to other reports, authorities arrested and detained dozens of Taheri’s followers throughout the year, including teachers of the Erfan-e Halgheh doctrine. Various reports by human rights organizations stated the government subjected Taheri’s followers to unannounced raids on their homes and places of business or teaching by security forces, including confiscation of personal belongings such as laptop computers, cellphones, and identification cards.

International media reported and numerous NGOs protested the March 12 death sentence of Marjan Davari for blasphemy. Davari, a translator, researcher, and writer, mostly of books of a metaphysical nature, also worked as a teacher of metaphysics at the Rah-e Ma’refat (Road of Wisdom) Institute. According to CHRI, the institute was officially registered and legally operated under the ownership of Davari’s husband, Karim Zargar, whom authorities also subsequently arrested. In addition to blasphemy, the government accused Davari of “conspiracy against the regime;” being a member of Eckenkar (an international spiritual movement founded in the 1960s), “spreading corruption on earth;” and having a love affair. Davari received an additional 16-month prison sentence for insulting Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

Authorities initially arrested Davari at her father’s home in September 2015, and held her for three months in solitary confinement in Ward 209 of Evin Prison,

controlled by the MOIS, before transferring her to the women's ward. CHRI reported that authorities prevented Davari's lawyer from reading her case file, and denied the lawyer's requests for bail. While imprisoned, Davari reportedly suffered from health issues including severe pain in the joints of her legs for which she was denied appropriate medical treatment.

Human rights organizations reported in April the self-immolation of two Yarsani brothers – Mehdi and Ehsan Fozoni – in Kermanshah, which they attributed to the government's ongoing discrimination and related economic problems facing the Yarsani community.

Christian news website *Mohabat News* stated that in February, Molavi Abdolhamid Ismaeelzahi, the country's leading Sunni cleric and Friday prayer leader of Zahedan, wrote a letter to Supreme Leader Khamenei expressing concern over a report by Amadnews.com on discrimination against Sunnis. The report stated that the head of the judiciary, Ayatollah Sadegh Larijani, ordered Sunni prisoners convicted of drug smuggling to be executed as soon as possible so that they would not be subject to a parliament bill proposing the elimination of the death penalty for certain prisoners convicted of drug-related offenses. The report also stated at least 50 Sunni prisoners could be executed as a result of Larijani's alleged secret order. While Ismaeelzahi noted that the veracity of the report could not be determined, he said it had increased fears among the Sunni population, which, according to *Mohabat News*, made up a disproportionately large proportion of those on death row. CHRI reported that Ismaeelzahi said in February that he had been banned from traveling outside of Zahedan by government officials.

Residents of provinces with 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, as well as discrimination, including suppression of religious rights, lack of basic government services, and inadequate funding for infrastructure projects. The UN special rapporteur highlighted in her March and August reports the large number of executions of mainly Sunni Kurdish prisoners on *moharebeh* charges, as well as the "indiscriminate and blind use of lethal force" against Kurdish couriers. Human rights NGOs, including HRANA, reported throughout the year on the extremely poor conditions inside Ardabil Prison, including reports of Shia guards routinely torturing Sunni prisoners. Sunnis reported it was sometimes difficult to distinguish whether the cause of government discrimination against them was religious or ethnic, since most Sunnis were also members of ethnic minority groups.

According to Baluchi rights activists, Baluchi journalists and human rights activists continued to face arbitrary arrest, physical abuse, and unfair trials. Baluchi rights activists reported that authorities often pressured family members of those in prison to remain silent. In October CHRI quoted the director of the Baloch Activists Campaign saying that every year, police extrajudicially killed between 100-200 “bandits” (predominantly Sunni Muslims) in Sistan and Baluchestan Province.

In October CHRI reported that authorities changed to life-in-prison earlier sentences of lifetime internal exile for Mohammad Ali Shamshirzan and Hamid Arayesh of the Gonabadi Dervishes Sufi order. According to CHRI, four other dervishes who had similarly been sentenced to exile were said to be facing five to seven years in prison. CHRI reported that authorities indicated they would drop these sentences and free the men if they “repented.” According to the report, authorities arrested the six men in Kowar, Fars Province, in 2011 when Shia Muslim seminary students attacked their Sufi religious gathering. Apparently because of the men’s religious beliefs, the revolutionary court in Shiraz convicted them in 2015 of “waging war against the state” and for following “a deviant sect.” CHRI reported that Shamshirzan began his exile in Bandar Abbas in the spring of 2016, but was imprisoned in January after checking in with the local police station. Shamshirzan was hospitalized twice during the year for medical problems, but each time authorities quickly returned him to prison despite doctors’ recommendations that he remain in the hospital.

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. The Kurdistan Human Rights Network reported security forces arrested Hossein Mansouri, a Yarsani activist, in August and transferred him to an unknown location. According to another report, a female Yarsani activist was detained for two days and reportedly committed suicide upon her release.

In December media reported police arrested several Jews on unknown charges; the arrests were widely believed to be related to their religious affiliation. The arrests followed reports of attacks on two synagogues in Shiraz over consecutive nights. In the first instance, attackers broke into the Kenisa’eh Hadash (New Synagogue) and the Hadash Synagogue and desecrated two Torah scrolls and more than 100 prayer books, destroyed furnishings, *tefillin*, and prayer shawls, and stole silver.

There continued to be reports of arrests and harassment of Sunni clerics and congregants. CHRI reported in October that security forces detained more than 100 Sunnis following June 7 terrorist attacks at the parliament building and on former Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini's mausoleum, which killed 17 people. Authorities accused those arrested of being linked to the attacks, for which ISIS claimed credit. CHRI reported that CSTI, representing Sunni clerics based in the northwestern Kurdish-populated provinces, suspended its operations on July 13 following intimidation by MOIS officials (both predating and following the terrorist attack on parliament). CHRI reported that after the previous CSTI conference at the al-Nabi Mosque in Sanandaj in October 2016, MOIS officials had summoned and threatened nearly half of the more than 400 Sunni theologian participants.

CHRI reported that authorities released Christian convert Maryam (Nasim) Naghash Zargaran from Evin Prison on August 1; she had been imprisoned for engaging in Christian missionary activities. Authorities arrested Zargaran in 2012 and accused her of seeking to buy property for a Christian orphanage. She was denied access to a lawyer. A Revolutionary Court sentenced Zargaran to four years in prison in 2013 for "assembly and collusion against national security." After her release, authorities banned Zargaran from leaving the country for six months without explanation. In an interview with CHRI, Zargaran stated that prison officials prescribed unnecessary antipsychotic medications to female prisoners. She stated she had been "paralyzed" by the pills given to her during her incarceration, experienced difficulty standing, and fell down stairs several times.

The Special Court for the Clergy in Hamadan tried cleric Hassan Amini, CSTI's secretary general, on June 29, on charges of "propaganda against the state" after he criticized the execution of more than 20 Sunni prisoners in Rajai Shahr Prison in 2016. As of July, he was still awaiting a verdict, and no further updates were available at year's end.

CHRI reported in August that security and plainclothes agents beat and arrested 13 Sunni Arabs for publicly praying in Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province, in a traditional Sunni group prayer. Authorities took the men, ranging from 20-27 years old, into custody on August 11. According to CHRI, authorities gave family members of those arrested conflicting information regarding their whereabouts, and the families were not able to locate them.

CHRI reported that on April 10, authorities released on 1.12 billion rials (\$31,000) bail Molavi Fazl al-Rahman Kouhi, a Sunni cleric in Sistan and Baluchistan

Province and Friday prayer leader of Peshamag. MOIS agents in Zahedan had questioned him in custody for a week prior to his release. According to the report, Kouhi had issued a fatwa against fighting in the Syrian conflict, and had accused the IRGC of “taking advantage of poor Sunni youths” by sending them as soldiers to fight in Syria. According to CHRI, on April 5, Zahedan prosecutor Ali Movahdi Rad said Kouhi had been summoned after being given “several warnings about minding national solidarity.” Authorities accused Kouhi of “making angry speeches against internal and external security issues” and “inviting people to join terrorist groups.”

HRANA reported in February that a court sentenced four Sunni residents of Boukan to five years in prison for jogging. According to the report, the same judge who tried the case had also previously jailed 12 others for jogging. The report stated that the judge said jogging was part of organized activities that were against national security. HRANA reported that the sentencing followed coordinated raids by security forces on houses in Boukan in October 2016, resulting in beatings and arrests of local Sunni imams and their students by the security forces, and were widely viewed as targeting Sunnis on the basis of their beliefs.

In January HRANA reported on Solaiman Pairoti, a Sunni prisoner held in Rajai Shahr Prison, who had been hospitalized following a second heart attack in November 2016. According to HRANA, the agents overseeing Pairoti introduced the prisoner to other people at the hospital as a “dirty Da’esh,” referring to members of ISIS. Agents reportedly tied Pairoti to his hospital bed with handcuffs and shackles and he was beaten and spat on. Pairoti reportedly could not move or speak, with half of his body paralyzed, and was in a state of shock.

Iran Human Rights reported in June that since the start of Ramadan, approximately 90 case files had been opened in the city of Qazvin for individuals who had been caught eating or drinking during fasting hours. The Qazvin prosecutor stated that 20 individuals were sentenced to be flogged and the punishments were said to have been carried out on the same day.

Christian World Watch Monitor reported on the arrest or imprisonment of at least 193 Christians for their religious affiliation or activities in 2016. Authorities continued to arrest members of unrecognized churches for operating illegally in private homes or on charges of supporting and accepting assistance from “enemy” countries. Many arrests reportedly took place during police raids on religious gatherings and included confiscations of religious property. News reports stated that Christians who were arrested were subject to severe physical and

psychological mistreatment by authorities, which at times included beatings and solitary confinement. *Mohabat News*, citing local media reports, reported that authorities arrested several Christians in Tehran, Rey, and Pardis and that later, the IRGC released a video showing dozens of Bibles, textbooks, theological notes, and CDs; it is not known, however, if the arrests and confiscations were connected. Christian World Watch Monitor characterized the confiscation and IRGC press release as a "publicity stunt" to deter Christians from meeting. The IRGC accused the "large network" of Christians of "attempting to undermine the Abrahamic religions, disturbing public opinion, and distraction of public and cyberspaces using the excuse of promoting Christianity and holding house churches."

According to the NGO Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), on July 3, a revolutionary court in Tehran sentenced Christian converts Hadi Asgari and Amin Afshar Naderi to 10 years imprisonment; Naderi received an additional five years for blasphemy. Both will be forbidden to travel abroad for two years after their prison terms end. The government charged the two with "violating national security by hosting house churches and promoting Christianity." Authorities announced the charges following a reported eight months of custodial interrogation. *Mohabat News* reported that Naderi went on a hunger strike in January while in solitary confinement in Evin Prison. Naderi and Asgari, along with Amir Saman Dashti, Mohammad Dehnavi, and Ramil Bet-Tamraz, were arrested in August 2016 in a private garden in Firouzkooch for possessing Bibles. Four of the five were Christian converts. According to *Mohabat News*, security forces also beat Naderi for resisting arrest.

According to media reports, two men stabbed Farhang Amiri, a Bahai, to death in September 2016, outside his residence in Yazd. Authorities released them on bail in June after they confessed to killing Amiri because of his faith. BIC reported that the two men subsequently disclosed that they were prompted to kill Amiri by their religious beliefs and statements made by clerics that Bahais are against Islam.

According to the Bahai International Community (BIC), between January and September, authorities arrested at least 84 Bahais, and there were at least 97 Bahais in prison as of September. BIC stated that all arrests and detentions were directly linked to the individual's professed faith and religious identity. In April the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention ruled that the detention of 24 Bahais, who were among the 84 arrested since January, was arbitrary and that their arrest and detainment violated their rights. Charges brought against Bahais included "insulting religious sanctities," "corruption on earth," "propaganda against the system," and actions against national security. They were also arrested for their

involvement with the Bahai Institute for Higher Education (BIHE), a university-level educational institution the government considered illegal.

According to CHRI, a court sentenced three Bahai students, who had been barred from university, to five years in prison for being Bahai. Authorities had barred Rouhieh Safajoo, Sarmad Shadabi, and Tara Houshmand from enrolling in university because of their religious beliefs, despite the high marks they had received on their 2013 entrance exams. The three wrote letters to the president, the Ministry of Science, the parliament, and the judiciary to complain about violation of their human rights. On November 4, a court convicted them of “membership in the anti-state Bahai cult” and “publishing falsehoods.”

International media and human rights organizations reported widely on the sudden transfer in August of numerous inmates, including at least 15 Bahais, held in the Rajai Shahr (Gohardasht) Prison to another section of the prison. The reports stated that the new section was equipped with added security features, including surveillance cameras and microphones in toilets and showers, and that prison officials prevented the prisoners from taking personal belongings such as medicine and clothes with them. Prison officials also initially denied family visits, and there were reports of worsening health conditions of those imprisoned. Observers said they believed the authorities imposed these measures because of the prisoners’ faith.

According to BIC, on September 18, the government released Mahvash Sabet following 10 years in prison. Sabet was one of the seven leaders of the Yaran, a group tending to the social and spiritual needs of the Bahai community with the knowledge and approval of the government. In 2008, authorities arrested the seven individuals and sentenced them to 20 years in prison for “disturbing national security,” “spreading propaganda against the regime,” and “engaging in espionage.” The other six leaders – Fariba Kamalabadi, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, Saeid Rezaie, Behrouz Tavakkoli, and Vahid Tizfahm – remained in detention as of year’s end. It is widely believed that authorities targeted these individuals because of their religious affiliation.

According to CHRI, MOIS agents arrested Bahai singer Behnam Rohani-Fard on September 4 when he returned from a European concert tour. Authorities accused him of holding concerts to celebrate the life of Bahai founder Baha’u’llah, and charged him with “propaganda against the state,” “disturbing public opinion” and “membership in the illegal Bahai organization.” Security officials reportedly interrogated Rohani-Fard at least 20 times for three to four hours on each occasion

during his subsequent month-long solitary confinement in Ward 209 of Evin Prison, controlled by the MOIS. Rohani-Fard had previously spent nine months in a prison in Yazd in 2010 for his song “Zendani” (Prisoner), said to be composed in solidarity with the imprisoned Yaran Bahai leaders.

Although the exact number was not known, according to reports by *Iran Wire* and other sources, authorities arrested and otherwise harassed numerous Bahais, including through raids on homes and businesses, in the run-up to the bicentennial of the birth of the Bahai founder in late October. The MOIS and the IRGC reportedly conducted raids throughout the country, including in Tehran, Isfahan, and Mashhad.

Many Bahais reportedly continued to turn to online education at BIHE despite government censorship through use of internet filters and blocking of websites and the arrests of teachers associated with the program. Since the BIHE’s online and offline operations were illegal, students and teachers faced the risk of arrest for participation. BIHE instructor Azita Rafizadeh remained in prison serving 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 arrested Koushk-Baghi in March 2016 while visiting his wife at Evin Prison.

There were reports of authorities placing restrictions on Bahai businesses or forcing them to shut down after they had temporarily closed in observance of Bahai holidays or of authorities threatening shop owners with potential closure, even though businesses could legally close without providing a reason for up to 15 days a year. BIC stated in September that since President Hassan Rouhani took office in 2013, there were at least 645 incidents of “economic oppression” by authorities against Bahai-owned businesses, ranging from intimidation and threats to their closure. In July authorities sealed 16 Bahai-owned shops in Khuzestan Province after the owners closed for a Bahai holy day, and in April the government sealed 18 Bahai-owned shops for similar reasons. According to BIC, the government continued to raid Bahai homes and businesses and confiscate private and commercial property, as well as religious materials.

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. On April 18, according to BIC, security officers told the caretaker for the Bahai cemetery of

Tehran that a Bahai woman had died in Gilavand. The caretaker discovered the woman had actually died four months before and was initially buried in the Bahai cemetery of Gilavand, but had subsequently been disinterred. According to the report, the security officials told the man, “You have no right to bury your deceased in the Gilavand cemetery.” The authorities similarly exhumed the body of another deceased Bahai who had also died four months earlier and had been buried in the Gilavand cemetery. According to a BIC report, the woman’s remains had been removed from the coffin and were missing.

The Iran Human Rights Documentation Center reported in July that supervisors of Vadi Rahmat, Tabriz’s largest government-run cemetery, had since 2011 denied burial in the cemetery to at least 44 Bahais. According to the report, Bahai families of the deceased, in cooperation with ambulance services, sometimes prepared the body at home following religious injunctions.

Christians, particularly evangelicals and converts from Islam, continued to experience disproportionate levels of arrests and detention, and high levels of harassment and surveillance, according to Christian NGO reports. Numerous Christians remained imprisoned at year’s end on charges related to their religious beliefs. Prison authorities reportedly continued to withhold medical care from prisoners, including some Christians, according to human rights groups. According to human rights NGOs, the government also continued to enforce the prohibition on proselytizing.

According to CHRI, in July Judge Mashallah Ahmadzadeh of Branch 26 of the Tehran Revolutionary Court issued long prison sentences to at least 11 Christian converts in a period of fewer than two months, all on allegedly specious charges. On July 6, Ahmadzadeh sentenced Azerbaijani nationals Yusif Farhadov, Eldar Gurbanov, and Bahram Nasibov, along with Iranian national Nasser Navard Goltapeh, to 10 years in prison for being “Zionist Christians” who “acted against national security with the intention of overthrowing the state in a soft war” in a trial reportedly lacking due process. Security forces arrested the individuals at a Christian reception in Andisheh in June 2016.

On June 24, Judge Ahmadzadeh also sentenced Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani, Mohammad Reza Omid, Mohammad Ali Mosibzadeh, and Zaman Fadaei, all Christian converts, to 10 years in prison each for “assembly and collusion against national security,” organizing home churches, and preaching “Zionist Christianity.” The judge sentenced Nadarkhani and Omid to two additional years in internal exile following the completion of their prison terms. MOIS agents

arrested the men while they were performing Christian rituals at the house of a friend in Rasht in May 2016. According to CSW, authorities arrested Omid, Mosibzadeh, and Fadaei for drinking communion wine.

On June 11, Judge Ahmadzadeh sentenced Victor Bet Tamraz, the former leader of Iran's Assyrian Pentecostal Church, along with Christian converts Hadi Asgari and Kavian Fallah Mohammadi, to 10 years in prison. The judge sentenced Christian convert Amin Afshar Naderi to 15 years in prison. MOIS agents allegedly arrested these converts for participating in Christian activities or rituals.

*Mohabat News* reported that authorities summoned Sevada Aghasar, a member of the Armenian Orthodox Christian community, to Evin Prison on July 4, to begin serving a five-year prison sentence for violating national security through collusion and underground church gatherings. The government initially arrested Aghasar in 2013 along with two other Christians, and charged him with promoting Christianity on Facebook and contacting Persian speaking Christians. A revolutionary court in Tehran ultimately sentenced him in 2015.

Authorities continued to hold Ebrahim Firouzi, a former Muslim who converted to Christianity, in Rajai Shahr Prison since 2013, convicted of "collusion against national security" for converting to and practicing Christianity, and related missionary activities. As of year's end, he was serving a five-year prison sentence that was upheld following multiple appeals. *Mohabat News* reported that after serving his prison sentence, Firouzi would be exiled to Sarbaz village in Sistan and Baluchistan Province. In August *Mohabat News* reported that Firouzi was one of the many prisoners of conscience abruptly transferred to a new ward in Rajai Shahr Prison, and that he had commenced a hunger strike to protest the prison's deplorable conditions. While in prison, Firouzi's health reportedly rapidly deteriorated, and prison authorities denied him permission to receive appropriate medical care.

CHRI reported that the government had prosecuted Firouzi three times since 2010 for converting from Islam to Christianity and organizing Christian religious meetings. After initially arresting Firouzi in January 2010, interrogators offered him freedom if he declared himself a Muslim. Firouzi refused to do so, and the revolutionary court in Karaj subsequently convicted him of "propaganda against the state." After Firouzi was freed in 2011, authorities arrested him again in 2012 for "attempting to create a website teaching about Christianity" and charged him again with "propaganda against the state." During interrogations following his third arrest in 2014, Firouzi was reportedly pressured to issue a false statement in

exchange for freedom but again refused. According to the latest decision by the Appeals Court, Firouzi will remain in prison until at least 2019.

In her August 17 report, the UN special rapporteur highlighted the case of Catholic converts Anoohe Rezabakhsh and her son Sohail (Augustin) Zargarzadeh, who were arrested on February 20 in their home by the IRGC in Oroumiyeh, West Azerbaijan Province. According to CHRI, two plainclothes intelligence agents entered their home without prior notice and searched the premises, seizing personal items such as religious books. There was no subsequent information on the case.

According to human rights organizations, Christian advocacy groups, and NGOs, the government continued to regulate Christian religious practices. Official reports and the media continued to characterize Christian house churches as “illegal networks” and “Zionist propaganda institutions.” Christian community leaders stated that if the authorities found Armenian or Assyrian churches were baptizing new converts or preaching in Farsi, they closed the churches. Authorities also reportedly barred unregistered or unrecognized Christians from entering church premises, closed churches that allowed them to enter, and arrested Christian converts.

Christian advocacy groups stated the government, through pressure and church closures, had 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 citizens who had converted to Protestantism or other Christian faiths reportedly practiced their religion in secret. Other unrecognized religious minorities such as Bahais and Yarsanis were also forced to gather in private homes to practice their faith in secret.

The government barred Christian practices at cemeteries. In August *Mohabat News* reported that the local municipality had blocked the entrance to the historic Christian graveyard in Kermanshah and had increasingly taken over parts of the cemetery. It also reported that “extremist” elements had destroyed gravestones over the past several years. Families of the Christians buried there could no longer visit. Human rights organizations reported in September that security forces in Tehran arrested a Christian couple accused of participating in a Christian funeral in Behesht-e Zahra, Tehran’s largest cemetery.

The government continued to monitor the statements and views of senior Shia religious leaders. Shia religious leaders who did not support government policies or Supreme Leader Khamenei's views reportedly continued to face intimidation, arrest, and imprisonment on charges related to religious offenses.

Critics stated the extrajudicial Special Clerical Courts were used 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.

According to CHRI, security officials detained prominent cleric Hojjatoleslam Ahmad Montazeri on February 21, to begin a six-year prison sentence for "endangering national security" and "leaking secrets of the Islamic system." He was then granted a furlough and released the next day, reportedly following the direct intervention of the supreme leader. In August 2016, local media reported the Qom branch of the Special Clerical Court interrogated Montazeri for posting audio recordings of his father, the late cleric Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri. In the recorded speech, the grand ayatollah condemned a 1988 mass execution of political prisoners. Authorities subsequently arrested Ahmad Montazeri in September 2016, and in November 2016, sentenced him to 21 years in prison, 15 of which were suspended. He remained out of prison at year's end.

According to AI, Shia cleric Ayatollah Hossein Kazemeini Boroujerdi, who was serving an 11-year sentence after his initial conviction in 2007 on charges including *moharebeh* and "abusing his clerical flock," was released from prison on temporary medical leave in January. Activists report the underlying charges related to his espousal of religious beliefs that differed from those propagated by the government. Following his release, Special Clerical Court officials placed Boroujerdi under house arrest and 24-hour surveillance. Court officials reportedly threatened to return him to prison and to kill him for speaking to the media, in violation of the terms of his release. Authorities banned him from writing and distributing publications, delivering speeches, continuing his teachings, and organizing ideological or doctrinal meetings. AI reported that Boroujerdi remained in poor health, suffering from heart disease and kidney problems, which were said to have been exacerbated by the denial of adequate care during his imprisonment.

According to a September 17 report by *Radio Farda*, the Special Clerical Court sentenced Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Reza Nekounam, a Shia religious instructor in Qom originally arrested in 2015, to five years in prison and an undisclosed number of lashes. The court also stripped Nekounam of his right to

clerical office. The court reportedly said it would not disclose any details about the case to “protect” the status of the clergy and Nekounam's reputation. Sources stated the arrest was related to Nekounam's indirect criticism of other clerics. It was said he indirectly criticized Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi's opposition to fast internet services and also criticized an incident in Isfahan in which acid was thrown on women to punish them for improper hijabs. In an interview, Nekounam stated, “The one who throws acid [at others] is the most violent person.”

Authorities reportedly continued to deny the Sabeian-Mandaean and Yarsan religious communities access to higher education and government employment unless they declared themselves as Christian or Muslim, respectively, on their application forms.

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 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. Authorities also deemed activities such as Zumba dancing and instruction “un-Islamic,” leading to arrests and harassment. In August for example, media reported on the arrest of six individuals for teaching Zumba dancing, trying to “change lifestyles” and not adhering to the hijab dress code.

In September BIC reported that Bahai schoolchildren at all levels continued to be monitored and slandered by administrators and teachers in schools, including being threatened with expulsion. According to the report, religious studies teachers insulted Bahai beliefs, and sometimes when Bahai students attempted to clarify them, they were threatened with expulsion for “teaching” their faith.

Public and private universities continued to deny Bahais admittance and to expel Bahai students once their religion became known. BIC reports stated that the government also blocked Bahai students’ examination results and declared their files “incomplete,” thereby preventing their admission to university. In September *Iran Wire* reported that at least 115 Bahais were banned from universities during the year. The report also stated that Bahai students who passed entrance exams were told by officials that they might be able to study, but that they would need to write a letter and disavow their faith in order to do so. CHRI reported on the June expulsion of Farzad Safaei who, according to the report, was one semester away

from earning a bachelor's degree at the Islamic Azad University in Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province, when the university's security director summoned him and asked about his religious affiliation. According to a report in *Iran Press Watch*, Laeya Shaerzadeh, an undergraduate student, was similarly expelled in September after three terms of study at the University of Hafez in Shiraz. 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.

According to BIC, government regulations continued to ban Bahais from participating in more than 25 types of work, many related to food industries, because the government deemed Bahais "unclean."

The website of the Mosques Affairs Regulating Authority reported in 2015 that there were nine Sunni mosques operating in Tehran and 15,000 across the country. These numbers, however, were disputed by the Sunni community who said the vast majority of these were simply prayer rooms or rented prayer spaces. International media and the Sunni community continued to report that authorities prevented any new Sunni mosques from being built in Tehran. According to the official website of the Sunni imam leading Friday prayers in Azadshahr, intelligence agents sealed Yaft-Abad Sunni Mosque in south Tehran on June 2. According to the report, more than 1,000 Sunnis had regularly prayed at the mosque.

Sunnis reported the number of mosques in the country did not meet the demands of the population. Because the government barred them from building or worshiping in their own mosques, Sunni leaders said they relied on ad hoc, underground prayer halls, or *namaz khane*, to practice their faith. Security officials continued to raid these unauthorized sites.

Intelligence and security services reportedly continued to harass Sufis and Sufi leaders. Media and human rights organizations reported that on July 10, authorities blocked access to the Gonabadi order's Mazar Soltani websites, which contained speeches by the order's leader, Nour Ali Tabandeh, and articles on mysticism. CHRI reported that the Taskforce to Determine Instances of Criminal Content, the country's principal internet filtering body, had blocked access to the websites. CHRI quoted the order's lawyer as saying that state authorities were attempting to erase the group's presence online. Tabandeh, who was arrested in 2007 in his hometown of Bidokht and subsequently exiled to Tehran and held under virtual house arrest, stated that he often felt the authorities were trying to eliminate him.

According to CHRI, in May more than 3,000 students from various universities in the country signed a petition condemning discriminatory university policies against Gonabadi dervishes after university officials expelled Mostafa Daneshjou, a formerly imprisoned lawyer and Gonabadi dervish, from the Islamic Azad University of Tehran. Daneshjou was completing his second term and reportedly was not provided with an explanation for his expulsion. The petition said that Iranian people of any belief and religion should have equal access to higher education and learning, and its signatories called upon the government to stop viewing religious and ethnic minorities as security threats.

*Mohabat News* in June reported that advertising agencies affiliated with state security institutions published an anti-Christian propaganda book entitled, “Christian Zionism in the geography of Christianity,” highlighting “the menace of Christianity to the Islamic Republic.” This was reportedly one of many such publications and online materials the government used to spread anti-Christian messages and deter the practice of or conversion to 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 that the birth registration system prevented them from giving their children Yarsani names. Without providing details, Yarsanis in exile reported thousands of community members remained missing after arrests by security forces. The UN special rapporteur’s August report stated that groups such as the Gonabadi order and Yarsanis continued to face a range of human rights violations, including attacks on their places of worship, the destruction of community cemeteries, and arrests and torture of community leaders. CHRI reported in May that the majority of Yarsani candidates seeking seats in the local elections had been disqualified on the basis of their religion.

According to the Tehran Jewish Committee, five Jewish schools and two kindergartens continued to operate in Tehran, but authorities required their principals to 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.

Government restrictions on published religious material continued. *Mohabat News* reported in August that in addition to closing numerous churches throughout the country, the government had restricted publication of anything related to Christianity. *Mohabat News* also reported that officials confiscated books about Christianity already on the market, although government-sanctioned translations of the Bible were said to exist. Government officials still frequently confiscated Bibles and related non-Shia religious literature, pressuring 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 their topic, were required to carry labels on the cover denoting their non-Shia Muslim authorship.

Sunni leaders reported 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 for the students. Assyrian Christians reported the government continued to permit their community to use its own religious textbooks for use in schools, after the government reviewed and authorized their content. Unrecognized religious minorities, such as Yarsanis and Bahais, reported they were unable to legally produce or distribute religious literature. The UN special rapporteur's August 14 report said, "Adherents of recognized religions also continue to face severe restrictions and discrimination, and are reportedly prosecuted for peacefully manifesting their religious beliefs."

The Guardian Council, assigned by the constitution to confirm the eligibility of candidates for the presidency, deemed only Shia Muslim males eligible for the presidency. In the May presidential election, from a total pool of 1,636 individuals who had registered, the Guardian Council allowed only six to run, all of whom were Shia Muslim.

Local and international media reported that on September 4, the Yazd Court of Administrative Justice, citing vague reasons, called for the suspension of Sepanta Niknam, the Zoroastrian member of the Yazd City Council. HRW said that an effort by the Guardian Council to bar non-Muslims from running for city and village council in areas with a majority Muslim population was behind the action. Niknam, the head of the Yazd Zoroastrian Association, had first been elected to the council in 2013 and had already served a four-year term without incident before being reelected in local council elections by an even greater margin. CHRI reported that the head councilman of Yazd, Gholamali Sefid, refused to carry out

the court order suspending Niknam. Sefid quoted, “In my mind and in my religion, I know this ruling is not consistent with religion, freedom, or logic.” On October 18, Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani affirmed that removing Niknam from his elected seat because he was not Muslim was illegal. Larijani referred the case on October 23 to the Expediency Discernment Council, an entity that resolves disagreements between the branches of government. On October 24, *Tasnim News* quoted Ayatollah Yazdi, a member of the country’s Guardian Council and Assembly of Experts that Niknam’s suspension was “final and irreversible,” and that a non-Muslim could not make decisions on behalf of a Muslim majority. Many international observers were highly critical and saw this development as a move by the unelected Guardian Council to vet candidates for local elections, traditionally the purview of parliament, further circumscribing the rights of minority communities.

Sunnis reported continued underrepresentation in government-appointed positions in the provinces where they formed a majority, such as Kurdistan and Khuzestan, as well as an inability to obtain senior government positions. An April CHRI report observed that while there were 21 Sunni representatives in parliament (of a total of 290), no Sunni had served in a ministerial position since the founding of the Islamic Republic despite comprising a significant percent of the population. A separate CHRI report stated that, according to senior Sunni cleric Molavi Abdolhamid Ismaeelzahi, more than six million Sunnis supported President Rouhani's re-election in May. Many members of the Sunni Muslim community were therefore reportedly disappointed by President Rouhani's decision to exclude religious minority members from his new cabinet, while others said there had not been much progress in minority religious rights since the supreme leader’s appeal in September for equal treatment or President Rouhani’s pledges to end discrimination. The UN special rapporteur noted that Sunnis continued to assert “authorities do not appoint members of their communities to employ them in high-ranking government positions.”

Sunni activists reported that throughout the year, and especially during Moharam, the government sent hundreds of Shia missionaries to areas with large Sunni Baluch populations to try to convert the local population.

*Deutsche Welle* and other international media quoted Jewish community representatives such as Siamak Morsadegh, the sole Jewish member of parliament, as stating that there continued to be government restrictions and discrimination against Jews as a religious minority, but that there was little interference with Jewish religious practices. 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 with other citizens.

Government officials continued to employ anti-Semitic rhetoric in official statements and sanction them in media outlets, publications, and books. In a February speech, Supreme Leader Khomeini said that there was a “Zionist plot” to sow instability in the region and that Israel was a “cancerous tumor.” 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. Local newspapers carried editorial cartoons that were anti-Semitic in nature, often focusing on developments in Israel or elsewhere in the region.

According to human rights activists, the government maintained a legal interpretation of Islam that 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 and discrimination throughout the country without regard to religious affiliation.

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 religious minority 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**

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

There continued to be reports of non-Bahais dismissing or refusing employment to Bahais, sometimes in response to government pressure, according to BIC and other organizations monitoring the situation of Bahais in Iran.

BIC reported that since August 2016, more than 220 influential figures, including clerics, religious figures, academics, editors, and government representatives, publicly issued speeches, articles, or written declarations against the Bahais. According to BIC, anti-Bahai rhetoric had increased markedly in recent years.

Yarsanis outside the country reported that widespread discrimination against Yarsanis continued. They stated Yarsani children were socially ostracized in school and shared community facilities. Yarsani men, recognizable by their particular mustaches, often faced employment discrimination. According to reports, Shia preachers often encouraged such social discrimination against Yarsanis.

According to CSW and others, converts from Islam to Christianity faced ongoing societal pressure and rejection by family or community members. Christian World Watch Monitor and CSW reported in September that Christian children in Rasht and Shiraz, all members of the Church of Iran, were told to either study Shia Islam or leave school. As part of a minority faith community recognized by the constitution, the law permitted the students to have access to the religious teaching of their own community, as approved by the Ministry of Education. Furthermore, until recently, according to the report, the children had been exempted from studying Islam provided they could present a signed letter from their denomination. Authorities, however, began to reject these letters on the grounds the church was an “illegal organization.” The report said the message to the Christian community was clear, “convert or leave.”

According to reports from CHRI, HRANA and Iranwire, unidentified assailants vandalized two synagogues in Shiraz on December 24-25. Prayer books were reportedly thrown into toilets and Torah scrolls ripped up. Valuable religious items such as silver candleholders were reportedly stolen.

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

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

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

The U.S. has no diplomatic relations with the country, 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 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. 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.

In August the Secretary of State called attention to the fact that members of the Bahai community were in prison simply for abiding by their beliefs, and denounced the continued sentencing to death of individuals on vague apostasy laws. In September a Department of State spokesperson condemned the second death sentence of Mohammad Ali Taheri, founder of the Erfan-e Halgheh spiritual movement, along with the ongoing arbitrary arrests of several of Taheri's followers. In May a Department of State spokesperson condemned the unjust imprisonment of the seven Bahai leaders being held for exercising the freedoms of religion, association, and expression. In other statements, U.S. government officials, including the Deputy 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 U.S. again supported an extension of the mandate of the UN special rapporteur in a vote at the UN Human Rights Council. The U.S. also voted in November and December in the General Assembly in favor of resolutions expressing concern over 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 22, the Secretary of State announced the redesignation of 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.