

Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

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Responses to Information Requests

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Iran: Information about the Gonabadi dervishes, including their origin, history in Iran, leaders, ideology, practice; and the treatment of dervishes and their family members by society and authorities in Iran, including whether dervishes can practice their faith in Iran (1965-2014)

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1. Overview

1.1 History of the Gonabadi Dervishes in Iran

Sources note that the Gonabadi [Gunabadi] Order in Iran is one of the three main branches of the Nematollahi [Ni'matullahi] Sufi Order [1] (Van den Bos 2013, 148; Lewisohn 1998, 447; Mohajed 2004). The Gonabadi Order considers itself part of Shia Islam (Van den Bos 2013, 148; FIDH et al. Oct. 2010, 23; AI June 2014, 115). The Gonabadi Order derives its name from the city of Gonabad in Khorasan province, where Sultan Ali Shah, one of the order's grand masters, was born (Majzooban Noor 26 June 2011).

According to sources, the Gonabadi Order is Iran's largest Sufi order (Van den Bos 2013, 148; RFE/RL 8 Mar. 2014). Numbers range from more than 2 million members (ibid. 7 Sept. 2011), to at least 5 million members in Iran (Human Rights Watch 25 July 2013). Sources indicate that members of the Gonabadi Order live throughout Iran (ibid.; IOPHRI 21 Nov. 2011, 4; RFE/RL 7 Sept. 2011), including in major cities such as Tehran and Ishafan (ibid.).

1.2 Ideology and Practice of Gonabadi Dervishes in Iran

In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, a professor of political science and public policy at York University, whose research interests include Middle East politics and religious fundamentalism, stated that different Shi'ite Sufi orders, including the Gonabadi Order, share many of the same religious beliefs (Professor 27 Aug. 2014). In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, a senior lecturer at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies at Exeter University, who has written extensively about Sufism in Iran, including the Gonabadi Order, explained that the core ethical beliefs of the Gonabadi Sufi Order can be summarized as "selflessness, generosity, broadness of spiritual vision, and religious tolerance" (Senior Lecturer 4 Sept. 2014). As Sufis, the practice of the Gonabadi dervishes also emphasizes a personal, internal spiritual practice and relationship with God (ibid.). However, unlike other branches of Sufism, "Gonabadi dervishes were forbidden from ascetism and withdrawal from the world by their leader" and do not wear a special costume (IHRDC 12 Sept. 2014, 1).

In an article published in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, scholar Matthijs Van den Bos notes that other sources have stated that Gonabadi masters are often considered "sober" in their doctrine and that the order displays a "political ambivalence" towards the post-revolutionary Iranian state (Van den Bos 2013, 150). In contrast, according to an academic article on the Nematollahi Order published in the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*,

the Gunabadi Sufis remain active supporters of the fundamentalist ideology of the Islamic Republic, a political stance which reflects this branch's emphasis on the preservation of the nomocentric side of Islamic teachings (*hifz-i zhair*) and its concern for purely Sharia affairs. (Lewisohn 1998, 453)

According to another article on the socio-cultural profile of Sufism, in the same journal, the first principle of the Gonabadi branch is "'allegiance' to the *Qutb*, who is the actual present head of the order," and is seen as "the representative of the Imam on earth" (ibid. 1999, 52). According to the Senior Lecturer, the "Gonabadi Sufis consider the *Qutb* as a guide who acts as their spiritual director" (Senior Lecturer 4 Sept. 2014). Two sources explain that this principle is contrary to the Shia Islamic tradition of the *mujtahid* [2] as the religious authority between an individual and God (ibid.; Professor 27 Aug. 2014). According to the Senior Lecturer,

[p]art of the animosity between the Sufis and the clerical state-sponsored Shi'ism in Iran relates to the historical opposition between the Shi'ite Muslim clerics (called *Mujtahid* ...) and the Sufis that has existed over the past five centuries. ...

However, the central practices of the Gonabadi dervishes are identical in respect to normal theological beliefs and practice with ordinary Shi'ite practice, such as ritual prayer 5 times a day, fasting during Ramadan and the giving of alms, practices which the Sufis share with the rest of Shi'ite (and indeed Sunni) Muslims ... (4 Sept. 2014).

An article on Al-Monitor, a Middle East news website, similarly states that "Sufis' lack of interest in exoteric Islam and religious rules has always been a point of conflict between the Sufis and the clerics" and that this conflict "has always existed" (Al-Monitor 1 Dec. 2013).

According to the Senior Lecturer, as Sufis, the Gonabadi dervishes are also devoted to the use of music in their ceremonies and to the writings of Sufi poets such as Rumi (4 Sept. 2014). According to Van den Bos, another practice of the Gonabadi Sufi Order is the practice of *dhikr*, a Sufi "spiritual exercise consisting of the repetition- individual or collective, loud or silent, with or without movements- of a divine name" (Van den Bos 2013, 150).

Members of the Gonabadi Order meet weekly in *hosseiniehs* [husayniyya] (prayer centres or Sufi lodges) (ibid., 151; AI Feb. 2009, 3; Senior Lecturer 4 Sept. 2014). Sources report that the weekly gatherings usually take place on Thursday and Sunday evenings (ibid.; Van den Bos 2013, 151). According to the Senior Lecturer, members listen to music, sermons and recite prayers together at these gatherings, which last between one and three hours (Senior Lecturer 4 Sept. 2014). Men and women are separate during the gatherings (ibid.).

1.3 Organization of Gonabadi Dervishes in Iran

The Senior Lecturer provided the following information on the organizational structure of the Gonabadi Order:

- The leader of the Gonabadi Order is the grand master (*qutb* or *pir*).
- Under the grand master, there are approximately 5 to 6 *shaykhs* (spiritual teachers) who are appointed by the grand master in Iran. They have the authority to initiate individuals into the order.
- Under the teachers, there are a number of prayer leaders, who lead the prayers at the various Sufi lodges. Each of the approximately 30 lodges in Iran has its own prayer leader and a select few have their own shaykh.
- Under the prayer leaders are the individual dervishes or members of the order.
- The Gonabadi Order is financed through the individual members of the order, including monetary donations and other contributions such as land to be used by the order (4 Sept. 2014).

The academic article on the socio-cultural profile of Sufism published in the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* states that the grand master is appointed through hereditary succession in the Gonabadi Order (Lewisohn 1999, 53).

Sources report that the current grand master of the Gonabadi Order in Iran is Nour Ali Tabandeh [Majdhub Ali Shah; Nur Ali Tabanda; Noor-Ali Tabandeh] (AI June 2014, 115; Senior Lecturer 4 Sept. 2014) [3].

2. Treatment of Gonabadi Dervishes in Iran

2.1 Religious Freedom in Iran, 1979-September 2014

2.1.1 Legislation

Iran ratified the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966*, Article 18 of which provides for the freedom of religion and the freedom to practice or "manifest" one's religion (UN 1966). However, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran reports that Iran has failed to comply with its international obligations in terms of human rights, including religious freedom (UN 13 Mar. 2014, para. 2-3).

The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran provides that the state's official religion is Islam (Iran 1979, Art. 12). The Constitution recognizes the non-Muslim religious minorities "Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian Iranians" as the "only recognized religious minorities" (ibid., Art. 13). The Constitution also provides for the equal rights of its citizens "based on colour, race, language and the like" (ibid. Art. 19) and for the equal protection of its citizens under the law (ibid., Art. 3(14), 20).

Minority Rights Group International (MRG) reports that, despite these constitutional guarantees, "discrimination on the basis of religion and ethnicity is rife in Iran" (July 2014). Similarly, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom's (USCIRF) *Annual Report 2014* states that Iran's Constitution "discriminates against its citizens on the basis of religion or belief, as all laws and regulations are based on unique Shi'a Islamic criteria" (US 2014, 59). The US Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report for 2013* states that "the constitution and other laws and policies severely restrict freedom of religion" and that "in practice, the government severely restricted religious freedom" (US 2013a, 1, 3). According to the USCIRF report for 2013,

[t]he government of Iran continues to engage in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. ... During the past year, the already poor religious freedom conditions continued to deteriorate, especially for religious minorities, ... [including] Sufi Muslims. (US 2013b, 71)

2.2 Treatment by Society

Information on the treatment of Gonabadi dervishes by Iranian society was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to two sources, members of the Gonabadi Order have lost their employment because of their affiliation with the order (Van den Bos 2013, 151; FIDH et al. Oct. 2010, 24). In written correspondence with the Research Directorate, a representative of the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC), an "independent, non-profit organization," based in the US whose mission is to establish a "comprehensive and objective historical record of the human rights situation in Iran" (IHRDC n.d.), noted that "Gonabadi dervishes and individuals affiliated with the group are subject to restrictions on their right to work," citing an example of one individual who was "blacklisted" from the state broadcasting agency (IHRDC 12 Sept.

2014). The same source stated that Gonabadi "face dismissal from government jobs on the basis of their faith," referring to another individual who was dismissed from his government position due to his religious beliefs (ibid.). A report co-authored by the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and the Iranian League for the Defence of Human Rights (LDDHI), an Iranian human rights organization based in France, states that three teachers and three professors were expelled from work because of their affiliation to the Nematollahi Gonabadi Order (Oct. 2010, 24). Amnesty International (AI) reports that "at least" four teachers were dismissed from their employment in 2008 because of their participation in the order's practices (AI Feb. 2009, 3). Sources also report that lawyers have lost their licenses for representing Gonabadi dervishes (ibid. Feb. 2012, 32; FIDH et al. Oct. 2010, 24). AI reports that a lawyer was banned from practising law for five years because he represented a Gonabadi dervish (AI Feb. 2009, 4).

2.3 Treatment by Authorities, including Security Forces and Judiciary, 1965-2014

2.3.1 1965-1979

The Senior Lecturer noted that from 1965 to 1979, the Gonabadi Order "continued to experience a period of vast expansion," which dates back centuries (Senior Lecturer 4 Sept. 2014). He also explained that during this time, the order faced isolated attacks from Islamic clerics, but that the general public favoured the order, and they were allowed to publish books and open Sufi lodges throughout Iran (ibid.). Corroborating and further information about this time period could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

2.3.2 1979 (Islamic Revolution)-2004

AI-Monitor reports that since the Islamic Revolution, Sufis have "come under pressure" from the Iranian government and that "Sufi elders have been charged and convicted with disturbing public order and taking action against national security" (1 Dec. 2013). Similarly, an article published in 2009 in *Iranian Studies* reported that dervishes of all of the Sufi orders have been "suffering severe harassment at the hands of the fundamentalist state for the past three decades" (Lewisohn 2009, 298). Freedom House reports that "Gonabadi dervishes are apparently persecuted because of their more open interpretation of Islam and the growing popularity of their beliefs, which is regarded as a threat by Iran's Shiite clerical establishment" (Freedom House 2012).

Sources report that in 1979, a main Sufi lodge in Tehran was burned down (Van den Bos 2013, 150; Lewisohn 1998, 452) and some of the lodge's shaykhs and dervishes were imprisoned by the regime (ibid.). The 1998 article published in the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* also reports that in the early 1990's the main Gonabadi cemetery in Tehran was destroyed "according to the ayatollahs, to make more space for public worship" (ibid., 452-453).

2.3.3 2005-2013

Sources report that the harassment of Sufis has increased since President Ahmadinejad took office in August 2005 (MRG July 2014; RFE/RL 12 Oct. 2006). Similarly, Van den Bos notes that since then, "the situation of the [Gonabadi] order deteriorated sharply" (Van den Bos 2013, 151). He explains that anti-Sufi *fatwas* were issued by religious clerics, "which were often followed by violence and destruction" (ibid.). AI reports that in 2006 Ayatollah Lankarani stated that Sufis were "misleading Iranian youth" and that "any contact with them was forbidden" (June 2014, 115). Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) reports that, according to a representative of the Gonabadi Order, the Ayatollah's fatwa in 2006 also stated that any contact with Sufis, particularly of the Gonabadi branch, was not permitted (RFE/RL 12 Oct. 2006).

According to a report by the International Organization to Preserve Human Rights in Iran (IOPHRI), an "independent initiative of European and American human rights activists" (IOPHRI n.d.), between 2006 and 2011, "attacks against the dervishes became more regular and more organized" under the "guidance" of Supreme Leader Ali Khomeini (21 Nov. 2011, 4). Sources report that Khomeini denounced Sufism, or "false mysticisms" in a speech (AI 12 Apr. 2013; Van den Bos 2013, 152) given in November 2010 (ibid.).

According to two sources, Ahmadinejad's re-election in 2009 brought further repression of the order, stemming from Grand Master Tabandeh's support of opposition presidential candidate Mehdi Karrubi (ibid.; FIDH et al. Oct. 2010, 24).

The FIDH and LDDHI 2010 report noted that the "Nematollahi Gonabadi Order has recently been persecuted most severely" (Oct. 2010, 23). Similarly, AI reports that "Gonabadi dervishes ... have faced rising harassment in recent years" (AI 12 Apr. 2013).

Sources report that several Gonabadi lodges have been destroyed (FIDH et al. Oct. 2010, 24; Van den Bos 2013, 151). In February 2006, the Gonabadi lodge in the city of Qom was destroyed (ibid.; RFE/RL 12 Oct. 2006). According to sources, many Gonabadi dervishes were injured or attacked by security forces during this incident (ibid.; Lewisohn 2009, 298). Two sources report that, as a result of this incident, over a thousand Gonabadi dervishes were imprisoned (IOPHRI 21 Nov. 2011, 4; Lewisohn 2009, 298), some remaining in police custody for months (ibid.). Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) reported that hundreds were detained at the time (RFE/RL 12 Oct. 2006). RFE/RL also reported that in May 2006, 52 Sufis and their lawyers were sentenced to jail terms and lashings for their involvement in the February 2006 incident (ibid.).

In November 2007, the Gonabadi lodge in the city of Borujerd was destroyed (FIDH et al. Oct. 2010, 24; Van den Bos 2013, 151). The 2009 academic review article published in the journal *Iranian Studies* reported that the regime's Basij militia group, along with state security forces, burned down the lodge, injured seventy Gonabadi dervishes and imprisoned "more than one hundred and fifty" dervishes and "sympathizers" (Lewisohn 2009, 299).

In February 2009, the Gonabadi lodge in Isfahan was destroyed (Van den Bos 2013, 151; FIDH et al. Oct. 2010, 24). RFE/RL reported in 2009 that security forces attacked a group of dervishes the day after the Isfahan lodge was demolished by local authorities, using force and tear gas against the group (RFE/RL 19 Feb. 2009). A number of dervishes were injured and several were reportedly detained (ibid.). The FIDH and LDDHI report notes that Gonabadi lodges in the cities of Ahvaz, Omidiyeh and Karaj were also attacked between 2008 and 2010 (FIDH et al. Oct. 2010, 24).

According to the USCIRF 2013 report, "[o]ver the past few years, authorities have detained hundreds of Sufi Muslims, particularly Nematollahi Gonabadi dervishes, sentencing many to imprisonment, fines and floggings" (US 2013b, 73). AI reported in 2009 that a Gonabadi Dervish was flogged 74 times after conviction of "slander" after publicly complaining about ill-treatment received by a Ministry of Intelligence official (5 Feb. 2009, 4).

According to the UN Special Rapporteur, in his March 2014 report on the human rights situation in Iran, "[i]n recent years, authorities have targeted Dervish (namely, Sufi) Muslims, including members of the Nematollahi Gonabadi order. ... since 2008, 90 Gonabadi Dervishes have been summoned to the Ministry of Intelligence for questioning, 391 have been summoned to public and revolutionary courts, and at least 238 Gonabadi Dervishes have been arrested. Altogether, these actions have resulted in at least 970 prosecutions since 2008, with some cases still open. (UN 13 Mar. 2014, 11)

Sources report that in May 2010, 24 Gonabadi dervishes were sentenced to prison terms and flogging for having participated in a demonstration in 2009 in the city of Gonabad (FIDH et al. Oct. 2010, 24; AI June 2010, 20). The demonstrators were protesting the detention of the supervisor of a dervish cemetery in Bidokht, who had allowed a burial to take place in the cemetery, contrary to a government order banning such burials (ibid.; FIDH et al. Oct. 2010, 24). According to the FIDH and LDDHI report, the sentencing terms ranged from 91 days to five months, flogging and "internal exile" (ibid.).

Sources report that on 5 September 2011, a Gonabadi dervish was killed and several injured during a government attack by the Basij militia on Gonabadi dervishes in Kavar, in the southwestern province of Fars (US 2013b, 73; RFE/RL 7 Sept. 2011; IOPHRI 21 Nov. 2011, 5). According to two sources, at least 60 Gonabadi were arrested (US 2013b, 73; AI Feb. 2012, 49). In contrast, the IOPHRI reports that 29 were arrested, including Gonabadi lawyers and administrators of Majzooban Noor, the news website of the Nematollahi Gonabadi Order [4] (IOPHRI 21 Nov. 2011, 6-8). According to the USCIRF 2013 report, seven remain in detention, three of whom are affiliated with the Majzooban Noor website, and four of whom are Gonabadi lawyers who defended the dervishes in court (US 2013b, 73). The 2013 report notes that three of the Gonabadi lawyers remain in Evin prison and were charged in late 2011 under the Islamic Penal Code with "'insulting the Supreme Leader,' 'spreading lies,' and membership in a 'deviant group'" (ibid., 74).

Sources report that Iranian state media continued to vilify Sufism in 2013 and 2014 (US 2014, 60; Van den Bos 2013, 152), in particular the Gonabadi order (ibid.). Majzooban Noor reports that the police force has included "discussions and talks against Sufism and Islamic mysticism" in ideology courses that police officers must attend (Majzooban Noor 5 May 2014). This same source reports that the course is being taught by a cleric who wrote a book titled *Materialistic Spiders*, which contains allegations and offensive comments against Sufism, and "especially the Gonabadi order" (ibid.). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Sources report instances of the ill-treatment of Gonabadi dervishes while in detention (AI 12 Apr. 2013; Human Rights Watch 25 July 2013). Human Rights Watch reports that Gonabadi dervishes have been convicted in unfair trials (ibid.). Complaints included:

- not being informed of the charges against them upon their arrest (IHRDC 28 Mar. 2013);
- being denied access to a lawyer (ibid. 12 Sept. 2014; AI 12 Apr. 2013; US 2013a, 10); and
- their lawyers not being permitted to review the case against them (ibid.; ICHRI 27 Mar. 2014).

Two sources also report that imprisoned Gonabadi dervishes experience sub-standard hygienic conditions in detention (ICHRI 8 May 2012; IHRDC 28 Mar. 2013). Sources report accounts of Gonabadi dervishes being beaten and assaulted while in detention (ibid.; Majzooban Noor 19 Apr. 2014; Human Rights Watch 25 July 2013). The *International Religious Freedom Report for 2013* similarly reports that dervishes were subjected to "ill-treatment" (US 2013a, 10). Sources report the following of Gonabadi dervishes in detention:

- they have been denied medical care and treatment (Majzooban Noor 1 July 2014; RFE/RL 8 Mar. 2014; IHRDC 12 Sept. 2014, 5);
- they have been sentenced to solitary confinement for periods of one to six months (Majzooban Noor 8 May 2014; IHRDC 28 Mar. 2013; Human Rights Watch 25 July 2013);
- they have been denied family visits (ibid.; Majzooban Noor 10 Aug. 2014; IHRDC 28 Mar. 2013);
- they have been illegally transferred (ICHRI 11 Mar. 2014; Majzooban Noor 25 Aug. 2014), or transferred to unknown locations (ibid.; Majzooban Noor 21 Aug. 2014); and
- some have served sentences beyond the length of their sentencing term (Majzooban Noor 2 July 2014; ICHRI 8 May 2012).

2.3.4 June 2013-September 2014

According to Human Rights Watch, since President Rouhani assumed office in 2013, "the overall rights situation ... has not significantly changed for the better" (15 Mar. 2014). Similarly, sources report that Rouhani has not delivered on his campaign promises to defend the rights of religious minorities (US 2014, 59; Majzooban Noor 10 Aug. 2014). According to the Editor of Majzooban Noor, the security forces who have pressured the Gonabadi dervishes in the past remain in power and since Rouhani has been in office, "prison sentences for a number of dervishes were issued" (RFE/RL 8 Mar. 2014). Other sources similarly report that several Gonabadi dervishes were sentenced in July 2013 on various charges including "membership in a deviant group" (US 2013a, 10) and endangering or disrupting "national security" (ibid.; ICHRI 27 Mar. 2014). Likewise, Human Rights Watch reports that in July 2013, revolutionary courts in Tehran and Shiraz sentenced 11 members of the Gonabadi order to prison terms of 1 to 10.5 years for their "peaceful activities" (15 Mar. 2014). The International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (ICHRI), a non-partisan, independent human rights non-profit organization based in New York (ICHRI n.d.), also notes that of those sentenced in July 2013, four were lawyers who represented the Gonabadi dervishes in court and ran the Majzooban Noor website (ICHRI 27 Mar. 2014).

According to the USCIRF 2014 report, "Iran's government ... has been stepping up its harassment and arrests of its Sufi Muslim minority, including prominent leaders from the Nematollahi Gonabadi Order, while increasing restrictions on places of

worship and destroying Sufi prayer centres" (60). Human Rights Watch similarly reports that "[a]uthorities systematically targeted religious and ethnic minorities, with some of the harshest treatment reserved for ... members of the Nematollahi Gonabadi Sufi order," including "arresting their members and destroying their houses of worship" (Human Rights Watch 15 Mar. 2014). Sources report that at least one Sufi lodge was attacked or damaged in 2013 by Iranian authorities (Van den Bos 2013, 151; US 2013b, 74).

According to the UN Special Rapporteur, as of 3 January 2014, 19 Gonabadi Dervishes remain in detention (13 Mar. 2014, 10). Reportedly, many of the imprisoned are Gonabadi lawyers who represented the dervishes, or members of the Majzooban Noor website (Majzooban Noor 8 May 2014; IOPHRI 21 Nov. 2011, 6, 8). The UN Special Rapporteur report states that the Gonabadi dervishes have been charged with a variety of offences under the Islamic Penal Code, including "disruption of public order," "assembly and collusion against national security," "insulting the Supreme Leader," "propaganda against the system," "agitating the public consciousness," and "membership in organizations that aim to disrupt national security" (UN 13 Mar. 2013, 24, 26, 32, 54-55). Of the Gonabadi dervishes who have been sentenced, the sentences imposed for these offences range from seven years and six months to ten years and six months (ibid.). Sources report that four Gonabadi dervishes who were detained in 2013 have also been convicted of the offence of "enmity against God (*moharebeh*)" (ibid.; Majzooban Noor 4 June 2014). Majzooban Noor reports that the prison terms for these four Gonabadi dervishes collectively amount to 28 years of exile within Iran, in the cities of Zabol, Dezful, Maragheh and Sardasht (ibid.). This same source reports that three other Gonabadi dervishes were convicted of "enmity against God" and were sentenced to "deportation forever" (ibid.). The UN report states that one dervish that was charged with the same offence ("enmity against God") was sentenced to a prison term of 15 years and six months in 2004 (UN 13 Mar. 2014, 55). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to Majzooban Noor, on 8 March 2014, over 2,000 Gonabadi dervishes protested the lack of proper medical care of two detained Gonabadi dervishes outside of Tehran's main judicial court (AI-Monitor 16 Mar. 2014; ICHRI 11 Mar. 2014). The ICHRI reports that the dervishes were assaulted by police forces (ibid.). AI-Monitor reports that approximately 200 dervishes were arrested (AI-Monitor 16 Mar. 2014). In contrast, ICHRI reports that approximately 326 dervishes were arrested (ICHRI 11 Mar. 2014). Both sources note that the detainees were all released the following day (ibid.; AI-Monitor 16 Mar. 2014).

Majzooban Noor notes recent reports of Gonabadi dervishes being summoned and interrogated by the Ministry of Intelligence (Majzooban Noor 26 Apr. 2014). This same source also notes recent reports of the homes of several Gonabadi dervishes being robbed and Gonabadi religious material being stolen from the homes (Majzooban Noor 17 May 2014). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Two sources report on several imprisoned Gonabadi dervishes who began another hunger strike to protest their detention conditions (Majzooban Noor 6 Sept. 2014; Reporters Without Borders 12 Sept. 2014). According to Reporters Without Borders, the hunger strike began on 31 August 2014 (ibid.).

2.4 Treatment of Family Members by Authorities

According to the IOPHRI, in September 2011, security forces "harassed and abused" the family of the Director of a Gonabadi website (IOPHRI 21 Nov. 2011, 9). The ICHRI reported in 2012 that the family of an imprisoned Gonabadi dervish was "harassed" and "interrogated for five hours" by government officials, and was not treated "properly" by the authorities during their visits to see their family member in prison (ICHRI 8 May 2012).

Human Rights Watch reports that the Editor of Majzooban Noor, Farhad Nouri, stated that his mother was arrested in September 2011 and spent approximately three weeks in solitary confinement in a detention facility, was eventually released, then charged and prosecuted (Human Rights Watch 25 July 2013). He said he believed she was targeted by the authorities so that he would turn himself in (ibid.). According to the report, he fled Iran in 2011 (ibid.). He also reported, in Majzooban Noor, that family members of some of the imprisoned Gonabadi dervishes are threatened by authorities because of their interviews with the media in which they discussed detention conditions (Majzooban Noor 10 Aug. 2014). The Senior Lecturer similarly explained that, at present, entire families are "put under surveillance if one Gonabadi family member is questioned or detained by the authorities," and that family members are threatened and cautioned not to speak to the press about the situation (4 Sept. 2014). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3. State Protection

The UN Special Rapporteur notes Iran's "lack of adherence to the rule of law, as well as a failure to investigate complaints and to bring human rights violators to justice" (UN 13 Mar. 2014, para. 3). He also writes that Iranian laws, policies, attitudes and practices identified by the UN as violating human rights "regretfully continue without redress and persist in undermining the independence of the State's judicial organs, and in nullifying safeguards for fair trials" (ibid., para. 5). Similarly, the US *International Religious Freedom Report for 2013* states that

[t]he government failed to take sufficient action with regard to continued discrimination, restrictions, and occasional attacks against religious minorities. Authorities also consistently failed to investigate crimes committed against members of minority religious groups and against their property, including religious sites and graveyards. (US 2013a, 15)

With regard to the availability of state protection for Gonabadi dervishes in particular, Majzooban Noor reports that "[u]nfortunately despite all complaint of Dervishes there is no arrest and judiciary process on those who caused all these conflicts" (Majzooban Noor 4 June 2014).

In a response to the UN Special Rapporteur's allegations about the treatment of the Gonabadi Order in Iran in his 2014 report, the Government of Iran stated that "[d]ervishes are citizens of the Islamic Republic of Iran and are therefore protected

by the Constitution and relevant laws" (Iran [2014], 9). Further, in response to the UN Special Rapporteur's concerns over the state's application of the rule of law, Iran stated that

... arbitrary arrests cannot be carried in the Country. And when hearing complaints lodged by members of the public, judicial offices completely and uncompromisingly abide by the rule of law and possible victims can easily secure damages by lodging complaints. (Iran [2014], 1)

Further information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Notes

[1] The Nematollahi Order is one of the two main Sufi orders in Iran in the 19th and 20th centuries (Lewisohn 1998, 438). Sufism is defined as Islamic mysticism (BBC 8 Sept. 2009). Sufi orders can be found in Sunni, Shia and other Islamic groups (ibid.).

[2] The *mujtahid* is defined as "one who strives in the path of religion" (Senior Lecturer 4 Sept. 2014). According to the Senior Lecturer,

[o]rdinary Iranian Shi'ite (non-Sufi) believers usually follow and emulate a Mujtahid who is qualified in matters of theology and ritual worship, and these Mujtahids almost all deny the right and legitimacy of the Sufi masters (qutb or pir) to offer spiritual guidance to their own followers, believing that the Sufi tenets of the master-disciple relationship are heretical and deviant (ibid.).

[3] The previous grand masters of the Gonabadi Order include Sultan Ali Shah (Hajji Mulla Gunabadi) (d. 1909); Nur Ali Shah II (d. 1918); Salih Ali Shah (Hajj Muhammad Hasan) (d. 1966); Rida Ali Shah (Sultan Husayn Tabanda Gunabadi) (d. 1992); and Mahbub Ali Shah (Hajj Ali Tabanda) (d. 1997) (Lewisohn 1998, 451; Mojahed 2004).

[4] According to RFE/RL, the Majzooban Noor website, "a website dedicated to news and information about the Gonabadi dervishes in Iran, has been blocked more than 40 times since its launch in 2007" and Iranian authorities have arrested most of its founders (RFE/RL 20 June 2014). According to the editor of the website, who serves as the editor from outside Iran, "Sufis active in cyberspace have come under attack from Iranian authorities" (ibid.).

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Attempts to contact the following individuals and organizations were unsuccessful within the time constraints of this Response: Foundation for Democracy in Iran; Human Rights in Iran Unit; International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran; International Organization to Preserve Human Rights in Iran. A lecturer in International Studies at the University of London, an assistant professor at the Institute of Iranian Studies at the University of Gottingen, Germany and a representative from the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center were also contacted.

Internet sites, including: Al Jazeera; BBC; Committee of Human Rights Reporters; ecoinet; Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2nd ed.; Factiva; Foreign Policy; Freedom House; Human Rights Activists News Agency; Huffington Post; ISIM Newsletter; National Council of Resistance of Iran; United Nations – High Commissioner for Refugees; Refworld; United States – Department of State.

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