

# IRAN



## **USCIRF STATUS:**

**Tier 1 Country of Particular Concern**

## **BOTTOM LINE:**

Already poor religious freedom conditions in Iran continue to deteriorate, particularly for religious minorities, especially Baha'is, Christians, and Sufi Muslims, as well as for dissenting Shi'i and Sunni Muslims. Harassment, arrests, and imprisonment intensified, a trend likely to worsen as the June 2013 presidential election approaches.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**FINDINGS:** The government of Iran continues to engage in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, including prolonged detention, torture, and executions based primarily or entirely upon the religion of the accused. Iran is a constitutional, theocratic republic that discriminates against its citizens on the basis of religion or belief. During the past year, the already poor religious freedom conditions continued to deteriorate, especially for religious minorities, in particular for Baha'is as well as Christians and Sufi Muslims. Physical attacks, harassment, detention, arrests, and imprisonment intensified. Even some of the recognized non-Muslim religious minorities protected under Iran's constitution—Jews, Armenian and Assyrian Christians, and Zoroastrians—face harassment, intimidation, discrimination, arrests, and imprisonment. Majority Shi'i and minority Sunni Muslims, including clerics who dissent, were intimidated, harassed, and detained. Dissidents and human rights defenders were increasingly subject to abuse and several were sentenced to death and even executed for the capital crime of "waging war against God." Heightened anti-Semitism and repeated Holocaust denials by senior government officials and clerics continue to foster a climate of fear among Iran's Jewish community. Since the 1979 revolution, members of minority religious communities have fled Iran in significant numbers for fear of persecution.

Since 1999, the State Department has designated Iran as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). USCIRF recommends in 2013 that Iran again be designated as a CPC.

Since the disputed 2009 elections, religious freedom conditions in Iran have regressed to a point not seen since the early days of the Islamic revolution. Killings, arrests, and physical abuse of detainees have increased, including for religious minorities and Muslims who dissent or express views perceived as threatening the legitimacy of the government. During the reporting period, the government continued to use its religious laws to silence reformers and critics, including women's rights activists, journalists, and lawyers for exercising their internationally-protected rights to freedom of expression and freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief. With the June 2013 presidential election approaching, the Iranian government will likely increase its efforts to crush any form of dissent and scapegoat religious minorities, as it has done in the past.

**PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS:** During the past year, U.S. policy on human rights in Iran included a combination of public statements, multilateral activity, and the imposition of unilateral sanctions on Iranian government officials for human rights violations. The U.S. government should continue to identify specific Iranian officials—including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—and entities responsible for severe human rights and religious freedom violations and impose travel bans and asset freezes on those individuals, while continuing to work with its European and other allies to do the same. USCIRF urges the U.S. government to continue to speak out vigorously, including in formal or informal bilateral or multilateral fora, about deteriorating human rights and religious freedom conditions, and to demand the release of all prisoners of conscience. Additional recommendations for U.S. policy toward Iran can be found at the end of this chapter.

## RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS

### HEIGHTENED CONCERNS SINCE THE JUNE 2009 DISPUTED ELECTIONS

The disputed June 2009 elections marked a decisive turning point in the human rights and religious freedom environment in Iran, as security and paramilitary forces used brutal force against the hundreds of thousands of Iranians who protested in the streets in the months after the elections. Dozens of Iranians have been killed and thousands have been arrested, convicted, and given lengthy prison terms. Hundreds remain in detention. More than two dozen dissidents have been executed, on a variety of charges, including alleged religious crimes such as “waging war against God,” “spreading corruption on earth,” and “moral corruption.” During the reporting period, the Iranian government brought national security cases against members of religious minority communities and individuals for alleged crimes such as “confronting the regime” and apostasy. In the run-up to the June 2013 presidential elections, Iranian security services will likely increasingly crack down on any form of public dissent, particularly by journalists, and scapegoat religious minorities.

### GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE

The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran proclaims the Twelver (Shi'i) Jaafari School of Islam to be the official religion of the country. All laws and regulations, including the Constitution itself, must be based on Islamic criteria. The head of state, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, is the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution and directly controls the armed forces, the internal security forces, and the judiciary. The Supreme Leader is chosen by the Assembly of Experts, a group of 86 Islamic scholars elected by popular vote from a government-screened list of candidates. All legislation passed by the *Majles* (parliament) is reviewed for adherence to Islamic and constitutional principles by the Guardian Council, six of whose 12 members are appointed by the Supreme Leader. The Guardian Council also screens and disqualifies candidates for all elective offices, including the Assembly of Experts and the 290-member parliament, based on vague and arbitrary requirements, including candidates' ideological and religious beliefs. Disputes over legislation between the parliament and the Guardian Council are adjudicated by the Expediency Council, an advisory body appointed by the Supreme Leader. Five seats in the parliament are reserved for recognized religious minorities, two for Armenian Christians, one for Assyrian Christians, and one each for Jews and Zoroastrians.

### MAJORITY AND MINORITY MUSLIMS

Over the past few years, the Iranian government has imposed harsh prison sentences on prominent reformers from the Shi'i majority community, many of whom have been tried on criminal charges of “insulting Islam,” criticizing the Islamic Republic, and publishing materials that allegedly deviate from Islamic standards, for simply exercising their internationally-protected rights of freedom of expression and freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief. In early 2010, the Iranian government began convicting and executing reformers and peaceful protestors, including on the charge of *moharebeh* (waging war against God). Reportedly, more than two dozen individuals have been charged, convicted, and sentenced to death for *moharebeh*. Approximately 20 are known to have been executed.

---

SINCE THE JUNE 2009 ELECTIONS, THE GOVERNMENT HAS STEPPED UP ITS CRACKDOWN ON SHI'I CLERICS...

---

Since the June 2009 elections, the government has stepped up its crackdown on Shi'i clerics, prohibiting them from publicly questioning the election results and from criticizing the government's response to demonstrations, while also targeting some for house arrest, detention without charge, trial without due

process, torture, and other forms of ill treatment. For example, during the reporting period, Ayatollah Ali-Mohammad Dastgheeb and Ayatollah Yusuf Saanei, both publicly critical of the regime's post-2009 crackdown, have been harassed and intimidated by authorities and had their properties vandalized by security agents.

In October 2006, Ayatollah Mohammad Kazemeini Boroujerdi, who advocates the separation of religion and state and has spoken out on behalf of the rights of Iran's religious minorities as well its Shi'i Muslim majority, was arrested and imprisoned without charge. He and 17 of his followers were sentenced to death on spurious charges, including "enmity against God" and spreading propaganda against the regime. After an appeal, the death sentence was withdrawn and Ayatollah Boroujerdi was sentenced to 11 years in prison. Ayatollah Boroujerdi remains in prison, and the government has banned him from practicing his clerical duties and confiscated his home and belongings. According to reports, Ayatollah Boroujerdi's health continues to deteriorate and he has suffered physical and mental abuse while in prison.

## **Sunni Muslims**

Muslim minorities continue to face repression. Several of the country's ethnic minorities—Arabs, Baluchis, Kurds, and Turkmen—practice Sunni Islam. These groups are subject to discriminatory policies based on both their ethnic identity and their faith. Sunni Muslim leaders regularly are intimidated and harassed by intelligence and security services and report widespread official discrimination in government employment, particularly in leadership positions in the executive and judicial branches. Sunni Muslims comprise approximately 9% of Iran's population of nearly 80 million.

Sunni leaders report widespread abuses and restrictions on their religious practice, including detentions and abuse of Sunni clerics, as well as bans on Sunni teachings in public schools and Sunni religious literature, even in predominantly Sunni areas. In December 2011, Sunni Muslim members of parliament wrote to the Supreme Leader asking for an end to discrimination against Sunni Muslims and seeking permission to build a mosque in Tehran. The Sunni community still has not been able to build a mosque in Tehran and, in recent years, Sunni mosques were destroyed in eastern Iran near Zabol, Sistan-Baluchistan, and Mashhad. In recent years, dozens of Sunni clerics reportedly were arrested for spreading Sunni teachings, including in Kurdistan, Kermanshah, Baluchistan, West Azerbaijan, Ahvaz, Tavalesh, and Khorassan provinces.

## **Sufi Muslims**

During the past year, arrests and harassment of Sufi Muslims increased significantly. Sufi Muslims—who come from the Shi'i Muslim tradition—face government repression of their communities and religious practices, including harassment and imprisonment of prominent Sufi leaders and the destruction of prayer centers and *hussainiyas* (places of worship). Since the 2011 denunciation of Sufis by some Shi'i clerics, government restrictions on Sufi groups and places of worship have become more pronounced.

---

DURING THE PAST YEAR, ARRESTS AND HARASSMENT OF SUFI MUSLIMS INCREASED SIGNIFICANTLY.

---

Over the past few years, authorities have detained hundreds of Sufi Muslims, particularly Nematollahi Gonabadi dervishes, sentencing many to imprisonment,

fines, and floggings. In September and October 2011, a Gonabadi dervish was killed and several were injured during a government crackdown in southwestern Iran, Fars province, during which the Basij militia arrested at least 60 Sufis. Seven remain in detention, including Hamidreza Moradi, Mostafa Daneshjou, Reza Entesari and four attorneys—Farshid Yadollahi, Amir Eslami, Afshin Karampour, and Omid Behruzi—who defended the dervishes in court. Three of the four attorneys continue to be held in

## IRAN

---

Evin prison and were charged in late 2011 with insulting the Supreme Leader, “spreading lies,” and membership in a “deviant group.” According to human rights groups, the fourth attorney, Amir Eslami, has a serious heart condition and has been sent to the hospital for medical attention. In December 2012, the other six in detention reportedly were tried in a revolutionary court, some charged with “waging war against God,” a capital offense. By the end of the reporting period, their trial was ongoing.

Furthermore, during the reporting period Iranian state television aired a series of programs designed to denigrate and demonize Sufism, particularly the Nematollahi Gonabadi order. In January 2013, several prayer centers of the Gonabadi order have been demolished or attacked by Iranian authorities. Reportedly, the government is considering banning Sufism.

### NON-MUSLIM RELIGIOUS MINORITIES

The constitution of Iran formally recognizes Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians as protected religious minorities who may worship freely and have autonomy over personal status matters (e.g., marriage, divorce, and inheritance). Nevertheless, the primacy of Islam and Islamic laws and institutions adversely affects their rights and status and they live, in effect, as second class citizens. Members of these groups are subject to legal and other forms of discrimination, particularly in education, government jobs and services, and the armed services. In addition, their places of worship frequently are defaced with graffiti. Iran’s Ministry of Education administers their schools and they must use state-approved religious curriculum.

Non-Muslims may not engage with Muslims in public religious expression or persuasion; some also face restrictions on publishing religious material in Persian. The law provides for the collection of equal blood money for the death of Muslim and non-Muslim men, however, Baha’is, Sabean Mandaean men, and all women remain excluded. According to Iranian law, Baha’i blood is *mobah*, which means members of the Baha’i faith can be killed with impunity.

Since the June 2009 elections, the Iranian government has intensified its campaign against non-Muslim religious minorities at a level not seen since the years immediately following the Iranian revolution in the early 1980s. Virulent and inflammatory statements by political and religious leaders continue with an increase in harassment and imprisonment of, and physical attacks against, these groups. In October 2010, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei publicly stated that “enemies of Islam” are using the spread of Sufism, the Baha’i faith, and Christian house churches to weaken the faith of young people. Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, head of the Guardian Council, referred to them as “sinful animals” and “corrupt.”

### **Baha’is**

The Baha’i community has long been subject to particularly severe religious freedom violations. Iranian authorities view Baha’is, who number at least 300,000, as “heretics,” and repress them for “apostasy” and other baseless charges. Since 1979, the government has killed more than 200 Baha’i leaders and dismissed more than 10,000 from government and university jobs. Baha’is may not establish places of worship, schools, or any independent religious associations. In addition, Baha’is are barred from the military and denied government jobs and pensions as well as the right to inherit property. Their marriages and divorces also are not recognized, and they have difficulty obtaining death certificates. Baha’i cemeteries, holy places, and community properties are often seized or desecrated, and many important religious sites have been destroyed. The Baha’i community faces severe economic

---

SINCE 1979, THE GOVERNMENT HAS  
KILLED MORE THAN 200 BAHA’I  
LEADERS AND DISMISSED MORE  
THAN 10,000 FROM GOVERNMENT  
AND UNIVERSITY JOBS.

---

## IRAN

---

pressure, including denials of jobs in both the public and private sectors and of business licenses. Iranian authorities often pressure employers of Baha'is to dismiss them from private sector employment.

During the past two years, Baha'is have faced increasingly harsh treatment, including increasing arrests and detentions and violent attacks on private homes and personal property. More than 650 Baha'is have been arbitrarily arrested since 2005. As of February 2013, at least 110 Baha'is are being held in prison solely because of their religious beliefs, twice the number held in early 2011. Throughout 2012 and early 2013, Baha'i-owned businesses and personal property were the target of arson attacks in several cities, with police doing nothing to find the perpetrators.

---

AS OF FEBRUARY 2013,  
AT LEAST 110 BAHA'IS  
ARE BEING HELD IN  
PRISON SOLELY  
BECAUSE OF THEIR  
RELIGIOUS BELIEFS,  
TWICE THE NUMBER  
HELD IN EARLY 2011.

---

Dozens of Baha'is are awaiting trial while others were sentenced to prison terms ranging from 90 days to several years. All of those convicted are reportedly appealing the verdicts. According to human rights groups, more than 500 Baha'is have active cases pending against them, despite having been released from detention. Also in recent years, Baha'i cemeteries in various parts of the country, including Tehran, Ghaemshahr, Marvdasht, Semnan, Sari, Yazd, Najafabad, and Isfahan, have been desecrated, defaced, or in some way blocked to the Baha'i community. Over the past several years, numerous articles in the government-controlled newspaper *Kayhan*, whose managing editor is appointed by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, and other media outlets have vilified and demonized the Baha'i faith and its community.

Iranian authorities have gone to great lengths in recent years to collect information on Baha'is and monitor their activities. During the reporting period, dozens of Baha'is were arrested throughout the country, including in Tehran, Babolsar, Karaj, Nazarabad, Shahrekord, Semnan, Mashhad, Bandar Abbas, Shiraz, and Ghaemshahr. In most of these cases, Ministry of Intelligence officials appeared at their homes, searched the premises and confiscated computers, books and other materials, and then made arrests. In most cases, no formal charges were filed.

According to a February 2013 report by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran, more than 30 Baha'is were imprisoned in 2012 alone. Baha'is in the small town of Semnan have been particularly impacted, with approximately 35 Baha'is having been arrested and nearly 50 homes and businesses in Semnan have been either raided and ransacked or vandalized and destroyed. Eleven Baha'is from Semnan remain in prison. In September 2012, a five-month-old boy was imprisoned with his mother, who is serving a 23-month sentence. The infant was hospitalized outside the prison because of a lung disease caused by unsanitary prison conditions. Another woman is serving a 30-month sentence with her 10-month old boy. In December 2012, a third Semnan woman was imprisoned with her one-year-old child. At the end of the reporting period, all three women and their children remain in prison.

In February 2012, Iranian authorities raided several Baha'i homes in Shiraz, confiscated materials, and arrested at least 13 Baha'is. At the end of the reporting period, several of those arrested remain in detention.

In May 2011, in at least four different cities, Iranian authorities raided more than 30 homes and arrested 18 Baha'is involved with the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education (BIHE), the community's effort to educate its youth. Several Baha'is were released after days or weeks in detention, but in October 2011, seven were tried and found guilty of membership in a deviant sect with the goal of acting against national security. The seven were sentenced to either four- or five-year prison terms. In January 2012, Vahid Mahmoudi, one of the seven educators imprisoned, was released on probation after his sentence was suspended. The other six educators—Mahmoud Badavam, Noushin Khadem, Farhad Sedghi, Riaz Sobhani, Ramin Zibaie, and Kamran Mortezaie—remain in prison. In late 2011 and 2012, three

## IRAN

---

additional BIHE instructors—Faran Hessami, Kamran Rahimian, Shahin Negari—were convicted and sentenced to four years in prison, and a fourth—Kayvan Rahimian—was convicted and sentenced to a five-year term. In September 2011, prominent human rights lawyer Abdolfattah Soltani was arrested for defending the Baha’i educators. In March 2012, a court sentenced him to 18 years’ imprisonment and banned him from practicing law for 20 years. In June, an appellate court upheld the conviction but reduced his sentence to 13 years.

Since 2008, seven Baha’i leaders—Fariba Kamalabadi, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naemi, Saeid Rezaie, Mahvash Sabet, Behrouz Tavakkoli, and Vahid Tizfahm—have been in jail based on an assortment of dubious charges, ranging from espionage to “corruption on the earth.” In August 2010, the seven were sentenced to 20 years in prison. The two women currently are held in Evin prison while the five men are held under appalling conditions in the notorious Gohardasht prison outside Tehran. Attorneys for the seven Baha’is, including Nobel Laureate Shirin Ebadi, have had extremely limited access to their clients and court proceedings.

Although the Iranian government maintains publicly that Baha’is are free to attend university, a *de facto* policy of preventing Baha’is from obtaining higher education remains in effect. Of the very few Baha’is who were enrolled in universities in recent years, most were expelled once their religious beliefs became known. Furthermore, young Baha’i schoolchildren in primary and high schools increasingly have been vilified, pressured to convert to Islam, and in some cases expelled on account of their religion.

In recent years, militant societal actors emboldened by Iranian law and policy have physically attacked Baha’i individuals and property with impunity. Since October 2010 in Rafsanjan, dozens of shops have been attacked and more than 20 Baha’i homes and businesses have received letters warning Baha’is of severe consequences for forming friendships with Muslims.

### Christians

During the reporting period, Iranian authorities continued to raid church services, harass and threaten church members, and arrest, convict, and imprison worshippers and church leaders. Christians, particularly Evangelical and other Protestants, are subject to harassment, arrests, close surveillance, and imprisonment; many reportedly have fled the country. Assyrian and Armenian Christian religious leaders also have been targeted. Since becoming president, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has called for an end to the development of Christianity in Iran. The government requires Evangelical Christian groups to submit membership lists.

---

IN JANUARY 2013, SAEED ABEDINI, AN IRANIAN-BORN AMERICAN PASTOR, WAS SENTENCED IN A TRIAL WITHOUT DUE PROCESS TO EIGHT YEARS IN PRISON FOR “THREATENING THE NATIONAL SECURITY OF IRAN” FOR HIS ACTIVITY SINCE 2000 IN THE CHRISTIAN HOUSE CHURCH MOVEMENT.

---

Christian converts face severe restrictions on religious practice and association, arbitrary arrests and detentions for practicing their faith, and violations of the right to life through state execution for apostasy and extrajudicial killings. Since June 2010, at least 300 Christians have been arbitrarily arrested and detained throughout the country, including in Arak, Bandar Abbas, Bandar Mahshahr, Ardabil, Tabriz, Khoramabad, Mashhad, Hamadan, Rasht, Shiraz, Isfahan, and Elam. Iranian authorities typically release prisoners, but leave the charges against them or their convictions in place to threaten them with re-imprisonment at any future time. At the end of the reporting period, at least a dozen Christians remain in prison.

## IRAN

---

In January 2013, Saeed Abedini, an Iranian-born American pastor, was sentenced in a trial without due process to eight years in prison for “threatening the national security of Iran” for his activity since 2000 in the Christian house church movement. Pastor Abedini had been in Iran since June 2012 to continue work to establish an orphanage and was arrested and imprisoned in September. Reportedly, he has spent several weeks in solitary confinement and was physically and psychologically abused by authorities in Evin prison.

In October 2012, five Iranian converts to Christianity—Mohammad Roghangir, Surush Saraee, Eskandar Rezaee, Shahin Lahooti and Massoud Rezaee—were arrested in a raid on a prayer gathering at a house church in Shiraz. They were charged with evangelism and are scheduled for trial in March 2013. The five men are members of the Church of Iran, one of the country’s largest house church movements. In February 2012, Iranian authorities raided a house church gathering in Shiraz, confiscated religious materials, and arrested 10 Christian converts. At the end of the reporting period, four remain in detention without charges—Mojtaba Hosseini, Homayoon Shokoohi, Vahid Hakkani, and Mohammad-Reza Paroei.

In January 2011, Behnam Irani, a pastor from Karaj was convicted of crimes against national security and sentenced to one year in prison. He started serving his sentence in May 2011 and learned in October that he would have to serve five years in connection with a previous conviction. He is reported to be in poor health and has not received proper medical attention. Farshid Fathi, a Christian convert arrested in Tehran in December 2010, was sentenced to a six year prison term in February 2012. Part of the evidence offered at trial was that Fathi possessed and unlawfully distributed Farsi language Bibles and Christian literature. He has spent a number of months in solitary confinement and remains in prison.

Christian pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, jailed since October 2009, was sentenced to death for apostasy in November 2010 by a court in Gilan province. Prosecutors acknowledged he had never been a Muslim as an adult but said the apostasy law still applies because he has Islamic ancestry. Rejecting his appeal in June 2011, the court suspended the death sentence contingent upon his recanting his faith, which he refused to do. Facing international pressure, officials released Nadarkhani in September 2012, only to re-arrest him on Christmas day and then release him days later in early January 2013.

### **Zoroastrians and Sabean Mandaean**

In recent years, members of the Zoroastrian community—numbering between 30,000 and 35,000 people—have come under increasing repression and discrimination. In 2011, a Zoroastrian man, Mohsen Sadeghipour, began serving a four-and-a-half year prison term for propaganda of the Zoroastrian faith. Three others—Mojtaba Ahmadi, Pouria Shahpari, and Mohammad Javad Shahpari—were convicted and imprisoned in 2010 on blasphemy and other trumped-up security-related charges. All four remain in prison.

Over the past few years, the unrecognized Sabean Mandaean religious community, numbering between 5,000 and 10,000 people, has been facing intensifying official harassment. Reports continue about Sabean Madaeans facing societal discrimination and pressure to convert to Islam, and being denied access to higher education. Many families have fled the country.

### **Jews and Anti-Semitism**

In recent years, official anti-Semitism has risen sharply in Iran, and members of the Jewish community have been targeted on the basis of real or perceived ties to Israel. President Ahmadinejad and other leaders made public remarks during the reporting period denying the Holocaust and calling for the elimination of the state of Israel. Officially-sanctioned anti-Semitic propaganda continued to appear in official statements, media outlets, publications, and books in 2012. In recent years, in line with a stepped-



## IRAN

---

up state-sponsored campaign, numerous programs broadcast on state-run television advanced anti-Semitic messages, a prominent newspaper held a Holocaust denial editorial cartoon contest, and the Iranian government sponsored a Holocaust denial conference. Anti-Semitic editorial cartoons depicting demonic and stereotypical images of Jews, along with Jewish symbols, also were published in the past year.

---

IN RECENT YEARS, OFFICIAL ANTI-SEMITISM HAS RISEN SHARPLY IN IRAN, AND MEMBERS OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY HAVE BEEN TARGETED ON THE BASIS OF REAL OR PERCEIVED TIES TO ISRAEL.

---

Official government discrimination against Jews continues to be pervasive, fostering a threatening atmosphere for the approximately 20,000-25,000 member Jewish community. According to the State Department, despite minimal restrictions on Jewish religious practice, education of Jewish children has become increasingly difficult, and distribution of Hebrew religious texts is strongly discouraged.

### **WOMEN'S RIGHTS**

The government's enforcement of its official interpretation of Shi'i Islam negatively affects the human rights of women in Iran, including their freedoms of movement, association, and thought, conscience, and religion or belief, as well as freedom from coercion in matters of religion or belief. The Iranian justice system does not grant women the same legal status as men. For example, testimony by a man is equivalent to the testimony of two women. Civil and penal code provisions, in particular those dealing with family and property law, discriminate against women.

During the reporting period, Iranian authorities heightened their enforcement of the strict dress code for women. By law, Iranian women, regardless of their religious affiliation or belief, must be covered from head to foot while in public. Social interaction between unrelated men and women is banned. Iran's "morality police" increased their presence throughout the country and more frequently stopped cars with young men and women inside to question their relationship.

Over the past few years, many leading women's rights activists have been arrested, and some remain in prison, for their involvement in the Campaign for Equality movement aimed at ending discrimination against women in the application of Islamic law in Iran. For example, Nasrin Sotoudeh, a member of the Equality movement, was sentenced to 11 years in prison (later reduced to six years) and barred from practicing law and from leaving the country for 20 years. She started a hunger strike in October 2012 to protest a travel ban imposed on her 12-year-old daughter. She ended the hunger strike in December after the travel ban was lifted. She remains in Evin prison, mostly in solitary confinement.

Women also have been sentenced to death under Islamic law. For example, Sakineh Ashtiani, an Azeri woman, was convicted of adultery in 2006 and sentenced to death by stoning. Unconfirmed reports in 2012 indicated that authorities no longer plan to carry out the stoning sentence, although the government has not clarified its position. She remains in prison in northwest Iran.

### **CRACKDOWN ON INTERNET FREEDOM, THE MEDIA, AND HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS**

According to human rights groups, throughout 2011 and 2012, Iranian authorities continued to restrict access to thousands of websites, particularly international news sources, the Green Movement, ethnic and religious minorities, and human rights groups. With the upcoming June 2013 presidential elections, the Iranian government is likely to crack down on journalists, activists, and netizens even further. Authorities have issued a "list of Internet offences" which includes content "contrary to the morals of society" and contrary to religious values, and Iran's "cyber police force" has arrested hundreds of individuals. In

## IRAN

---

February 2011, the Ministry of Intelligence arrested eight bloggers who had been critically discussing Islamic doctrine on the Internet. In January 2012, they were sentenced to prison terms ranging from five to nine years.

Iranian authorities regularly detain and harass journalists and bloggers who write anything critical of the Islamic revolution or the Iranian government and block websites. The UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran estimates at least 45 journalists and bloggers remain in prison as of the end of 2012. Several have been charged with being an “enemy of God,” “propaganda against the regime,” and “insulting the Supreme Leader.” Since the June 2009 disputed election, the Iranian government has engaged in cyber attacks on Persian and English language websites, which limited groups’ ability to send reports outside the country on human rights and religious freedom abuses.

In September 2012, human rights lawyer Mohammad Ali Dadkhah, a co-founder of the Center for Human Rights Defenders, began serving a nine-year prison sentence after being convicted of “membership in an organization seeking to overthrow the government” and spreading propaganda against the system through interviews with foreign media.” Human rights groups believe Dadkhah was targeted because he served as a lawyer for Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani and conducted some media interviews about his case in 2010 and 2011. Dadkhah is serving his sentence in Evin prison.

### UN REPORTS AND ACTIONS

In March 2011, the UNHRC created a Special Rapporteur position to investigate and report on human rights abuses in Iran, a longstanding USCIRF recommendation, which had not existed since 2002. In August 2011, Ahmed Shaheed, the former Maldivian foreign minister, started in his new role as Special Rapporteur. The Iranian government has not responded to the Special Rapporteur’s request to visit Iran, although various officials said publicly he would never be permitted in the country. On February 28, 2013, the Special Rapporteur released his most recent report to the UN Human Rights Council, which focused on a wide range of violations, including those faced by Baha’is, Christians, Sufi and Sunni Muslims, and dissident Shi’i Muslims. His report includes a detailed list of Baha’is and Christians in prison. In October 2012, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon issued his annual report on the situation of human rights in Iran, which included details of abuses, including arbitrary detentions and false imprisonment, against religious minorities, particularly Baha’is and Christians. In December 2012, for the 10th year in a row, the U.S. government co-sponsored and supported a successful UN General Assembly resolution on human rights in Iran, which passed 86 to 32, with 65 abstentions. The resolution condemned the Iranian government’s poor human rights record, including its continued abuses targeting religious minorities.

### **U.S. POLICY**

The U.S. government has not had diplomatic relations with the government of Iran for over 30 years, and U.S. law prohibits nearly all trade with Iran. The United States has imposed sanctions on Iran because of its sponsorship of terrorism, refusal to comply with International Atomic Energy Agency regulations regarding its nuclear program, and, in 2010 for the first time, severe human rights and religious freedom violations. According to the State Department, these sanctions are intended to target the Iranian government, not the people of Iran. As a result, there are a number of exemptions, including exports of U.S. agricultural and medical products, U.S. donations of humanitarian articles, and U.S. imports of Iranian carpets and certain food items.

The U.S. government continued to highlight publicly the Iranian government’s human rights and religious freedom abuses. During the reporting period, in multilateral fora and through public statements, high-

## IRAN

---

level U.S. officials urged the Iranian government to respect its citizens' human rights, including the right to religious freedom. For example, in January 2013 spokespersons from both the White House and State Department expressed concern and called for the release of Iranian-American pastor Saeed Abedini. In July 2012, the State Department released a statement marking 1,000 days that pastor Yousef Nadarkhani had been in prison, called for his immediate release, and condemned the Iranian government's treatment of ethnic and religious minorities. In February 2012, both the White House and State Department released statements citing reports that Pastor Nadarkhani's execution order had been renewed, and called for the lifting of the death sentence and for his immediate release.

Since 2010, the United States and the European Union (EU) have worked closely on a range of human rights issues in Iran. In April 2011, the EU imposed travel bans and asset freezes on 32 Iranian officials and entities responsible for serious human rights abuses. Since then, the EU has added 55 officials and entities bringing the number to 87. The United States and EU have issued a number of joint statements condemning human rights and religious freedom abuses in Iran.

On July 1, 2010, President Obama signed into law CISADA, the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act (P.L. 111-195), which highlights Iran's serious human rights violations, including suppression of religious freedom. CISADA requires the President to submit to Congress a list of Iranian government officials or persons acting on their behalf responsible for human rights and religious freedom abuses, bars their entry into the United States, and freezes their assets. President Obama issued an executive order in September 2010 sanctioning eight Iranian officials for having committed serious human rights abuses after the June 2009 elections. Since then, the President has added three more Iranian officials and four Iranian government entities to the list. USCIRF long had called for the U.S. government to identify Iranian officials and entities responsible for severe religious freedom violations and impose travel bans and asset freezes on those individuals, and had specifically identified seven of the officials named in the executive order and an eighth named in June 2011. No previous Iran sanction measures had provisions dealing with human rights violations. USCIRF worked with Congressional offices on the need to develop such sanctions.

In August 2012, the President signed into law the Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act of 2012 (H.R. 1905 / P.L. 112-239). This law enhances human rights-related provisions of previous Iran sanctions laws such as CISADA. In October, the administration issued Executive Order 13628, implementing the law by blocking the property of Iranians deemed to have committed censorship or limited free expression in Iran. Nevertheless, sanctions have not yet altered Iran's repression of dissent or its efforts to control the Internet.

The U.S. government seeks to increase Iranian citizens' access to information about international human rights standards and to publicize the Iranian government's human rights abuses through Voice of America radio and television broadcasts, the Persian-language version of the America.gov Web site, and the Persian-language radio station Radio Farda, which broadcasts to Iran. Additionally, since 2004, the U.S. government has funded a wide range of programs to support civil society, human rights, and the rule of law in Iran, as well as expand information and documentation of human rights abuses.

According to USAID, funding in 2012-2013 will continue to include support for civil society and advocacy, promoting the rule of law and human rights, and increasing access to alternative sources of information in Iran. In Fiscal Year 2012, no request was made for specific democracy or human rights programming, although some portion of the \$35 million requested for Near East democracy programs likely was used to support continued human rights and public diplomacy programming in Iran. In Fiscal year 2013, \$30 million was requested for similar programming.

In August 2011, the Secretary of State re-designated Iran as a country of particular concern. According to the State Department, "as an action under the IRFA, the secretary of state designated the existing ongoing

## IRAN

---

restrictions on certain imports from and exports to the country, in accordance with section 103(b) of the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions Accountability and Divestment Act of 2010, pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the act.”

### RECOMMENDATIONS

In response to the systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, and the repressive practices routinely imposed by the Iranian government, the U.S. government should continue to work closely with its European and other allies, in bilateral and multilateral fora, to apply pressure on the Iranian government through advocacy, diplomacy, and targeted sanctions with the aim of halting the government’s human rights and religious freedom violations.

#### **I. STOPPING ABUSES OF FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF AND SUPPORTING HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY**

In addition to continuing to designate Iran as a CPC, the U.S. government should continue to speak out publicly and frequently at the highest levels about the severe religious freedom abuses in Iran, and ensure that violations of freedom of religion or belief and related human rights are part of all formal and informal multilateral or bilateral discussions with the Iranian government, by calling on the Iranian government to:

- release the seven Baha’i leaders—Fariba Kamalabadi, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naemi, Saeid Rezaie, Mahvash Sabet, Behrouz Tavakkoli, and Vahid Tizfahm—and 10 Baha’i educators and administrators, as well as other Baha’is in prison on account of their religion or belief, and drop all pending charges against these and other Baha’is;
- rescind immediately laws that allow Baha’is to be killed with impunity, permit the Baha’i community to practice their faith in Iran, and allow full access for Baha’is to study in public universities without discrimination;
- release all Christians, including Saeed Abedini, Behnam Irani, Farshid Fathi, in prison on account of their religion or belief, and drop all pending charges against Christian converts;
- release Shi’i cleric Ayatollah Mohammad Kazemini Boroujerdi and his followers and other dissident Muslims, including Sufis, in prison on account of their religion or belief;
- release from prison women’s rights activists, including Nasrin Sotoudeh, who advocate for ending discrimination against women in the application of Islamic law, and Sakineh Ashtiani, who remains on death row for allegedly committing adultery;
- release from prison human rights defenders, activists, and journalists, including Muhammad Ali Dadkhah and Adolfattah Soltani, who have been targeted for reporting on human rights and religious freedom abuses and defending victims; and
- halt state-sponsored anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial, and cease all messages of hatred and intolerance, particularly toward Jews and Baha’is, in the government-controlled media and remove the government-appointed editor of *Kayhan*, Hossein Shariatmadari.

# IRAN

---

## **II. U.S. GOVERNMENT ACTIVITIES RELATED TO HUMAN RIGHTS AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM**

The U.S. government should:

- use appropriated Internet freedom funds to develop free, secure email access for use in Iran; facilitate the provision of high-speed internet access via satellite; and distribute immediately proven and field-tested counter-censorship programs in order to prevent the arrest and harassment of religious freedom and human rights activists and help them maintain their freedom of expression and legitimate expectations of privacy;
- ensure that funding to promote democracy and human rights in Iran includes support for effective initiatives advancing freedom of religion or belief, as well as ways to promote rule of law and human rights defenders programs that specifically seek to protect religious minorities; and
- fund U.S. public diplomacy entities adequately, such as Voice of America and Radio Farda, and expand and develop new programming focusing solely on the situation of human rights, including the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief, in Iran.

## **III. IMPOSING TARGETED SANCTIONS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM VIOLATIONS**

The U.S. government should:

- continue to identify Iranian government agencies and officials responsible for particularly severe violations of religious freedom, including but not limited to:
  - Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei;
  - President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad;
  - Sadegh Ardeshir Larijani, Head of the Judiciary;
  - Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, Chair, Guardian Council;
  - Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi, Assembly of Experts;
  - Hossein Shariatmadari, Managing Editor, Kayhan;
  - Mohammad Moghiseh, Presiding Judge of Branch 28 of the Islamic Revolutionary Courts;
  - Abbas Pir-Abbassi, Presiding Judge of Branch 26 of the Islamic Revolutionary Courts; and
  - Abolghassem Salavati, Presiding Judge of Branch 15 of the Islamic Revolutionary Courts; and
- continue to bar from entry into the United States and freeze the assets of Iranian government officials identified as having engaged in particularly severe religious freedom violations, including but not limited to those listed above, and, where appropriate, their immediate family members.

## IRAN

---

### IV. PROVIDING THE OPPORTUNITY FOR RELIGIOUS MINORITIES TO SEEK ASYLUM

The U.S. Congress should:

- reauthorize and make permanent the Lautenberg Amendment, which aids persecuted Iranian religious minorities and others seeking refugee status in the United States by establishing a presumption of eligibility and allowing fast-track processing to prevent backlogs in the countries that host their processing.

### V. PROMOTING FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF AND RELATED HUMAN RIGHTS IN MULTILATERAL FORA

The U.S. government should:

- call on the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) to follow up vigorously on Iran's compliance with the recommendations from the February 2010 UPR, including those related to freedom of religion or belief;
- continue to support an annual UN General Assembly resolution condemning severe violations of human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, in Iran, and calling for officials responsible for such violations to be held accountable, and press for a resolution condemning severe violations of human rights in Iran, including freedom of religion or belief, at the UNHRC;
- call on Iran to cooperate fully with the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights Situation in Iran, including allowing the Special Rapporteur to visit;
- call on the UNHRC to monitor carefully and demand Iran's compliance with the recommendations of those UN special representatives who have already visited Iran, particularly the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief (1995), the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (2003), the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression (2003), and the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living and on the right to non-discrimination in this context (2005); and
- encourage the UNHRC to continue to use its existing procedures to maintain oversight of conditions for freedom of religion or belief in Iran, including continued visits and reporting by the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, and other relevant special rapporteurs and working groups, to which Iran has issued a standing invitation.