KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom conditions in Iran remained poor. In February, then President Hassan Rouhani signed amendments to articles 499 and 500 of Iran’s penal code imposing prison time on those guilty of “insulting Islam” and conducting “deviant activity” that “contradicts or interferes with the sacred law of Islam.” In June, three Christians were arrested, charged, and sentenced to five years in prison each on the basis of these amendments. Iran also continued using charges of “corruption on Earth,” “enmity against God,” and national security-related charges to persecute religious minorities. In April, the Arak Criminal Court sentenced two men to death for “insulting the Prophet,” and upheld the sentence on appeal in August. Iran’s government also continued to arrest, charge, sentence, and jail scores of Christians on charges including “propaganda against the regime.” Christian converts from Islam faced particular targeting for persecution. Despite the prevalence of COVID-19 in Iran’s prisons, scores of religious minorities, including Christians, Baha’is, and Sunnis, were called to begin prison sentences. Iran also continued to spread antisemitism. It released the results of its third Holocaust denial cartoon contest in January. Several submissions critical of Israel contained explicitly antisemitic tropes. In December, a state media outlet criticized a Shab-e Yalda display reminiscent of a Jewish Sukkah as a “distortion.” Smaller religious communities, including nontheists, also faced severe persecution. While Iran’s government considers followers of the Yarsan faith to be Shi’a Muslims who practice Sufism, members identify as a distinct and separate religion and are estimated to number up to two million. The Yarsani community’s January bid to gain recognition under Iran’s constitution failed, and Iran’s National Defense University published an article in Spring 2021 calling the community a “security threat.”

Iran continues to detain those calling for greater religious freedom, including USCIRF Religious Prisoners of Conscience Golrokh Iraee and Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani. On April 12, 2021, Branch 26 of the Tehran Revolutionary Court sentenced Iraee in absentia to an additional year in prison, a two-year travel ban, and a two-year ban on participating in political organizations. Authorities arrested Iraee in 2016 for “insulting Islamic sanctities” after discovering an unpublished short story in her home criticizing the religiously-grounded practice of stoning adulterous women to death.

Iran continues to harass and imprison women who protest religious headscarf laws. In July, officials in Mashhad arrested five people for not observing “Shari’a criteria” after women modeled at a fabric store’s opening event without headscarves. Iran also continued detaining lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh despite serious health problems requiring multiple prison furloughs to receive medical treatment throughout the year. The Iranian government also targets and fails to protect members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community. Iran actively executes people who engage in same-sex relations, citing religious grounds. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) arrested a lesbian woman in November on charges including “supporting homosexuality.” In May, authorities failed to fully prosecute the honor killing of a 20-year-old gay nonbinary person.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Iran as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted sanctions on Iranian government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals’ assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations;
- Raise religious freedom and other human rights abuses in bilateral and multilateral negotiations with Iran’s government on issues of regional and international security;
- Work with members of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance as well as others throughout the international community to exert multilateral pressure on Iran to improve religious freedom conditions; and
- Press for the release of all religious prisoners of conscience, including Youcef Nadarkhani and Golrokh Ebrahimi Iraee.

The U.S. Congress should:
- Reauthorize and exercise oversight to ensure implementation of the Lautenberg Amendment, which aids persecuted Iranian religious minorities seeking refugee status in the United States, and extend this Amendment to religious minorities in Iran who are citizens of Afghanistan.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- Country Update: Religious Freedom Conditions in Iran
- Hearing: State-Sanctioned Religious Freedom Violations and Coercion by Saudi Arabia and Iran
- Podcast: Religious Restrictions in Iran
Throughout 2021, the government arrested scores of Baha’is across Iran. Many detained Baha’is were held incommunicado or taken to undisclosed locations. Ministry of Intelligence officials also searched the home of a Baha’i citizen and confiscated her belongings. Iranian universities continued to deny education to Baha’is on account of their faith. In November, Places Administration agents in Qaemshahr closed six Baha’i businesses. In August, officials from the Natural Resources Department of Mazandaran Province demolished the homes of three Baha’is. In December, the Execution of Imam Khomeini’s Order (EIKO) announced the auction of thirteen Baha’i farms in Iran. Many Baha’is are being forced to use the Khaveran mass grave site where victims of the 1988 prison massacres are buried.

Iran also continued to target Christians, especially Christian converts. In January, Christian converts Sam and Mariam Khosravi lost an appeal against a sentence for charges of “propaganda against the state,” months after a judge forced them to give up custody of their daughter on the basis of their religious beliefs. In February, the prosecutor’s office in Sarband summoned Christian convert Ibrahim Firouzi after he published six online videos regarding his mistreatment. After being jailed in Zahedan prison for “insulting the sacred,” Firouzi undertook a hunger strike until receiving assurances he would be freed. Iranian authorities released him on bail in late February but charges against him remain in place. In April 2021, Christian convert Hamid Ashouri was sentenced to ten months in prison on charges of “propaganda against the state,” which he began serving at Karaj Central Prison in July.

In April 2021, a bipartisan group of senators led by Ronald L. Wyden (D-OR) introduced S.Res. 183, condemning Iran’s treatment of Baha’is and citing USCIRF’s 2021 Annual Report. Representative Theodore E. Deutsch (D-FL) introduced a companion bill in the House, H.Res. 744, in October. That same month, members of Congress sent a bipartisan letter to the White House urging steps to promote greater internet freedom in Iran, which is often particularly critical for religious minority communities. In December, Senator Patrick J. Toomey (R-PA) and Senator Benjamin L. Cardin (D-MD) introduced a bill to impose mandatory sanctions on Iranian officials targeting dissidents inside and outside Iran, including dissidents actively supporting religious freedom.

On November 15, the U.S. Department of State designated Iran a CPC under IRFA and imposed as the relevant presidential action sanctions on Iranian officials who targeted peaceful protesters. Following Iran’s attempted kidnapping of an American-Iranian in New York who opposes religious headscarf laws, the State Department sanctioned Iranian officials who target dissidents abroad.