



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

COUNTRY UPDATE: IRAN

July 2025

Vicky Hartzler
Chair

Asif Mahmood
Vice Chair

Commissioners

Ariela Dubler
Mohamed Elsanousi
Maureen Ferguson
Stephen Schneck
Meir Soloveichik

Erin D. Singhsinsuk
Executive Director

USCIRF's Mission

*To advance international
freedom of religion or
belief, by independently
assessing and unflinchingly
confronting threats to this
fundamental right.*

By Hilary Miller, Policy Analyst

State Perpetration of Religious Freedom Violations in the Islamic Republic of Iran

Introduction

Iranian authorities continue to systematically target members of minority faith communities, including Baha'is, Jews, Christians, Sufis, Sunni Muslims, and other non-Shi'a Muslim groups. The government also persecutes individuals who dissent from the government's interpretation of Islam and systematically enforces religiously grounded policies that limit religious freedom for Iranians. In April 2025, the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council adopted a [resolution](#) denouncing the Iranian government's "systematic discrimination, arbitrary detentions, and violations of religious freedom" and specifically called on the government to cease its repression of religious minorities.

In the more than two years since the brutal state killing of [Mahsa Zhina Amini](#) for wearing "improper hijab," authorities have intensified their crackdown on Iranian women and girls who refuse to comply with the government's religiously grounded mandatory hijab law. The government has also engaged local proxies in Europe, such as the Foxtrot and Rumba gangs in Sweden, and other criminal networks in the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Belgium to target Jews and Jewish sites in these countries. It has also continued to advance antisemitic propaganda in its official media directed at foreign audiences.

This country update evaluates the Islamic Republic of Iran's continued violations of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). It highlights the government's recent targeting of religious minorities, ongoing use of religiously grounded policies to restrict FoRB for women and girls, and use of the state's forced imposition of Islam within the judicial system to violate FoRB for religious minorities. The report also assesses Iran's global campaign to target Jewish sites and people abroad through antisemitic propaganda and physical attacks. In the wake of a military escalation with Israel and the United States in June 2025, reports suggest the Iranian government has begun a systematic crackdown on religious minorities.



ForB Violations Following Regional Escalation

Following U.S. and Israeli military strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities and other targets in June 2025, the Iranian government dramatically escalated its crackdown on dissidents and religious minorities. Iran's top judicial chief instructed prosecutors throughout the country to expedite trials and intensify punishments for individuals tried on religiously-based charges, including "Corruption on Earth" and "Enmity against God," in an effort to extinguish perceived internal threats including espionage. Iran's parliament also passed a law imposing the death penalty for cooperation with Israel, the US, or "hostile groups" on the basis that such actions constitute "Corruption on Earth."

Iranian authorities have systematically carried out arbitrary mass detentions of religious minorities, including Baha'is, Jews, Christians, and Sunnis. After Israel carried out targeted strikes on Evin Prison, prison authorities transferred a group of Christian prisoners without notice to the Greater Tehran Central Penitentiary and Qarchak women's prison, where they are being held in poor, overcrowded conditions. Iranian state media has also escalated its antisemitic rhetoric in wake of the attacks. In July, Iranian news agency published a propaganda music video with lyrics that explicitly threaten Jews. This inflammatory rhetoric has made Jews in Iran feel increasingly insecure and threatened.

Targeting of Religious Minorities

Baha'is

Baha'is are the largest unrecognized non-Muslim religious minority in Iran, numbering at approximately 300,000 members. The Iranian Constitution does not recognize the Baha'i faith. Iran's government defames Baha'is as enemies of the state and uses certain provisions of the Penal Code to target them. Authorities have continued to vigorously enforce the state's anti-Baha'i policies by carrying out systematic arrests, enforced disappearances, and various forms of degrading treatment such as employment discrimination, house raids, seizure of assets, and destruction of Baha'i property and burial sites. Several of the "Yaran-e-Iran" or "Friends in Iran"—the former leadership of the Iranian Baha'i community arrested in 2008—[remain](#) in prison and at risk. In February 2025, an Iranian prosecutor rejected the findings of a forensic medical report that deemed [Afif Naeimi](#), another Yaran-e-Iran member, unfit to serve his sentence in a Karaj prison because of his deteriorating heart situation.

Baha'is also face severe economic discrimination for adhering to their religious practice. In May 2025, Iranian authorities forcibly shuttered four Baha'i-owned businesses in Urmia, penalizing the owners for not working in observance of a Baha'i religious holiday. In June, authorities targeted Baha'i business owners in Shiraz with legally ambiguous procedures, forced pledges, and interrogations about their religious practices, including closing shops in observance of holidays.

In February 2025, Judge Davoud Khatir [sentenced](#) nine Baha'is in Tabriz, each to one year in prison, on charges related to membership in a group “opposing the Islamic Republic of Iran.” That month, Iranian intelligence forces raided the Shiraz home of [Mahboub Habibi](#), a member of the Baha'i faith whom authorities previously sentenced for “propaganda against the regime,” seizing electronic devices including laptops and phones. In March, Iranian intelligence authorities also raided the Isfahan home of Faraz Agha Babaie and seized his personal belongings. Authorities later summoned Babaie for interrogation, during which he was physically assaulted. That month, after authorities released [Ardeshtir Fanaian](#) from Semnan Prison, community leaders learned that he was subjected to cruel treatment, including spending half of his six-year prison sentence in solitary confinement. In May, security forces in Yazd raided the homes of six Baha'i citizens, seizing religious books, mobile phones, and laptops. In June, the Fars Province Court of Appeals ruled to recharge a group of 26 Baha'is previously acquitted after being arrested in 2016 with “propaganda against the regime.”

The government has particularly targeted Baha'i women. In December 2024, a group of [UN experts](#) condemned the Iranian government's systematic targeting of Baha'i women through arrests, interrogation, enforced disappearances, home raids, confiscation of personal belongings, and limitations on freedom of movement. In March 2025, Iranian intelligence officials raided the home of Emilia Hakiman in Zahedan, seizing her religious books, mobile phones, and other technology after a two-hour search. In April, the Court of First Instance upheld the Court of Appeals' initial ruling of an 11-year prison sentence for [Shahdokht Khanjani](#), a Baha'i woman from Saman sentenced in 2024 for her religious activity. That same month, Branch 104 of the Qaemshahr Criminal Court sentenced Maryam Zabihi to 10 months in prison on charges of “educational activities contrary to Islamic principles.” Days later, authorities arrested Golnoush Nasiri and Farideh Moradi, who are from Mashhad, and transferred both women to Vakilabad Prison to begin serving their eight-month prison sentences. In May, acting on an order signed by Tehran's Prosecutor General Saeed Mortazavi, security agents stormed the home of Sonia Todiee in Babol, confiscating her phone, books, and other personal belongings.

Iranian authorities also continue to deny members of the Baha'i faith proper burial according to the community's ritual practice. UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief Nazila Ghanea rebuked these denials in March 2025. In the last year, Baha'i families in Rafsanjan

have been forced to pay large sums of money to obtain burial permits for their deceased loved ones, despite not receiving any services in return. Furthermore, authorities continue to tolerate the digging of deep trenches outside of Baha'i cemeteries, which is part of an ongoing effort to block their access to the burial site. Iranian authorities in Rafsanjan have also prohibited Baha'is from using traditional mortuary facilities—forcing members to wash and prepare bodies for burial in the open grounds of the Behesht Zahra cemetery. In May, the family of Ahdieh Shojaie, a Baha'i woman from Bagheyn, was required to pay exorbitant fees to local authorities to bury her over 100 kilometers from the community's Kerman cemetery, which was forcibly closed in 2018. In June, authorities continued to impose severe restrictions limiting the community's ability to access the Golestan Javid Baha'i cemetery in Bonjourd.

Christians

Christians make up less than one percent of the population in Iran. Iran has continued its crackdown on Christians, in particular Christian converts from Islam whom the regime targets for their religious activity and promoting so-called “Zionist Christianity” in an effort to broadly link Christians to Israel. For exercising their right of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including for changing their religion or belief, Christian converts from Islam face grave danger to their personal safety in Iran. A group of Iranian Christian converts in Panama, whose [temporary](#) visas in June 2025 were extended by the government of Panama after a global advocacy [campaign](#), remain at risk of being [repatriated](#) to Iran. USCIRF has also [called](#) for the U.S. Congress to permanently reauthorize the [Lautenberg Amendment](#), a family reunification program which aids persecuted religious minorities from Iran seeking protection in the United States.

In March 2025, Branch 26 of the Tehran Revolutionary Court sentenced Christian convert Narges Nasri to 16 years in prison. Her charges included “propaganda activity contrary to Islamic law,” “membership in opposition groups” for her involvement in house churches, and “propaganda against the state” for social media posts supporting protests against mandatory hijab laws and other FoRB violations. In April 2025, Evin Prison authorities denied medical treatment for Iranian Christian convert Laleh Saati, sentenced in 2024 for “acting against national security through connections with Zionist Christian organizations.” In April, an Islamic Revolutionary Court in Tabriz sentenced Mehdi Rahimi

and Kia Nourinia to 12 years' imprisonment in absentia for their possession of Bibles and other Christian literature found in their home during an unlawful house raid in November 2024. Both Christian converts were convicted under Article 500 of the Penal Code for "propaganda activity of deviant Christian Zionist beliefs opposed to the system of the Islamic Republic of Iran."

Iranian officials have also continued targeting Christian leaders. In February 2025, authorities re-arrested [Joseph Shahbazian](#), a Christian pastor and house church leader previously sentenced for "leading an organization that aims to disrupt national security." In May, activists reported that the Revolutionary Court in Bandar Anzali, Gilan Province, will hear a new case against house church leader [Abdolreza Ali Haghnejad](#). He was previously charged and sentenced for "acting against national security" and "promoting Zionist Christianity."

Iranian authorities continue to mistreat religious minorities in prison. In February 2025, authorities detained Christian convert [Naser Navard Goltapeh](#) and later denied him medical treatment after he suffered a stroke from a 35-day hunger strike protesting prison conditions. In April, authorities also denied Amir-Ali Minaei medical support when his heart condition rapidly declined after he began a hunger strike protesting his detention in Evin Prison. Minaei has been detained since 2024, serving a sentence of three years and seven months for "propaganda activities against the regime through establishing a house-church." In May 2025, Armenian Christian [Hakop Gochumyan](#)—sentenced in 2024 to 10 years in prison for "engaging in deviant proselytizing activity" and leadership in "a network of evangelical Christianity"—wrote a letter detailing Iranian authorities' cruel treatment of him while in detention, including psychological torture, denial of due process, and threats to his family.

Jews

As of 2025, approximately 8,500 Jews live in Iran, primarily in Tehran, Isfahan, Yazd, and Shiraz. The current situation of Iranian Jews remains precarious. Iran's government officially recognizes Judaism but publicly demonizes Jews as enemies of Islam, denies and distorts the history of the Holocaust, surveils Jewish houses of worship, establishes Jews-only polling stations to intimidate community members, coerces community representatives to vocalize support for the government, and holds Jews collectively responsible for Israeli military actions. By promoting antisemitic ideas and tolerating

attacks at Jewish holy sites in Iran, authorities have nurtured a hostile environment in which Iranian Jews feel increasingly threatened. The regional escalation in June 2025 has exacerbated these insecurities.

Government leaders, state media, and clerics loyal to the regime have repeatedly used antisemitic tropes to promote inflammatory and intolerant rhetoric about Jews, including the idea that Jews are sub-human, deviant infidels. In January, officials convened Iran's third annual Holocaust cartoon, caricature, and poster competition, which promotes Holocaust distortion and denial. That month, Iranian Member of Parliament Alireza Abbasi made comments in an interview that invoked Holocaust denial, distortion, and inversion.

During Ramadan in 2025, the state-run Iranian Broadcasting Authority aired a TV show depicting an antisemitic caricature of a Jewish man—including a long crooked nose and distorted face—performing sorcery. In March 2025 on international Qods Day, Ayatollah Ahmad Alam Al-Hoda—the Friday prayer imam for the city of Mashhad—delivered a speech in which he claimed that "all the stories about the Holocaust are a complete lie" and accused England of "inventing the idea of the Holocaust." Also that month, individuals reportedly affiliated with the paramilitary Basij organization and Hezbollah in Hamadan engaged in intimidating expression at the entrance of the tomb of Esther and Mordechai, a Jewish religious site.

Sunni Muslims

Sunni Muslims are the largest religious minority in Iran and constitute roughly five to 10 percent of the Muslim population. The government has continued to systematically target Sunni Muslims through executions, arrests, disappearances of prominent clergy, destruction of homes, and denial of building permits. In April 2025, five Sunni Muslim men were executed in Vakilabad Prison in Mashhad for their religious identity. Under extreme pressure by prison authorities, each detainee was subject to forced confession to justify their executions. Days later, Iranian authorities executed a Sunni religious leader in Mashhad for his religious activity. During the interrogation, intelligence agents reportedly taunted him over his faith in the hours before his execution, casting aspersions about the Sunni minority by calling Sunnis dogs and terrorists. In May, authorities deployed security forces to the Makki mosque in Zahedan—one of Iran's largest Sunni mosques—after prominent Sunni cleric Molavi Abdolhamid spoke out against the

government's recent arrests of Sunni imams. Molavi has previously denounced the Iranian government, in particular for its role in the so-called "Bloody Friday" massacre of 2022, when state forces killed almost 100 protesters leaving a mosque during protests in southeastern Iran.

Other Religious Minorities

Throughout 2025, Iranian prison authorities continued to deny needed medical care to [Farzaneh Gharehassanlou](#), a Gonabadi Sufi jailed at Vakilbad Prison in Mashhad, and her husband [Dr. Hamid Gharehassanlou](#). Both were arrested in November 2022 for participating in an event commemorating a young woman killed by security forces while protesting the state killing of Mahsa Zhina Amini. During interrogations, both were [tortured](#) into confessing to religiously grounded charges, including "corruption on Earth." Gharehassanlou, a healthcare worker herself, continues to suffer from complete sensory loss on the left side of her body as a result of medical mistreatment by Iranian prison authorities.

In January 2025, authorities placed [Abolfazl Pour-Hosseini](#), a member of the Erfan-e-Halgheh spiritualist movement, in solitary confinement after he ended a hunger strike in protest of unfair prison conditions and new charges against him handed down in 2024. For nearly two months, prison authorities repeatedly denied Pour-Hosseini's wife and children visits to Karaj Central Prison, where he is serving a five-year prison sentence. In June 2025, authorities reportedly arrested 19 members of the Yamani religious movement, an offshoot of Shi'ism, during a religious gathering and detained them in Vakilabad Prison in Mashad.

Sikhs first settled in Iran in the early 20th century. At its peak, the community numbered roughly 5,000. After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and particularly throughout the 1980s during the Iran-Iraq war, Sikhs left Iran because of severe religious restrictions imposed by the government and because of economic limitations caused by the conflict. As of 2025, there are fewer than 100 Sikh families residing in Tehran, Zahedan, and Bandar Abbas. Without constitutional recognition, Sikhs face certain forms of discrimination like other non-Muslim religious minorities in Iran.

Government-Forced Religious Compliance

Mandatory Hijab Laws

The Iranian government has intensified its [enforcement](#), including through violence, of laws that systematically repress FoRB for Iranian women and girls. Authorities target Iranians who dissent from religiously grounded mandatory hijab laws with coercive measures, including arbitrary detention, flogging, interrogations, and shutting down their social media accounts. In March 2025, Iranian judicial authorities arrested and later interrogated a group of women journalists in Tehran who removed their headscarves during a public demonstration against the government's religiously grounded hijab policy. In May, local religious authorities prohibited women from attending the Islamic Republic's Football Federation's national team soccer game in Mashhad. The government-backed Astan Quds Razavi organization and Ahmad Alamolhoda, Ayatollah Khamenei's representative in the province, reportedly said the match could proceed on the condition that women were prohibited from entering the stadium.

In March 2025, the UN Fact-Finding Mission on Iran released a [report](#) noting that Iranian women and girls "continue to face systematic discrimination, in law and in practice" with respect to the enforcement of the mandatory hijab laws against their personal religious beliefs. The Iranian government is leveraging more sophisticated tools and surveillance technologies—including the installation of cameras on residential and commercial buildings and equipping over 50,000 police officers with body cameras—to enforce mandatory hijab laws. In Isfahan, authorities have reportedly started to use contactless payment readers and surveillance cameras to identify women who defy compulsory hijab. Authorities are also sending threatening messages to women who dissent from religious hijab laws and to their families as well.

Judicial Irregularities on a Religious Basis

As of late May 2025, Iranian authorities have executed approximately 478 individuals during the year, including on religiously based charges such as *moharabeh* (waging war against God) and *esfad-fil-arz* (corruption on Earth). Those targeted for such charges include both religious minorities and individuals who have been alleged to dissent from the state's interpretation of Islam. In June 2025, amid the military escalation with Israel and the United States, Iran's top judiciary official instructed prosecutors throughout the country to expedite trials and impose harsher punishments for individuals charged

with *moharabeh* and *esfad-fil-arz* as a way to crack down on purported espionage or collaboration with Israel and the United States. On June 17, Iran's Parliament approved a motion to fast-track a bill that allows for greater use of the death penalty for these religiously based charges. Of the approximately 152 individuals that Iran's government executed in May 2025 alone, roughly half involved religiously grounded *qisas* cases in which Islamic jurisprudence prescribes retributive justice.

Judicial authorities have also prosecuted Iranians for blasphemy, or *sabb al-nabi* (insulting the Prophet). In March, pop music artist Mehdi Yarrahi produced a song that encouraged Iranian women to defy the country's mandatory hijab law. He was subjected to 74 lashes, a religiously grounded punishment issued by Tehran's moral security prosecutor. In April, Branch 6 of the Criminal Court One of Tehran Province sentenced Iranian singer Amirhossein Maghsoudou to death for "insulting the Prophet." In a separate case in 2024, Maghsoudou was sentenced to 10 years in prison for "promoting immorality and indecency."

Promotion of Antisemitism Abroad

The government of Iran is directly engaging criminal networks abroad to carry out attacks against Jewish targets and make Jews in Europe unsafe. In January, Iran recruited a Georgian drug trafficker to assassinate a rabbi in Azerbaijan. While the plot was ultimately foiled, it was later reported that members of Iran's Quds Force paid \$200,000 to carry out the attack and recruited a local Azerbaijani to surveil the rabbi's movements. Iranian authorities have actively recruited gangs throughout Europe, in particular Sweden, to carry out attacks on Israeli embassies and Jewish sites, including houses of worship, memorial centers, restaurants, and community centers. Following the June 2025 regional military escalation, Iran has also escalated its targeting of Jewish sites and individuals abroad. In July, Danish authorities arrested a man recruited by Iranian intelligence authorities to gather information on possible attacks on Jewish targets in Germany. Days later, British authorities released a report detailing Iranian government efforts to activate proxy cells to kill or kidnap Jewish individuals in the country.

Iranian authorities are also spreading antisemitism online and through official foreign media channels. For example, the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting network uses Spanish-language media to promote antisemitic myths and ideas, including Jewish power over Hollywood and Holocaust revisionism. Through IRIB's PressTV and its Spanish-language counterpart, HispanTV, Iranian authorities are also pushing the "Plan Andinia" conspiracy. This myth is anchored in the tropes of Jewish people hoarding power, money, and influence and plotting a "secret plan" to establish a second Zionist state in the Patagonia region of Argentina and Chile.

Conclusion

The government of Iran remains an egregious violator of freedom of religion or belief. Authorities continue to target religious minorities relentlessly, including Baha'is, Christians, Jews, Sunnis, and other non-Muslim groups; repress Iranian women with religiously grounded policies; and enforce religious interpretations on Iranians regardless of their religious beliefs. Outside its borders, Iran is sponsoring a global campaign of antisemitism by recruiting local proxies to carry out attacks against Jewish sites and individuals and by using its international media outreach to promote anti-Jewish ideas. Iran's systematic, ongoing, and egregious policies and actions reaffirm the designation as a country of particular concern by the U.S. Department of State.



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Professional Staff

Michael Ardovino
Policy Analyst

Susan Bishai
Senior Policy Analyst

Mollie Blum
Policy Analyst

Guillermo Cantor
Director of Research and Policy

Mingzhi Chen
Supervisory Policy Advisor

Andrew Hamm
Public Affairs Associate

Sema Hasan
Senior Policy Analyst

Thomas Kraemer
Chief Administrative Officer

Kirsten Lavery
Supervisory Policy Analyst

Veronica McCarthy
Public Affairs Specialist

Hilary Miller
Policy Analyst

Nora Morton
Operations Specialist

Molly Naylor-Komyatte
Policy Analyst

Dylan Schexnaydre
Policy Analyst

Katherine Todd
Policy Analyst

Scott Weiner
Supervisory Policy Analyst

Kurt Werthmuller
Deputy Director of Research and Policy

Nathan Wineinger
Chief of Public Affairs

Jean Wu
Policy Analyst

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan legislative branch agency established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.