

KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, religious freedom conditions in Iran remained egregiously poor. As in years past, the government responded to calls for reform by systematically cracking down on religious minorities. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the country has been governed under the religious doctrine of *Velayat-e Faqih* (rule of the jurist); its supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, is a religious scholar appointed by the 88-member Assembly of Experts. Iran harasses, fines, and arrests those who dissent from its interpretation of Ja'afri Shi'a Islam. The government uses its official religious interpretation as an ongoing basis for denying freedom of religion and belief to citizens who express dissent through peaceful protest. Under Iran's Penal Code, *moharebeh* (enmity against God) is vaguely defined and often used for political purposes; both this charge and *sabb al-nabi* (insulting the prophet) are capital crimes. Apostasy is not codified as a crime in the Iranian Penal Code, but detainees are still tried as apostates because the constitution mandates the application of Shari'a to any cases that the law does not explicitly address. In June 2019, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif [claimed](#) Iran's [execution](#) of members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community was necessary according to "moral principles."

USCIRF [documented](#) a particular uptick in the persecution of Baha'is and local government officials who supported them in 2019. Iran's government [blamed](#) Baha'is—without evidence—for widespread popular protests, accusing the community of collaboration with Israel, where the Baha'i World Centre is located. Iran's government also continued to promote hatred against Baha'is and other religious minorities on traditional and social media channels. In July,

Twitter [banned](#) several official Iranian media accounts for incitement against Baha'is in Iran.

The Iranian government also targeted adherents of Sufi orders, which emphasize and practice Islamic mysticism, for "following a deviant sect" of the religion. Sufis who protested the house arrest of their spiritual leader, Dr. Noor Ali Tabandeh, faced ongoing harassment and mistreatment. Iran's government also interfered in the selection of a successor to the leader of the Nematollahi Gonbadi Sufi community, who passed away in December 2019 following medical mistreatment and months under house arrest.

Christians, especially those who converted from Islam, also were persecuted and imprisoned for practicing their faith. In May, Iran forcibly closed an Assyrian church in Tabriz. In December in Mashhad, authorities destroyed the grave of the only Christian pastor in Iran to have been executed for apostasy. Iran also twice delayed a sentencing hearing for Assyrian pastor Victor Bet Tamraz, his wife Shamiram Isavi, and three Christian converts from Islam. Pastor Bet Tamraz was charged in 2015 with "conducting evangelism" and "illegal house church activities."

Women who peacefully protested the government's mandatory religious head covering were summoned, interrogated, and arrested throughout 2019. These included three women sentenced to prison for [handing out flowers](#) on the Tehran metro to protest the religious head covering mandate. Judge Mohammed Moghiseh reportedly threatened the women during the hearing and [denied them access to a lawyer](#). In several instances, judges imposed egregious sentences—beyond those allowed under Iranian law—against these women.

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;
- Press for the release of all religious prisoners of conscience, including [Youcef Nadarkhani](#), [Golrokh Ebrahimi Iraee](#), and [Robert Levinson](#); and
- Reauthorize and ensure implementation of the Lautenberg Amendment, which aids persecuted Iranian religious minorities seeking refugee status in the United States.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** [Global Efforts to Counter Anti-Semitism](#)
- **Policy Brief:** [Increased Persecution of Iran's Baha'i Community in 2019](#)
- **Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** more than 100 prisoners from Iran added

Background

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a theocratic, authoritarian state with restricted political participation. Ninety to 95 percent of the population are Shi'a Muslim, while Sunni Muslims account for 5–10 percent. Approximately 0.3 percent ascribe to other religions, including the Baha'i faith, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Judaism. While the Jaafari (Twelver) school of Shi'a Islam is the official religion, the constitution extends full respect to the five major Sunni schools. It also recognizes Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians as protected minorities.

Five of the parliament's 290 seats are reserved for religious minorities—two for Armenian Christians and one each for Assyrian/Chaldean Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians. There are two Hindu temples, and Buddhism has historic influences. Iran is home to several other religious groups that face persecution, including Mandeans, Yarsanis, nonbelievers, and followers of spiritual movements. In December 2016, President Hassan Rouhani publicly released a nonbinding Charter on Citizens' Rights that promised recognition of all religious identities and nondiscrimination, but religious minorities have seen little change based on this document.

Persecution of Religious Minorities

In March, several Sufis were convicted on spurious national security charges and sentenced to [prison](#), lashings, internal exile, and social media bans. At the end of 2019, scores of Sufis remained incarcerated at [Fashafuyeh](#) and [Qarchak](#) prisons. Several were [denied medical care](#). Dr. Tabandeh, spiritual leader of the Nematollahi Gonbadi Sufi community, began a [hunger strike](#) in November 2019. He was hospitalized, denied access to his doctors and advisors, and after [severe medical malpractice](#), died in December. Dr. Tabandeh had appointed Alireza Jazbi as his successor, but at year's end Tabandeh's nephew, Mohammed Tabandeh, who is linked to Iran's Ministry of Intelligence, was contesting Jazbi for leadership of the movement with the assistance of an anti-Sufi cleric linked closely to senior Iranian government officials.

Iran's nearly 300,000 Christians include traditional Armenian and Assyrian/Chaldean churches and newer Protestant and evangelical communities. Iran continued to target Christian converts from Islam; in July 2019, for example, the Intelligence Ministry [arrested eight Christian converts](#) in Bushehr and sent them to solitary confinement. In May, Intelligence Minister Mahmoud Alavi [announced](#) efforts to "counter the advocates of Christianity" and his ministry summoned people in Hamdan who showed interest in the faith. USCIRF Religious Prisoner of Conscience and Christian convert [Youcef Nadarkhani](#) remained in Evin Prison at year's end and went on a [three-week hunger strike](#) in September after the government rejected his sons' refusal to study Islam.

In February, three Torah scrolls were [stolen](#) from the Ezra Yagoub synagogue in Tehran, but police did not investigate. On December 16, Ayatollah Khamenei [praised](#) a French Holocaust denier on Twitter. A follower of spiritual leader Mohammed Ali Taheri was arrested in March and put into solitary confinement in Evin Prison. Two other followers were [sentenced](#) to prison and a 100 million toman (\$3,000) fine in June following a ten-minute trial. In August, Judge Moghiseh sentenced a Taheri follower to 20 years in prison on charges including "insulting the sacred." In November, the president of the Zoroastrian Association of Yazd Province [criticized](#) hiring discrimination against Zoroastrians, restrictions on religious observance, and extralegal activity regarding Zoroastrian-held land.

Iran and Anti-Semitism

At a USCIRF [hearing](#) on anti-Semitism on January 8, 2020, U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism Elan Carr stated that Iran is the "world's chief trafficker in anti-Semitism" and that "anti-Semitism isn't ancillary to the ideology of the Islamic Republic of Iran. It is a central foundational component of the ideology of that regime, and we have to be clear about it, and we have to confront it and call it out for what it is."

Women and Religious Freedom

In April, Iran's Guidance Patrol (*Gasht-e Ershad*) in Tehran [summoned](#) hundreds of women to its headquarters for driving or riding in cars without headscarves. The women were forced to promise to cover their heads in cars. USCIRF Religious Prisoner of Conscience [Golrokh Iraee](#) was [released](#) on bail from Evin Prison in April 2019 but rearrested in November following a [conviction](#) by Judge Iman Afshari of Branch 26 of the Tehran Revolutionary Court for "insulting the supreme leader" and "propaganda against the state." Iraee had been jailed in 2016 for an unpublished story criticizing the practice of stoning women to death for adultery. In August 2019, Judge Afshari [sentenced](#) Saba Kord Afshari to an unenforceable 24 years in prison for protesting the mandatory head covering. Lawyer Nasrin Soutoudeh was sentenced to [38 years in prison and 148 lashes](#) after defending women who had removed their headscarves in public as a protest.

Key U.S. Policy

In 2019, the United States escalated its "maximum pressure" strategy against Iran with the positioning of the [USS Abraham Lincoln](#) aircraft carrier in the Persian Gulf and President Donald J. Trump's April 2019 [designation](#) of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a foreign terrorist organization. The United States also imposed sanctions on [cyber attackers](#) and [entities that support](#) the IRGC and Basij militia. In November, the U.S. Department of the Treasury [sanctioned](#) Mohammed Mohammadi Golpayegani for his role in the systematic persecution of Baha'is, one of the U.S. government's most explicit designations to date on religious freedom grounds. In December 2019, the Treasury Department also [sanctioned](#) two "Hanging Judges" for severe violations of religious freedom in Iran. On December 18, the State Department [redesignated](#) Iran as a CPC under IRFA and reimposed existing ongoing travel restrictions on Iranian individuals connected with the commission of serious human rights abuses.

At the second [Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom](#) in July 2019, Vice President Michael R. Pence spoke about Iran's violations of religious freedom and [called on Iran](#) to free Pastor Bet Tamraz and his wife. President Trump also [met](#) with the couple's daughter [Dabrina Bet Tamraz](#). In September, Vice President Pence and Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo [chaired an event](#) at the UN highlighting the Bet Tamraz family and other religious persecution survivors.

While approximately 12 religiously persecuted Iranians were admitted to the United States in 2019 under the bipartisan Lautenberg Amendment, nearly 80 fully vetted Iranians remained in Vienna, Austria, at the end of the reporting period awaiting final approval to fly to the United States for resettlement.