

It is my honor to share some highlights regarding the systematic discrimination and harassment of religious minorities in Iran. As I present this report, a total of 249 members of religious minorities are known to be in prison. They include 184 Sunnis, 36 Bahais, 21 Christians, 6 Sufi Gonabadi Dervishes, 1 Yarsan and one member of Erfan Halgheh.

Iran's minorities suffer from systematic and pernicious discrimination, regardless of their standing in the Constitution. As a matter of fact, one could argue that the Constitutional recognition of Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians is an institutional designation of these groups as second-class citizens, and a justification for discriminatory practices against them. Non-designated minorities, particularly the Bahai suffer from more systemic and erratic persecution.

Some of the most recent examples of repressive measures against religious minorities are:

- 1) Discrimination and propaganda
- 2) Lack of Resources
- 3) Control and Surveillance

This report will focus on these areas and when possible, highlight the comments of the communities' leadership regarding their status.

### **1. Discrimination and propaganda:**

- Iran's recognized minorities are used as propaganda tools for the regime, to promote a facade of tolerance and acceptance, while their real experiences indicate otherwise. In April, President of Tehran's Zoroastrian Association, Afshin Namiranian praised the Islamic Republic's Constitution and reprimanded members of his faith who see themselves as targets of discrimination. Yet, a month later, in May, Sepanta Niknam, a Zoroastrian civil servant who had registered for the sixth term of the city council in Tehran was disqualified on the grounds of non-adherence to Islam. This is not the first time that Mr. Niknam was disqualified from serving as an elected leader due to his religion.
- The Sunni population suffers from systematic discrimination in government employment, with a few token exceptions. Sunni religious leader and Friday Imam of Zahedan, Molavi AbdolHamid has issued numerous statements and made pleas to halt the discriminatory treatment of his Sunni community. He has criticized the "Planning Council of Sunni Schools" as an instrument positioned to "take over all Sunni religious affairs and apply pressure and surveillance of all institutions in different parts of the country." In May, he criticized the pressure imposed on the Sunni population to participate in the elections and stated that given the ongoing deprivations and discrimination experienced by Sunnis, it is unrealistic to expect Sunnis to engage in the elections.
- It also suffers from disproportionate levels of poverty and unemployment which I will address in the next section. Yet, Iranian officials try to whitewash the experiences of

Sunnis in the name of unity. In a press conference, targeting a Sunni audience, Hojjatoleislam Asgar, encouraged all religions to participate in “Hafteye Vahdat,” or Unity Week. Citing unity and empathy in Islam, he discouraged the feeling of discrimination, rather the act of it and stated “feeling of discrimination is more deadly than discrimination itself.”

- Among the Christians, Robert Beglarian, the representative of the Armenian community who walks a fine line of praising the regime to protect his community while advocating for them, in a careful conversation revealed to Mohabbat News that his community suffers from systematic discrimination in employment, particularly in government offices. His counterpart, Ara Shahverdian delivered remarks where he praised the freedom availed to the Christians to freely practice their religion, without addressing the imprisonment of the converts and closure of churches. This type of “representation” has also occurred with the Assyrian community where the community leaders do not publicly object to the repressive measures against their community, such as the closure of their churches.
- Iran continues to pass laws that lead to discrimination and persecution of minorities, such as an amendments to the Penal Code which criminalizes any insult to Iranian ethnic groups. Even when they rule to end discriminatory practices against a group, they do not implement their own laws, such as the new “landmark” ruling of the Iranian Supreme Court which decided that house churches are not illegal.
- It is also fundamentally important that we recognize the all encompassing practice of discrimination and propaganda used against the Bahai community. The discrimination against the Bahai community is on every level, from “cradle to grave,” promoted by laws, fatwas, promoted in the state sanctioned media, and getting ingrained in the social practice. The ongoing arrests and closure of businesses are only examples of the repressive measures against this community.
- Finally, the Islamic Republic is known as the largest propagator of anti-Jewish hate. Iranian regime, through its textbooks and media continues to promote hostility and antisemitic falsehoods, Holocaust denial and conspiracy theories. The regime seeks to equate Jews with Zionism and the state of Israel and forces the community’s leadership to speak and protest against the Jewish State (See Behnam Gholipour’s report on IranWire and the Anti-Defamation League’s report.)

## **2. Iran’s minorities also suffer from a lack of resources.**

It is evident that due to the economic mismanagement of the country everyone suffers from a lack of resources and opportunities, but arguably, Iran’s minorities bear the brunt of these consequences. To name a few:

- Sunnis, particularly around the borders of the country in Kurdistan, Baluchistan and Ahvaz suffer from disproportionate levels of poverty and unemployment. They are most

likely to be arrested, jailed and executed. Religious and ethnic discrimination are two sides of the same coin for the population in these regions where one type of discrimination is exacerbated by the other. Protests over water shortage didn't begin in Esfahan, rather it began in these regions, and turned particularly violent in Ahvaz.

- Armenian representative in the parliament, Robert Biglarian referred to the lack of religious educational resources in his community. Religious education for Christians is only allowed in the mother language and due to lack of human and financial resources, it is difficult for his community to publish their required books and provide government-approved religious education. Forcibly closed Christian churches remain closed, arbitrarily.
- Bahais are arguably the most persecuted group, as a minority group with no rights. They continue to experience confiscation of their properties, business closures, lack of access to higher education, and even access to cemeteries where they can conduct ritual burial. Iran Press Watch reported yesterday that amid the water crisis in Iran, 13 irrigated farmland plots belonging to Bahais in the village of Kata were targeted for the purposes of confiscation.

**UPDATE:** The city of Shiraz is (as of December 15) is [hosting](#) a workshop where artists are to design disparaging work against Bahais. These types of “artistic” forum are not new to the Islamic Republic. [Previously](#), the regime convened similar workshops in Esfahan to create works against Bahais, Wahabis, Christianity and Zoroastrian faiths. Iran has also held multiple Holocaust “[cartoon contests](#).”

### **3. Control and surveillance. The regime imposes excessive control and exerts and intrusive surveillance on its minorities.**

- In Sari, the Commission on Ethnicities, Sects and Religions adopted a detailed plan to exert more control over Dervishes and Bahai communities. Recent court orders were issued to expel Bahais from their ancestral homes in the village of Ivel.
- For Gonabadi Dervishes, according to this community’s leadership abroad, the rules for conversion to Sufi order have changed and those who seek to join this order now have to pass through an educational period with Marja Taghlid, who is approved by the government clergy before entering the faith, this is a departure from the traditional system of conversion to Sufis, which is open and accepting of all.
- For Sunnis, the Planning Council which I referred to earlier is used to monitor and control all aspects of life in the Sunni communities around the country. This includes educational content, religious sermons and civic life.

**4. Despite these challenges, the US and other nations have the potential to implement a robust policy agenda that could mitigate the suffering of Iran's minorities and address these issues in a systematic manner. Here are some of our recommendations:**

1. Continue to designate Iran as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
2. Press Iran to release all prisoners detained for their religion or belief, according to the most recent Supreme Court Ruling.
3. Raise religious freedom and other human rights abuses in any discussions with Iran's government regarding U.S. re-entry to and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA);
4. Continue to 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, and
5. Work with members of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance to exert multilateral pressure on Iran to improve religious freedom conditions and release religious prisoners of conscience;