

**2009 International Religious
Freedom Report: Iran**
US State Department
Oct. 26, 2009



The Constitution states that Islam is the official state religion, and the doctrine followed is that of Ja'afari (Twelver) Shi'ism. The Constitution provides that "other Islamic denominations are to be accorded full respect," while the country's pre-Islamic religious groups--Zoroastrians, Christians, and Jews--are recognized as "protected" religious minorities. However, Article 4 of the Constitution states that all laws and regulations must be based on Islamic criteria. In practice, the Government severely restricted freedom of religion.

During the reporting period, respect for religious freedom in the country continued to deteriorate. Government rhetoric and actions created a threatening atmosphere for nearly all non-Shi'a religious groups, most notably for Baha'is, as well as Sufi Muslims, evangelical Christians, and members of the Jewish community. Reports of government imprisonment, harassment, intimidation, and discrimination based on religious beliefs continued during the reporting period. Baha'i religious groups reported arbitrary arrest and prolonged detention, expulsions from universities, and confiscation of property. Government-controlled broadcast and print media intensified negative campaigns against religious minorities, particularly the Baha'is, during the reporting period. All non-Shi'a religious minorities suffered varying degrees of officially sanctioned discrimination, particularly in the areas of employment, education, and housing.

Although the Constitution gives Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians the status of "protected" religious minorities, in practice non-Shi'a Muslims faced substantial societal discrimination, and government actions continued to support elements of society who created a threatening atmosphere for some religious minorities.

The U.S. Government makes clear its strong objections to the Government's harsh and oppressive treatment of religious minorities through public statements, support for relevant U.N. and nongovernmental organization (NGO) efforts, as well as diplomatic initiatives. Every year since 1999, the U.S. Secretary of State has designated the country as a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act for its particularly egregious violations of religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 631,000 square miles and a population of 70 million. The population is 98 percent Muslim--89 percent is Shi'a and 9 percent Sunni (mostly Turkmen and Arabs, Baluchs, and Kurds living in the southwest, southeast, and northwest respectively). There are no official statistics available on the size of the Sufi Muslim population; however, some reports estimate between two and five million persons practice Sufism in the country. Non-Muslims are estimated to account for 2 percent of the population.

Recent unofficial estimates from religious organizations claim that Baha'is, Jews, Christians, Sabean-Mandaeans, and Zoroastrians constitute 2 percent of the population. The largest non-Muslim minority is the Baha'is, who number 300,000 to 350,000. Unofficial estimates of the Jewish community's size vary from 20,000 to 25,000.

According to U.N. figures, 300,000 Christians live in the country, the majority of whom are ethnic Armenians. Unofficial estimates for the Assyrian Christian population range between 10,000 and 20,000. There are also Protestant denominations, including evangelical religious groups. Christian groups outside the country estimate the size of the Protestant Christian community to be less than 10,000, although many Protestant Christians reportedly practice in secret. Sabean-Mandaeans number 5,000 to 10,000 persons. The Government regards the Sabean-Mandaeans as Christians, and they are included among the three recognized religious minorities; however, Sabean-Mandaeans do not consider themselves Christians. The Government estimates there are 30,000 to 35,000 Zoroastrians, a primarily ethnic Persian minority; however, Zoroastrian groups claim to have 60,000 adherents. There are indications that members of all religious

minorities are emigrating at a high rate, although it is unclear if the reasons for emigration are religious or related to overall poor economic conditions.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution declares the "official religion of Iran is Islam and the doctrine followed is that of Ja'afari (Twelver) Shi'ism." All laws and regulations must be consistent with the official interpretation of Shari'a (Islamic law). The Constitution provides Sunni Muslims a degree of religious freedom; however, the Government severely restricts overall religious freedom. The Constitution states that "within the limits of the law," Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians are the only recognized religious minorities who are guaranteed freedom to practice their religious beliefs. However, members of these recognized minority religious groups reported government imprisonment, harassment, intimidation, and discrimination based on their religious beliefs.

The Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, heads a tricameral structure of government (legislative, executive, and judicial branches). The Supreme Leader is not directly elected, but chosen by a group of 86 Islamic scholars (the Assembly of Experts), who are directly elected. All acts of the Majles (Parliament) must be reviewed for strict conformity with Islamic law and the Constitution, and all candidates for any elected office must be vetted by the unelected Council of Guardians, which is composed of six clerics, appointed by the Supreme Leader, and six Muslim jurists (legal scholars), nominated by the head of the judiciary and approved by the Majles.

The Government observes 14 religious holidays as national holidays, including Eid-e-Ghadir, Tassoua, Ashura, Arbaeen, Death of the Prophet Muhammad, Martyrdom of Imam Reza, Birthday of Imam Ali, Ascension of the Prophet Muhammad, Birthday of Imam Mahdi, Eid-e-Fitr, Martyrdom of Imam Ali, Martyrdom of Imam Jafar Sadegh, Eid-e-Ghorban, and the Islamic New Year.

The Government does not respect the right of Muslim citizens to change or renounce their religious faith. A child born to a Muslim father automatically is considered a Muslim by the Government.

Non-Muslims may not engage in public religious expression, persuasion, and conversion among Muslims, and there are restrictions on published religious material. In February 2008, a revision to the Penal Code was drafted for approval by the legislature whereby apostasy, specifically conversion from Islam, would be punishable by death. This revision passed in the Majles in September 2008 and was reportedly implemented on a 1-year trial basis. On June 23, 2009, the Legal and Judicial Committee of the Majles recommended removing the revision from the Penal Code, but no further information was available at the end of the reporting period. Previously, death sentences for apostasy have been issued under judicial interpretations of Shari'a. However, there were no reported cases of the death penalty being applied for apostasy during the reporting period.

Proselytizing of Muslims by non-Muslims is illegal. Evangelical church leaders are subject to pressure from authorities to sign pledges that they will not evangelize Muslims or allow Muslims to attend church services. Members of religious minorities, excluding Sunni Muslims, are prevented from serving in the judiciary and security services and from becoming public school principals.

Applicants for public sector employment are screened for their adherence to and knowledge of Islam, although members of religious minorities could serve in lower ranks of government employment, with the exception of Baha'is. However, government workers who do not observe Islam's principles and rules are subject to penalties.

The Constitution states that the army must be Islamic and must recruit individuals who are committed to the objectives of the Islamic Revolution. In practice, however, no religious minorities are exempt from military service. The law forbids non-Muslims from holding officer positions over Muslims in the armed forces. Members of religious minorities with a college education can serve as officers during their mandatory military service but cannot be career military officers.

By law, religious minorities are not allowed to be elected to a representative body or to hold senior government or military positions, with the exception that 5 of a total 290 seats in the Majles are reserved for religious minorities. Three of these seats are reserved for members of Christian religious groups, including two seats for Armenian Christians and one for Assyrian Christians. There is also one seat to represent Jews and one to represent Zoroastrians. While Sunnis do not have reserved seats in the Majles, they are allowed to serve in the body. Sunni Majles deputies tend to be elected from among the larger Sunni communities. Members of religious minorities are allowed to vote; however, no member of a religious minority, including Sunni Muslims, is eligible to be president.

The legal system discriminates against religious minorities. Article 297 of the amended 1991 Islamic Punishments Act authorizes collection of equal "blood money" (diyeh) as restitution to families for the death of both Muslims and non-Muslims. Prior to a 2004 change, the law gave a lesser monetary amount as "blood money" for non-Muslims. Baha'is and Sabeian-Mandaeans, in addition to women, are excluded from the equalization provisions of the bill. According to law, Baha'i blood is considered mobah, meaning it can be spilled with impunity.

Adherents of religious groups not recognized by the Constitution, such as the Baha'is, do not have freedom to practice their beliefs. The Government prohibits Baha'is from teaching and practicing their faith. Baha'is are barred from all leadership positions in the Government and military.

The Government considers Baha'is to be apostates and defines the Baha'i Faith as a political "sect." The Ministry of Justice states that Baha'is are permitted to enroll in schools only if they do not identify themselves as such, and that Baha'is preferably should be enrolled in schools with a strong and imposing religious ideology. There were reports that Baha'i children in public schools faced attempts to convert them to Islam.

After a brief policy change in 2007 allowing Baha'i students to enroll in universities, the Government reverted to its previous practice of requiring Baha'i students to identify themselves as a religion other than Baha'i in order to register for the entrance

examination. This action precluded Baha'i enrollment in state-run universities, since a tenet of the Baha'i Faith is not to deny one's faith. The Ministry of Justice states that Baha'is must be excluded or expelled from universities, either in the admission process or during the course of their studies, if their religious affiliation becomes known. University applicants are required to pass an examination in Islamic, Christian, or Jewish theology, but there was no test for the Baha'i theology.

Baha'is are banned from the social pension system. In addition, Baha'is are regularly denied compensation for injury or criminal victimization and the right to inherit property. Baha'i marriages and divorces are not officially recognized, although the Government allows a civil attestation of marriage to serve as a marriage certificate.

The Government allows recognized religious minorities to establish community centers and certain self-financed cultural, social, athletic, or charitable associations. However, the Government prohibited the Baha'i community from official assembly and from maintaining administrative institutions by closing any such institutions.

The Government propagated a legal interpretation of Islam that effectively deprived women of many rights granted to men. Gender segregation was enforced generally throughout the country without regard to religious affiliation. Women of all religious groups were expected to adhere to Islamic dress in public. Although enforcement of rules for conservative Islamic dress eased at times, the Government periodically cracked down on "un-Islamic dress." The Government's 12-point contract model for marriage and divorce limits the rights accorded to women by custom and traditional interpretations of Islamic law.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

During the reporting period, respect for religious freedom in the country continued to deteriorate. Government rhetoric and actions created a threatening atmosphere for nearly all non-Shi'a religious groups, most notably for Baha'is, as well as Sufi Muslims, evangelical Christians, and members of the Jewish community. Reports of government imprisonment, harassment, intimidation, and discrimination based on religious beliefs

continued during the reporting period. Baha'i religious groups reported arbitrary arrest and prolonged detention, expulsions from universities, and confiscation of property. Government-controlled broadcast and print media intensified negative campaigns against religious minorities, particularly the Baha'is, during the reporting period. All non-Shi'a religious minorities suffered varying degrees of officially sanctioned discrimination, particularly in the areas of employment, education, and housing.

The Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance (Ershad) and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) monitored religious activity closely. Members of recognized religious minorities were not required to register with the Government; however, their communal, religious, and cultural events and organizations, including schools, were monitored closely. Registration of Baha'is was a police function during the reporting period. The Government also required evangelical Christian groups to compile and submit membership lists for their congregations.

The Government generally allowed recognized religious minority groups to conduct religious education for their adherents in separate schools, although it restricted this right considerably in some cases. The Ministry of Education, which imposed certain curriculum requirements, supervised these schools. With few exceptions, the directors of such private schools must be Muslim. Attendance at the schools was not mandatory for recognized religious minorities. The Ministry of Education must approve all textbooks used in coursework, including religious texts. Recognized religious minorities could provide religious instruction in non-Persian languages, but such texts required approval by the authorities. This approval requirement sometimes imposed significant translation expenses on minority communities. However, Assyrian Christians reported that their community was permitted to write its own textbooks, which, following government authorization, were then printed at government expense and distributed to the Assyrian community.

On May 25, 2009, the EU Presidency issued a statement expressing its deep concern over the violations of religious freedom in the country. On December 18, 2008, for the sixth consecutive year, the U.N. General Assembly passed another resolution

condemning the human rights situation in the country and decrying the Government's harsh treatment of religious minorities.

Broad restrictions on Baha'is severely undermined their ability to freely practice their faith and function as a community. Baha'i groups reported that the Government often denied applications for new or renewed business and trade licenses to Baha'is. The Government repeatedly pressured Baha'is to accept relief from mistreatment in exchange for recanting their religious beliefs. The Government prevented many Baha'is from leaving the country.

Baha'is could not teach or practice their religious beliefs or maintain links with coreligionists abroad. Baha'is were often officially charged with "espionage on behalf of Zionism," in part due to the fact that the Baha'i world headquarters is located in Israel. These charges were more acute when Baha'is were caught communicating with or sending monetary contributions to the Baha'i headquarters.

During the reporting period, Baha'is continued to face an increasing number of public attacks, including a series of negative and defamatory articles in *Kayhan*, a government-affiliated newspaper whose managing editor was appointed by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamene'i. The national daily newspaper *Etemad* and several provincial newspapers also published defamatory articles against Baha'is. The articles often accused Baha'i and Sunni Salafist groups of working together to undermine national security and to commit espionage on behalf of foreign governments. State-run media reported that on May 19, 2009 Majles member Hojjatoleslam Mohammad-Ebrahim Nekounam told a session of Parliament that Baha'ism was established to "infiltrate Iran" and "create divisions" among Muslims and that members of the Baha'i community throughout the country were working toward those goals. In February 2009 the semiofficial Fars News Agency reported that the Prosecutor General sent a letter to the Minister of Intelligence warning that Baha'is had "extensive and established ties with the Zionist regime and their members try to collect information, carry out infiltration activities, and destroy people's belief in Islam." During the reporting period, articles in the state-run media alleged that Baha'ism encourages its followers to commit incest with close family members.

Public and private universities continued to deny admittance to or expel Baha'i students. Although in 2007 the Government briefly allowed Baha'i matriculation into universities, in 2008 the Government reverted to its earlier policy of denying university admittance to Baha'i students; this policy remained in effect throughout the reporting period.

There were reports that the Government compiled a list of Baha'is and their trades and employment using information from the Association of Chambers of Commerce and related organizations, which are nominally independent bodies that are nonetheless heavily influenced by the Government.

Many Sunnis claimed that the Government discriminated against them. However, it is difficult to distinguish whether the cause of discrimination was religious or ethnic, since most Sunnis are also members of ethnic minorities. Sunnis cited the absence of a Sunni mosque in Tehran, despite the presence of more than one million adherents there, as a prominent example. Sunni leaders reported bans on Sunni religious literature and teachings in public schools, even in predominantly Sunni areas. Human rights organizations reported that the Government demolished several Sunni mosques during the reporting period. Sunnis also noted the underrepresentation of Sunnis in government-appointed positions in the provinces where they form a majority, such as Kurdistan and Khuzestan Provinces, as well as their inability to obtain senior governmental positions.

Sunni Majles representatives asserted that government discrimination led to the lack of Sunni presence in the executive and judicial branches, especially in higher-ranking positions in embassies, universities, and other institutions, as well as anti-Sunni propaganda in the mass media, including books and other publications.

While the Government recognizes Judaism as an official religious minority, the Jewish community experienced official discrimination. The Government continued to sanction anti-Semitic propaganda involving official statements, media outlets, publications, and books. The Government's anti-Semitic rhetoric, along with a perception among radical Muslims that all Jewish citizens of the country support Zionism and the state of Israel, continued to create a hostile atmosphere for Jews. The rhetorical attacks also further

blurred the line between Zionism, Judaism, and Israel and contributed to increased concerns about the future security of the Jewish community.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad continued a virulent anti-Semitic campaign. During the reporting period, the President publicly stated in news conferences that the Zionists infiltrated the world and must be stopped and destroyed, together with Israel.

President Ahmadinejad continued to regularly question the existence and the scope of the Holocaust, which created a more hostile environment for the Jewish community. At a January 2009 speech at Sharif University in Tehran, the President alleged that the "Holocaust discourse" was created to expand "Zionist command over centers of power, wealth, and the world media."

The Government promoted and condoned anti-Semitism in state media; however, with some exceptions, there was little government restriction of, or interference with, Jewish religious practice. The Government reportedly allowed Hebrew instruction but limited the distribution of Hebrew texts, particularly nonreligious texts, making it difficult to teach the language. Moreover, the Government required that in conformity with the schedule of other schools, Jewish schools must remain open on Saturdays, which violates Jewish law.

Jewish citizens were free to travel out of the country but were subject to the general restriction against travel by the country's citizens to Israel. This restriction, however, was not enforced.

The Sabean-Mandaean religious community reportedly faced harassment and repression by authorities similar to that faced by other religious minorities. The Government often denied members of the Sabean-Mandaean community access to higher education.

Sufis within the country, Sufi organizations outside the country, as well as numerous human rights organizations, remained extremely concerned about growing government repression of Sufi communities and religious practices, including increased harassment and intimidation of prominent Sufi leaders by the intelligence and security services.

Government restrictions on Sufi groups and houses of worship (husseiniya) became more pronounced in recent reporting periods. There were numerous reports of Shi'a clerics and prayer leaders denouncing Sufism and the activities of Sufis in the country in both sermons and public statements.

The Government carefully monitored the statements and views of senior Shi'a religious leaders. The Special Clerical Courts, established to investigate offenses and crimes committed by clerics, and which the Supreme Leader oversees directly, are not provided for in the Constitution and operate outside the judiciary. In particular, critics alleged that the clerical courts are used to prosecute certain clerics for expressing controversial political ideas and for participating in nonreligious activities, including journalism.

Non-Shi'a religious leaders reported abuse and widespread restrictions on their ability to practice their faith. They also reported bans on Sunni teachings in public schools and Sunni religious literature. Residents of provinces with large Sunni populations, including Kurdistan, Khuzestan, and Sistan-va-Baluchestan, reported discrimination and lack of resources, but it is difficult to determine if this discrimination was based on religion or ethnicity, or both.

Laws based on religious affiliation continued to be used to stifle freedom of expression. Independent newspapers and magazines have been closed, and leading publishers and journalists have been imprisoned on vague charges of "insulting Islam" or "calling into question the Islamic foundation of the Republic." According to domestic press reports, on June 9, 2009, singer Mohsen Namju was sentenced to a 5-year prison term for "insulting Islamic sanctities, reciting verses of the Holy Qur'an ridiculously, and insulting the world Muslims' sacred book."

On October 8, 2008, authorities in Qom arrested online journalist and cleric Mojtaba Lotfi for posting on an Internet site a sermon by Ayatollah Montazaeri, a well-known opponent of the system of clerical rule. The sermon criticized President Ahmadinejad for saying Iran is the freest country in the world. On November 29, 2008, a special court for the clergy sentenced Lotfi to 4 years in prison and 5 years of banishment from Qom.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

According to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States and other leading human rights organizations, more than 200 Baha'is have been killed since 1979, and 15 have disappeared and are presumed dead.

Baha'i groups outside the country reported that government authorities increased their harassment and intimidation of the members of the Baha'i community during the reporting period.

The Government continued to imprison and detain Baha'is based on their religious beliefs. The Government arbitrarily arrested Baha'is and charged them with violating Islamic Penal Code Articles 500 and 698, relating to activities against the state and spreading falsehoods, respectively. Often the charges were not dropped upon release, and those with charges pending against them reportedly feared re-arrest at any time. Most were released only after paying large fines or posting high bails. For some, bail was in the form of deeds of property; others gained their release in exchange for personal guarantees or work licenses.

At the end of June 2009, at least 20 to 30 Baha'is remained in detention because of their religious beliefs. The Government never formally charged many of the others but released them only after they posted bail.

In mid-March, intelligence agents in Sari reportedly arrested Shirin Foroughian Samimi, a Baha'i. In 2008 authorities closed down her husband's store, arrested him, and charged him with endangering national security. He was released after 9 days.

On March 9, 2009, security forces reportedly arrested Baha'i Pooya Tebyanian in his home in Semnan.

On January 18, 2009, security forces in Ghaemshahr in Mazandaran Province detained four Baha'is after raiding their homes. Previously, on January 10, authorities in Ghaemshahr arrested another Baha'i, Pegah Sanaie; she was released on bail on January 17.

On January 16, 2009, several Baha'i women were reportedly arrested for performing missionary work on Kish Island.

On January 15, 2009, security forces in Tehran arrested five Baha'is and took them to Evin Prison. At least one Baha'i, a woman from Shiraz named Negin Rezaei, was being held in section 209 of Evin Prison at the end of the reporting period.

On January 9, 2009, three Baha'i community leaders--Adel Fanaian, Abbas Nourani, and Zaher Eskandarian--were arrested in their homes in Semnan Province.

On November 22, 2008, authorities arrested two Baha'is in Sari, Mazandaran Province, after searching their homes and confiscating Baha'i materials.

On November 18, 2008, a Baha'i was arrested in Ghaemshahr.

Two officials of the Baha'i community in Isfahan and one other member of the Baha'i community, arrested in May 2008, reportedly on charges of burying their dead at a particular site that had been used for the past 15 years, remained in Isfahan Prison at the end of the reporting period.

The seven leaders of the Baha'i community--Fariba Kamalabadi, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, Behrouz Tavakkoli, Saeid Rezaie, Vahid Tizfahm, and Mahvash Sabet--arrested between March and May 2008 remained in detention. In February 2009 the Judiciary spokesman announced that the seven were accused of "espionage for Israel, insulting religious sanctities and propaganda against the Islamic Republic." In May 2009 state-run media reported the Government also charged them with "spreading corruption on earth," a crime punishable by death. None had been allowed access to their attorney, Abdolfattah Soltani. On June 16, 2009, security agents arrested Soltani without a warrant and took him to an unknown location. At the end of the reporting period, the Baha'i leaders were awaiting trial by a revolutionary court.

Mohammad Ismael Forouzan, a Baha'i arrested in March 2008 on unknown charges, was informed that his appeal had been denied, and he began serving a 1-year prison sentence.

Aziz Pourhamzeh, Kamran Aghdasi, and Fathollah Khatbjavan, detained in January 2008, reportedly remained in prison at the end of the reporting period.

Pouriya Habibi and Simin Mokhtari, arrested in January 2008 and detained on charges of teaching the Baha'i Faith, reportedly remained in Evin Prison at the end of the reporting period.

The Government continued to hold many Baha'i properties, including cemeteries, holy places, historical sites, and administrative centers, that were seized following the 1979 Revolution. Many of the properties have been destroyed. Baha'is were generally prevented from burying and honoring their dead in accordance with their religious tradition.

On January 19, 2009, the Baha'i cemetery of Ghaemshahr was attacked for the fourth time in 8 months and almost completely destroyed. According to witnesses, municipality officials razed the cemetery with a bulldozer at night.

On January 12, 2009, government workers entered a Tehran cemetery and demolished an entire section known as the burial ground of "infidels," an area where the Government interred people executed in the early years of the Islamic Revolution. Among the graves destroyed were those of Baha'is who had been members of national or local Baha'i governing councils in 1980, 1981, or 1984, years when the government rounded up the members of these councils and executed them.

The property rights of Baha'is were generally disregarded, and they suffered frequent government harassment and persecution. The Government raided Baha'i homes and businesses and confiscated large numbers of private and commercial properties, as well as religious materials, belonging to Baha'is. The Government reportedly seized numerous Baha'i homes and handed them over to an agency of Supreme Leader Khamene'i. The Government also seized private homes in which Baha'i youth classes

were held, despite the owners' having proper ownership documents. The Baha'i community reported that the Government's seizure of Baha'i personal property and its denial of Baha'i access to education and employment was eroding the economic base of the community and threatening its survival.

On March 1, 2009, the University of Semnan expelled Minoo Shahriari, an economics student, on the grounds that she was Baha'i.

According to domestic press reports, the University of Kerman expelled nine Baha'i students on January 14, 2009.

On December 1, 2008, there were reports of protests by Muslim students at Goldshat College in Kelardasht in Mazandaran Province over the expulsion of a Baha'i classmate.

On November 2, 2008, two Baha'i students were expelled from Shaheed Beheshti University on the basis of their religion.

There were reports of authorities forcing Baha'i businesses to close, placing restrictions on their businesses, and asking managers of private companies to dismiss their Baha'i employees.

Sufi Muslims likewise faced an increasing repression campaign, including defamatory attacks in newspapers and in sermons by Shi'a clerics.

On March 14, 2009, a representative of the Gonabadi dervishes, a Sufi mystical sect, reported that authorities were holding 41 dervishes in Evin Prison for practicing their religion.

On February 18, 2009, authorities razed the house of worship of Gonabadi dervishes at Takht-e Foulad, in Isfahan, with bulldozers. All Sufis present were arrested and had their mobile phones confiscated. Sufi books and publications were destroyed.

In January 2009 Jamshid Lak, a Sufi of the Gonabadi Dervish order, was flogged 74 times. He was charged in 2006 with "slander" against the Ministry of Intelligence after

reportedly publicly complaining of the ill treatment he received at the hands of the Ministry.

In late December 2008, authorities arrested six members of the Gonabadi Dervishes on Kish Island. Their books, other materials, and computers were confiscated.

In November 2008 Amir Ali Mohammad Labaf, of the Nematollahi Gonabadi Sufi order, was sentenced to 74 lashes, 5 years in prison, and internal exile to the town of Babak for "spreading lies."

In October 2008 at least seven Sufi Muslims in Isfahan and five Sufis in Karaj were arrested because of their affiliation with the Nematollahi Gonabadi Sufi order.

Christians, particularly evangelicals, continued to be subject to harassment and close surveillance. During the reporting period, the Government vigilantly enforced its prohibition on proselytizing by closely monitoring the activities of evangelical Christians, discouraging Muslims from entering church premises, closing churches, and arresting Christian converts. Members of evangelical congregations were required to carry membership cards, photocopies of which must be provided to the authorities. Worshippers were subject to identity checks by authorities posted outside congregation centers. The Government restricted meetings for evangelical services to Sundays, and church officials were ordered to inform the Ministry of Information and Islamic Guidance before admitting new members.

On May 21, 2009, security officials arrested five Christian converts in Karaj who had gathered in a home for Bible study and worship. The house where they were meeting was searched and several Bibles confiscated. The five were being held at an unknown location.

On May 14, 2009, authorities arrested Abdul Zahra Vashahi, father of a prominent Christian Iranian human rights activist in the United Kingdom, in Bandar Manshahr after warning him that he would be held accountable for his son's activities. He was released 6 days later.

On May 14, 2009, a court in Ouroumieh reportedly denied pension benefits to Fatemeh Pauki, a retired Christian school teacher from West Azerbaijan Province. Pauki had been repeatedly detained and forced by authorities to promise to end her contact with Christian groups. Her husband, who had been detained and harassed by authorities over the years as well, was mysteriously killed in 2005.

In late March 2009, according to domestic human rights groups, a revolutionary court closed the Pentecostal church of Shahr Ara in Tehran, which belongs to Assyrian Christians. According to reports, the stated reason for the closure was the "illegal activities" of converting Muslims to Christianity and "accepting converts" to worship as members of the congregation.

On March 10, 2009, a Shiraz court sentenced three Christian converts--Seyed Allaedin Hussein, Homayoon Shokouhi, and Seyed Amir Hussein Bob-Annari--to 8-month prison terms with 5 years' probation. The judge warned the men to discontinue their Christian activities or risk being tried as apostates.

On March 5, 2009, authorities arrested two members of the Christian community, Maryam Rostampour and Marzieh Amirizadeh Esmaeilabad. The women were being held in Evin Prison and reportedly were not receiving adequate medical care.

On January 21, 2009, authorities arrested three Christians--Hamik Khachikian (an Armenian Christian), Jamal Ghalishorani, and Nadereh Jamali (both Christian converts)--in Tehran. Their homes were searched and their computers and books were confiscated. According to a February 9 report, Khachikian was released without charges on January 28, while Ghalishorani and Nadereh were later released on bail.

On October 22, 2008, Ramtin Soodmand, a Christian, was released on bail. Soodmand had been arrested on August 21 on charges of spreading antigovernment propaganda.

On July 17, 2008, plain clothes security officers raided the home of Isfahan Iranian Christians Abbas Amiri and his wife, Sakineh Rahnama, during a meeting. Both Amiri and Rahnama died of injuries suffered during the raid. Authorities denied permission for the local Christian community to hold a memorial service for the couple.

On June 3, 2008, a Christian convert couple, Makan Arya and Tin Rad, reportedly were seized from their home in Tehran. Authorities accused Arya of "activities against national security" and Rad of "activities against the holy religion of Islam." Officials threatened to charge the two with apostasy. After being forced to sign statements swearing that they had not converted from Islam, Arya and Rad were released on bail. The two were forced to leave their church, and Arya was pressured to display pictures of Muslim leaders in his storefront window to ward off continued attacks on his shop.

According to a September 30, 2008, report, Christian converts Mahmoud Matin-Azad and Arash Basirat were released after a tribunal ruled that the charges of apostasy brought against the men were invalid. The two were arrested in Shiraz in May 2008.

Christian convert Mojataba Hussein, arrested in May 2008, remained in detention. His family did not know where he was being held, and requests for a visit were denied.

There were no developments in the 2007 killings of three senior Sunni clerics.

Forced Religious Conversions

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States or who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

Government officials reportedly offered Baha'is relief from mistreatment in exchange for recanting their religious affiliation, and if incarcerated, recanting their religious affiliation as a precondition for releasing them.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Although the Constitution gives Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians the status of "protected" religious minorities, in practice non-Shi'a Muslims faced substantial societal discrimination, and government actions continued to support elements of society who create a threatening atmosphere for some religious minorities. President Ahmadinejad's agenda stressed the importance of Islam in enhancing "national solidarity" and

mandated that government-controlled media emphasize Islamic culture in order to "cause subcultures to adapt themselves to public culture."

After President Ahmadinejad took office in August 2005, conservative media intensified a campaign against non-Muslim religious minorities, and political and religious leaders issued a continual stream of inflammatory statements. The campaigns against non-Muslims contributed to a significantly worse situation for non-Muslim society throughout the reporting period.

Sunni Muslims and Christians encountered societal and religious discrimination and harassment at the local, provincial, and national levels.

Baha'is faced government-sanctioned discrimination in the workplace. Baha'i graveyards in Abadeh and other cities were desecrated, and the Government did not seek to identify or punish the perpetrators.

Baha'i groups outside the country reported vandalism of Baha'i cemeteries, the desecration of a body exhumed from a Baha'i grave in Abadeh, and attacks against a Baha'i cemetery in Najafabad.

On October 23, 2008, individuals using a bulldozer desecrated a Baha'i cemetery in Darzikola.

The car of Soheil Naeimi, a Baha'i, was burned in Rafsanjan in Kerman Province on July 25, 2008, after his family and ten other Baha'i families received threatening letters from a group calling itself the "Anti-Baha'ism Movement of the Youth of Rafsanjan."

On July 18, 2008, a Baha'i family's home was burned to the ground in Kerman, according to the representative of the Baha'i International Community to the U.N.

A building owned by a Baha'i couple was burned down in Tangriz in Fars Province on June 10, 2008. The family reportedly filed a formal criminal complaint, but authorities declined to pursue the case.

There were reported problems for Baha'is in different trades around the country. Baha'is experienced an escalation of personal harassment, including receiving threatening notes, compact discs, text messages, and tracts. There were reported cases of Baha'i children being harassed in school and subjected to Islamic indoctrination. Baha'i girls were especially targeted by students and educators, with the intention of creating tension between parents and children.

There was serious concern from several religious and human rights groups about the resurgence of the once banned Hojjatiyeh Society, a secretive religious-economic group that was founded in 1953 to rid the country of the Baha'i Faith in order to hasten the return of the 12th Imam (the Mahdi). Although not a government organization, it was believed that many members of the administration were Hojjatiyeh members and used their offices to advance the society's goals. However, it was unknown what role, if any, the group played in the arrests of numerous Baha'is during the reporting period. Many Baha'i human rights groups and news agencies described the goals of the Hojjatiyeh Society as the eradication of the Baha'is, not just the Baha'i Faith. The group's anti-Baha'i orientation reportedly widened to encompass anti-Sunni and anti-Sufi activities as well.

Many Jews sought to limit their contact with or support for the state of Israel out of fear of reprisal. Anti-American and anti-Israeli demonstrations included the denunciation of Jews, as opposed to the past practice of denouncing only "Israel" and "Zionism," adding to the threatening atmosphere for the community.

There were reports during the reporting period that members of the Sabeen-Mandaean community experienced societal discrimination and pressure to convert to Islam.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Iran was first designated a CPC in 1999 and was most recently re-designated on January 16, 2009. As the action under the IRF Act, the Secretary designated the existing ongoing restrictions on United States security assistance in accordance with section 40 of the Arms Export Control Act, pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act. The United States has no diplomatic relations with Iran, and thus it does not raise directly with the

Government the restrictions that the Government places on religious freedom and other abuses the Government commits against adherents of minority religious groups.

The U.S. Government makes its position clear in public statements and reports, support for relevant U.N. and nongovernmental organization efforts, and diplomatic initiatives to press for an end to government abuses. The U.S. Government calls on other countries that have bilateral relations with Iran to use those ties to press the Government on religious freedom and human rights matters.

On numerous occasions, the U.S. State Department spokesman has addressed the situation of the Baha'i and Jewish communities in the country. The U.S. Government has publicly condemned the treatment of the Baha'is in U.N. resolutions, including one that passed in the General Assembly in 2008. The U.S. Government encourages other governments to make similar statements.