

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Iran deteriorated, with the government escalating its severe repression of religious minorities and continuing to export religious extremism and intolerance abroad. During the year, scores of Christians were [arrested](#), assaulted, and unjustly [sentenced](#) to years in prison. In January, Iran [removed](#) the “other” option from the religion category on national ID cards, forcing members of the Baha’i community to either deny their religion or be denied this crucial document. The government also continued to [arrest](#) Baha’is and impose lengthy prison sentences on them. [Between 50 and 100](#) Baha’is were reported to be in prisons in Iran during 2020, despite the widespread prevalence of COVID-19. In October, officials [confiscated](#) Baha’i land near the city of Sari. In late November, Iran conducted a [mass raid](#) on Baha’i houses, arresting 20 people and searching about 50 houses. Iran also severely [mistreated](#) Sunni [activists](#) and [clerics](#) in 2020. In September, Iran’s Supreme Court [affirmed](#) death sentences for seven Sunni prisoners on charges including “waging war against God” and “corruption on Earth.” The government continued to repress the Gonabadi Sufi community after [hastening the death](#) of its spiritual leader Noor Ali Tabandeh in 2019. During 2020, it continued to detain Sufis who had protested Tabandeh’s house arrest in 2018 and subjected several of them to egregious mistreatment.

Throughout the year, Iran’s government continued to promote antisemitism. In March, several submissions to a COVID-19 cartoon contest sponsored by Iran’s Ministry of Health [asserted](#) that COVID-19 was a Jewish conspiracy. The ministry took no action to reject these submissions. In September, state media [advanced](#) false ideas about Jewish victims of the September 11th terrorist attacks and Iran [launched](#) its third Holocaust denial cartoon contest. In February, a Basij student group in Hamedan made [threats](#) against the [tomb](#) of Esther and Mordechai. In May, unknown [assailants attempted to set](#)

[fire](#) to the religious site. That same month, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei [tweeted](#) that the United States is controlled by “wealthy Zionists and their corporate owners,” a common antisemitic dog-whistle.

Iran’s government [closed](#) 147 shops during Ramadan for “not following Shari’a law” and arrested three people for eating during the daily fast. It also [imprisoned](#) and prosecuted several women who peacefully protested mandatory headscarf laws. Imprisoned lawyer Nasrin Soutudeh, who defended many of these women in court, began a hunger strike on August 11, and was [denied](#) adequate medical care. She was [granted](#) a temporary release from prison on November 9 after contracting COVID-19 but [ordered](#) to return on December 2 despite needing ongoing medical evaluation. Iran also continued to [detain](#) USCIRF Religious Prisoner of Conscience [Golrokh Iraee](#) at Qarchak Prison and deny her visits with her ill [husband](#). In addition to invoking religion to restrict the religious freedom of women, Iran invokes its interpretation of Shari’a to justify religious freedom violations against the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community and actively executes LGBTI people for their sexual identity.

USCIRF Religious Prisoner of Conscience [Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani](#) [remained](#) in prison on a six-year sentence for “promoting Zionist Christianity.” Pastor Victor Bet Tamraz and his wife [fled](#) in August [following](#) a rejected appeal against charges of “gathering and colluding to commit crimes against national security.” In March 2020, the government of Canada [granted asylum](#) to spiritualist leader and USCIRF Religious Prisoner of Conscience [Mohammed Ali Taheri](#) following threats to him and his followers by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The IRGC continued to threaten the lives of Taheri’s followers outside Iran in 2020. Taheri is the founder of the Erfan e-Halgheh spiritualist movement and was sentenced to death in 2015 before the sentence was overturned later that same year.

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);
- 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, citing specific religious freedom violations;
- Raise religious freedom and other human rights abuses in any discussions with Iran’s government regarding U.S. re-entry to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA);
- 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;
- Press for the release of all religious prisoners of conscience, including [Youcef Nadarkhani](#) and [Golrokh Ebrahimi Iraee](#); 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

- **Factsheet:** [Iranian Government Officials Sanctioned for Violating Religious Freedom](#)
- **USCIRF Spotlight:** [Religious Freedom in Iran during COVID-19](#)

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, but religious minorities have seen little change based on this document.

Persecution of Religious Minorities

In May, officials at Fashafoye Prison [denied medical care](#) to Sufi prisoners and [moved](#) four Sufis into Ward 5 of the prison, where there were known cases of COVID-19. In September, officials at Evin Prison gave medicines to Sufi activist Benham Majoubi without his consent that caused limb numbness, paralysis, and loss of consciousness. Officials then [sent](#) Majoubi to Aminabad Hospital while [denying him access](#) to crucial medicine. Mahjoubi [died](#) in February 2021.

Iran also escalated its persecution of Christians in 2020, particularly converts from Islam. Officials [lashed](#) Christian convert Mohammed Reza Omid 80 times for drinking communion wine in October following his completion of a two-year sentence for [participation](#) in a house church. In February, the IRGC arrested Christian convert Mary Mohammadi at a peaceful protest in Tehran. She was [held incognito](#) and subjected to [beatings and sexual assault](#) at the Vozara Detention Center. At a court hearing in April, Judge Javad Ahmadi from Branch 1167 of the Criminal Court of Tehran [asked Mohammadi repeated questions](#) about her [faith and conversion from Islam to Christianity](#) that had no bearing on her charge of "disturbing public order." In April she was [sentenced](#) to three months and one day in prison and ten lashes. However, her sentence was [suspended](#) for a year. In January 2020, Branch 105 of the Civil Court in Shiraz [sentenced](#) Christian convert Ismaeil Maghrebinejad to three years in prison for "insulting Islamic sacred beliefs." In February, he was [given](#) an additional two-year sentence for promoting "Evangelical Zionist

Christianity," and in May he received an additional year for "propaganda against the state." In September, Iran's Ministry of Intelligence coerced a judge in Bushire to rule that a Christian couple who converted from Islam must return their adopted daughter to the care of the state because she was Muslim. The ruling came [despite](#) fatwas from two Shi'a grand ayatollahs deeming the adoption consistent with Islamic legal interpretations.

Iran also continued its systematic repression of Baha'is, including a [mass raid](#) on about 50 Baha'i houses in late November. A court official in Shiraz [threatened](#) to "uproot" Baha'is in the city in late spring. In March, 30 Baha'is were [summoned](#) to Branch 10 of the Shiraz Revolutionary Court on grounds related to a 2016 Ministry of Intelligence case against them. In April, Judge Hojjat Nabavi from Branch 2 of the Birjand Revolutionary Court [sentenced](#) nine Baha'is to lengthy prison sentences for "membership in the illegal and anti-security deviant Baha'i sect." While one was acquitted, the court [denied](#) an October appeal by the eight other Baha'is.

Key U.S. Policy

The Trump administration continued its "maximum pressure" tactic in 2020 as high-level officials, including then Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo, repeatedly [highlighted](#) the plight of persecuted religious minorities. In August, [Elliot Abrams replaced](#) U.S. Department of State Iran Envoy Brian H. Hook. In January 2020, the United States [killed](#) IRGC Quds Force Commander Qassim Soleimani in Baghdad, Iraq, for "actively developing plans to attack American diplomats and service members in Iraq and throughout the region." Later that month, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) [blocked](#) the domain of the semiofficial Iranian Fars News Agency. Throughout 2020, the Treasury Department sanctioned high-ranking Iranian officials responsible for severe religious freedom violations, [including](#) Intelligence Minister Mahmoud Alavi. At the February 2020 National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, DC, then President Donald J. Trump [called](#) on Iran to free jailed Christian convert Mary Mohammadi. In October, the United States supported a United Nations [resolution](#) condemning human rights restrictions in Iran, including religious freedom violations. On December 2, the State Department [redesignated](#) Iran as a CPC under IRFA and reimposed existing travel restrictions on Iranian individuals connected with the commission of serious human rights abuses. While approximately 12 religiously persecuted Iranians were admitted to the United States in 2019 under the bipartisan Lautenberg Amendment, at the end of 2020 nearly 80 fully vetted Iranians remained in Vienna, Austria, awaiting final approval to travel to the United States for resettlement.

Individual Views of Commissioner Johnnie Moore

Iran is the world's leading proprietor of hostage diplomacy and the world's leading sponsor of terrorism, especially through its proxies like the terrorist Houthis, Hezbollah, and various Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-affiliated groups active across Europe, South America, the Middle East, and elsewhere. Iran's activities within and outside of the country target religious minorities and especially Jews, Evangelical Christians, and Baha'is. I'm appalled by reports that certain Biden administration officials would, in effect, reward Iran for its bad behavior by eliminating sanctions prematurely. Negotiations with Iran must only be pursued in consultation with America's allies in the Middle East (including Saudi Arabia and Israel). They must involve the release of arbitrarily detained Americans (and others) and address Iran's gross human rights abuses and proxy activities, and those negotiations are only reasonable if they produce an outcome that would be satisfactory to a bipartisan majority of members of Congress, as if a new deal were a treaty. Otherwise, Iran will only take advantage of American goodwill to lie more, kidnap more, kill more innocents, threaten the elimination of Israel, and further destabilize the world. Finally, I will give my remaining words to Wang Xiyue, the American PhD student from Princeton who was taken hostage by Iran during the Obama administration *after* the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA): "The menace of the Islamic Republic can't be appeased . . . for 42 years Iran has demonstrated that it changes its behavior only in response to strength in the form of American-led international pressure."