

KEY FINDINGS

In 2022, religious freedom conditions in Iran sharply deteriorated. Following the death of Mahsa Zhina Amini after her arrest and torture by police for wearing an “improper hijab,” Iran repressed nationwide protests with lethal force, detained and killed [children](#), sexually assaulted and raped [detained](#) protesters, and engaged in other [gross violations of human rights](#), including executions of protesters without due process. Scores of protesters received [charges](#) grounded in Islamic religious concepts that in Iran carry the [death penalty](#), raising serious concerns of mass executions. Iran’s government also escalated its repression of Baha’is, [restricting](#) access to religious sites, issuing [legal rulings](#) supporting confiscation of Baha’i properties, [denying](#) Baha’is entrance to universities, and conducting systematic [arrests](#). Security forces [arrested](#) 30 Yarsanis in Khermanshah and [sentenced](#) two Yarsanis, including a [community leader](#), to prison terms for “propaganda against the state.” Iranian security forces [destroyed](#) a Sunni mosque in Zahedan and [threatened](#) Sunni clerics who condemned the [killing](#) of at least 96 protesters following Friday prayers on September 30. Prison officials at Bander Abbas prison [tortured](#) Sunni cleric Musa Rahimi to death following his arrest for holding prayers on the date designated by Saudi Arabia instead of Iran’s religious establishment. The Tehran Revolutionary Court [sentenced](#) an Iranian Christian to a 10-year prison sentence, and he and two other Christians also received a 10-year “deprivation of social rights” upon their release for their membership in a house church. [Several](#) other [Christians](#) faced [sentencing](#) and prison time on

similar charges. In January, Ministry of Intelligence officials in Dezful summoned eight Christians and [pressured](#) them to abandon their faith. Several members of Iran’s Gonabadi Sufi community [remained](#) under alleged arbitrary detention, including in [solitary confinement](#). Iran also continued to persecute nontheists and members of spiritualist movements. In August, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) [arrested](#) eight followers of Erfan-e Halgheh. Iran’s leadership also spread [explicitly antisemitic](#) messages over traditional and social media. It continued [targeting](#) Iranian religious minorities abroad, in one case, [forcibly repatriating](#) dissidents.

In 2022, women and girls continued to face religious freedom repression in Iran. Religiously grounded laws in Iran continued to allow impunity for men who [murdered women](#) for violating “family honor.” Security forces [arrested](#) and deployed egregious violence against women and [girls](#) who peacefully protested the [increased enforcement](#) of mandatory headscarf laws. [Golrokh Iraee](#), a women’s rights activist who previously served prison time for writing an unpublished short story criticizing the stoning of adulterers, was [arrested](#) in September and [moved](#) in November from Qarchak to Evin Prison. Iran also [targeted](#) and actively executed lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) Iranians on religious grounds, including those [outside](#) the country. Prison officials [hanged](#) two gay men on sodomy charges in January and two [other](#) gay men in July. In August, a court in Urmia issued [death sentences](#) against two LGBTQI+ [activists](#) for “corruption on Earth.”

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;
- Issue clarifications of [general and specific sanctions licenses](#), expedite the

processing of general license applications, and [continue issuing](#) new general licenses that facilitate financial and technological [support](#) for Iranians asserting their freedom of religion or belief through peaceful demonstrations and labor strikes; and

- Work with members of the [International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance](#) and other international associations to support the United Nations (UN) Fact Finding Mission to Iran and support a Security Council referral of the situation in Iran to the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity against those asserting freedom of religion or belief.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Reauthorize and exercise oversight to ensure implementation of the Lautenberg Amendment, which aids persecuted Iranian religious minorities seeking refugee status in the United States, and urge the Biden administration to expand the program’s capacity to process, vet, and resettle Iranian religious minorities.
- Convey, through legislation, press statements, and media messaging, bipartisan support for Iranian protesters’ calls for greater religious freedom in Iran.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- Country Update: [Religious Freedom in Iran in 2022](#)
- Special Report: [Religious Propaganda in Iran](#)
- Podcast: [The Nexus of Religious Freedom and Women’s Rights in Iran](#)
- Podcast: [Religious Prisoners of Conscience in Iran](#)

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 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 historical influences. Iran is home to several other religious groups that face persecution, including Mandeans, Yarsanis, nonbelievers, and spiritual movements, such as Erfan-e Halgheh.

Religious Minorities

In 2022, Iran's government escalated its persecution of Baha'is, conducting nationwide arrests and [spreading propaganda](#) against the group. In February, Judge Mohammadghasem Ain al-Kamali of Branch 1 of the Semnan Revolutionary Court [ruled](#) that the Execution of Imam Khomeini's Order (EIKO) could legally confiscate the property of Baha'is following false allegations against a Baha'i man in the province. Branch 54 of the Tehran Appeals Court upheld the decision in August following the [destruction](#) of six Baha'i houses in Rooshankoo. In July, Iran [rearrested](#) three members of the now disbanded Friends of Iran (Yaran Iran) who previously spent a decade in prison. In late August, Ministry of Intelligence officials [arrested](#) 14 Baha'is during a religious study in Ghaemshahr. Throughout the fall and winter of 2022, Iran [continued](#) its systematic campaign of Baha'i arrests.

Iran's government also continued using antisemitic rhetoric to incite intolerance against Jews. In April, an IRGC-affiliated think tank [declared](#) there was no "real antisemitism" in Nazi Germany. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei regularly uses antisemitic tropes such as Jewish financial domination and deliberately conflates Judaism and Israeli government policy in his tweets. U.S. Department of State Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism Deborah E. Lipstadt has [condemned repeatedly](#) this "vile antisemitic rhetoric."

The government also [targeted](#) Christian Iranians, particularly converts from Islam. In February, the Tehran Court of Appeal [ordered](#) a review of the sentences of nine Christians on the grounds that membership in a house church did not constitute a threat to national security, leading to their acquittal. However, the lower courts continued [sentencing](#) Christians on national security grounds. Pastor [Youcef Nadarkhani](#), who is serving a six-year sentence for leading a 400-member house church, was [allowed](#) a five-day furlough for Easter but returned to Evin Prison shortly thereafter. In May, the Civil Court of Bandar Anzali [levied](#) a fine of \$185 (six million tomans) on Christian convert Rahmat Rostimpour for violating Article 500 of Iran's penal

code [prohibiting](#) education "contrary to Islam." In August, Iran's Supreme Court declined to review the 10-year prison sentence [against](#) house church leader Anooshavan Avedian. That same month, house church leader Josef Shahbazian [began](#) a 10-year sentence at Evin Prison following a June 2020 [raid](#) on a private home in which security forces arrested 30 Christians. In October, however, two Christian prisoners, [Nasser Navard Goltapeh](#) and [Fariba Dalir](#), were released from Evin Prison. Following the outbreak of mass protests, the Ministry of Intelligence reportedly [pressured](#) Armenian Christian churches and church [leaders](#) to issue statements supporting the government.

Sunni Muslim Iranians faced repression in 2022 as security forces targeted communities in the geographic and social [periphery](#) in response to protests. Cleric Musa Rahimi reportedly [died](#) under [torture](#) in a prison in Bandar Abbas following his arrest for announcing the start of Eid al-Fitr in alignment with the Saudi date rather than the Iranian date. In September, security forces in Zahedan [shot](#) at least 96 people leaving the [Makki](#) Grand Mosque to attend protests. In November, security forces [opened](#) fire on worshipers at the mosque. Both the IRGC and a Shi'a religious official linked to Ayatollah Khamenei [condemned](#) Sunni clerics for comments [supporting](#) protesters and criticizing the government. Iran's most prominent Sunni cleric, Molavi Abdolhamid, continued to [express](#) his support for protesters.

Iran also continued its mistreatment of Gonabadi Sufis in 2022. Three Gonabadi Sufis at Great Tehran Prison were [denied](#) access to visitors in April. In August, Gonabadi Sufi journalist [Kasra Nouri](#) was [moved](#) from Adel Abad Prison in Shiraz to a local Ministry of Intelligence [office](#). During protests in December, security forces [arrested](#) Gonabadi Sufi Mohsen Afrouz.

Key U.S. Policy

The Joseph R. Biden administration has supported protesters in Iran calling for greater religious freedom. In [remarks](#) at the UN General Assembly, President Biden lauded "the brave women of Iran who right now are demonstrating to secure their basic rights." In November, the United States voted in [favor](#) of establishing a UN fact-finding mission on Iran at the UN Human Rights Council. That same month, Vice President Kamala D. Harris [stated](#) that the United States would "work with our partners to remove Iran from the UN Commission on the Status of Women." In December, the United States [voted](#) in favor of the resolution—which it cosponsored—to remove Iran from the commission.

The U.S. Department of the Treasury and the State Department continued to impose targeted sanctions on Iranian officials for violating religious freedom in 2022, including [leaders](#) in Iran's [IRGC](#) and Basij militias. In September, the Treasury [issued](#) General License D-2, which facilitates outside technological support to Iranians protesting for greater religious freedom and other rights.

On November 30, the State Department [redesignated](#) Iran as a CPC under IRFA and, as the relevant presidential action, imposed travel restrictions on Iranian officials complicit in religious freedom violations.