

# IRAN 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution states that all laws and regulations must be based on undefined “Islamic criteria” but protects certain aspects of religious freedom for members of some but not all religious minorities. In practice, the government severely restricted religious freedom, and there were reports of imprisonment, harassment, intimidation and discrimination based on religious beliefs. There were continued reports of the government charging religious and ethnic minorities with *moharebeh* (enmity against God), “anti-Islamic propaganda,” or vague national security crimes for their religious activities. Those reportedly arrested on religious grounds faced poor prison conditions and treatment, as with most prisoners of conscience. The frequent arrest and harassment of members of religious minorities continued during the year, following a significant increase in 2012. There continued to be reports of the government imprisoning, harassing, intimidating, and discriminating against people because of their religious beliefs. The constitution states that Ja’afari Shia Islam is the official state religion. It provides that “other Islamic denominations are to be accorded full respect” and officially recognizes only three non-Islamic religious groups, Zoroastrians, Christians, and Jews, as religious minorities. Although the constitution protects the rights of members of these three religions to practice freely, the government imposed legal restrictions on proselytizing and regularly arrests members of the Zoroastrian and Christian communities for practicing their religion. The government occasionally vilified Judaism. The government considers Bahais to be apostates and defines the Bahai faith as a “political sect.” The government prohibits Bahais from teaching and practicing their faith and subjects them to many forms of discrimination not faced by members of other religious groups.

Government rhetoric and actions created a threatening atmosphere for nearly all non-Shia religious groups, most notably for Bahais, as well as for Sufi Muslims, evangelical Christians, Jews, and Shia groups not sharing the government’s official religious views. Bahai and Christian groups reported arbitrary arrests, prolonged detentions, and confiscation of property. Government-controlled broadcast and print media continued negative campaigns against religious minorities, particularly Bahais. All religious minorities suffered varying degrees of officially sanctioned discrimination, particularly in the areas of employment, education, and housing. Bahais continued to experience expulsions from, or denial of admission to, universities.

## IRAN

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Members of non-Shia religious groups faced some societal discrimination, and elements of society created a threatening atmosphere for some religious minorities. The government's campaign against non-Shia created an atmosphere of impunity allowing other elements of society to harass religious minorities.

Since 1999, the United States has designated Iran as a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act. In 2011, the Secretary of State redesignated Iran as a CPC, and redesignated the existing restrictions on certain imports from and exports to Iran. The U.S. government made clear its strong objections to the government's harsh and oppressive treatment of religious minorities and pushed for improvements through high-level public statements and reports, support for relevant UN and nongovernmental organization (NGO) efforts, coordinated diplomatic initiatives with the international community, and sanctions. The U.S. government also engaged with NGOs and civil society to gain a greater understanding of the status of religious freedom in the country. The United States has no diplomatic relations with Iran.

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the population at 79.9 million (July 2013 estimate). Muslims constitute 99 percent of the population; 90 percent are Shia and 9 percent Sunni (mostly Turkmen, Arabs, Baluchis, and Kurds living in the northeast, 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 people practice Sufism.

Groups together constituting the remaining 1 percent of the population include Bahais, Christians, Jews, Sabean-Mandaeans, and Zoroastrians. The two largest non-Muslim minorities are Bahais and Christians. Bahais number approximately 300,000, and are heavily concentrated in Tehran and Semnan. According to UN figures, 300,000 Christians live in the country, although some NGOs estimate there may be as many as 370,000. The Statistical Center of Iran reports there are 117,700. The majority of Christians are ethnic Armenians concentrated in Tehran and Isfahan. Unofficial estimates of the Assyrian Christian population range between 10,000 and 20,000. There are also Protestant denominations, including evangelical 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. There are from 5,000 to 10,000 Sabean-

## IRAN

Mandaeans. The Statistical Center of Iran estimated in 2011 that there were approximately 25,300 Zoroastrians, who are primarily ethnic Persians; however, Zoroastrian groups report 60,000 members.

### **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

#### **Legal/Policy Framework**

The constitution and other laws and policies severely restrict freedom of religion. The constitution declares the “official religion is Islam and the doctrine followed is that of Ja’afari Shiism.” The constitution states all laws and regulations must be based on undefined “Islamic criteria” and official interpretation of sharia (Islamic law).

The constitution provides Sunni Muslims a degree of religious freedom, and states that, “within the limits of the law,” Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians are the only recognized religious minorities with protected ability to worship freely and to form religious societies, as long as they do not proselytize. Although the Sabean-Mandaeans do not consider themselves Christians, the government regards them as Christians, and thus they are included among the three recognized religious minorities. The government does not recognize any other non-Islamic religion, and adherents of these other religious groups, such as the Bahais, do not have the freedom to practice their beliefs.

Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Ali Khamenei heads a three-branch government structure (legislative, executive, and judicial branches). A group of 86 Islamic scholars known as the Assembly of Experts chooses the supreme leader. The scholars are directly elected every eight years. The unelected Guardian Council reviews all acts of the Majlis (parliament) for strict conformity with Islamic law and the constitution, and all candidates for any elected office, including membership in the Assembly of Experts. The Guardian Council is composed of six clerics appointed by the supreme leader and six Muslim legal scholars nominated by the judiciary and approved by the Majlis.

The constitution does not provide for the rights of Muslim citizens to choose, change, or renounce their religious beliefs. The government automatically considers a child born to a Muslim father to be a Muslim and deems conversion from Islam to be apostasy, which is punishable by death.

## IRAN

Non-Muslims may not engage in public religious expression, persuasion, or conversion among Muslims. Such proselytizing is punishable by death. The government restricts published religious material. Government officials frequently confiscate Christian Bibles and pressure publishing houses printing Bibles or unsanctioned non-Muslim materials to cease operations.

The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (Ershad) and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security closely monitor religious activity. The government does not require members of some recognized religious minorities to register as a precondition for effective operation or lawful existence, but the authorities closely monitor their communal, religious, and cultural events and organizations, including schools. The government requires evangelical Christian congregations to compile and submit membership lists. The government requires Bahais to register with the police.

Non-Muslim religious minorities may not be elected to a representative body or hold senior government or military positions, with the exception of five of the 290 Majlis seats reserved by the government for religious minorities. There are two seats for Armenian Christians, one for Assyrian Christians, one for Jews, and one for Zoroastrians. Sunnis do not have reserved seats in the Majlis but are permitted to serve in the body. Sunni Majlis deputies tend to be elected from among the larger Sunni communities. The government allows religious minorities to vote; however, religious minorities, including Sunni Muslims, are ineligible to be president.

Members of religious minority groups, except Sunni Muslims, may not serve in the judiciary, security services, or as public school principals. Officials screen applicants for public sector employment for their adherence to and knowledge of Islam, although members of religious minorities, with the exception of Bahais, may serve in the lower ranks of government. Government workers who do not observe Islamic principles and rules are subject to penalties. Bahais are barred from all leadership positions in the government and military.

The constitution states the army must be Islamic, in the sense that it must be committed to Islamic ideals and must recruit individuals who are committed to the objectives of the Islamic Revolution. In practice, however, no members of religious minority groups are exempt from military service. The law forbids non-Muslims from holding positions of authority over Muslims in the armed forces. Members of constitutionally protected religious minorities with a college education

## IRAN

may serve as officers during their mandatory military service but may not be career military officers.

Article 297 of the amended 1991 Islamic Punishments Act authorizes collection of equal *diyeh* (blood money) as restitution to families for the death of both Muslims and non-Muslims. According to law, Bahai blood is considered *mobah*, meaning it can be spilled with impunity and Bahai families are not entitled to restitution.

The government generally allows recognized religious minority groups to open schools. The Ministry of Education imposes certain curriculum requirements and supervises these schools. With few exceptions, the directors of such private schools must be Muslim. Members of recognized religious minority groups are not required to attend these schools. The Ministry of Education must approve all textbooks used in coursework, including religious texts. Members of recognized religious minority groups may provide religious instruction in non-Persian languages, but authorities must approve their texts. This requirement sometimes imposes significant translation expenses on minority communities.

The government, since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, formally denies Bahai students access to higher education. In 1991 the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution signed a secret memorandum stating Bahais “must be expelled from universities” and Bahai children “should be enrolled in schools which have a strong and imposing [Shia Islamic] religious ideology,” presumably to indoctrinate Bahais in the state-supported religion. The Ministry of Justice states Bahais are permitted to enroll in schools only if they do not identify themselves as such. To register for the university entrance examination the government requires Bahai students to identify themselves as a religion other than Bahai. These requirements preclude Bahai enrollment in state-run universities, because a tenet of the Bahai faith is not to deny one’s faith. The Ministry of Justice requires universities to exclude Bahais or expel them if their religious affiliation becomes known. University applicants are required to pass an examination in Islamic, Christian, or Jewish theology, but there is no test for Bahai theology.

Non-Shia religious leaders report bans on Sunni religious literature and on Sunni teachings in public schools. Sunnis may not build new schools or mosques.

Bahais are banned from the social pension system. In addition, Bahais are regularly denied compensation for injury or criminal victimization and the right to inherit property. The government does not recognize Bahai marriages and divorces but allows a civil attestation of marriage to serve as a marriage certificate.

## IRAN

The government allows recognized religious minority groups to establish community centers and certain self-financed cultural, social, athletic, or charitable associations. However, the government prohibits the Bahai community from officially assembling or maintaining administrative institutions and actively closes such institutions as part of this policy.

Jewish citizens are free to travel out of the country, and the government generally does not enforce legal restrictions on travel to Israel by Jewish citizens. Other citizens may not travel to Israel.

The government carefully monitors the statements and views of senior Shia religious leaders. The supreme leader oversees the extra-judicial Special Clerical Courts established to investigate offenses and crimes committed by clerics. These courts are not provided for in the constitution.

The government maintains a legal interpretation of Islam that forces citizens of all faiths to follow strict rules, justified on the basis of religion, that effectively deprive women of many rights granted to men. The government enforces gender segregation throughout the country without regard to religious affiliation. Women of all religious groups are expected to adhere to “Islamic dress” in public; this includes covering their hair and fully covering the body in loose clothing. Although enforcement of rules for such conservative dress eases at times, the government periodically punishes “un-Islamic dress.” In a possible easing of dress code enforcement, Iranian police officials announced in November that enforcement would be transferred from the Gashte Ershad (“Guidance Patrol”) to a new “social council” within the Ministry of the Interior. The government’s 12-point template contract for marriage and divorce, while not mandatory, limits the rights accorded to all women by custom and traditional interpretations of Islamic law.

### **Government Practices**

The government severely restricted religious freedom. Government rhetoric and actions continued to create a threatening atmosphere for nearly all non-Shia religious groups, most notably for Bahais, as well as for Sunni Muslims, including Sufis; Christians, especially evangelicals; Jews; and Shia groups that did not share the government’s religious views. Government-controlled broadcast and print media continued negative campaigns against religious minorities, particularly

## IRAN

Bahais. All non-Shia religious minorities suffered varying degrees of officially sanctioned discrimination, especially in employment, education, and housing.

The government continued convictions and executions of dissidents, political reformists, and peaceful protesters on the charge of *moharebeh* and anti-Islamic propaganda. The government executed at least 27 individuals on charges of *moharebeh*, according to credible NGO reports. Authorities at Zaehedan Prison in Sistan-Baluchistan executed a group of inmates on October 26, eight of whom were charged with *moharebeh*, according to human rights groups. Also on October 26, officials executed Kurdish political prisoners Habibollah Golparipour and Reza Esmaili at Uremia Prison and Salmas Prison, respectively, on charges that included *moharebeh*, according to human rights groups.

Christian pastor Youcef Nadarkhani, imprisoned at various times over the last three years, was released on January 7, following a 2010 conviction of evangelizing Muslims. His lawyer and prominent human rights attorney, Mohammed Ali Dadkhah, remained in jail at year's end, after a 2011 conviction of "propaganda against the regime."

Christian pastor and dual U.S.-Iranian national Saeed Abedini, detained since September 2012, was sentenced in January to eight years in prison on charges related to his religious beliefs. Officials at Evin Prison reportedly subjected Abedini to physical and psychological abuse during his detention, and repeatedly denied him medical treatment and consular access. On November 3, authorities transferred Abedini to Rajai Shahr Prison, a facility reputed to be overcrowded and with insufficient medical care, placing him in a ward known to house violent offenders. Abedini reportedly remained in Rajai Shahr Prison at year's end.

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the government has executed more than 200 Bahais, although there were no reports of Bahai executions during the year. The government frequently prevented Bahais from leaving the country, harassed and persecuted them, and generally disregarded their property rights.

The government arrested at least 42 Bahais during the year, and released some, according to Bahai organizations. At year's end, at least 116 Bahais were in detention and 443 Bahai cases were still active in the judicial system, according to these organizations. In many cases the government charged them with violating Islamic penal code articles 500 and 698, relating to activities against the state and spreading falsehoods, respectively. The government often charged Bahais with "propaganda against the regime" or crimes related to threatening national security.

## IRAN

Often the charges were not dropped upon the prisoners' release, and those with charges pending against them reportedly feared arrest at any time. Government officials reportedly offered Bahais release from prison and relief from mistreatment in exchange for recanting their religious affiliation and making a declaration adopting Islam.

Seven Bahai leaders (Fariba Kamalabadi, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, Behrouz Tavakkoli, Saeid Rezaie, Vahid Tizfahm, and Mahvash Sabet) remained in detention at year's end, serving sentences extended by the authorities in 2011 to 20 years. They were charged in 2011 with "espionage for Israel, insulting religious sanctities, and propaganda against the Islamic Republic." The government did not allow any of the seven access to their attorney, Abdolfattah Soltani, who was arrested in September 2011, on charges including "spreading propaganda against the system," "setting up an illegal opposition group," and "gathering and colluding with intent to harm national security." In March 2012, the authorities sentenced Soltani to 18 years in prison and banned him for an additional 20 years from practicing law. On November 2, Soltani began a hunger strike to protest the lack of medical care at Evin Prison, where he remained at year's end.

Soltani's wife, Massoumeh Dehghan, was charged with spreading propaganda against the state, sentenced in November 2012 to a one-year prison term, suspended for five years, and was banned for five years from leaving the country. On October 7, human rights groups reported that Branch 54 of Tehran Appeals Court upheld her sentence in full.

Authorities in Tonekabon arrested Zayullah Qadri, Soroush Gorshasebi, and Faramarz Lotf, on or around September 23, and transferred the three Bahai men to an unknown location, according to Bahai groups. Family members said they were assaulted by officials when they tried to visit the detainees, and two relatives were reportedly sprayed in the face with tear gas. Gorshasebi was freed on bail after 17 days in detention.

The government raided Bahai homes and businesses and confiscated large amounts of private and commercial property, as well as religious materials. On October 13, Ministry of Intelligence and Security agents raided 14 Bahai homes in Abadeh, confiscating computers, books, and other possessions, according to Baha'i World News Service. Authorities then summoned the occupants for questioning and reportedly warned them to leave Abadeh or risk being attacked by city residents.

## IRAN

The government continued to hold many Bahai properties it seized following the 1979 Revolution, including cemeteries, holy places, historical sites, and administrative centers. The government generally prevented Bahais from burying their dead in accordance with their religious tradition, and many of their cemeteries have been destroyed. On August 19, Iranian Christian news agency Mohabat News reported the Revolutionary Court in Sanandaj had issued an order for the destruction of a Bahai cemetery where over 40 Bahais are reportedly buried. Authorities had reportedly already sold the cemetery land at the time of the report.

There were reports of authorities placing restrictions on Bahai businesses or forcing them to close, asking managers of private companies to dismiss Bahai employees, and denying applications for new or renewed business and trade licenses. On October 5, authorities forcibly closed a business in Tonekabon owned by three Bahais: Soroush Gorshasebi, Sina Gorshasebi, and Omid Qaderi, according to human rights activists. One report said the reason for the closure had not been announced but noted that Bahais were forbidden to sell food items to Muslims and said officials often extended this ban to other items.

Although the government maintained publicly that Bahais were free to attend university if they did not identify themselves as Bahai, public and private universities continued to deny admittance and expel Bahai students, indicating the implicit policy of preventing Bahais from obtaining higher education remained in effect.

The government continued to imprison and detain members of the Bahai Institute for Higher Education. On October 8, courts tried Nazim Baqeri and sentenced her to four years in prison on charges of endangering national security through her association with the university. After their arrest for “membership in the Bahai community” in 2011, Fuad Moqaddam and Emanullah Mostaqim of the Bahai Institute for Higher Education were both sentenced in 2012 to five-year prison terms. Moqaddam reportedly began his five-year sentence at Evin Prison on May 11. A human rights NGO reported that Mostaqim, who had recently undergone open heart surgery and suffers from diabetes, reported to Evin Prison on May 20, to begin serving a five-year sentence and was transferred to Rajai Shahr Prison on May 30.

The government’s continuing seizure of Bahai personal property and its denial of access to education and employment eroded the Bahai community’s economic base and threatened its survival. Members of the Bahai community reported Bahai children in public schools faced attempts by their teachers and administrators to

## IRAN

convert them to Islam. The detention of Bahai students continued. Leva Khanjani, a Bahai student who in August 2012 began a two-year prison sentence on charges relating to her participation in December 2009 post-election student protests, received a four-day furlough in July but was reportedly still in Evin Prison at year's end.

Harassment and arrests of Sufis also continued. On July 10, Branch 15 of Tehran's Revolutionary Court informed seven members of a Sufi order that it had sentenced them to prison terms ranging from seven-and-a-half to ten-and-a-half years on charges that included "membership in a sect endangering national security," "disturbing the public mind," and "establishing and membership in a deviant group." According to international NGO Human Rights Watch, defendants Hamid-Reza Moradi, Reza Entesari, Amir Eslami, Afshin Karampour, Farshid Yadollahi, Omid Behrouzi, and Mostafa Daneshjoo reported due process violations including being prevented from meeting with their lawyers and from reviewing their case files, as well as ill treatment by Ministry of Intelligence and Security agents during their detention. All seven were reportedly in Evin Prison at year's end. On July 18, Branch 2 of the Revolutionary Court in Shiraz informed four Sufis that it had sentenced them to prison terms ranging from one to three years on charges of membership in an "anti-government" group intent on endangering national security, according to Human Rights Watch. A Sufi-affiliated news site reported that several Sufi prisoners including Moradi suffered from malnutrition and a lack of medical care.

Human rights groups reported several instances of due process violations by authorities against members of the Sunni community. In March activists and human rights organizations issued a joint statement expressing concern about due process violations in the trials of Sunni imam Molavi Fathi Mohammad Naghshbandi and 11 other Sunnis sentenced to death for the January 2012 assassination of pro-government Sunni cleric Mostafa Jangi Zehi.

On June 5, International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran reported that 20 Sunni inmates of Rajai Shahr Prison in Karaj were convicted of *moharebeh*, a capital offense, and that many had admitted to the charge under torture. The source also reported that Sunnis in the prison were mistreated because of their beliefs.

The government actively denied Christians freedom of religion. Christians, particularly evangelicals, continued to experience high levels of harassment and surveillance. The authorities arrested Christians disproportionately, including

## IRAN

members of evangelical groups, according to human rights activists. The status of many of these cases was not known at year's end. Authorities released some Christians almost immediately, but held others in secret locations without access to attorneys. The United Nations Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran conveyed reports that authorities held at least 20 Christians in custody as of July. Prison authorities reportedly withheld proper medical care from some Christian prisoners, according to human rights groups. In one such case, Christian pastor Behnam Irani suffered from a blood infection without medical attention. Irani has also endured beatings by prison guards, according to human rights activists.

A court in Rasht informed four Christians on October 20 that it had sentenced them to 80 lashes each for drinking wine during communion and possession of a satellite antenna, according to a human rights organization. Authorities had arrested Behzad Taalipasand, Mehdi Reza Omidi (Youhan), Mehdi Dadkhah (Danial) and Amir Hatemi (Youhanna) during a Christian service at a house church in December 2012. Authorities carried out Taalipasand's and Dadkhah's sentences on October 30.

Christian convert Farshid Fathi, who was arrested in 2010 and sentenced in 2012 by Tehran's Revolutionary Court to six years in prison for being the "chief director of a foreign organization in Iran and raising funds for the organization," reported in a letter that he had been subjected to severe mental torture by officials at Evin Prison, according to an August 18 report by Iranian Christian news agency Mohabat News.

In May Pastor Farhad Sabokrouh, Shahnaz Jazan, Davood (David) Ali-Jani, and Naser Zamen-Dezfulifour, Christians arrested in December 2011, began serving one-year sentences for "missionary activities and anti-regime propaganda through spreading of Christianity," according to Mohabat News. At year's end, Ali-Jani was in Karoon Prison in Ahwaz while the other three were in Sepidar Prison, also in Ahwaz. Mohammad-Hadi (Mostafa) Bordbar, one of 50 Christian converts arrested in a December 2012 raid in Tehran, was informed on July 31 that Branch 26 of the Revolutionary Court of Tehran had sentenced him to 10 years in prison for membership in an "anti-security organization" and for convening with intent to commit crimes against Iranian national security, but was released on November 3 after an appeals court acquitted him of all charges. The trial of Armenian Christian pastor Vruir Avenessian, who was also arrested in the December 2012 raid, began on September 7 in the same court, where Avenessian reportedly faced charges of "action against national security" and "proselytizing Farsi-speaking citizens."

## IRAN

Muslim converts to Christianity faced harassment, arrest, and sentencing. Many arrests took place during police raids on religious gatherings, which also included government confiscation of religious property. Plainclothes officials arrested Mohammad Reza Farid, Saeed Safi, and Hamid Reza Ghadiri on May 29 during a house service for Christian converts, according to a human rights organization. As of July 8, their families had not been able to obtain information about their detention conditions and authorities had not presented charges.

There were reports of arrests and harassment of Sunnis. Intelligence officials re-arrested Sunni activist Hossein Javadi on the charge of acting against national security after the Supreme Court had exonerated him from this charge and released him after three years imprisonment in Rajai Shahr Prison, according to human rights activists. At year's end, Javadi was reportedly back in Rajai Shahr Prison serving the remainder of his original five-year sentence.

Shia religious leaders who did not fully support government policies or the supreme leader's views also faced intimidation and arrest. Prison conditions remained poor for dissident Shia cleric Ayatollah Hossein Kazemini Boroujerdi, who was serving an 11-year sentence on unspecified charges in Evin Prison, where officials reportedly continued to torture him and deny him access to medication for several health problems, according to human rights activists.

On May 7, Dr. Kamran Ayazi, a dentist serving a nine-year sentence on charges of *moharebeh* following his conviction of criticizing Islam on internet message boards, began a hunger strike to protest his transfer to solitary confinement following his complaints of poor nutrition in Evin Prison, according to human rights activists. In August 2012, news media reported allegations that Ayazi suffered severe bleeding after being flogged.

There were reports in August and September of increased enforcement of dress codes, according to human rights activists; those arrested were subject to fines or other punishment. In a possible easing of dress code enforcement, police officials announced in November that enforcement would be transferred from the Gashte Ershad ("Guidance Patrol") to a new "social council" within the Ministry of the Interior.

The government enforced the prohibition on proselytizing by closely monitoring the activities of evangelical Christians, discouraging Muslims from entering church premises, closing churches, and arresting Christian converts. Authorities pressed evangelical church leaders to sign pledges they would not evangelize Muslims or

## IRAN

allow Muslims to attend church services. Meetings for evangelical services remained restricted to Sundays. Reports suggested authorities regarded the act of allowing Muslims to visit a Christian church as proselytizing. Some Christian advocacy groups reported the government pressured Armenian, Assyrian, and evangelical churches to cancel all services in the Farsi language. Members of evangelical congregations were required to carry membership cards, photocopies of which had to be provided to the authorities. Security officials posted outside congregation centers subjected worshippers to identity checks.

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) officials arrested Christian pastor Robert Asserian in Tehran on May 21 during a prayer meeting at his Central Assemblies of God Church, according to advocacy group Christian Solidarity Worldwide. Asserian was reportedly released on bail July 2. The IRGC gained oversight of churches in 2012, replacing the Ministry of Intelligence and Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, according to human rights activists. Christians of all denominations reported the presence of security cameras outside their churches, allegedly to confirm that no non-Christians participated in services.

Police units raided the houses and confiscated the properties of some Christians. On January 9, authorities in Tehran raided the houses of two Christians, known as Shahrzad Y. and Sam S., arresting both on charges of “formation and promotion of house churches and holding gatherings intended for committing crimes,” according to a Christian news agency. The authorities reportedly confiscated personal items during the raid including laptops, cameras, and religious books.

Official reports and the media continued to characterize Christian house churches as “illegal networks” and “Zionist propaganda institutions.” Arrested members of house churches were often accused of being supported by enemy countries. On October 12, Mojtaba Seyyed Alaedin Hossein, Mohammad-Reza Partoei, Vahid Hakkani, and Homayoun Shokouhi reportedly lost their appeals of convictions for spreading Christianity, disrupting national security, propaganda against the regime, and contact with foreign agencies, according to human rights activists. The four Christians, who were arrested during a February 2012 raid on a house church, were each sentenced to three years and eight months in prison.

Assyrian Christians reported their community was permitted to write its own textbooks which, following government authorization, were printed at the government’s expense and distributed to the Assyrian community. The government reportedly allowed Hebrew instruction but limited the distribution of Hebrew texts, particularly nonreligious texts, making it difficult to teach the

## IRAN

language. The government required Jewish schools to remain open on Saturdays, a violation of Jewish religious law, to conform to the schedule of other schools.

With some exceptions, there was little government restriction of, or interference with, Jewish religious practice. Government officials, however, continued to sanction anti-Semitic propaganda in official statements, media outlets, publications, and books.

There were reports of government officials making anti-Semitic statements. On November 10, the hardline semi-official IRGC-affiliated news agency Fars News reported that IRGC Lieutenant Commander of the Navy Brigadier General Alireza Tangsiri said “the Israelis are Jews and the Americans are Christians. Our Quran stresses that they are not our friends.” While in office, former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad continued to question the existence and the scope of the Holocaust and publicly called for the destruction of Israel. (Hassan Rouhani was elected president in June and sworn in on August 4, succeeding Ahmedinejad.)

Authorities also harassed and repressed the Sabeen-Mandaeen religious community in ways similar to its harassment of other minority religious groups, including often denying members of the community access to higher education and government employment.

There were reports of arrests and harassment of Sunni clerics and congregants. Many Sunnis reported discrimination; however, it was 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 Sunnis in the city as a prominent example. Sunni leaders reported bans on Sunni religious literature and teachings in public schools, even in predominantly Sunni areas. Sunnis also noted the underrepresentation of Sunnis in government-appointed positions in the provinces where they form a majority, such as Kurdistan and Khuzestan, as well as their inability to obtain senior government positions. Residents of provinces with large Sunni populations, including Kurdistan, Khuzestan, and Sistan-Baluchistan, reported repression by the judiciary and security services, discrimination, lack of basic government services, and inadequate funding for infrastructure projects.

Security officials continued to raid prayer sites belonging to Sunnis. On October 16, security forces surrounded Sadeghiyeh Mosque in Tehran and prevented Sunni worshipers from entering to celebrate Eid al-Adha, according to human rights organizations.

## IRAN

The government repressed Sufi communities and their religious practices. Intelligence and security services continued their harassment and intimidation of prominent Sufi leaders. Government restrictions on Sufi groups and *husseiniya* (houses of worship) have become more pronounced in recent years. Authorities razed at least one Sufi home during the year, and there were reports of government officials driving Sufi families off their land and then transferring the property titles to cronies, according to human rights activists.

The government reportedly used the clerical courts to prosecute certain clerics for expressing controversial political ideas and participating in nonreligious activities, including journalism. On September 2, journalists reported the Special Clerical Court in Tabriz sentenced Sunni cleric Abdolsalam Golnavaz to six years in prison and permanently barred him from wearing clerical clothing on charges of “criticizing authorities in Kurdistan province as a means of incitement” and “propagating Sunni views aimed at creating sectarian conflict.” On September 11, NGOs reported that dissident cleric and blogger Arash Honarvar Shojaee, convicted in 2010 on espionage charges and held in the Special Clerics Ward (Ward 325) at Evin Prison, was additionally charged with “insulting [former Supreme Leader] Imam Khomeini.” Shojaee reported that authorities refused to release him despite confirmation from the medical examiner that his health made him unable to endure a prison sentence.

UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran Dr. Ahmed Shaheed submitted his fifth report in October, in which he stated “members of recognized and unrecognized religions alike, including members of the Bahai, Christian, Sunni Muslim, Yarsan and other religious communities, are increasingly subjected to various forms of legal discrimination, including in employment and education, and often face arbitrary detention, torture and ill-treatment.”

### **Government Inaction**

The government failed to take sufficient action with regard to continued discrimination, restrictions, and occasional attacks against religious minorities. Authorities also consistently failed to investigate crimes committed against members of minority religious groups and against their property, including religious sites and graveyards. In an interview published on October 31, however, Ali Younesi, President Rouhani’s Senior Adviser on Ethnic and Religious Minorities, called for the government to take measures to prevent “extremists and pressure groups” from targeting religious minorities.

## IRAN

The family of Ataollah Rezvani, a Bahai killed on August 24 in Bandar Abbas, reported that the investigating judge had discounted religiously motivated murder as the cause of death and was pursuing either suicide or murder without religious motivation as the cause, although no progress on the investigation had been reported at year's end. Rezvani was reportedly shot in the back of the head. A relative discounted robbery and revenge as motives due to several circumstances of the crime and stated that Rezvani was targeted because he was Bahai. A local imam had reportedly spoken against the Bahai community in his sermons on several occasions, including several days before Rezvani's death. The investigation was pending at year's end.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Although the constitution gave Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians the status of "protected" religious minorities, in practice non-Muslims faced substantial societal discrimination, and government actions continued to support elements of society that created a threatening atmosphere for them.

The conservative media continued its campaign against non-Muslim religious minorities, begun after former President Ahmadinejad took office in August 2005. Political and religious leaders continued to issue a stream of inflammatory statements against non-Muslims. These campaigns contributed to a difficult situation for the non-Muslim community throughout the year.

Unknown actors desecrated Bahai graveyards, according to Bahai organizations. The government did not seek to identify or punish the perpetrators. There were reported problems for Bahais at different levels of society around the country. Bahais experienced continued personal harassment, and there were reported cases of Bahai children being harassed in school and subjected to Islamic indoctrination. Non-Bahai were often pressured to refuse employment to Bahais and to dismiss Bahais from their employment in the private sector.

There were reports of Shia clerics and prayer leaders denouncing Sufism and the activities of Sufis in the country in both sermons and public statements.

Many Jews reportedly sought to limit their contact with or support for the state of Israel due to fear of reprisal. In early January news outlets reported that the Jewish community was fearful following the December 2012 murder of Daniel

## IRAN

Mahgerefteh, an Iranian Jewish man reportedly in a romantic relationship with the daughter of a member of the IRGC. Although authorities maintained that Mahgerefteh was killed in a robbery, some members of the Jewish community stated there were inconsistencies in the official account and suspected the daughter was complicit in the killing.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

Since 1999, the United States has designated Iran as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. In August 2011, the Secretary of State redesignated Iran as a CPC, and redesignated the existing restrictions on certain imports from and exports to the country, in accordance with section 103(b) of the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions Accountability and Divestment Act of 2010, pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the act.

The United States has no diplomatic relations with Iran, and therefore has limited opportunity to directly raise concerns with the government over its religious freedom abuses and restrictions. On several occasions, however, senior U.S. government officials, including the President and the Secretary of State, raised directly with their Iranian counterparts the case of Christian pastor and dual U.S.-Iranian national Saeed Abedini, who is being held on charges related to his religious beliefs, and called for his release. The Department of State also publicly called for the release of Mr. Abedini and other prisoners held on religious grounds.

The U.S. government also used other avenues to call on Iran to respect religious freedom and condemn abuses. These include public statements and reports, support for relevant UN and NGO efforts, diplomatic initiatives, and sanctions. On numerous occasions U.S. government officials, including the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, addressed the situations of Bahai, Christian, Jewish, and other communities in the country.

In May the Departments of State and Treasury imposed sanctions against the Committee to Determine Instances of Criminal Content (CDICC), an Iranian governmental organization, pursuant to E.O. 13628 because it engaged in censorship or other activities with respect to Iran on or after June 12, 2009, that prohibit, limit, or penalize the exercise of freedom of expression or assembly by citizens of Iran or that limit access to print or broadcast media. The CDICC was designated in part for its role in filtering internet content based on broadly defined

## IRAN

laws, including insulting religious figures. Such laws could be used to block web sites of religious minorities. In May the State Department also imposed visa restrictions on nearly 60 officials of the government and other individuals who participated in the commission of human rights abuses related to political repression, some of whom participated in the ongoing repression of religious minorities.

In March the United States voted at the UN Human Rights Council to renew the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran. The United States also voted in November and December at the UN Third Committee and UN General Assembly, respectively, in favor of a resolution expressing concern over Iran's human rights practices, including the continued persecution of religious minorities.