

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom conditions in Iran remained poor. In February, then President Hassan Rouhani [signed](#) amendments to articles 499 and 500 of Iran’s penal code imposing prison time on those guilty of “insulting Islam” and conducting “deviant activity” that “contradicts or interferes with the sacred law of Islam.” In June, three Christians were arrested, [charged](#), and [sentenced](#) to five years in prison each on the basis of these amendments. Iran also continued using charges of “corruption on Earth,” “enmity against God,” and national security-related charges to persecute religious minorities. In April, the Arak Criminal Court [sentenced](#) two men to death for “insulting the Prophet,” and [upheld](#) the sentence on appeal in August. Iran’s government also continued to [arrest](#), [charge](#), [sentence](#), and [jail](#) scores of Christians on charges including “propaganda against the regime.” Christian converts from Islam faced particular targeting for persecution. Despite the prevalence of COVID-19 in Iran’s prisons, scores of religious minorities, including [Christians](#), [Baha’is](#), and [Sunnis](#), were called to begin prison sentences. Iran also continued to spread antisemitism. It [released](#) the results of its third Holocaust denial cartoon contest in January. Several submissions critical of Israel contained explicitly antisemitic tropes. In December, a state media outlet [criticized](#) a Shab-e Yalda display reminiscent of a Jewish Sukkah as a “distortion.” Smaller religious communities, including nontheists, also faced severe persecution. While Iran’s government considers followers of the Yarsan faith to be Shi’a Muslims who practice Sufism, members identify as a distinct and separate religion and are [estimated](#) to number up to two million. The Yarsani community’s January bid to

gain [recognition](#) under Iran’s constitution failed, and Iran’s National Defense University published an article in Spring 2021 calling the community a “security threat.”

Iran continues to detain those calling for greater religious freedom, including USCIRF Religious Prisoners of Conscience [Golrokh Iraee](#) and [Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani](#). On April 12, 2021, Branch 26 of the Tehran Revolutionary Court [sentenced](#) Iraee in abstentia to an additional year in prison, a two-year travel ban, and a two-year ban on participating in political organizations. Authorities arrested Iraee in 2016 for “insulting Islamic sanctities” after discovering an unpublished short story in her home criticizing the religiously-grounded practice of stoning adulterous women to death.

Iran continues to [harass](#) and [imprison](#) women who protest religious headscarf laws. In July, officials in Mashhad [arrested](#) five people for not observing “Shari’a criteria” after women modeled at a fabric store’s opening event without headscarves. Iran also continued detaining lawyer [Nasrin Soutoudeh](#) despite serious health problems requiring multiple prison [furloughs](#) to receive medical treatment throughout the year. The Iranian government also targets and fails to protect members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transexual, and intersex (LGBTI) community. Iran actively executes people who engage in same-sex relations, citing religious grounds. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) [arrested](#) a lesbian woman in November on charges including “supporting homosexuality.” In May, authorities [failed](#) to fully prosecute the honor killing of a 20 year-old gay nonbinary person.

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;
 - Raise religious freedom and other human rights abuses in bilateral and multilateral negotiations with Iran’s government on issues of regional and international security;
 - Work with members of the [International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance](#) as well as others throughout the international community to exert multilateral pressure on Iran to improve religious freedom conditions; and
 - Press for the release of all religious prisoners of conscience, including [Youcef Nadarkhani](#) and [Golrokh Ebrahimi Iraee](#).
- 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 extend this Amendment to religious minorities in Iran who are citizens of Afghanistan.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Iran](#)
- **Hearing:** [State-Sanctioned Religious Freedom Violations and Coercion by Saudi Arabia and Iran](#)
- **Podcast:** [Religious Restrictions in Iran](#)

Background

The Islamic Republic of Iran has a theocratic, authoritarian government that allows only 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. The constitution 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 in Iran, but current data on the populations of both communities are sparse. Iran is home to several other smaller persecuted religious groups, including Mandeans, [Yarsanis](#), nonbelievers, and spiritual movements.

Religious Minorities

Throughout 2021, the government [arrested](#) scores of Baha'is [across](#) Iran. Many detained Baha'is were held incommunicado or [taken](#) to undisclosed locations. Ministry of Intelligence agents also [searched](#) the home of a Baha'i citizen and [confiscated](#) her belongings. Iranian universities continued to [deny](#) education to Baha'is on account of their faith. In November, Places Administration agents in Qaemshahr [closed](#) six Baha'i businesses. In August, officials from the Natural Resources Department of Mazandaran Province [demolished](#) the homes of three Baha'is without warning. In December, the Execution of Imam Khomeini's Order (EIKO) [announced](#) the auction of thirteen Baha'i farms in Kata. The government of Iran also continued to [deny](#) Baha'is the right to bury their deceased in empty plots at the Golestan Javid cemetery outside Tehran which the community has used for decades. Instead, Baha'is are being forced to use the Khaveran mass grave site where victims of the 1988 prison massacres are buried.

Iran also continued to target Christians, especially Christian converts. In January, Christian converts Sam and Mariam Khosravi [lost](#) an appeal against a sentence for charges of "propaganda against the state," months after a judge [forced](#) them to give up custody of their daughter on the basis of their religious beliefs. In February, the prosecutor's office in Sarbaz summoned Christian convert Ibrahim Firouzi after he [published](#) six online [videos](#) regarding his mistreatment. After being jailed in Zahedan prison for "insulting the sacred," Firouzi [undertook](#) a hunger strike until receiving assurances he would be freed. Iranian authorities [released](#) him on bail in late February but charges against him remain in place. In April 2021, Christian convert Hamid Ashouri was [sentenced](#) to ten months in prison on charges of "propaganda against the state," which he began serving at Karaj Central Prison in July.

Iran continued detaining USCIRF Religious Prisoner of Conscience [Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani](#), who led a 400-member house church and was arrested in 2018 on charges of "acting against national security" and "promoting Zionist Christianity." In February 2021, the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention [declared](#) Nadarkhani's detention a violation of international law. In November, Iran's Supreme Court [ruled](#) that nine Christian converts

serving prison sentences for involvement in house churches did not "act against national security," a decision that may positively affect similar cases. The converts were [released](#) in December pending review of their sentences.

Sunni Muslims in Iran, particularly religious leaders, faced [persecution](#) and [sentences](#) on spurious charges. Authorities [demolished](#) the foundations of a Sunni mosque in Iranshahr in January, and [demolished](#) another in Zahedan in December. In March, the Urmia Special Clerical Court [sentenced](#) cleric Rasul Hamzepour to three years in prison for "propaganda against the state." In June, the Special Court for the Clergy [summoned](#) a Sunni cleric, Fazul al-Rahman Kuhi, during his furlough from Vakilabad prison. In December, intelligence officials in Azadshahr [arrested](#) Sunni cleric Nematollah Mashouf after he refused to lead Friday prayers following the [removal](#) of the previous cleric.

Gonbadi Sufis in Iran also faced ongoing persecution in 2021. Journalist Kasra Nouri [remains](#) in prison on a six-year term at Adelabad Prison. After being [denied](#) medical care at Evin Prison, Sufi prisoner Benham Mahjoubi fell into a coma in February and died soon thereafter. Also in February, Branch 28 of the Tehran Revolutionary Court [sentenced](#) Abbas Deghan to prison time following his participation in 2018 protests against the Gonbadi Sufi leader's house arrest. Iran [executed](#) a Sufi man, Hossein Mohammadi, in July. In August, Sufi cleric Hafiz Sedigh was [arrested](#) in Zabol. In November, Azad University [denied](#) Gonbadi Sufi Mostafa Daneshjoo admission despite a court order. During demonstrations in Isfahan over water scarcity in November, Persian social media websites likely funded by Iran's government blamed the protests on the Gonbadi Sufi community.

Key U.S. Policy

The Joseph R. Biden administration [began](#) negotiations with Iran's government in November 2021 over nuclear issues. At a United Nations (UN) speech in September, President Biden [confirmed](#) the administration's intention to seek a return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

In April 2021, a bipartisan group of senators led by Ronald L. Wyden (D-OR) introduced [S.Res. 183](#), condemning Iran's treatment of Baha'is and citing USCIRF's [2021 Annual Report](#). Representative Theodore E. Deutch (D-FL) introduced a companion bill in the House, [H.Res. 744](#) in October. That same month, members of Congress [sent](#) a bipartisan letter to the White House urging steps to promote greater internet freedom in Iran, which is often particularly critical for religious minority communities. In December, Senator Patrick J. Toomey (R-PA) and Senator Benjamin L. Cardin (D-MD) introduced a [bill](#) to [impose](#) mandatory sanctions on Iranian officials targeting dissidents inside and outside Iran, including dissidents actively supporting religious freedom.

On November 15, the U.S. Department of State [designated](#) Iran a CPC under IRFA and imposed as the relevant presidential action sanctions on Iranian officials who [targeted](#) peaceful protesters. Following Iran's attempted kidnapping of an American-Iranian in New York who opposes religious headscarf laws, the State Department sanctioned on Iranian officials who target dissidents [abroad](#).