



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

COUNTRY UPDATE: IRAN

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To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

Religious Freedom Conditions in Iran

By [Scott Weiner](#), *Supervisory Policy Analyst*

Overview

Since the outbreak of protests following the killing of Mahsa Zhina Amini on September 16, 2022, Iran's government has responded to Iranians peacefully protesting for greater freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) with [live fire](#), [mass arrests and imprisonment](#), [sexual and gender based violence](#), and [executions](#). State violence in Iran has persisted for decades, but the Iranian government's most recent actions have reflected particular brutality. In March 2023, United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Iran Javaid Rehman raised concerns that the "scale and gravity" of these violations indicated "the possible commission of international crimes, notably...[crimes against humanity](#)." In its [2023 Annual Report](#) chapter on [Iran](#), USCIRF recommended the U.S. government support a Security Council referral of the situation in Iran to the International Criminal Court (ICC) for crimes against humanity against those asserting freedom of religion or belief.

This country update enumerates the Iranian government's systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom over the past year, with a particular focus on its targeting of religious minorities and dissidents peacefully asserting their right to freedom of religion or belief. In addition to its violence against protesters, the Iranian government's crackdowns have severely targeted the Baha'i community and the Sunni religious minority. This repression has included killings, imprisonment, torture, rape and other sexual violence, and enforced disappearances.

Background

Iran is a theocratic authoritarian state with restricted political participation. Iran's government endorses a singular interpretation of Ja'afri Shi'a Islam, though the constitution nominally recognizes some Christian groups, Jews, and Zoroastrians. Iranian authorities continue to impose religiously grounded policies on Iranians regardless of their individual beliefs in violation of Article 18 of the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which guarantees the fundamental freedom of religion or belief. Protestors imprisoned for peacefully dissenting against the state's imposition of religiously grounded hijab laws are also being held in violation of Article 18.

Many of these policies target women especially. Based on its interpretation of Islam, Iran's government has required women to wear a religious headscarf (hijab) in public spaces since the 1979 revolution regardless of their religious beliefs. Following



the outbreak of protests in September 2022, many women and girls in Iran have openly defied these laws. Nonetheless, the government has doubled down on its efforts to enforce mandatory hijab laws. In May 2023, President Ibrahim Raisi’s administration presented to parliament a bill that would *define* improper hijab wearing as “nudity” and allow officials to arrest, *fine*, and imprison women for not wearing the hijab. The bill would prohibit commissioning work from individuals or entities that promote non-compliance with mandatory hijab laws, including on social media. In August, fearing public backlash, Iran’s parliament voted to *invoke* Article 85 of the country’s constitution that permits a parliamentary committee to review bills without public debate, meaning the new law will be reviewed and debated behind closed doors.

Iran’s religiously based laws set more *lenient* punishments for so-called “honor” *killings* (which usually target women and girls) than for other kinds of homicides. In 2023, Iran’s judiciary *continues* to impose lenient sentences for such murders. In addition, starting in November 2022 and lasting through at least *May 2023*, Iranians across the country reported alleged poison gas attacks targeting girls’ schools. Official statistics state over *13,000* girls have been hospitalized because of these attacks. Iranian authorities for months failed to investigate the source of the attacks and used *tear gas* against those protesting this inaction. As late as April 2023, Iran’s Ministry of Intelligence *denied* the occurrence of any poison attacks, blaming mass hysteria as the culprit instead.

State-Perpetrated Killings

On March 21, 2023, Special Rapporteur Javaid Rehman *stated* that Iranian state authorities had killed at least 526 people since the start of the protests. By early April 2023, an Iranian diaspora human rights organization reported that Iran’s government had *killed* 537 people, including four hanged on protest-related charges. Other Iranian diaspora *human rights groups* and *international media* have confirmed the names of individual protestors and the dates on which they were killed.

In the early days and months of the protests, senior Iranian leaders *called* on security forces to “deal decisively” with the protestors and “without leniency.” A leaked government *order* on September 21, 2022, by Iran’s General Headquarters of Armed Forces to commanders in all provinces directed security forces to “severely confront troublemakers.” Several Iranian government officials, including *Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei* and *Qods Force Commander Ismail Qaani* have also publicly affirmed the strategy of crackdowns against protestors and those reporting on the protests. Mazandaran Province police chief *Hassan Mofakhami* announced a new round of crackdowns in April 2023. He *told a subordinate* during a June 2023 visit to Babolsar beach to “break the neck of anyone who may seek to break the [hijab] norms, and I’ll take responsibility for it.” In July 2023, Iran *restarted* morality police street patrols to enforce mandatory hijab laws and, throughout the summer, *shut down* businesses that did not enforce these laws.

Videos taken by unconnected Iranians *across Iran* and over several months indicate that Iranian *security forces*

have used live fire and “nonlethal” weapons at close range, including shooting in [crowded confined spaces](#), [residential areas](#), and [into cars](#). Live fire and fatal beatings have killed both adults and [children](#). On September 22, 2022, 16-year-old Sarina Esmailzadeh [joined](#) protests near her language school in Karaj. At the protest, Iranian security forces beat Esmailzadeh over the head until she bled. She died in a nearby house soon after.

In addition, Iran has [issued](#) charges that carry death sentences against protestors asserting [freedom of religion or belief](#). Iran has carried out multiple executions of protestors, often following their torture in detention as well as multiple due process violations. Among those executed were [Mohsen Shekari](#) in December 2022, [Mohammed Mehdi Karami and Seyyed Mohammad Hosseini](#) in January 2023, and [Majid Kazemi, Saleh Mirhashemi, and Saeed Yaghoubi](#) in May.

Imprisonment

Thousands of Iranians have been arrested in relation to protests since September 2022. These include large numbers of religious minorities targeted deliberately by Iran’s government and in violation of Article 18 of the UDHR.

Since September 2022, Iran has systematically arrested scores of Sunni religious officials based on that status, often following their sermons or public statements. Three such clerics were [detained](#) in a single day in January 2023: [Abdolhamid Ismaeelzahi](#), Loghman Amini, and Ebrahim Nanaleh. [Amini and Nanaleh](#) were released on bail in February but [tried](#) in June in the Hamedan Special Clerical Court over their support of protests. In February, security forces [arrested](#) Molavi Ebrahim Hassanzahi and reportedly subjected him to torture. In June, the court [sentenced](#) Amini to 11 years in prison and Nanaleh to 12. State security forces have arrested at least [seven](#) of Ismaeelzahi’s associates in 2023. On December 4, 2022, and again on January 22, 2023, the Hamedan clerical court [summoned](#) Mamusta Haj Saber Khodamoradi over his support of the protests. On May 1, 2023, the court [sentenced](#) him to seven months in prison and 72 whip lashes. Security officials [arrested Molavi Abdulmajid Moradzahi](#) in January 2023 in Zahedan and held him in solitary confinement without charges for at least four months. That same month, the Clerical Court of Hamedan [sentenced](#) Sunni cleric Seifallah Hosseini to [17 years](#) in prison (although he was [released](#) on bail in April 2023). A Sunni cleric from Piranshahr, Yunes Nokhah, was also [sentenced](#) in January 2023 to 58 months in

prison on charges including blasphemy. In late January, Iranian officials placed Mowlana Mohammed-Hossein Gorgij under house arrest in Azadshahr and [prevented](#) him from [leading](#) Friday prayers or giving sermons ahead of his appearance at the Special Court for Clerics. In April, Intelligence Ministry agents [arrested Molavi Abdolaziz Omarzahi](#) at the Makki seminary. That same month, security officials [arrested](#) Molavi Amanollah Saadi and subjected him to prolonged detention without charges. In June, state security officials [arrested](#) Hafez Kamran Salemezahi and Molavi Nazir Bakhshzahi. In July 2023, the Ministry of Intelligence office in Piranshahr [summoned](#) and interrogated Mamusta Jamaladdin Vaji and Mamusta Sharif Mahmoudpour. In August 2023, government officials summoned Molavi Fathi Mohammed Naqshabandi and [threatened](#) him with arrest if he continued to criticize the government during sermons. Security officials also [arrested](#) Molavi Abdollah Barahouie at a seminary in Khash in August.

Baha’is in Iran have for decades faced the severe and systematic deprivation of liberty and other restrictions as a matter of [government policy](#), which [treats](#) Baha’is as a “deviant sect of Islam.” This persecution escalated following the outbreak of protests in 2022 and is again escalating near the one-year anniversary of their start. Iranian authorities have arrested scores of Baha’is across Iran, taken them to locations that were initially undisclosed, and sentenced them to excessive jail terms as the government has attempted to restrict internal dissent in response to the protests. In January 2023, the Tehran Revolutionary court sentenced a Baha’i man, [Badie Khazei](#), to [six years](#) in prison for “acting against national security” and “propaganda against the state.” That same month, Branch 26 of the same court [sentenced Sepehr Ziaee](#) to five years in prison on charges related directly to his Baha’i faith after keeping him for 50 days in solitary confinement. He was arrested in September 2022 and not given an indictment for [over a month](#). Following his arrest in November 2022, [Pooya Saraf](#) was [detained](#) at Shiraz Detention Center No. 100 and had only [limited contact](#) with his family. His detention order was extended again in February 2023, but he was released on [bail](#) in March. Also in February, the Alborz Revolutionary Court sentenced [Payam Vali](#) to 16 years in prison for speaking out about the conditions of Baha’is in Iran. In May 2023 the Alborz Court of Appeals [shortened](#) his sentence to nine years and nine months. In March, the Esfahan Revolutionary Court sentenced [Parwa Behdad](#) to three years in prison following her November 2022 [arrest](#) in Isfahan. The charges against

her were not [disclosed](#), and she was detained in solitary confinement for over 21 days. [Hami Bahadori](#), a Baha'i man arrested in October 2022, was denied a trial until June 2023, at which the Tehran Revolutionary Court sentenced him to six years in prison. That same month, the Shiraz Revolutionary Court [sentenced](#) Houshedar Zarei to six years in prison and a subsequent travel ban. Baha'i couple [Vesal Momtazi](#) and Anisa Samiyan were sentenced to [multiple years](#) in prison in June 2023. In July, the Qaemshahr Revolutionary Court sentenced 14 Baha'is individually to multiple years in prison. Later that month, authorities conducted a [mass arrest](#) of Baha'is in Gilan province. In August, the Mashhad Revolutionary Court [sentenced Sanaz Tafazoli](#) to a total of ten years and nine months in Vakilabad prison.

Since 2022, Iran has re-arrested four of the seven members of the former Yaran-e-Iran (Friends of Iran), a group of Baha'i leaders in the country who were jailed between 2008 and 2017. In June 2022, security forces re-arrested and detained [Fariba Kamalabadi](#), [Mahvash Sabet](#), and [Afif Naimi](#). Kamalabadi and Sabet received ten-year sentences in December 2022, and Naimi was given a seven-year sentence in February 2023. In August 2023, security forces detained [Jamaloddin Khanjani](#).

Iranian courts have not only sentenced women to prison terms for violating the country's headscarf laws, but in some cases have also ordered them to undergo psychological treatment. For example, in July 2023, the Tehran Criminal Court [mandated](#) that actress Asfaneh Bayegan [undergo](#) psychological treatment on the grounds that her wearing of a hat instead of a hijab in public is evidence of a fictional "anti-family personality disorder." The sentence prompted a [letter of protest](#) in July 2023 from the heads of four Iranian psychiatry boards on the grounds that it ignores established medical criteria and best practices, and actively harms efforts to overcome stigmas in Iran around mental health treatment.

Torture

As USCIRF has [reported](#) previously, several Iranians have credibly alleged torture by agents of Iran's government as a result of their participation in protests against mandatory hijab laws and other religious freedom restrictions, including many who were in government custody at the time. There exist documented examples of torture by Iranian officials against religious prisoners of conscience. [Mahvash Sabet](#) is an Iranian Baha'i woman and former member of the Yaran-e-Iran who served time in Evin prison. According to Narges Mohammadi,

an Iranian activist detained at Evin Prison, on March 2, 2023, she [personally witnessed](#) torture at the prison and reported the use of torture specifically against Sabet. Activist Faezeh Hashemi, who was imprisoned in Evin at the same time as Sabet, [confirmed](#) in an audio recording on [April 3, 2023](#), that she spoke to Sabet herself. Sabet reportedly stated that her interrogators repeatedly hit her chair, causing her knees to repeatedly "bang into the wall." Hashemi also noted the existence of x-rays revealing that this repeated trauma led to Sabet's broken knees, a punishment well beyond the imposition of lawful sanctions.

[Hamid Gharehassanlou](#) and his wife [Farzaneh](#) are Gonabadi Sufi Iranians arrested at the 40-day [commemoration](#) of the killing of 22-year-old [Hadis Najafi](#). According to an August 12, 2022 [interview](#) with Radio Farda, Gharehassanlou's brother Hassan alleged that interrogators [tortured](#) Farzaneh for two days at Kashoi Prison, forcing her into making a false confession. Interrogators in Karaj also reportedly tortured Hamid, which according to his [brother](#), caused a punctured lung and fractured ribs on Hamid's left side. On or about December 9, 2022, Hamid posted a picture of himself from a hospital showing [bruises](#) consistent with this account and medical bandages on his left ribcage. Hamid Gharehassanlou was sentenced to death on December 5, 2023, on the religiously grounded charge of "corruption on Earth," but his sentence was reduced to 15 years in April 2023. His wife was sentenced to five years in prison in April 2023. USCIRF has documented Iran's systematic [campaign](#) against Gonabadi Sufis as well as the more recent crackdowns on those attending commemorations of slain protestors against religious freedom restrictions in Iran.

Iranian security officials have also systematically used torture, specifically the unlawful and excessive use of blows to the head, against girls protesting religious freedom restrictions in Iran. In some cases, officials have claimed falsely that the girls' deaths were [due](#) to [implausible causes](#) inconsistent with the evidence. Mahsa Zhina Amini herself suffered such torture from security officials while in detention. Both her father and doctors familiar with her case have [noted](#) bleeding from her ear consistent with a blow to the head. In September 2022, Iran International published photos reportedly depicting Amini's CT scan. The pictures reportedly [show](#) a skull fracture on the right side consistent with a blow to the head. Police [claimed](#) she died of a heart attack despite her family denying she had any heart problems and little

evidence consistent with this cause of death.

[Hasti Hossein Panahi](#) is a 16-year-old Iranian girl who participated in the September 2022 protests along with several classmates. In November 2022, their school principal and security guards summoned the girls and showed them video footage of their participation. Security officials then [took](#) the girls to an unknown location and reportedly beat them. One hour later, Panahi fell into a coma and was flown by helicopter to the [Kausar hospital](#) in Sanandaj. Iran's Coordinated Council of Teachers Syndicates reported that Panahi's medical file indicates her coma was caused by "a direct blow to the head." Panahi remained hospitalized for six months and was released in April 2023 with severe mobility difficulties.

Nika Shakarami, also 16, [disappeared](#) on September 20 at a protest against the killing of Mahsa Zhina Amini for wearing "improper hijab" and died soon thereafter. A police official told her family that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) had arrested Nika. In a [video](#) released on October 7, 2022, Shakarami's mother reports:

I saw my daughter's corpse myself. [Most of] her body was unhurt. There was only the autopsy suture visible on her chest. Her face and cheeks were broken. Her teeth were crushed, and she had a big cavity in the back of her skull.

Government-Perpetrated Rape and Sexual Violence

USCIRF [reported](#) comprehensively in April 2023 on Iran's systematic use of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) against both adults and minors engaged in the peaceful assertion of their freedom of religion or belief. While Iran's use of SGBV as a tactic is not new, the gravity of such conduct took on new significance following protests where women are asserting their bodily autonomy from the state. Survivors of this sexual violence [include](#) Iranian women and men from a range of religious groups. An Armenian Christian woman, who was violently arrested by plainclothes officers on October 1, 2022, at protests against mandatory hijab, reported that during her detention at Evin Prison an interrogator [told](#) her, "you thought that because you're a Christian you can do whatever you want and remove the hijab" and sexually assaulted her. Officials at Kachoui Prison sexually assaulted Armita Abbasi (age 21) in October 2022. IRGC agents in Mazandaran province sexually assaulted Mehdi

Mohammadifard (age 19) in late 2022. IRGC agents in Tir Kola prison in Sari sexually assaulted Javad Rouhi (age 35) in late 2022. Interrogators at a clandestine detention site in Oshnavieh sexually assaulted Kayan Samedi (age 23) in late 2022 or early 2023. Prison officials at the Zahedan Juvenile Detention Center sexually assaulted Benjamin Koukhan (age 17) in January 2023.

Other Bodily Injury

Iran's government has systematically [inflicted](#) bodily injury on civilians asserting their freedom of religion or belief. Between September 2022 and April 2023, security forces blinded at least [580 protestors](#) in one or both eyes after [firing](#) pellets, teargas canisters, paintball bullets, rubber bullets, and other projectiles. Innocent bystanders have been affected as well. In Isfahan, a six-year-old girl standing on her grandfather's balcony was [blinded](#) in one eye when security forces opened fire on protestors. However, such injuries are usually not accidental. Iranian security forces often [aim](#) directly at protestors' faces [and](#) at their genital regions. The government has also [arrested](#) activists protesting this serious bodily harm.

Iran's government has also targeted medical professionals treating wounded protestors. [Doctors](#) have been intimidated, arrested, and allegedly killed for providing medical treatment and speaking publicly about the nature of the injuries they are treating. In October 2022, Iranian security forces [opened](#) fire on a doctors' protest outside the Tehran Medical Council building, wounding several and killing a surgeon.

Enforced Disappearances

Scores of Iranians arrested across the country in relation to the protests have been [held incommunicado](#) and prevented from contacting their families to confirm their whereabouts and general health. These include members of religious minority communities. Baha'i Iranian [Pooya Saraf](#) was [held incommunicado](#) for a month during his detention. [Payam Vali](#)'s whereabouts are known, but he was [denied](#) contact with his family for weeks in May and June 2023 after he [released](#) audio files detailing conditions in Ghezalhasar Prison in Karaj. Baha'i woman [Nahaleh Shahidi](#) was [detained](#) over three months in Kerman Prison without legal proceedings moving forward on her case.

International media outlets have [documented](#) the widescale disappearance of protestors into a series of prisons and detention centers. Journalists reporting on the protests have also been [held incommunicado](#). Those held incommunicado include minors, some of whose

names are known. Sixteen-year-old Nika Shakarami's family was [unaware](#) of her whereabouts for over a week following her attendance at a protest on September 20, 2022, in Tehran. By that time Shakarami was deceased. Her mother was asked to identify her body on September 30, 2022. Investigative [reporting](#) and eyewitness testimony support the claim she was arrested by anti-riot police or members of the Basij militia. Her aunt [reported](#) that the IRGC told her that it had held Shakarami for five days and then transferred her to prison authorities. Hasti Hossein Panahi, a 16-year-old who participated in the protests, was taken to an [unknown location](#) on November 10, 2023, and fell into a coma soon afterwards. Her family was moved in January 2023 to a government apartment and briefly [held](#) incommunicado as well following reports that Panahi was beaten over the head with a baton to a degree that was "potentially fatal." Kayan Samedei was [arrested](#) at protests following the killing of Mahsa Amini and taken to a clandestine site in Oshnavieh. He was held for 21 days before being released on bail.

Conclusion

The United States government is uniquely positioned to coordinate international efforts to counter Iranian authorities' violations of the Iranian people's right to freedom of religion or belief. At a time of increasing international multipolarity, continued American leadership demands the U.S. government affirm its unique commitment as a global power to the protection of human rights, including freedom of religion or belief. Responding to Iran's systematic restrictions on religious freedom, particularly those targeting women, must be a central aspect of United States policy. As recommended in USCIRF's [2023 Annual Report](#), the Joseph R. Biden administration should continue to impose targeted sanctions on Iranian officials complicit in violations of freedom of religion or belief, expanding the use of such sanctions where effective. It must also raise religious freedom and other human rights abuses in any bilateral and multilateral negotiations with Iran's government on issues of regional and international security.

The United States government is also uniquely positioned to coordinate international efforts to counter Iranian authorities' violations of the Iranian people's right to freedom of religion or belief. It should fully support the efforts of the [U.N. Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran](#). It should provide technical expertise and resources to initiatives already underway looking to document specific evidence of crimes against humanity in Iran, including those targeting religious minorities and dissidents against the government's singular religious interpretations.

U.S. policymakers also should seriously consider, in light of the existing indications of Iranian authorities' perpetration of crimes against humanity since September 2022, supporting a UNSC referral of the situation in Iran to the ICC. Such a referral would advance U.S. interests by enhancing international accountability for the Iranian government's systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief.



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