

briefing

Iran

Religious Freedom Profile

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JULY 2008



CHRISTIAN
SOLIDARITY
WORLDWIDE
VOICE FOR THE VOICELESS

PO Box 99, New Malden,
Surrey KT3 3YF

T: 0845 456 5464

E: admin@cswworldwide.org.uk

W: www.cswworldwide.org.uk

REGISTERED CHARITY NO. 281836

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I. Executive Summary

Since the 1979 revolution, Iran's religious and ethnic minorities have suffered gross human rights violations, including extra-judicial and judicial killings, incommunicado detentions, confiscation of property, denial of education and inequality in legal matters. Though the intensity of the persecution of minorities decreased during the initial years of reformist President Khatami's government, the last years of his administration and the new government of President Ahmadinejad has seen a renewed deterioration in human rights. This has been a cause of great concern for religious and ethnic minorities in Iran. During the last two years, there have been fresh waves of arrests, detention and intimidation of Muslim converts to Christianity and Bahá'ís.

2. Recommendations

At a time when international attention is focused on Iran's nuclear policy, CSW urges the international community:

- to monitor and raise human rights violations and curbs on basic freedoms with the Iranian government, including those suffered by ethnic and religious minorities;
- to urge the Iranian government to fully comply with its obligations under international human rights law, in particular with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which it is a state party;
- to call for the cessation of arbitrary detention and intimidation of Christian minorities, especially those from a Muslim background;
- to urge the Iranian government to refrain from the arbitrary detention and active monitoring of Bahá'ís ;
- to urge that concrete steps are taken towards granting freedom of worship for the Bahá'í community, including the right to conduct services, organise religious training and be granted access to tertiary education;
- to urge the Iranian authorities to curtail anti-Semitic reporting in state media;
- to increase minority language and culture lessons at minority schools and to commission non-Muslim educators to produce religious education material for their own children and to cease using text books that are aimed at assimilating non-Muslim children.

3. Current Issues

Nearly every phase of President Ahmadinejad's leadership has been steeped in controversy. From the outset, his election, ideological framework and association with various radical groups have given cause for concern. Iran's poor economic climate and elitist government has effectively ostracised its people, and as a result they have become disillusioned by the government's inability to identify with the public. In the light of this, President Ahmadinejad has presented himself as a man who himself derives from a humble background in order to maximise his popularity. His apparent patriotism and 'courage' in facing the West has meant

that he has been viewed by majority Iranians as a promising and fresh voice in comparison to the weakening hold of the clerical regime among the people. Considering the speed at which Ahmadinejad came to leadership and the popularity he has achieved, the success of this rhetorical approach is clear. However, his poor performance on economic and domestic issues, flamboyant comments on Israel and clashes with the clerical establishment is increasingly leading to a loss of popularity.

As the international community's attention focuses on the issue of Iran's nuclear policy, there have been significant set backs on the human rights conditions in Iran which have gone relatively unnoticed. The President's appointment to the parliament of former intelligence and security officers connected with gross human rights violations, including the extra-judicial killings of Iranian dissidents living abroad, has caused great concern inside and out of Iran. His appointment of a cleric with no academic background as the chancellor of Tehran University and other appointments that replaced reformists with hardliners have led to demonstrations and criticism within Iran. Demonstrations and ethnic tensions have been repressed with excessive force. In addition, a new wave of control over the written media has begun, with actions taken against webbloggers.

3.1. Christian Community

3.1.1. Apostates

The persecution of Muslim converts to Christianity has re-escalated since 2005. The Iranian police continue to detain apostates for brief periods and pressurise them to recant their Christian faith and to sign documents pledging they will stop attending Christian services and refrain from sharing their faith with others. There have also been increasing reports of apostates being denied exit at the borders, with the authorities confiscating their passports and requiring them to report to the courts to reclaim them. During the court hearings they are coerced to recant their faith with threats of death penalty charges and cancellation of their travel documents. Although verdicts stipulating the death penalty for apostasy are rarely, if ever, carried out, intense pressure and serious human rights abuses occur regularly, and extra-judicial murder and attacks by official Islamic militias or radical groups are a serious concern.

During 2008, reports of the arrest and detention of Muslim-background Christians and leaders of underground house churches in Shiraz, Mazandaran and Tehran continued. In all of these cases, they were kept incommunicado and in solitary confinement for days or weeks with no official charges or legal representation. During their detention they were interrogated regularly, verbally abused, asked to recant their faith and threatened with apostasy and treason charges. They were released either by signing documents pledging no involvement in Christian activities, or paying hefty bails and turning over deeds to their properties, with no guarantees that the investigations against them were dropped or that they would not be charged.

On a fact-finding visit to Iran during 2008, CSW became aware of a minimum of 40 cases of Christians, particularly converts from Islam, whose passports had been confiscated at the airport on their return from attending Christian conferences abroad. They were all required to present themselves in front of judges, who coerced them to convert to Islam if they wanted to regain their travel documents without facing criminal charges. A significant number were pressured to comply.

CSW was able to interview one of the Christians who refused to recant his faith in such a way. He has been summoned to court five times during 2008. At each hearing, he was asked

for the reasons behind his conversion and pressured to recant his Christian faith. He repeatedly refused to convert back to Islam and stopped reporting to the court, which to date is still demanding his appearance. In addition to giving up hopes of ever being allowed to travel abroad, he was fired from his job as his co-workers at the factory learned about his conversion and refused to work alongside an apostate, whose presence 'defiled' the office. This reaction arises from the idea that non-Muslims, particularly apostates, are *najess*, impure, thus any physical contact with them or products produced by them can potentially defile a Muslim's purity. Ayatollah Khomeini himself had declared that "non-Muslims of any religion or creed are *najess*."¹ Khomeini argued that although a handshake with a non-Muslim is not *najess*, contact with bodily liquids of a non-Muslim was. Thus washing the clothes of non-Muslims and Muslims together, eating food, consuming products or using utensils touched by non-Muslims are potentially *najess*.

Although physical intimidation and torture during detention is rarely reported, on 25 June 2008, Compass Direct News reported that a couple, both of whom are Muslim converts to Christianity, were detained for 4 days during which they were subjected to physical harm.² Tina Rad (28) and Makan Arya (31) were arrested for holding a bible study at their house and Makan was charged with 'activities against national security'. During their detention, they were threatened with the death penalty and told that the police would place their 4-year-old daughter into a care institution if they do not stop attending the church. They were forced to sign documents pledging to stop participating in Christian activities and were released. According to the Compass Direct News, Tina Rad was released on bail of \$30,000 and Makan Arya on bail of \$20,000.

During 2006, CSW was informed of various cases of detention of Christians. An Iranian Church leader was arrested in April and interrogated about his Christian faith and activities. In June, after a period of solitary confinement and having appeared in court several times, he was told he had been charged with "working against the Islamic government of Iran and conspiracy to overthrow it". This charge amounts to treason, and if convicted he could face the death penalty. However, he was later released on bail and the case is still pending.³

On 2 May 2006, Mr Ali Kaboli (51) was arrested from his shop in Gorgan, Golestan province, and was held incommunicado for several weeks. No reason was given for his arrest. He had converted to Christianity over 30 years ago. He has church leadership responsibilities in northern Iran and had been threatened, arrested and interrogated on several occasions in recent years in connection with his Christian activities. Although not formally charged, the authorities threatened his family that he would face legal proceedings. He was released on bail on 12 June 2006.

Reza Montazami and his wife, Fereshteh Dibaj, were detained by the secret police for 9 days in October 2006 before they were released on bail. The couple, who were house church leaders in Mashhad, still await an official charge.⁴ Fereshteh Dibaj is the daughter of the late Rev. Mehdi Dibaj, who was abducted and killed in 1994 following his release from prison where he was incarcerated for nine years for apostasy.

¹ Sanasarian, Eliz (2000) *Religious Minorities in Iran*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pg. 85-86

² "Convert couple arrested, tortured, threatened", Compass News Direct, 25 June 2008
<http://www.compassdirect.org/en/display.php?page=news&lang=en&length=long&idelement=5448& backpage=&critere=&countryname=&rowcur=>

³ Source: Middle East Concern. His name and details have been withheld for security reasons.

⁴ For a detailed account see "Christian Couple Released on Bail", Compass Direct, 5 October 2006;
<http://www.compassdirect.org/en/display.php?page=news&idelement=4571&lang=en&length=short&backpage=index&critere=Iran&countryname=&rowcur=0>

On 22 November 2005, Pastor Ghorban Tourani, a 53-year-old Muslim convert to Christianity was murdered by a group of extremists in front of his house. His murder came after his release from interrogation by the police. The police raided Mr Tourani's house after his murder, confiscating Christian materials. To date his murderers have not been brought to justice.

In February 2005, Hamid Pourmand, a colonel in the Iranian army and senior church leader, was given a three-year prison sentence for deceiving the armed forces about his faith, having converted from Islam to Christianity over 25 years ago. Non-Muslims are not allowed to become officers in the army. Evidence presented to the court to show that his superiors knew about his faith before his promotion to the rank of officer was rejected as false. Mr Pourmand was subsequently charged with apostasy and proselytizing Muslims. However, he was acquitted by the court in May, following intense international attention. Mr Pourmand was released from prison on 20 July 2006, fourteen months before the end of his three-year sentence. No formal explanation was given for his early release.

Muslim converts to Christianity are still the most vulnerable among the Christian community in Iran. However, the death penalty is not applied and there are vibrant house and public churches that are mostly formed by converts. Even though converts are able to continue their faith and meet with others, converts who are in leadership positions and lead Christian ministries face serious risk of detention, intimidation, imprisonment and extra-judicial physical harm.

3.1.2. Assimilation of Children

Children of the recognised non-Muslim minorities are exempted from Islamic Religious Education and can study at the registered minority schools. Minority schools are still state schools, using the same curriculum, but with the additional opportunities of taking minority language and history lessons. The principals have to be Muslims and the school's activities are closely monitored. There are around twenty Armenian schools in Tehran, and a few others in Isfahan and Tabriz. Assyrians have only two schools in Tehran.

Minorities complain that the minimal hours provided for language and culture per week are not enough for children to learn their native languages in addition to Farsi studies. Similarly, there are increasing concerns over the Religious Education text book used at the minority schools. All non-Muslim children are required to read the official books across class years, which are written by the Ministry of Education. The books have clear Islamic assumptions, such as referring to Jesus Christ as "prophet Jesus". Similarly, the books allude to Qur'an verses and sayings of Muhammad without referencing the sources or acknowledging that they are Islamic ideas. Rather than teaching children about their own religion, the books offer general comments on ethics and God.

Limitations on language and culture lessons as well as the strong subtext of teaching non-Muslim children Islamic values and ideas in their religious education classes are genuine concerns for minorities.

3.2. Bahá'í Community

In a public speech delivered on 20 November 2005, Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, the secretary-general of the Guardian Council and a mentor of Ahmadinejad, declared that "non-Muslims are sinful animals who roam the earth and engage in corruption."⁵ Two specific groups,

⁵ As quoted by Compass News, "Iranian Convert Stabbed to Death; Secret Police crackdown results in the torture of 10 other Christians", 28 November 2005

Bahá'ís and Jews, have been increasingly targeted and singled out since the beginning of President Ahmadinejad's administration. Bahá'ís remain the most persecuted religious minority in Iran, ever since the revolution of 1979.

On 14 May 2008, six members of the Bahá'í national coordination group were arrested; Mrs. Fariba Kamalabadi, Mr. Jamaloddin Khanjani, Mr. Afif Naeimi, Mr. Saeid Rezaie, Mr. Behrouz Tavakkoli, and Mr. Vahid Tizfahm. With these arrests, the total number of national Bahá'í leaders who are kept in incommunicado detention without legal representation have reached seven. Mrs Mahvash Sabet, the first leader to be detained, was arrested on 5 March 2008. CSW continues to be concerned for their welfare.

International attention over a confidential letter sent by the Chairman of the Command Headquarters of the Armed Forces to various government agencies on 29 October 2005, requested the identification and monitoring of Bahá'ís has resulted in increased media attacks against Bahá'ís.⁶ According to the Bahá'í International Community, the official *Kayhan* newspaper “has carried more than 30 defamatory articles about the Bahá'ís and their religion in recent weeks with the clear intention of arousing suspicion, distrust, and hatred for the Iranian Bahá'í community.”⁷

In November 2006, a new letter, dated 19 August 2006, from the Ministry of Interior to provincial officials was brought to the attention of the international community. The letter, similar to that sent by the military headquarters in 2005, requests officials to acquire detailed information on the financial status, social interactions and activities of Bahá'ís.⁸ According to the Bahá'í International Community, 60 Bahá'ís were imprisoned between 2004-2006.⁹

Despite international pressure, Bahá'ís are still denied university education. Bahá'í International Community notes that that “majority of the roughly 200 Bahá'ís who managed to enrol in Iranian universities had been expelled by the end of the year. And for the academic year 2007-2008, almost 800 of the more than 1,000 Baha'is who sat for and properly completed the entrance exam in June 2007 have received word that their files are 'incomplete' — thus preventing their enrolment.”¹⁰

3.3. Jewish Community

The small Jewish community in Iran is currently facing a similar situation. In 2005, the Annual Report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom stated that “Iran's anti-Israel policy continues to create an atmosphere of fear and intimidation among Iran's Jews, and members of the Jewish community have been singled out on the basis of “ties to Israel,” whether real or perceived.”¹¹ This has been taken to a further level by President Ahmadinejad who has made radical threats against Israel a corner stone of his rhetoric. On various occasions he has declared the Holocaust to be a myth created and used by the Zionist elite to control the world for their purposes. Anti-Semitic books such as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* continue to be widely distributed in Iran and the media

⁶ “Rising Discrimination against the Bahá'ís”, International Federation for the Human Rights, 5 April 2006; http://www.fidh.org/rubrique.php?id_rubrique=2

⁷ “Treatment of the Followers of the Bahá'í Faith in the Islamic Republic of Iran”, statement submitted by the Bahá'í International Community to the UN, 27 March 2006

⁸ See “Iran Steps up Secret Monitoring of Baha'is”, Bahá'í World News Service, 2 November 2006, <http://news.bahai.org/story/488>

⁹ “Treatment of the Followers of the Bahá'í Faith in the Islamic Republic of Iran”, statement submitted by the Bahá'í International Community to the UN, 27 March 2006

¹⁰ “Persecution: Under siege in Iran, Bahá'ís demonstrate the courage of their convictions”, the Bahá'í International Community, <http://www.bahai.org/dir/worldwide/persecution>

¹¹ Annual Report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, p 112, May 2005

continually publishes propaganda against Jews, together with international conspiracy theories.

These conspiracy theories reach extraordinary levels, as comments on TV by Hasan Bolkhari, the Cultural Advisor to the Iranian Education Ministry have shown. Mr Bolkhari claimed that the cartoon series Tom and Jerry is part of a Jewish conspiracy to improve the image of mice, since Jews were called 'dirty mice' in Europe. The lecture includes statements such as; "I'd like to tell you that... It should be noted that mice are very cunning... and dirty. No ethnic group or people operates in such a clandestine manner as the Jews. Read the history of the Jews in Europe. This ultimately led to Hitler's hatred and resentment. As it turns out, Hitler had behind-the-scenes connections with the Protocols [of the Elders of Zion]. Tom and Jerry was made in order to display the exact opposite image. If you happen to watch this cartoon tomorrow, bear in mind the points I have just raised, and watch it from this perspective."¹²

When politicians and intellectuals of Iran fail to differentiate between Jews as a people group and the policies of the State of Israel, combined with extravagant theories which single Jews out as the root of various problems Iran and the Islamic world faces, what is engendered is not an abstract enmity to a foreign country, but a direct threat to the Jewish community in Iran.

4. Background

4.1. Constitutional and International Guarantees

Article 12 of the Iranian constitution declares Islam to be the country's official religion with Ja'fari Shi'ism as the chosen doctrine: "the official religion of Iran is Islam and the Twelver Ja'fari school, and this principle will remain eternally immutable. Other Islamic schools, including the Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki, Hanbali, and Zaydi, are to be accorded full respect, and their followers are free to act in accordance with their own jurisprudence in performing their religious rites." Though Islamic Shari'ah law forms the principle source of legislation, the Republic is governed by a unique blend of religious and secular state structures and laws.

Article 13 of the 1979 constitution recognises Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism as minority religions. Article 64 guarantees five seats in parliament for minority religions, two seats for Armenians and one each for the Assyrian, Jewish and Zoroastrian communities. These recognised communities are allowed to open charitable associations, cultural centres, schools for children and may use their own language in religious practices and instruction of their congregations. Bahá'í and Sunni Muslim minorities are not officially recognised as minorities and are not represented in the Iranian parliament. However, as stated above, Sunni beliefs and practices are protected by Article 12. All activities of religious minorities are monitored by the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance and by the Ministry of Information and Security.

Iran is a party to key international human rights conventions, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).

¹² The talk, which was broadcasted by the Iranian TV Channel 4 on 19February 2006 can be viewed with the accompanying translation and transcript at the Middle East Media Research Institute website, <http://www.memritv.org/search.asp?ACT=S9&PI=1049#>

4.2. Demography of Religious and Ethnic Minorities

Although the demography of religious minorities has changed rapidly due to emigration, 97 per cent of the population is thought to be Muslim (89 per cent Shi'a and 8 per cent Sunni). The remaining three per cent is comprised of Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, Mandaeans and Bahá'ís. According to government sources, there are 30,000 Zoroastrians, 79,000 Christians, 13,000 Jews, 28,000 'others' and 47,000 'not stated' residing in Iran.¹³ However non-governmental sources claim there are 13,000 Chaldean, Latin and Armenian Catholics; 122,000 Armenian, Assyrian and Greek Orthodox (112,000 of which are Armenian) and 8,500 Protestants.¹⁴ In addition the Bahá'í International Community estimates that around 300,000 Bahá'ís are still living in Iran.¹⁵ This makes the Bahá'í community the largest non-Muslim religious minority in Iran.

4.3. The Situation of Ethnic and Religious Minorities

Iran has a long history of well-catalogued human rights abuses and of harsh treatment of intellectuals, journalists and Muslim clerics who oppose the State. There are two areas of discrimination which are often given less emphasis than political dissidents. These are women's rights and the rights of religious and ethnic minorities. Although there have been improvements in women's access to education and thus literacy rates, women are continually denied their most basic rights.¹⁶ Yakin Ertürk, the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, noted that the continuing violence against women is upheld and perpetuated by two interrelated factors: "patriarchal values and attitudes based on male supremacy, and state-promoted institutional structures based on gender-biased, hard-line interpretations of religious principles."¹⁷ Ertürk added that while the former is a universal problem, the latter is specific to the politics of Iran.

Similarly, cultural values and state-promoted institutional structures have resulted in the perpetuation of violence and discrimination against religious and ethnic minorities in Iran. One of the main features of the 1979 revolution was the antipathy of Iranians to colonial powers, which helped create a strong national identity. This led to Islam being associated with the opposition of the secular regime of the Shah. Furthermore, the traditional Islamic perception of other religions, a history of conflict between Sunni and Shi'a groups and Western 'Christian' domination has resulted in a culture of mistrust and intolerance towards religious and ethnic minorities.

Khomeini's doctrine of *Welayat al Faqih* describes the jurisdiction of a learned religious scholar, the Supreme Leader, who leads the country in accordance with Islam. The Supreme Leader has direct authority over the military, judiciary and security forces. All legislation passed by the parliament (*Majlis*) must be reviewed by the Council of Constitutional

¹³ Iran: International Religious Freedom Report 2005, released by the United States Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, Section I

¹⁴ Marshall, Paul, (2000) *Religious Freedom in the World; A Global Report on Freedom and Persecution*. Tennessee: Broadman & Holman, p 171

¹⁵ "Closed Doors: Iran's Campaign to Deny Higher Education to Bahá'ís", Bahá'í International Community, New York, 2005

¹⁶ For a more detailed account on the violation of women's rights see articles II.D and III.A-B of the Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, Its Causes and Consequences, Mission to the Islamic Republic of Iran, 27 January 2006

¹⁷ Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, Mission to the Islamic Republic of Iran, p 2, 27 January 2006

Guardians for adherence to Islam and the constitution of Iran. The Council, half of whose members are clerics chosen by the Supreme Leader, also decides on the eligibility of candidates for seats in parliament. According to Article 168 of the constitution, the judiciary functions “in accordance with the criteria of Islam.”

Article 167 allows for judges to deliver verdict “on the basis of authoritative Islamic sources and authentic fatawa” in the absence of any relevant legislation in the codified law. This automatically explains the use of the Shari’ah law in punishing apostates from Islam with death, in granting greater value to the testimonies of a Muslim over a non-Muslim in judicial processes and in forbidding the marriage of a Muslim woman to a non-Muslim man.

The Ministry of Intelligence and Security and the Revolutionary Guards, which monitor the application of the law, and the paramilitaries Basijis and Anser-e-Hezbollah, can intimidate or threaten individuals who do not conform to the values of Islam or that of the Islamic Republic.

Although Article 19 of the constitution guarantees that “all people of Iran enjoy equal rights whatever their ethnic group or tribe,” official discrimination against religious minorities exists. Government employees are expected to adhere to Islam and Islamic laws and those who do not follow an Islamic code of conduct can be punished. Even though officially-recognised minorities are allowed to own their own schools, they are still required to teach Islam and be governed by Muslim principals. Students aspiring to pursue degree-level education must demonstrate a sufficient knowledge of Islam, which blocks opportunities for minorities.

4.3.1. Muslim Minorities

SUNNI

Iran’s Sunni population, which forms the largest religious minority in the country, enjoys a greater degree of religious freedom compared with non-Muslim groups. However, Sunnis complain of state bias against them, especially over the lack of Sunni participation in senior and influential government positions. In April 2004, a group of Sunni representatives sent a letter to Ayatollah Khamenei, asking for an end to anti-Sunni propaganda in the media.¹⁸ The problems that Sunnis face are much more complicated than religious affiliation. Sunni minorities in Iran are from Turkmen, Arabic and Kurdish communities, all of which have a strong geo-political presence in countries neighbouring Iran. The discrimination they face is primarily based upon this ethnic and political tension rather than their religious beliefs per se.

SHIITE

Over the years many Shia clerics, intellectuals and journalists have been arrested, detained or imprisoned or have been subjected to public bans limiting their teaching and writing. The most significant of these has been the house arrest of Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montezari from 1997 to 2003 and the ban which still forbids him to teach Islam or criticise Iran’s Supreme Leader and his teachings. As in the case of Sunni minorities, the persecution of Shia clerics and intellectuals is not primarily due to religious belief but rather a reaction to the regime and the possible threat such criticism may pose to the power of the regime’s control over Iranian society.

4.3.2. Non-Muslim Minorities

¹⁸ Iran: International Religious Freedom Report 2005, released by the United States Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, Section II

The situation is different for non-Muslim minorities who do not pose an actual political threat to the unity of Iran or the political power of the government, since their numbers are significantly smaller than both Muslim minorities and political dissidents. Furthermore, they do not have any significant presence in state structures or in positions of influence. The persecution of non-Muslim minorities is primarily due to theological, cultural and political assumptions of Iranian society and the government, which perceive them to be a moral threat or decadence.

BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY

Bahá'ís living in Iran have faced intense persecution since 1979. Around 200 Bahá'ís have been killed and 10,000 have been dismissed from government and university jobs. Holy places have been destroyed, many Bahá'ís have been arrested and thousands of students have been denied access to university education. They are considered apostates and heretics by Islamic clerics, since they believe in a prophet and holy book which came after Mohammad, who is seen by Muslims as the final prophet from God. Though Islamic traditions show respect for religions preceding Islam, any claim of a new revelation from God after Mohammad is considered blasphemous.

This automatically places Bahá'ís at odds with Islam and Iranian society. Since the revolution and the reification of Islam for Iranian identity, Bahá'ís are perceived as a threat to the homeland and seen as a favoured group by the Shah. They are not officially recognised in Iran, having no legal status or identity, and they are continually denied access to fair judicial processes and other economic and civil rights.¹⁹ Changes in laws relating to 'blood money' which equalised the money paid for the death of a non-Muslim with that of a Muslim, excluded Bahá'ís whose blood is seen to be 'mobah' according to the law, meaning "it can be spilled with impunity."

CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Armenian, Assyrian and Chaldean Christians live in relative peace and enjoy official recognition as ethnic and religious minorities. However they suffer similar limitations and discrimination as other recognised minorities, in terms of access to education, government and army positions. The Armenian MP Leon Davidian argued that Christian minorities "enjoy more advantages than non-Muslims in other self-declared democratic nations. We have our own schools and teach our own languages...We freely practise our own religions."²⁰ However, a high emigration rate among these communities is indicative of the difficulties faced by these minorities in Iran, despite relative privileges offered by the government.²¹

Evangelical and Pentecostal churches are distrusted and persecuted in Iran. In addition to state-based persecution, church leaders or proselytizing Christians have been attacked, kidnapped and killed by mobs or state agents.²² One of the main reasons for such intense persecution has been the high number of apostates from Islam in Evangelical and Pentecostal

¹⁹ For a detailed account see "The Bahá'í Question: Cultural Cleansing in Iran", Bahá'í International Community, 2005

²⁰ "Interview with Armenian MP Leon Davidian" by Sergeh Barseqian, Yes-e-no, Daily Newspaper, No. 268, 31 Jan 2004

²¹ Reuters article titled "Iran's religious minorities waning despite own MPs", 16 February 2000 states that though Armenians are persecuted as Bahá'ís and enjoy relative freedom even in producing alcohol for domestic consumption, nevertheless their numbers are decreasing as many Armenians choose to emigrate.

²² The well known cases of Protestant church leaders killed since the founding of the Islamic Republic of Iran: In 1979, Rev Sayyah of the Anglican Church in Shiraz, Bishop Dehqani survived an attack but his son Bahram Dehqani was kidnapped and killed. In 1990, Rev Soodmand from the Assemblies of God Church in Mashad was imprisoned and hung for proselytizing. In 1994, Mehdi Dibaj, Bishop Haik Hovsepian-Mehr and Rev Tateos Michaelian of the Presbyterian Church. In 1996, Rev 'Ravanbakhsh' Yusefi in Sari. (Source: <http://www.elam.com/articles/Remember%2DTheir%2DSacrifice/>)

churches. Unlike ethnic Christians of the Armenian and Assyrian communities, Protestant churches actively proselytise. The fact that most of these groups meet on private property also fuels suspicion and reaction from local authorities. The government has requested that church leaders provide a full list of their members to the Ministry of Information and Islamic Guidance and do not allow any Muslims to attend their churches or change their religion.²³ Many Church leaders continue to ignore these orders. The publication of any religious material in Persian is forbidden. This directly affects Christians with a Persian background, rather than ethnic minorities who use their own languages, such as Armenian, in religious practices.

JEWISH COMMUNITY

Jews living in Iran have enjoyed a relative degree of freedom to practise their religion, including the use of Hebrew for religious instruction. However, the Jews face various limitations on their rights to travel and to communicate with Jewish communities outside Iran, especially in Israel. They are required to seek exit clearance each time they leave Iran and families are generally not allowed to leave the country at the same time. Jewish schools have been asked to remain open on Saturdays in accordance with the national education calendar. This poses a problem for Jews who want to keep Saturday as a day of rest in accordance with Jewish teachings on the Sabbath. There have also been sporadic acts of vandalism and personal attacks against Jews.²⁴

ZOROASTRIAN COMMUNITY

According to the UNHCR, there are around 45,000 Zoroastrians living in Iran.²⁵ Zoroastrianism is an ancient Near Eastern religion that has had a dominant presence among Persian people before the conversion of Persians to Islam. This close historical link with the national identity of Persians and the relative respect Islam shows to religions preceding Islam has resulted in their official recognition and tolerance. Although Zoroastrians enjoy legal freedoms such as the ability to open schools and charitable associations, they share similar difficulties with other minorities in accessing employment in the public sector.

²³ See *Ethnic and Religious Groups in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, prepared by Nazila Ghanea-Hercock for UNHCR, 5 May 2003, pp 16

²⁴ Iran: International Religious Freedom Report 2005, states; "in 2000, 10 of 13 Jews arrested in 1999 were convicted on charges of illegal contact with Israel, conspiracy to form an illegal organization, and recruiting agents. Along with 2 Muslim defendants, the 10 Jews received prison sentences ranging from 4 to 13 years. An appeals court subsequently overturned the convictions for forming an illegal organization and recruiting agents, but it upheld the convictions for illegal contacts with Israel with reduced sentences. One of the 10 was released in February 2001 and another in January 2002, both upon completion of their prison terms. Three additional prisoners were released before the end of their sentences in October 2002. In April 2003, it was announced that the last five were to be released. It is not clear if the eight who were released before the completion of their sentences were fully pardoned or were released provisionally. During and shortly after the trial, Jewish-owned businesses in Tehran and Shiraz were targets of vandalism and boycotts, and Jews reportedly suffered personal harassment and intimidation."

²⁵ Background Paper on Refugees and Asylum Seekers from the Islamic Republic of Iran, UNHCR, Centre for Documentation and Research, p 27, January 2001