

Briefing

Iran

Religious Freedom Profile

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Christian Solidarity Worldwide
Voice for the Voiceless

PO Box 99, New Malden, Surrey KT3 3YF

T: 020 8942 8810 **E:** admin@csw.org.uk

W: www.csw.org.uk

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I. 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 the cause of great concern for religious and ethnic minorities in Iran.

II. 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 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.

III. Current Situation

Much of the enthusiasm that followed the election and the reformist agenda of President Khatami faded during the last two years of his government. Amnesty International noted that "President Khatami's last years and months in office saw a renewed deterioration in human rights, marked by arrests, detentions and increasing harassment of critics of the system, especially journalists, web bloggers and other human rights defenders."¹ This prepared the

¹ Amnesty International, "Iran: The new government fails to address dire human rights situation", www.amnesty.org, 16 February 2006

ground for the increasing difficulty minorities are now facing under the new government of President Ahmadinejad.

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. In addition, his apparent patriotism and 'courage' in facing the West has meant that he is viewed by many Iranians as a saviour figure.² Considering the speed at which Ahmadinejad came to leadership and the popularity he has achieved, the success of this rhetorical approach is clear.

As the international community's attention focuses on the issue of Iran's nuclear policy, there have been significant developments 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.³ His appointment of a cleric with no academic background as the chancellor of Tehran University and other appointments that replaced reformists with hardliners⁴ have led to demonstrations and criticism within Iran. Recent 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.⁵

Christian Community

The already precarious situation of religious minorities in Iran is worsening further. Reportedly, President Ahmadinejad declared that the government needed to stop the

² Sheibani, Mehrad. "This Was a Bad Iranian Year", *Rooz; Everyday, when Tehran Wakes Up*; www.roozonline.com, 28 Mar 2006

³ See "Essential Background: Overview of human rights issues in Iran", Human Rights Watch, <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2006/01/18/iran12214.htm>, 18 January 2006

⁴ See "Iranian leader picks hardliners", BBC News, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4150214.stm, 14 August 2005

⁵ According to Amnesty International report, "Iran: The new government fails to address dire human rights situation" (16 February, 2006), webbloggers Sayed Ahmad Sigarchi, Ahmad Reza Shiri, Arash Sigarchi have been recently detained, imprisoned and flogged in relation to their political comments on their weblogs.

growth of house churches in Iran, saying “I will stop Christianity in this country.”⁶ Paul Marshall of Freedom House notes that “in the 1990s, the Islamic Republic of Iran used death squads against converts, including major Protestant leaders, and the situation is worsening under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The regime is currently engaged in a systematic campaign to track down and reconvert or kill those who have changed their religion from Islam.”⁷

This was the case in the killing of the church leader, Ghorban Tourani, who was kidnapped from his house in north-east Iran on 22 November 2005, and whose dead body was thrown in front of his house a few hours later. Compass News agency states that “the Iranian government, which sent its secret police to search Tourani’s home and confiscate his Christian materials after his death, has told his family that local Muslims who were ‘angry about his conversion’ apparently murdered him.”⁸

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, and was tried before a shari’ah court. If found guilty, he would have faced the death penalty. 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.

During 2006, CSW has been 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

⁶ As quoted by Compass News, “Iranian Convert Stabbed to Death; Secret Police crackdown results in the torture of 10 other Christians”, 28 November 2005

⁷ Marshall, Paul “Apostates from Islam; the case of the Afghan convert is not unique”, The Weekly Standard, 04/10/2006, Volume 011, Issue 28

⁸ “Christians mourn martyred convert”, Compass Direct, 6 December 2005;
<http://www.compassdirect.org/en/newsarcen.php?idelement=4099&critere=Iran&countryname=&rowcur=0>

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.⁹

On 2 May, 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 before they were released on bail. The couple, who were house church leaders in Mashhad, still await an official charge.¹⁰ 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.

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."¹¹ Two specific groups, 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.

Despite international pressure Bahá'ís are still denied university education.¹² According to the Bahá'í International Community, 60 Bahá'ís have been imprisoned during the last two

⁹ Source: Middle East Concern. His name and details have been withheld for security reasons.

¹⁰ 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>

¹¹ As quoted by Compass News, "Iranian Convert Stabbed to Death; Secret Police crackdown results in the torture of 10 other Christians", 28 November 2005

¹² See "Briefing note on the human rights situation in the Islamic Republic of Iran", presented by the International Federation for the Human Rights to the UN General Assembly- Third Committee, 60th session, October 2005

years.¹³ Recent 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.¹⁴ 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.”¹⁵ In November 2006, a new letter, dated 19 August 2006, from the Ministry of Interior to provincial officials has been 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.¹⁶

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.”¹⁷ 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 continually publishes propoganda against Jews, together with international conspiracy theories.

These conspiracy theories reach extraordinary levels, as recent 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

¹³ “Treatment of the Followers of the Bahá'í Faith in the Islamic Republic of Iran”, statement submitted by the International Bahá'í Community to the UN, 27 March 2006

¹⁴ “Rising Discrimination against the Bahá'ís”, International Federation for the Human Rights, 5 April 2006; http://www.fidh.org/rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=2

¹⁵ “Treatment of the Followers of the Bahá'í Faith in the Islamic Republic of Iran”, statement submitted by the International Bahá'í Community to the UN, 27 March 2006

¹⁶ See “Iran Steps up Secret Monitoring of Baha'is”, Bahá'í World News Service, 2 November 2006, <http://news.bahai.org/story/488>

¹⁷ Annual Report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, p 112, May 2005

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."¹⁸

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.

III. Background

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.¹⁹ Other mainstream Islamic schools of thought such as Hanafi, Shafi, Maliki and Hanbali are granted 'full respect' and given freedom to exercise their traditions. 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

¹⁸ The talk, which was broadcasted by the Iranian TV Channel 4 on 19 February 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&P1=1049#>

¹⁹ Article 12 states: "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." An English translation of the constitution is available at <http://www.iranonline.com/iran/iran-info/Government/constitution.html>

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.²⁰

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).

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 3 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.²¹ 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.²² In addition the Bahá'í International Community estimates that around 300,000 Bahá'ís are still living in Iran.²³ This makes the Bahá'í community the largest non-Muslim religious minority in Iran.

IV. The Situation of Religious and Ethnic 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

²⁰ Background Paper on Refugees and Asylum Seekers from the Islamic Republic of Iran, UNHCR, Centre for Documentation and Research, 3.6, p 22, January 2001

²¹ Iran: International Religious Freedom Report 2005, released by the United States Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, Section I

²² Marshall, Paul, (2000) *Religious Freedom in the World; A Global Report on Freedom and Persecution*. Tennessee: Broadman & Holman, p 171

²³ "Closed Doors: Iran's Campaign to Deny Higher Education to Bahá'ís", Bahá'í International Community, New York, 2005

continually denied their most basic rights.²⁴ 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.”²⁵ 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 to 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 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

²⁴ The Annual Report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, May 2005, states that: “The government’s monopoly on and enforcement of the official interpretation of Islam negatively affect the human rights of women in Iran, including their right to freedoms of movement, association, thought, conscience and religion, and freedom from coercion in matters of religion or belief. The Iranian justice system does not grant women the same legal status as men; for example, testimony by a man is equivalent to the testimony of two women. Provisions of both the Civil and Penal Codes, in particular those sections dealing with family and property law, discriminate against women.” (p 111)

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

²⁵ 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

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.²⁶

As the UK Home Office 2005 Country of Origin Information Report on Iran points out, although Article 19 of the constitution guarantees that “all people of Iran enjoy equal rights whatever their ethnic group or tribe,” government discrimination against religious minorities still exists.²⁷ 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.

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.²⁸ 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

²⁶ The US Department of State Country Report on Human Rights Practices 1999 states that “organizations such as the Ansar-e Hezbollah, a movement of hard-line vigilantes who seek to enforce their vision of appropriate revolutionary comportment upon the society, harass, beat, and intimidate those who demonstrate publicly for reform or who do not observe dress codes or other modes of correct revolutionary conduct. This includes women whose clothing does not cover the hair and all of the body except the hands and face, or those who wear make-up or nail polish. Ansar-e Hezbollah gangs also have been used to destroy newspaper offices and printing presses, intimidate dissident clerics, and disrupt peaceful gatherings.” (Section I:f)

²⁷ Country of Origin Information Report, 2005, Iran, Home Office, 6.56

²⁸ Iran: International Religious Freedom Report 2005, released by the United States Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, Section II

strong geo-political presence in countries neighbouring Iran. The discrimination they face are primarily based upon this ethnic and political tension rather than their religious beliefs per se.

Shia

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 2003²⁹ 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.

Non-Muslim Minorities

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 and cultural 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.³⁰ 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

²⁹ See "Iran 'to free dissident ayatollah'", http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/2697989.stm

³⁰ Annual Report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, p 111, May 2005

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. 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.³¹ Recent 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."³²

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."³³ 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.³⁴

Evangelical and Pentecostal churches are distrusted and persecuted in Iran. Since the revolution, many church leaders have been arrested, imprisoned and executed on charges of apostasy from Islam or insulting Islam, which are punishable by death. In addition to state-based persecution, church leaders or proselytizing Christians have been attacked, kidnapped and killed by mobs or state agents.³⁵ One of the main reasons for such intense persecution

³¹ For a detailed account see "The Bahá'í Question: Cultural Cleansing in Iran", Bahá'í International Community, 2005

³² Iran: International Religious Freedom Report 2005, released by the United States Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, Section II

³³ "Interview with Armenian MP Leon Davidian" by Sergeh Barseqian, Yes-e-no, Daily Newspaper, No. 268, 31 Jan 2004

³⁴ 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.

³⁵ 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

has been the high number of apostates from Islam in Evangelical and Pentecostal 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.³⁶ 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.³⁷

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/>)

³⁶ See *Ethnic and Religious Groups in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, prepared by Nazila Ghanea-Hercock for UNHCR, 5 May 2003, pp 16

³⁷ 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. There were no reports of vandalism or similar harassment during the reporting period."

Zoroastrian Community

According to the UNHCR, there are around 45,000 Zoroastrians living in Iran.³⁸

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.

³⁸ Background Paper on Refugees and Asylum Seekers from the Islamic Republic of Iran, UNHCR, Centre for Documentation and Research, p 27, January 2001