

iran

PERSECUTION 101



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Decades of fierce government oppression have failed to eradicate the church in Iran

Introduced in 1979 after a bloody revolution, the modern-day theocracy ruling Iran is consistent in its violence against all who dare disagree with its radical interpretation of Islam. From its founding, the government has enacted a draconian system of laws and enforces it with police, an ideological judiciary, and an extensive penal system known for its cruel treatment of religious prisoners. In Iran, loyalty to the state requires adherence to Twelver Ja'afari Shia Islam, the official state religion. Any other belief is immediately suspect and when acted upon is often punishable by death. Still, reports from the country show that the Christian church is thriving, with some experts calling it the fastest-growing Christian community in the world.





QUICK FACTS



Type of Government

Theocratic
Republic



Head of State

Supreme Leader Ali
Hoseini-Khamenei
since 1989



Total Population

Approx. 87.59 million
(2023 estimate)



Religious Demography

99.6% Muslim - 87.59 mil
0.4% Other - 350,000



Ethnic Demography

61% Persian	6% Lur
16% Azeri	2% Arab
10% Kurd	5% Other

TYPES OF PERSECUTION



Government Restrictions

Government policies hinder
both corporate and private
religious practice



Government Violence

The Iranian government keeps
an extensive security apparatus
authorized to violently repress
minority religious expression.



Social Pressure

Many Christians in Iran —
especially those converting
from Islam to Christianity —
face pressure from friends,
families, and neighbors.



ICC IN IRAN

Government repression makes any open work in Iran completely impossible. International religious NGOs are not allowed to operate in the country, and any work they do has to be done in extreme secrecy. Citizens found working with an international NGO, particularly on religious causes, are considered enemies of the state and subjected to degrading treatment in Iran's penal system.

Consequently, any ICC work on Iranian issues must be conducted with a great deal of discretion and little publicity. Though growing rapidly, the church in Iran is in dire need of outside training and encouragement. In addition, ICC has been able to conduct U.S.-based advocacy on human rights in Iran over the years and has seen significant interest among the international community in supporting the repressed people of Iran where possible.



Backgrounder on Religious Freedom in Iran

One of only six theocracies in the world, religion and politics are deeply intertwined in Iran. Its constitution, finalized soon after the 1979 revolution, is a religious manifesto that quotes the Quran extensively and mandates the military to fulfil “the ideological mission of jihad in Allah’s way; that is, extending the sovereignty of Allah’s law throughout the world.” For religious minorities, there is no escape from the extremist policies of a government fueled by an extremist interpretation of Shia Islam that leaves no room even for Sunni Islam much less religious minorities like Christianity.

Though the Iranian constitution claims to protect all human, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, these rights are granted conditionally on “conformity with Islamic criteria,” rendering them effectively meaningless in the Iranian political context.

The government makes a regular practice of trampling on citizens’ rights in favor of Islamic customs, even deploying “morality police” on the streets to ensure strict adherence to various Islamic customs like those mandating coverings or various hairstyles for women.

Minority religious thought is outlawed and vigorously prosecuted by a wide-ranging penal code that punishes blasphemy with death. Torture, amputation, floggings, and even stonings are all used to penalize religious and political dissidents, and the regime holds an unknown number of prisoners of conscience in a network of prisons known for their severely inhumane conditions.

Though the government does allow small, isolated communities of religious minorities to exist and even participate politically, conversion from Islam to these faiths is strictly prohibited and a 2021 law outlaws insulting “divine religions or Islamic schools of thought” and committing “any deviant educational or proselytizing activity that contradicts or interferes with the sacred law of Islam,” according to the U.S. Department of State. Sharing one’s faith with a Muslim is punishable by death.



In addition to its human rights concerns, Iran also presents a severe threat to international geopolitical stability with its efforts to develop nuclear weapons capability and counter western interests in the Middle East.

In this context, western governments have struggled to instigate meaningful improvements for Iran's religious minority population. Though the issue is regularly highlighted by the United States and others, the United States does not keep diplomatic relations with Iran and is limited in the direct effect it can have on the topic. Iran is already heavily sanctioned on account of its broader military and human rights issues, negating one potential potent avenue of pressure from the United States.

Despite the lack of outside aid, the Christian church in Iran is one of the fastest-growing Christian populations in the world, according to experts familiar with the issue. Though still a tiny part of the population, Iranian Christians are proving resilient to the government pressure that surrounds them every day.

Resources and Reports

[ICC's 2022 POY Report - Islamic Revolutionary Guard Chapter](#)

[ICC's 2022 POY Report - Ayatollah Ali Khamenei Chapter](#)

[State Department 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom – Iran Chapter](#)

[USCIRF 2023 Annual Report – Iran Chapter](#)

