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**STATUS OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN  
FOR THE 48<sup>TH</sup> SESSION OF THE  
UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW**

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## Status of Human Rights in Iran for the 48<sup>th</sup> Session of the Universal Periodic Review

### Introduction

1. The European Centre for Law and Justice (ECLJ) is an international, non-governmental organization dedicated to promoting and protecting human rights around the world. The ECLJ also holds Special Consultative status before the United Nations Economic and Social Council. This report discusses the status of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran (Iran) for the 48th session of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR).

### Background

2. Iran is a country located in South Asia along the Persian Gulf and has a population of approximately 88.5 million people.<sup>1</sup> The country is predominantly Muslim, with 98% of the population identifying as Muslim.<sup>2</sup> Zoroastrians, Jews, Christians, and Baha'is comprise the remaining 2%.<sup>3</sup> In its 2024 World Watch List, Open Doors ranked Iran as the 9th worst country for Christians.<sup>4</sup> This ranking stems from the fact that converting to Christianity is illegal and converts are often arrested and imprisoned.<sup>5</sup>

3. Iran's last review was held on November 8, 2019.<sup>6</sup> As a result of the review, Iran received 329 recommendations, 143 of which it supported.<sup>7</sup> It was recommended by Saudi Arabia, but only noted by Iran, that the government “[e]nd immediately and fully the systematic persecution, including killings, arbitrary detention and torture in places of detention, of members of religious minorities in the Islamic Republic of Iran, and promote effective remedies and compensation for all victims and their families.”<sup>8</sup> It was further recommended by Haiti, and supported by Iran, that the government “[p]rotect the rights of Christians and other minorities and promote interfaith dialogue between religious groups in the Islamic Republic of Iran.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Iran, WORLD DATA,

<https://www.worlddata.info/asia/iran/index.php#:~:text=A%20considerable%20share%20of%20the,Damawand%20is%20at%205%2C604%20meters> (last visited Mar. 14, 2024).

<sup>2</sup> World Religion, THE ASS'N OF RELIGION DATA ARCHIVES (2022), [https://www.thearda.com/world-religion/national-profiles?u=110c#S\\_2](https://www.thearda.com/world-religion/national-profiles?u=110c#S_2).

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> *World Watch List 2024*, OPEN DOORS, <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/persecution/countries/> (last visited Mar. 14, 2024).

<sup>5</sup> Iran, OPEN DOORS, <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/persecution/countries/iran/> (last visited Mar. 14, 2024).

<sup>6</sup> *Universal Periodic Review – Iran (Islamic Republic of)*, OHCHR, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/ir-index> (last visited Mar. 14, 2024).

<sup>7</sup> *Infographic Iran (Islamic Republic of)*, OHCHR, [https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/lib-docs/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session34/IR/IslamicRepublicofIran\\_Infographic.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/lib-docs/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session34/IR/IslamicRepublicofIran_Infographic.pdf) (last visited Mar. 14, 2024).

<sup>8</sup> OHCHR, UPR of Iran (Islamic Republic of) (3rd Cycle – 34th Session): Thematic List of Recommendations, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/lib-docs/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session34/IR/MatriceRecommendationsIran.docx> (last visited Mar. 14, 2024).

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

## Legal Framework

4. Article 12 of the Constitution of Iran establishes Islam as the state’s official religion.<sup>10</sup> Under Article 14 of the Constitution:

the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran and all Muslims are duty-bound to treat non-Muslims in conformity with ethical norms and the principles of Islamic justice and equity, and to respect their human rights. This principle applies to all who refrain from engaging in conspiracy or activity against Islam and the Islamic Republic of Iran.<sup>11</sup>

5. Article 13 of the Constitution further recognizes Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian Iranians as religious minorities “who, within the limits of the law, are free to perform their religious rites and ceremonies, and to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education.”<sup>12</sup>

6. Article 72 of the Constitution forbids the Islamic Consultative Assembly from enacting “laws contrary to the *usul* [rules] and *ahkam* [commandments] of the official religion of the country or to the Constitution.”<sup>13</sup>

7. Article 499 of Iran’s Penal Code criminalizes “insult[ing] Iranian ethnicities or divine religions or Islamic schools of thought recognised under the Constitution[] with the intent to cause violence or tensions in the society.”<sup>14</sup> Those convicted under this law can face up to five years imprisonment and a fine.<sup>15</sup> Article 500 of the Penal Code prohibits “any deviant educational or proselytizing activity that contradicts or interferes with the sacred law of Islam” and “making false claims or lying in religious and Islamic spheres, such as claiming divinity.”<sup>16</sup> Those convicted under this article can face a prison sentence of up to five years and a fine.<sup>17</sup>

8. Moreover Article 513 criminalizes speech against Islam:

Any person [who] insults the sacred values of Islam or any of [the] Great Prophets or the [twelve Shi’ite] imams or the Holy Fatemeh [daughter of Prophet Mohammad], if considered as *sāb-al-nabi* shall be punishable by the death penalty; otherwise shall be sentenced to one to five years imprisonment.<sup>18</sup>

9. Similarly, Article 262 of the Penal Code states that “[a]nyone who swears at or commits *qazf* against the Great Prophet [of Islam] (peace be upon him) or any of the Great Prophets, shall be considered as *Sāb ul-nabi* [a person who swears at the Prophet], and shall be sentenced to the death penalty.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> IRAN (ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF) 1979 [CONSTITUTION] (Rev. 1989), art. 12, [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iran\\_1989](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iran_1989).

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* art. 14.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.* art. 13.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* art. 72.

<sup>14</sup> Penal Code of the Islamic Republic of Iran art. 499, available at <https://end-blasphemy-laws.org/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/iran/>.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

<sup>16</sup> *Id.* art. 500.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.*

<sup>18</sup> *Id.* art. 513.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.* art. 262.

10. Further, the government prohibits converting from Islam to any other religion,<sup>20</sup> which is punishable by death.<sup>21</sup>

11. Iran is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).<sup>22</sup> Under Article 18 of the ICCPR:

1. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

2. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.<sup>23</sup>

12. Moreover, under Article 27 of the ICCPR:

In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language.<sup>24</sup>

13. This fundamental right to religious freedom is likewise enshrined with similar language under Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR):

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.<sup>25</sup>

## Christian Persecution

14. Even though Iran's Constitution provides the right to freedom of religion to religious minorities, this right does not include converting from Islam to another religion. The government only recognizes Christians who are ethnic Armenians, Assyrians, or who belong to the small expatriate community.<sup>26</sup> Further, the government prohibits Christians from holding

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<sup>20</sup> Dr. Ewelina U. Ochab, *Are New Iranian Criminal Laws Curtailing Freedom of Religion or Belief?*, FORBES (July 5, 2021), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ewelinaochab/2021/07/05/are-new-iranian-criminal-laws-curtailing-freedom-of-religion-or-belief/?sh=5ec302401a1a>.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ratification Status for Iran (Islamic Republic of)*, OHCHR, [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?CountryID=81&Lang=EN](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?CountryID=81&Lang=EN) (last visited Mar. 14, 2024).

<sup>23</sup> G.A. Res. 2200 (XXI) A, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights art. 18 (Dec. 16, 1966), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights> [hereinafter ICCPR].

<sup>24</sup> *Id.* art. 27.

<sup>25</sup> G.A. Res. 217 (III) A, Universal Declaration of Human Rights art. 18 (Dec. 16, 1966), <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

<sup>26</sup> *Faceless Victims: Rights Violations Against Christians in Iran 2024 Annual Report*, ARTICLE 18 (2024), <https://articleeighteen.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Annual-Report-2024.pdf>.

religious services or possessing religious materials in Persian, the national language of Iran.<sup>27</sup> As a result, Christians in Iran are harassed, arrested, and imprisoned simply for peacefully practicing their faith.<sup>28</sup> The government routinely raids house churches, arrests worshipers, and confiscates any religious material.<sup>29</sup> In fact, in 2023, 166 Christians were arrested in Iran.<sup>30</sup> Many Christians who are arrested are charged with “acting against national security” or using “propaganda against the regime.”<sup>31</sup> Authorities routinely require exorbitant sums of money in order to release Christians on bail.<sup>32</sup> According to Nazila Ghanea, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief:

It hurts even more for Christians’ real “crimes” to be cloaked under false charges such as “acting against national security”. Your [real] crime is that you are Christian; your crime is that you have Christian literature; your crime is that you gather with other Christians in house-churches; and your crime is that you converted.<sup>33</sup>

15. Since Iran’s last UPR, the Iranian government has taken steps to further restrict religious freedom and persecute Christians. In 2021, amendments were made to Articles 499 and 500 of the Penal Code of Iran.<sup>34</sup> The amendment to Article 499 added language that includes insulting divine religions or Islamic schools of thought as a punishable offense and those found guilty are subjected to a prison sentence or a fine.<sup>35</sup> Article 500 provides up to five years’ imprisonment for “any deviant educational or proselytising activity” or for “making false claims or lying in religious and Islamic spheres, such as claiming divinity.”<sup>36</sup> An international human rights organization dedicated to promoting freedom of expression warned that these provisions “impose a threat to anyone who refuses to subscribe to state-sanctioned beliefs and ideologies, they . . . disproportionately impact individuals belonging to religious and faith-based minorities and ethnic groups.”<sup>37</sup>

16. These types of blasphemy laws are common in Muslim majority countries and have been used egregiously. Critiquing Islam or sharing religious beliefs contrary to the Islamic teachings can be seen as blasphemous. For Christians, professing Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the only way to salvation can be punished under Iran’s laws.

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<sup>27</sup> *Id.*

<sup>28</sup> Lisa Zengarini, *Iran: Harassment: Against Christians Increasing*, VATICAN NEWS (Feb. 28, 2023), <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2023-02/iran-harassment-against-iranian-christians-increasing.html>.

<sup>29</sup> *Iran*, *supra* note 5.

<sup>30</sup> Jayson Casper, *Report: Iran Arrested 166 Christians in 2023, Targeting Bible Distributors*, CHRISTIANITY TODAY (Feb. 21, 2024), <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2024/february/iran-christians-persecution-religious-freedom-2023-report.html>.

<sup>31</sup> *Id.*

<sup>32</sup> *Iran: Full Country Dossier*, OPEN DOORS INT’L (Jan. 2023), <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/country-dossiers/>.

<sup>33</sup> *Faceless Victims Rights Violations Against Christians in Iran 2024 Annual Report*, *supra* note 26.

<sup>34</sup> *Iran Passes Bill that Threatens Further Repression of Christian Converts*, ARTICLE 18 (Feb. 19, 2021), <https://articleeighteen.com/news/7872/>.

<sup>35</sup> *Id.*

<sup>36</sup> *Id.*

<sup>37</sup> *Iran: Parliament Passes Law to Further Choke Freedoms and Target Minorities*, ARTICLE 19 (FEB. 19, 2021), <https://www.article19.org/resources/iran-parliament-passes-law-to-further-choke-freedoms-and-target-minorities/>.

17. As stated above, the Iranian Penal Code also explicitly prohibits sharing Christian beliefs with Muslims. Like criminalizing blasphemy, banning proselytization infringes on the right to practice one's faith. Below we have highlighted just a few examples of Christians being targeted and arrested for simply practicing their faith and gathering together to worship.

18. On December 24, 2023, authorities raided the home of Christian convert, Esmaeil Narimanpour.<sup>38</sup> Authorities searched his home, without a warrant, and confiscated Christian books.<sup>39</sup> Previously, Esmaeil had been forced to attend re-education classes with an Islamic cleric following his conversion to Christianity.<sup>40</sup>

19. On December 11, 2023, the authorities raided a house church meeting and arrested three Christians.<sup>41</sup> Approximately twenty-five Christians were gathered at the house church, including women and children.<sup>42</sup> Those who were not arrested were forced to fill out forms that inquired about their faith and religious activities.<sup>43</sup> The three individuals who were arrested were taken to their own homes by authorities who then searched their homes.<sup>44</sup>

20. In February 2023, an Iranian convert was pardoned after spending almost five years in prison for "acting against national security" for his role in organizing house churches.<sup>45</sup> He was also flogged for drinking wine as part of the Christian sacrament of Holy Communion.<sup>46</sup>

21. In September 2023, Anooshaven Avedian, an Iranian-Armenian Christian, began serving his ten-year sentence.<sup>47</sup> He was sentenced under Article 500 of the Iranian Penal Code.<sup>48</sup>

22. On August 15, 2023, a Christian man and his wife were arrested while visiting a friend's house outside of Tehran.<sup>49</sup> Authorities also seized their personal belongings and Christian books.<sup>50</sup> The wife has since been released on bail, while the husband remains in prison.<sup>51</sup>

23. Between June 1 and July 17, 2023, authorities arrested more than sixty-nine Christians across eleven cities in Iran.<sup>52</sup> The vast majority of those arrested are reported to be Christian converts.<sup>53</sup> While many have since been released, those individuals were reportedly required

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<sup>38</sup> *Christmas Arrests for Seven Iranian Christians*, OPEN DOORS (Jan. 9, 2024), <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/latest-news/christmas-arrests-iran/>.

<sup>39</sup> *Id.*

<sup>40</sup> *Id.*

<sup>41</sup> *Christmas Arrests for Seven Iranian Christians*, *supra* note 38.

<sup>42</sup> *Id.*

<sup>43</sup> *Id.*

<sup>44</sup> *Id.*

<sup>45</sup> *#Place2Worship Campaigner Released After Nearly Five Years in Prison*, ARTICLE 18 (Feb. 9, 2023), <https://articleeighteen.com/news/12583/>.

<sup>46</sup> *Id.*

<sup>47</sup> *Iran: Full Country Dossier*, OPEN DOORS INT'L (Dec. 2023), [https://www.opendoors.org/persecution/reports/Iran-Full\\_Country\\_Dossier-ODI-2024.pdf](https://www.opendoors.org/persecution/reports/Iran-Full_Country_Dossier-ODI-2024.pdf).

<sup>48</sup> *Id.*

<sup>49</sup> *Iran: Jailed Christians Denied Christmas*, ASIA NEWS (Dec. 23, 2023), <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Iran:-Jailed-Christians-denied-Christmas-59818.html>.

<sup>50</sup> *Id.*

<sup>51</sup> *Id.*

<sup>52</sup> *At Least 10 Still Detained as Numbers of Arrests and Affected Cities Rise*, ARTICLE 18 (Aug. 10, 2023), <https://articleeighteen.com/news/13706/>.

<sup>53</sup> *Id.*

to sign statements that they would refrain from carrying out future Christian activities or they would be forced to attend Islamic re-education classes.<sup>54</sup>

24. On May 9, 2023, three female Christian converts were arrested and held in Tehran’s Evin Prison for forty days and were denied access to an attorney.<sup>55</sup> On June 29, 2023, two of the women were released on bail.<sup>56</sup> The women were scheduled for a hearing on July 2, 2023, but there have been no further updates.<sup>57</sup>

25. In March 2023, three Christian converts were charged and sentenced under Article 500 of the Iranian Penal Code.<sup>58</sup> While the three individuals were released from prison, two of them were later re-arrested.<sup>59</sup> As of the end of 2023, the two individuals remain in prison.<sup>60</sup>

26. Throughout 2023, at least nine Christians were pardoned and released from prison.<sup>61</sup> However, it must be noted that many of the individuals were already nearing the end of their prison sentences.<sup>62</sup> Further, because the charges related to the peaceful practice of their Christian faith, they should have never been arrested and convicted in the first place.<sup>63</sup>

27. On July 30, 2022, Christian convert, Mohammad Golbaz, was arrested by more than a dozen intelligence agents from his motorcycle repair shop.<sup>64</sup> The agents also searched his parents’ home and confiscated a picture of Jesus.<sup>65</sup> Golbaz was sentenced to six months in prison.<sup>66</sup>

28. In January 2022, Christian convert and church leader, Abdolreza Ali-Haghnejad, was re-arrested for spreading Christianity after a Supreme Court judge overturned his acquittal.<sup>67</sup> He is now serving a six-year prison sentence in Minab Prison.<sup>68</sup> A week after his arrest, his wife was charged with conducting “propaganda against the state.”<sup>69</sup> She spent over three weeks at Lakan Prison before being released on bail.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> *Id.*

<sup>55</sup> *Faceless Victims Rights Violations Against Christians in Iran 2024 Annual Report*, *supra* note 26.

<sup>56</sup> *Id.*

<sup>57</sup> *Id.*

<sup>58</sup> *Id.*

<sup>59</sup> *Id.*

<sup>60</sup> *Id.*

<sup>61</sup> *At Least 166 Christians Arrested in Iran Last Year for Their Faith*, IRAN WIRE (Feb. 19, 2024), <https://iranwire.com/en/news/125515-at-least-166-christians-arrested-in-iran-last-year-for-their-faith/#:~:text=At%20least%20nine%20Christians%20were,issued%20in%20the%20first%20place.>

<sup>62</sup> *Id.*

<sup>63</sup> *Id.*

<sup>64</sup> *Christian Convert Arrested, Detained in Karaj on Unknown Charges*, ARTICLE 18 (Aug. 5, 2022), <https://articleeighteen.com/news/11491/>.

<sup>65</sup> *Id.*

<sup>66</sup> *Faceless Victims Rights Violations Against Christians in Iran 2024 Annual Report*, *supra* note 26.

<sup>67</sup> *Id.*

<sup>68</sup> *Id.*

<sup>69</sup> *Wife of Imprisoned Pastor Charged with “Disturbing Public Opinion”*, ARTICLE 18 (Feb. 3, 2023), <https://articleeighteen.com/news/12540/>.

<sup>70</sup> *Id.*

29. Even after being released from prison, Christians are continuously monitored and harassed.<sup>71</sup> Individuals have reported that authorities monitor their homes and that they have received “distressing” phone calls from interrogators.<sup>72</sup> Several Christians reported that, while being interrogated, they received print-outs of personal emails and other telecommunications that were then brought before a judge to be used as evidence of their Christian activities.<sup>73</sup> Further, the government routinely re-opens old cases or files new charges.<sup>74</sup> Because of this, many Christians find themselves having to flee from the country.<sup>75</sup>

30. Even though Iran claimed to support a recommendation that called for the government to “[p]rotect the rights of Christians and other minorities and promote interfaith dialogue between religious groups in the Islamic Republic of Iran,”<sup>76</sup> its actions, as demonstrated above, indicate otherwise.

31. Iran’s policies and practices clearly violate fundamental protections found in international human rights instruments such as the ICCPR and the UDHR. Again, Article 18 of the ICCPR guarantees the right to freedom of religion and the ability to “manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.”<sup>77</sup> Further, prohibiting converting to a religion other than Islam infringes on one’s ability to freely “adopt a religion or belief of his choice.”<sup>78</sup> These rights are guaranteed to everyone, not just individuals belonging to the Muslim majority. Everyone must be free to practice his faith in public or private, without the fear of being harassed and arrested by police.

## Recommendations

32. Iran must immediately end its practice of arresting Christians and release all Christians who have been arbitrarily detained for peacefully practicing their faith. Further, Iran must reform its laws to allow for Christians to peacefully practice their religion according to the tenets of their faith and permit Christians and other religious minorities to open and operate churches without government interference. We further urge Iran to protect religious freedom for all its citizens, no one should be harassed or imprisoned because of his faith.

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<sup>71</sup> Samantha Kamman, *One-Third of Christians Arrested in Iran Targeted for Possessing Multiple Bibles: Report*, THE CHRISTIAN POST (Feb. 19, 2024), <https://www.christianpost.com/news/iran-targeted-bible-distributors-during-2023-wave-of-arrests.html>.

<sup>72</sup> *Id.*

<sup>73</sup> *Id.*

<sup>74</sup> *Id.*

<sup>75</sup> *Christian Arrests in Iran Surge Amid Ongoing Persecution*, IRAN INTERNATIONAL (Feb. 20, 2024), <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202402207730>.

<sup>76</sup> OHCHR, UPR of Iran (Islamic Republic of) (3<sup>rd</sup> Cycle – 34<sup>th</sup> Session): Thematic List of Recommendations, *supra* note 8.

<sup>77</sup> ICCPR art. 18, *supra* note 23.

<sup>78</sup> *Id.*