

Iran: Suppression of religious freedom and persecution of religious minorities

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Abstract

The article explores the situation of non-Shiite Muslims, non-Christian religions like Baha'i, and the different Christian confessions in Iran. It particularly examines their legal situation, asks for the ideological position of the Iranian leadership concerning other religions and then describes the actual problems, as the government rarely uses legal means against other religions, but uses allegations of espionage against them.

Keywords Iran, Shia, Sunni, Baha'i, Protestants, Evangelicals.

1. The Iranian revolution

Shah Reza Pahlavi maintained progressive economic policies while relying heavily on the West. Unpopular because of his use of repressive measures and his secret service, he was subsequently deposed of by the Shiite Islamic revolution. In 1979 the Islamic Republic was proclaimed. Ever since the Islamic clergy, as guardians of the revolution, maintain authority over the politicians, who, while mostly democratically elected, are hand-picked by the religious guardians. Consequently, in spite of its democratic structures, Iran remains a theocratic police state which ignores human rights, in particular those of minorities, non-Muslims and women.

Year after year, the classical reference works which categorize countries according to their religious freedom¹ and the persecution of

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¹ Eg. Boyle & Sheen 1997; Marshall 2000; Marshall 2008; Moreno 1996; International Coalition for Religious Freedom; US State Department 2008 (the

Christians (Shea 1997; Marshall 1997), as well as the annual reports of human rights organizations, the US State Department Human Rights Report,² and the US State Department Religious Freedom Report,³ have been rating Iran among the states where religious freedom is obviously non-existent and where even adherents of the state religion who hold a divergent doctrine are brutally persecuted.

Of the 70 million inhabitants of Iran, 95.6% are Muslims, 2.8% Zoroastrians, 0.7% Baha'i, 0.5% Christians (0.3% Orthodox), 0.5% non-religious and 0.1% Hindus.⁴ Shiite Islam is the state religion and 93% of the inhabitants adhere to it. Owing to the constant emigration of members of religious minorities, the figures for the religious minorities could, however, in the meantime be considerably lower.⁵

The Iranian revolution which has its origins in the long ideological history of the Iranian Shia (see Arjomand 1984; Ansari 2002), aimed at subjecting all spheres of society and each individual citizen to the will of the religious leaders – if necessary by means of control, threat and violence (cf. Akhavi 1987). Not even the political government itself is exempt from this. There is a broad consensus among scholarly researchers globally,⁶ including Islamic authors, that this has remained in force unaltered to date. This policy was and is considered to be a model for other parts of the world and has encouraged the spread of violence against dissenters and the suppression of religious freedom worldwide (Esposito 1990; Menashri 1990). This strategy is still maintained despite the fact that even insiders have to admit that the dream of a society better than that of the Shah era, a dream to which Ayatollah Khomeini owed much of his support, has long been shattered, particularly since the poor find

annual reports are very substantial on Iran); Aid to the Church in Need 2008.

² See the three reports quoted below on the human rights situation in Iran.

³ See the six reports quoted below on religious freedom in Iran.

⁴ According to Barrett 2001:379 who uses mainly official figures. The current updates of the work on the Internet do not give any divergent figures.

⁵ This is the assumption of eg. Johnstone 2005:352-355 based on intensive research by locals. He estimates: 99% Muslims, 0.5% Baha'i, 0.33% Christians (0.18% Orthodox), 0.5% non-religious, 0.1% Hindus, but he seems to subsume Zoroastrians with Muslims. The current updates of the work available at www.operationworld.org do not give any divergent figures. More details on the distribution of Christians below.

⁶ See the recent publications of Keil 2006; Grimond 2003; Kar 2005; Khameni 2002; Montazam 2002; Hooglund 2002; Menashri 2001; Nikpey 2001.

themselves in a worse situation than before and the image of Islam has suffered among the population.

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is the Supreme Guardian of the Islamic Revolution. He is the de facto Chief of State and, as many may not know, also the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces⁷ and all armed units. Equally, the office of the President of Parliament and almost all of the top government offices are held by Islamic clerics who, while often regarded as liberal by Western observers owing to their often only slight deviations from the views of the Council of Guardians, do not in the slightest doubt the Islamic revolution and the necessity of maintaining a purely Islamic state.⁸

The 83 religious leaders elect the 'Supreme Guardian of the Revolution' who supervises all political proceedings. All laws and actions voted on by Parliament (called 'Majles' or 'Majlis') are scrutinized and approved by the so-called 'Council of Guardians' which consists of six religious leaders appointed by the Ayatollah and six Islamic jurists who are proposed by the Supreme Judge and elected by Parliament. Up until the nomination of the current President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Council of Guardians has rejected almost all laws proposed by Parliament, and even under this 'hardliner' this is happening repeatedly. All religious activities are meticulously supervised by the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance and the dreaded 'Minister of Intelligence and Security' (MOIS).

There is no prospect of improvement. For example, in 1998 the Iranian Parliament passed a law which prohibits any kind of medical care or treatment of patients by members of the opposite sex.⁹ (However, in reality many Iranians, especially in Teheran, are not observing such laws.) When the Parliament planned to raise the minimum age of marriage from 9 to 15 years in October 2000, the Council of Guardians refused to implement the suggestion. In addition, they still consider the so-called temporary marriage, known only in Shiite Islam, acceptable. Such a marriage can be entered into

⁷ Evidence in U.S. Department of State 1995:1076. An overview of the various constitutional organs in Iran and their interrelatedness is given by Keil 2006:25-32, who also gives an excellent portrayal of the divergent streams among Islamic clerics.

⁸ Evidence e.g. in Schirazi 2005; Coiplet 2001; Grimond 2003.

⁹ U.S. Department of State 2001:4; on further laws pertaining to marriage and sexuality see the detailed list in Kar 2005:57.

for a duration of at least 60 minutes and with several women simultaneously and leaves women at the mercy of de facto prostitution.¹⁰

2. Human rights in general¹¹

The lack of religious freedom in Iran is only one aspect of the wide range of human rights violations¹² which do not occur only in secret but are endorsed by official ideology¹³ and not only by the religious leaders but even government agencies, even though the latter would prefer to see some moderation for their own benefit. In the Iranian judicial system, one and the same person fills the role of judge and state attorney. Most defendants have no legal representation, there are no remand prisons and the authorities are allowed to keep prisoners in custody as long as they wish without having to provide reasons.

Sylvain Coiplot (2001) justifiably writes:

Even worse than this arrogance is the fact that reformers as well as conservatives have a common goal. The reformers too want to prevent the separation of state and religion. They only argue about how to achieve this goal. This fact is easily overlooked by outsiders. The reformers are therefore often mistaken for opponents of a theocratic state. The conservatives are making allegations in this regard but the reformers deny these categorically and vehemently support the Islamic revolution. The question is whether they only do this in order to save their own lives.

To add a further random example of human rights violations, access to higher education can only be attained after passing an exam in Islamic theology. This is an undisputed legal requirement for university studies in all of Iran (U.S. Department of State 2002:2).

¹⁰ See Schirrmacher 1995:10-11; U.S. Department of State 2001:4-5.

¹¹ Currently the best scholarly treatment is by Afshari 2001.

¹² See in particular Ebady 2000, as well as the annual reports of leading human rights organisations, e.g. Amnesty International Report 2008 and earlier years (many further reports on Iran are available at www.amnesty.org), Human Rights Watch World Report 2008, 2007, 2003, 1997; U.S. State Department 2008a, 2007 and earlier years, and the reports of the International Society for Human Rights www.ishr.org (search for Iran). Recently United Nations 2008.

¹³ See Keil 2006; Kar 2005; Afshari 2001; Karabell 2000:206-233; Strong 1997:109-217.

3. Religious freedom in general

There is no freedom of religion in Iran.¹⁴ Basic freedoms which are guaranteed by the constitution are denied to all adherents of divergent forms of Islam,¹⁵ as well as to non-Islamic minorities who are called ‘people of the book’ in the constitution, meaning Christians, Zoroastrians and Jews. They are oppressed and sometimes heavily persecuted, for example by having their leaders assassinated. All missionary work, de facto only practised by Christians and Baha’i, is strictly prohibited (Keil 2006:61-64).

A report of the U.S. Department of State on Human Rights of the year 2000 described the conditions in Iran as ‘poor’. It specified that religious minorities ‘experience varying degrees of officially sanctioned discrimination, particularly in the areas of employment, education, and housing’. Furthermore, ‘they suffer discrimination in the legal system, receiving lower awards in injury and death lawsuits, and expose themselves to the danger of receiving heavier punishment than Muslims’ (Menashri 2003:7).

Article 1 of the Iranian Constitution¹⁶ of 1980 (amended in 1989) stipulates that Iran is an “Islamic Republic”. Article 2 extensively elaborates on the role that belief in the one God, and his revelation plays in the legal system. Laws are based on the Koran and Sunna, and religious leaders watch over both, the laws as well as their application. Human dignity and freedom (Art. 2, para.6) are mentioned only in respect to human responsibility towards God, which results in the necessity of relying on the leadership of holy men. According to Article 4 all laws and regulations must without exception be “based on Islamic criteria” which have to be watched over by the ‘Guardian Council’. According to Article 11 the government is responsible for cultivating the unity of the Islamic world because all Muslims worldwide are forming a single great nation. According to Articles 19

¹⁴ On the definition and the foundational significance of religious freedom as a human right, see Schirmmacher 2000 for a brief essay and the following works for more extensive treatment: Adhar & Leigh 2005; Taylor 2005; Ferrari 2001; Cookson 2003; Witte & van der Vyveer 1996; van der Vyveer & Witte 1996; Guntau 2007.

¹⁵ The question whether one needs to differentiate between Islam itself as a religion generating religious persecution and it being abused in that regard, which is indeed an issue in other Islamic countries, hardly poses itself in Iran; cf. Schirmmacher 2002; Klingberg & Schirmmacher 2001.

¹⁶ www.iranonline.com/iran/iran-info/Government/constitution.html.

and 20 all people enjoy equal rights and equal protection of the law, but only “in conformity with Islamic criteria”. According to Article 14 the human rights of all non-Muslims who have not fought against Islam (Sura 60,8 is quoted here) are to be respected in accordance with Islamic ethical norms of justice, provided that they refrain from engaging in any conspiracy or activity against Islam or the Republic of Iran. One is inclined not to trust the application of Article 23 which claims that no one may be molested or punished simply for holding a certain belief. Even the “investigation of an individual's belief is forbidden”, which is otherwise presupposed by the entire constitution.

In 1984, the UN Human Rights Commission appointed a Special Rapporteur for Iran whose mandate has since then been extended annually. When Khomeini died in 1989 there was hope for improvement, which however was soon dashed (a view shared by Boyle & Sheen 1997:421-422). The reports of the UN Special Rapporteur show that the situation has instead worsened since 1990. In September 1994, the UN Sub-Commission for the Protection of Minorities condemned Iran for its increasing persecution of Christians, especially for the continuous killing of their leaders (cf. News Network International 1994). In March 1995, the Commission issued a special resolution (cf. Lawton 1995:8-10) condemning Iran for the oppression of religious minorities after the outgoing Special Representative had submitted a devastating detailed report. (The UN Human Rights Commission came to an end under the chairmanship of Sudan and after its dissolution was replaced by the UN Human Rights Council in 2006, in which 47 nations chosen by the general assembly have the right to vote. From this time onward there have rarely been any meaningful condemnations or reports on the human rights situation in non-Western countries. However, the UN General Assembly, expressed its deep concern regarding the constant deterioration of the human rights situation in Iran in a resolution on 19 December 2006, which was accepted with 72:50 votes with 55 abstentions.)

The World Reports of Human Rights Watch of 2002, 2003 and 2007 have confirmed a considerable worsening of the situation of religious minorities since 1994, and again since 2001.¹⁷

¹⁷ Concerning the lack of religious freedom see particularly Human Rights Watch World Report 2007, in which Evangelicals, Baha'i and Sufi are named as main victims.

4. Treatment of religious minorities

The suppression of religious freedom most strongly affects the largest religious minority, the Baha'i, and the non-orthodox, that is the Catholic and Protestant (especially evangelical) Christians, and the few remaining Jews. But besides these it also affects Islamic groups like the Sufis or Azeris.

4.1 Jews

The Jews are under extreme threat as they are suspected of spying for Israel. "Especially members of the Jewish community were under this suspicion. The majority of Jews living in Islamic states already emigrated by the 1950s and 1960s or were expelled or deported. At the end of the 1970s 100,000 Jews were living in Iran. Today there are only 25,000."¹⁸

4.2 Baha'i

Unlike other monotheists, the Baha'i do not enjoy any constitutional or formal protection, not even on paper. Although they are very peaceful, tolerant and supportive of human rights (Kazemzadeh 1999), they are not recognized as Dhimmis (protected monotheists) since only Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Iranians are recognized religious minorities according to Article 12 of the Constitution. Their religion was founded by Baha'u'llah in Teheran in the middle of the 19th Century.¹⁹ Since Mohammed was the last prophet according to orthodox Islamic view to whom God revealed a message, no other religions which developed after his death are granted the right to exist. The 300,000 Baha'i were already oppressed before the Islamic revolution and 200 of their leaders were killed during the revolution. Since 1993 this religion has been prohibited, even in the private sphere. There is no doubt that the Baha'i are oppressed in Iran in a most cruel manner. The goal is to at least eliminate them from

¹⁸ Menashri 2003:2. The figures are the same as in the reference works on statistics of religion named above. Detailed cases are documented most extensively in the International Religious Freedom Report 2006 of the U.S. Department of State.

¹⁹ On their history mainly see Adamson 2007; Hutter 1994; Bürgel & Schayani 1998.

the public eye.²⁰ Leaders of the pacifist Baha'i are regularly sentenced to death in fast-tracked trials.²¹

In 1993 the Special Rapporteur of the UN Commission for Human Rights published an Iranian government directive²² which lists in detail the measures taken against the Baha'i. They include total control of all their activities, denial of access to education and all important positions in the workplace, prevention of all connections to foreign countries and the elimination of influential leaders. Iran naturally denies the existence of this document.

In his last report, Copithorne²³ points out the tightening of the restrictions of religious freedom. He refers to the persecution of the Baha'i in particular, who continue to suffer from human rights violations. His report names arbitrary arrests, denial of access to higher education, dismissals and professional disqualifications. Twelve Baha'i are still in custody for religious reasons, among them Behnam Mithaqi and Kayvan Khalajabadi. Copithorne visited both men during his last visit to Iran, after which their death sentences were confirmed by the Supreme Court. The death sentences of Dhabihu'llah Mahrami and Musa Talibi have also been confirmed in the meantime, based on charges of apostasy among various other accusations. In 1996 at least 9 Baha'is identified by name were said to have been arrested because of their faith. The continued discrimination of Baha'is by the legal system is manifested, for example, in a case in which a mother was excluded from her daughter's inheritance owing to her religious affiliation.²⁴

²⁰ The most extensive documentations are to my knowledge all somewhat dated: Nationaler Geistiger Rat der Bahai in Deutschland 1995; Hearing 1984. Cole 2005 is more up to date, also compare for recent times the German Wikipedia entry http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Verfolgung_der_Bahai and Enayati 2002. There is also quite a lot of material on the international website of the Baha'i (www.bahai.org; <http://question.bahai.org>; www.bahai.org/dir/worldwide/persecution), however often not going beyond 1998, eg. www.bahai.org/article-1-8-3-8.html. There is a report on the denial of access to higher education (Baha'i International Community 2005) and on persecution (Der Nationale Geistige Rat der Bahai in Deutschland 2003). More current reports appear in the yearbooks and journals of the Baha'i which are difficult to access, and on the Baha'i World News Service website. The most current listing of individual cases is found in the respective International Religious Freedom Report of the U.S. State Department.

²¹ Morigi 1998 gives the names of killed leaders of the Baha'i. Many details on the sufferings of the Baha'i, including names, can be found in U.S. Department of State 2003.

²² U.S. Department of State 1994:1182 and 1995:1081-1083; The Rutherford Institute:3.

²³ The Special Rapporteur of the UN Commission for Human Rights at that time.

²⁴ Hashemi & Adineh 1998:12.

According to the Annual Reports of Amnesty International, in one year 65 Baha'i were arrested and only some of them were released.²⁵ In the preceding year 66 had been arrested²⁶, obviously in connection with recent government instructions: "In March, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief expressed concern about an October 2005 letter instructing various government agencies to identify, and collect information about, Baha'i in Iran."²⁷

The World Report of the Human Rights Watch 2007 quotes this letter of the Supreme Leader of the Revolution, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (Human Rights Watch 2007). Consequently, approximately 54 Baha'i were arrested because they had taught poor children English, arithmetic, reading and writing free of charge (Human Rights Watch 2007).

In 2004 several holy places, which are connected with the early history of the Baha'i in Iran, were destroyed, including the birthplace of the founder of the religion. This was done in order to erase the cultural traces of this religion in Iran (Hutter 2005:118).

4.3 Muslims

Muslims are also persecuted for religious reasons. Article 12 of the Constitution says: "The official religion of Iran is Islam and the Twelver Ja'fari School", also called Twelver Shia.²⁸ The Constitution also says: "Other Islamic schools are to be accorded full respect." This is only partly true in reality. **Sunni Islam**, which has adherents mostly among the Turkish, Kurdish and Balutchi people, is not fully respected. Sunni Muslims hardly suffer any persecution from the highest government levels but frequently do so at the hands of local religious leaders and authorities. There is not a single Sunni mosque in Teheran. Sunni leaders have repeatedly complained abroad about the suppression of the Sunni faith by government authorities.²⁹

²⁵ Amnesty International 2007:191-192 (page numbers of German edition).

²⁶ Amnesty International 2006:214 (page numbers of German edition).

²⁷ Amnesty International 2007:192 (German). The report referred to: Asma Jahangir, United Nations. Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief concerned about treatment of followers of Baha'i Faith in Iran. Available online: <http://tinyurl.com/unhcr-ch>.

²⁸ On the Twelver-Shia (resp. the Ja'fari school of Islamic law) see the classic by Halm 1988:34-185, as well as Schirmacher 2002b:428-549; Schirmacher 1989:116-122; Schirmacher 1997:46-49.

²⁹ Confirmed by Boyle & Sheen 1997:425 and U.S. Department of State 2002:4-5.

Apart from the Sunnis, the Azeris are suffering persecution from their Islamic brethren, according to Human Rights Watch (2007). According to Amnesty International (AI) it is mostly the Sufis who are suffering.³⁰ According to AI, 1,000 members of the Sufi fellowship in Nematollahi were forcefully arrested, and hundreds were injured because they refused to leave their mosque in February 2006. In May 2006, 52 Sufis who intended to make legal representation on behalf of the others were sentenced to corporal punishment. The lawyers taking part in this action were professionally disbarred. "In a fatwa of August the Sufis were declared 'null and void' as a religious fellowship."³¹ (A fatwa is a religious opinion on Islamic law issued by an Islamic scholar which is binding to the Iranian authorities.)

Even Shiite leaders are not protected from religious persecution. The World Report of Human Rights Watch 2003 states that the Supreme Ayatollah Hossain Ali Montazeri, formerly the designated successor of Ayatollah Khomeini, is under house arrest in Qom owing to his deviating religious views, and other older Shiite leaders are being persecuted.³²

4.4 Orthodox and Catholic Christians

Even though the **Armenian and Assyrian (Nestorian) Christians** are granted one seat in Parliament – like the Jews and Zoroastrians – and even though they are not suspected of siding with Western powers owing to their lengthy history in Iran, their religious freedom is still negligible. One cannot even talk about traditional toleration and partial autonomy such as had been granted to orthodox minorities in large parts of the Islamic world for centuries. There is little known about their situation, however, because traditionally they tend not to spread information abroad.

The emigration of one quarter of the 200,000 Armenians – all Persians who love their home country – speaks for itself, especially since a further 7% of the 150,000 remaining population continue to emigrate annually (Boyle & Sheen 1997:423). According to the

³⁰ Amnesty International 2007:191-192 (German). This is confirmed by U.S. Department of State 2006.

³¹ Amnesty International 2007:191 (German).

³² Human Rights Watch 2003:5; there are many reports on the Internet on Hossain Ali Montazeri, eg. available online: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2699541.stm.

findings of the UN Special Rapporteur, approximately 15,000 to 20,000 Christians of all denominations are emigrating from Iran annually (U.S. Department of State 2002:2). Regardless whether one assumes an approximate number of between 115,000-120,000 Christians as does the Iranian government, or 300,000 Christians as does the UN Special Rapporteur (:2), the Christian minority in Iran could become negligible in the near future.

The situation of the **Catholic congregations** is very different from that of the long-established Orthodox churches, even though some of them have also been in the country for centuries. On 10 August 1979 all Catholic priests and members of Catholic orders were ordered to leave the country within one month, while the Protestants and Anglicans had to leave the country immediately. The Archbishop of Teheran was expelled.

In June 1980 the authorities closed all catholic schools which were referred to as 'foreign'. According to Didier Rance, the anti-Christian repression has two aspects: on the one hand it is discrimination and on the other it is the attempt to assimilate, which is being carried out mostly by means of school classes and indoctrination during military service. The Islamization of the school system touches all aspects of education: The young Christians need to memorize texts which are saturated with Islamic propaganda and which slander and insult the Christian religion (Morigi 1998).

Churches in Iran and their estimated membership 2001³³

Denomination	Congregations	Members	Adherents
Armenian-Apostolic	63	72,368	110,000
Nestorians	8	7,692	11,000
Catholics	17	4,000	7,000
Presbyterians	9	1,703	3,100
Pentecostals	12	1,400	3,000
Anglicans	3	480	1,200
12 other denominations	16	6,000	9,000
Christians in total	129	94,000	145,000

³³ Estimates as of the end of 2001 by Johnstone 2005:353, updated according to www.operationworld.org.

4.5 Protestant Christians

The government is more hostile towards the Protestant churches because of their privileged relationships with Western countries which are in greatest enmity to the Iranian government, and also because of their greater missionary initiative. According to the report of Human Rights without Frontiers, the persecution of Protestants increased during the 1990s. Four Protestant leaders died under circumstances which cannot exclude complicity of the government. (Source: Droits de l'homme sans frontières, March 13, 1998 quoted by Morigi 1998:section on Iran, p.2).

The greatest monitoring efforts are aimed at conversions from Islam to the Baha'i religion and to Protestant Evangelical Christianity, and such converts are prosecuted most severely. Apostasy from Islam is subject to the death penalty, both in theory and in practice. The death penalty is imposed by the courts of justice and executed in prison but also carried out by Hezbollah groups by means of secret or public assassination. Capital punishment for apostasy from Islam, while so far not stipulated by law, is based on a decree issued by Ayatollah Khomeini and is considered to be part of the Sharia. The decrees of the Ayatollah and the numerous fatwas of renowned Islamic clerics are considered as legal sources in their own right, as the infamous case of Salman Rushdie has shown. He was sentenced to death because, although being born as a Muslim (in India), he became secularised and disinterested in Islam. Often a law, promulgated in 1996, is referred to which provides for capital punishment for espionage. In practice all Catholic and Protestant Christians are automatically suspect of espionage because of their contacts abroad.

In 1994 the Fellowship of Protestant Churches was seriously shaken by the assassination of three of their most important elected representatives. It began with Pastor Mehdi Dibaj who was sentenced to death in 1984 because of his conversion from Islam to Christianity 45 years previously. When Pastor Haik Hovespian-Mehr started an international campaign for Dibaj he achieved the release of Dibaj at the beginning of 1994 only to disappear himself a few days later. His family was told that he had been murdered. In April 1994 a fatwa appeared in a Teheran newspaper demanding the killing of Dibaj. Finally, halfway through 1994, Dibaj also disappeared. In July his body was 'found' by the government. His successor as chair of the Council of Protestant Churches, Pastor Tateo's Michaelian was

murdered in June 1994. The prominent pastor Mohammad Bagher Yusefi who looked after Dibaj's children, was found hanged in the vicinity of his home at the end of 1996.³⁴

Evangelical Christians frequently disappear after having been kept in custody for a short period of time, especially those who had formerly been Muslims (often before 1979!).³⁵ The International Religious Freedom Report 2001 reports that between 15 to 23 evangelical leaders who disappeared were murdered between November 1997 and November 1998 (U.S. Department of State 2001:6). Each year new cases are reported.

In its annual report of 2006 (:214), Amnesty International mentions that Hamid Pourmand who had converted from Islam to Christianity and whose change of religion had been neither accepted nor registered by the army, was sentenced to three years in prison because he was said to have misled the military concerning his change of religion. In its annual report of 2007 (:191), AI reports the arrest of the daughter and son-in-law of the above mentioned Medhi Dibaj who was murdered in 1994, immediately after his release from nine years imprisonment because of alleged apostasy.

The printing of any kind of Christian literature, even that of internal information bulletins for use during a church service, is prohibited. The evangelical churches have gone underground because they were instructed to submit membership lists (U.S. Department of State 2002:2) and were forced, apart from other oppressive measures, to hold their services in Assyrian or Armenian languages which they can neither speak nor understand. Any church service in Persian, their mother tongue, is severely sanctioned.

³⁴ These details are based on the research by the Center for Religious Freedom of the US human rights organization Freedom House, Washington DC, www.freedomhouse.org/religion/martyrs/iran.htm and The Rutherford Institute 1996:5. Cf. the special report of News Network International of 26 July 1994. On Yusefi also see the detailed report "Another Iranian Christian Pays the Ultimate Price" by the Persian organization Elam Ministries at www.domini.org/openbook/iran1.htm.

³⁵ International Christian Concern, Washington (www.persecution.org/suffering/country_info.php?iran.html) is providing current news and cases. A report on Iran of September 2006, which is no longer available online gave 16 detailed individual cases between 1997-2001.

The officially registered evangelical churches are permitted to meet only on Sundays. The pastor is obliged to inform the government before any new members may be admitted, after which the members receive special identity papers which they have to carry at all times. At the beginning of a church service these identity papers are often checked by a religious guard at the entrance or at times even during the church service. Even in Teheran, other Iranians and tourists are prevented from entering church premises (:6).

According to the Representative Body of the Iranian Christians founded in 1980/81 (a type of Protestant Church Council in exile), Iranian Christians International (ICI),³⁶ the persecution of Christians has been increasing since 2000.³⁷ The number of Christians, however, is equally growing (mostly owing to the turning away from Iranian Islam which is experienced as cruel and disappointing), while simultaneously large numbers are emigrating. According to the figures of ICI, there were 16,000 Protestant Iranian Christians in exile worldwide in 1990, in 1994 36,000, and in 1999 55,000, half of which are converts from Islam. The remainder are from other religious minorities or from Christian families.

Occasionally even evangelical leaders from Western countries are being subjected to the Iranian justice system, that is, if they dare to enter the country at all. For example, Stuart Timm, a South African citizen, was kept in custody for 26 days while on holiday in Iran in 1997. He was released only after the South African government exerted extensive pressure. Another example is Daniel Baumann, who holds dual Swiss and American citizenships, who was denied contact with either embassy.³⁸ In both cases no charges were laid and no explanation was given.

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³⁶ Iranian Christians International, P.O. Box 25607, Colorado Springs, CO 80936, USA. www.iranchristians.org. A global list of all Iranian churches in exile is available at: www.farsinet.com/icc.

³⁷ Confirmed from a Roman-Catholic perspective by Morigi 1998.

³⁸ See the detailed report: "Western Christians detained in Iran" by Iranian Christians International at www.domini.org/openbook/irn70224.htm.

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WEA religious liberty press release: Iran - Apostasy law

Keywords Iran, apostasy law, death penalty, WEA, appeal.

February 18, 2009: [The World Evangelical Alliance] strongly condemns the systematic and ongoing violations of religious freedom, including prolonged detention, torture, and executions based primarily or entirely upon the religion of the accused, especially for religious minorities such as Protestant Christians.

WEA notes that the constitution of Iran formally recognizes Christians as protected religious minorities who may worship freely and have autonomy over their own matters of personal status. Nevertheless, the primacy of Islam and Islamic laws, in particular the recent Apostasy law, adversely affects the rights and status of Christian minorities, who are already subject to severe forms of discrimination.

WEA acknowledges that Christians in Iran, in particular Evangelicals, continue to be subject to harassment, arrests, close surveillance, and imprisonment. WEA also recalls that the Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad reportedly has called for an end to the development of Christianity in Iran, and that over the past few years, there have been several incidents of Iranian authorities raiding church services, detaining worshippers and church leaders, and harassing and threatening church members.

WEA expresses concern over the recent penal code revision, and opposes the death penalty as a matter of law and policy. This law clearly violates the Islamic Republic of Iran's commitments under the international human rights conventions, by codifying serious punishments, including the death penalty on converts from Islam. Therefore, it is considered in itself a clear violation of Article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which reads: "Every human being has the inherent right to life" an important and binding international document which Iran has ratified in 1975 without any pre-conditions, in addition to Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which reads: "Everyone has the right to life", and Article 18 of the same declaration which reads: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion."

WEA hereby expresses its deep and grave concerns and apprehension of the implications of the Penal Code, which sets out a mandatory death sentence for apostasy, in addition to other severe limitations and restrictions on freedom of religion and belief.

Therefore, WEA calls upon the Iranian authorities, both in government and parliament, to address the substantive concerns highlighted in this letter, and to fully respect its human rights obligations, in law and in practice.

WEA calls for abolishment of the death penalty carried out in the absence of respect for internationally recognized safeguards.

WEA calls on all democratic governments at the highest levels, to vigorously speak out publicly about the deteriorating conditions for freedom of religion or belief in Iran, and draw attention to the need for the international community to hold authorities accountable in specific cases where severe violations have occurred or will occur especially in respect to the recently passed Apostasy law that legalizes the death penalty for apostates.

WEA calls on the UN Human Rights Council to monitor carefully and call for with the recommendations of the representatives of those special mechanisms that have already visited Iran, particularly those of the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief (1995).

Dr. Geoff Tunnicliffe, Executive Director - International Director / CEO, World Evangelical Alliance (WEA)

Mr. Godfrey Yogarajah, Religious Liberty Commission, World Evangelical Alliance (WEA)

The World Evangelical Alliance is made up of 128 national evangelical alliances located in 7 regions and 104 associate member organizations. The vision of WEA is to extend the Kingdom of God by making disciples of all nations and by Christ-centered transformation within society. WEA exists to foster Christian unity, to provide an identity, voice and platform for the 420 million evangelical Christians worldwide.

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